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**Erasmus University Rotterdam**
Making Minds Matter

# THE ASSEMBLAGE OF SOCIAL DEATH

汉奸辱华

去死！

社 死

## MAPPING DIGITAL VIGILANTISM IN CHINA

QIAN HUANG

# The Assemblage of Social Death

# Mapping Digital Vigilantism in China

## 社死：解析中国的网络正义

Qian Huang

This dissertation is part of the research project “Digital vigilantism: Mapping the terrain and assessing societal impacts”, which was financed by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) grant number 276-45-004.

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The Assemblage of Social Death
Mapping Digital Vigilantism in China

De Assemblage van Sociale Dood:
In Kaart Brengen van Digitale Waakzaamheid in China

社死：解析中国的网络正义

Thesis

to obtain the degree of Doctor from the
Erasmus University Rotterdam
by command of the
rector magnificus

Prof.dr. A.L. Bredenoord

and in accordance with the decision of the Doctorate Board.
The public defence shall be held on

Friday 28 October 2022 at 10.30hrs
by

Qian Huang
born in Fujian, China.

Erasmus University Rotterdam

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我永远感恩父母，

纵我远游求学，做我翼下之风。

I will be forever grateful to my parents,

for being the wind under my wings in this journey far away from home.

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### Chapter 2. An Historical Overview of Digital Vigilantism in China

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**Chapter 6. The 2018 Dolce & Gabbana Advertising Controversy: Offense-taking and Justice-seeking Beyond Digital Vigilantism**

Huang, Q. & Janssens, A.G. (2019). Come mangiare un cannolo con le bacchette: The contested field of luxury fashion in China, a case study of the 2018 Dolce & Gabbana advertising incident. *ZoneModa Journal*, *9*(2), 123–140. https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/9970

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**Chapter 7. Context Collapse of Everyday Life and Punishment: Theorising Social Consequences of Digital Vigilantism**

Huang, Q. & Trottier, D. Context collapse of everyday life and punishment: Theorising social consequences of digital vigilantism from the vantage point of China.

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# Chapter 1.

# Introduction

# Chapter 1. Introduction

## Social death

"Shehuixing siwang" [社会性死亡], "shesi" in short, means social death, or socially dead. The term was popularised on Chinese social media since 2020, at first referring to serious public embarrassment experience by an individual. In a Douban[1] group that was created in March 2020 and named after this term, there are more than 500,000 members and 94,500 posts where members share their own stories of social death to alleviate their feelings of embarrassment and shame[2]. However, this term generated nationwide public discussion after two cases took place. The first case took place in August 2020, in which Liang (female) made public accusations on Sina Weibo that her ex-boyfriend Luo (male) raped her on their first date. Luo was consequently doxed, shamed, and fired from his jobs, for which he announced on his social media that "I am already socially dead." The case ended up with an announcement and apology from Liang, stating that Luo did not rape her. The second case took place in November 2020, in which a female student from Tsinghua University made a public accusation on WeChat Moments that a male student groped her in the canteen. In her Moments, she explicitly used that term and announced her intention to cause the social death of the perceived offender within her social network. After the post was reposted on many other social media platforms and gained nation-wide attention, security footage demonstrated that it was the male student's bag bumping into the female student. The case ended up with doxing and shaming of the female student for her false accusation and her "evil intention" to cause the male student's social death, which did not stop even after she issued a public apology. Several state media outlets in China also published opinion pieces to criticise this phenomenon (Lin, 2020; Xingyuan, 2020a, 2020b). In these two cases, the term social death is used to describe the all-

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[1] Douban.com was launched on March 6, 2005 and is a Chinese social networking service website that allows registered users to record information and create content as well as form groups related to film, books, music, recent events, and activities in Chinese cities.

[2] Statistics retrieved from https://www.douban.com/group/687707/ on March 7th, 2022.

encompassing reputation damage and forced isolation from all social relations due to negative online exposure (Shen, 2020).

While relatively new on Chinese social media, the term social death is also a concept that has been discussed in relation to different topics with various definitions. The earliest literature using this term regards histories of slavery. Patterson (1982) describes the slave's natal alienation as social death because their existence is not socially recognized apart from his master and their informal social relations are not legitimised. In other later sociological studies with different focuses, social death refers to a status where individuals are considered unworthy of social participation and deemed to be dead or non-existing when they are alive, which can happen before, with, or after their biological or physical death (Borgstrom, 2017). The causes of such status can be caused by various conditions or experiences that individuals have, such as dementia (Brannelly, 2011), teenage pregnancy (Whitehead, 2001), AIDS (Dageid & Duckert, 2008), incarceration (Price, 2015), rape (Mann, 2021), etc. Building upon Goffman's (1968) concept of the mortification of self, scholars also establish that social death can be regarded as a gradual procedure (Norwood, 2009) or certain status (Králová, 2015) of series of losses, such as loss of (social) identity, loss of ability to take part in daily activities, loss of social relationships, and the losses associated with the disintegration of the body. Even though researchers discuss social death with many contextualised nuances, the core of social death is always social exclusion, which coincides with the use of this term in recent Chinese public and media discourses.

While it is unclear how Chinese social media users came up with this term and whether it was inspired by the academic discussion mentioned above, the term social death is used similarly on Chinese social media platforms: it refers to the damage of reputation and the deprivation of social relations. While gaining its popularity only fairly recently on the Chinese Internet, the term captures the (intended) consequence of a phenomenon with many faces: digital vigilantism (DV).

**Digital vigilantism as a mediated hybrid participatory surveillance**

Digital vigilantism (DV) refers to the weaponised digital visibility used for retaliating against individuals who are perceived to break certain social rules or norms (Trottier, 2017), which means that such forms of networked harassment on social media platforms is morally motivated and functions as a mechanism to enforce social order (Marwick, 2021). In previous literature that focuses on DV phenomena in Western contexts, the concept is applied strictly according to Trottier's definition. However, this thesis investigates DV in China and its convergence with (and divergent from) human flesh search (HFS), citizen activism, collective action, media/online events, and a whole range of digital violence or peer-surveillance behaviours such as trolling and mob mentality.

In many phenomena that have attracted public attention in recent years, traces of DV can be easily observed. Globally, *cancel culture* is on the rise. As a continuation of call-out culture, citizens *cancel* – meaning publicly name, shame and withdraw support from – public figures and companies for their perceived objectionable or offensive conduct or speech, which can also involve other forms of vigilante justice, such as hostile debate, stalking, intimidation, and harassment (Mishan, 2020). The global waves of #MeToo movements –also regarded as part of the call-out culture – demonstrate how DV sometimes can be an integral part of contemporary connective social movements (Zeng, 2020). In mundane daily life, review bombing has become a common tactic to express discontent, retaliate against or punish artists, actors/actresses, movie producers, etc. (Wordsworth, 2019). As forms of DV, these connective social movements often seek justice via pursuing the social death of (perceived) offenders.

Trottier (2017) proposes to understand DV through the lens of surveillance and social visibility. He establishes that DV is a mediated and lateral form of surveillance where unaffiliated citizens primarily watch over other individuals. According to Lyon (2007), surveillance should be understood as "a focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for the purpose to influence, management, protection or direction" (p. 24). He also provides four aspects for investigating various surveillance types: what type of information is gathered, how the information is used, what processes it includes, and what results it

yields. When looking at these four aspects of DV-based surveillance, we can see that it demonstrates unique hybridity.

First, when collecting information, DV practices combine face-to-face surveillance and digital/file-based surveillance. While incidents may begin with the real-time capture of footage or evidence in an embodied space, it inevitably involves the archiving and circulation of this footage on digital platforms such as Sina Weibo and WeChat. In terms of actionable content, DV makes use of both evidence of embodied actions and utterances, as well as content (already) located on digital platforms. The latter may include previously authored content by the target or content about the target that was either authored or (crowd)sourced by the denouncer. It bears noting that this data may be sourced from various social sectors. A dispute that begins within a particular social sphere (e.g., subculture fandoms) will not remain contained to that sphere. As a practice, participants will attempt to unearth details about the target's employment status, their family, as well as other sensitive information such as financial or medical records, if available. With the increasing digitisation and ubiquity of devices in Chinese society, collecting such information does not require any additional dedicated technologies. This hybrid information collecting process is, therefore, very much normalised in Chinese society.

After the information is collected about a target, DV participants use it to attempt to bring embodied harm to them, as well as harm through manipulation and reworking of their digital records. When we discuss online surveillance, often we are addressing practices that draw from, and in turn feed into, an assembly of digital information about users or their *data double*. Data double refers to a typically dispersed body of data associated with the individual, such as files and records (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000). When assessing the individual, it is typically more efficient to invoke their data instead of the person. The person is answerable to the data double while not having control over—or even access to—its content. This speaks to asymmetrical relations of visibility between the data subject and those operating these systems.

In contrast, while policing involves a degree of paperwork (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997), this typically has a direct impact on the embodied target. However, DV operates on both the target's data double and individual. On the one hand, DV

participants attack the target's digital reputation through naming, shaming, and doxing on social media platforms. This often results in the deletion of targets' social media content and accounts. In deleting their account - or having it removed through other means - traces of their digital doubles will likely remain online, although they will likely lose any means to manage this presence. Their digital presence may also be compromised through "review bombing" (Wordsworth, 2019) of any goods or service they may offer to the public. In addition to attacks on the data doubles, DV participants also use such online visibility to attack the target's embodied livelihood and cause the target's social death, such as getting them fired from work, expelled from school, or punished by the law. Here we can reflect on the use of the term vigilante, as well as the language and lens of vigilantism more broadly. This is typically understood in terms of the (threatened) use of physical violence. In both academic analysis and popular press, invoking the term vigilante is meant to reflect on how digital forms of intervention themselves can be culturally harmful (Galtung, 1990; Polak & Trottier, 2020). Yet cases that either begin or are mediated on digital platforms can end up having embodied consequences, including physical assault.

The most significant difference between DV and other forms of surveillance is that it merges process and outcome, which often involves a direct exclusion from a shared identity or community. Typically, the collection and analysis of information are first conducted before a decision of exclusion or granting access is made. There are, of course, also some forms of surveillance that may launch scrutiny of a target population with the expectation/prejudice that they are "criminal" or "deviant", such that the judgement comes before the scrutiny rather than the other way around (Vicenová, 2020). In both scenarios, while the judgement may occur under the public eye, the previous steps tend to be handled discreetly. However, in cases of DV, the collection, analysis, and judgement are typically collapsed as a singular event. The visibility of DV targets does not only serve as a request for information gathering but also directly a result of the exclusion because the relevant information has been made visible in the online public sphere. In other words, heightened public scrutiny of a target may simultaneously serve to investigate and bring harm to their livelihood.

This is not to say that DV instances only occur in one phase. There are clear instances where the development and consequences of online denunciations

span over weeks or months. What is distinct here is that, even in the early stages of such a case, an outcome or verdict is typically already openly proclaimed. Public discourse – referring to user-generated posts and comments – in China surrounding this phenomenon has already identified this hybridity since its first recorded emergence in 2006. Citizens and media often use legal analogies to criticise DV and its potential harm, such as *gongkai chuxing* [public execution] (Wenzhongbaoweigangbi, 2020) and *weishen xianpan* [judgement before trial] (The Future Link, 2019). Informed by contemporary Chinese history, many Chinese citizens also refer back to phenomena in the Culture Revolution era when the Chinese legal system was paralysed and due procedures of trials were ignored (B. Wang, 2008), such as *dazibao* [big-character Poster][3] and *hongweibing* [the red guard][4] (Gorman, 2017). Just as the consensus among Chinese citizens illustrated in these public discourses, DV participants provide verdicts before or alongside the data collection, investigation, and trial, which is a very different process compared to traditional surveillance. It is due to such hybridity of the DV surveillant assemblage that social death is made possible and is often the consequence of DV.

### Digital vigilantism as a surveillance assemblage

As mentioned before, Trottier (2017) approaches DV through the lens of surveillance studies, where there are various established theoretical frameworks. The early framework established by Bentham and further developed by Foucault theorises surveillance as physically and spatially bounded and enabled by centralised mechanisms. The concept of the panopticon explains how such mechanisms work: the feeling of being under constant watch generates (self-)discipline and governmentality (Galič, Timan & Koops, 2017). Building upon such a framework, many scholars investigate and theorise surveillance from a state-/institution-versus-citizens perspective, which also generates concepts that regard phenomena similar to DV as a form of citizens' resisting

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[3] Big-character posters [in Chinese: 大字报] are handwritten, wall-mounted posters with large-sized characters used as a means of protest and propaganda. They were popular during The Culture Revolution for political debate as well as denunciation.

[4] The Red Guard [in Chinese: 红卫兵] is a group of militant students who pledged to eliminate all remnants of the old culture in China and purge al bourgeois elements within the government during The Cultural Revolution.

state/institutional surveillance, such as the concept of *sousveillance* - meaning the people watching the powerful (Mann, Nolan & Wellman, 2003). This approach interrogates citizen-led surveillance as phenomena that take place in stable power structures. However, when looking at some Chinese DV cases, the power positions are not always distinct and prominent when both the participants and targets are individual citizens, although there could be some imbalance (in both directions) of political, economic, and social capital between the participants and targets.

Such a lack of stable power structure in surveillance is well explained by the framework of *surveillant assemblage* coined by Haggerty and Ericsson (2000), which is built upon Deleuze and Guattari's theory of assemblages. Enabled by digital technologies, surveillance becomes more networked and distributed, and integrates physical with digital as well as institutional and self/peer-surveillance (Galič, Timan & Koops, 2017). With such distributed infrastructure, the surveillant assemblages consist of a multiplicity of heterogeneous objects, whose unity only exists because these items function together (Deleuze & Guattari, cited in Haggerty & Ericsson, 2000). In surveillant assemblages of DV, the heterogeneous objects usually include individual citizens (both the participants and the targets), various media (traditional or new, as institutions or individual staff), communities and social groups, as well as social and state institutions. They should not only be understood as actors and stakeholders in DV cases, but also as the nodes in the DV surveillant assemblages. There are information flows existing prior to the formation of any particular assemblage among these nodes, and these flows are only fixed temporarily and spatially by the assemblage. Such formation is energized by a range of desires, such as the desire to control, govern, protect, and entertain (ibid.). In Chinese DV cases, the aforementioned nodes can be driven by different desires, such as to protect national identity, to govern public opinions, or to profit from the attention economy, which energize the temporary formation of surveillant assemblages. In these temporary assemblages, complex power relations are also constructed and are constantly changing.

While this may seem like an atomised practice, peer-based watching can, in turn, support more elaborate forms of surveillance and scrutiny, notably through temporary partnerships. Following Haggerty and Ericson (2000), discrete and

otherwise contextually distinct social actors may be assembled in order to share information and other resources in order to render a target or target population visible. Of particular interest is whether these temporary alliances primarily serve one agent or agenda (e.g., the police, the Chinese Communist Party) or if they can enable multiple, potentially conflicting agendas. The former type of alliance with a dominant agent and unified agenda is demonstrated by the "Australian jogging lady" case.

On March 17, 2020, a video of an Australian-Chinese woman jogging and flouting the quarantine rules in Beijing was posted on several Chinese social media platforms. In the video, she argues loudly and claims to be harassed by a Beijing community worker who criticised her for violating the 14-day quarantine rules and jogging outdoors without wearing a mask. She was named and shamed by Chinese netizens, fired by her employer, and later deported by the Chinese government (Global Times, 2020). In this case, Chinese citizens are seemingly united and mobilised by the state's agenda of controlling the Covid-19 pandemic in China, voluntarily watching "bad citizens" represented by the Australian woman.

The latter type of alliance with conflicting agendas normally can be identified in cases that involve observable financial interests. Recent development includes DV cases targeting charity frauds, exemplified by the *Luo Yixiao case* in 2016. The father wrote several diary-style articles on his WeChat public account to crowdfund for treating his daughter's leukaemia, which was later promoted by the marketing company Xiaotongren, owned by Luo's friend. These efforts raised 2 million RMB (approximately equivalent to 283 thousand USD) in total. When Chinese netizens uncovered that the father, in fact, had three apartments and a car, suggesting financial means, various agents mobilised with different agendas in mind. Citizens who felt taken advantage of sought to punish the father for his dishonesty. Official NGOs and certified charity platforms used this opportunity to call for a more regulated charity environment in China (Zhang, 2016). State media, the mouthpiece of the government, highlighted Luo's illegal charity fund-raising activity, criticised self-media for hyping and exploiting the incident without fact-checking, and warned Chinese citizens to be more careful with

information provided by self-media[5] (Song, 2016). Even though these actors collectively named and shamed Luo, their agendas could not be more different. Such conflicting agendas can also be found in many fandom DV cases. Such attempts to mobilise broader public scrutiny align more generally with Shearing and Wood's (2003) account of nodal governance, in which governments allocate security duties across sectors, including state, corporate, non-governmental and even informal settings. These developments provide a sound conceptual foundation for understanding DV in China because they address the confluence of state-citizen and citizen-citizen relations in place of a rigid distinction between these, all without omitting the importance of intentions to control and asymmetrical relations between entities. In other words, non-state or non-party actors can be mobilised or self-mobilising, which in itself tells us very little about their impact on the efficacy and legitimacy of state/party forms of control.

### Digital vigilantism as context collapse

The normalisation of DV as an assemblage of hybrid participatory surveillance not only impacts the individual target in DV incidents through harmful mediated visibility (Trottier, 2017), but also influences how citizens interact with other citizens and with media technology, because of the constant risk of context collapse. Context collapse as a concept has been widely adopted by scholars to discuss self-presentation, identity constructions, and social interactions in the current digital era when individuals are well-connected by various social media (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2011). It is based on Goffman's (1978) dramaturgical framework in which individuals perform their identities depending on the social situation they are in. These social situations and target audiences are usually segregated, allowing individuals to present themselves

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[5] In China, self-media [in Chinese: 自媒体] refers to social media accounts on platforms such as WeChat and Sina Weibo, that are usually run by individual users instead of established media companies. However, successful self-media can also form media companies or managed by media companies. Therefore, the boundaries between self-media and traditional commercial media are sometimes blurred. In other academic works, it is also sometimes referred to as we-media. In this thesis, I use commercial media to include both self-and traditional commercial media.

differently and construct different social identities based on their interpretation of their current setting. These social situations are also called contexts by later scholars (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014), and they entail different norms and expectations of how individuals should present themselves.

When various digital media technologies and social media platforms make people more connected, some originally segregated contexts are fused, and users face a far less transparent audience: networked publics (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Appropriate self-representations and identities in such networked publics become harder to achieve because, when performances are presented to different audiences synchronously and without boundaries, what is appropriate for certain audiences will offend others (ibid.). Such blurred boundaries and flattened contextual differences afforded by social media are referred to as *context collapse*. Individuals experience the collapse in both social spaces and time, in which they must meet the expectations of diverse audiences across not only contextual boundaries but also temporal ones (Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Such collapse is also analysed in privacy studies as a threat to the contextual integrity of information (Nissenbaum, 2011).

The majority of literature on context collapse focuses on how users manage and negotiate their self-presentation on social media by intentionally choosing post content, using appropriate language, and managing privacy settings (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Duguay, 2016). However, the normalisation of DV has decreased individuals' agency when navigating and managing context collapse, which will be further discussed in Chapter 7.

### China as a vantage point to study digital vigilantism

When discussing the need to theorise surveillance, Lyon (2007) emphasises the importance of avoiding overly abstract conceptualisation, accounting for specific practices, and contextualising these practices in processes of everyday life. To contextualise DV in citizens' everyday life, the analysis needs to be embedded in a specific society: in this case, China. This does not mean that I intend to over-generalise findings based on China and cancel the differences of this global practice brought by varying economic, political, and cultural conditions. I rather endeavour to situate the analysis while acknowledging the potential differences

that other researchers must attend to when applying the theory to other societies. While I propose to use Chinese society as a footing to study DV, I caution against both the narrative of Chinese exceptionalism that overestimates China's particularity and the common approach of using China only as a case study to contest, supplement, or modify Western theories (Zhang, 2016). Instead, I believe that by situating empirical research in a Chinese context, theories of global implications can be constructed (ibid). Some of China's contemporary social conditions have amplified DV practices and rendered the dynamics between actors more visible, which makes Chinese DV a potential prototype to understand DV practices and their social consequences.

A prominent feature of Chinese society is its ubiquitous state power that makes Chinese DV susceptible to restrictions and co-optation, which is also present elsewhere (Akarsu, 2020; Schaffar, 2016; Trottier, Gabdulhakov & Huang, 2020). Since the 2000s, the Chinese government has developed a more nuanced and updated control over the Internet by expanding its censorship management institutions, differentiating targets of control, and innovating management methods (Yang & Mueller, 2014). The main strategy adopted by the state is *yindao yulun*(引导舆论), which means "guide the public opinion" (Yang, 2014). A combination of Internet governance policies is implemented to achieve desirable public opinions (ibid.). These methods enable an authoritarian public (Toepfl, 2020) that is strategically constructed, which enhances support for the existing socio-political system both directly and indirectly, and bolsters system stability and legitimacy, as the Chinese Communist Party intends (Hyun & Kim, 2015). This enhanced Internet control regime is attainable also because of the Internet and platform infrastructure (Griffiths, 2019) and relevant legal institutions in China (Hu, 2016). In addition to pressure from the state surveillance apparatus that common civilians face, online micro-celebrities may also be warned to avoid discussing certain topics or encouraged to align with the state's propaganda (Epstein, 2019). Under such strong political pressure, Chinese citizens and media tread carefully when engaging in DV activities. DV practices regarded as harmful for the state's rule can be self-censored by participants or censored by the state: most influential opinion leaders shy away from politically controversial DV incidents, and mainstream media are under tighter control over the content they cover. This has resulted in the recent

tendency of visible and influential Chinese DV incidents to often conforming to state-sanctioned social norms (Huang, 2021). Even in anti-corruption DV incidents, which are usually regarded as a demonstration of the Internet's democratising potential, only local officials are targeted and punished as individuals, while the central government and structural issues are left untouched (Herold, 2008). Therefore, Chinese DV as a form of informal justice is often encouraged and co-opted by the state not only to solve some political legitimacy or crisis issues (Cain, 1985) but also to enhance certain state-endorsed social norms and ideologies.

Mass media and state institutions perpetuate the mediated visibility of DV as well. In China, state-owned and commercial media have different roles, characteristics, and relations with the state. Commercial media are private companies and enjoy a relatively higher level of freedom in terms of topic choices and editing (Winfield & Peng, 2005). Some commercial media, such as *Pengpai News Agency*, *Xinjingbao*, *Caixin*, and *Phoenix* benefit from a reputation of keeping up to trending societal issues. They report on and provide dedicated columns for hotly debated incidents. On the contrary, state-owned media started as part of the state propaganda apparatus from the establishment of People's Republic of China (PRC) to the Opening and Reform movement in 1978, and their administrative and staffing issues are still directly controlled by the state even though they enjoy relative freedom in terms of daily operation. In addition, reports from the state-owned media usually feature government announcements and responses. When the incident is regarded as a threat to social stability, however, state-owned media also produce articles of greater length to analyse the issue and provide a state-desired perspective and conclusion.

Another factor that can amplify DV's social consequences in China is the influence of traditional Chinese culture. Guided by Confucianism, traditional Chinese culture values moral conformity achieved by non-violent methods, especially shame and fear, over behavioural conformity achieved by the rule of law (Nichols, 2015). Maintaining social order through such moral socialisation requires self-policing practices at different levels, especially those of family and village (Dutton, 1992). The self-policing that is required by such a principle was practiced by people in the form of *village pacts* in the Zhou Dynasty and became prevalent in the Song Dynasty (Dutton, 1992). The village pact was essentially a

form of neighbourhood surveillance and mutual warnings in response to breaches and transgressions which were regarded as harmful for the public welfare. The punishment of such breaches and transgressions were mostly non-physical spectacles of the dishonoured family, such as posters on the door, social isolation, expulsion from the pact, and the registration of evil deeds (ibid.). Even though Chinese society has been modernised and influenced by Communism, the long history of emphasising shame and fear has resulted in a higher negative reaction towards shame and social exclusion among Chinese people (Eisenberger et al., 2003). While the mobilisation of shame in other societies may differ from China, its prevalence and persistence in other regions of the world suggest that it may mobilise digital vigilantism more broadly (Nussbaum, 2016; Trottier, 2019).

The legal system in contemporary China also provides Chinese citizens more motivation to resort to DV. The current laws and regulations in China are not comprehensive in many aspects. Some offences are yet to be deemed unlawful and, therefore, cannot be punished legally, such as animal abuse, which contributes to prominent justifications in Chinese DV cases (Huang, 2021). There are also public discourses demonstrating Chinese citizens' dissatisfaction with the vague definition and soft punishment of some illegal conduct, such as child sexual abuse and sexual harassment (Qi & Oberwittler, 2009). As Ren (1992) points out, an incomprehensive legal system often pushes citizens to moralise issues in order to achieve better social control. In addition, from 2015, Internet Police in fifty cities started their own Weibo, WeChat, and Baidu BBS accounts, to deter and stop cybercrime, harmful speech and behaviours, and to act on netizens' reports about illegal behaviours on the Internet. The Internet Police is a state police division that is solely responsible for policing various Internet crimes, including online threats, spamming, pornography, terrorism, hacking and fraud. While the Internet Police encourages citizens to provide information to fight crimes, the exposure of individuals' personal information acquired illegally is outlawed. The establishment of such systems encourages citizens' online self-policing.

As stated before, it is not my intention to indicate that the above-mentioned preconditions lead to completely different DV practices in China. Rather, since there are similar DV cases and state co-option—even if it is to a lesser degree—in many other societies as mentioned, as well as the potential of a proliferation of

such measures in more societies in the future, I intend to use Chinese society as a vantage point and establish a prototype to study DV practices, relevant discourses, and their social consequences in this thesis.

**Research questions**

Therefore, with the intention of using Chinese society as a vantage point to contribute to the understanding of DV phenomena, I propose the following research question: *how is digital vigilantism manifest in the contemporary Chinese media landscape*? By adopting the theoretical framework of surveillant assemblage mentioned previously, several sub-questions are developed:

SQ1. What are the historical developments and current trends of DV practices in contemporary China?

SQ2. How are DV practices afforded by digital media in China?

SQ3. How do media and public discourse in China render DV meaningful?

SQ4. What do fans perceive and react to the cancelation – a form of DV – of their idol?

SQ5. How do Chinese citizens use DV tactics against non-individual targets and what are the implications?

SQ6. What are the social consequences of DV practices in China?

**Methodology**

By adopting the theoretical framework of surveillant assemblage, I regard DV incidents as assemblages where desires and information flows are captured and fixed, temporally and spatially, in various nodes. In the distributed infrastructure of DV surveillant assemblages, the information flows that exist prior to the assemblage formation are captured temporarily when energized by a range of desires, such as the desire to control, to govern, to protect, and to entertain (ibid.). In these temporary assemblages, complex power relations are also constructed as well as constantly changing.

A useful concept to understand such complex power relations in which exclusions based on social identities occur is *intersectionality*. This concept was first coined by Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1991) to analyse the structural and political vulnerability faced by black women in the US legal system. Following this genealogy, more critical and feminist scholars use intersectionality as an analytical tool to investigate how seemingly separable identity categories such as gender, race, class, and sexuality can mutually constitute individuals' vulnerability (Cooper, 2016). Some scholars have also adopted the intersectionality framework in the local context of China (Chiu, 2017; Clothey et al., 2018; Wang, 2015; Zhang, 2013). Although some criticise the adoption of the concept of intersectionality as a more general framework due to its possibility of disappearing black female scholarship (Alexander-Floyd, 2012), scholars propose to use intersectionality as a general analytical framework to understand power structures and dynamics when the unitary or multiple approaches are insufficient (Hancock, 2007). Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (2013) also endorse the idea that intersectionality should not be understood as a treatment of superficial categories and differences but is best framed as an analytic sensibility of considering the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power.

While seemingly incompatible with assemblage theory, which does not emphasise structure, the concept of intersectionality could be understood in the assemblage framework (Puar, 2012). Puar argues that identities and intersectionality should be regarded as encounters or events where traces and intersections are not always self-evident (ibid.). Similar to Puar's approach, Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (2013) propose to investigate categories as always permeated, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power. Following this line of inquiry means focusing on how intersectionality forms in every encounter/event. Therefore, I adopt the intersectional approach to analyse temporarily and dynamically formed individual vulnerabilities in this thesis.

By combining the aforementioned two approaches, I use various data collection and analysis methods to examine Chinese DV in a case-by-case manner to answer my research questions. In this way, each assemblage is understood with a tailored method and a proper amount of attention is given to specific nodes based on the significance of these nodes in individual assemblage. Brief

introductions of the specific methods used in each chapter will be provided in the following paragraphs as well as the chapter arrangement section, and more detailed explanations will be provided in each chapter.

To answer the first two sub-questions, I conduct qualitative content analysis on a case database of historical news articles that I constructed via keyword search. For sub-question 3, I select relevant case studies from the constructed case database, use purposive sampling to collect social media posts and comments as well as news reports, and conduct thematic analysis or critical discourse analysis (CDA) on collected data. Sub-question 4 and 5 are answered by inductive thematic analysis on semi-structured in-depth interviews and purposively sampled social media posts and comments. Lastly, by reviewing previously collected and analysed empirical data, I provide a theorisation of DV's social consequences in order to answer sub-question 6.

In the process of data collection, I encountered some difficulties and ethical dilemmas. The original plan of interviewing police officers and government officials to answer sub-question 5 did not succeed, because I was informed by a contact within the police force that new unwritten rules forbade police officers to accept interviews without their supervisors' permission, which was not granted for my research. Also, DV targets in high-profile cases also refused interviews and indicated that the experiences were so traumatic that they could not calmly discuss them. I did not try to persuade them, due to ethical concerns. There are risks of traumatising interviewees who have experienced online doxing and harassment, because the in-depth interviews require them to recall, retell, and potentially relive previous traumatising experiences. Such risks are obviously against the *beneficence* principle—meaning ensuring the wellbeing of the participants—of ethical research (Christian, 2005). This principle is also endangered when potential risks are brought to interviewees whose livelihoods depend on the state in authoritarian countries like China, such as common civil servants and police officers in the case of my research. While they are part of the state apparatus, they are still vulnerable individuals because they are subject to severe institutional punishment if accepting interview is disapproved by their supervisors and institutions. Bearing these ethical concerns in mind, I chose to use publicly available mass media and social media content. Even though such

data and analysis might not provide the full picture that researchers desired, the wellbeing of (potential) participants remains my top priority.

**Chapter arrangement**

Chapter 2 presents the historical changes of DV in China and situates these changes in relation to contemporary Chinese technological and socio-political development. To have a better understanding of the media landscape related to Chinese DV, I have constructed an empirical Chinese DV case database for the years 2006 to 2018 through theory-driven keyword searches, mainly in WiseNews Database, supplemented by Sina Weibo searches. Afterwards, the constructed database with 1265 popular Chinese DV cases occurring between 2006 to 2018 are coded thematically and inductively in the following categories: *initiator(s), platform(s), target, repertoire(s), justification(s),* and *outcome*. *Initiator(s)* is coded into organised/existing groups or individuals. After the initial analysis, codes were grouped by year, counted, and compared to identify characteristics, changes, and trends of DV in China, supplemented with a close reading of some representative cases to provide a more detailed and in-depth description and analysis of general codes in the later discussion. The Chinese DV incidents tend to be more organically formed and DV participants usually work with a combination of various retaliation methods, including publishing visual evidence, doxing, and reporting to institutions. 2013 marks several changing trends: fewer cases about corrupted officials, more cases about public incivilities, more cases targeting celebrities, and more cases demonstrating nationalism. In this chapter, I argue that these developments demonstrate the mediation and, more importantly, the mediatisation of justice-seeking on the Chinese Internet, conditioned by ubiquitous state power.

Based on the trends I identified in Chapter 2, namely more cases about public incivilities, more cases targeting celebrities, and more cases demonstrating nationalism, I then shift my focus to individual or sets of cases as themed surveillant assemblages from Chapter 3 to Chapter 6.

In Chapter 3, I present the public-incivility-related DV cases as the first sets of assemblages. I investigate how citizens who become DV targets due to their objectionable behaviours are presented, discussed, and then generalised as

specific social groups that demonstrate DV participants' grievances and relevant social problems in China. Since these incidents usually rely heavily on the meaning-making process in denunciations, I focus on how DV participants frame actors and interactions, and the development of their original denunciatory posts in selected DV incidents. Similar to Chapter 2, relevant Chinese cases were first identified through theory- and topic-driven keyword searches in the WiseNews database. After identifying key cases, the original denunciatory Sina Weibo posts were collected. After the data collection, in-depth qualitative analysis of the framing provided by DV participants on selected cases was conducted. Specifically, I analysed framing devices adopted by participants in selected cases based on Linström & Marais's checklist (2012). I first focus on a specific case that took place in public transportation. The woman who tried to stop the train from leaving was named and shamed for her behaviour in a public discourse that emphasises her identity as a teacher, a mother, and a woman. The second finding is generated from a set of cases against citizens with nice cars. It is found that there is more scrutiny over individuals with luxurious cars if they do something objectionable in the public space. DV participants usually present a binary framing of the rich versus the vulnerable to make the public shaming even more meaningful, which demonstrates grievances and class struggles in Chinese society. Both findings illustrate that DV is not only a means to punish the targets, but also a public discourse where participants communicate their grievances and demonstrate the norms and values in which they believe.

In Chapter 4, I then cast my gaze on another alarming trend in China: the increase in nationalistic DV incidents. Four high-profile cases are selected, in which Chinese citizens are accused of betraying the motherland and are therefore publicly named and shamed on Chinese social media platforms. Even though these cases were high-profile, and it is not hard to identify these DV targets due to large amounts of media coverage, I believe that there are ethical reasons to avoid naming targets directly in this article so that less undesired digital visibility and thus less harm can be brought to the targets. The selected four cases took place in 2017, 2018, 2020, and 2021. In these cases where the surveillant assemblages were temporarily energized, different actors and nodes are activated and contribute to how the information flows, including social media users as DV participants, professional new media content creators, as well as state media and institutions. Therefore, I collect representative data from each of these actors

and nodes within a month after each incident happened. In these nationalistic DV assemblages, power is imposed by the DV participants on DV targets via the construction of national identity and exclusion of “the traitors”. To understand how such power abuse and dominance are produced and reproduced (van Dijk, 2001, p.96) in public discourses in contemporary Chinese society, van Dijk’s socio-cognitive approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA) is conducted on the collected data. I argue that targets in such incidents experience intersectional vulnerabilities as female social/intellectual elites who are disharmonious with mainstream Chinese values such as patriotism. Due to the temporality of the assemblage formation, such intersectional vulnerability is unpredictable and has severe consequences, potentially resulting in self-censorship and intellectual women's constant fear of being victimised by nationalist, populist, and misogynistic DV assemblages in China.

In Chapter 5, I then focus on a type of DV assemblages that has caught increasing global attention in recent years: cancel culture. In this type of DV assemblages, celebrities or public figures as individuals are targeted, shamed, and boycotted for various reasons. The dynamics of such assemblages is more complex due to the involvement of fandoms. To better understand how fans perceive and engage in the DV against and the cancelation of their idols, the chapter is mainly informed by ten semi-structured, in-depth interviews carried out between June 2020 and October 2020. The interviewees are ten female self-identified Xiao Zhan fans (aged 19 to 29), who are Chinese citizens yet live (in addition to China) in various countries (the Netherlands, the US, and Australia). The chapter is also informed by existing primary and secondary sources of how both cases develop. Public posts on (social) media platforms, press coverage, and public statements by celebrities are consulted to identify key actors and events, and to illustrate the discursive shaping of conflicts. These key documents not only shape the case analysis but are also pivotal in the sense-making process of the participants. The timelines and public discourses of chosen case studies are formulated to supplement the interview data and analysis. I argue that fans’ engagement with their idol’s cancelation can be understood through the lens of neo-tribalism. In contemporary society, fandoms are neo-tribes, yet they are constantly framed in conventional politics, which leads to potential conflicts: consequently, negotiation is needed between fans’ neo-tribal and conventional political identities.

In Chapter 6, I go beyond the strict boundary of DV – justice-seeking targeting individual citizens – and extend my investigation to a case of nationalistic justice-seeking targeting a brand. I examine the nationalistic sentiment demonstrated in the case of the 2018 Dolce & Gabbana advertisement controversy. While seemingly a bit off the topic of this thesis, because it is a case against a brand (and its founders) instead of only individuals, this case provides a good entry point to see the dynamics between various actors in the offence-taking and justice-seeking processes from a meso-level perspective. I identify the key agents engaged in the incident and examine the capital they held, chose, and/or challenged by conducting a detailed analysis of the incident timeline and the framing employed by agents. I collected and cross-checked factual information about key actors and decisive moments in the escalation of the incident provided by both Western and Chinese news outlets. The public opinion report published by SNSDatamining served as a supplementary source to identify key social media influencers, celebrities, watchdogs and netizens and their posts (SNSdatamining, 2018). I then examine how different agents used framing to influence the incident and negotiate their capital (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Adopting Bourdieu's field theory, I interpret the interactions between actors involved in the development of this incident and argue that these interactions demonstrate the capital conversion between actors in the filed global luxury fashion. This can provide a framework for understanding these developments that may be translated to analyse incidents of cancellation in other fields.

Finally, in Chapter 7, based on all the empirical research I have conducted, I work towards a non-normative theoretical framework to understand the social consequences brought by the proliferation of DV. Follow Trottier's (2019) line of inquiry, I investigate DV through the lens of surveillance studies, understand the common features of DV practices, and analyse its social and structural impact instead of adopting a case-by-case approach. It is important to note that I invoke some cases to illustrate my arguments without analysing their impacts individually. I argue that the social implications of normalising the mediated hybrid surveillant assemblage of DV can be understood as an unmanageable and intensified context collapse of individuals' everyday life and the punishment imposed on them, where power imbalance is constant and determines the degree of the cross-contextual punishment of individual DV targets.

# Chapter 2.

# An Historical Overview of Digital Vigilantism in China

**Chapter 2. An Historical Overview of Digital Vigilantism in China**

The 2006 *Cat Torture Case* marks one of the first efforts of online collective action against an individual citizen to protect a shared value (Han, 2018)—in this case, animal rights and welfare. A video clip of a woman crushing a kitten's skull with her high heels led to a large-scale campaign to expose her identity on an online forum, *Mop Forum*. The woman's personal information—including her name, job, address, and phone number—was published online after a four-day search (ibid.). Due to this campaign's social impact, some press followed the story and reported on the case, but only afterwards. The incident ended with the woman's resignation from her job but without the government's direct involvement or her employer. While the expression "social death" was yet to trend in the public discourse at that time, this woman was socially dead after this incident. This case's process is relatively straightforward, with two major actors involved: the cat-torturing woman and the angered Chinese netizens.

In November 2016, a Chinese female student, Jiang Ge, was killed in Japan. The killer was her best friend Liu's ex-boyfriend. Later, on Sina Weibo, the victim's mother, Jiang Qiulian, published Liu's personal information, their private conversations and the phone call recording in which Liu's parents insulted her, and blamed Liu and her family for Jiang Ge's death and denounced their indifference. Small-scale attention on this case and shaming on Liu was observed, but the incident did not yet make a nation-wide impact. However, in November 2017, after a commercial online media channel, *Jumian* [*The Situation*], published a special issue on this incident, interviewing and setting up a meeting for the two parties, the incident immediately became a national trending topic on various social media platforms, leading to further and larger-scale shaming and harassment of Liu. Meanwhile, Liu and several public opinion leaders started to question Jiang's mother's motive, which triggered some netizens to shame her. People's Daily, the newspaper directly run by the Chinese government, also discussed the moral and legal implications of this case in a commentary (People's Daily, 2017). In January 2018, two public opinion leaders who supported Liu posted about disputes between themselves and Liu and exposed their previous attempt to sway public opinion, which turned many former supporters against all three of them. This incident's process is complex,

with various actors involved, and controversies lasting more than one year on multiple social media platforms.

Netizens' practice of collectively naming and shaming targets, as well as seeking the targets' social death in incidents similar to above-mentioned cases, is often named *wangluo zhengyi* [online justice] in China. Some influential cases of this phenomenon are studied through the concept *new media event/incident* (also known as *Internet event/incident*) by Chinese media scholars (Fang, 2014; Zeng, Zhong & Liu, 2014; Liu, 2015; Wu & Liu, 2018), which has been widely used since Qiu and Chan's (2009, 2011) co-edited book *New Media Events Research*. In the early 2010s, this concept was usually broadly and descriptively defined as "public events where large numbers of citizens participate in often unorganised, autonomous online efforts to express their sentiments and opinions, address collective needs, or influence public opinion and policy" (Jiang, 2010b, p. 1). However, this descriptive definition is unproductive in contemporary society, since almost all influential public events are entangled with new media (Qiu & Miao, 2016). Therefore, scholars suggest using this concept as an analytical perspective to understand how power dynamics between social actors are formed in such cases (ibid.; Wu, 2014). Bearing this analytical perspective in mind, I intend to study not only Chinese online justice cases that are historically significant as new *media events* (Dayan & Katz as cited in Qiu & Miao, 2016), but also common cases that demonstrate how Chinese citizens seek personal justice by retaliating against individuals online. Hence, online justice in China is studied in this thesis as digital vigilantism (DV), a more specific concept coined by Trottier (2017), referring to citizens' engaging in practices targeting an individual's online visibility for retaliation or punishment when they perceive that individual as breaking certain legal or moral boundaries. Three elements are crucial for defining DV: (i) the targets of DV activities are individuals, instead of social or state institutions; (ii) DV activities are primarily conducted for retaliating against or punishing the targets, instead of only for truth-seeking or initiating social movements (despite the possibility of containing or further developing into truth-seeking or social movements); (iii) unlike the commonly-used concept cybersecurity vigilantism (Silva, 2018), which refers to non-state actors using informal means to counter criminal behaviours, digital vigilantism counters not only formal crimes but also any behaviours that are deemed offensive. The practices adopted by vigilantes to retaliate against, punish, or

cause the social death of perceived offenders—the *repertoire* (Moncada, 2017)—include recording and publishing evidence online, identifying and making individual's information visible online without his/her consent, shaming, physical violence, and/or the threat of using physical violence (Trottier, 2017).

Since 2006, when the *Cat Torture Case* marked the national influence of this phenomenon, DV has been widely adopted by Chinese citizens to defend social norms and values shared by groups and communities. Through comparing the above two cases, some changes of Chinese DV practices seem to emerge: (i) the process is longer and more complex; (ii) more actors and stakeholders are directly involved in the development of cases, especially key opinion leaders, professional media, and the state; (iii) DV incidents are fomented on multiple social media platforms simultaneously with more significant social impact; (iv) the justifications of DV incidents can spark more controversies. Even though the comparison based only on these two cases is insufficient for a direct conclusion, it warrants further investigation on the historical development of DV incidents in China.

When discussing the relationship between DV activities and society, Trottier (2019) proposes a tentative DV model explaining the dynamics: on the one hand, DV activities are conditioned by many aspects of society, such as morality, group identity, confidence in the state, platform settings, legislation, and media cultures; on the other hand, mediated policing and denunciation in DV cases can in turn shape and influence these social conditions. Based on this model, changes observed in DV practices can provide a window to see which and how social conditions have changed in China from 2006—especially (media) technological, social-cultural, and political conditions. This chapter, therefore, aims to address the historical changes of digital vigilantism in China and situate these changes in relation to contemporary Chinese technological and socio-political development by adopting the concepts of mediation and mediatisation. I argue that these changes can be understood as a demonstration of the *mediation* and *mediatisation* of justice-seeking in China. The former concept analyses the immediate and concrete impact of communicating via a medium, while the latter focuses on the long-term and structural impact of media as an independent social institution (Hjarvard, 2008b), both of which will be further discussed in the later part of this chapter.

### Understanding digital vigilantism in China via human flesh search

The concept of digital vigilantism has not been widely applied in empirical research in the Chinese context. However, in addition to the previously mentioned general concept *new media events*, another concept that closely resembles DV, *human flesh search* (HFS)—also often called *Internet crowdsourcing*—has been extensively studied. It refers to voluntary online participation that attracts and demands citizens' collective efforts to conduct a people-powered search to identify a target or reveal the truth (Heng, Lin, Xu, Zhang, & Zhao, 2019). Unlike DV, HFS can sometimes be triggered by non-offence-based reasons—such as identifying an attractive person—and it only refers to one repertoire (Moncada, 2017) of DV, which is seeking and publishing individuals' personal information (doxing). Therefore, HFS cannot be regarded as equivalent to DV. However, the HFS literature is still relevant for studying Chinese DV given that most HFS research focuses on cases triggered by perceived offences, and most of the participants in HFS cases also resort to other DV repertoires in addition to doxing.

Researchers have approached HFS from various perspectives. A significant proportion of HFS research emphasises the legal and ethical implications of HFS in cases that target civilian individuals. Cheung (2009) examines the legal case in which Wang, whose personal information was made public on the Internet due to his infidelity and who sued websites for privacy violation, and suggests an urgent need to reform personal information and privacy laws. Examining the same case, Bu (2013) advocates for more specific regulations and laws, and suggests that the rise of HFS as a form of online vigilantism will lead to dramatic restrictions imposed by the government. In addition to the above-mentioned points, Zhang & Gao (2016) also consider the self-regulation of Internet service providers and social campaigns of privacy protection and morality as potential solutions. When approaching HFS from a legal perspective, the implied normative judgement is mostly negative, with concerns about privacy and violence.

Another group of scholars mainly discusses the social and political implications of cases that target government officials. They argue that anti-corruption HFS shows the awakening of Chinese civic consciousness (Cheong & Gong, 2010) and

helps to hold officials and government accountable for their behaviours and claims (Gao & Stanyer, 2014). While most research demonstrates a cautiously positive attitude towards such cases targeting officials, some scholars also take its complexity into account. Gorman (2016) points out that while HFS targeting officials damages the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) 's legitimacy, it also acts as a safety valve for social frustration and a channel to gather and evaluate public opinions. The nuances between the central government and local government also determine how these incidents develop: citizens are relatively free to criticise the local government, while attacks on the central government are largely suppressed (Herold, 2008).

When the cases are not chosen discriminatively based on their targets, most of the research ends with the argument of HFS being a double-edged sword. Chen & Sharma (2011) argue that HFS both fights and deters illegal and unethical behaviours, and invades individuals' privacy and potentially discourages Internet usage. A similar conclusion is provided by Chang & Leung (2015), arguing that HFS can both help punish bad behaviours and maintain social justice, as well as damage people's lives and reputation. This type of research provides a sound basis for studying HFS and DV in China, yet hardly taps into a more in-depth analysis.

Compared to various scholars' historical approach to study the broader new media events (Fang, 2014; Zeng et al., 2014; Liu, 2015; Wu & Liu, 2018), HFS researchers usually refer to HFS as a monolithic and continuous phenomenon without change. This tendency leads to a partial picture of HFS, as the ever-changing social conditions in contemporary China are not accounted for. One research effort that bridges this gap is Feng's (2012) quantitative empirical research. He concludes that HFS incidents before 2007 are mainly triggered by unethical acts, while concerns about public interests become the dominant causes after that year. Feng's research on HFS illustrates the need to look into and contextualise potential fundamental changes in Chinese HFS. While useful, Feng's data include HFS cases not triggered by offensive conduct, meaning that they are not all DV cases. Moreover, his data collection ends in 2011, which makes his findings and arguments not directly applicable to this chapter's scope. Besides, China has experienced many technological, political, and societal changes since President Xi took power, especially in relation to media, including

the fast development of digital technologies, increasing ideological propaganda, and tightening control over public opinions (Repnikova, 2017). These call for in-depth research on historical changes of DV, a form of mediated collective action, in relation to the current social conditions in China.

In the previous HFS literature, discussions on social media platforms are provided only in a more general manner, with insufficient attention to specific technological features related to netizens' practices. Meanwhile, computer science scholars provide analyses on how specific platform features and networks enable fast and large-scale dissemination of information (L. Cheng et al., 2012; B. Wang et al., 2009; F. Wang et al., 2010) while leaving socio-political factors out of consideration, which is understandable given their disciplinary focus and approach. However, to address the research question of this chapter comprehensively, both aforementioned perspectives should be considered. This need can be addressed by introducing the concept of *platform affordances*. First coined by Gibson (1977), *affordance* refers to the possibility of action offered by a given technology, which is later applied to media studies as the possibility provided by media's technological, aesthetic, and social characteristics that enable, limit, and structure social communication and interactions (Hjarvard, 2014). By using the term affordance, researchers can include analyses of both the materiality of technology (Hutchby, 2001) and the perceived affordances (Norman, 1999), enabling discussions on how technological characteristics—platform features in the case of studying social media—create possibilities for users, as well as how users' agency impacts these possibilities.

Therefore, inspired by the historical approach taken by Feng and above-mentioned new media events scholars, and adopting the concept of media affordances, this chapter sets out to identify historical developments of Chinese DV by constructing and examining a database of empirical DV cases from 2006 to 2018, and then develop an in-depth analysis of the dynamics between DV activities, technologies, and the Chinese society.

**Methods**

I first construct an empirical Chinese DV case database for the years 2006 to 2018. Because DV cases depend on weaponising the target's online visibility, they

can be collected based on the amount of media attention the incidents acquire. Therefore, cases that gain coverage from major news outlets from 2006 to 2018, including traditional and social media, are collected. The collection is conducted through theory-driven keyword searches mainly in WiseNews Database, supplemented by Sina Weibo searches. WiseNews Database is chosen because it is the world's largest database for Chinese news coverage, ranging from print to the web and social media content at the amount of over 470,000 sources dating back to 1979 (Wisers, 2018). Even though the search results on Sina Weibo are incomplete due to deletion and censorship, data collected on Sina Weibo can serve as a verification of previously-collected WiseNews data as well as a supplementary dataset due to the platform's central role in presenting public opinions in China (Jiang, 2010a). Based on the definition of digital vigilantism and the term "human flesh search" that is often used by Chinese media, the following combination of keywords are used: (i) "fennu" [angry], which indicates being collectively offended, AND "wangluo baoguang/wangbao" [online exposure] OR "wangyou bao" [netizens report on someone], which refer to rendering targets visible online; (ii) "fennu" [angry] AND "renrou" [human flesh] OR "renrou sousuo" [human flesh search].

The constructed database includes 1265 popular Chinese DV cases occurring between 2006 to 2018. Cases are coded thematically and inductively in the following categories: *initiator(s), platform(s)* used by the initiator(s) and participants*, target, repertoire(s), justification(s),* and *outcome*. *Initiator(s)* is coded into organised/existing groups or individuals. The *platform(s)* used by DV participants include foreign platforms, forums/Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs), personal blogs, video-sharing platforms, Sina Weibo, WeChat (including Moments, group chat, and public account), and others. The *target* refers to the individual who is perceived to have violated certain formal or informal rules, such as laws, regulations, moralities, or some orders that are established by various non-state actors (Moncada, 2017). In this chapter, the *target* (deemed by participants) is coded into civilian, government personnel, and celebrity. *Repertoire(s)* refers to the practices that vigilantes utilise to retaliate against others (ibid.), which in this chapter is coded into publishing visual evidence, seeking and/or publishing personal information (doxing), boycotting, harassing, physical harm, and reporting to the institution(s). *Justification(s)* looks at the way vigilantes publicly legitimise their activities (ibid.), which is coded into

*abusing public power/resource*, *animal brutality*, *economic crime/conflict*, *incivility*, *indifference/disrespect/insulting*, *sexual offence, sexual scandal*, *demonstration of wealth/social status*, *traffic transgression*, *unpatriotic speech/action*, *unprofessional/unsafe conduct*, *violence/physical harm*, and *others*. *Outcome* refers to how the case concluded, which is coded into *with institutional punishment* (when administrative or legal punishment from the government and any form of punishment from the target's employer is publicly announced), *with no institutional punishment* (when there is no institution involved or the institution announces no punishment after its investigation), and *unclear* (when no clear decision or no follow-up announcement are is made after the initial institutional response of starting an investigation). It should be noted that in categories of *platform(s), repertoire(s),* and *justification(s)*, multiple codes can be applied to one case.

After the initial analysis, codes were grouped by year, counted, and compared in order to identify characteristics, changes, and trends of DV in China, supplemented with a close reading of some representative cases in order to provide a more detailed and in-depth description and analysis of general codes in the later discussion.

**Results**

Based on coding and initial observation of the constructed case database, several characteristics and trends of Chinese DV activities can be identified. The most prominent characteristic of Chinese DV cases is that they are mainly initiated by individuals spontaneously rather than existing organisations. Among the 1265 Chinese DV cases between 2006 to 2018, there are only eleven cases that are started by organisations, most of which are media companies. Compared to DV activities in some countries like Russia (Gabdulhakov, 2018) and Slovakia (Vicenová, 2020), Chinese DV cases are rarely initiated by vigilante groups with a clear organisation and mission. This may result from the Chinese government's tight control over civil society, especially on activities potentially leading to collective actions (Herold, 2008). As demonstrated in Table 1, justifications provided by Chinese DV participants are highly diverse, ranging from illegal conduct to unethical behaviours, to some more controversial or less universal norms, with *violence/physical harm* as the most common justification. In many

cases, multiple justifications are provided. For instance, a single anti-corruption case often includes combined justifications of *abusing public power/resource* and *sexual scandal/violence*. The justifications that rank top three in case numbers are illegal conduct, followed by conduct deemed unethical or immoral in China (e.g., *disrespect*, *incivility*, *sexual scandal*, *animal brutality*, *demonstrating wealth*).

Table 1. Justifications of DV activities in China between 2006 to 2018

| **Justification** | **Case Number** |
|---|---|
| Violence/physical harm | 388 |
| Abusing public power/resource | 235 |
| Sexual offence | 132 |
| Indifference/disrespect/insulting | 125 |
| Incivility | 118 |
| Sexual scandal | 115 |
| Animal brutality | 83 |
| Unprofessional/unsafe conduct | 81 |
| Economic crime/conflict | 76 |
| Traffic transgression | 70 |
| Demonstrating wealth/social status | 62 |
| Unpatriotic speech/action | 45 |
| Others | 62 |

In terms of the yearly differences in case numbers of each justification, visible patterns are found in categories of *abusing public power/resource*, *sexual offence*, *incivility*, *demonstrating wealth/social status*, and *unpatriotic speech/action*, while other categories remain steady or fluctuate without an identifiable trend (see the detail data in Appendix). The numbers of DV cases triggered by *abusing public power/resource* and *demonstrating wealth/social status* shown in Figure 1 demonstrate a shared trend of a higher frequency between 2007 to 2012. The decrease of *demonstrating wealth* from 2011 can be well explained by the intimidation caused by the high-profile Guo Meimei case[6] in that year. Meanwhile, the case numbers of some other DV justifications exhibit an opposite trend. Cases caused by s*exual offence* and *incivility* are gradually taking up a larger share during the period 2009 to 2018, which seems to be in accordance with relevant ideological debates or trendy topics on Chinese social media. In terms of DV activities targeting individuals who are spotted performing unpatriotic speech or actions, the case number peaks in 2007 and remains high until 2009, which can be explained by the relatively high level of nationalism in those years due to the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Schneider, 2018). After a low point in 2012, such DV cases experience a mild increase from 2013 to 2018.

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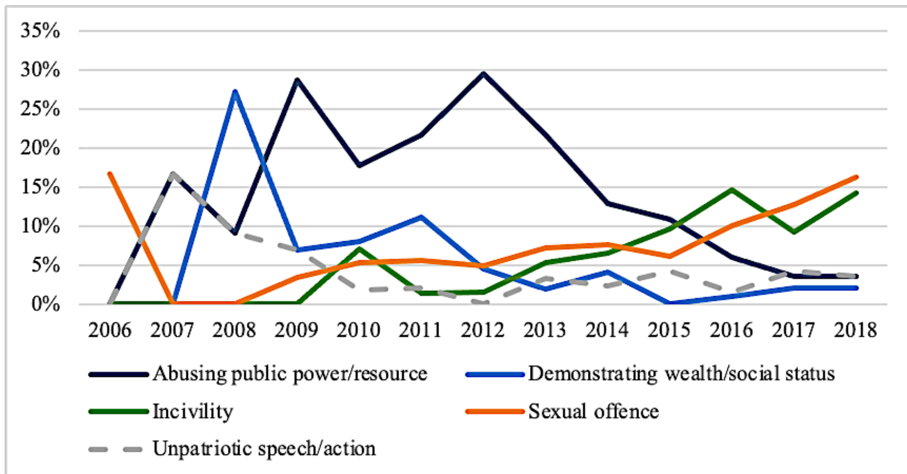
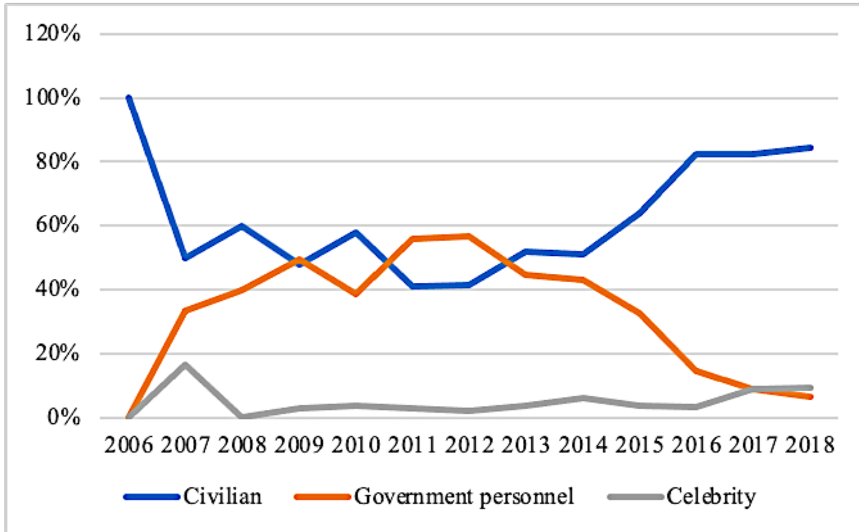
[6] In June 2011, Guo Meimei, a Chinese Internet celebrity, caused outrages on Sina Weibo and Chinese society due to her posts of conspicuous consumptions and lavish lifestyle, which also led to Chinese citizens distrust of Red Cross China because of Guo's verification as a senior manager in a company affiliated with the Red Cross.

Figure 1. case number percentages of DV incidents with selected justifications from 2006 to 2018



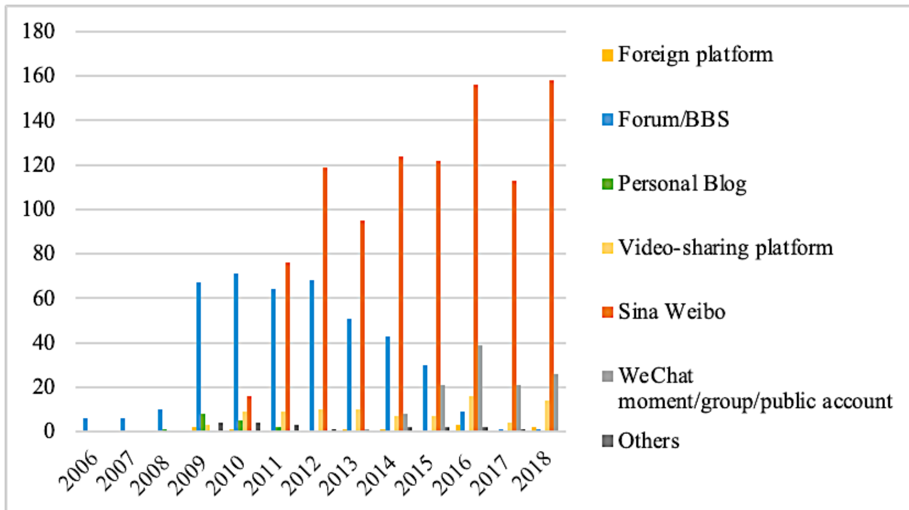

The data also show changes in DV targets, as can be seen in Figure 2. From 2007, DV cases targeting government personnel start to increase gradually, matching Feng's (2012) finding of the shift in focus of HFS to public causes from 2007. In accordance with the trends of DV incidents caused by *abusing public power/resource* and *demonstrating wealth/social status*, such type of DV activity demonstrates a downward trend after 2012 while the percentage of DV cases targeting civilians understandably exhibits a reverse trend. Celebrities are always a marginal group to be targeted, yet a slight increase from 2016 can be observed from the data, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. case number percentages of various DV targets from 2006 to 2018



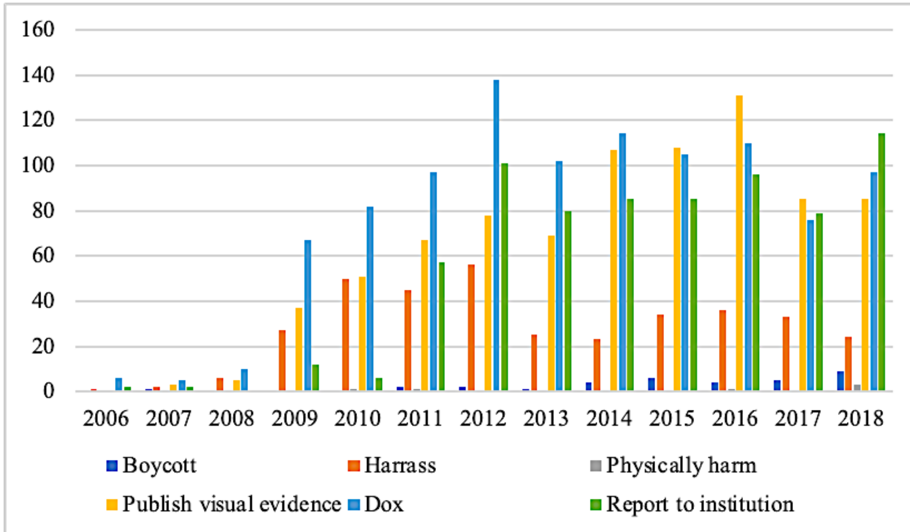

Illustrated by Figure 3, Chinese DV participants' platform choices vary during the thirteen years as well. From 2006 to 2010, forums and bulletin board system (BBS) are the main digital platforms used by DV participants, such as Mop Forum, Tianya BBS, Baidu BBS, and various local forums. These platforms share certain features and affordances that facilitate and encourage DV activities, which will be further explained in the discussion. As for Sina Weibo, even though it was established in 2009, it did not become the primary platform for DV activities until 2011, which coincides with the start of large-scale civic engagement on Sina Weibo in that year (G. Yang, 2012). Since then, Sina Weibo has always been the central platform for DV activities. In addition to Sina Weibo, WeChat—with its functions of Moment, group chat, and public account—has also become a popular platform for citizens to conduct DV from 2014. Some DV activities use both WeChat and Sina Weibo for maximum visibility and scale of the targets' social death. Besides above-mentioned major platforms, video sharing platforms are often used by DV participants since 2009, usually for initial discovery or evidence storage. The changes of platform choices coincide with the general Chinese Internet development history (Yang, 2012), and require further detailed analysis specifically in relation to Chinese DV activities in the latter part of this chapter.

Figure 3. platforms used by DV participants in China between 2006 to 2018



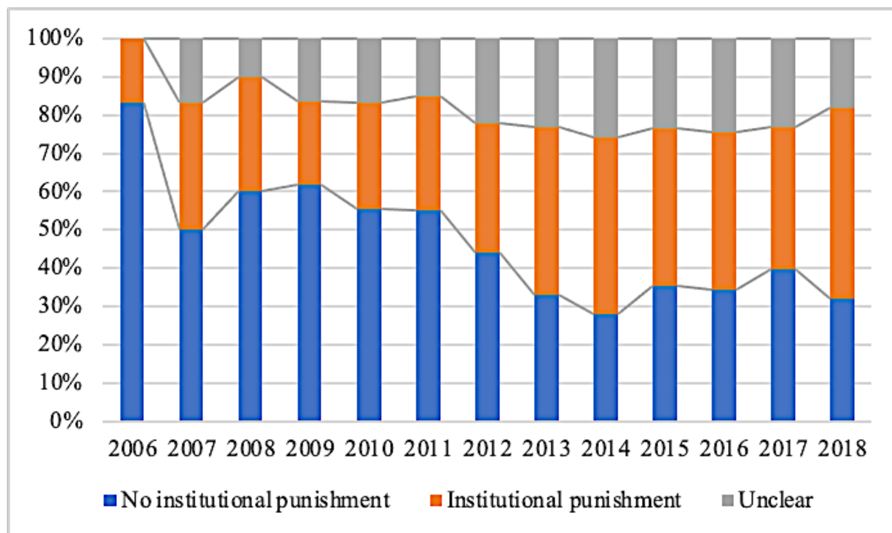

During these thirteen years, Chinese DV participants developed various combinations of repertoires in different periods. As observed in Figure 4, by 2010, the major repertoires are *doxing*, *publishing visual evidence*, and *harassing*—often used simultaneously. Since 2011, the repertoire of reporting to institutions starts gaining popularity among Chinese DV participants; in 2018, there are cases where participants only resort to *reporting to institutions* without *doxing*. The shift of repertoire combinations occurs in 2011 when Chinese DV participants replace *harassing* with *reporting to the institutions* when encountering offences. The data also shows that physically harming targets is always the least chosen repertoire. There is also a soft increase of *boycotting* as a repertoire since celebrities became DV targets more often from 2016.

Figure 4. DV participants' repertoire in China between 2006 to 2018




In accordance with the increase of reporting to institutions as a repertoire, there are fewer DV cases left unpunished by the institutions, as shown in Figure 5. This trend is of interest when taking other trends into consideration, namely the decrease in cases targeting government personnel and in cases with the justification of abusing public power/resources.

Figure 5. case number percentage of DV case outcomes in China between 2006 to 2018




**Discussion**

*Mediated justice-seeking: platform affordances and DV practices*

DV is a form of mediated justice-seeking, and participants' chosen platforms are crucial in shaping the practice (Trottier, 2019). Therefore, to further understand the changes demonstrated in the results, an in-depth analysis of these platforms' features and affordances concerning DV practices is required.

In the late 1990s to early 2000s, China entered its Web 2.0 era, which is signalled by the emergence of various video-sharing websites, blogs, and some early-stage social networking sites (Fang et al., 2014). Forums and BBSs are especially popular in this era, including Mop Forum established in 1997, Tianya BBS in 1999, and Baidu BBS in 2003. These platforms enable Chinese citizens to share experiences, emotions, and opinions through the connected network (Yang, 2012). These include content that angers citizens and challenges shared values and norms, such as infidelity and animal abuse, as shown in the justification of DV incidents. Afforded by certain features, these forums and

BBSs enable and encourage Chinese netizens to (re)act on offences they discover online, hence DV as a phenomenon emerges and is popularised.

One crucial feature of forums and BBSs that makes citizens feel more secure in voicing their concerns on (perceived) social injustice is the relative anonymity these platforms can provide users during their prime time in DV activities (2006-2011). Even though identity verification on the Internet was discussed and experimented with in a small scale by the state since 2007 (Wang & Hu, 2016), it was not until 2012 that a universal identity verification system was put in place (Fu, Chan, & Chau, 2013). Another critical feature of forums and BBSs is that they afford the formation of various communities, invoking DV activities against offences that challenge their shared values and norms. Most of these platforms connect people based on locations (e.g., local forums), lifestyle topics (e.g., Tianya Club), or beliefs/ideologies (e.g., Utopia Forum), which frequently blurs the online and offline boundaries (Yang, 2009, 2012). Because of the security provided by anonymity and the shared identity provided by the community, citizens engaged in these communities tend to feel more secure, obliged, and motivated to share experiences and emotions about social injustice that also concerns other members, who share local knowledge or values without the necessity to physically meet up. Some platforms also have features that provide their users with more tangible incentives. For instance, Mop Forum introduced a virtual currency system, in which users can acquire virtual currency when they provide useful information to other users' inquiries (Pan, 2010). Such incentive helps to create a larger pool of willing informants and thus produce more successful doxing. With positive experiences of acquiring useful information, users are more willing to make inquiries on the platform, leading to a cycle that fosters DV as a commonly accepted and utilised practice on these platforms.

After 2010, Sina Weibo starts to replace forums and BBSs as the primary platform for DV activities and some of its features afforded DV activities differently compared to its predecessors. Sina Weibo is a microblogging platform established in 2009, with similar features to Twitter such as a character limit and the function of tagging other users with "@" and following/participating in certain topics with "#". The function of tagging other users facilitates DV participants to name and shame the target, as well as to inform relevant official accounts of the target's misbehaviour. The possibility of following/participating

in topics helps the participants to coordinate an ad hoc community that partakes in DV activities, keeps themselves updated about an incident without the need of establishing a follower/followee relationship, and increases the visibility of an incident by posting and commenting with a related hashtag (Bruns & Burgess, 2015). Sina Weibo also allows users to directly embed up to nine pictures in a post, which is taken advantage of by users for both presenting evidence and incorporating longer texts in a post by turning them into pictures to circumvent the word count limit. Videos from some third-party platforms are also allowed to be embedded on the Sina Weibo platform, which makes it more convenient for visual evidence of offences to spread. By allowing longer texts in the form of pictures, the platform facilitates storytelling for DV activities, which is important for the initial circulation in these incidents (Trottier, 2019).

After 2014, WeChat also joins Sina Weibo and becomes a key platform to initiate or participate in DV activities, and its half-public-half-private features (Wang & Gu, 2016) change some patterns of how DV is conducted. WeChat is a software launched by Tencent in early 2011 that soon developed into the most popular social media platform in China (Tu, 2016), affording users to send texts, voice messages, videos, and pictures in both private chats and group chats. WeChat groups can be created conveniently for various purposes, and there can be from three up to 500 members in each group. In addition to affording users' interpersonal communication, group chats can also function as a semi-public sphere to some degree (Wang & Gu, 2016), with pre-existing offline communities with a large number of members that are organised based on location (e.g., expat group, yezhuqun [property owners' group]), employment (e.g., company group), cultural identity (e.g., fan group), etc. Users are usually engaged in multiple groups simultaneously, and they might or might not share the same ideologies, values, and norms. WeChat groups, therefore, afford DV activities by providing pre-existing communities, organisation and mobilisation possibilities, and potential sites of debate. Similarly, WeChat Moments, a function allowing users to post their own or comment on others' status or things of interest, also offers DV participants a wide range of audiences based on personal connections, and a site to initiate and/or mobilise others to participate in DV activities. Besides, WeChat also complicates DV activities with its public account feature. This feature is established in 2012 and enables individuals and organisations to send multi-media and longer content, unlike microblogging, to their subscribers;

users of this feature can be regarded as media outlets (ibid.). With no word count limit and the possibility to embed more visual material, WeChat public accounts can develop better storytelling and more in-depth analysis or critique of an event; with the subscription system, it is also easier for content not to be missed by users. Besides, the public account content can be conveniently forwarded to users' Moments and chats by clicking the embedded "Forward" button, which also boosts the circulation and dissemination of content —in this case, content related to DV activities.

All these features and affordances of social media platforms used by the DV participants clearly amplify the consequences of public naming and shaming, causing different levels of social death of the targets by damaging their reputation and depriving them of various social relations.

*Mediatised justice-seeking: media logic and DV practices*

As the previous discussion explains, DV practices are very much influenced by relevant affordances of platforms used by participants in different periods of time. However, some changes cannot be explained solely by different platform affordances. Instead, considerations of how Chinese society, especially institutions, have changed during the thirteen years in relation to DV practice changes are essential.

One of the most visible changes—the decline of DV cases targeting government personnel for abusing public power or resources after 2012—is highly related to changes in Chinese political institutions. The official anti-corruption campaign led by Xi Jinping and Wang Qishan in 2012 institutionalised anti-corruption activities to maintain the legitimacy of the CCP by solving one of the biggest sources of public anger—corruption among CCP officials (Zhao, 2016). In December 2012, the party established strict restrictions on government personnel's public and private behaviour, set up more official internal reporting channels online, and impose severe punishment on caught corrupted officials (Yuen, 2014). These implemented measures put government officials under high pressure, and most corruption cases were dealt with within the party. Hence, there is less corruption left for the public to expose. The second potential factor of the decline is the better (social) media literacy among government personnel.

Many anti-corruption DV cases between 2009 to 2013 demonstrate the targets' lack of media literacy leading to their demise in the social media era. Some targets are discovered from their media presence, such as *tianjiayan juzhang [director with Sky-high-priced Cigarette]*[7] and *biaoshu [watch uncle]*[8], who are spotted demonstrating luxurious consumption in media coverage and therefore doxed; some are put under the spotlight because of their misuse of certain technology, such as *Weibo kaifang [get a room on Weibo] Director*[9]. Due to the media literacy improvement among the overall Chinese population and the government's efforts of educating officials to be cautious about their public image on media (Wang, 2020; Zheng, 2013), opportunities to discover this type of target decrease accordingly. Let us also not forget the tightened control over public opinions since Xi took power in 2013 (Repnikova, 2017), which can be another factor resulting in fewer DV cases targeting corrupted officials that successfully gain citizens' attention and media coverage. Therefore, changes in Chinese political institutions influence the justice-seeking via DV activities.

Meanwhile, as data has shown, institutions – especially the government – are increasingly involved in the outcome of DV incidents, which can be attributed to the increasing amount of verified accounts of government branches on Sina Weibo (CNNIC, 2019) and the increasing popularity of reporting to institutions as a DV repertoire. Also, DV cases with justifications that coincide with trendy public debate topics (such as sexual offence), are more relatable (such as incivility), and are supported by the government (such as unpatriotic conduct), are on the rise in the researched period. In addition, when choosing targets, Chinese DV participants start to give slightly more attention to celebrities. These trends illustrate the affordances of social media platforms and, more importantly, illustrate the *mediatisation* of Chinese citizens' justice-seeking activities. Mediatisation theory has been widely applied in studying the dynamics between media and society, especially in relation to politics, claiming that media

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[7] In 2008, a district-level official Zhou Jiugeng was found consuming luxurious cigarettes in meetings covered by media, causing online suspicion and official investigation.

[8] In 2012, a provincial-level official Yang Dacai was given the nickname "watch uncle" or "watch brother" because netizens found his luxury watch collection that is clearly beyond his salary in his previous media presence, causing online outrage and later official investigation.

[9] In 2011, a city-level official Xie Zhiqiang was mocked by netizens and then investigated by the local government because he misunderstood Sina Weibo as private messaging platform and flirted openly with his mistress.

has become an independent social institution that has its own logic and can challenge the logic of other social institutions (Hjarvard, 2008a; Mazzoleni, 2017; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008). This concept has also been used to discuss the interaction between digital media and political transformation in China (Sun, 2007; Sun, 2014; Meng, 2016; Zhang, 2019; Wang, 2020). Following this path, I explore how Chinese DV as a justice-seeking activity is mediatised based on three signals of mediatisation in the context of social media platforms identified by Hjarvard (2014): (i) the platform has created public spheres for other social institutions, and thus become the connecting node between them; (ii) its logic accommodates as well as challenges the logics of other social institutions, thus becoming an integral part of them; (iii) (social)media-related personnel and processes became part of the organisational changes in other social institutions.

These signals can be identified in the case of Chinese DV participants seeking justice on social media platforms. When shifting from forums/BBS to Sina Weibo, all actors are better connected on the platform, including the target, participants, and various social institutions, making Sina Weibo the connecting node.

Secondly, the popularity logic of social media platforms accommodates and challenges moral and/or political logics in the mediated justice-seeking process. Van Dijk and Poell (2013) establish popularity as one of the social media logics, referring to the platforms' efforts to enhance the platform's value and that of its users by strategically increasing certain users' visibility with various incentives. Such manipulation is afforded by standardised metrics and mechanism such as "likes" and "trending topics". Under this logic, topics and content that can generate a large-scale emotional response, especially fear and anger about outer-groups (Berger & Milkman, 2012), are favoured by platforms, and therefore strategically also favoured by social media content producers. However, the logic of vigilantism or any form of justice-seeking is supposed to be punishing and/or reintegrating perpetrators through various legal and/or informal measures (Nussbaum, 2016). These two varying logics and their dialectical relationship can be observed in Chinese DV cases. On the one hand, DV targets are punished when they are made visible unwantedly (Trottier, 2017) by the participants with the assistance of social media platform features and logics, illustrating how these

platforms' popularity logic assists and accommodates the vigilantism logic. On the other hand, the justice-seeking logic is challenged by social media's popularity logic, which can be observed in the changes of DV justifications and targets, when DV participants tend to focus on specific offences and targets partially because they stand to gain more visibility and sometimes rewards of varying kinds from their DV activities. The second signal of mediatisation proposed by Hjarvard (2014) can also be found in the increasing involvement of media actors, especially key opinion leaders (KOLs) and WeChat public accounts, in the development of (cases/events), taking advantage of the visibility brought by DV activities to acquire visibility and other incentives provided by platforms, which often interferes with the justice-seeking logic.

Lastly, Sina Weibo and WeChat have become an integral part of how actors interact with each other in the justice-seeking process. Reporting to institutions online by tagging relevant ones has become a crucial part of the standard repertoire combination for DV participants. Deleting the targets' social media content and cancelling their social media accounts has also become a common practice in response to the online naming and shaming for the target. These social media platforms, especially Sina Weibo, have become the predominant locale for relevant institutions to respond to DV reports and announce their decision on these matters. Hence, represented by Sina Weibo, social media platforms have been institutionalised by all actors, which signals the mediatised nature of justice-seeking in Chinese DV activities.

**Chapter summary**

By constructing and analysing a case database of DV incidents between 2006 to 2018, this chapter provides a comprehensive longitudinal review of DV activities in China. By adopting a perspective of historical development, I identify patterns and trends of Chinese DV activities instead of viewing them as a monolithic phenomenon, as was commonly done before. The analyses on these patterns and trends demonstrate that Chinese DV activities are mediated and more importantly mediatised justice-seeking practices, which are not only afforded by social media platforms but also influenced by their logic and conditioned by the ubiquitous state power in China. This overview, however, is not able to take into account DV activities that lack media coverage. Research on such less visible

Chinese DV incidents can also provide crucial knowledge about the Chinese media landscape and socio-political conditions because it can provide insights on factors that lead to a lack of news coverage and to state censorship.

This chapter provides an overall account of the traits and trends of DV practices in China, which establishes the foundation for the following chapters. The overview in this chapter will also be supplemented by more detailed and in-depth qualitative analysis on motives, public discourse, and social impacts of DV activities in China in later chapters, for a better understanding of the phenomenon. In Chapter 3, I dive into the media's and public's framing of DV cases regarding private transportation in public spaces and public transportation to further explore the identified trend of increasing DV cases triggered by incivility in public spaces. Considering the trend of more DV cases invoking nationalism, I analyse the media and public discourses in four high-profile cases targeting well-educated female “traitors” in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 focuses on how fans understand, experience, and react to DV activities against celebrities, often coined as *cancellation*, which responds to the identified trend of more incidents where celebrities are targeted. Some of these trends even have a spill-over effect on similar social phenomena, yet beyond the strict scope of DV, namely the cancellation of brands—instead of individuals—that are sparked by nationalism. I explore the meso-level societal impact of such cancellation by closely studying the 2018 D&G advertisement incident in Chapter 6. The overview of 1265 DV cases also inspires and enables my theorisation of DV’s societal consequences in Chapter 7.

# Chapter 3.

# Social Conflicts: Digital Vigilantism in Public Spaces

**Chapter 3. Social Conflicts: Digital Vigilantism in Public Spaces**

One of the trends I have identified in Chapter 2 is the increase of DV cases triggered by public incivilities. Hence, I discuss DV cases that demonstrate social conflicts in public spaces to start my empirical analyses on the DV assemblages in this chapter. Specifically, I focus on two types of public spaces, one being public transportation and the other one being private automobiles in public urban spaces. In these public spaces, there are laws, regulations, and moral orders that individuals are expected to obey in their activities and interactions. When these legal and social norms are broken, other citizens might feel entitled and compelled to denounce those perceived offenders with the intention of causing their social death.  By investigating how DV targets and their perceived offences are presented, discussed, and generalised as specific social groups, this chapter can thereby help to understand common grievances and relevant social problems in China that are implicated in DV. Since these incidents usually rely heavily on the meaning-making process in denunciations, I mainly focus on how DV participants frame involved actors, interactions, and the development of selected DV incidents.

For the first type of public spaces, I focus on one case study, *The 2018 Stopping the Train Incident*, to illustrate in detail how the framing develops in one incident. In January 2018, a woman impeded a train's departure because her husband was denied entry at the boarding gate. A passenger recorded and shared the conflict, and the video went viral. The woman was given a penalty of 2,000 yuan (roughly 300 USD/255 Euro) and later suspended from her job as a deputy dean in a primary school. She appeared in two interview videos before and after the punishment was announced. In the first interview video, for a private-owned short-video streaming website, she insisted that it was just a matter of ten seconds so that her husband could make it to the train and wondered why her behaviour was so poorly regarded. In the second interview on the CCTV (China Central Television) News Channel, she admitted that she was overreacting and caused troubles for both the railway staff and passengers, and wished to apologize, hoping that netizens would forgive her. However, this apology video was not able to save her from various forms of social death, such as reputational damage and severe career setbacks. There are two waves of denunciation in total in this case, the first one after the original video published, and the other after

the interview videos were released. Therefore, I analyse the frames in these three waves of denunciation and how these frames interact with each video that triggered the public reactions.

After the close analysis on the case study, I then look for framing patterns in 70 DV cases related to *haoche* [nice or luxurious cars, later referred as nice cars] between 2006 to 2018 that emerged from the historical overview of DV cases in the first Chapter. DV cases about car-related issues take place very often in China, in which hostility is openly expressed towards people with nice cars. Instead of diving into the development of each case in-depth, I intend to demonstrate another set of patterns in DV cases taking place in public spaces, to supplement the findings in the case study on one incident.

**From scrutiny to denunciation: The significance of framing in DV**

The scrutiny and discovery of perceived offences are typically understood as events that set off DV campaigns. Such offences include problematic behaviour in public spaces such as public transportations and roadways, but also statements that may have been uttered online. In most cases, such behaviour may already take place in conditions that are recognised as being "in public", yet subsequent responses serve to augment the visibility of the target to a wider audience, as well as reframe their behaviour in a denunciatory light. When presenting the visual evidence, DV participants also provide a description of the events leading up to their footage. In these original posts, DV participants editorialise and frame the offence with information they provide, including the identity of the perpetrator, the sequence of events, and any dialogue exchanged in the process. Consequently, the audience will perceive and evaluate the incident and involved actors under the influence of framing (Goffman, 1974; Reese, 2001), which is crucial in the later DV stages of offence-taking and denouncing targets and their behaviours. In addition to the initial discovery of offence, offence-taking also happens when a broader audience is exposed to the original denunciatory posts, which can lead to a larger scale and further rounds of mediated denunciation.

Such offence-taking and denunciation can be conditioned by participants' moral concerns, social identity, and their confidence in the institutions on relevant

issues (Trottier, 2019). Establishing moral grounds to frame an offence is typically based on pre-existing concerns already in public discourse. For instance, anti-paedophile vigilante groups operating in the United Kingdom might frame their campaigns in reference to high-profile incidents of child sexual abuse (Warrington, 2018). Yet such claims and grievances may equally be (re)articulated in response to an offence, especially those which may be rather exceptional in frequency or severity (Schneider & Trottier, 2013). While concerned with commonly held and even hegemonic values, denunciations themselves can be scrutinised in public discourse, and become subject to counter-denunciations.

Participants also frame DV incidents in ways that reflect or appeal to social groups they identify with. They may associate a place, a tradition, or an abstract value with the community which they believe they belong to and need to defend (Trottier, 2019). By framing the offence as a threat to these elements, DV participants are able to mobilise citizens who share the same social identity to denounce the target. On the other hand, participants may also be judged based on widely held perceptions of whoever is making a denunciation; for example, if they belong to a marginalised community. For example, while disparity between extreme wealth and precarity among citizens may fuel denunciations of offences symbolised by and revolving around nice cars, this disparity may potentially also serve to dampen or dismiss such criticisms.

How participants view the state's role in relation to offences also shapes their framing of incidents. DV activities can be framed or implied to be caused by the unwillingness, ineffectiveness, or ineligibility of the police to deal with the offence (ibid.). In cases taking place in public spaces, the framing of the police's role in incidents is especially important since such cases usually involve laws and regulations, which differs from cases focusing more on morality where the police may have no function, such as marital affairs or problematic speech.

Denunciation is thus a means to (re)frame an event in the above-mentioned perspectives, as well as a call to mobilise retaliation against the targets. A common mobilisation by digital media users is seeking the job loss of targets, notably when their employer is known and drawn into the denunciation through social media platforms (Milbrandt, 2020). In some instances, harassment and

harm (be they digital or physical) are also sought. Studying the framing in denunciations made against targets in the two chosen type of public spaces can therefore help to understand the moral concerns, social identities, and citizens' relationship with police in Chinese society.

**Methods**

Given the importance of the meaning-making process in denunciations, I focus my analyses on how DV participants frame actors, interactions, and the development of their original denunciatory posts in selected DV incidents. It is important to note that the chosen cases merely serve as a snapshot of some common practices and narratives in DV cases that involve public spaces, rather than an exhaustive summary of such practices and narratives.

For the 2018 Stopping the Train Incident case study, I collected the original denunciatory Sina Weibo posts and corresponding comments in all three waves. For the 70 DV cases related to nice cars, I collected the original denunciatory posts on forums or Sina Weibo. Some of the posts are no longer retrievable from the original platforms due to various factors, but they are archived in relevant news reports as direct quotes or screenshots, which made the data collection possible. For the cases whose original denunciatory posts could still be found, I also collected the ten comments with the most likes or interactions for each post as supplementary data. Afterwards, I conducted in-depth frame analysis on collected data. Specifically, we analysed framing devices listed in Table 2, which are adapted from Linström & Marais's checklist (2012, p. 33), adopted by participants in selected cases.

Table 2. Framing devices (adapted)

| Category | Examples |
|---|---|
| **Rhetorical Devices** | Word choice; metaphors; exemplars<br>Key words (presence and/or absence)<br>Sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgement<br>Concluding statements |
| **Technical Devices** | Photo/video captions, commentaries, and subtitles; leads<br>Photographs and videos<br>How is the development of incident described/shown?<br>How are the actors described/shown?<br>How are the actors labelled?<br>What elements are present or absent?<br>What are the information sources?<br>Who are quoted?<br>How are they identified? |

**Unqualified as a mother and teacher: 2018 stopping the train incident**

The first wave of public shaming started after the original video showed the target's transgression. In this video, the person behind the camera constantly reminds the woman of the illegality of her behaviour by asking her "do you know it is illegal to do so?" By doing so, the initial DV participant frames the women's behaviour as a legal transgression, which justifies his intervention. This shared video on Weibo provoked a large-scale vitriolic denunciation against the woman. There are three main frames in the the first waves of denunciation.

First, the DV participants frame the woman's behaviour as illegal, immoral, and uncivil. Following the frame in the initial shared video, the participants denounce the woman for the illegality of her behaviour by quoting Article 77 in *Regulation on the Administration of Railway Safety*. In addition, she is framed as an immoral and uncivil individual as she "has no respect of punctuality", "has

a horrible public manner," "is unreasonable and making a scene," and "endangers others' safety." By establishing this frame, DV participants justify their vitriol against the woman, calling her "psycho" and "trash," regarding her as "despicable" and "disgusting", asking her to "fuck off", and wishing for her to suffer in the future through "getting a divorce," "being beaten up," and "losing her job forever."

In addition to the negative framing of her behaviour, DV participants also frame this incident as a demonstration of her inability to uphold the standards required for her identity and social roles, which are a teacher, a mother, and a woman. Participants express concerns about her students and daughter: "I can't imagine what kind of people/person her students/daughter will become." She is regarded as "unqualified as a teacher/mother" and as having "tarnished the occupation/the title 'mother'." By starting the comments with "as a woman/mother/teacher," the participants imply a higher moral standard for these three identities. This frame is so dominant in the public discussion that some media shift their focus to perceived social issues surrounding these identities. For example, a special column titled *How Can Directors of Discipline Avoid Becoming Monsters Who Stop the High-speed Train?* on Tencent News, indicating that teachers and other authority figures are easily "alienated by the power they have at schools."

Another interesting frame targets law enforcement. In the original shared video, two railway officers were shown first trying to persuade the woman and then forcing her off the train. In the comment section, the participants criticise the officers for being too soft when forcing the woman out and giving her a penalty: "The law enforcements treat their own rules as shit; no wonder people keep breaking it." The participants do not only use this causality frame to attribute this incident to the inability of railway officers, but make a generalisation about the failing rule of law and weak law enforcement in contemporary China.

The second wave of public shaming took place after the woman's interview and apology videos were published on Sina Weibo. In this wave, the frame focuses on the (in)sincerity of her apology and the (im)possibility of her changing. Participants speculate about why she issued the apology in order to justify their continuous shaming. For example, her explanation of her behaviour is framed as

"finding excuses for her behaviour" and her sharing feelings about the punishment is interpreted as "admitting that she is only apologising because her life was ruined." Furthering this frame, the participants also provide an argumentative frame that the continuous public shaming is necessary because the woman is a bad person and can not change. She was accused of lying to gain sympathy: "she has her ID card in her hand on the video[10]. How dare she lie about such an obvious thing! Does she think that we are all retarded and have no common sense?" The participants then make a judgment that she deserves the public shaming and punishment of her life being ruined, and further decide that she should not be forgiven: "NEVER! She should never be forgiven" because "we won't need police if apology works." These frames demonstrate that DV activities in this case are punitive instead of reintegrative (Scheff, 1988, 2003), which means that when the target misbehaves, the public shaming takes place mainly to exclude her from the society directly, causing her social death. Therefore, DV can greatly harm a targets' social standing, perhaps more so than through other policing mechanisms, because an opportunity for rehabilitation is not provided.

### The rich versus the vulnerable: Scrutiny on nice cars

In terms of the DV cases involving nice cars in China, there are three types, including traffic conflicts (from minor to severe), demonstration of wealth, and corruption or government-related privileges. The most common type of car-related DV case is traffic conflicts. The severity can vary: a scratch, violating traffic regulations, physical violence, or injury and death caused by the driver. It is expected that citizens pay more attention to and try to find lawbreakers or individuals who harm people, but the cases that draw most of the attention are those involving nice cars. A typical framing of such incidents follows this pattern: a woman/man who drives a nice car brand harms a socially disadvantaged individual. High-profile cases of this type include "Maserati driver beat up food delivery guy" in 2017, "Lady driving luxurious car ganged up on security guard after a dispute" in 2016 and "Volvo driver insulted a taxi driver as '"inferior" in 2015.

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[10] In the apology video, the woman claimed that her husband had her ID card and that that was the reason she was so desperate to wait for him coming to the train.

Another prominent type of case is caused by the owners of luxurious cars showing off their wealth. In this type of case, the target does not have to overtly break any law. Rather, their vehicle serves as a form of conspicuous consumption that offends netizens and potentially raises questions about the legality of the acquired wealth. The *Guo Meimei case* mentioned in the first chapter is the most representative instance of this type and it even became a commonly agreed term to use when referring to people engaging in similar conduct (Link & Qiang, 2013).

Nice cars that demonstrate corruption or government-related privilege are also a common subject in DV cases in China. The *gongche* [public service car] has a connotation of government officials' privileges that lingered from a previous era when such privileges were commonly accepted. However, Chinese citizens started to realise how problematic it was to use public service vehicles for private affairs, and the Internet enabled them to voice such grievances. The access to so-called public service cars had been criticised as a symptom of corruption (Notar, 2014) because they were often used by officials for personal affairs, such as picking up children and travelling. This type of case gradually disappeared after Xi Jinping took power in 2013. The central government reformed the public service car system in 2014, cancelling the cars for officials who had a rank lower than sub-provincial (ministerial) level (Xinhua News Agency, 2014). Together with the public service car system reformation, the intense anti-corruption movement started by the central government may have contributed to the decrease of such cases (Ke et al., 2018).

Several characteristics can be identified in DV participants' framing. When a conflict is involved, as in most instances of the first type, people with nice cars are juxtaposed with disadvantaged people. The former is typically presented as blameworthy, while the latter are meant to elicit sympathy. Participants achieve such framing first by naming the car brand or simply using "haoche" to represent the target. The brands mentioned include Audi, BMW, Buick, Mercedes-Benz, Porsche, Land Rover, Maserati, Bentley, and Volvo. What makes the contrast more drastic is the emphasis that participants place on the vulnerable identities of the other party, for example, age (elder, child) or job (parking lot attendant, security guard, delivery man, taxi driver). These labels often emphasise physical vulnerabilities associated with age, and vulnerable social status brought by jobs

that are temporary, badly paid, and physically demanding. In addition, DV participants mobilise Chinese netizens by highlighting aggressive actions in which the target engages and/or the rude speech that the target utters. For instance, words like *insult*, *slap*, *beat up*, *break* (a body part), and *gang up* are often used to describe what the target did to the other party, and the targets often utter curse words or insults such as “you are inferior” and “you worthless security guard.” Pictures and videos are also presented as evidence of the transgressions. With these rhetorical and technical devices, DV participants frame traffic conflicts as the rich bullying the weak, which moralises incidents and both parties involved, and mobilises more Chinese netizens to become DV participants.

DV participants also generalise the target as a questionable social group and the incident as a problematic social trend in their framing. Even though the initial DV participants sometimes refrain from directly associating the target with a social group in the original post, their binary framing tends to provoke other participants to draw such links when they comment on and/or repost the original Weibo post. The fact that the targets are driving nice cars is often interpreted as an indication of the social group to which the targets belong, such as government officials, rich people, *heishehui* [mafia], *baofahu* [nouveau riche], and *chaiqianhu* [the relocated][11]. The participants then adopt such generalisations to make comments about certain problematic social trends. For instance, shaming from DV participants commonly include statements like “in this society, if you have the money, you will rule,” “It seems he’s connected to the mafia. Otherwise, how can he be so aggressive and audacious?” and “They are definitely the relocated. So rude and vulgar! You are rich, so what?” By associating the car brands to certain social groups, the Chinese DV participants voice their concerns, dissatisfaction, and anger about social problems, especially about the increasing gap between rich and poor (Jain-Chandra et al., 2018) and the consequences of such an increasing gap.

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[11] Chaiqianhu has a very negative connotation in Chinese. It refers to people who suddenly get a large amount of money because they are compensated by the government to relocate, which makes them rich but still rude and uneducated.

The absence of criticism against the police in participants' framing in these cases is intriguing. As mentioned before, DV participants often frame their activities as a result of the unwillingness, ineffectiveness, and ineligibility of the police to deal with the offence (Trottier, 2019). However, in Chinese "nice car" DV cases, most participants tag the official Weibo accounts of local police or relevant institutions, informing them of the offence and demanding reactions, without criticising or implying that the police are incompetent. Official local police accounts usually respond promptly, promising that they are looking into the case, soliciting more information, or announcing the outcome of cases. The absence of a negative frame about law enforcement in nice-car-related DV incidents, which is different from the explicit criticism against law enforcement in the previous case study, is potentially caused by the undivided attention paid to the "rich versus the vulnerable" frame.

Through the framing in their posts and comments, Chinese DV participants render nice cars meaningful when moralising the offence and shaming the target. Nice cars, and sometimes even common vehicles, have been symbolic in Chinese society. Before the reform and opening-up, private cars were associated with "a bourgeois lifestyle" (Zhang, 2017, p. 42) and passenger cars were only enjoyed by high government officials (Barme, 2002). Therefore, the word *gongche* has a connotation of privilege and political power originating from and lingering after that period. With the development of the car industry due to Deng's policy, the private car ownership rose dramatically in the early 2000s, and the connotation of cars also changed to some degree (ibid.). To own a car means to be able to live a modern, comfortable, and mobile life, which comes from and in turn indicates superior economic power. An imported foreign car is the most visible symbol of the modernity and social status of its owner (Hooper, 2007) because, in China, to own such a car requires resources beyond the means of an average salaried professional (Zhang, 2017). Therefore, nice cars have always been associated with social status and power in Chinese society. When people with different economic and social power interact and negotiate in streets, highways, and other traffic-related public spaces (Urry, 2000), this symbolic meaning is consolidated and amplified, which leads to the above-mentioned binary framing of the rich versus the vulnerable in Chinese netizens' DV activities against people with nice cars.

Hence, DV activities targeting people with nice cars can be regarded as a demonstration of struggles between different social strata in China. “Social strata” is a more appropriate concept compared to “social classes” to describe the distinct social groups in current Chinese society, because it focuses more on material and economic inequality without the strong political connotation the latter has in relation to the political struggle in the early years of the CCP’s rule (Zhang, 2017). In the past decade, income disparity in China has increased rapidly and China has become one of the most economically unequal countries in the world, with an estimated Gini coefficient of 47.3 points (Jain-Chandra et al., 2018). Such increasing wealth inequality can lead to a greater interpersonal hostility among social groups, due to perceived disadvantage and relative deprivation (Greitemeyer & Sagioglou, 2017). In Chinese society, this perceived disadvantage is consolidated by product brands that signify different powers to consume. In this case, car brands mobilise social groups that perceive relative deprivation to target seemingly advantageous social groups. However, it is important to point out that focusing on overt hostility between social groups often overshadows the long overdue discussion on structural issues that result in such increasing disparity, including unequal access to education (Anagnost, 2008).

**Chapter summary**

There are several characteristics emerging from the frame analysis in this chapter. Firstly, public shaming is mostly punitive, aiming to directly exclude the targets from society, thus achieving the social death of the targets, instead of having a reintegrative aim. When doing so, the participants also often use the cases to make a generalised negative comment about a social group. Even when a single individual is being targeted, the denunciation itself also mobilises social categories. Offensive conduct in trains and on streets is rhetorically coupled to the broader representation of particular social groups. This frame of generalisation is then often picked up by media discourses when they quote directly from online posts, reach out to friends and family of those who are implicated, and invite readers to comment and share reports as well. This is partly out of necessity, so that journalists can produce a news-story out of what often begins as a social media post. Yet it also demonstrates how the DV assemblages work: through temporary partnerships and collaborations with a

range of actors. As such, even toxic and anti-social discourse may become a core component of routine news cycles. Another commonality identified in this chapter is gendered shaming, either explicit or subtle, which signals a broader social narrative in Chinese society. These patterns will be further illustrated and discussed in next chapter, where I investigate the public and media discourse in Chinese DV cases with another theme.

# Chapter 4.

## Intersectional Vulnerability: Digital Vigilantism and Populist Misogynistic Nationalism

## Chapter 4. Intersectional Vulnerability: Digital Vigilantism and Populist Misogynistic Nationalism

In this chapter, I shift my focus to another trend identified in the historical overview chapter: the increasing DV cases set off by nationalism. In May 2017, a Chinese girl who was an overseas student in America found herself a target of naming and shaming by millions of Chinese social media users. The controversy was caused by her commencement speech at the graduation ceremony of the University of Maryland, in which she contrasted air quality in China and in America as a metaphor to contrast the freedom of speech in the two countries. Her speech caused a national debate where two sides focused on different parts of her speech and regarded her speech as a "lie/suck-up" or a valid comparison with some "exaggerated and flawed arguments." Her personal information and all her social media accounts including Sina Weibo, Facebook, and Linked-in were exposed and spammed. She even became a meme afterwards. Most of the Chinese DV participants regard her as an "unpatriotic, ungrateful, and lying traitor". Such shaming continued even after she closed all her social media accounts. In recent years, such incidents that are triggered by unpatriotic behaviours are not rare. In these incidents, citizens identify and expose individuals' unpatriotic conduct or speech and call for shaming and/or other forms of punishment, such as being expelled from their university or fired from their workplace. These incidents are connective actions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) in which participants seek the social death of individuals who offend a certain value, patriotism in this case, through public naming and shaming.

The rising nationalism on Chinese social media in recent years has led to many discussions in both the public media (Deng & Lin, 2020; Yang, 2021) and academic research (Liu, 2019; Luqiu & Kang, 2021; Schneider, 2018; Zhang et al., 2018). In many cases, Chinese citizens are triggered by international relations events to demonstrate nationalism on social media platforms, and the nationalistic sentiments and anger are usually directed to the opposing countries—either their government, as abstract concepts, or their products. Examples of this include the American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia and the conflict between China and Japan over Diaoyu Island (Gries, 2004; Schneider, 2018). In recent years, Chinese citizens have also taken offence at brands that "disrespect" or "insult" China, which is illustrated in the 2018

Dolce & Gabbana Advertisement Incidents (in Chapter 6) and H&M's announcement about the Xinjiang issue (Friedman & Paton, 2021). In the aforementioned nationalistic incidents on Chinese media, the targets are usually "the outsiders/others" (foreign countries/brands), yet we should also pay attention to the recent rising nationalistic sentiments and hostilities that are directed towards "the insiders/one of us" —fellow Chinese citizens—which are often displayed in the form of DV. Just as in the incident described at the beginning of the chapter, there are many DV cases targeting Chinese citizens who are perceived as betraying the motherland by publicly speaking against China (Deng & Lin, 2020) or coming back to China from foreign countries during the second wave of the Covid pandemic (Trottier et al., 2021).

In these nationalistic DV cases, the boundary between "us" and "the others" seems no longer determined by nationality or culture as commonly understood but becomes rather relational, contingent, and value-loaded. Therefore, to investigate how DV participants rationalise their exclusion of fellow Chinese citizens with certain characteristics, such as gender and class, from the national identity can shed light on how the nationalist identity manifests in contemporary Chinese citizens' daily life and discourses, and the dynamics between such identity construction and various Chinese social institutions. In addition, these nationalistic DV cases present alarming risks to general Chinese citizens of becoming a target of such incidents, which warrants an in-depth analysis of how national identity is constructed and how individual citizens are put at risk of social exclusion through public and media discourses in Chinese DV cases. By adopting the theoretical framework of assemblage and intersectionality, which will be further elaborated in later sections, this chapter investigates the intersectional vulnerability that individuals experience in nationalist DV incidents in China, and how power relations are captured temporarily in the DV surveillant assemblage.

## China's digital nationalism

The topic of Chinese nationalism has generated great research in media studies, politics, international relations, culture studies, etc. Building upon the theoretical framework of the imagined community (Anderson, 2006), most scholars study Chinese nationalism as the phenomenon related to socially,

culturally and politically constructed collective identity. However, there have been varying explanations on how and by whom such national identities are constructed. While some scholars pay more attention to the state's role in encouraging and shaping Chinese nationalism (Gorman, 2017; Zheng, 1999), the rising of grassroots populist nationalistic sentiments also attracts the scholars' attention in studying Chinese nationalism (Huang, 2021; Leibold, 2010; Zhang, 2020). There is an increasing number of scholars developing a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics between "the state" and "the people" in the formation of Chinese nationalism (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Repnikova & Fang, 2018; Schneider, 2018). On the one hand, the CCP constructs a shared narrative of five-thousand-year glory (Yu, 2014), hundred-year humiliation (Callahan, 2004, 2006), and a promising national future that will only take place with the CCP's leadership (Y. Guo, 2004); on the other hand, Chinese citizens have been constructing different versions of national identities by constructing and attacking "the others." The boundary between "us" and "the others" has also gradually changed throughout the years.

From the late 1990s to early 2010s, many cases of such othering stemmed from international relations and historical events where the two sides of "us versus them" have already been clearly provided: "us" being the Chinese nationals and "them" being the abstract idea of certain countries and their citizens (also as an abstract collection/mass instead of individuals). For example, Chinese online forums and BBSs saw a large scale of nationalistic sentiments rising after the 1999 American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the 2001 collision of Chinese and American fighter jets over the South China sea, with increasing hostility against the US military and government (Gries, 2004). Historical and contemporary Sino-Japanese events like the Nanjing Massacre and the Diaoyu Islands dispute have also generated shared nationhood on Chinese search engines, forums, BBSs, and social media platforms (Schneider, 2018; Suzuki, 2007). In these episodes of Chinese digital nationalism (also often referred to as cyber nationalism or online nationalism), the foreign states, governments, or "people" as a mass are usually the target of othering for Chinese citizens. Such abstract othering sometimes manifests more concretely as the boycotting of foreign brands. Many brands have been boycotted by Chinese citizens simply because they are from countries in dispute with China, such as Carrefour in 2008, many Japanese brands in 2010, and Lotte in 2017.

As the Internet and communication technologies (ICT) develop and social media become more integrated into daily life, there are more cases of Chinese nationalist citizens targeting the "others" in the form of specific brands and individuals. Different from the reasons for boycotting the brands mentioned above, from the late 2010s, more foreign brands—such as Dolce & Gabbana, Balenciaga, and H&M—are boycotted due to what is done and said on behalf of the brands, often related to racism, China's territorial disputes, and China's human rights issues (Friedman & Paton, 2021). Similarly, foreign celebrities are called out and often boycotted for *ruhua* [insulting China], such as Kiko Mizuhara, Jimmy Kimmel, and John Cena (BBC News, 2016; Bloomberg News, 2021; Blum, 2013). These brands and celebrities are "the others" in both the essential and the behavioural level: their foreign nationalities make them the outsiders who are naturally put under more scrutiny regarding their attitudes towards China, and their ruhua behaviours make them the outsiders to attack and thereby strengthen national identity construction (Anderson, 2006). Not only are the celebrities with foreign nationalities attacked as "the others", but Taiwan and Hong Kong celebrities who are supposed to be "one of us" undergo increasing scrutiny. Chinese citizens identify, expose, boycott, and request official bans against celebrities who are deemed to overtly state or subtly indicate their support of Hong Kong's or Taiwan's independence or their criticism of the CCP, mainland China, or mainland Chinese (Kim, 2019; Victor et al., 2019). As Chinese citizens become more used to and comfortable with this sequence of actions, the standards of conduct deemed unpatriotic and punishable becomes more ambivalent, such as not posting celebratory/mourning messages on Weibo on important dates and not stopping collaboration with ruhua brands, which is very concerning.

Patriotic Chinese citizens also target other fellow Chinese citizens, demonstrating the complexity of constructing national identity through exclusion. While Chinese with foreign ties are no longer deemed traitors by default (Jia, 2005), Chinese overseas students and expats, in general, are still constantly scrutinised for their loyalty to the motherland (Huang, 2021). Meanwhile, there are more common Chinese citizens being put under such constant scrutiny. Citizens are publicly named and shamed on social media for posing disrespectfully in front of a national hero's statue, for posting about their love for a foreign culture, or for making inappropriate posts or comments that indicate traces of un-patriotic

sentiments. This trend has been fittingly compared to the Big Character Posters and Red Guards in The Culture Revolution (Gorman, 2017), and scholars are rightfully concerned about the prevalence and consequences of such peer surveillance and social exclusion.

**Methods**

Adopting the theoretical framework of assemblage that emphasises the emergent and unstable characteristics (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000), I approach the Chinese nationalist DV phenomenon by studying cases where Chinese citizens' desires to control emerge and the information flows are temporarily fixed. Four high-profile cases are sampled, in which female Chinese citizens with higher education backgrounds are accused of betraying the motherland and are therefore publicly named and shamed on Chinese social media platforms. It is not the intention of this chapter to present these four cases as representative of all Chinese nationalistic DV incidents or to argue that only Chinese intellectual women are targeted due to nationalism in China. Instead, following the recent scholarship on online shaming with a feminist perspective (Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Saresma et al., 2021; Lee & Abidin, 2021), this chapter focuses on how DV can be used as a form of gendered violence and how its discourses are constructed when the targets have certain social identities – in this case, young intellectual women.

Even though these cases were high-profile, and it is not hard to identify these DV targets due to large amounts of media coverage, I believe that there are ethical reasons to avoid naming targets directly in this chapter so that less undesired digital visibility and thus less harm can be brought to the targets. The selected four cases took place in 2017, 2018, 2020, and 2021, including the case introduced at the beginning of the chapter.

Table 3. Sampled targets' information

| Target | Gender | Education | Accused of | Year |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Y | Female | Bachelor's degree in the US | Ruhua and *henguo* [hating the motherland] commencement speech | 2017 |
| T | Female | Master's degree, enrolled in a PhD programme in China | Ruhua and henguo online speech | 2018 |
| K | Female | Master's degree in China; Chinese government-sponsored exchange in the US | Ruhua and henguo online speech | 2020 |
| X | Female | Bachelor's degree in Australia | Ruhua and henguo speech; *maiguo* [sell out the motherland] | 2021 |

In these cases where the surveillant assemblages were temporarily energised, different actors and nodes are activated and contribute to how the information flows, including social media users as DV participants, professional new media content creators, and state-owned media institutions. Therefore, I collected representative data from each of these actors and nodes: (i) ten most popular posts and their ten most popular comments for each case (40 posts and 400 comments in total) on Sina Weibo are collected to represent social media users as DV participants; (ii) five most popular relevant articles from WeChat public accounts for each case (20 articles in total) are collected to represent professional new media creators; all relevant news articles and commentaries by People's Daily and Xinhua News Agency (12 pieces in total) are collected to represent the state-owned media and institutions. Four rounds of data collection took place

within a month after each incident happened: 2017 May and June 2018 April and May 2020 March and April, and 2021 March and April.

In these nationalistic DV assemblages, power is imposed by the DV participants on DV targets via the construction of national identity and exclusion of "the traitors." To understand how such power abuse and dominance are produced and reproduced (van Dijk, 2005) in public discourses in contemporary Chinese society, van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA) is conducted on the collected data. CDA regards language as a social practice and an enactment of power in societies (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Among various approaches to CDA, van Dijk's (2005) socio-cognitive approach focuses on the theoretical discourse-cognition-society triangle. Van Dijk defines discourse, such as conversational interaction, written text, and images, as a communicative event. Cognition refers to personal and social cognition, such as beliefs, goals, evaluations, and emotions. For van Dijk, society can be both the local face-to-face interactions and the global socio-political structures such as social groups, institutions, political systems and many other abstract properties of societies and cultures (ibid.). The analysis from van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach focuses on linguistic markers such as lexical style, syntactic structures, semantic meanings, rhetorical figures, and topic choice. These linguistic markers build the foundation for understanding a discourse through the analysis of topics and macro-propositions, analysis of local meanings, analysis of subtle formal structures, analysis of context models, and analysis of event models. As for the social cognition level of analysis, knowledge, attitudes, ideologies, norms, and values presented in the discourses are investigated. The last level of analysis in van Dijk's triangle—society—discusses the social situations, actions, actors, and societal structures involved and illustrated in the discourses. The analysis will be presented in a mixture of public discourse and media discourse. In the analysis and discussion, public discourse refers to the discourse presented in DV participants' posts and comments, while media discourse refers to the discourse presented in articles from Chinese commercial media and state-owned media.

**To shame and exclude: The power of Chinese nationalist discourses**

*"The ungrateful traitors"*

The fundamental discourse in Chinese nationalist DV cases is that patriotism is an unquestionable norm. The participants and commercial media shame the targets for not loving their country, which is seen as violating a universal value and basic human virtue. First, this discourse is established by direct lexical choices such as "the bottom line of loving your country". Participants also strengthen this discourse by using concession syntax such as "even if" and "we can…but". For instance, participants put *patriotism* before *freedom* by commenting that "it is saddening to see people smearing China and taking the opposing stance against the national interest of our motherland, even if it is for the pursuit of so-called freedom" (Sober Pie). Sometimes, such concessions can also be expressed more subtly: "this has nothing to do with political ideologies; this is the bottom line of being a human" (Li). This discourse is often directly followed by a discourse of exclusion of targets in an explicit manner, such as "… so she isn't qualified as a Chinese" or "she should just give up her Chinese citizenship". It is important to note that explicit exclusion is usually found in social media comments and commercial media outlets, while hardly seen in formal state institutions' responses or state-owned media.

Building upon this discourse, participants and commercial media further shame and exclude participants as "the ungrateful traitor". This is accomplished by defining the targets' speech or behaviour as ruhua or henguo, and then constructing contrasts between the past and present and between China and other countries. In most posts and articles, there is no nuanced discussion of the nature of the targets' speech or behaviour. Instead, the terms ruhua and henguo are directly applied without reasoning and explanation. Targets are put in a vulnerable position because they lose the power to define and explain their actions. The "traitor" discourse is further amplified with the addition of "ungrateful" adjectives by constructing various sets of contrast. The first set of contrast focuses on the "hundred-year humiliation" and current strong China. Just as many scholars argue, state-led patriotism education emphasises national humiliation to raise nationalism among Chinese citizens (Callahan, 2004). DV

participants resort to this discourse and very often combine rhetorical devices such as parallelism and rhetorical questions. For instance,

> Shame on *jingri* [Self-deemed Japanese]! [angry emoji] Don't you remember the Nanking Massacre, the comfort women, the Yasukuni Shrine? How much blood and tears did our people have to shed to win the war so that we can have peace today?

Painful historical events were named and used as examples of how Chinese people as a community have been mistreated. To qualify as a Chinese requires remembering these events and not forgetting the hatred towards those countries that perpetrated such mistreatment, and their people. Such shaming does not directly relate to the specific behaviour or content of speech; rather, similar or identical narratives can be observed in two different incidents involving the same "enemy". Such discourse of past humiliation is further intensified by descriptions and stories of national heroes' sacrifices.

> What did it mean to be a communist party member? [...] So many soldiers froze to death, and their bodies were just left in the snow-covered ground ... they sacrificed their lives for the country and the people! Why? Because of love! The love for the motherland and its people! (Feng).

This contrast narrative continues with the celebration of a contemporary safe, strong, and economically successful world power, which is also posed as a contrast to the situations in other countries.

> I have read so much about Syria these days. I am extremely proud of being Chinese when comparing (Syria) to our military drill in the South China Sea. It is not easy for China to achieve what we have today. We must be thankful for the lives and blood that countless national heroes sacrificed. Since I know about xxx [the target's name], it pains me to see people defending her, saying it is about freedom of speech; it is obviously insulting China, insulting all Chinese! (Hua)

As shown in this Sina Weibo comment, contrasts are drawn between current China and the old China, especially in the late 19$^{th}$ century to the early 20$^{th}$ century, and between China and some other countries experiencing political,

economic, or humanitarian crises. Such contrasts are made to demonstrate that the current good life Chinese people are living should be attributed to the efforts made by the vague mix of the nation, the CCP and the heroes, which led to the conclusion that good Chinese should be thankful instead of criticising the "country". With economic growth and technological development soaring in China in the past decade, Chinese citizens also have higher confidence in their country and construct the contrast between China and Western countries (Huang, 2021).

> My fellow people who have studied abroad all understand the phenomenon of "going abroad makes you love China more." [...] the convenient payment with QR codes, public transportation, Taobao, the safe environment even in midnights ... All these convenient and safe lives that we have already been used to come from our strong motherland. In contrast, we all experience different levels of inconvenience and unsafe environments in the foreign countries we study in. Our motherland behind all these has managed to become stronger step by step, with perseverance, and with endless efforts, despite being so weak in the past. How can we not love our country? (INSIGHT)

By emphasising such contrast, the DV participants and media establish an "ungrateful" image of the targets, legitimising the exclusion of the targets.

The discourse of ungrateful traitors is present not only in DV participants' comments and posts but also in commercial and state-owned media outlets. It demonstrates the wide range of shaming and exclusion facing the targets and the impact of the state-led nationalism narrative (Callahan, 2006; Yu, 2014).

*"The corrupted elites"*

Another discourse observed in these incidents is shaming and excluding the targets because they represent corrupted vested interests and social elites. Unlike the across-the-board appearance of "the ungrateful traitors" discourse, this discourse is mainly observed in DV participants' posts/comments and articles from commercial media outlets. The discourse attacks the targets based on the perceived wasted national resources, the targets' immorality, and the potential harm to Chinese society.

To legitimise the shaming and exclusion, the DV participants first establish narratives about how much resources the country, the people, and their parents have invested in the targets. Posts and comments question "how much of the taxpayers' money did she waste" after it was exposed on social media platforms that T was a graduate student in a famed university and got admitted to a doctoral programme inside China. When the targets study abroad and the argument about taxpayers' money is relatively invalid, the topic of their parents' investment and sacrifice is chosen instead:

> Even though her parents did not support [her wish to study abroad] and did not have the ability to afford the high expenses, they still *smash their iron pots and pans into pieces and sell them as scrapped iron*[12] [sacrifice all they have] to support her dream of studying abroad (Yufucaijing).

The financial support from the targets' parents can also lead to participants questioning the legality of the family's wealth: "someone should investigate how her parents got all the money for her study in America!" To support their suspicion, DV participants and commercial media also take the targets' social media posts out of context as evidence. Target K tried to acknowledge her privileges in her Sina Weibo post: "I acknowledge that I owe the resources and platforms provided by my parents and the city I live in for any of my success today." However, this post is used against her as evidence of her potentially corrupted parents and her boasting about her elite background.

The lexical choice of *jingzhi'de'lijizhuyizhe*[13] [meaning vested interest; literal translation: sophisticated/excellent self-serving egoists] is commonly used across all four cases. The term was coined by Professor Qian Liqun from Peking University when criticising the current Chinese higher education system (Tencent Sixianghui, 2015). It was later taken out of context and then popularised by users and public accounts on social media platforms to mainly criticise students and young professionals who graduate from famed universities

[12] A Chinese saying that uses hyperbole to emphasise the sacrifice one makes. In Chinese: 砸锅卖铁

[13] In Chinese: 精致的利己主义者

and are deemed selfish. An example of using this term in these cases is as follows:

> This Miss Y is definitely a model of *jingzhi'de'lijizhuyizhe*. These people are best at doing and saying the "right" thing in different situations. If they can get attention by blabbing controversial things, they will blab. Worst case scenario, they just say they're sorry afterwards. [...] they don't have any integrity or sense of justice in their mind. [...] if necessary, they can kiss ass and try their best catering to the "political correctness"; [...] For Miss Y type of people, praising the air in America is just an act and her showtime. Behind all the virtue words, they only love their dirty soul, and their futures that are carefully planned. (USAmamaquan)

Using this term to label the targets, DV participants assume ill motivations behind targets' speech or behaviours and ascribe to them moral flaws: selfish, calculating, and untrustworthy. This discourse is also closely linked to the previous "ungrateful" discourse, which states that all these investments and opportunities have been in vain, and that the targets are ungrateful. By constantly using adverbial clauses of purpose without providing any evidence such as "to please Australians as well as maintain her luxurious lifestyle, X started to smear her own country" (Nanxiaoxi), the DV participants and commercial media also perpetuate assumptions about targets' moral flaws and present them as facts, which leaves no room for the targets to defend themselves against the overwhelming amount of such discourse. The commercial media outlets also use contrast to further emphasise the targets' lack of morality. For example, a Chinese Harvard graduate's speech is used as a contrast to Y's speech. When narrating the story of the Harvard graduate, special emphasis is put on the fact that he comes from a poor rural family, and he intends to bring back knowledge and technology to improve his hometown and all other poor rural areas in China.

The DV participants further their argumentation for socially excluding the targets by discussing the (potential) harms when these elites are in power. "It is a trend that Jingris are getting higher degrees and becoming a large part of elites. We should be careful; otherwise, the country will be in danger if they are allowed to work in the government or hold power!" However, it is important to note that

when presenting the perceived harms of these "social elites", DV participants are vague and flexible about who the "social elites" are. In the four chosen cases, "social elites" can refer to professors and lecturers in universities, high-level intellectuals, communist party members, overseas students, and students in famed universities; it can also refer to families with political, financial, or social resources. By creating this vague "us versus them" division and implying the demand for more opportunities and resources for "the people", the DV participants and commercial media demonstrate populist sentiment in their discourse.

*"The ugly slut"*

Another common discourse in all four cases demonstrates the misogyny in Chinese online public discussion (Jing-Schmidt & Peng, 2018). Shaming and exclusion are directed based on the targets' gender (female), which is supposed to be irrelevant to the original discussion on patriotism. Like the "corrupted social elites" discourse, this discourse is present mainly in social media posts, comments, and articles from commercial media outlets. The most obvious demonstration is that both DV participants and commercial media overtly use gendered insulting words including *slut*, *whore,* and *succubus* to describe and shame the targets. These lexical choices are made to label and insult the targets for their immorality based on their sexual impurity, which illustrates a form of widely accepted misogyny (Ging & Siapera, 2018; Vickery & Everbach, 2018). To support the misogynistic lexical choices, the participants and commercial media also extensively discuss the targets' romantic relationships and sex lives. In the articles from commercial media, unverified and unsupported claims about one target's involvement with foreign men are made: "she had over ten white boyfriends in the past five years, and she even participated in an orgy with no less than 15 white men once" (Nanxiaoxi). Ironically, a different version of the same target's sex life is provided in the article from a commercial media outlet: "she maintains sexual relationships with over ten men at the same time." This discrepancy in presented "facts" about the same person shows the lack of credibility in these commercial media articles. Following the discourse provided by commercial media, DV participants also make speculations about and shame the targets by commenting, "I bet that she always sucks up to white men" or "I can see that she is one of those whores who allow whichever Japanese man to

fuck her". Such discourse is problematic not only because many of these claims are unverified or pure speculation, but also because it is based on the ideology that women with sexual desires, specific preferences, and active sexual life are immoral and should be shamed. By discussing the targets' personal lives, both the media and public discourse make private issues into public issues.

Another present gendered shaming discourse is based on the targets' appearance. Commercial media usually use uncensored photos—often with unflattering angles, facial expressions, or demonstrating undesired qualities of women—in their articles. Pictures of targets with a shaved head, smoking, tongue-out, or sitting with spreading legs are selected to accompany the texts. With the material provided by commercial media, DV participants attack the targets' appearance based on these presented photos in their (re)posts and comments, such as "If she is so rich, why didn't she get herself some plastic surgery? I get scared whenever I see her face" and "she looks like a monster with that shaved head". Some participants even make memes and GIFs with these unflattering pictures, accompanied by mocking or vitriolic texts, such as "breath in deeply for the sweet air" and "forcing an ugly and fake smile". These memes later became pop culture references on various Chinese social media platforms, which prolonged the undesired visibility and shaming of the targets. Like the slut-shaming, the ugly-shaming also illustrates deep-rooted misogyny and ideology that a woman's appearance is part of her morality. Both discourses are still very effective methods to destroy women's reputations and cause their social death in Chinese society.

**The intersectional vulnerabilities in Chinese DV assemblages**

The discourses presented in the previous section demonstrate that the Chinese public and media construct the Chinese nationality by normalising patriotism and emphasising various sets of contrasts between the present versus the past and between China versus other countries. However, in these discourses, the targets are not only shamed and socially excluded because of their perceived offence to the shared national identity, but because of their other identities as well, in this case the class identity of (perceived) social/intellectual elites and the gender identity of women. Such shaming and exclusion discourses illustrate the temporality and dynamics of distributed power between different nodes/actors,

which leads to unpredictable intersectional vulnerabilities in the surveillant assemblage of Chinese nationalistic DV.

*The temporality of national identity construction*

In these discourses, the national identity is constructed in the DV surveillant assemblage temporarily intersecting targets' class identity and gender identity. The discourse of targets being social/intellectual elites yet also corrupted strengthens the discourse of them being "ungrateful", further excluding them from the Chinese society for being disqualified from being Chinese. Meanwhile, the fact that targets are female adds another aspect for the DV participants and media to disqualify the targets as Chinese: being Chinese women yet (perceived) having sexual desires for or relationships with foreign men. The class and gender identities are supposed to be irrelevant in judging whether an individual is unpatriotic and hence whether they should be excluded from Chinese society; however, the discourses in these four cases clearly demonstrate that other social identities that an individual possesses can lead to a temporary expansion of evaluation criteria in national identity construction: social/intellectual elites should be extra grateful, and women should refrain from sexual desires especially for foreign men. In the DV surveillant assemblage, targets are not publicly shamed and excluded based on a specific, stable, and previously-agreed-upon national identity; rather, they are shamed and excluded when their other social identities intersect with a national identity that is general, fluid, and assembled temporarily. Such temporality of national identity construction put individuals at risk of unpredictable shaming and exclusion based on any of their social identities and past speech and actions, which can lead to a large scale of self-censorship among citizens.

*The synergetic desires and distributed power*

In these DV assemblages, the power is distributed among various actors with distinct yet synergetic desires to capture and use the information. The DV participants are driven by their grievances in addition to nationalism, the commercial media intend to gain more profit in the attention economy, and the state co-opts various actors to maintain and promote its ideology and control over the country and its people.

The public discourses in DV participants' social media posts and comments show that the participants shame and exclude the targets not only because they feel offended by speeches and actions that are against their nationalistic ideology, but because they have grievances against other social groups as well; in this case, the social/intellectual elites and women. In these four cases, social elites are used as a label without a clear definition, but mostly referring to intellectuals or individuals from families with certain forms of power. Contemporary Chinese society has complex relationships and public perceptions with the intellectuals, especially in the humanities and social sciences (Han & Jia, 2019). In various communist campaigns in PRC's history, intellectuals are regarded as petit-bourgeois and polluted by Western ideologies, who are the enemy of achieving communism and socialism, which leads to a negative perception about intellectuals that lingers even in today's Chinese society (ibid.). Meanwhile, being an intellectual—individuals with higher education degrees, as defined by the DV participants in these four cases—has also become a useful resource in the market economy of current Chinese society of (Brown et al., 2021) In addition, the traditional Chinese ideology believes that a man of learning is superior to others[14], and many Chinese people believe that higher education is the ultimate path to moving up on the social class ladder (ibid.).  Therefore, higher education is very much valued and pursued, yet sometimes also mocked and even hated in contemporary Chinese society (R. Han & Jia, 2019). In addition to historical influences, decreasing social mobility—even via education in contemporary Chinese society—also adds to populist grievance, as demonstrated by the other group of people referred to as social elites in participants' discourse - individuals with resourceful families. Such populist grievances against perceived social elites contribute to the DV participants' desire to capture the information flow about the targets and shame them publicly.

Another grievance driving the DV participants in these four cases is the perceived Chinese women's decreasing sexual morality and interest in Chinese men. Chinese women have been shamed as sluts, whores, and gold-diggers on social media platforms (Jing-Schmidt & Peng, 2018), all of which are related to Chinese

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[14] In Chinese: 万般皆下品，惟有读书高.

women’s willingness to engage in sexual activities or marriage. There is an increasing demonstration of such grievance, especially in recent years, possibly due to the bigger difference in gender ratio and the consequent rising difficulties for men to find a spouse in China (S. Chen, 2020; Wee, 2021). Combining the deep-rooted misogyny in Chinese society (Jing-Schmidt & Peng, 2018; Ng & Han, 2018; Wang, 2015), DV participants vent such grievance masked in patriotism in these four cases, and in similar cases. Such masked misogyny and gendered public shaming are also present in other communities and societies, demonstrating women's vulnerability in digital media across cultures (Bjork-James, 2020; Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Kim, 2018).

Commercial media play an important role in framing the incidents and amplifying public shaming and social exclusion (Trottier, 2019). As demonstrated in the previous analysis, the commercial media in these four cases frame the targets’ speeches or behaviours as insulting China, emphasise their educational background and gender, and meanwhile provide material for gendered shaming, which all contribute to the direction and scale of public debates and shaming in these four cases. The choices they make are heavily influenced by the logic of the attention economy (Cheng, 2020). The business model of WeChat public accounts is that more views and shares bring more sponsorships and advertisements, which generate incomes (ibid.). Therefore, actively participating in the public debates about controversies and provoking Chinese citizens' nationalism, populism and misogyny have become common strategies among Chinese commercial media, especially on social media platforms, to attain more traffic and thus generate more income (Quan, 2018).

The state is also involved in shaping the discourses in these four cases. As demonstrated in the analysis, the state-owned media participate in the ungrateful traitor discourse provided by the DV participants and commercial media. Without engaging in and trying to settle more fundamental debates with the cultural nationalists about national identity and the CCP’s ruling legitimacy concerning such national identity (Y. Guo, 2004), the state has developed a set of strategies that co-opt populist-nationalist sentiments to maintain domestic cohesion and stability as well as the CCP’s ruling position (Repnikova & Fang, 2018). Yet, the state-owned media avoid directly engaging in populist scepticism and criticism about social and intellectual elites. This is potentially because of the

vague yet wide definition of deemed social/intellectual elites, which can be potentially directed to the ruling elites and therefore undermines the CCP's ruling legitimacy (He et al., 2021). In terms of the misogynistic discourse, while it is absent in the state-owned media articles, there is no censorship or criticism of such discourse. Given the willingness and capability of the Chinese government to censor unwanted media content, the absence of censorship and criticism show that such misogynistic discourse is condoned. This condonation aligns with the Chinese government's mostly negative attitude towards feminist discourses and social movements (Fincher, 2020; Zeng, 2020). The state's power in shaping the discourses in these four cases and in similar cases, however, fundamentally stems from its fundamental controls and impacts over Chinese society, including the national patriotism education (Callahan, 2009), mainstream ideologies and values, as well as over the media landscape, ranging from mass media to social media platforms (Repnikova, 2017).

Therefore, targets in these four cases are vulnerable because their intersectional identities are under the watchful eyes of different actors in the DV assemblages; various actors have different forms of discursive power over them (Trottier, 2017): defining their identities, defining their actions, defining the social norms, and most importantly providing social and political conditions for the public shaming and exclusion.

**Chapter summary**

By purposefully selecting four high-profile cases of nationalistic digital vigilantism against female intellectuals in China based on the theoretical framework of surveillant assemblage, this chapter illustrates how nationalism, populism, and misogyny are present in the public and media discourses. I argue that these discourses demonstrate the intersectional vulnerability facing Chinese intellectual women due to the temporality of national identity construction, the synergetic desires, and the distributed powers in the DV surveillant assemblages. While it is a pity that the targets were not interviewed to better understand how they perceive and experience such intersectional vulnerability, I believe that an ethical research design that avoids potential secondary victimisation and repeated traumatisation is more important. This unavoidable limitation brought by the chosen research topics and subjects also requires us as researchers to

consider and develop innovative research methods that can help to shed light on individuals' subjective experiences of public shaming and social exclusion without harming the research subjects.

The intersectional vulnerability and masked misogyny facing women are also present in other societies and communities, as presented in previous sections. While this chapter starts by investigating nationalistic DV cases and relevant discourses, it is the populism and misogyny hidden behind and combined with nationalism that concern me more. To better understand these synergetic discourses in surveillant assemblages on social media as a global and cross-cultural phenomenon, future comparative research is much needed so that potential solutions can be found.

# Chapter 5.

## Neo-tribal Contestation: Digital Vigilantism in Fandoms

## Chapter 5. Neo-tribal Contestation: Digital Vigilantism in Fandoms

In this chapter, I explore another trend identified in Chapter 2: the increasing DV cases against celebrities and within/among fandoms. This type of DV cases where celebrities get named, shamed, and then boycotted for various reasons are present not only in China but also in Western countries, which is often referred to as "cancel culture". Cancel culture can be understood as the most recent iteration of contestation among fan communities, in which practices, claims, and underlying political or ideological assumptions are addressed for the purposes of revision or rejection. Cancellation is thus both a contested practice (individual instances are openly debated as (in)appropriate) and a contested term (at a meta-level, cultural critics may claim that the practice cannot be distinguished from other forms of critique or is merely an extension of earlier debates over "political correctness"). Celebrities and fans are actively engaging in politics by calling out and cancelling other individuals and brands (Andrews, 2020; Bouvier, 2020; Clark, 2020; Ng, 2020). Typically unsolicited, calling out or cancelling occurs when a celebrity's misdeeds are uncovered or when they become a symbol of a problematic ideology, in turn forcing celebrities and their sponsors to make a (public) political statement (Driessen, 2020). In recent years, the global trend of "cancel culture" has raised many discussions in both public discourses and academia, either being praised as an effective way to keep individuals accountable (Shabazz, 2021) or raising alarms of causing large scale of self-censorship (Bokat-Lindell, 2020).

The dynamics between different actors in this type of DV incidents become more complex compared to cases described in previous chapters, because the celebrities' fandoms could be involved in different ways: some continue to be part of the fandom and empathise with the targeted celebrity, while others quit the fandom and join the DV participants to denounce the celebrity. In addition, such incidents are often entangled with social values, norms, and politics. Therefore, to explore how the fans perceive and engage in this type of DV incidents can shed lights on not only the dynamics between actors but the interactions between fandom and politics as well. This chapter use Xiao Zhan and *the 227 Incident* as a case study to explore such dynamics. Xiao Zhan is a rising pop idol in China who became a DV target and was boycotted in February 2020 by a collective of netizens named *the 227 United*, which also gives the

incident its name *the 227* Incident. The collective claims to consist of fanfiction writers, content creators, and other citizens who are concerned about freedom of expression (Li, 2020). In public discourse, the boycott was triggered by the shutdown of the fanfiction platform Archive of Our Own (AO3) in China due to a report to government authorities made by Xiao Zhan fans. This report takes issue with a fan fiction entitled *Xia Zhui* [The Fallen] featuring Xiao Zhan as the main character - a prostitute who has dysphoria. The 227 United regarded the shutdown of AO3 as the loss of a safe haven, symbolizing a further deteriorated environment for creative works. In response, they appealed and managed to "cancel" Xiao by giving low reviews (review bombing) to Xiao-related cultural products, and boycotting products and brands that he endorses, etc. (ibid.). This incident was widely reported and has sparked online discussions on various issues, including toxic fandom practices, the relationship between idols and fans, creative freedom in subcultures, and more generally, censorship in China. In this case, the cancelation of Xiao started from disagreements between fandoms and became a battle between political stances.

In recent years, *liuliang mingxing* [data traffic idols] and *liuliang fenquan* [data fandom] are on the rise in China (Yin, 2020; Zhang & Negus, 2020). Data traffic idol refers to those "who gained their visibility and success through the active interventions of fans into the data circulating across social media" (Zhang & Negus, 2020, p. 501). Relatedly, the term data fandom serves to characterize the fandom of such idols. Chinese traffic idols inherit the production methods and aesthetic styles from K-pop and J-pop, while the fandom also appropriates practices of *zuoshuju* [increasing the sale/clicks/votes] from K-pop fans and *kejin* [spending large sums of money to boost sales] from J-pop fans (ibid.). Chinese data fandom also attracted global attention when the fans of Kris Wu, a typical data traffic idol, used their common tactic zuoshuju to boost the performance of his new album on the global iTunes charts, knocking Ariana Grande and Lady Gaga off the top spots (Deng, 2018).

To provide an insight into cancel culture as a type of DV, I ask the following research questions: how do fans perceive and negotiate the cancellation of Xiao Zhan in China? Consequently, what can we learn from these modes of engagement about current trends like cancel culture or reframing one's political identity and engagement? This chapter highlights the dynamics between fandom

and political identities in China, as well as the convergence between entertainment and everyday political engagement across social institutions.

## Idol fandom practices and everyday political engagement

The relationship between fandom and political engagement has received ample scholarly attention, particularly in a Western context. Fandom is formed based on routine and emotionally invested consumption as well as the (re)production of a given popular narrative, text, or any form of cultural products (Jenkins, 2002; Sandvoss, 2005). These cultural products are a means to express emotions, beliefs, and ideologies, and occasionally help to construct communities sharing a common political identity (Karaosmanoglu, 2020). Hence, celebrities might invoke these sexual, ethnic, or partisan identities and mobilise their fans for particular political causes, either sincerely or strategically (Street, 2012; Wheeler, 2012). In addition to this "top-down celebrity-run model" of fan activism, fans also invoke their shared identities and communities to engage in social movements as an expression of a "bottom-up participatory" fan activism (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012, para. 2.2).

However, in mainland China, invoking political identities and engaging in fan activism requires a more delicate approach. While this is especially evident in recent years due to tighter state control over ideologies and public opinions (Repnikova, 2017), academic research on such an approach remains scarce (Zhang, 2016). Both celebrities and their fans in mainland China appear to limit their political engagements to less controversial issues and usually conform to mainstream social norms and political ideologies. Even if celebrities wield a progressive identity to brand themselves, they usually reframe these identities as less controversial. For example, homosexuality is disguised as friendship (Wang, 2019), and the term "strong woman" often replaces the more threatening "feminist" (Cai, 2019, p. 7). As mentioned above, more cases can be observed in both societies where celebrities, as well as their fandoms, slipped into political debates in recent years. When investigating this type of political entanglement, we need to analyze not only similarities between fandom practices and political practices (Van Zoonen, 2005) but also how fandom can be politicized (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012). Moreover, politics can become fandomised, meaning that the fandom-like affective bond impacts the substance of political engagement

(Sandvoss, 2013). This latter development is indicative of the highly mediated milieu in both Eastern and Western societies, especially among generations that have grown up with these platforms (Inthorn & Street, 2011; Jenkins, 2006).

In this study, I consider pop idols as celebrities who attain fame and fortune due to extraordinary qualities (Lai, 2006). In the East Asian context, idol specifically refers to young celebrities who have been managed and trained by an entertainment management agency (Kang, 2017). With the rapid growth of domestic digital platforms and intra-Asia transnational influence of idol production, Chinese idols normally have some standardised characteristics such as youthfulness, with a strictly managed persona (normally by an agency), and are dependent almost entirely on the traffic on digital platforms provided by their fans (Zhang & Negus, 2020). Xiao Zhan is among such data traffic idols, considered the most prominent of this category in 2019 (Sina Entertainment, 2019).

What makes pop idol fandoms relevant to this study is that they underscore the dynamics between fandom and politics through their more "mundane" everyday fandom practices. Fans' everyday consumption forms a major part of their fandom practice and fan identity (Jenkins, 2012). Some ways in which pop idol fans consume cultural products, however, do not only resemble but also internalise certain political practices, such as voting, actively sharing relevant information in the community, and rallying (online) against their perceived opponents (Brough & Shresthova, 2012; Van Zoonen, 2005). Although these practices are deemed constructive in fan studies, fans can also denounce and boycott idols (Driessen, 2020), stop consuming relevant products, and announce the idol's cancellation in fan wars, which may or may not be caused by political reasons.

In previous literature on fandom and politics, the left-versus-right division of electoral democracy often sets the foundation for analysis in the context of Western democracies (Dean, 2017), and the oppression-resistance narrative usually dominates the analysis in the context of authoritarian countries such as China (Fung, 2009). However, these frames allow a limited perspective on contemporary fandom and politics. Many scholars have pointed out the shift in civic engagement due to structural fragmentation, individualisation, and various

breakdowns in group memberships and institutional loyalties in many societies (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The youth increasingly engage in connective actions that are more personal and fluid, expressed as personal hopes, lifestyles, and grievances, instead of traditional collective actions that depend more on strong political organisations such as churches, parties, and interest groups (Bennett, 2007; Hinck, 2016).

This new way of youth civic engagement is well explained by Maffesoli (1995) as interests-based neo-tribes—a more intrinsically motivated view instead of traditional ideal political engagement in civic society—and consider fandom practices as potential everyday political engagement. He argues that taste-based groups are becoming a more significant form of identity construction and social interaction. Neo-tribes are formed on taste and interest in cultural products or lifestyles, which are facilitated and further fragmented by digital activities (ibid.). Identities formed in these neo-tribes are usually empathetic, temporary, and relational to many overlapping groups. This means that group members develop and maintain their identities through constant momentary production or consumption practices and with attention to their intra- as well as inter-tribe relations (ibid). Fandoms espouse many of these characteristics, and many researchers have applied the concept to analyse the formation and intra-dynamics of various fandoms, such as the Ibiza fandom (Sandvoss, 2014) and K-pop fandom (Chang & Park, 2018).

When adopting the lens of neo-tribalism, many features of fandom identities and practices are incompatible with the ideology-based, stable, and rational political identities and engagements. Such incompatibility suggests that we need to go beyond the above-mentioned traditional frameworks in understanding fan-based political engagement, even if these frameworks are not entirely dismissed. Built upon Maffesoli's theory, Flinders and Wood (2018) argue that neo-tribe practices can be regarded as everyday politics that challenge conventional political institutions and social movements. Adopting this line of thought, I consider political fan engagement as a mode to explore fandom and politics. Particularly, through the lens of fandoms being transcultural taste-based communities, we can go beyond the current understanding of the relationship between fandom and politics by learning from their own discourse, repertoires, and practices, which will be further discussed in this study's analysis.

## Methods

To better understand how fans perceive and engage in the DV against and cancelation of their idol Xiao, I conducted ten semi-structured, in-depth interviews carried out between June 2020 and October 2020. The interviewees are with ten self-identified as female Xiao Zhan fans (aged 19 to 29), who are Chinese citizens yet live in various countries (China, the Netherlands, The US, and Australia), who were recruited via a Xiao's fan chat group on WeChat and snowball sampling. All interviewees have a high school level education or above. The interviewees are selected on the grounds that they are young and in the process of developing their political identity. Fandom might offer the interviewees a blueprint to understand both their fannish engagement and social and political engagement (Dean, 2017). None of the interviewees has the possibility to have a direct influence on the political issues involved in this incident via traditional political engagement, since most of the conventional democratic political participation is limited in China.

Interviewees were recruited via social media based on their willingness to discuss their experiences, emotions, and opinions on the topic, as well as by employing snowball sampling for recommendations. The interviews were conducted with the help of a semi-structured interview guide, to allow for some flexibility whilst having some room for deviating from this list (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). All interviews began with questions related to the interviewees' personal demographic (e.g., what is your age, profession?), educational and political backgrounds (e.g., how would you describe your political involvement?). Later, interviewees were asked to describe and reflect on their fandom identities and fandom practices (e.g., how did you become a fan of Xiao Zhan? What kind of activities do you engage in as a fan?). Subsequent questions invoked descriptions, emotions, and opinions about relevant controversies (e.g., Can you describe what happened in the 227 incident and how you felt?). To maintain interviewee privacy and for ethical concerns, all interviews have been anonymized. Before the start of the interviews, I sent them digital consent forms and recorded their explicit verbal consent. Interviews lasted between 30 and 70 minutes, and they were conducted in Chinese.

The analysis is also informed by existing primary and secondary sources describing how the cases developed. Public posts on (social) media platforms (137 Sina Weibo posts and comments as well as 12 articles from WeChat public accounts are collected between 2020 February 27th and June 14th), press coverage, and public statements by Xiao are consulted to identify key actors, events, and the discursive shaping of conflict. These key documents not only shape our own case analysis but are also pivotal in the sense-making process of our participants. The timelines and public discourses of the chosen case supplement the interview data and analysis.

All data (the public posts, statements, and press coverage, as well as the interview transcripts) was subjected to a thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that this process facilitates a shift from open to thematic coding and helps identify latent themes in the data. Three levels of codes were assigned to the data, from open codes for the smallest units (fragments, sentences, words), axial codes for broader categories, and thematic codes for the major themes (Boeije, 2005). We then compared the different themes to our analyses to identify the main comparative and contrasting elements. These large themes are discussed in the following sections.

**Fan engagement as neo-tribal practices**

The fandoms in these two cases demonstrate several characteristics of neo-tribes. The interviews clearly demonstrate that both fandoms are taste-based formations. While this may seem intuitive, I want to briefly dwell on this point as a starting point for our later analysis on other neo-tribal characteristics of the fandom. All interviewed Xiao's fans started their fandom journey because of his prettiness, his chemistry with Wang Yibo[15], or the drama *The Untamed*.

[15] Wang Yibo is the co-star who plays Lan Zhan in the drama The Untamed. Because the characters Xiao and Wang play in the drama have a very intimate relationship (explicitly romantic in the original novel Modao Zushi but made vague and subtle in the drama due to the censorship in China), the chemistry between these two characters and even the actors in real life becomes a source of fandom. This type of fans calls themselves "cpfen" (couple fans).

These taste-based communities are maintained and consolidated by empathy and affection (Maffesoli, 1995). Such empathy and affection are expressed in Xiao's fans' narratives of their *authenticity*. For Xiao's fans interviewed in this chapter, his "common-people" experience (Dana, 20), meaning that he went to a non-entertainment-industry-related university and used work as a graphic designer, and his "multidimensional personality" (Fiona) makes his fans empathise with him as a real person. When the idol was involved in controversies, such empathy and affection play an even more important role in their fandoms. Xiao's fans say whenever they think about how Xiao is experiencing all the hatred and failure in their career as a person with emotions, they feel sad, and some end up crying several times a day during and after the 227 Incident.

The fandom as neo-tribes is also fluid and temporal (Maffesoli, 1995). Since the interviewees are all current fans of the idols, they themselves do not present such fluidity and temporality. However, according to the complimentary public discourses I collected, there are indeed fans or to-be-fans who terminate their fandom identity after the controversies or for some other reasons, such as bad acting in another drama. Sometimes the fluidity can also occur in the form of being excluded by other fans. However, factors behind such fluidity are not only taste-based but also very often related to social norms, values, ideologies, and politics, which is quite obviously demonstrated. Therefore, even though this chapter looks at developments that are in excess of conventional political debates, it remains that such framing plays a role in shaping the cancelation of pop idols and the contestation of/from their fandoms.

Consumption and reproduction of cultural products play a central role in neo-tribes (ibid.). As for Xiao's fandom, fans actively consume and (re)produce Xiao-related cultural products both materially and immaterially. Lena (19) told us, "I always follow his activities. If I'm not a fan, I wouldn't have done that. I've also looked for previous news and information about him. I also watched all the dramas, reality TV shows, and interviews he was in." In addition to the more common fan consumer practices such as purchasing music and merchandise and fan (re)producing practices such as creating celebrity-related content and maintaining fan communities (Fung, 2009), data fandom also incorporates a logic of platformisation and develops some data-fandom-specific practices that

dematerialises data/traffic as a new affective object, including *kejin*, *zuoshuju*, and *kongping* (Yin, 2020; Zhang & Negus, 2020). All interviewed fans purchase Xiao-related products, including *The Untamed* merchandise, Xiao's digital EP, and Xiao-endorsed brands. Five out of ten fans interviewed are involved in various fandom WeChat groups. In these WeChat groups, fans share information about the shows, events, and media coverage that Xiao is engaged in. For fans who are not directly involved in these chat groups, they also regularly follow relevant hashtags and the idol's own Weibo account to stay updated about Xiao. Active Xiao Zhan fans also adopt common data fandom practices such as *kongping* [manipulating comments and posts] or *zuoshuju*. Most interviewees describe their fandom practices for Xiao as an exception: even though they dislike and/or did not engage themselves in these practices, they are willing to do so for Xiao Zhan. Yana (29) states:

> For me at that time, they (fans) seemed funny to me for some of their actions. However, after I became part of the fandom, I realized that wow, there are things that you just must do. Take kongping as an example. I want *luren* [passers-by, meaning people who are not fans] to see only positive things about my idol when they open a relevant topic.

Some forms of consumption and reproduction demonstrate the fluid, personal, and neo-tribal political engagement, also coined as lifestyle politics, where they live their civic ideals through everyday choices such as consumer or commodity activism (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). Individuals who consume Xiao-related products are regarded as supporters of censorship and the "reporting culture" in China, which is not acknowledged by many of Xiao's fans. Anna (24) insisted:

> I don't think their (some Xiao's fans) goal in the beginning is to report the whole platform. They only wanted to stop the circulation of this one (the fanfiction) on Sina Weibo. But it went out of hands and Xiao Zhan became a collateral damage, which is beyond their (Xiao's fans who reported the fanfiction) expectations.

The misalignment of perceived and assigned meaning of Xiao's fans' consumption and production practices demonstrates fans' contested

understanding of content moderation practices, social media affordances, and platform policies. More generally, relevant practices of kongping and zuoshuju are also the main causes of criticism against data traffic stars and data fandom in Chinese society. Tatiana (25) believes that “the most fundamental reason why 227 ends up on such a large scale and huge impact is because the public has been tired and resenting some fandom practices for a very long time, such as kongping and zuoshuju.”

**Framing pop idol fandoms in contemporary politics**

Even though Xiao’s fandom and his fans’ practices lend substantial credibility to Maffesoli's theory of the increased significance of neo-tribes, there is still a strong presence and impact of conventional political identities and debates. Conventional political identities are stable, rational, and ideology-based/demanding, often requiring more education, pressure, or socialization (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Maffesoli, 1995). Common topics are relatively stable in these political and ideological debates, such as democracy and equality, which are also usually highly contextualised.

Conventional politics frame fandom practices by providing (and limiting) potential topics and stances with which the fans and the general public engage. As mentioned above, in the 227 Incident, the cancellation of Xiao is framed as a fight for freedom of speech and creative expression, as well as resistance against the culture of reporting and snitching to the government, which are two main political issues in China. Therefore, with such framing, the stances are limited to for-or-against cancelling Xiao, which maps onto debates for-or-against freedom of speech. Hence, the existing Chinese political debates limit the framing and stances in this case, which hardly allow other ways of interpreting everyday political engagement of Xiao’s fandom in the public discourse. Thus, critical analysis can supplement concepts such as oppression and resistance with a nuanced understanding of the relationship between fandom and politics, where unorthodox modes of resistance (and oppression) are excluded.

Pop idols and their fans can feel the pressure or necessity of avoiding or engaging in conventional politics. This is because these practices are always situated in specific cultural and political contexts in the societies where they take place. The

irony of the 227 Incident is that the reporting action of some of Xiao's fans is intended to make Xiao "apolitical"—Chinese fans often act proactively to spare their idols from future political troubles —while this exact action is criticised as a political stance in this incident. As Tina (27) elaborates, "they (fans who report the fanfiction) thought that this could result in people criticising their idol for being involved in teenage pornographic products [...] and then he might be banned." Such avoidance of political engagement has almost become a consensus strategy among Chinese idol fandoms because not antagonising the state is a must for a state-sanctioned media presence, without which an idol will not last in the industry. However, it is the effort to avoid political engagement that renders Xiao's fandom negatively political in the eyes of the 227 United, which also makes Xiao a symbol of the threat to freedom of creative expression posed by both state censorship and data fandom culture in China.

The political topics that pop idols and their fandoms engage in are also shaped by the contingent political and cultural contexts. The 227 Incident is partially caused by the divergent understanding and attitudes towards "harmful erotic content". All interviewed Xiao's fans are young adults, and none of them find the fanfiction *Xiazhui* offensive or problematic, even though Chinese regulation stipulates that it should be censored as erotic content. Yet some try to understand the teenage fans who think otherwise: "I don't think you can blame them for this because many of them are still very young and grow up in an environment where mainstream education is still 'sex is evil' and the pornographic platform is illegal thus should be banned" (Sara, 25). The Chinese state sets and maintains the ideological boundaries of various social activities, especially with a set of moralities that penetrate education, media, and cultural production (Fung, 2009). One of the beliefs is that sexual depictions and pornographic contents are harmful to society, and therefore need to be banned and punished. This belief is demonstrated in many waves of *Jingwang Xingdong* [Clean Net Campaign] in the past decades, including the one involved in the 227 Incident in March 2020.

### When in conflict: Negotiating neo-tribal and conventional political identities

By critically examining these seemingly conflicting phenomena and explanations, I aim to understand cancel culture (within fandom) as DV practices more broadly. Fans' reactionary responses can be regarded as the contestation and negotiation between neo-tribal identities and conventional political identities. As a rising form of social grouping and community identity, the fluid taste-based neo-tribes are often framed as potentially in conflict with the more stable social divisions based on conventional political and ideological beliefs. When such conflicts occur, individuals need to negotiate these two types of identities: either by reconciling them or by abandoning one of them. Usually, if the abandonment needs to happen, the less stable taste-based neo-tribal identities are sacrificed. Thus, contested fan practices take place.

After The 227 Incident, some ofXiao's fans made public announcements on various Chinese social media platforms that they had quit being his fans, many of whom are AO3 and Lofter users. The considerable overlap between Xiao Zhan/The Untamed CP fans and BL/fanfiction fans plays an important role. In these posts, ex-fans criticised Xiao for not actively condemning his fans for their various radical behaviours such as reporting AO3, online bullying, and harassment (Weiniyouzi, 2020). A verse adapted from Martin Niemöller's post-war confessional prose *First They Came…* (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2012) is also used in such announcement:

> First they came for the fanfiction, and I did not speak out—because I don't read fanfiction; Then they came for the Lolita[16], and I did not speak out—because I was not one; [...] Then they came for K-pop, and I did not speak out—because I don't follow K-pop; ... Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me. (Anonymous, 2020)

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[16] Lolita is a Japanese subculture that also became popular in China. Fans of this subculture dress in a specific fashion style that is highly influenced by Rococo style.

By adapting Niemöller's prose and comparing Xiao and his radical fans to oppressors, ex-fans of Xiao abandon their neo-tribal identities to stay true to their belief in freedom of speech.

Even when I interview fans who remain in the fandoms after controversies, some still express their willingness to abandon these fandom identities if Xiao and his ideologies are proven unworthy or no longer match the fans' values and political stance. Xiao's fan Dana says that "if Xiao Zhan did something super bad or illegal, like soliciting prostitutes, doing drugs, plagiarism or relationship affairs, I might stop being his fan."

An idiom in Chinese fandoms states: one starts the fandom journey for their (idols) pretty appearance, falls in love with them for their talents, and finally stays loyal for their integrities. It captures how fandoms as neo-tribes are taste-based, yet the "integrities", might it be moralities or political stances, can result in the consolidation, negotiation, or abandonment of fans' neo-tribal identities.

**Chapter summary**

The DV against pop idols and the consequent reactionary fan engagement in pop idol fandom are forms of contemporary political engagement which attempt to not only instrumentalise the career of a targeted public figure but also mobilise either a fan community or alternatively a general public. This emerging form of political engagement appears to be manifest through groups defined by shared lifestyles and understandings of appropriate conduct, as opposed to broader comparatively stable alignments seen among traditional political identities (Maffesoli, 1995). Pop idols and their fandoms must constantly (re-)negotiate their political and neo-tribal identities. This negotiation fuels (self-)policing in fandoms, with cancellation as an extreme expression of these processes. Such (self-)policing differs from and reflects the cultural and political environments that shape these fandoms.

In troubling the boundaries that would otherwise distinguish politics and pop culture, this chapter contributes to a nuanced understanding of consumer identities as they pertain to political engagement. Stepping beyond our immediate focus, studying everyday political engagement in fandoms can also be significant in a predictive manner, insofar as fandom practices will be or have

been adopted by political actors. This includes recent developments in which the Chinese state promotes fandom nationalism (Liu, 2019).

However, while the respondents were candid when describing their witnessing of and participation in politicized fan practices, they only provide a partial account of these developments by virtue of their continued participation in these fandoms. Further research on fans' reactions to their idols' cancellation would benefit from accounts of those who chose to abandon these communities, those who were rejected or "cancelled" from these communities, as well as those who instrumentalised these communities as outsiders.

My analysis focuses on particular dimensions regarding the nexus between politics and entertainment. As such, some relevant aspects remain as topics for future research. This includes the perceived authenticity and replaceability of pop idols, and how this influences these idols' political credibility for fans. While Xiao's case supports an understanding of everyday politics that is more closely aligned with mediated cultural practices, it would be reckless to claim that anti-/pro-government distinctions are eschewed. The way these might flare up in fans' attempts to make sense of their political engagement will shed further light on how conventional political actors can appropriate these practices. Finally, the degree to which pop idols and their fandoms operate through digital media, and also invite political engagement via such media, speaks to the need to consider the above developments in relation to platform economies (Craig & Cunningham, 2019; Liang & Shen, 2016). Cancellation, connective actions and data fandoms are inherently dependent on the affordances of social media platforms, and are thus at least partly directed by their business models. Though exceeding the scope of this chapter, such influence is never far removed from the decisions taken by fandoms.

# Chapter 6.

# The 2018 Dolce & Gabbana Advertising Controversy: Offense-taking and Justice-seeking Beyond Digital Vigilantism

## Chapter 6. The 2018 Dolce & Gabbana Advertising Controversy: Offense-taking and Justice-seeking Beyond Digital Vigilantism

After exploring cancel culture as a type of DV incidents that target celebrities, I intend to further this line of investigation on cancellation practices, yet moving beyond DV to illustrate the broader impact of mediated and mediatised offense-taking and justice-seeking. Thus, I invite you to gaze upon one case where a brand is cancelled in China. In November 2018, Italian luxury fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana (D&G) released a series of advertisements for its Shanghai fashion show, *The Great Show*, on social media. These videos promoted an event marked to be the brand's biggest, an homage to the Chinese consumer who accounted for approximately 30 percent of D&G's 2018 revenues (Vogue, 2018) In these videos, a stereotypically Chinese-looking model wearing a D&G dress and jewellery awkwardly eats exaggeratedly large Italian foods—a pizza, spaghetti, and a cannolo—with chopsticks. Overlaid above a soundtrack of Chinese folk music, a Mandarin-speaking male voiceover introduces the film, incorrectly pronouncing the company's name. The narrator makes sexual innuendos about the size of the dishes and describes chopsticks as "stick-shaped cutlery" while referring to the food as "the great Italian cuisine". This contrasting, normative presentation of the two cultures, along with the narrator's intentionally strong accent and the model's exaggerated facial expressions, resulted in extensive backlash against the advertisements from fashion followers as well as from Chinese and international press. Criticism increased following the publication of screenshots of an Instagram conversation between a social media user and a purportedly hacked account attributed to Stefano Gabbana. In these images, the user criticises the campaign and in response @stefanogabbana derides China as "...Ignorant Dirty Smelling Mafia" and "the country of [poop emojis]" (Friedman & Wee, 2018). Hashtags including #boycottdolce began trending across Chinese and global social media networks following the public sharing of the adverts and screenshots by fashion followers and industry watchdog @diet_prada. Between November 21st and 24th, more than 50 hashtags related to the D&G incident were trending on Sina Weibo, with 31 of them reaching over 1 million searches. The most searched, #DGTheGreatShowCancelled, had been read over 870 million times by December 1 (SNSdatamining, 2018; Xu, 2018).

The events and public discussion resulted not only in a brand boycott, but also influencers and models quitting *The Great Show,* celebrities ending collaborations, and the event's cancellation, allegedly at the request of the Chinese Culture and Tourism Department. The incident also precipitated the removal of D&G products from retail locations including luxury department store Lane Crawford, and all Chinese and some European online shopping sites. Despite an apology video by D&G founders, Vogue China also cancelled all D&G content and advertisements in its spring issues (Ap, 2018; SNSdatamining, 2018; Williams, 2019). The events harmed not only D&G's image, but also its global business, with its Asia-Pacific market shrinking from 25% to 22% of total turnover in March 2019 (Cristoferi, 2019).

The latest State of Fashion report proclaims that "Greater China is expected to overtake the US as the largest fashion market in the world in 2019" (Mckinsey & Company, 2019). Emphasising a focus on luxury and emerging consumer markets, the report highlights the key role of the growing Asian sector (Kapferer, 2014). However, along with this affirmation the publication bears a warning for brands intending to capitalise on the rapid growth of the Chinese market. It cautions that while the returns for successful brands may be manifold, "so are the penalties for those who fail" (Mckinsey & Company, 2019, p. 11). Cases of successful Asian expansion by Western fashion brands are many, yet the D&G case provides a view of the risks brands may face when engaging with the Chinese market. Given the frequency of comparable events, I believe the D&G case is demonstrative of a trend of conflicting interactions between actors in the global luxury fashion industry and its Chinese market (Paton, 2019). Thus, I address the incident as an indication of broader societal and structural change rather than analysing it as a micro-level study of marketing and consumer behaviour. By doing so, this chapter may provide a framework to understand comparable cases. The following research addresses the question: *How does the 2018 Dolce & Gabbana incident represent the conflicting structural interactions between actors in the digitised global luxury fashion industry and its Chinese market?*

## Global luxury fashion, its agents, and capital

Analyses of luxury fashion conducted by scholars of fashion, sociology, and cultural studies often provide macro-perspectives, theorising about the nature of the industry and its products. These works regard the importance of branding and marketing as an outcome of luxury products' representative and symbolic nature, goods described by Coco Chanel as necessities beyond necessity (Hochswender, 1989). These symbolic "unnecessaries" are deemed to function within Veblen's realm of conspicuous consumption, as products with psychological and status value—expensive items purchased not for utility—but to display social class, association, and wealth (Fionda & Moore, 2009; Husband & Chadha, 2010; Okonkwo, 2007; Veblen & Mills, 2017; Vickers & Renand, 2003). While Veblen's definition and its relation to social class have been debated, the symbolic, geographic and heritage nature of luxury items are deemed of key importance. As such, branding and marketing of these characteristics is paramount. Brands must sell their products and, in order to do, so must associate items with the exquisite nature of luxury and a strong brand identity while functioning within the ever-increasing speed of fashion cycles (Fionda & Moore, 2009; Kapferer & Bastien, 2017).

Recent meso- and micro-level studies from the business history of fashion and cultural economics disciplines have emphasised the importance of intermediaries and legal systems as key structures for an industry threatened by increasing digitisation and globalisation (Blaszczyk & Pouillard, 2018; Blaszczyk & Wubs, 2018; Janssens & Lavanga, 2020). Work has further addressed digitisation, mediatisation and the impact of new media forms on the industry (Brydges et al., 2018; Rocamora, 2013, 2017). While these diverse works engage with the fashion context and pose questions about communication, they often do not directly analyse the structural changes caused by new media. Luxury fashion branding scandals similar to the D&G incident have often been addressed via micro-level analysis. These works generally focus on individual producers' strategies and on consumer attitudes and purchasing choices. For example, crisis communication and public relations scholars have provided insights into how brands should react in order to minimise harm to their image and business (D'Arco et al., 2019; Sádaba et al., 2019). Business management scholars have regarded such cases as demonstrative of the cultural challenges foreign brands

may encounter when conducting business in China (Froese et al., 2019). These analyses form part of a larger body addressing the interaction of international brands with Chinese producers and markets, which emphasises the importance of the growing Chinese market for global goods (Bonetti, 2014; Ling & Segre-Reinach, 2018; Segre-Reinach, 2018, 2009). Works within this body present problems resulting from differences of understanding, branding and production, but also highlight the key role of Chinese consumers and their interest in international and well-established products and brands (Zhang & Kim, 2013).

The range of discussion surrounding the luxury fashion industry, its actors, digitisation, and branding strategies holds significant value. However, both grand theories and micro-level cases provide limited insights for the clear understanding of the structural interactions between different actors in the D&G incident. Therefore, this chapter will blend understanding from the above studies with an analysis employing a meso-level approach.

*Field theory and fashion*

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu bridges the above-mentioned approaches by applying Field Theory to the fashion industry (Rocamora, 2015). Straddling the gulf between macro and micro, Bourdieu argues that global society is structured into a number of distinct meso-level sub-spaces dedicated to specific types of activity: fields (Power, 1999). These fields, according to Swartz's interpretation, "denote arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge or status, and the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate and monopolize... different kinds of capital" (Swartz, 2012, p. 117). Bourdieu and Delsaut regard fashion as a competitive field ruled by conflict for the exclusive power to impose legitimate symbols of distinction upon clothing, a cultural field split between restricted and large-scale production (Rocamora, 2002). Restricted production is represented as purely artistic, while the latter focuses on the *bourgeois* mass market and is dominated by the quest for profitability (Rocamora, 2015; Segre-Reinach, 2015). While this division has been updated in discussions of the fashion system, and fashion pyramid, it presents key logics defined by the contrasting ideas of fashion as cultural product and as profitable mass consumer item (Kawamura, 2018; Lönnqvist, 2011; Raustiala & Sprigman, 2006; Rocamora, 2015). Given the importance of social

structures, actors, their logics, and contexts to the understanding of the D&G incident, this chapter will employ these theories for the following analysis.

*Agents and capital in luxury fashion*

This article adopts two key concepts of Bourdieu's Field Theory as theoretical tools: agents and capital. Bourdieu theorises that each field contains independent agents who interact with other agents and the field. Discussing agents in fashion and more broadly, Bourdieu identifies four categories: agents of production, consumption, legitimation, and diffusion (Bourdieu, 1993). Agents of production are individuals or institutions in charge of the material and symbolic production of works; agents of consumption are individuals or institutions who consume the above-mentioned works; agents of legitimation are entities, institutionalised or not, who practice symbolic sanctions and forms of recognition to consecrate certain types of work or persons; agents of diffusion communicate the symbolic value of cultural products to consumers and the general public (ibid.). Agents within the global luxury fashion field can be identified as follows; designers and brands are agents of production; customers and potential customers are agents of consumption; traditional media, celebrities, influencers (and occasionally general social media users) can be both agents of legitimation and of diffusion. This results from a blurring and development of roles linked to the democratisation and digitisation of fashion media (Boyd, 2015).

Bourdieu identified four major types of capital held by agents: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Economic capital is the amount of money and wealth an agent has. Cultural capital can be present in three forms: the embodied long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, the objectified form of cultural goods, and the institutionalised form such as educational qualifications (Power, 1999). Social capital is the aggregate of resources of a durable network of mutual acquaintance and recognition (ibid.). Symbolic capital is "the degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration, or honour and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge and recognition" (ibid.). A key feature of capital is that different types are interconvertible, with economic capital the most easily converted.

Within the global luxury fashion industry, there is an established and dominant distribution of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital, predominantly focused around established Western brands (Segre-Reinach, 2012). This links to the luxury fashion industry's historical engagement with Western court culture and highly skilled production clusters in Paris, London, and later in New York and Milan (Gilbert, 2013; Okonkwo, 2007; Steele, 2017). Even with the globalisation of production and consumption resulting from market development, outsourcing, and digital technologies, the luxury fashion industry retains its relationship with Western centres recognised for producing both material and symbolic fashion (Rocamora, 2002).

Consumers, as agents of consumption, hold economic capital. Such economic capital has a crucial impact on the global luxury fashion field, as it may influence aspects as key as retail locations, marketing and even product design (Rocamora, 2015). Currently, the market with key expected levels of growth, and therefore economic capital, is Greater China (Mckinsey & Company, 2019). As such it is of growing importance that luxury brands consider the power of the Chinese consumer in their brand development and advertising, by either targeting the market or ensuring that they do not estrange its consumers with stereotypical or orientalist imagery often prevalent within fashion (Segre-Reinach, 2012).

Since the 19th century, the established agents of diffusion and legitimation have been publications and their journalists, who communicate fashion: selecting, editing, and circulating information to the public via magazines, newspapers and television stations, their embodied form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1993). They practice their symbolic capital by framing fashion information and discussions, setting the parameters for sectoral and public conversation by means of "persistent selection, emphasis and exclusion" which enable audiences to "locate, perceive, identify and label" information (Gitlin, 2003, p. 7). In the early 2000s, opportunities brought by the Internet fostered the development of independent fashion websites and retailer's own digital magazines, who joined the above agents. Yet during this period, despite digitisation, symbolic and cultural capital generally remained in the hands of the established fashion agents and press (Bradford, 2012).

With the development of digital media, especially social media, the fashion industry has undergone changes in retailing, brand and market development, and most importantly communication - the control of how information flows and is framed - which leads to changes in the distribution of symbolic capital. In the past decade, bloggers, and influencers, who enjoy great social capital, have developed a growing impact on consumer purchasing behaviour (Nelson Best, 2017; Rocamora, 2018). Fashion bloggers, influencers, industry watchdogs, and occasionally common social media users can pose a threat to the controlled access to and coverage of fashion products, events, and people, becoming a secondary set of agents of diffusion and legitimation (Boyd, 2015). Though in recent years more influencers have accepted sponsorships and collaborated with fashion institutions, some influencers and watchdogs provide counter-narratives and critical points-of-view on the industry, including @diet_prada, @Cashincopy, and The Cutting Room Floor podcast (Strugats & Sherman, 2019). While the validity of some statements made by these watchdogs have been questioned, their position as questioners of traditional narratives have led them to amass significant followings and have given them positions of some authority (ibid.). These changes are demonstrative of the democratisation of fashion in the contemporary digitised global economy: the translation of social capital into symbolic capital (Boyd, 2015).

It is clear that the global luxury fashion field has a long-held dominant distribution of capital among its established agents. However, digitisation, democratisation and market developments are leading to changes in power dynamics, resulting in the clear transitions of position and capital apparent in the 2018 D&G case.

## Methods

In order to understand how the established structure and capital distribution of the global luxury fashion field was challenged during the 2018 D&G incident, this article sets out to identify the key agents engaged in the incident and examine the capital they held, chose, and/or challenged. To do so, I conducted a detailed analysis of the incident timeline and the framing employed by agents.

I collected and cross-checked factual information about key actors (including their time of involvement in the incident, nationality, platform of post and key messages) and decisive moments in the escalation of the incident provided by both Western and Chinese news outlets. News articles were sourced by searching the keywords “Dolce & Gabbana”, “D&G” and “dujiabanna [Dolce & Gabbana]” in LexisNexis and Wisers Chinese News Database with the date limitation of November 17 to 23, 2018. The public opinion report published by SNSDatamining served as a supplementary source to identify key social media influencers, celebrities, watchdogs and netizens and their posts (SNSdatamining, 2018).

As agents of diffusion and legitimation have traditionally had significant impact on the global luxury fashion field by framing information and discussions, framing can be regarded as a crucial way for agents to practice their cultural and symbolic capital. To address this framing and its role within the D&G incident, I examine how different agents used framing to influence the incident and negotiate their capital (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). This involved the collection and analysis of information published and posted by these agents between the 17th and 23rd of November, the dates identified as key to the development of the incident.[17]

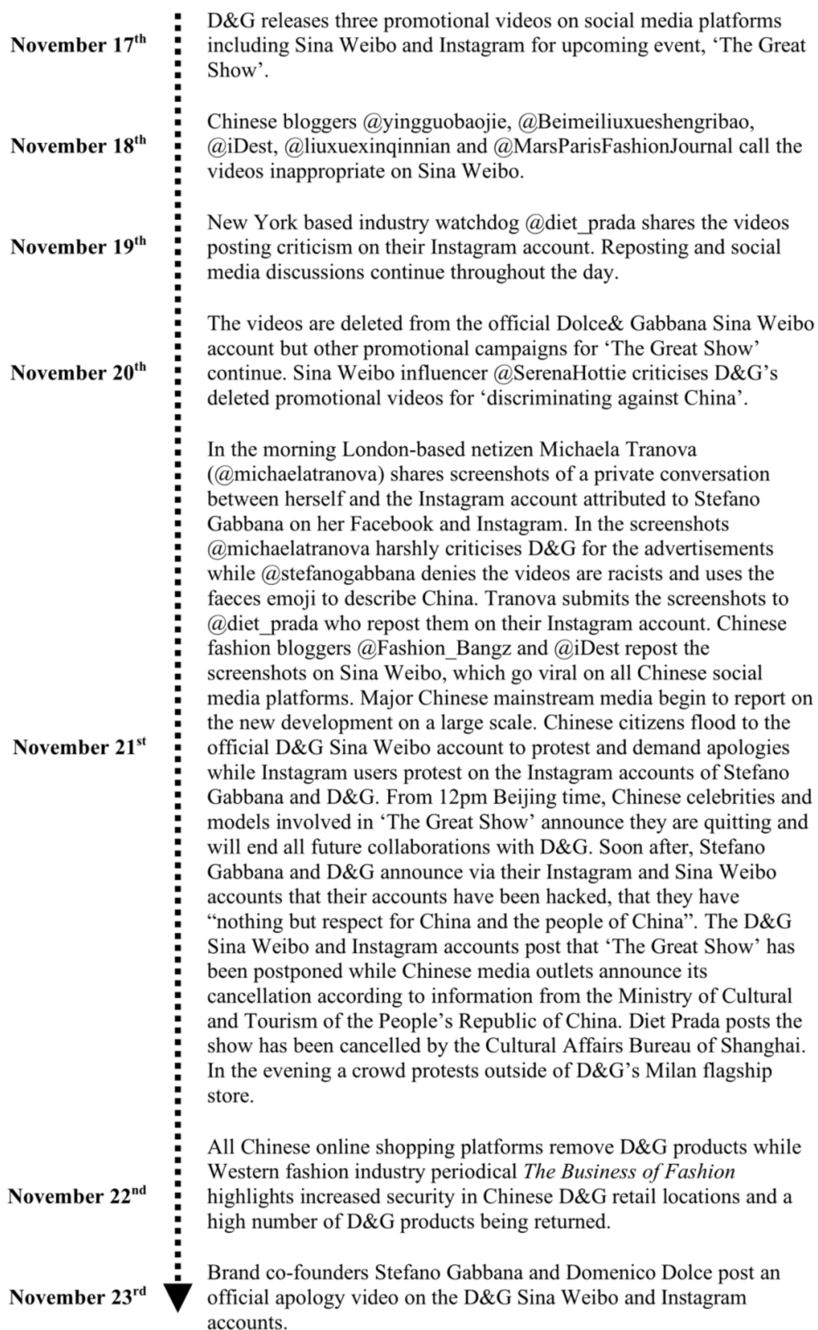
## Analysis

The timeline of the incident is showed in figure 6. Agents and the corresponding capital they demonstrated during the incident can be identified as follows. The brand D&G is the agent of production holding symbolic capital, expressing, and legitimising its understanding of fashion and referencing Chinese culture in its advertisements. General Chinese social media users are potential agents of consumption with economic capital. Chinese Sina Weibo accounts @yingguobaojie, @Beimeiliuxueshengribao, @iDest, @liuxuexinqinnian, @MarsParisFashionJournal, @SerenaHottie, @Fashion_Bangz, and Instagram accounts @diet_prada and @michaelatranova may be seen as agents of diffusion and partial agents of legitimation, practicing their social and symbolic capital by

[17] See appendix 4 for the classification, lists of social media influencers, watchdogs, common social media users, and celebrities engaged in the development of the incident.

disseminating information and their framing of the incident via social media posts. Chinese and Western mainstream media can be identified as agents of diffusion with cultural capital embodied in newspaper articles communicating information provided by social media. Finally, celebrities and models involved in *The Great Show* may be seen as agents of diffusion and legitimation, whose announcements terminating all collaborations with D&G serve as a symbolic de-legitimisation of the brand. It is interesting to note that, during the development of the incident, the traditional agents of diffusion and legitimation, established consumer-focused fashion media, did not play a significant role.

Figure 6. 2018 D&G incident timeline



*Stages of escalation*

Three major stages of escalation can be identified. The first stage is the growth of public discussion following Chinese social media influencers' criticism of the promotional videos between the 18th and the 20th of November. This discussion negatively addressed the advertisements, claiming that they stereotyped Chinese culture and could be seen as "insulting to China".[18] The main framing adopted by Chinese Sina Weibo influencers emphasises D&G's reliance on the Chinese market and criticises the brand for trying to earn Chinese money without respecting the people and culture.[19] This framing shows that among Chinese social media users, there is an awareness of Chinese consumers' economic capital and their intention to convert such capital into symbolic capital. The fact that this incident concluded with an official apology from D&G founders is indicative of the possibility of such a conversion. It is noteworthy that in contemporary China, capital conversion intentions are often demonstrative of nationalistic sentiment towards China's recent economic prosperity, which conforms with the official 'Chinese dream' framing of Chinese Communist Party propaganda (Yang, 2016).

The second stage began when Chinese social media influencers reposted screenshots of the conversation between @michaelatranova and @stefanogabbana, and Chinese mainstream media engaged. At this point the framing changes and the incident escalates. Following the publication of the conversation, the framing of the incident shifts from a focus on "inappropriate or discriminatory promotional adverts" to emphasising Stefano Gabbana's purported racism (Sina News, 2018). The change of focus and resulting accusations demonstrate how social media influencers and fashion watchdogs successfully mobilised their followers to criticise the brand and designer. This shows the conversion of social capital into symbolic capital, which provides the

[18] Yingguobaojie (@yingguobaojie), "zhege dapai you ruhua? ni rangwo 'qikuaichifan', wo rangni 'qikaigundan,'" Sina Weibo, November 18, 2018, https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1617545659311821985&wfr=spider&for=pc. The original post has been set as private and is not searchable or viewable. Therefore, we provide the link to the archived post on Baidu Baijiahao database.

[19] SerenaHottie (@SerenaHottie), "... zai shipinzhong huashi qishi zhongguoren, haiyao yong zhejige shipin laiquan zhongguoren de qian?" Sina Weibo, November 20, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/2244243302/H3ArT2dwb?type=comment.

authority to challenge the designer's symbolic legitimacy. Such conversion exhibits similarities with DV practices in China, yet in this case the participants seek the social death of a brand. In the past decade, due to the rise of social media, this practice of using social capital to establish, protect, or gain symbolic capital has been routinely used by Chinese citizens as described in the previous chapters. Radicalised by the above-mentioned nationalistic consumerism, agents involved in the D&G incident weaponised this proven tactic to achieve their goals.

In contrast to the new agents of diffusion and legitimation, established fashion consumer periodicals refrained from directly accusing the brand and designer of racism. Rather, they frame the incident as an unfortunate event stemming from misperception. They emphasise the D&G apology and its rejection by Chinese media and social media users. Similarly, the majority of well-known Chinese fashion influencers refrained from commenting or taking a strong stance on the issue. This approach is understandable given that both consumer periodicals and established fashion influencers gain economic capital by accepting endorsement from and collaborations with brands (Bradford, 2012). These increase their dependence on brands and render them less likely to criticise. Contrastingly, less-established influencers who are still accumulating social capital and resulting access to economic capital are more prone to take a strong stance in social controversies to gain popularity (van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

The third stage of escalation began on the 21st between 12:00 and 13:50 CST, when Chinese celebrities and models involved in and invited to the show announced that they would boycott the event and discontinue all future collaborations with D&G. The framing in celebrity announcements echoes responses to similar incidents which pit national dignity against opportunity, careers, and economic gain (Zhang, 2018). Boy band member Wang Junkai's comment elucidates this conflict; "My country is above everything. We have always been proud of and confident about Chinese cultural heritage and aesthetics. With no doubt, you are the best!"[20] Such framing indicates a struggle

[20] Junkai Wang (@KarryWangStudio), "zuguo gaoyu yiqie, duiyu zhongguode wenhuadiyun he jingshenshenmei, women yizhi shengandao jiaoao he zixin. Wuyongzhiyi, nishi zuihaode!,"

and choice between the benefits of and the source of celebrities' symbolic capital in their related field. Celebrities are chosen by brands because their visibility and popularity driven by their field's symbolic capital can be converted into a consumption drive (Driessens, 2013). Once offered the opportunity to collaborate with brands, celebrities gain economic capital through endorsement fees and symbolic capital as recognised fashion icons. However, such symbolic capital is determined by factors including public opinion, which explains the tendency for Chinese celebrities to align with social norms and the rising nationalism encouraged by the Chinese government (Liang, 2019).

Our data also indicates the limited determinative impact that established fashion and mainstream media, Chinese or Western, had on the incident. The majority of these outlets did not report on the events before the exposure of the conversation between @michaelatranova and @stefanogabbana. When commenting on the conflict, they do not present a new framework. A framework they commonly adopt highlights economic consequences, addressing the celebrity and model boycott, the show's cancellation, and D&G's expected drop in profits, emphasising the significance of Chinese consumers' capital.

Some media even shifted their framing in a way that suggests the influence of public opinion. Three Western media outlets, *Dazed, The Financial Times*, and *The Guardian,* amended their framing on the 23rd of November. They change from identifying the brand and Stefano Gabbana as players in an incident triggered by misperception to a frame including accusations of racism. While it is too bold to claim these media are losing their cultural and symbolic capital, it is obvious that their traditional positions and capital in the field are increasingly challenged within the digitised global fashion economy. The 2018 D&G incident clearly represents conflicting interactions between actors in the global luxury fashion field and the Chinese market.

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Sina Weibo, November 21, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/6349794947/H3GmNbSQr?type=comment.

**Chapter summary**

This chapter adopts Bourdieu's field theory to analyse the 2018 D&G incident, identifying agents who contested the established distribution of capital in the global luxury fashion field. It indicates the increasing capability of consumers and less-established influencers to challenge the symbolic capital of brands and established fashion media, presenting the conversions of capital possible within the mediatised fashion field. It poses questions about the role of traditional fashion media and its framing of digitally focused incidents. It also demonstrates s the broader impact of digitally mediated justice-seeking practices beyond DV.

Given the above findings, this analysis provides a framework for research on similar cases, such as the recent critique of Versace and Coach for categorising Hong Kong as a country (Hancock, 2019). It emphasises the risks of social media marketing and the importance of careful brand positioning, especially in such crucial and highly mediatised markets as China. It highlights the engagement level of the Chinese market and emphasises the changing roles of not only producers and information disseminators, but also those previously deemed passive consumers.

This chapter could benefit from a greater analysis of the intercultural dynamics of the fashion industry, addressing political controversy, racial representation, and orientalism, and from an examination of the interaction between the global fashion field and other fields. Moreover, a greater consideration of the controversial background of D&G would contextualise the case better (Adegeest, 2018). Nonetheless, the chapter provides a vital perspective into the interactions between entrenched actors and those brought into the debate by recent digital developments.

# Chapter 7.

## Context Collapse of Everyday Life and Punishment: Theorising Social Consequences of Digital Vigilantism

## Chapter 7. Context Collapse of Everyday Life and Punishment: Theorising Social Consequences of Digital Vigilantism

After providing a bird's-eye-view examination of the historical development of Chinese DV cases and illustrating how different actors and stakeholders interact in several case studies themed with trends identified in the overview, I intend to discuss the social consequences of Chinese DV (and potentially of DV in general). In such discussions, there are two traps that typically befall scholars: 1) a normative evaluation based on the justification of a DV case or whether it conforms to "The Rule of Law"; 2) a dichotomous analytic framework of oppression and resistance. In both cases, the media coverage and academic literature discussing DV's impact, privacy violations and potential false accusations are usually mentioned, especially in cases whose justifications are more trivial or debatable (e.g., theft, incivility, infidelity), and the term cyberbullying is often used to describe this type of DV (Reichl, 2019; Trottier, 2019). On the other hand, as mentioned before, DV is often regarded as socially positive when there is a progressive cause attached to it, and it is often framed as a social movement or activism. For example, when the #MeToo movement gained momentum, many women denounced sexual offenders they encountered in their professional life on various social media platforms. This wave of DV is widely applauded, and the visibility brought to the targets (perceived sexual abusers) is often regarded as a form of social justice. DV cases are judged based on whether they take a more legal approach—meaning collaborating with the state law enforcement—or not (Kosseff, 2016), which to some degree contradicts with the second trap of the dichotomic analytical framework of oppression and resistance. When analysing online practices and their social implications, this framework is often adopted, especially in authoritarian societies like China, which results in the normative evaluation of DV incidents based on their justification, as mentioned first. For most researchers, DV cases that are against the state's narratives are often regarded as progressive and praised despite potential harmful processes, while DV cases that align with the state's ideology are regarded as a potential threat to the public and to democracy. We believe that this approach to evaluate DV is very much in line with the standards of activism studies/collective action studies which, while meaningful, does not provide a systematic theoretical framework to understand DV's social implications.

Therefore, to work towards a systematic theoretical framework across different societies, I propose to follow Trottier's (2019) line of inquiry, investigate DV through the lens of surveillance studies, understand the common features of DV practices, and analyse its social and structural impact. In particular, the hybridised nature of DV's participatory surveillance enables scrutiny and social sanctions that transcend any particular society. I argue that the social implications of normalising such surveillance can be understood as an unmanageable and intensified context collapse of individuals' everyday life and the punishment imposed on them. It is important to note that I invoke some cases in this chapter to illustrate my arguments instead of analysing their impacts individually.

Floridi (2015) argues that contemporary citizens are living *onlife* instead of a distinct on/offline life, which not only changes how identities are formed, relationships are maintained, and realities are perceived, but also normalises many forms of surveillance (Lyon, 2018). Among these different forms of surveillance, DV has gone from a novelty to a common and normalised practice since its emergence in China in 2006, as I showed in Chapter 2. Such normalisation of DV makes citizens unconsciously vigilant and fosters the intention to surveil their fellow citizens, and it turns citizens' passive reception of self-presentation into their active search for information. This leaves individual citizens less agency to navigate and manage context collapse.

## The context collapse of everyday life

As mentioned in the Introduction, DV combines face-to-face surveillance and digital/file-based surveillance, during which time the information collected can be recorded and circulated on social media platforms. This results in not only the context collapse of individuals' image management on social media but also the context collapse of potentially every aspect of individuals' daily life, whether mediated or not. Y's case (in Chapter 4) presents a salient example for us to understand such context collapse. The speech that got her into trouble was meant for a specific audience in a particular social situation, namely a graduation ceremony at the University of Maryland. However, not only was the speech extracted from this context but the contexts she tried to maintain separately—her studies in America and the society of her motherland that requires patriotism—

also collapsed. In addition, the fact that Y's previous (perceived) offensive online posts and life experiences were all dug out, which brought about more shaming, demonstrates a temporal aspect of this context collapse.

In this case, another intriguing dimension of context collapse that takes place in China—or any country with restricted access to the global Internet—is the (in)consistency of individuals' conduct on domestic versus international platforms. In Y's case, YouTube is often regarded as a separate context since it is blocked in China, yet Yang's speech in this context was easily brought into the domestic Chinese platform context by any actor who has the global mobility—virtually or physically—and desire to make the collapse happen. Celebrities who intend to conduct business in China are currently under routine scrutiny for their speech and conduct across contexts (on Chinese domestic platforms and other global platforms), especially for political issues. Celebrities like Tzu-yu Chou (Buckley & Ramzy, 2016) and Chapman To (Chen, 2014), who support Taiwan/Hong Kong independence in the global context—either on international media or global social media platforms—while avoiding such speech in the Chinese domestic context have frequently become DV targets and suffered from consequences, such as official or unofficial bans of media appearance (Huang, 2017), being boycotted by Chinese audiences (Fung, 2021), and losing endorsement or contracts from companies in China (ibid.). DV cases like these make some citizens applaud while making others concerned that in current society, there is no hiding of an individual's (perceived) misconduct in current society due to the increasing digitalisation and complication of social interaction.

The digitalisation of virtually all social interactions (especially during a pandemic that requires embodied social distancing) also intensifies such unmanageable context collapse. An active and accessible online presence has become more important not only for contemporary social life but also for professional activities. Surveilling individuals based on their digital presence is facilitated by the perceived need to provide detailed personal information on professional networking websites like LinkedIn and ResearchGate that promise better career opportunities (Muscanell & Utz, 2017). Entrepreneurs and artists need to establish their personal websites or social media profiles with some personal information to compete in the market (Haynes & Marshall, 2018). The rise of online celebrities brought by the platform economy demonstrates the possibility

of turning social capital into other forms of capital (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011), which renders online visibility desirable among citizens who want to take advantage of this capital transformation. In many ways, citizens are forced—or nudged—to provide information about and perform their different "selves" in various contexts on different platforms or under different accounts, which seem distinct but, in fact, can potentially collapse on the contemporary Internet.

Due to technological developments in and beyond China, including certain social media platforms' features, the surveillance infrastructure, and accessible and versatile digital devices, citizens' agency to navigate and manage their personas in different social contexts is receding. This pervasive yet uncertain context collapse of everyday life challenges traditional interpersonal relationships, rendering all social ties into potential surveillance participants and targets. A major social media platform that aids such context collapse brought by DV in China is Sina Weibo. Sina Weibo is not only a platform where DV participants take advantage of this form of nodal governance to punish perceived offenders by unwanted online visibility, but is also one major source of offence-taking and context collapse. For users who do not use Sina Weibo to connect with their acquaintances, the platform seems to still grant them a degree of anonymity (Chen, Li, Hu & Li, 2016), which makes it easier for them to voice certain emotions and opinions, especially when they normally regard themselves as a "nobody" and think that their posts would not be of interest to other citizens. However, when posts and their authors become targets of DV, such anonymity can be easily revoked, which flattens users' "real life" and their imagined anonymous safe space. Another primary Chinese social media platform and "super-app" (Sapra, 2019), WeChat, exacerbates the context collapse by bringing every context of an individual's life into one app through private chats, group chats, and Moments. In terms of private chat and Moments, WeChat gives its users an illusion of intimacy, security, and privacy, which makes citizens feel more at ease to share their personal life and opinions (Qu, 2020). WeChat groups are often created based on certain types of pre-existing or formed communities that share certain spaces (e.g., neighbours), identities (e.g., fandom), personal relationships (e.g., classmates), etc. Therefore, group members might be more inclined to share personal information or make personal comments (Harwit, 2017). However, users in the same group may share

conflicting beliefs, ideologies, and values, which can lead to potential offence-taking.

Adding to the features of social media platforms, one of the surveillance infrastructure components—identity authentication—and some cell phone features also facilitate context collapse. Since 2012, the Chinese government has gradually pushed all social media platforms to a compulsory identity authentication by requesting users to register accounts with their mobile phone number (Xinhua News Agency, 2012). These mobile phone numbers can only be acquired from three state-owned telecom companies with ID cards provided and registered. Therefore, all social media accounts can be directly traced back to individual citizens, a feature that may emerge in other parts of the world (e.g., Price, 2021). With such an infrastructure, it is relatively easy for the DV participants to impose context collapse upon individuals. In addition to portable audio and visual recording devices, some mobile phone features, especially screenshotting, make context collapse happen more frequently by assisting the use of private or semi-private communication as evidence against individuals, often taken out of context. In 2018, a female lawyer became a DV target when screenshots of her WeChat Moments and company group chats were shared on Sina Weibo (Guancha Net, 2018). In posts that were supposed to be private, she talked about her education, job, and life in a "*zhuangbi* [showing-off, pretentious, and lying] manner", which results in a nationwide doxing and shaming. In this case, her posts can be viewed as a demonstration of her vanity in her own private life; however, when shared in the public sphere, her posts become a public moral issue because of her "dishonesty".

In a society where context collapse is a persistent risk, the anxiety (Lacan, 1988) generated by the knowledge of potential scrutiny by any and everybody can change how citizens interact with each other. In surveillance assemblages, the desire to surveil is key to their formation. For surveillance conducted by social institutions, the agenda is typically more apparent, focused, and limited (if only by privacy and data protection laws or by budget restrictions). However, in the assemblages of DV, surveillance is conducted by fellow citizens whose agenda is opaque, fluid, and expansive, especially in social contexts marked by fragmented identities and neo-tribalism (Maffesoli, 1995). Even though identity has always been constructed and multi-layered, it has been complicated and fragmented in

many different ways due to increasing varieties of cultural products that monetise certain tastes, ideologies, values, and beliefs (ibid.). Instead of an overarching political identity that influences offence-taking, such as liberal/conservative, individuals can have multiple coexisting yet conflicting identities that trigger offence-taking: political identities that are issue-based (e.g., climate change, animal rights, gender equality, freedom of speech), cultural identities that vary in scales (e.g., nationalism, localism, fandom), social class identities that are often subject-dependent (e.g., middle-class, knowledge elite, underdogs).

All these identities are related to particular values, rules, and norms. Wherever one of them is perceived to have been violated by another citizen, actors assembled through DV mobilise. Demonstrations of the context collapse brought by such conflicting identities can be found in many DV cases related to fandom. A Douban user who posts about her affection for pop cultures in the Japanese Showa era is publicly shamed because of her "betrayal of the nation". Just as in other surveillance assemblages, there can be various actors who desire control. What can further complicate this assemblage is the lack of a uniform and consistent 'code of conduct' or 'morality' of what citizens should or should not do in most cases. Instead, whenever a norm of any group - may it be political, cultural, or social - is perceived to be violated, which can be temporary and inconsistent, hybrid participatory surveillance will take place. Part of such uncertainty can be well explained by panopticism[21], in that individuals are always potentially under watch due to asymmetrical visibility (Foucault, 1977). However, another major part of it stems from the near impossibility to anticipate when an offence is made and on what grounds individuals can be denounced or targeted, due to the seemingly separate yet collapsed contexts of individuals' everyday life as well as to the fragmented identities mentioned before.

### The context collapse of punishment

Not only is it nearly impossible to maintain separate contexts and keep one's perceived misdeeds undiscovered, but the punishment imposed on DV targets

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[21] As well as other types of -opticon such as synopticon and omniopticon.

also transcends any distinctions between online and offline, work and leisure, public and private, etc. When investigating the consequence and potential harms brought by DV, scholars are well aware of the enduring and intense—sometimes disproportionately so—punishment brought by online visibility (Trottier, 2017). Adding to that, I propose to consider another trait of such crowdsourced punishment, which is the degree to which punishments imposed on individuals have crossed contexts. This also speaks to the difficulty in any group asserting the boundaries of just and proportionate punishment, as the stigma from a damaged reputation may not only follow the target beyond any context in which they are sanctioned but may also bring harm to others that share an affiliation with the target, such as their family, or members of the same (vulnerable/marginal) community. Traditionally, such authority to punish across contexts remains in the hands of state law enforcement, whereby citizens are sentenced and deprived of rights in all or some social contexts (Garland, 1993) (even here, in some societies, prisoners may hold certain rights such as to pursue education, to vote, and to see family), which is enabled and supported by institutionalised state violence. However, the normalisation of DV and nodal governance (Shearing & Wood, 2003) extends the authority of cross-contexts punishment to ad-hoc collections of common citizens, which are backed by dispersed symbolic and cultural violence enabled by the connectivity of the Internet as explained above. Perceived offenders' rights and opportunities can be easily denied in every context without an official sanction. In the 2017 Jiang Ge case, Jiang's roommate, Liu, has been publicly shunned, harassed, and denied job opportunities even without official punishment from the state legal institution. Sometimes such cross-contextual punishment can lead to or collaborate with an official sanction—which often happens in China—because of either public pressure or the co-optive nature of the DV incidents. The anti-corruption DV cases demonstrate how such symbolic violence and public pressure can lead to institutional punishment, and many cases that involve nationalism illustrate the possibility of joint punishment when the triggers of DV incidents suit the state's agenda. In the cases of "unpatriotic" celebrities mentioned in the previous section, Chinese citizens' online criticism and boycotting are later joined by the government's unstated sanction.

This unmanageable cross-contextual visibility and punishment do not only happen to DV targets, as citizens who launch or participate in DV typically also

have limited agency in controlling the framing, targeting, bandwidth and punishment of given cases. Some participants might launch a DV incident to expose and punish an offence within a community or in a certain context. However, this can be easily taken out of context by other citizens with other agendas, which might lead to re-directed and/or intensified cross-contextual punishment that is not desired by the original participants. Another uncertainty of such cross-context online visibility and punishment is that the participants can also become targets in the process of DV incidents. Very often, the initial participant also becomes a target later because of the harm they brought to the initial target. For instance, in 2018, a doctor accused of mistreating a boy in a public swimming pool committed suicide. Her family stated that the incident was caused when the boy first touched her inappropriately. The boy's family who initiated the DV was subsequently doxed and harassed. Another common cause of backlash on initial DV participants is the offence perceived in their DV posts. In a case investigated in Chapter 4, J was doxed and punished both by citizens and by her university because of her use of derogatory vocabulary against Chinese nationals in her DV post exposing some Chinese Marvel fans' public littering at an event.

Such unmanageable context collapse of punishment is both the core component and consequence of DV. Due to the lack of legal and institutional legitimacy, the main leverage and intimidation that DV participants have is the symbolic violence they can impose on targets across contexts to ensure their perceived justice is served. The "social death" discourse mentioned in the introduction encapsulates the context collapse of punishment brought to the targets of DV incidents.

### The power imbalance in the context collapse

When framing contemporary digital media practices in terms of surveillant assemblages (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000), it is tempting to regard all actors and nodes as equal in their power and privilege since these networks are not described as a hierarchical system. However, scholars also point out the importance of considering the power relations between actors that can impact the result of surveillance (Lyon, 2007). Therefore, when we discuss the context collapse brought by the surveillance assemblage of DV, we should not ignore that

various forms of power can determine how an individual experiences the context collapse of everyday life and punishment even in the broader trend of more difficult management of context collapse.

The power imbalance is present firstly at the level of individuals. Due to DV's reliance on digital media such as social media platforms, the degree of influence individuals have on these platforms can play a role in the circulation, framing, and thus the outcome of DV cases (Myles & Trottier, 2017). Also, individuals with greater economic power have relatively more means to manage the different contexts of their life and punishment. However, for individuals whose economic power mainly stems from the social capitals they accumulate on digital platforms, such as Internet celebrities, it is even harder to manage the context collapse of everyday life, and the cross-contextual punishment is more severe because their livelihood depends on their online reputation, popularity, and presence. Compared to public-facing individuals who are rather dependent on digital social capital, people with more "conventional" sources of power often suffer less from the context collapse of punishment. Established artists, scholars, and organisation leaders are often still able to maintain their career to a certain degree despite the temporary negative publicity, which can also often be seen in Chinese #MeToo cases. Power imbalances through context collapse also reflect the established mainstream social norms and relations. For instance, women are usually under greater scrutiny and exposed to greater vitriol compared to men, as demonstrated in Chapter 3 & 3, due to stereotypes, discrimination, and differing expectations in the contemporary patriarchal Chinese society.

In China, however, the intertwined sectors of tech platforms and the state are a fundamental force in creating the power imbalance. Various affordances of digital platforms also contribute to the power imbalance of the context collapse brought by DV. Chinese digital platforms have direct control of the online visibility that DV depends on, because of the state-endowed mandate to moderate and censor content. Platforms can delete content and manipulate recommendations in various forms (Tai & Fu, 2020). All these measures can disrupt the information flow in the assemblage of DV as well as the process of cross-contextual punishment. It is important to point out that these measures can be taken by platforms for reasons other than political pressure from the state, such as paid content moderation on demand as part of their business

model (Chen, Zhang & Zhou, 2020). In addition to the direct control over information flow in DV through platforms, the Chinese state can also overrule other actors in the DV assemblages by controlling the narrative in the "final truths" derived from formal investigations, and by shaping public opinion via mass media framing, which can easily determine individual DV targets' experience of the context collapse, ultimately experienced as a cross-contextual assessment (and punishment) of a targeted individual.

Therefore, even in DV's participatory surveillance assemblages, the power possessed by different actors varies, which determines the degree of "social death"—the cross-contextual punishment—of individual DV targets.

**Chapter summary**

Based on previous empirical chapters, this chapter provides a normatively ambivalent approach to study the social consequences of DV, and complicates popular and academic discourses that dichotomise oppression and resistance. As a mediated form of participatory surveillance with hybridity in information collection and processing, DV leads to the context collapse of individuals' everyday life and to punishment that can potentially change interpersonal interactions. Even though I base the argument on Chinese DV and contextualise the analysis in Chinese society, this chapter can still present a potentially generalisable theorisation of DV's social consequences. Similar trends and phenomena that enable the routinisation of DV and amplify its consequences—while to a lesser degree or in different forms—can be observed or may potentially proliferate in many other societies. The mediation and digitalisation of everyday life take place in almost all societies, and the technologies that enable context collapse in DV, such as screenshots and relevant platform features, are also universally available. The motivation of resorting to DV—a legal system perceived to be flawed and unjust—is also a common feature of nearly every society.

Following these implications, researchers should be mindful that any single account of a DV case may reflect a particular agenda or perspective. A participant's account of events or a journalistic report may overlook the diverse set of reasons that would compel others to participate in denunciation of the

target. Also, due to the power imbalance among different actors in these surveillance assemblages, citizen-led movements, even when targeting state officials, are not inherently resistant. State authorities or other social institutions may be positioned to co-opt or otherwise take advantage of these events. When the agendas from different actors in the surveillance assemblages coincide, the essence of these movements is more nuanced. Scholarly interpretations of such developments should maintain a degree of ambivalence and a multi-stakeholder analysis should always be included. However, we should also be aware of the challenges facing researchers in terms of the hesitance key actors may have to speak openly on these matters, even anonymously or pseudonymously.

When it comes to assessing the societal harm brought to targets, researchers should also be attentive to the social contexts that are breached. We should resist the desire to simply provide a sweeping statement that an incident is harmful just because it takes place on the Internet' and the damning footage is "everywhere" on social media platforms. In tracing data flows, models can be established to assess how many and to what degree the boundaries of an individual's social contexts are breached, which can inform further social works and legal proceedings concerning DV cases.

The analysis of context collapse in this chapter focuses mainly on the micro-level (in terms of individuals) consequences of routinised DV practices. On this note, the further theorisation of DV's meso- and macro-level impact can follow. Following the discussion in Chapter 6 on how actors' positions and capitals in the field of global fashion change, I propose to interrogate whether the collapse of fields (Bourdieu, 1993) and the redistribution of forms of capital and powers in autonomous fields can be the meso-/macro-level equivalence to the micro-level context collapse. The importance of contexts to an individual's life can be comparable to that of fields to social activities, where fields are defined as the structured and distinct sub-spaces dedicated to specific types of social activities (ibid.). And when the intrinsic values, goals, rules and means of functioning, as well as the resource distribution, of different autonomous fields are challenged by the routinisation of DV, the boundaries of these fields start to collapse.

Ethically, we should also re-assert the implications of our involvement as a research community in making sense of both individual cases and of broader

patterns of practices and discourse that shape these practices. We should also always be mindful of how we position ourselves in relation to the assemblages of actors who may temporarily coalesce to affect some forms of justice.

# Chapter 8.

# Conclusion

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## Main findings

In this thesis, I examined Chinese DV practices as mediated hybrid participatory surveillance assemblages that result in the social death—severe reputation damage and loss of social relations—of the targets. Driven by various desires, such as to control, profit, punish, or entertain, different actors and stakeholders use temporarily captured information flows to publicly name and shame individuals perceived to have broken laws, norms, and values. By adopting various research methods based on the specific assemblage and key actors involved, I mapped out the related media landscape and dynamics between actors concerning Chinese DV phenomena.

I started by reviewing all Chinese DV cases covered by media outlets between 2006 to 2018 to acquire a better understanding of the historical development of DV in China. In Chapter 2, I conclude that Chinese DV is mobilised organically without structured organisation, routinised as a common tactic when citizens encounter offences, and highly mediated as well as mediatised. Several trends across these 13 years are identified: the sudden decrease of anti-corruption DV cases, the increasing incivility-related DV cases, the increasing sentiment of nationalism, and the increasing number of celebrities falling as DV targets. These identified trends set the foundation for the case studies in Chapters 3 to 6. In Chapter 3, I analyse the public discourses surrounding cases involving incivilities and other transgressions in public spaces. DV participants use DV to vent their grievances about social phenomena or against some social groups represented by these cases, such as the increasing gap between rich and poor as well as (perceived) wrong conduct of women or teachers. Following this line of inquiry, I then focus on four DV cases targeting perceived unpatriotic female intellectual elites in Chapter 4 and identify the discourses of ungrateful traitors, corrupted elites, and slut-shaming in both public and media discourses, which demonstrates the intersectional vulnerability facing Chinese intellectual women. Chapter 5 explores the rending topic of cancel culture as a form of DV, which illustrates the dynamics between fandom practices and political engagement. By interviewing fans whose idol was cancelled, I demonstrate how fandom identities

are neo-tribal yet limited and framed by traditional politics, and how fans are constantly negotiating these two types of identities. Taking one step beyond DV, which emphasises individual citizens as targets, I then discuss the changing capital among different actors via studying the cancellation case of the brand D&G, which also echoes back to the increasing sentiment of nationalism discussed in Chapter 4. After the broad empirical overview and case studies, I propose a non-normative framework to understand the social consequences of DV in Chapter 7. I argue that for individuals, the routinisation of DV means the unmanageable context collapse of everyday life and punishment.

### The role of state: Fundamental, not incidental

In DV practices, especially in China, the state is a key stakeholder—if not the most powerful one—in shaping the dynamics. By the state, I mean the CCP-monopolised political institutions and governing apparatus in China. In this thesis, I intentionally shift the focus away from the state to other actors and stakeholders in the DV assemblages, because I aim to present more nuanced and complex dynamics of Chinese DV. When discussing public opinions and digital collective/connective actions in China, the focus is often put on the dichotomous relationships between "the people" and "the state". While useful, the over-emphasis of and sometimes misattribution to the state can be misleading and ignores the complex interactions between other stakeholders—such as the platforms, commercial media, citizens, and sub-cultural communities—in these phenomena taking place in digital China.

Hence, my intention is not to deny or downplay the state's influences on how DV is practiced in China. Rather, I would like to argue here in the conclusion that the state's influence on DV in China is more fundamental, systematic, and subtle instead of incidental and direct. With the increasing knowledge and accumulated experience in dealing with the digital society, the Chinese state has already developed a more intricate governance system than just censorship (Guo, 2020). Indeed, there are still many DV cases directly censored under the order of the state if regarded as endangering the social stability, such as several #MeToo cases that involve high-level or high-profile individuals within the state apparatus. However, in the majority of the DV cases studied in this thesis, the state performs its power in an indirect manner. The most fundamental power the

state has over the society is its monopoly on ideologies. As demonstrated in the empirical chapters, the public discourses often coincide with the ideologies promoted by the state, such as nationalism (Chapter 4 & 5) and the need to prohibit pornographic content (Chapter 5). The legal apparatus that makes digital platforms responsible for the content generated by their users also makes it possible for the state to not get directly involved in every individual incident. Conditioned to avoid institutional punishment such as fine or even a complete shutdown, Chinese platforms act pre-emptively on content moderation without direct command from the state. For example, Sina Weibo directly took down perceived pornographic content and blocked several fanfiction accounts after the report from some of Xiao's fans was made (Chapter 5). Additionally, the state also subtly hints at where the public and media discourses should be directed by publishing relevant articles on state-owned media. In case studies in Chapter 4, for instance, the state-media adopt and encourage the discourse of *the ungrateful traitor* yet relatively disengage from *the corrupted elites* and *the ugly slut* discourses, which serves as the state's signal of its stance to the public. With this intricate system, the Chinese state is imposing its monopolistic power indirectly on the Chinese citizens and Chinese society.

**Limitations and future research**

Even though I try hard to comprehensively map out Chinese DV practices, there are still some limitations in this thesis due to its scope and focus. Firstly, the thesis mainly focuses on high-profile DV cases which were covered by the media, ignoring DV cases that went silent due to various reasons. Future research on such less visible cases can also be fruitful in providing insights on factors that lead to media attention or to the state's censorship. As mentioned in the introduction, in the original research design I intended to interview individuals from Chinese law enforcement as well as individuals who have been targeted in DV incidents, to understand their opinions and experiences about Chinese DV. However, I was not able to realise this part of the research due to the lack of access as well as ethical concerns. I did not want to break the beneficence principle of research ethics and subject my potential participants to either reliving traumatising experiences or potential career harms. As a result, this type of interview data is missing in my thesis. While I see this as flaw in my research, I do not regret my decision.

To ensure both the quality and ethics of research in the future, I propose the following solutions. Firstly, the researchers can adopt other innovative research methods to gather other types of data, such as discourse analysis on public documents or social media content. Even though such data and analysis might not provide the full picture that researchers desire, the wellbeing of (potential) participants should still be the top priority. Also, when dealing with vulnerable research subjects who have traumas or mental issues, researchers need to at least have basic psychological knowledge or seek assistance from certified psychiatrists. In addition, we should make the research mutually beneficial: instead of using the participants as merely the source of our data, we should find the ways in which we can give back to the participants. In the case of DV research, I propose to form an organisation or information hub where DV targets could find useful information, such as legal aid and psychological counselling, to mitigate the harms brought by DV practices.

As for the future research on DV from this perspective, I believe that it will be more productive to focus on targets from low-profile cases since they might be more willing to talk, which can also provide insights for a better understanding of how targets experience DV incidents. However, this strategy still requires more ethical consideration because no harm—not less harm—should be done to the participants' wellbeing. Last but not least, I did not conduct an in-depth analysis on DV-related legal issues due to the scope of this project, which should be supplemented by researchers with legal expertise.

## Epilogue: Some brief soul-bearing notes from the author

I would like to end this thesis with some really personal experiences and feelings that I had in this almost five-year research journey. Being constantly exposed to Chinese DV cases have taken a toll on me. Even though I have never become a DV target, I have become more paranoid about my online presence, more reluctant to pursue (social) media exposure, and sometimes traumatised by my own imagination of how I can potentially be named and shamed on social media.

I have seen some citizens being doxed and shamed for speaking critically about China, the Chinese government, or the Chinese people, no matter how mild the critic is and whether it is posted in Chinese on the Chinese social media platforms or in English on the Western social media platforms. Because of this, I do not dare to make such comments, not only on Chinese media, but any social media in general, so that I will not experience the serious consequences of context collapse brought by a DV case against me. Meanwhile, I have also seen Chinese scholars being called out as "brainwashed", "propaganda agent", and "the CCP accomplice" for trying to correct misrepresentation or biased reports in Western media.

I have seen some lecturers and professors being named, shamed, and then reported to the Chinese government for "promoting western ideologies" or "smearing China's national image", sometimes in Chinese universities but sometimes in foreign universities as well. Because of this, whenever there are Chinese students in my class, I become more cautious about what examples I use and how I talk about them, so that there won't be a day when I find myself being shamed as such "traitor intellectual" on Chinese social media.

I have seen some Chinese women being trolled, harassed, and even physically harmed for dating foreign men. When I was doing my research, I found several online groups seeking out Chinese women who date or marry foreign men, posting their photos, doxing them, and slut-shaming them with the meanest language. I observed them for a long period and wanted to interview them for a better understanding of their thinking processes, but in the end, I decided not to do so because I might also become their target as I am in relationship with a foreign man.

What makes it worse for me is the constant self-doubting and self-blaming following my behavioural changes. I see myself as a coward who does not practice the freedom of speech because of fear, who self-censors just to stay away from troubles, and who give in to the digital mobs against whom I am supposed to fight. This vicious cycle continues with me feeling scared when I tell myself "F**k this, I will not be intimidated by them" and then cannot stop imagining how, if someone decides to make me a DV target, the many things that I am, I have, I say, and I do could be used against me and against my family who are still living in China. And then of course, I keep censoring myself and treading carefully in this digital world where the contexts can collapse at any moment.

I have never been a DV target, yet I experience all these negative emotions, just by witnessing what happens to other people. I cannot imagine how traumatic it is for the people who actually went through all the unwanted visibility, the intense shaming, and the endless harassment. Meanwhile, there are more individuals becoming DV targets every day in China, as well as in the rest of the world. DV has not only become routinised, but a go-to tactic if anyone aims to destroy someone. The "transgressions" that get individuals into trouble can be the most minor things that happened a decade ago, yet such "dirt" can be so destructive as long as it touches some nerves.

I feel so devastated and powerless because in the past five years I have witnessed this undesirable trend and I do not know how to put a stop on it. However, I also know that the responsibility is not only on me.

It is not my intention to end the thesis on such a depressing note, but I see no better option than trying to make you—the readers—a bit more empathetic with all the DV targets and even more concerned about DV's impact on individuals' mental health. I believe if people can empathise with each other a bit more, they might be more reluctant and more careful to use DV against fellow citizens. In that way, we might be able to get the negative impact of DV under control from its root instead of only depending on the legal system or the platforms for a solution.

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# Appendices

## 1. Case Number of DV Justification in China from 2006 to 2018 (Chapter 2)

| Year ( 20_ _ ) | 06 | 07 | 08 | 09 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Abusing public power/resource | 0 | 1 | 1 | 25 | 20 | 31 | 60 | 33 | 22 | 18 | 12 | 5 | 7 |
| Animal brutality | 2 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 9 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 8 | 10 | 10 | 16 | 11 |
| Economic crime/conflict | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 8 | 3 | 7 | 12 | 4 | 7 | 11 | 9 | 10 |
| Incivility | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 2 | 3 | 8 | 11 | 16 | 29 | 13 | 28 |
| Indifference/ disrespect/ insulting | 0 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 4 | 15 | 18 | 13 | 10 | 7 | 20 | 10 | 21 |
| Sexual offence | 1 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 6 | 8 | 10 | 11 | 13 | 10 | 20 | 18 | 32 |
| Sexual scandal | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 10 | 16 | 16 | 11 | 24 | 12 | 14 | 6 | 1 |
| Show off wealth/ social status | 0 | 0 | 3 | 6 | 9 | 16 | 9 | 3 | 7 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Traffic transgression | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 6 | 10 | 15 | 5 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Unpatriotic speech/action | 0 | 1 | 1 | 6 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 5 | 4 | 7 | 3 | 6 | 7 |
| Unprofessional/ unsafe conduct | 0 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 12 | 8 | 8 | 10 | 6 | 7 |
| Violence/ physical harm | 1 | 1 | 3 | 12 | 19 | 24 | 49 | 30 | 49 | 61 | 57 | 36 | 46 |
| Others | 0 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 6 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 7 | 15 |
| Sum | 6 | 6 | 11 | 87 | 113 | 143 | 203 | 152 | 170 | 165 | 199 | 141 | 196 |

**2. Interview Guide (Chapter 5)**

Demographic:

- What is your age?
- Which gender do you identify with?
- What is your profession?
- What is your educational background?
- How would you describe your political involvement?

Fandom identities and practices:

- When and how did you become a fan of Xiao Zhan?
- Have you ever been part of any fandom before?
- What kind of activities do you engage in as a fan?

Controversies- and politics-related:

- Can you describe what happened in the 227 incident and how you felt?
- Why do you think Xiao and his fans did what they do?
- As a fan, did you participate in any of the collective actions? Did you have any conflict or argument with other fans? Is there any disagreement among the fans?
- What is the current situation of Xiao Zhan's fandom?
- Was there any organised activity from his fans trying to solve consequences brought by the controversies?
- Where do you think the public's strong emotions come from?
- Do you have any struggle dealing with the different identities you have in this incident?
- So what's your vision on the future fandom culture?
- What do you think about the public discussion or the public sphere after these incidents.
- Do you think this incident has any implication for citizens' political participation or public discussion in societies in general?

## 3. Sample Thematic Analysis (Chapter 5)

| Original Text | Open Codes | Axial Codes | Thematic Codes |
|---|---|---|---|
| After I watched it, I was like 'wow Xiao Zhan's acting was good, and I have never heard of him before. So after I finished the show, I fell in love with this person and feel he's so close to the character in the novel. | Fan Identity - likes Xiao's acting | Taste-based | Neo-tribal identity |
| And when Xiao Zhan released a song, she spent 3000rmb to buy as many as she could so that he can be on the chart. For example, a while ago Xiao released a single called guangdian, and because of the fans's kejin, its sales exceed 100 million yuan (around 12.5 million euros). And Xiao is one of the spokespeople of Ester Lauder, and then all his fans were crazy about buying that brand. | Fan practice - spend money (kejin) | Consuming and (re)producing in/material cultural product | |
| And even though cp fans felt they were wronged, they still try to xiguangchang (wash the square, meaning try to clean public opinion) and defend weifen. Cp fans call themselves turtle, you know, meaning that we are kind and tolerant even when we are wronged by weifen, never stop zuoshuju (create the traffic and good statistics) for both idols. But everything is done quietly. In our group chat, the leader always tells us to bimai (turn off the mic, meaning not to post or comment), do not fight with anyone publicly, and focus on the statistics. | Fan practice - kongping & zuoshuju | | |
| I have some friends who are weifen, or people in the group chat, they are very involved, and this incident indeed brought them a lot of trauma. For example, some of them cried everyday once the whole thing blew up, so hard that they couldn't go to work. And then some of them just uninstalled Sina Weibo because she doesn't want to see any more of this. | Fan Identity - emotional | Empathy and Emotions | |
| If Xiao Zhan did something like having an affair, having questionable sexual activities, doing drugs, saying something that's anti-China, then I think he deserves this large scale of firestorm. | Fan identity - potential abandonment | Temporal & fluid | |
| For the ACG fans, I think what they hate is the reporting action. Because the word "report" is very very sensitive in China, but in other societies the connotation of "report" or "sue" might not be that bad; instead people might be encouraged to file complaints or something like that. It's because they (people in other societies) do not have the collective memory of the culture revolution. Because of the culture revolution, the word "report" has a very specific meaning. It keeps reminding (Chinese) people of the time when everyone is forced to report on their friends and families, teachers and so on. So Chinese people have deep resentment against "reporting". | Historical context - cultural revolution | Provides conditions | Traditional political identity/issue |
| However, I don't think you can blame for this because many of them are still very young, like 16 or 17, and they grow up in an environment like China where mainstream discourse is still "sex is evil" and such pornographic platform is illegal thus should be banned. You can't blame them. | Social context - insufficient sex education | | |
| Secondly, the incident happened to take place when the state was having a big campaign to clean the online environment in terms of pornographic and other illegal contents. This is too much of a coincident. The fact that AO3 got banned was not because of the fans' report. Of course, they tried to take advantage of this. | Political context - government censorship | | |
| The people who started it wrote an article to call for support and managed to engage so many stakeholders and make them believe that they should be concerned, and they are fighting for their own freedom of speech. I think this will become a common tactic in the future. | Political topic - freedom of speech | Provides Frames | |
| If Xiao Zhan did something like having an affair, having questionable sexual activities, doing drugs, saying something that's anti-China, then I think he deserves this large scale of firestorm. But what happened here is just a few fans reporting (deemed) pornographic depictions on Weibo, and then both Xiao and his other fans had to suffer. I don't think it's reasonable. | Potential threshold to abandon Xiao | Abandon | Negotiation when identities in conflict |
| There's nothing like super illegal things that he did, such as soliciting prostitutes, doing drugs, plagiarism, or relationship affairs… Unless they found that Xiao Zhan did something super bad and illegal, I might stop being his fan. | | | |
| Nothing changed for me. And actually, most of the fans stay supporting them or him this time. There seemed to be a lot of scandals about him got exposed, you know, but all these so-called scandals aren't even qualified as scandals ... It's only some cursing words in his social media posts he made when he was 19. Come on, the numbers of the 'fuck' word I said on my social media can wrap one circle around the earth. But he's public figure now, and these things were dug up. These things are really nothing for a normal person. | Reasons not to abandon Xiao | | |

## 4. Key Social Media Influencers, Watchdogs and Social Media User in 2018 D&G Incident (Chapter 6)

Key Non-fashion-related Chinese social media influencers:

1. @yingguobaojie 英国报姐 [Ms. British News] (Sina Weibo & Zhihu account)

2. @beimeiliuxuesehngribao 北美留学生日报 [College Daily] (Sina Weibo & WeChat public account)

3. @liuxuexinqingnian 留学新青年 [New Youth Abroad] (Sina Weibo)

Key Fashion-related Chinese social media influencers:

1. @SerenaHottie (Sina Weibo)

2. @Fashion_Bangz (Sina Weibo)

3. @iDest (Sina Weibo)

4. @Mars 的巴黎时尚笔记 [Mars Paris Fashion Journal] (Sina Weibo)

International fashion watchdogs: @diet_prada (Instagram)

*Key social media user:* @michaelatranova (Instagram)

**5. Sampled Chinese and Western Media Outlets in 2018 D&G Incident (Chapter 6)**

Chinese mainstream media (including newspapers, news websites):

1. Xinhuashe 新华社 [Xinhua News Agency]
2. Renmin Ribao 人民日报 [People's Daily]
3. Huanqiu Shibao 环球时报 [Global Times]
4. Guanchazhewang 观察者网 [Guanchazhe Online News]
5. Guangming Ribao 光明日报 [Guangming Daily]
6. Fenghuang Xinwen 凤凰新闻 [Pheonix News]
7. Pengpai Xinwen 澎湃新闻 [The Paper News]
8. Xinjingbao 新京报 [Jing Daily]
9. Sanlian Zhoukan 三联周刊 [Sanlian Weekly]
10. Jiemian Xinwen 界面新闻 [Jiemian News]
11. Jinri Toutiao 今日头条[Toutiao News]

Western mainstream media (English publications from the U.S. and the U.K.):

1. New York Times
2. The Wall Street Journal
3. Financial Times
4. CNN
5. Washington Post
6. USA Today
7. Independent
8. BBC
9. Financial Times
10. Independent
11. Telegraph
12. The Guardian
13. Reuters

Western established fashion media:

1. Vogue
2. Bazaar
3. WWD
4. Glamour
5. Drapers
6. Dazed
7. Business of Fashion

### 6. Chinese Source Translation in 2018 D&G Incident (Chapter 6)

1. SNSdatamining, "Dujiabanna ruhua shijian: 24 xiaoshinei qinshou dazao niandu 'gongguan chehuo xianchang'" 杜嘉班纳辱华事件：24 小时内亲手打造年度"公关车祸现场 [Dolce & Gabbana insulting China incident: public relation disaster created by itself within 24 hours], *The Paper* 澎湃新闻, November 21, 2018. https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2657460.;

2. Zhixin You, "D&G shejishi beibao ruhua zao zhongren dizhi, Shanghai daxiu yi xuanbu quxiao D&G 设计师被曝辱华遭众人抵制，上海大秀已宣布取消！ [D&G Designer is boycott by people due to his racism exposed by netizens, and the cancelation of the brand's Shanghai Show has been announced]," *Xinhuanet*, November 21, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2018-11/21/c_1123748728.htm.;

3. Elitico Marketing, "D&G ruhua shijian, fenxi pinpai gai ruhe yingdui xinmeiti weiji gongguan D&G 辱华事件，分析品牌该如何应对新媒体危机公关 [D&G insulting China incident, analysing how brand should cope with new media public relation crisis]," November 23, 2018.

4. https://eliticomarketing.com.au/dg 辱华事件，分析品牌该如何应对新媒体危机/

5. Yingguobaojie (@yingguobaojie), "zhege dapai you ruhua? ni rangwo 'qikuaichifan', wo rangni 'qikaigundan'这个大牌又辱华？你让我"起筷吃饭"，我让你"起开滚蛋" [This brand insulted China again? You tell me to 'use chopsticks to eat food', I tell you to 'get out of country']," Sina Weibo post, November 18, 2018, https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1617545659311821985&wfr=spider&for=pc. The original post has been set as private and is not searchable or viewable. Therefore, we provide the link to the archived post on Baidu Baijiahao database.

6. SerenaHottie (@SerenaHottie), "... zai shipinzhong huashi qishi zhongguoren, haiyao yong zhejige shipin laiquan zhongguoren de qian ? ... 在视频中花式歧视中国人，还要用这几个视频来圈中国人的钱? [...they discriminate against Chinese people in the videos in so many ways, and they want to earn Chinese money with these videos?]," Sina Weibo post, November 20, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/2244243302/H3ArT2dwb?type=comment.

7. Sina News, "Dolce Gabbana ruhua shijian zhuizongbaodao 杜嘉班纳辱华事件追踪报道 [Reports on the development of Dolce Gabbana Insulting China Incident]." http://fashion.sina.com.cn/zt_d/dgruhua/.

8. Emma (@emma), "sheilai jiujiu dui DG ruhua jiti zhuangsi de shishang gongzhonghao? 谁来救救对 DG 辱华集体装死的时尚公众号? [Who can save the fashion public accounts who said nothing about DG insulting China?], Douban post, November 23, 2018, https://www.douban.com/group/topic/128420370/

9. Zhiqi Zhang, "Mingxing zhadui biaotai aiguo: women dui zhengzhi gongtongti de zhongcheng jiujing yuanyu shenme? 明星扎堆表态爱国：我们对政治共同体的忠诚究竟源于什么? [Celebrities made patriotic statment all at once: where does our loyalty to a political community come from?], *Jiemeian News*, November 28, 2018. https://www.weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309351000894310621088051725&u=5182171545&m=4310621031305503&cu=1820246805.

10. Junkai Wang (@KarryWangStudio), "zuguo gaoyu yiqie, duiyu zhongguode wenhuadiyun he jingshenshenmei, women yizhi shengandao jiaoao he zixin. Wuyongzhiyi, nishi zuihaode! 祖国高于一切，对于中国的文化底蕴和精神审美，我们一直深感到骄傲和自信。毋庸置疑，你是最好的! [My country is above everything. We have always been proud of and confident about Chinese cultural heritage and aesthetics. With no doubt, you are the best!]," November 21, 2018, https://www.weibo.com/6349794947/H3GmNbSQr?type=comment.

**Portfolio**

**Publication**

*Journal articles*

1. Huang, Q., Driessen, S. & Trottier, D. (in press). When pop and politics collide: A transcultural perspective on contested practices in pop idol fandoms in China and the West, *International Journal of Communication*.
2. Huang, Q. (2021). The mediated and mediatised justice-seeking: Chinese digital vigilantism from 2006 to 2018, *Internet Histories*, *5*(3-4), 304-322. DOI: 10.1080/24701475.2021.1919965
3. Trottier, D., Huang, Q. & Gabdulhakov, R. (2021). Covidiots as the global acceleration of local surveillance practices. *Surveillance & Society*, *19* (1), 109-113. DOI: 10.24908/ss.v19i1.14546
4. Huang, Q., Gabdulhakov, R. & Trottier, D. (2020). Online scrutiny of people with nice cars: A comparative analysis of Chinese, Russian, and Anglo-American outrage. *Global Media & China*, *5*(3), 247-260. DOI:10.1177/2059436420901818
5. Huang, Q. & Janssens, A.G. (2019). Come mangiare un cannolo con le bacchette: The contested field of luxury fashion in China, a case study of the 2018 Dolce & Gabbana advertising incident. *ZoneModa Journal*, *9*(2), 123-140. DOI: 10.6092/issn.2611-0563/9970.

*Book chapters*

1. Trottier, D., Huang, Q. & Gabdulhakov, R. (2020). Mediated visibility as making vitriol meaningful. In S. Polak & D. Trottier (Eds.), Violence and trolling on social media: History, affect, and effects of online vitriol (Media matters) (pp. 25-47). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. doi: 10.5117/9789462989481

*Edited book*

1. Trottier, D., Gabdulhakov, R. & Huang, Q. (2020). Introducing vigilant audiences: Justice seeking through global digital media. Open Book Publishers: Cambridge, UK.

**Main conference presentations**

1. Huang, Q. (2022, May 25-30). The Assemblage of Nationalism, Populism, and Misogyny in Chinese Digital Vigilantism. Paris, France, ICA 2022.
2. Mols, A., Pridmore, J., Huang, Q., de Neergaard, K., Van Bruyssel, S., de Leyn, T., Bhallamundi, I., Vitak, J. & Pagh, J. (2022, May 24). Workshop: Context convergence in mobile phone use: Mapping

multiplicities of presence, digital inequalities, and well-being across the Global North and South. Paris, France, ICA 2022.

3. Huang, Q. (2022, April 4-7). The Assemblage of Nationalism, Populism, and Misogyny in Chinese Digital Vigilantism. Antwerp, Belgium, Nationalism and The Media Conference.
4. Huang (2020, July). The Context Collapse of Everyday Life and Punishment: Theorising Social Consequences of Digital Vigilantism from The Vantage Point of China. IAMCR 2020.
5. Huang, Q., Gabdulhakov, R. & Trottier, D. (2019, June 29). Online Scrutiny of People with 'Nice Cars': The Class Struggle in China and Beyond. Singapore, The 17th Chinese Internet Research Conference.
6. Huang, Q. (2019, June 4). 'Defend Our Motherland Like We Are Defending Our Idols': Chinese Vigilant Patriots on Social Media. Utrecht, UGlobe "Digitized Global Mobilities" Seminar.
7. Trottier, D., Gabdulhakov, R. & Huang, Q. (2019, April 16). Informing the Court of Public Opinion Through Mediated Scrutiny, Nationalism, and Denunciation. St. Petersburg, Russia, Comparative Media Studies in Today's World 7th International Conference.
8. Huang, Q. (2018, June 8). From Mop to Sina Weibo: Three Stages of Digital Vigilantism in China. Aarhus, Denmark, Surveillance Studies Network 8th Biennial Conference.
9. Huang, Q. (2018, May 22). Negotiating Power on Social Media Platforms: Digital Vigilantism on Weibo in China. Leiden, Modes of Connection: The 16th Chinese Internet Research Conference.

**Organizational work**

1. Founder of *The Informal Chinese Media Research Network*
2. Local organisational team for the 9th Biennial Surveillance & Society conference of the Surveillance Studies Network.

**Media presence**

1. Huang, Q., Fang, C. & Shen, Q. (2021, May). Don't judge a book by its cover: Discussion on Stop Asian Hate Movements in the US and Europe. *Youzhaoyiri*.
2. Huang, Q. & van Vlaardingen, V. (2021, October). Let's talk about cancel culture. *What's Your X?*
3. Huang, Q. & Kuai, J. (2021, November). Chinese Digital Vigilantism: The Mediated and Mediatised Justice-Seeking. *The Nordic Asia Podcast*.
4. Huang, Q. (2021, September. Is social media to blame for the increasing polarization? In *InBetweeners Flash Science Talk Session Communicating in the Polarized World* (in Chinese).

## Courses and training followed during PhD project

| Course | EC |
|---|---|
| Work-Life Balance (2017) | 1.00 |
| Introduction to Participatory Action Research (PAR) (2017) | 1.00 |
| Ethnography and its varieties (2017) | 2.50 |
| RMeS Winter School & Graduate Symposium 2017-18 (2018) | 2.00 |
| Introduction to coding with ATLAS.ti (2018) | 1.00 |
| Interviewing curriculum (2018) | 2.50 |
| Qualitative data analysis (QDA) (2018) | 2.50 |
| Workshop Professionalism and Integrity in Research (2018) | 1.00 |
| Contemporary approaches to digital cultures: platforms, politics, performances and people (2018) | 6.00 |
| Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) (2019) | 2.50 |
| Method of 'con/text analysis' for interviews and other biographic data (2019) | 2.50 |
| ECREA Summer/Winter School 2019-2020 (2020) | 6.00 |
| | ------ + |
| Total EC | 30.50 |

## Didactic training

2019 Basic didactics course (Research Training Consultancy RISBO)

**Courses taught during PhD project**

| Year | Level | Course | Task |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2017-2018 | BA | Academic Skills | 1 tutorial group |
| | BA | International & Global Communication | 2 tutorial groups |
| | BA | Communication as a Social Force | 2 tutorial groups |
| 2018-2019 | BA | Academic Skills | 1 tutorial group |
| | BA | International & Global Communication | 2 tutorial groups & 1 lecture |
| | BA | Communication as a Social Force | 2 tutorial groups |
| 2019-2020 | BA | Academic Skills | 1 tutorial group |
| | BA | International & Global Communication | 2 tutorial groups & 1 lecture |
| | BA | Communication as a Social Force | 2 tutorial groups |
| 2020-2021 | BA | Communication as a Social Force | 1 guest lecture |
| | MA | Master Thesis Supervision | 3 students |
| | BA | Communication Technologies and their Impacts | 2 tutorial groups |
| 2021-2022 | BA | International & Global Communication | 2 tutorial groups & 1 lecture |
| | MA | Digitalisation and Social Change | co-design & 2 seminars |
| | MA | Master Thesis Class | 1 seminar group |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| BA | Qualitative Research Methods in Media & Communication | 2 tutorial groups |
| MA | Media Research Methods 2 | 2 seminar groups |
| MA | Research Workshop: Surveillance and The Media | design & seminars |
| MA | Master Thesis Supervision | 6 students |
| BA | Privacy, Surveillance, and New Media Technologies | design & seminars |
| MA | Digital Citizens and Communities | 1 lecture |
| BA | Communication Ethics | 1 tutorial group |
| BA | Bachelor Thesis Supervision | 9 students |
| BA | Communication Technologies and their Impacts | 3 tutorial groups |

**Thesis Abstract**

Digital vigilantism (DV) is a process where citizens who are facilitated by digital media and technology are collectively offended by other citizens' activities and use visibility as a weapon to conduct mediated policing and control. In China, DV is featured by the so-called "human flesh search engine" and other forms of citizen-led vigilante activities. Such DV activities reflect the current social and political situation in contemporary China; in turn, DV activities construct the social and political reality in China. This research includes an overview of the historical development of Chinese DV, close examinations of experiences, discourses, and influences in several empirical DV cases, as well as a theorisation of DV's social impact. By adopting different qualitative methodologies, the research develops a theoretically nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of DV in China and the interplay between DV and Chinese society, as well as contributes to the current scholarship on surveillance studies and digital cultures in China.

# THE ASSEMBLAGE OF SOCIAL DEATH: MAPPING DIGITAL VIGILANTISM IN CHINA

Digital vigilantism (DV) is a process where citizens who are facilitated by digital media and technology are collectively offended by other citizens' activities and use visibility as a weapon to conduct mediated policing and control. In China, DV is featured by the so-called "human flesh search engine" and other forms of citizen-led vigilante activities. Such DV activities reflect the current social and political situation in contemporary China; in turn, DV activities construct the social and political reality in China. This research includes an overview of the historical development of Chinese DV, close examinations of experiences, discourses, and influences in several empirical DV cases, as well as a theorisation of DV' s social impact. By adopting different qualitative methodologies, the research develops a theoretically nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of DV in China and the interplay between DV and Chinese society, as well as contributes to the current scholarship on surveillance studies and digital cultures in China.