

# Dissenting public or engaged citizens? Predictors of general and contentious online political expression in China

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## Abstract

Online political engagement in China has been explained as both conventional and contentious forms of political participation. Depending on the explanations, potentially contradicting factors are assumed to promote online political engagement. To resolve this contradiction, this research distinguished general and contentious online political expression. The analyses of two datasets showed that general online political expression positively related to variables associated with conventional participation, such as personal resources, political interest, efficacy, and satisfaction with personal and China's general economic situations. On the other hand, expression regarding contentious food safety issues was mainly explained by factors related to contentious participation such as support for alternative political ideas (i.e. freedom of expression and giving more voice to citizens) and the perception of injustice. In both datasets, political expression was positively associated with social media use for news. The results from the two studies suggest that different factors may be at work in explaining general and contentious political expression. The potential of the two different types of political expression for political change in China is discussed.

## Keywords

Food safety, news use, political discussion, political engagement, social media

## Introduction

The growing use of digital media in China has raised scholarly interest in whether political expression and discussion occurring via new media can stimulate social and political change. Based on

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the observation of high-profile online incidents that have generated netizens' criticism and challenges directed at government agencies and officials, some claim that the emerging online public sphere strengthens the burgeoning civil society of China and heralds political reform in a more liberal and democratic direction (Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2009; Zheng, 2008). These cases involving large-scale online reactions to government policy failures and corruptions are understood to be a form of online activism and protest insofar as they are characterized by the demands of netizens for immediate remedies to social and political injustices.

While previous research, which focuses on dramatic but isolated events entailing mass online participation, illustrates the disruptive potential of new media for political change in China, it overlooks the functions of online political engagement in normal situations. With the popularization of new media such as the Internet and social media, the Chinese citizens who engage in online political activities may comprise diverse groups with various social backgrounds, political orientations, and motivations for communication. Given the expansion of online political engagement, this research aims to explore individual-level predictors of both *general* and *contentious* online political expression, particularly on issues of food safety, which attracted large-scale online activism. Comparison of the factors shaping the two different forms of online political expression illuminates the complexity and uniqueness of online political communication in China, and provides an empirical basis for discussion about the potential and limitation of new media for sociopolitical change.

The current research draws upon two potentially competing theoretical frameworks drawn from previous research on political participation in Western contexts, summarized as the *dissenting public thesis* and the *engaged citizen thesis*. Under the dissenting public thesis, political expression using digital media is regarded as a form of activism against the status quo in China. Based on classic Western literature about anti-system protest participation (e.g., Davies, 1962; Gurr, 1970; Lipset, 1960), this research expects individuals who actively engage in online political discourse to be politically disaffected and socially disadvantaged.

On the other hand, the engaged citizen thesis is based on personal resource and engagement model of participation (e.g. Inglehart, 1997; Putnam, 2000; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995), which suggests that online political expression, as an element of conventional political participation, is likely to be influenced by an individual's resources, motivations for political engagement, and social networks. It is expected that people who express their ideas online are politically engaged and socially well connected, in addition to being advantaged individuals. To test the two theses, two sets of survey data were collected from adult Internet users in mainland China. With the first dataset, this research mainly examined predictors of general online political expression, while the second dataset was used to explore factors related to online expressions regarding food safety issues.

## **The rise of the online public sphere in China**

The proliferation of new communication technologies in China has raised expectations that they may lead to an online public sphere that is relatively autonomous from the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This belief largely draws upon the affordance of digital media, which renders state efforts to manage public communications more cumbersome and expensive. Monitoring by state agencies over numerous sites and digital services requires far more resources than the supervision of traditional news media. Even China's most sophisticated apparatus of Internet censorship and manipulation is far from complete due to the abundance of information and the decentralized quality of communication mediated by digital media (Yu, 2009). When the

government shuts down troubling sites and services, the relevant messages can go viral through the digital communication networks of individuals and beyond. In response to the state's Internet censorship and restriction, China's digital media users have devised creative means, such as using proxy servers and employing coded words, satire, and parody to question and criticize the status quo (Gong & Yang, 2010; Xiao, 2011; Yu, 2007).

Owing to these features of modern technology, digital media provide the Chinese public with communication tools at a relatively low cost, including Internet bulletin board systems (BBSs), blogs, and social networking sites (SNSs), to produce and share political information and to voice their own political views. Under an authoritarian regime in which the public sphere is constrained, new media serve as a virtual public sphere, which can influence political decision making and process in China. Ultimately, the rise of an online public sphere is expected to lead to political reform in the direction of a more open, democratic, and liberal China (Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2009; Zheng, 2008).

Indeed, some empirical studies have found that the online political discourse of citizens represents information and viewpoints that are alternative to official accounts of politics offered by traditional news media. In the content analysis of blog posts concerning the dismissal of corrupt Shanghai party leader, Chen Liangyu, Zhou (2009) found that Chinese bloggers provided diverse viewpoints unavailable in the traditional news media, which simply echoed the CCP's position that the dismissal manifested the national government's successful anti-corruption move. Contrary to this account by traditional media, many blog posts viewed the incident as an internal political struggles, a matter of quality of government officials, and even a symptom of institutional and systematic problems. Esarey and Xiao (2011) also discovered more criticism of the government and less state propaganda in the postings of Chinese bloggers than in articles from mainstream newspapers. They also found bloggers increasingly used words related to the support of liberal democracy, such as freedom of speech, democracy, and political reform.

Other scholars, however, are cautious about the potential and the significance of new media for citizen engagement and political change in China. They question the deliberativeness, autonomy, and effectiveness of online political discourse. The online sphere in China, like its Western counterparts, is infiltrated with infotainment, misinformation, and parochial interests (Leibold, 2011). Political debates via digital media are often so short-lived that they do not entail meaningful political outcomes (Bondes & Schucher, 2014). Although online political expression and opinions sometimes draw attention from the government and mainstream news media, the government is still more likely to set the agenda for online public opinion rather than vice versa (Luo, 2014). Even for controversial political issues, such as government corruption, citizen bloggers are more likely to react to traditional news media coverage rather than to initiate the stories (Hassid, 2012). Online platforms can therefore serve regime stability by acting as a "safety valve" that defuses any populist energy for collective action (MacKinnon, 2008), even strengthening the legitimacy of the CCP in instances when the national government skillfully deals with the concerns and resistance of netizens (Cai, 2008; He & Warren, 2011).

Besides the debates regarding the democratic nature of online engagement in China, relatively little is known about who are active in online political expression and why they express their opinions online. Identifying individual-level predictors of online political expression can illuminate the political character of the online engagement of Chinese netizens. Given the paucity of empirical studies, existing theoretical frameworks that have been developed to explain political engagement in Western democracies can provide a good starting point. Explanations about the factors that shape online political engagement may vary depending on whether political engagement is viewed as a form of contentious activism or as conventional participation. Thus, the two

potentially competing theoretical perspectives—namely, dissenting public thesis versus engaged citizen thesis—are reviewed in the following section.

### **Online political expression as contentious activism**

A growing body of research has examined the potential of the Internet and social media as tools for political contention and protest against the status quo in China. These studies tend to focus on particular cases that entail large-scale online participation among Chinese netizens. In such events, which are often referred to as *mass Internet incidents*, netizens engage in online political expression, discussion, and activism to address particular social and political problems and injustices in China (Tong & Lei, 2013; Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2009). Many observers argue that these incidents represent a form of activism asking for immediate solutions to current problems, along with even broader social and political change and reform in China. Issues that have prompted mass online participation include the corruption of government officials (Zhou, 2009), food safety (Yang, 2013), environment (Xiao, 2011), land expropriation (Pu & Scanlan, 2012), high-speed train crash (Bondes & Schucher, 2014), and territorial disputes with Japan (Wu, 2007) among many others. Successful online activism initiated by citizens has attracted mainstream media attention and, in a limited number of cases, led to government reactions, such as government apology, dismissal of officials accused of wrongdoings, or adjustment and reversal of government actions.

Despite the growing body of literature exploring online activism in China, however, few studies have examined who are the people who engage in online activism and why they participate. Previous studies about active netizens in China, which are mostly based on qualitative research, broadly picture these individuals as a group of people who are politically dissatisfied with current social and political arrangements and who distrust the governing institutions in China. The contentious character of online activism and protest manifests with varying degrees, from the outburst of strong and negative emotions such as anger and frustration directed at particular problems and responsible government authorities, to a questioning of larger Chinese systems, and efforts to rally collective action (Bondes & Schucher, 2014; Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2009). Online activism is also considered an effective means for socially disadvantaged groups, including the powerless and poor, to protest against government injustice (Pu & Scanlan, 2012).

Overall, prior research concerning Chinese online activism suggests that netizens active in online political engagement may be individuals who are socially disadvantaged and politically dissatisfied. Originally conceived of as actions that happen outside conventional political processes, participation in social movements and protest was considered to be related to social and political alienation and disaffection (Davies, 1962; Gurr, 1970; Lipset, 1960). Accordingly, many scholars suggest that participation in social movements and protests should be correlated with individuals' distrust in political authorities, institutions, and regimes (Muller, 1972; Muller, Jukam, & Seligson, 1982; Sigelman & Feldman, 1983), as well as the sense of relative deprivation that happens when people perceive a gap between what they believe they deserve and what they really attain in any given society (Herring, 1989; Walker & Mann, 1987). To summarize this traditional view of participants in contentious politics, it was termed as dissenting public thesis.

### **Online political expression as conventional political engagement**

Studies conducted in Western contexts have identified both social and psychological factors that shape citizen engagement in conventional politics, including politically expressive behaviors.

Verba et al. (1995) summarized that individuals' political activities are mainly influenced by three main groups of variables: personal resources, pro-civic attitudes, and social connections. Personal resources, often correlated with measures of one's social status such as education and income, provide individuals with an economic and cognitive basis that is requisite for political action. Political participation also requires an attitudinal orientation willing to get involved in politics, and thus people who are politically interested and efficacious are more likely to participate. In addition to resources and attitudes, social networks and connections facilitate participation. Literature on social capital in particular notes that collective norms that are developed through social interactions can carry over to the political realm, so that individuals with higher social capital are more likely to engage in politics (Putnam, 2000).

More recent scholarship about protest participation also emphasizes that personal resources and willingness to engage are closely related to participation in contentious politics as well as conventional politics. Many researchers contend that collective action and protest have become normalized as a part of conventional politics in contemporary democracies (Inglehart, 1997; Putnam, 2000; Tarrow, 1994). As contentious political behaviors become a legitimate part of repertoire of political actions, the same factors shaping conventional politics—political resources, interest, efficacy, and social connections—also encourage participation in contentious politics (Paulsen, 1991; Verba et al., 1995). In sum, the existing literature from Western democracies suggests that individual engagement in politics, including expressive behavior such as participation in online political discourse, is more common among individuals with higher levels of resources, pro-civic attitudes, and social capital. To summarize this resource and engagement model of participation, this view is termed as engaged citizen thesis.

## Study 1: predicting general online political expression

Study 1 examined diverse social and psychological factors to test their differential contributions to general online political expression. Specifically, six main groups of variables were considered, including individual resources, social capital, pro-civic attitudes, relative deprivation, satisfaction with China's general situations, and finally, use of and trust in both traditional and online news media. Since thesis of engaged citizen and dissenting public may suggest contradictory relationships in some cases, alternative hypotheses are stated when the two theses predict opposing outcomes.

First, thesis of engaged citizen, based on resource and engagement model of participation (Inglehart, 1997; Putnam, 2000; Verba et al., 1995), predicts personal resources, pro-civic political attitudes (i.e., political interest and political efficacy), and social capital promote general online political expression. Prior studies conducted in Chinese settings provide some empirical support to engaged citizen thesis. They found that political efficacy was positively related to online political discussion (Mou, Atkin, Fu, Lin, & Lau, 2013) and information sharing about political and social issues using SNSs (Li, Lee, & Li, 2016). Zhong (2014) discovered that online bonding and bridging social capital increased Chinese college students' online civic engagement including posting and discussing political issues. Li et al. (2016) found that Chinese college students who shared information about political and social issues via SNSs frequently tended to make positive evaluations about Chinese government policy direction and performance. Their study documented generally positive associations between active citizenship (i.e. political efficacy and sense of civic duty) and positive appraisal of Chinese government and system (i.e. trust in party-state institutions, government policy evaluation, and optimism about government). The results imply that general online

political expression may be a function of both citizen engagement and trust in current Chinese system. Based on previous research, following hypotheses are made:

*H1a.* Individual resources are positively related to online political expression.

*H2.* Social capital is positively related to online political expression.

*H3.* Pro-civic attitudes are positively related to online political expression.

*H4a.* Relative deprivation is negatively related to online political expression.

*H5a.* Satisfaction with general situations in China is positively related to online political expression.

Alternatively, dissenting public thesis expects that people who are socially disadvantaged and dissatisfied with Chinese status quo should actively express their political views online. This prediction is based on Western literature linking political activism to sociopolitical deprivation and dissatisfaction (Gurr, 1970; Jost et al., 2012; Osborne & Sibley, 2013; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). The thesis also reflects observations of Chinese online activism whereby netizens protest against particular social and political problems and even ask for broader system reform (Bondes & Schucher, 2014; Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2009). Past research mainly conducted in Western contexts has noted that people's sense of relative deprivation tends to promote their support and willingness to express and participate against existing system (Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012). Relative deprivation has been found to invoke both perception and negative emotion about injustice, which tends to motivate people to take action (van Zomeren et al., 2008). Scholars have also suggested that dissatisfaction with economic and political system may encourage political action aiming to change existing system. Under the framework of system justification, Jost et al. (2012) showed that support to current system tends to depress support to political action, including expressive forms of protest such as signing a petition and sending a letter or email message of protest to government. Osborne and Sibley (2013) further supported that relative deprivation and system dissatisfaction both independently and jointly increased support to political mobilization. Based on prior research, following hypotheses are stated:

*H1b.* Individual resources are negatively related to online political expression.

*H4b.* Relative deprivation is positively related to online political expression.

*H5b.* Satisfaction with general situations in China is negatively related to online political expression.

Finally, both dissenting public and engaged citizen theses suggest potentially different functions of traditional and online news on political engagement via digital media. Typically, news use and political talks are strongly correlated (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001), and the positive relationship has been confirmed in new media settings insofar as the use of both traditional and online news increases online political interactions (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). In the context of China, however, the functions of traditional and online news media may differ for online political engagement. Despite the growth of commercial news outlets, Chinese news media is still under strong government supervision. Direct criticism against the state and the CCP is hard to find in Chinese newspapers and TV news programs (Stockmann, 2012). On the other hand, online sources

of news, such as political blogs and social media, are able to provide alternative perspectives to the CCP-sanctioned version of news as it appears in the traditional news media (Esarey & Xiao, 2011; Zhou, 2009). In addition, individuals active in online political engagement may have a high level of trust in information from the Internet, which is relatively freer from government regulation than traditional media. Mou et al.'s (2013) study provided empirical support to this notion, documenting the positive association between Internet trust and online discussion among Chinese college students. Moreover, the technological affordance of the Internet and social media makes it easy to transition from the consumption of news to online expressions of opinions about the news (Brundidge, 2010). Therefore, it is anticipated that both trust in the Internet as a source of information and the consumption of online news should be associated with online political expression:

*H6. Online news use and Internet trust are positively related to online political expression.*

## Data

The data for Study 1 were obtained from an online survey of Chinese citizens in December 2012 using a panel provided by a survey company based in Shanghai. The company recruited study participants from their existing panel of over 550,000 people. The company randomly emailed panel members in three major cities in China (Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen) who were qualified to participate in the study. Each study participant received a small amount of cash or coupon as compensation for participation in the survey. Based on the demographics of Chinese Internet users provided by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC; 2013), quotas for gender and age were set. If certain predetermined quotas had been met, participants belonging to these quotas would have been screened out.

Of a total sample size of 500 people, half of the sample was female (50%) and the average age of participants was 33.53 years (standard deviation (*SD*)=8.15 years). Education level was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*grade school or lower*) to 7 (*graduate or professional school*), with an average education level of 5.86 (*SD*=0.69), indicating approximately a college degree. Annual household income levels were measured on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (*below 10,000 Yuan*) to 10 (*above 100,000 Yuan*). The average value was 8.11, which corresponds approximately to a range of 80,001–90,000 Yuan.

## Measures

**Social capital.** Individual-level bonding and bridging social capital were measured using a scale proposed by Williams (2006). Five 7-point scale items were used to measure bonding social capital, and another five items were used to tap bridging social capital. To measure bonding social capital, respondents were asked to answer the extent of their agreement to the following statements: "There are several people I trust to help solve my problems," "There is someone I can turn to for advice about making very important decisions," "When I feel lonely, there are several people I can talk to," "If I needed an emergency loan of 3000 yuan, I know someone I can turn to," and "The people I interact with would help me fight an injustice." Five items to measure bridging social capital were the following statements: "Interacting with people makes me interested in things that happen outside of my town," "Interacting with people makes me interested in what people unlike me are thinking," "Talking with people makes me curious about other places in the world," "Interacting with people makes me feel like part of a larger community," and "Interacting with people

reminds me that everyone in the world is connected.” Composite indexes based on the average of the five items were respectively created for bonding capital ( $M=5.04$ ,  $SD=.94$ ,  $\alpha=.87$ ) and bridging capital ( $M=5.31$ ,  $SD=.95$ ,  $\alpha=.92$ ).

*Pro-civic attitudes.* Political interest was measured by asking participants to indicate their level of interest in politics on a single 7-point scale ( $M=5.08$ ,  $SD=1.10$ ). To gauge political efficacy, a two-item index tapping the internal political efficacy on a 7-point scale was created ( $M=4.54$ ,  $\alpha=.86$ ,  $SD=1.30$ ). The items asked to what extent respondents considered themselves having (1) ability to understand political matters and (2) ability to talk about and participate in public affairs.

*Satisfaction with Chinese society.* To assess satisfaction with the general situation in China, respondents were asked to indicate their levels of satisfaction with the “economic situation” ( $M=3.80$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ) and the “social political situation” ( $M=3.67$ ,  $SD=1.32$ ) in China on a 7-point scale.

*Relative deprivation.* To tap into individuals’ relative deprivation, respondents rated their subjective social status using the Scale of Subjective Status (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Operario, Adler, & Williams, 2004). The scale was developed to determine individuals’ perceptions of their relative social economic status, reflecting their sense of relative deprivation (Smith et al., 2012). Participants were shown a picture of ladder and were asked to mark their relative social economic status on the illustrated “social ladder” (1=bottom, 10=top,  $M=5.68$ ,  $SD=1.61$ ).

*News use.* Four different types of news use were measured by asking how many days a week respondents (1) read news from printed newspapers ( $M=4.78$ ,  $SD=2.56$ ), (2) viewed TV news ( $M=6.10$ ,  $SD=2.38$ ), (3) used Internet news websites ( $M=6.38$ ,  $SD=2.37$ ), and (4) obtained news via social networking sites ( $M=5.52$ ,  $SD=2.55$ ).

*Media trust.* To assess a participant’s level of trust in traditional news media and the Internet, respondents were asked to indicate their level of trust on a 7-point scale in information from (1) print newspapers ( $M=4.63$ ,  $SD=1.17$ ), (2) TV news ( $M=4.74$ ,  $SD=1.74$ ), and (3) the Internet ( $M=4.62$ ,  $SD=0.98$ ).

*Online political expression.* To assess individuals’ online political expression, respondents were asked how often they expressed their opinions about political and public affairs using (1) social networking sites and (2) online forums/BBSs on a 7-point scale (1=never, 7=very often). A composite index was created by averaging the two items ( $M=3.49$ ,  $SD=1.60$ ,  $\alpha=.92$ ).

## Results

Bivariate correlation analyses generally supported engaged citizen thesis as online political expression was positively associated with variables of personal resources, pro-civic attitudes, and social connections. Specifically, online political expression was related to two common indicators of personal resource: education ( $r=.14$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and income ( $r=.19$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Bonding ( $r=.31$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and bridging ( $r=.30$ ,  $p<.01$ ) social capital were also positively associated with general online political expression. Two pro-civic attitude variables of political interest ( $r=.50$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and political efficacy ( $r=.40$ ,  $p<.01$ ) were most strongly related to online political expression. On the other hand, correlation analyses generally rejected dissenting public thesis as general economic satisfaction



( $r=.26, p<.01$ ) and social political satisfaction ( $r=.16, p<.01$ ) were positively associated while relative deprivation ( $r=.36, p<.01$ ) was negatively associated with online political expression. At least at the bivariate correlation level, individuals who are more satisfied with current situations in China and perceive themselves better off than others were more likely to engage in political expression online.

For a more rigorous test, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted. The findings showed that the six major groups of predictors (i.e. personal resources, social capital, pro-civic attitudes, relative deprivation, satisfaction with the China's situation, and news media use) contributed in different ways to online political expression. First, both education ( $\beta=.09, p<.05$ ) and income ( $\beta=.22, p<.001$ ) contributed to online political expression in the initial regression model, although the significance disappeared in the final model. In a similar vein, both bonding ( $\beta=.14, p<.01$ ) and bridging capital ( $\beta=.17, p<.01$ ) were positive predictors of online political expression in Model 2 but their effect sizes were dwarfed after including pro-civic attitude variables. On the other hand, both political interest ( $\beta=.30, p<.001$ ) and political efficacy ( $\beta=.11, p<.01$ ) remained positive and significant predictors of online political expression (see Table 1). In sum, the analyses supported the positive association between online political expression and pro-civic attitudes (H3) which decreased effects of other predictors such as personal resources (H1a) and social capital (H2) in the final model. Relative deprivation was negatively associated with online political expression (H4a), even after including all the other variables ( $\beta=.12, p<.01$ ). Individuals who regarded themselves to have relatively higher social status tended to more actively voice their viewpoints, lending further support to engaged citizen notion.

On the other hand, regression analysis did not support the hypotheses from dissenting public thesis which predicted individuals who possess less resources (H1b) and feel stronger relative deprivation (H4b) would more actively engage in online political expression. Notably, satisfaction with general situations in China yielded mixed results. Satisfaction with economic situations in China positively predicted online political expression ( $\beta=.11, p<.05$ ), whereas satisfaction with social political situations ( $\beta=-.12, p<.05$ ) was negatively associated with political expression (H5). Finally, it was predicted that online news use and Internet trust would be positively related to online political expression (H6). The hypothesis was partially supported as social media use for news ( $\beta=.22, p<.01$ ) and Internet trust ( $\beta=.15, p<.01$ ) were positively associated with political expression, whereas news website use had no significant relationship.

## Study 2: predicting online political expression on food safety issues

Study 2 focused on the predictors of online political expression regarding food safety issues, which caused a great deal of online participation and activism. As consequence of the discovery of various fake foods, food safety has emerged as a major concern among Chinese citizens. Continuous promises made by party leaders to secure food safety went unfulfilled, and the issue began to have political significance in China (Collins & Gottwald, 2015). Netizens shared their concerns and expressed their anger and fears about food safety online, especially using microblogging service (Mou, 2014). Due to repeated incidents that threatened the safety of food, the Chinese government implemented the Food Safety Law in 2009. Regardless, the situation remains unresolved, and the government has been pressured to promulgate a revised law (Xinhua News, 2015).

Against this backdrop, food safety issues make a good case for testing the claims about Chinese online activism, which suggest that online activism is driven by netizen criticism of Chinese society and their desire for alternative social systems. More specifically, the current study aimed to

**Table 1.** Predictors of General Online Political Expression.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Gender	.16***	.15***	.04	.05	.06 <sup>+</sup>
Age	-.23***	-.19***	-.25***	-.24***	-.19***
Education	.09*	.09*	.03	.00	.01
Household income	.22***	.17***	.10**	.08*	.07 <sup>+</sup>
Bonding capital		.14**	.07	.04	.05
Bridging capital		.17**	.00	.02	.00
Political interest			.39***	.37***	.30***
Political efficacy			.17**	.14**	.11**
Satisfaction with Chinese economic situation				.14**	.11*
Satisfaction with Chinese political situation				-.12*	-.12*
Relative deprivation				.16***	.12**
Newspaper use					.10*
TV news use					-.11*
Internet news use					-.06
SNS news use					.22**
Newspaper trust					-.05
TV news trust					.10
Internet trust					.15***
R <sup>2</sup>	.12***	.19***	.37***	.40***	.47***

SNS: social networking site.

Entries are standardized regression coefficients.

+ $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

investigate whether the perception of social injustice and a political orientation toward liberal democracy affected the Chinese expression regarding the issues. Accordingly, the data employed for the study included respondents' support for alternative political ideologies, as well as their perceptions of food safety issues as problems related to social injustice in China. Like Study 1, alternative hypotheses are made when engaged citizen and dissenting public thesis predict contradicting relationships. First, based on engaged citizen thesis, it is expected that individual resources and political efficacy should promote expression regarding food safety issues:

*H1a.* Individual resources are positively related to online expression on food safety issues.

*H2.* Political efficacy is positively related to online expression on food safety issues.

Alternatively, based on dissenting public notion, it is predicted that individuals who are socially disadvantaged would actively express their dissent online. Also, if food safety issue is indeed a form of online activism driven by people's protest, netizens who actively express their opinion may perceive the issue as a social injustice problem since injustice perception is considered as one of the main social psychological factors of political activism or collective action (van Zomeren et al., 2008). In addition, it is presumed that those active in online political expression about food safety issues are more likely to embrace alternative political ideas of free speech and more voice to citizens in government decision:

*H1b.* Individual resources are negatively related to online expression on food safety issues.

*H3.* Support for alternative political ideas is positively related to online expression on food safety issues.

*H4:* Perception of food safety issues as a problem of social injustice is positively related to online expression on food safety issues.

Finally, online news media use is predicted to promote online expression based on the same rationales mentioned in Study 1:

*H5.* Online news use is positively related to online expression on food safety issues.

## Data

Study 2 data were based on an online survey, which was conducted in April 2012 using an online panel provided by a survey company based in Shanghai. Around the time of the data collection, a series of major food safety incidents occurred in China. Mou (2014) identified 12 incidents that had generated a great deal of Weibo postings between April 2010 and January 2012. The incidents included “dyed steamed bread,” “tainted milk,” and “tainted pork” cases all of which broke out months before the data collection and remained major public concerns among Chinese netizens.

The survey company recruited study participants from a panel of over two million Internet users in China. A total of 544 individuals participated in the study, and they received compensation (e.g. cash or coupons) from the survey company for their participation. Approximately half of the participants were female (52.2%). Participants were younger and more educated than the general Chinese population. The majority of participants were between 18 and 30 years old (65.8%), with a median age of 31–40 years. College graduates were the most common (62.5%), and half of the participants had a monthly income of less than 5000 Yuan.

## Measures

*Political efficacy.* To measure internal political efficacy, respondents were asked to judge to what extent they agree with the following two statements on a 5-point scale: “I have ability to understand political matters” and “I have ability to talk about and participate in public affairs.” The two 5-point items were averaged to build a composite index ( $M=3.66$ ,  $SD=.74$ ,  $\alpha=.74$ ).

*Support for alternative political ideas.* To assess the individual preferences for ideas related to liberal democracy (i.e. protecting freedom of speech and giving people more say in the decisions of the government), respondents’ support for post-materialistic values were measured using a short version of the post-materialism measures of Inglehart (1981) ( $range=0-2$ ,  $M=.82$ ,  $SD=.64$ ).

*Issue interest.* The individual interest in food safety issues was measured by asking the respondents to indicate their level of attention to food safety issues on a 5-point scale ( $M=3.47$ ,  $SD=.55$ ).

*Perception of social injustice.* Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statement “I consider the food security issue to be a matter of social injustice” on a 5-point scale ( $M=3.68$ ,  $SD=.97$ ).

**News use.** Respondents were asked on a 4-point scale to what extent they used print news media ( $M=3.11$ ,  $SD=.77$ ), TV news ( $M=3.47$ ,  $SD=.68$ ), news websites ( $M=3.76$ ,  $SD=.52$ ), and obtain news through SNSs ( $M=3.27$ ,  $SD=.81$ ).

**Online political expression.** A single-item measure was employed to gauge individual online expression, particularly on issues of food safety. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a statement that they use the Internet to express their opinions regarding food safety issues on a 5-point scale ( $M=3.86$ ,  $SD=.88$ ).

## Results

Bivariate correlation analyses showed significant and positive relationships between online expression on food safety issues and income ( $r=.13$ ,  $p<.01$ ), political efficacy ( $r=.22$ ,  $p<.01$ ), interest in food safety issues ( $r=.20$ ,  $p<.01$ ), support to alternative politics ( $r=.09$ ,  $p<.05$ ), perception of food safety issues as a matter of social injustice ( $r=.17$ ,  $p<.01$ ), print news use ( $r=.11$ ,  $p<.01$ ), TV news use ( $r=.13$ ,  $p<.01$ ), news website use ( $r=.20$ ,  $p<.01$ ), and getting news via social networking sites ( $r=.19$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

Regression analyses for Study 2 showed the similar patterns from bivariate correlation analyses. Most importantly, both support for alternative political ideas and perceptions of social injustice predicted online political expression on the food safety issues, supporting the notion of dissenting public (see Table 2). Specifically, individuals who preferred tenets of liberal democracy, such as freedom of speech and giving citizens more voice in policymaking, were more likely to use the Internet to express their own opinions concerning food safety issues ( $\beta=.09$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Similarly, when respondents perceived the issue as a matter of social injustice, they tended to use the Internet to express their opinions ( $\beta=.13$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

Among the demographic variables, education was negatively associated with online expression ( $\beta=-.14$ ,  $p<.01$ ), partially supporting dissenting public thesis. Income was not significantly related to online expression in the final model, rejecting engaged citizen thesis. Also, political efficacy ( $\beta=.15$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and issue interest ( $\beta=.22$ ,  $p<.001$ ) were positive predictors of online expression, which is in line with engaged citizen notion. Finally, the statistics showed that news website use ( $\beta=.09$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and social media use for news ( $\beta=.12$ ,  $p<.01$ ) predicted online expression, supporting H5.

## Discussion

The present research explores social and political factors that may differently affect general and contentious online political expression in China. The findings from two different datasets demonstrate the complex dynamics of online political engagement in China depending on the nature of political expression. First, the results of Study 1 show that general online political expression is largely explained by personal resources and attitudes, which is consistent with engaged citizen thesis based on resource and political engagement model of participation (Verba et al., 1995). In particular, individuals with higher levels of political interest and efficacy tend to be more active in political expression using digital media. The results also show that education, income, and social capital are positively related to online political expression even though the associations disappeared after including pro-civic attitudes. Another finding in support of engaged citizen thesis is that an individual's relative deprivation, measured as perceived social status, decreased the

**Table 2.** Predictors of Online Expression on Food Safety Issue.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Gender	-.07 <sup>+</sup>	-.03	-.02
Age	.01	-.03	-.01
Education	-.08 <sup>+</sup>	-.11**	-.14**
Income	.14**	.07	.05
Political efficacy		.17***	.15***
Interest in food safety issues		.24***	.22***
Support for alternative political ideas		.09*	.09*
Perception of social injustice		.13**	.13**
Newspaper use			-.01
TV news use			.00
Internet news use			.09*
SNS news use			.12**
R <sup>2</sup>	.03**	.15***	.18***

SNS: social networking site.

Entries are standardized regression coefficients.

+ $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

likelihood of engaging in online political expression. This can be interpreted as being related to a personal sense of efficacy and investment in political outcomes. When people perceive that they are relatively high in social status, they may also believe that their opinions about politics can affect the opinions of others, as well as impact political decisions.

However, results regarding the role of evaluations about social political and economic situations in China suggest that more complex dynamics may be working in political expression. Individuals' positive evaluations of current economic situations in China were positively related to online political expression, refuting dissenting public thesis. On the other hand, positive evaluations about political situation negatively predicted political expression, which supports dissenting public notion. The results imply that when political and economic satisfactions are considered together, they may play different roles in explaining political expression, such that individuals who are satisfied with economic situations actively engage in online expression but at the same time those who have a relatively low level of social political satisfaction are more likely to express their views online. Future research needs to further examine whether and how economic and political satisfaction may play potentially contradictory functions for Chinese online political engagement. Despite this exception, the findings of Study 1 generally indicate that online political expression may be a function of social and psychological factors tied to conventional participation, such as personal resources, political attitudes, social relations, and satisfaction with personal and general economic situations.

On the other hand, the results of Study 2 seem to indicate that predictors of online political expression about contentious issues may differ from those of general political expression. The current research shows that factors such as support for alternative political ideas—particularly freedom of speech and giving more voice to people—and perceptions of social injustice contributed to personal expression about food safety issues online. The positive association between support for alternative political ideas and online expression partially confirms the claim that the political orientation of the online public sphere represents desire for more liberal and democratic political

system in China (Esarey & Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2009; Zheng, 2008). In addition, the positive function of social injustice perception lends some support to prior observations that online political engagement is driven by dissent and protest to social injustices at the hands of the government (Xiao, 2011; Yang, 2009). I consider these results as partial evidence supporting claims that highlight the dissenting political character of online engagement in China. Notably, education was negatively associated with online political expression regarding food safety issues. The results imply that online media may serve as an effective tool to comment on hot-button issues related to government ineffectiveness by the relatively disadvantaged group of people in certain circumstances (Pu & Scanlan, 2012).

Despite the differences found in predicting general and contentious political expression, it should be emphasized that political or issue interest, efficacy, and the use of online news commonly predicted both types of expression. It is not surprising that individuals who are interested in and feeling efficacious about politics and particular issues are active participants in online political engagement. The more intriguing findings involve the stronger contribution of online news use to political expression, relative to the use of traditional news. The contrasting functions of online and traditional sources of news can be explained in different ways. Netizens may rely on the Internet as the informational basis for online political expression because they trust information from online sources more than news from the traditional media. Study 1 provides support for this reasoning, as trust in Internet information was positively associated with online political expression, whereas no such relationship was found between trust in traditional news media and political expression online. Another possibility is the simple matter of convenience or traversability (Brundidge, 2010) afforded by new media. Because it is easy to shift from reading online news to voicing opinions in online forums hosted by news sites or through social media sites, the consumption of online news may facilitate online political expression among Internet users.

Overall, the present study adds important new insights to the growing scholarship on the function of digital media for political change in China. While much research has explored the political significance of new media in China, few studies examine the individual-level factors that explain the online political engagement of netizens. Unlike prior research based on qualitative analysis, this study empirically investigated the social and psychological factors that explain online expression. The findings reveal that different forces are at work in predicting general and contentious online political expression among Chinese citizens. Similar factors promoting citizen participation in Western democracies explain online political expression among Chinese netizens. In everyday scenarios or the absence of mass Internet incidents, new tools of political expression may aid netizens, who are already advantaged and involved in politics, to further engage in politics. In contrast, when contentious issues, such as food safety, command the attention of netizens and the public at large, individuals who support alternative political ideologies and recognize the inherent injustice of certain issues may use online platforms to voice their concerns and, in some cases, dissent.

However, the dissenting aspect of online political expression needs careful interpretation. As Study 1 shows, relative deprivation and dissatisfaction with economic situations tend to decrease general online political expression. Based on the findings of two studies, I conclude that individuals who are active in online political expression may not necessarily hold anti-system attitudes, but rather, sporadic events and issues revealing systemic problems and weaknesses may mobilize some segments of politically engaged citizens. Given this, the discussion about the liberal and democratic potential of new media in China should take into account the specific conditions that turn normal online political engagement into political dissent and protest of the status quo. In addition, scholars need to further examine whether sporadic online activism is likely to develop into a

substantive challenge to current Chinese systems. It should be cautioned that any scholarly focus on online dissent and protest should not overlook the potential function of online political discourse to serve system legitimacy and stability in instances where the CCP and national government successfully respond to the demands of netizens and effectively address their concerns.

This study has several limitations. First, this research could not include the same predictors of general and contentious political expression due to the unavailability of some items. This inconsistency prevents us from making definite conclusions about how the two different types of expression should be explained. It should be acknowledged that the present research is exploratory, and expect future research to develop more coherent research designs. Second, this study did not consider other aspects of political engagement in China. In an authoritarian system wherein participatory opportunities for electoral participation and potentially contentious activities are greatly limited, political expression may in fact be the most accessible form of participation. Thus, its significance cannot be underestimated. However, other forms of participation, both online and offline, need to be considered in future research. These types of participatory activities may include voting at the local level, getting involved in voluntary associations, and political consumerism. Another shortcoming relates to variables included in this study to predict online activism. This research assumed that online activism would be mainly driven by social and political deprivation and dissatisfaction. However, it should be recognized that factors prompting online activism can be different and diverse depending on the nature of contentious issues and events. For example, online political engagement in such issues as protecting environment and homeowner's rights is not confined to socially disadvantaged and politically dissatisfied groups. Future research needs to consider other social and political factors involved in different types of contentious participation.

Finally, the two datasets do not represent the entirety of China's digital media users. The respondents from major cities in China are likely to be the most affluent and well-educated group of people who actively use digital media for political purposes, and thus their voices potentially exert the most significant impact on political processes and decision making. Given the regional and socioeconomic gaps in digital media use in China, however, these respondents are not typical users of new media in China. Future studies need to seek a sample that can show representative picture of digital media users and their behaviors.

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