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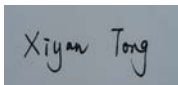
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Declaration

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This thesis has not been published or submitted for a degree at another university before.

Xiyan Tong

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature is written in a cursive style and reads "Xiyan Tong".

07/11/2017

Social Media and Distant Others:
The Mediation of Distant Suffering among Chinese Youth

By

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ABSTRACT

With the popularity of the internet and mobile intelligent terminals, more and more people are becoming social media users across the globe. China is no exception in this case, Chinese youth in particular. Social media could turn distant others into our virtual neighbours. These mediated interactions are carried out in mediapolis: a moral space where the audiences connect with the otherwise invisible others during the process of mediation. After being integrated into users' daily lives, social media could create new ways of living and new kinds of social relationships, among which is the users' acknowledgement of distant suffering.

Media witnessing and media remembering are two media practices employed to explore how audiences talk about distant suffering and position themselves with regard to it in this thesis. Through focus group discussions among Chinese university students, the empirical data showed how Chinese young people witness and remember distant suffering through social media.

Young social media users position themselves as witnesses of news of distant suffering in a detached way: there is a rationalised detachment from the suffering events; they showed no scepticism towards online distant suffering reports and their hospitality towards the distant sufferer is conditional on the immediacy between them.

The investigation of media remembering demonstrates the construction of a moral hierarchy in the way in which young social media users remember distant suffering: some incidents of suffering are banal, some are iconic, and some others are meaningful in their memories.

Young social media users' actions towards distant suffering including reposting, discussion and donation. While for their inactions, they have varied justifications, which involve their mistrust about online information and charitable organisations, their powerlessness as students, and compassion fatigue as a result of seeing too many similar events, and the existence of the national disaster-relief mechanism. Their opinions towards whether to accept the concept of cosmopolitanism are various. There are several new features in the mediation of distant suffering through social media compared with traditional mass media.

This study contributes to the growing research on the mediation of distant suffering. It extends the range of studies on the mediation of distant suffering from the West to the East, it broadens the research area from mass communication media to social media, and it answers the empirical question about the ways of the social media users' engagement with distant suffering.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandparents: Xingrong Wang (1933-2011) and Qingxin Tong (1935-2016).

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Everything happens for a reason. The inspiration of this thesis originated from a tragedy which I noticed in March 2013 on Sina Weibo (a social media platform in China). I doubt whether I would have known about this incident if not for Weibo, because when it happened I was studying thousands of miles away in the UK. It is one of the characteristics of the media to expand what the audience know beyond their local living areas and social media are no exception in this respect. As a matter of fact, due to attributes such as offering instantly available information and ubiquitous connectivity everywhere, social media brought revolutionary changes into information dissemination. In other words, social media have the potential to inform people what is happening beyond the immediacy of their local living areas. This is especially true in today's media-saturated and highly globalised world. It is no exaggeration to say that, in the contemporary world, people's everyday life is saturated with distant others through the media.

After I saw the Changchun-stolen-infant incident on Weibo where a baby boy was accidentally taken along with a stolen car: I could not resist following the story. I paid close attention to the latest developments of this case, and reposted information with the hope that someone on the internet would see and would offer a helping hand. I even mentioned this case to my housemates during dinner time. Although I could not remember what exactly what was said at the time, the anxious expressions I observed on their faces for the baby and his family made a very forceful impression on me. I believe that we were not the only people who reacted in that way during the case. The number of comments and reposts that

Weibo received, as shown in a later report (see Figure 1.1), illustrated the high level of attention that this incident attracted from the online community.

Looking back at this personal experience, I think it gave me the opportunity to reflect on one particular issue: what do mediated suffering events on social media mean to far-away users? To put it another way, how do people discuss and position themselves with regard to mediated information that portrays the distant suffering of faraway victims? These reflections became the research concerns of this study.

In this introduction chapter, first I am going to briefly describe the Changchun-stolen-infant incident, to demonstrate the inspirations of this thesis. Next I will discuss the development of the internet in China to clarify the technological background of social media in China. Furthermore, I will list a number of important concepts that will be used in this thesis. In the proceeding section the research questions will be discussed in detail. Finally, I will summarise the chapters of the thesis.

1.1 Changchun-stolen-infant Incident

The tragedy happened as a consequence of a young couple's carelessness and a criminal's actions. It was an early morning on 4th March 2013, in Changchun. Changchun is the capital city of China's north-eastern Jilin Province which was snow-covered at that time. Around 7 AM, Mr and Mrs Xu – a young couple, and the parents of a two month old baby – parked their car in front of the convenience store they were running and went inside to prepare for the whole day's work. The heating system in their store had been turned off the previous night, thus it was

extremely freezing inside. Considering that the store might be too cold for their two-month-old baby boy, they temporarily left him in the car with the ignition and air-conditioning on. Their plan was to bring the baby into the store after turning on the heating system, so that he would be warm and comfortable. Around 7.20 AM, the young couple went to fetch their child. To their astonishment, both the car and their baby were missing (He, 2013; Kaiman, 2013; Wu, 2013b). It was this carelessness combined with an opportunist theft which led to the disaster.

The young couple called the police. Thirty-four hours later, at around 5 PM on 5th of March, the criminal surrendered to the police as a search-and-rescue occurred across the city. The criminal confessed that two days ago on his way to a job interview he saw that the same car had not been locked. When he returned on the day of the accident, his original idea had been to steal and sell the car. He had no idea that a baby was in it. The criminal admitted he strangled the baby boy around 8 AM after fearing that he might be noticed by others, and buried his corpse in the snow en route to a nearby city. The criminal was sentenced to the death penalty for murder and was executed in November 2013.

It is not my intent in describing this case, to draw attention to either the culpability or the 'innocence' of the young couple involved. What I valued was the role that media, particularly social media, played in this case. Right after discovering the baby was missing, the young couple and their family called the police to report the case. In the meantime, they appealed to local media for help, hoping that they could find the car and the baby soon. Minutes after the incident a local radio station broadcasted it. A local newspaper posted this news on its official Weibo

account, and it drew the attention of Weibo users instantly. This event immediately became a hot topic on Weibo after China Central Television reposting it. Figure 1.1 provides a glimpse of how the event was reported from Weibo's 2013 annual report of hot topics by the Sina Weibo Data Centre (Sina Weibo Data Center, 2014a: 60).

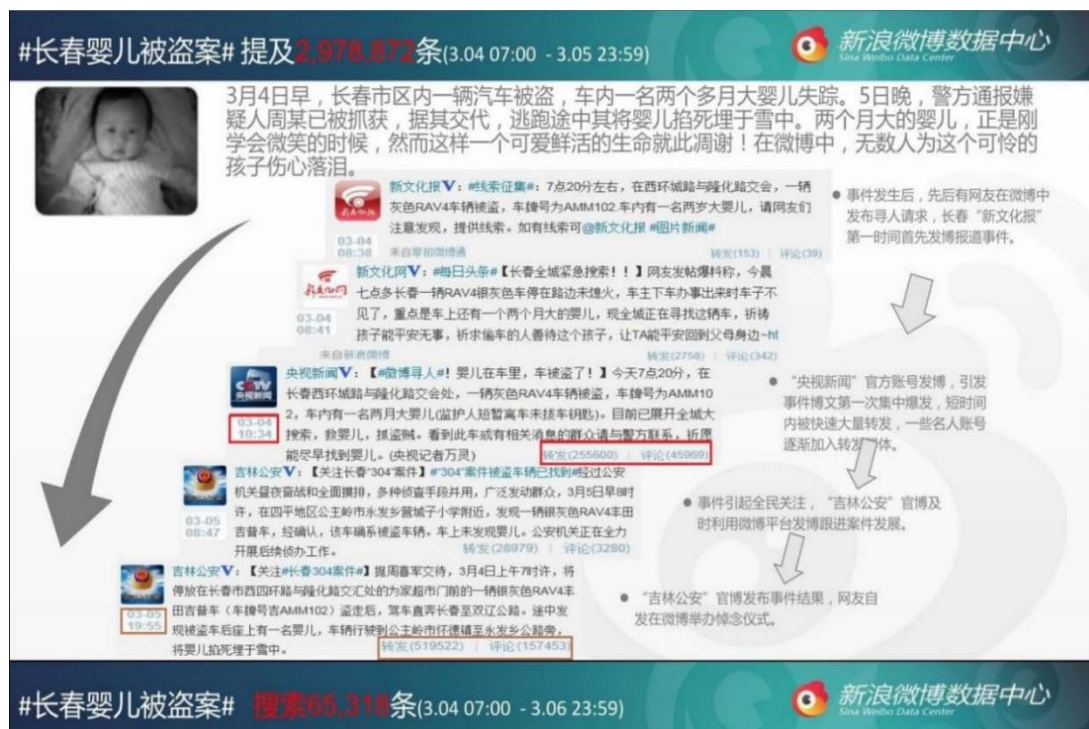


Figure 1.1 Changchun-stolen-infant case on Sina Weibo

Data source: 2013 Annual Report of Sina Weibo Hot Topics(Sina Weibo Data Center, 2014a: 60)

The above picture allows us to understand the role of Weibo, in this case, from several aspects. Firstly, that the case became a topical issue immediately after it happened, thus this event reached a large number of audiences in a short period of time. To illustrate this, the top of the picture reports that nearly 3 million weibos about #Changchun-stolen-baby-case# were posted in a forty hour period, from 7

AM (4th of March) to 23.59 PM (5th of March) after the case occurred. As shown at the bottom of the picture, the case was searched for 65, 318 times on Weibo during the same period. Both of these two indicators reveal the attention this event captured.

Secondly, there were four stages and also four crucial moments on Weibo about this case. The main body of the picture shows some screenshots of Weibo posted by different media organizations at the time of the accident. The first two were posted the earliest, almost at the same time as local media where the accident happened. The third one was posted by China Central Television (CCTV) at 10.34 AM, about two hours after the accident. This post was commented on and re-posted widely by users in a short time (as highlighted by the red square in Figure 1.1). Among them, are many Chinese celebrities, such as journalists, scholars and actors/actresses. Their reposts captured users' attention and made this case go viral on Weibo. The next screenshot was an update of the case by local police – Jilin Police. In the last screenshot, the Jilin Police revealed the death of the missed baby. This Weibo attracted a wide range of attention (as indicated by the brown square in Figure 1.1), a large number of users commented, some of them spontaneously held a memorial service in the comments area of this Weibo.

As a social media platform, Weibo is popular in China for a number of reasons. Firstly, information is instantly available to people as long as they are online. Secondly, there is a dual-way flow of information between producers and consumers of information resulting in easier and faster communication than other media providers, in China, have accomplished before. As a result of that, Weibo is

attractive to people who need to convey messages, such as planning online activities or getting their voices heard online. In some extreme cases, such as when a major disaster occurs, 'citizen-driven' (Qu *et al.*, 2011: 25) responses using social media could be the most important and effective responses. For instance, in the Changchun-stolen-infant case mentioned above ordinary Weibo users' participation made the criminal feel pressured to giving himself up to the police.

1.2 Development of the Internet in China

At the start of his book *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society*, Manuel Castells (2002: 1) wrote: '[t]he internet¹ is the fabric of our lives', and praised the internet, comparing it to the electric grid and the electric engine of the Industrial Age. It is true that internet-mediated communication (IMC) is becoming an essential part of our everyday lives, especially in recent years with the increase of internet access across the globe. There is a need to clarify here, that rather than CMC (computer-mediated communication), I would like to use IMC in this thesis. Because, after all, a computer that is disconnected from the internet is half-dead.

In this age of increased access, participation, instant information and internet addiction, immediate updates of the world are hard to resist. In the past few years, the division between computers and mobile phones has merged as computers have shrunk to the size of cell phones, while large-sized smart phones are predicted to take the place of tablets. For example, there are even bold predictions from experts working in digital technology area that within two years' time smart phones are

¹ I am not going to capitalise the word 'internet' in this thesis.

possibly going to be peoples' only computer. They propose that smart phones, tablets and many other smart terminals are convenient, portable and more affordable, which means that they are going to replace computers soon or later (Bonnington, 2015). Therefore, the internet has the potential to change who we are, not only as individuals but as a society.

No one would deny the fact that the development of the internet, both in penetration rate and in the availability of a diverse range of applications, has moved beyond people's imaginations, even for professional scholars. For example, in his first edition about the rise of the 'networked society' Manuel Castell argued that: 'CMC is not a general medium of communication and will not be so for the foreseeable future. While its use expands at phenomenal rates it will exclude for a long time the large majority of humankind, unlike television and other mass media' (Castell, 1996 cited in Tomlinson, 1999: 215). However, we could not find similar description about CMC in his second edition of the same book four years later. The fact that the internet is transforming and evolving at such a speed makes it tricky for scholars to match the pace of its change with adequate empirical studies, not to mention theoretical ones (see Table 1.1).

The internet was introduced into China from the developed Western countries. In China, only a few select scientists was connected by email with the Western world until 1989, the year which could be regarded as the first year of internet availability across the country. It was not until 1994 that China received a fully-functional internet connection to the global internet world. In spite of that, access to the internet was limited to very few people, among whom the majority were

researchers from tertiary-education institutions. Thanks to state promotion and efforts by private entrepreneurs to commercialise new information technologies in the early 1990s, the internet became available to the average urban consumer in 1996 (Wilson, 2004, cited in Yang, 2008: 127). After that, internet diffusion in China increased at an unprecedented speed across the world.

Table 1.1 World Internet Usage and Population Statistics

Global region	Population (2015, estimated)	Internet users, latest data (30 th November 2015)	Internet Penetration (% of population)	Internet use as percentage of total global use	Growth in internet usage 2000-2015 (%)
Africa	1,158,355,663	330,965,359	28.6	9.8	7,231.3
Asia	4,032,466,882	1,622,084,293	40.2	48.2	1,319.1
Europe	821,555,904	604,147,280	73.5	18.0	474.9
Middle East	236,137,235	123,172,132	52.2	3.7	3,649.8
North America	357,178,284	313,867,363	87.9	9.3	190.4
Latin America/ Caribbean	617,049,712	344,824,199	55.9	10.2	1,808.4
Oceania/ Australia	37,158,563	27,200,530	73.2	0.8	256.9
GLOBAL TOTAL	7,259,902,243	3,366,261,156	46.4	100.0	832.5

Sources: Information from www.internetworldstats.com; Internet Usage and World Population Statistics updated as of 30 November, 2015; Demographic (Population)

numbers are based on data from the US Census Bureau, Eurostats and from local census agencies; Internet usage information comes from data published by Nielsen Online, by the International Telecommunications Union, by GfK, by local ICT Regulators and other reliable sources.

In October 1997, when there were 620, 000 internet users across China, China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) published a report on the development of the internet in China. Since then, the CNNIC has completed a report biannually (every January and July). According to *The Thirty-seventh Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* by the CNNIC, by the end of 2015 the total number of internet users in China reached 688 million, which is more than the online population of Europe combined. Among all of the users, 90.7% are using instant-message apps, and 77% are using social media apps (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2016b: 52). It is just a decade or so since the emergence of the social media, however, the way people communicate and the relationships between people from different parts of the world has changed a lot due to this new medium. It is no exaggeration to say that social media has converted our world in unprecedented ways. Based on the data in these reports, by showing the total number of internet users and the penetration rate of the internet in China, we have a general idea of the development of the internet in China (see Figure 1.2).

The widespread use of the internet serves as a catalyst to boost the formation of a new pattern of sociability. As a result of its flexibility and communicative power, the internet enables people to construct relationships with faraway others who

share the same interests and values, and thus the composition of the online virtual community becomes possible. In this way, it seems that technology has erased distance among people, physical separation is truly not a problem for people in some situations. For instance, it is convenient to keep in touch with your globally dispersed families in real time as long as both of you have access to the internet. It is also possible to share information with rarely-seen friends at the other end of the world within minutes. However, we need to bear in mind that this kind of virtual connection does not necessarily lead to intimate interactions. This is especially true among people who do not have physical connections with others offline.

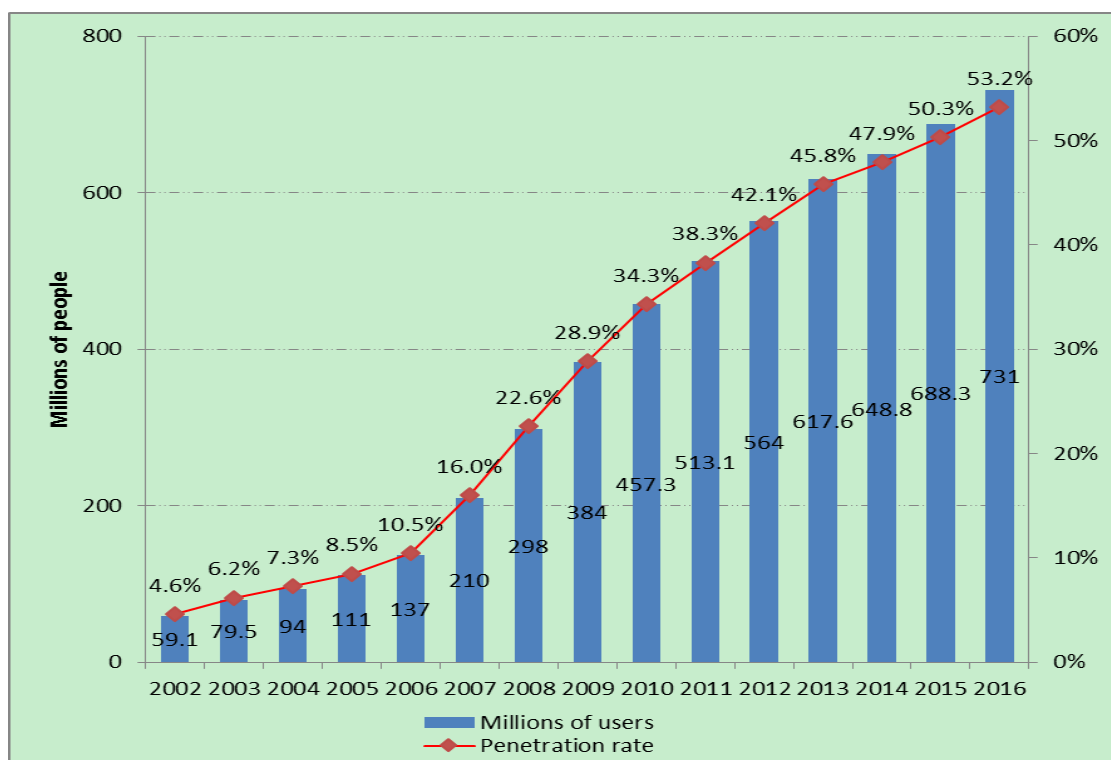


Figure 1.2 Amount of users and Internet penetration rate in China, 2002-2016

Sources: The figure was based on the *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* (from 2002-2016), year-end data. The internet penetration rates before 2002 were excluded in the reports, therefore, were not shown here.

Of course, the internet is not people's only channel for communicating with others, faraway others in particular. In spite of that, 'it is the relationship that we have with others which defines the nature of our own being' (Silverstone, 2007: 4); therefore, the links we have with those we know through mediated appearances and representations in this media-dominated world are increasingly becoming more and more crucial to us.

Research into China has grown worldwide with its phenomenal economic increase in past decades. The research on the internet in China is no exception. Considering the internet's influences on all aspects of social life it is not surprising that research within and outside of China is cross-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary. Till now we have seen studies done in sociology, anthropology, communication studies, politics, education, and law on different subjects (Yang, 2008; Yang, 2009b; Lu and Qiu, 2013; Wu, 2013a; Sullivan, 2014; Svensson, 2014; Yang, 2014; Gleiss, 2015; Liu, 2015; Schneider, 2015; Wu and Yang, 2015; Yin, 2015). It is no exaggeration to say that there are a large amount of book chapters, journal articles, and frequent international conferences on it.

Among various studies by Chinese and overseas researchers about China's internet, it is a dominating trend to focus on the political issues, such as censorship and the internet's democratising potential. For example, Schneider (2015: 1) believes that the web rather than being treated as 'spaces for networked social interaction', was used to convey 'authoritative information sources that broadcast approved content to a mass audience', for instance by the Chinese government. Notably more studies were conducted after events like 'Arab Spring' and 'Occupy Wall Street'. However,

the work of Wang (2013: 11) reveals that ‘the overwhelming focus on the political use of the Chinese internet provides an incomplete picture of how Chinese people are really using the internet’. Given that the majority of internet and social media users in China are young people (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2013: 18; China Internet Network Information Centre, 2014: 22; Sina Weibo Data Center, 2014b: 2; Huang and Guo, 2015), and that ‘understanding online China involves listening to the voices of Chinese netizens *online*’ (italics in original, Herold, 2011, cited in Yang, 2012: 177), in this thesis I am going to focus mainly on young social users.

1.3 Conceptual Background

This thesis intends to analyse how social media users discursively construct their agency in relation to distant others whose suffering they learned of through different social media platforms. In particular, I interviewed youth social media users in China as informants to explore how Chinese youth’s moral agency (towards the suffering of distant others) was mediated in this social media era. Technology, especially modern communication technology, has the potential to reshape the landscape of our emotional life (Turkle, 2011). Social media is one of the best examples due to its ability to expand users’ perceptions beyond their immediate experience. At the same time, social media users are situated within an environment of different information resources about distant suffering, where social media constitute an indispensable component, but are definitely not the only part of the environment.

The media are important channels through which moral issues and moral concerns are created and expressed in contemporary social and cultural situations. The media constitute and provide a moral space for sharing and debate and consequently enable the construction of audience's relationship with far-away and otherwise unseen others. In this thesis 'moral' is used in a philosophical sense, which refers to 'the ways in which we distinguish between conduct that is right or wrong; how it is that we act and think in accordance with principles of the right and the wrong' (Tester, 1994: 83). It is presumed that learning through media reports of distant suffering holds moral significance for an individual. A moral significance which is separate from whatever the users feel about the reports and the media they watch or read, and whatever their subsequent actions are towards those far-away sufferers. Following this definition and understanding of 'moral', 'morality' becomes practical, 'it is about what to do and what to feel; how to respond to our own and the world's demands' (Appiah, 2008: 22).

At the same time, users' subsequent expressions and actions after becoming aware of suffering news involves the construction of their agency. If we consider this matter in more detail, the formation of social media users' agency towards distant sufferers includes: involvement and judgement about media reports, what they think about and how they are going to engage with the media, and finally their responsive actions or inactions towards far-away sufferers (I will illustrate this process comprehensively in Section 3.2). Mayerfeld believes that 'the concept of wrong encompasses *failures to act* as well as *actions*' (Mayerfeld, 1999:8, italics added). Therefore, people could be 'wrong' from time to time even when they do

nothing at all. For example, we all understand that it is not right to watch people drown instead of trying to save them, within our capacity.

The discourses and practices of social media users, rather than the consumption of media texts, are the focus of this thesis. In this thesis, 'media texts' are understood as 'fundamentally dialogic, [because] they are intended to provoke some kind of response from the audience' (Tester, 1994: 58). As new media forms emerge with the arrival of Web 2.0 and User Generated Content (UGC), the distinctive characteristics of social media can be compared with traditional mass media like television, radio, and so on (I will exploit this in detail in Section 2.1). However, similarities still exist among social media users and traditional media audiences. Correspondingly, rather than being treated as 'passive receivers', I regard social media users as 'active consumers' (ibid: 81). The term 'discourse' is used in a number of ways. For example, in a narrow way, discourse refers to individuals' speech or statement, or a conversation between two people. In a broader sense, discourse is viewed as comprehensive as the entire social system, in which discourse embodies the social or the political world (Howarth, 2000: 2). While in its most open sense, discourse covers 'all forms of spoken interaction, formal and informal, and written texts of all kind' (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984, cited in Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 7).

Also, a 'practice' is 'a coherent and complex form of cooperative human activity whose internal goods involve distinctive standards of excellence which, if achieved, extend our possibilities of human flourishing or excellence' (MacIntyre, 1981, cited in Couldry, 2012: 189). In this thesis, the understanding and use of practice is quite

flexible, which includes but is not limited to: the discussion of media texts and responsive actions provoked by media reports, and any subsequent discussions with friends. Media witnessing (Section 3.3) and media remembering (Section 3.4) are treated as two discursive practices in this thesis, through which social media users construct their moral agency.

In the contemporary world, most individuals are still living a local life, because as a result of bodily constraints everyone is contextually situated in time and space. However, ‘transformations of place, and the intrusion of distance into local activities, combined with the centrality of mediated experience, radically change what “the world” actually is’ (Giddens, 1991: 187). Concentrating on the question of how social media users position themselves in relation to distant suffering and sufferers, this thesis utilises group discussions, of suffering events, to study the discursive construction of the self. Put another way, by focusing on the public discourses surrounding media stories of distant suffering, this thesis aims to investigate how social media users understood and involved themselves with distant suffering, and the suffering of others who were otherwise invisible in their daily lives. Furthermore, this study hopes to contribute to the comprehension of social media in the mediation of distant suffering with Chinese youth as an example.

1.4 Research Questions

The research in this study was not a linear process. I did not follow a step-by-step research process, rather, the writing of this thesis involved constantly revisiting the research questions, reconsidering the theoretical frameworks and reanalysing the empirical data. Although not all of the questions asked during the focus group

discussions were directly connected with the final research questions, they were of great importance to the formulation of the final research questions.

In this research I understand Weibo as a mediapolis (see detail in Section 3.1) which provides its users with the necessary resources to imagine and understand the distant sufferer. Viewers as agents are not mere receivers of media texts but constitute participants in the mediation process; based on that assumption the primary research question is:

In what ways do social media users construct their moral agency in relation to the suffering of distant others through processes of mediation?

Watching suffering on social media is primarily different from any other media experience. Because as a result of the dialogic characteristic of media texts, seeing suffering assumes that the audience has a moral responsibility – directly or indirectly – to act upon others suffering. The moral agency of the audience is discursively constructed within different cultural and social contexts, of which the media constitute an integral part. Moral agency is not only performed through the users' emotions and attitudes, but more importantly expressed through their actions.

In order to explore the construction of social media users' agency with regard to the suffering of distant others, the research uses a theoretical framework which employs the concepts of witnessing and remembering in media practices. Therefore, the secondary research questions which direct the data analysis include:

- a. How do social media users position themselves as witnesses of the suffering of others made visible through Weibo?
- b. How do social media users remember distant suffering?
- c. How do social media users describe themselves as actors in relation to the suffering of people they witness through Weibo?

Users' moral agency is articulated through the two media practices: media witnessing and media remembering, and these two media practices involve actions that social media users take and think of *vis-à-vis* distant suffering. Investigating how social media users place themselves as witnesses of distant suffering, enables the illustration of the moral implications they endow with the experiences of seeing the suffering of faraway others. Media witnessing makes the investigation of social media users' emotional involvement with the suffering of distant others possible. Exploring how suffering events are constructed discursively by social media users through the practice of media remembering shows how distant suffering transforms into components of the users' life world.

In contemporary society social media are basic media tools among Chinese youth, yet they are not the only tools. On the one hand, some youth choose not to use social media; on the other, social media – as a new form of media – are absorbing traditional media into them (see discussion of media convergence in Section 2.1 and Section 6.4). What features are arising from the mediation of distant suffering through social media? This additional problem will also be discussed in Chapter 6.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

There are seven chapters in all in this thesis. Chapter 1 is the introduction chapter. The Changchun-stolen-infant incident which attracted my interest in the mediation of distant suffering through social media is introduced in this chapter. The deployment of the internet in China is also explored in this chapter as a basic ground of the thesis. Next, I list the concepts that are going to be used in this thesis which is followed by the states of the research questions in this study.

Chapter 2 is the critical background of the whole thesis. There are two themes in this chapter: the background of the social media in China and the related notions which are going to be explored in the next few chapters. First I am going to bring in the definitions of social media, the history of social media and its development in China. After that, I am going to consider former studies that have been done on social media and to tell the whole story of Weibo, including its scale, the kinds of activity it allows and enables, and the mode of business model it adopts. Following that are several related notions in this thesis, which include: the charity development, the disaster-relief mechanism, the two stages of individualisation and finally the notions of indifference and empathy in China.

The next chapter is about the literature reviews of the thesis. In this chapter I will review the main literature from the field of mediation in order to provide a better theoretical and conceptual context for the empirical data analysis. I am going to examine 'mediapolis' and 'mediation' firstly. After that, I am going to clarify three main concepts in this thesis: suffering, distant others and the mediation of suffering. Following that, I will define the concept of 'agency' and three tensions in

the formation of moral agency in this thesis. In the next section, the concept of 'media witnessing' and former study about it among television audiences will be discussed. The last section in this section is about another media practice in this study – media remembering.

Chapter 4 is about the methodology in this thesis which talks about the methods used in this study and the ways of analysing the empirical data. After introducing the research context, the two methods used will be discussed later. The details of the fieldwork, including the scale and type of the data, will be examined in this chapter. I am also going to include the translation strategies and the ethical considerations in the next two sections of this chapter. In the end, the limitation of this study, including the selection of the participants and the identity of the researcher will be reviewed.

Chapter 5 is the first empirical data chapter in this thesis. I will focus on the two media practices – media witnessing and media remembering – in this chapter. The type of media witnessing among social media users and the reasons why the participants adopt this detached witnessing is going to be examined. After that, media remembering among social media users in this study is the main point in this chapter. I am going to analyse the moral hierarchy during the participants' remembering of distant suffering in the rest of this chapter.

Chapter 6 is the second empirical data chapter. All of the rest of the research questions will be discussed in this chapter. First, I am going to examine actions that social media users adopted at a distance toward suffering distant others.

Furthermore, the strategies that some participants used to justify their inactions toward distant other will be analysed. The third section in this chapter is about Chinese social media users' views on the concept of cosmopolitanism. Finally, I am going to introduce new features of mediation of suffering through social media in this chapter.

Finally, in the conclusion chapter I will re-state the research questions in this study and conclude the main empirical findings in this thesis. At the same time, I am going to reconsider the limitations of the design of this research and point out the possible directions of this research in future study.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the construction of the social media users' agency with regard to distant others is contingent on the following conditions: the nature of the suffering, the way it is reported by the media, and finally its geographical and cultural distance from the audience, namely the social media users in this study. The new features of mediation of suffering through social media remind us that as a new media form, social media provide us with new opportunities for getting informed about distant suffering; however, in the end it is up to the users themselves to make the decision whether to take actions to help to alleviate those suffering, or not.

CHAPTER 2 CRITICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Definitions of Social Media

When talking about Social Media, there are two related concepts which cannot be overlooked: Web 2.0 and User Generated Content (UGC). It has been argued by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 61), in their widely cited work, that social media is ‘a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content’. Web 2.0 was coined by Tim O’Reilly to describe a new way in which software developers and end-users started to utilise the World Wide Web. ‘Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform’ (O'Reilly, 2007: 17).

At first the producers and consumers of internet content and services were almost the same group of people; among whom the majority were from the computer science community. At that time, a web portal was like an e-version newspaper or magazine, from which users could get information but could not communicate with its editors effectively. A dual flow of information was always the intention of the inventors of World Wide Web, such as Tim Berners-Lee. With the widespread use of computers and ICTs, more and more less-technically-minded people joined the internet community. As a result, Web 2.0 emerged in the mid-2000s. In the era of Web 2.0, ‘all [Web 2.0] users are equally creative and are created equal’ (Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009, cited in Brake, 2014: 592). Indeed, internet users could enjoy

the convenience of two-way interaction for the first time, and feel the freedom to participate and contribute to the internet community in a collaborative way.

While Web 2.0 is regarded as the 'ideological and technological foundation' of Social Media, User Generated Content could be seen as 'the sum of all ways in which people make use of Social Media' (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010: 61). User Generated Content (UGC) is defined as 'the various forms of media contents that are publicly available and created by end-users'. According to a report by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2007, cited in Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010: 61), UGC needs to fulfil three basic requirements: 'firstly, it needs to be published either on a publicly accessible website or on a social networking site accessible to selected group of people; second, it needs to show a certain amount of creative effort; and finally, it needs to have been created outside of professional routines and practices'.

The idea behind social media is far from ground-breaking, and it has been defined in numerous ways. When media study first commenced, scholars noticed the emergence of social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook and Twitter, among many others. Little by little, with the widespread use of the internet, different kinds of social media started to emerge. We cannot discuss social media without taking its development into consideration. That is what I am going to do in this section in order to take a look at the various definitions of social media. Social media is always developing and changing as new functions emerge. Due to the fact that it is still evolving, no universal definition of social media exists even after ten years of the term's use. However, the following definitions of social media – some well-

known in academia others based on criteria from independent research organizations – give us a general idea of people’s understanding of this new media form.

In their pioneering paper *Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship* in 2008, danah boyd² and Nicole Ellison (2008: 211) provided a definition about social network sites as follows:

Social networks sites (SNSs) are web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public and semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.

By focusing on the core characteristics of SNSs, such as the exhibition of users’ personal profiles and their connections with the other, boyd and Ellison’s quotation still contains the most accepted definition within the study of social media after ten years. In a public network, each individual could experience the shift between content maker and receiver from time to time. Being a content maker and receiver in a virtualised online world turned out to be attractive to users, and consequently social network sites became more and more popular. The primary function of SNSs might involve self-expression, social interaction and forming connections within the new medium, but the format of this virtual world sped up the diffusion of

² danah boyd chooses not to capitalise her name.

information as well. On his work about microblogging, Yang (2009b) rightly points out that microblogging has two functions. Firstly, real-time news functions on a macro-communication level, such as massive information dissemination when large media events, natural disasters and crisis situations occur. Secondly, microblogging is effective for targeted micro-communications as well. On this level, microblogging could be used for precise communication, for example from one person to another. In the next section, we will use Sina Weibo as an example to have a look at the use of SNSs in China.

Van Dijck, in her book about the history of social media, classified four different types of social media: 'social network sites' (SNSs), such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google+; sites for 'user-generated content' (UGC), such as YouTube, Flickr, and Wikipedia; 'trading and marketing sites' (TMSs), which includes Amazon, eBay, Groupon and so on; and 'play and game sites' (PGSs), a thriving category with popular games. Van Dijck's classifications appear to include the majority of social media sites, or so it seems, because we need to bear in mind that 'there are no sharp boundaries between various platform categories' and that 'this classification of social media platforms is far from exhaustive' (Dijck, 2013a: 8).

On top of the four categories mentioned above, we can add at least another one: traditional media mobile apps (TMAs). As I write this passage, mobile apps have attracted millions of users in China; in part due to the government's promotion of integrated development between traditional and new media since August, 2014. Currently, the convergence between traditional and new media is running smoothly in China (ACJA, 2014). Mainstream news agencies in China, such as

People's Daily, Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television *et al.*, have opened new media services. Smart phone users can download these apps to get a daily update of real-time news. Users can even comment and interact in designated comment areas, normally at the bottom of each piece of news they read.

Focusing on the idea of sociality, in their project *Why We Post*, anthropologist Daniel Miller and his team (2016) defined social media as technology which allows 'scalable sociality', by which they meant that social media provides greater control over the degree of privacy and group size, compared with former communication media. For example, public broadcasting like newspapers, radios, and television aim to communicate to large groups of people; while private communications like letters, telephones and one-to-one conversations are channels for communication between small groups. The emergence of social media has created a new type of 'media sociality' which jumps between different scales easily: from the most private group to the most public group, and from the smallest group to the largest group. In other words, by using social media users have more freedom on the degree of privacy they want, or the size of group they wish to interact with. This flexibility is one of the most attractive points about social media.

Many organizations are also paying close attention to social media development across the globe. For instance, <http://thomascrampton.com/> is a website which focuses on the development of social media in various Asian countries. In 2010 and 2015, the website's social media team created different infographics to explain the social media landscape in China. According to their classifications (see Figure 2.1), the social media atmosphere is constantly evolving in China. This classification of

social media is pretty illuminating. It is a tricky job to follow changes of the social media all across the globe. In addition, consumers have the final say on the ways in which social media develops, because they are the consumers of various social media companies. On top of that – following the trend of western platforms, after years of development in a separate online environment and with distinct requirements from consumers – definitions for these western platforms never work easily on Chinese ones. We need to treat them differently when considering the new traits that Chinese social media sites have acquired over the past few years.

Unlike Western countries, where people use different apps for different purposes, such as WhatsApp for instant messaging and Instagram for photo sharing, Chinese users prefer using one app to integrate them into the social media world. The development of Weibo and WeChat in the last couple of years was in response to this trend in China's social media world. Integration is peculiar to the Chinese social media market, and could be seen as a motive for the adhesiveness of users. This, from another point, proved that while users are shaping social media, social media are shaping users at the same time.

By combining social presence and media richness theory in media studies, and the concept of self-presentation and self-disclosure in the field of social process, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) continue to create a classification scheme based on six different kinds of social media. Among these six classifications, social networking sites falls into the medium of social presence/ media richness and high in self-presentation/ self-disclosure. It is tricky to predict new trends and directions in the

development of social media, however, for the time being, any research on social media cannot afford to overlook social network sites (SNSs).

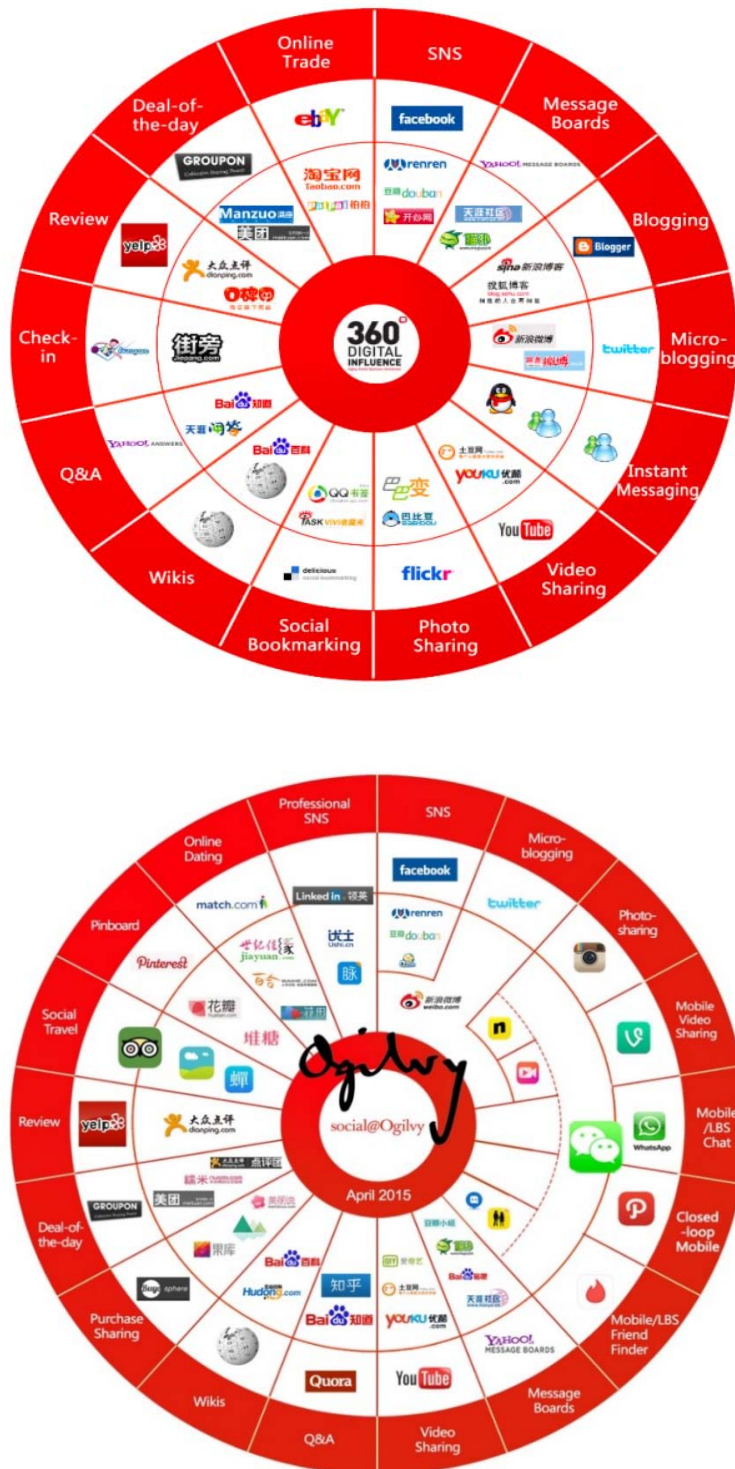


Figure 2.1 Evolution of Social Media in China (2010 & 2015)

Source: *China Social Media Landscape, 2015* (Webb, 2015): the year of 2010 at the top; the year of 2015 at the bottom.

Since 1997, China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) undertook a *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* biannually. In their reports, social media included SNSs, microblogs, and many other social services. Instant messaging services such as WeChat and QQ were excluded as the amount of users was too large. This is another categorization of social media.

In this section I briefly summarized several commonly used definitions of social media. The display of various definitions of social media by different scholars or institutions demonstrates the diversity and uncertainty of people's understanding of it. With countless requirements from users, coupled with fierce competition amongst media companies, it is understandable that social media will keep evolving. Considering that future, it will become more complex for academics in the field of media studies to agree on a comprehensive definition which includes every aspect of social media.

For the purposes of this thesis, social media requires (1) users to have an account to enter the social media ecology, (2) content on social media is sharable, and (3) users have the potential to interact with each other by posting and replying to comments. In the context of China, 'social media' in this thesis does not include QQ and WeChat. However, QQZone and WeChat Moments are regarded as social media because they fit the above definition. On top of that, I am not going to distinguish between social networking sites and social media, because their

meanings in a Chinese context are interchangeable. Therefore, except with special notes, the use of SNSs and social media are exchangeable in the following research.

2.2 A History of Social Media and its Development in China

It is not surprising to see that nowadays many people have incorporated social media website or smart phone applications into their everyday lives. For instance, Facebook and Twitter in the west, Weibo and WeChat in China. As a result of that, the way people connect, communicate and exchange information with each other has changed dramatically. In the perspective of Rainie and Wellman, like computer and smart phone operating systems, the direct consequence of combining social network websites or apps into people's lives leads to the appearance of a 'networked individualism' which is '*personal* – the individual is at the autonomous centre just as she is reaching out from her computer; *multiuser* – people are interacting with numerous diverse others; *multitasking* – people are doing several things; and *multithreaded* – they are doing them more or less simultaneously' (Rainie and Wellman, 2012: 7, italics in original).

Social media were designed as tools to promote social interaction. However, with its development and evolution, the ways people behave with those tools have changed. For example, people tend to share their own voices when something unexpected happens. As a result of that, 'I saw on Twitter/ Facebook...' is appearing in people's conversations more and more frequently, especially when major events or breaking news happens (Acar and Muraki, 2011; Zong, 2014; Resnyansky, 2015). It is no exaggeration to say that, rather than traditional mass media, social media today have become the main source of information for people, at least for heavy

users. Undoubtedly, social media has changed the way we connect and communicate with each other. In fact, the widespread use and penetration of social media platforms absorbs people and enables them to migrate to an online world, take what happened among Twitter users after Supertyphoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013 for instance, and consequently people choose to move their daily lives and even professional activities to these online websites as well (David *et al.*, 2016).

Social media are tools of cognition, communication and co-operation. Based on social theory, concepts of social facts, social relations, cooperation and community, Fuchs describes sociality as a threefold interconnected process of cognition, communication and cooperation. Social media platforms like Facebook integrate tools that support various forms of sociality into one platform (Fuchs, 2014; Fuchs, 2016). Fuchs believes that online sociality is not new, meaning that it was not introduced to the WWW by social media platforms. In actuality, social media have simultaneously preserved and transformed different forms of sociality, therefore, social media platforms reflect the convergence of different social activates and the convergence of different social roles in a contemporary online world.

Some researchers hold the view that '*social*' suggests two-way interactions between people, which may be classified as one-to-one, one-to-many, or many-to-many, [while] *media*, or tools that store and deliver information, typically include materials that deliver text, images, or sound' (Murphy *et al.*, 2013: 2, italics in original). Social media is possible in a Web 2.0 era when notions like user-generated content (UGC) and participatory culture have a real impact on people who are

using the internet. Social media emphasise the rapid distribution (two-way communication and sharing) of user-generated content among communities which rely on web-based technologies. As Berry (2011: 4) argues, 'software increasingly structures the contemporary world' and is also a way to 'revolutionise the limitations of the physical world'. Social media based on software have the same function of constructing as well. Social media enables people's voices to be heard beyond their immediate sphere of influence. Social media platforms 'support reciprocal conversation between users and offer users at least some opportunities to become the source of information' (Stockmann and Luo, 2017: 193). In sum, social media has transformed people's lives fundamentally as more and more people are taking it for granted as part of their everyday lives.

When talking about the development of social media in China, we should not forget the role of the history of the internet in China. The modern internet age, when internet was more usable for ordinary users rather than experienced computer professionals, began around 1993 in the Western world (Zuckerman, 2015). The widespread use of the internet in China did not become available until the late 1990s, which was the direct result of its poorly developed technology and economy. With the deepening of the Reform and Open-up policy since the late 1970s, commercial culture rapidly developed within China in the following years. By the late 1990s, as a result of this cultural change, individualisation had become an obvious fact in China, especially across urban areas where people had the privilege of enjoying the fruitful results of China's reform and open-up policy. What followed this development was the crisis in identity and faith. People started to explore

metaphysical problems such as the meaning of life, happiness, and so on (Yang, 2016).

2.3 Studies on Social Media

Since the inception of the internet, scholars from various disciplines have studied the impact and influence of this transformative communication technology on individuals from all walks of life. User discomfort is caused by several components: with the widespread use of wireless connection, the internet and smartphones, social media is becoming part of the daily routine for millions of people: the first thing some people do after waking up in the morning is to turn on their phones to check the latest updates from different platforms; and the last thing they do before going to sleep at night is to check their phones. Not to mention, that some constantly check their phones during the daytime out of the fear that they are going to miss any messages. More people start to complain of endless smart phone use; especially SNSs users whose reliance on the technology consumes time instead of enabling them to arrange their time freely and flexibly. We cannot overlook the fact that what these SNSs supply is just platforms, channels and chances, it is the users who are playing the decisive role on how and when to use them, and most crucially, to do what with them. It is the users that are creating for themselves what could be termed as a 'modern feeling of discomfort'.

2.3.1 Cultural and contextual differences in social media research

Unlike natural science studies, where theory and conclusion aims to build a universal picture of our world, in social sciences due to differences in languages and cultures many studies lack this universality. Generally speaking, many scholars

constructed their theories based on one country, or one shared culture. Whether their theories could be applied beyond their own country or culture where they were drawing inspiration and case studies from is doubtful. To put it another way, there is a tension between local specificity and theoretical generalisability in social science research. For example, Manuel Castells (2006: 12) pointed out that ‘the study of cultural processes, such as communication, is very much dependent on context’. Many scholars have noticed this paradox since the inception of social media research. As academics it is necessary to accept that there are geographical limits to our theories. It is uncommon to notice that many scholars made the necessary updates to their reasoning, and thus made their theories more plausible across the world.

There are other similar cases. In communication studies, Couldry raised the concept of ‘the myth of mediated centre’ when studying the social location of media. This concept is used to capture a claim made by many media institutions; according to them, there is a ‘mediated centre’ which has the power to represent the shared reality. Yet, ‘shared reality’ has been *constructed* by media (both mass media and new media), which was then accepted by audiences and regarded as their own shared experience. In a dialogue with scholars from Hong Kong, after thinking about the vast size and multi-level complexity of China, Couldry points out that there might be different ‘mediated centres’ for people from different walks of life (Chan and Fung, 2014).

Social media research has demonstrated that cultural differences often cause diverse attitudes, behaviours and usage patterns regarding social media. We do not

deny the fact that there are similarities in certain aspects between eastern and western social media users, yet the cultural differences usually led to diverse patterns of social media uses. For instance, research on SNS use between US and Korean participants pointed out that respondents from two different nations have different expectations of SNS relationships, and accordingly adopt different online communication behaviours (Cho and Park, 2013). Another study based on a comparison between young SNSs users from the UK and Bahrain, in the Middle East, found that: there was not much difference on the use of social media between these two different social and cultural contexts. For example, girls were more likely to have uncomfortable online experiences such as cyber bullying or cyber staking in both countries. However, culturally gendered perspectives placed restrictions upon usage: teenage girls hid their online interactions with boys from their parents in Bahrain due to the fact that this behaviour is regarded as culturally unacceptable, and unfortunately these interactions have resulted in the attempted suicide amongst the girls (Davidson and Martellozzo, 2013). In sum, we cannot overlook cultural differences when conducting research on how people use social media', especially when employing conclusions or theories concluded from studies conducted in other contexts.

2.3.2 Journalistic use of social media

The use of different SNSs dramatically changed the style of journalism we used to be familiar with. Audiences nowadays have direct access to a multitude of sources, and no longer rely on journalists to report the news. Audiences are not only news consumers anymore, on the contrary, due to instant availability and high levels of

interactivity on SNSs they have become 'pro-sumers' (Tapscott & Williams, 2008, cited in Curran *et al.*, 2012: 123).

Therefore, new forms of journalism – 'ambient journalism' or 'participatory journalism' – have become a reality in the past decade (Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Hermida, 2010b; Hermida, 2010a). With the widespread use of computer-mediated communication systems, journalism is not difficult or expensive to produce anymore; it surrounds us like the air we breathe every day. As new social media technologies flourish, platforms such as Twitter can facilitate an instant, online dissemination of short fragments of information from various sources – official or unofficial. Dating back to 2008, researchers noticed that national newspapers were integrating user-generated content (UGC) in the UK. During this process, mainstream news organizations were playing a traditional gate-keeping role towards UGC. This transforming innovation made the public – the former passive consumers of media – into active participants in the creation of the media landscape.

If we consider blogging, a lack of obstruction to access, production and distribution, is an inherent benefit of blogging that helps break the line between journalists and the public. By using content analysis on four top political blogs during the US presidential selection in 2004, Scott (2007, cited in Wei, 2009: 539) found that bloggers were participating in mediated reporting instead of first-hand reporting of events. For example, sharing the reports of others and commenting. At the same time, bloggers also performed a traditional surveillance role which was based on information provided by other mass media outlets. Scott defined 'the social power

of the blog' as a blogger's capacity to influence audiences. By lowering obstruction to access, the internet offers the underprivileged information that has less chance to reach the public sphere. However, whether people realise and actively utilise that power depends on the success or failure of their empowered communication (Wei, 2009).

2.3.3 General uses of social media

Although individual's use of the internet varies, new trends of handling SNSs keep appearing. Based on a survey with 1874 adults, in five cities, in East Asia, researchers found three different ways of internet connectedness: communication/entertainment; expression/participation; and information/research (Jung *et al.*, 2012). A study involving news-acquiring behaviour – with more than 3,500 college students from four East Asian cities including Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taipei – found that there is a rapid rise amongst youth accessing the news via mobile phones. Some also use their phones to follow news posts on mobile-accessible microblogs (Wei *et al.*, 2014).

The traits of SNSs made it a particularly effective medium for long-distance interactions. By using in-depth interviews with 23 American and international students, a study on social media's impacts on the cross-cultural adaptation of students studying abroad found that: different platforms were chosen by different people; online communication through social media was of great importance for participants, for example it could boost participant's psychological well-being, maintain their relational bonds, supply them with sociocultural skills and needed information. On top of that, online communication between international students

and distant family members back home could decrease the stress and concern experienced on both sides (Sandel, 2014).

A study in the United States aimed to discover young people's views about digital devices, and the functions that these devices served in their lives. The research used focus groups with high-school teenagers. The results show that: teenagers have a keen awareness of different digital devices; the time spent using these devices has surpassed the time they spend with traditional technologies; and digital devices help teenagers to socialise. Regardless of the advantages of digital devices, there was an awareness of online risks as well, such as the release of personal information and privacy (Hundley and Shyles, 2010).

Back in the 1950s, the concept of para-social interaction (PSI) was raised to analyse an audience's illusion of forming intimate and personal relationships with media personalities, especially TV celebrities at that time. Repeated PSI could create 'an illusion of intimacy' between celebrities and their audience, because the relationship was one-sided (Horton and Richard Wohl, 1956). In today's SNSs context, PSIs could be understood as a user's interpersonal involvement with a media personality through mediated communication (Men and Tsai, 2013).

A study on interpersonal relationships in China's virtual community found that two opposite voices co-exist within virtual interpersonal relationships: one perspective maintains that interpersonal relationships cannot be equal to the face-to-face relationships people have offline; the other maintains that there are no differences between virtual and offline relationships. Through online ethnography and offline

participant observation, the work of Wu (2014) shows that interpersonal relations, shaped in the virtual community, are not copies of those in real world and tend to be more flexible.

The value of social media as a serious 'knowledge management platform' has been verified during disaster responses. Small chunks of information which are contributed by social media in various forms – words, pictures, video clips, web links, or a mixture of any of the factors above – were easily acquired, shared and used. Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that social media have a transformative impact on knowledge sharing via distant response. In spite of social media being widely recognised as a medium to gather and share information on different occasions, until 2009 United States government officials had not yet devised mechanisms to efficiently access, and utilise social media in order to inform response and recovery efforts during disasters and crises (Sutton, 2009). Social media are evolving, while at the same time, users adopt and adapt new functions rapidly. By giving the US government's use of social media during the 2010 Haitian earthquake as an example, the work of Yates and Paquette (2011) showed that: if used properly, social media could help make faster decisions and supply more complete knowledge about what resources were needed during a crisis.

2.3.4 The negative sides of social media use

Social media could accelerate communication among the users. As a consequence, social media platforms are becoming more and more popular and they exert beneficial impacts, such as creating hyper-connectivity which enables users to share content with multiple others. However, social media also produce harmful

impacts which we cannot afford to overlook. Limited studies have been done on the overuse and misuse of social media, even though these phenomena are not uncommon after social media being used for a decade or so (Vishwanath, 2015).

Although becoming popular as stated above, it does not mean that SNSs do not have any shortcomings. With the widespread use of SNSs, especially among teenagers, many problems have been brought up, such as cyber bullying and harassment. For example, with an accompanying explosion of social media use Britain has witnessed a ten-fold increase in the amount of internet trolls from 2005-2014. Among which, sexual offences, harassment and threats to kill were the most serious incidents reported (Evans, 2015). What makes things worse is that parents might not know how to help when things go wrong. With rapidly changing technology and its consequences it is difficult for parents to know how to help when things go wrong. Schools are directing parents to cyber-bullying information websites, such as <http://www.stopcyberbullying.org/>.

Another problem is the malicious use of social media during emergencies. Different forms of malicious use during an incident involve mischievous pranks, rumours, or even acts of terrorism (Sun, 2011). These malicious uses of social media could cause irretrievable damage to disaster relief efforts: first and foremost, false information wastes time and money. In addition, users might not be enthusiastic about using social media during an emergency due to a sense of unworthiness or anger caused by false information on social media.

On top of that, the rapid spread of unverified content on social media can cause significant harm. This is characterised as a 'digital wildfire' (Webb *et al.*, 2016). Digital wildfire is a result of users being able to port and repost any content on social media to more than one user at the same time. Unlike what happened in the mass media era/period when traditional gate-keepers were functioning, the gate-keeping function has switched from the producers to the consumers of information in this Web 2.0 age, thus a source's credibility is of rising importance. This is the strength of unofficial social media in broadcasting, and the main characteristic is that social media can potentially attract many users in a short window of time. However, widespread unverified content could cause harm to the security of individuals, organisations, communities, states and even the entire population.

2.3.5 Non-use of social media

Though more and more people treat social media as a vital tool to keep informed of the news, and to maintain social interactions, we cannot overlook that social media technology is not universally adopted or available to everyone. It is not rare to find non-users amongst youth, the so-called 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001), who are supposed to be the lead users and early adopters of all social media technologies. Research with 20 American youth between 18 to 23 years old found that economic instability, fractured educational trajectories and social isolation were the common characteristics of these social media non-adopters (Bobkowski and Smith, 2013). Research on older Norwegians found a 'generational culture gap' between young and old people's experiences of SNSs. Older generations in Norway treated SNSs communication as cold and narcissistic, and did not value its

usefulness. Besides that, they held privacy and security concerns. Although expressing an interest in SNSs and realizing that contact with family and friends might be boosted by using SNSs, a lack of competence with the associated technology proves to be a barrier for these 'digital migrants' to use them (Lüders and Brandtzæg, 2014).

The development of ICTs, especially instant social media makes it possible for the public to be heard online. However, having the chance is not a necessary condition for some critical comments and key judgements to be made. There are several reason for this, such as a lack of political literacy displayed by internet users, literacy levels in online content consumers and digital inequality. In a study on the epistemic authority of Chinese journalism using the 2011 Wenzhou high-speed train incident as a case study, Tong (2013) found that social media use, such as Weibo for journalism, is more complicated than people expected. Weibo has its advantages in releasing initial information when incidents happen, and it could influence newspaper agendas to a certain degree. Nevertheless, besides being treated as one type of news source, a more authoritative interpretation of incidents were still offered by traditional media, such as newspapers.

Through conducting research on three disaster information websites started by volunteers after the Typhoon Morakot in Taiwan in 2009, Cheng (2014) found that online communities use communication technologies to exchange information and mobilise the masses after disasters. A new type of citizen participation – distributed citizen participation – emerged during the Web 2.0 era when dual-way communication became possible. The study also discovered that shortly after

disasters, different kinds of online communities also performed the role of gate-watching to guarantee the accuracy of disaster information.

2.4 The Story of Weibo

Weibo is a social networking website in flux, it is still unclear what its future potentiality will involve due to the continuous emergence of new functions. In the first few stages of its development, as a microblogging platform, Weibo was a copycat of Twitter. For example, its strategy was to build a large and loyal user base, on the first hand, and then move towards monetization following the development of Twitter. However, during the networking site's evolution in response to the requirements by its users, and competition from the social media ecology within China, Weibo have developed several new functions which are unknown to its western counterparts. To put it in a simple way, we could regard Weibo as a combination of Twitter, YouTube and Instagram at this specific stage. In this part of the thesis, in order to provide an overview of Weibo, firstly I am going to introduce the development of Weibo, then we will have a look at what Weibo enables its users to do, and finally the business model of this platform will be discussed.

2.4.1 The development of Weibo

Launched in August 2009, Sina Weibo was a news and information platform run by Sina – one of the web portals in China. Weibo was a copycat of the first microblogging platform – Twitter – in the initial phase of its development. In July 2012 a Beijing Flood killed 79 people. *People's Daily* started an official Weibo account to provide up-to-date information to the public of the disaster. This official approval represents the importance of Weibo in the governance of Chinese society.

At the same time, it is a milestone in the development of Weibo and social media in a broad scale in China. However, in 2013, under competition from WeChat (a smart phone application widely used among people with strong ties), Weibo use has tailed off, with a decline in its user increase rate and user hours. According to the vice-president of Weibo, Weibo was built into a public platform where users could follow celebrities and discuss important social issues online before 2013 (Cao, 2017). However, Weibo was forced to change its implementation strategies to encourage users. The product manager of Sina Weibo acknowledged that Weibo was originally a Chinese Twitter but later incorporated more Facebook-like features (Stockmann and Luo, 2017: 193).

After years' of development and evolution, today's Weibo looks like a combination of Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. One new function involves a live-streaming industry which is booming in China. These constant improvements and increasing function diversity to Weibo have created a healthy content ecosystem, and therefore have increasingly attracted users. As a result of its diverse content and less competition from other social media providers within China, as of March 2017, Weibo has reached 340 million active users (Armstrong and Wang, 2017). To put that number in perspective, that is more active users than Twitter over the same period (see Figure 2.2 to have a glimpse of the developing trend of both Twitter and Weibo). Today's Weibo is a platform based on interests, users can socialise, consume and interact online with others based on their common interests (Cao, 2017).

There are scholars who believe that internet use has turned China's cyberspace into a contentious space (Yang, 2008; Yang, 2009b; Han, 2016). At the same time scholars harbour suspicions about the empowerment potential of the internet and its uses. This is due to the fact that governmental authorities are updating their knowledge about the internet as well. Thereafter, they could take the initiative to inspect and take necessary actions to control online information correspondingly.

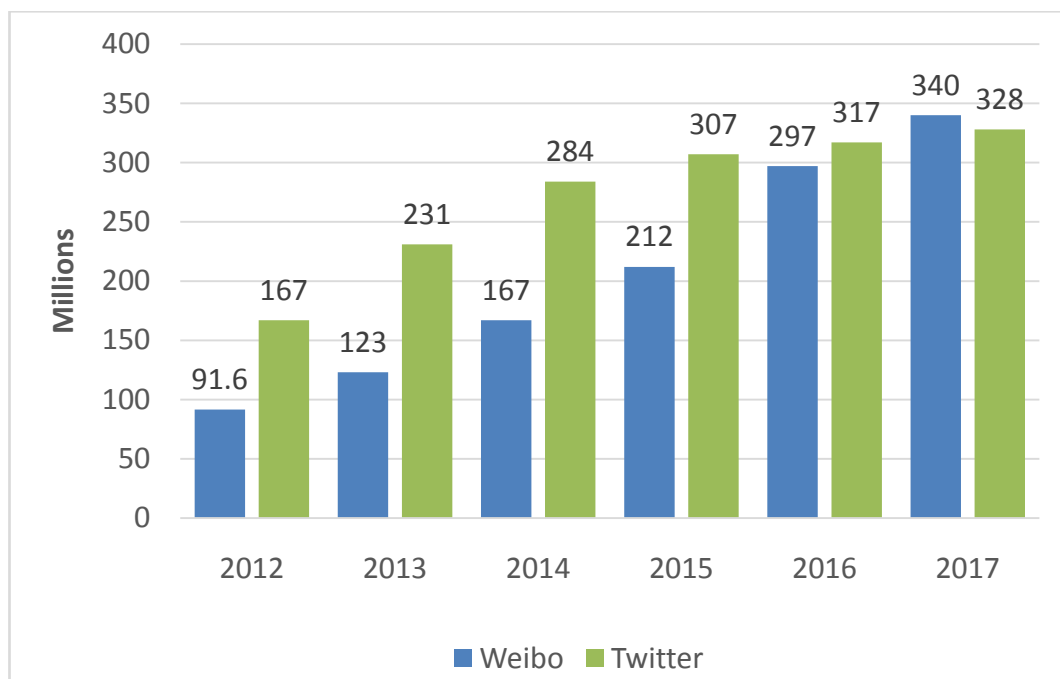


Figure 2.2 Amount of Weibo and Twitter Monthly Active Users, 2012-2017

Sources: The amount of Weibo MAU was based on the *Annual Report of Sina Weibo Users* (figures from 2012-2016 were in September, in 2017 was from Sina's final report of Q1); while the data for Twitter was from www.statista.com (The Statistics Portal, 2017).

2.4.2 Activities enabled on Weibo

Weibo never stopped evolving since its launch in 2009, whether as a result of the pressure from other social networking platforms or due to its long-range development planning and policies. Since it is not the intention of this thesis to give a panoramic description of Weibo's history of development, in this part I am going to list the relevant capabilities that Weibo provided to its users.

Generally speaking there are two kinds of Weibo accounts: unverified accounts and verified accounts (where the user pays a monthly or yearly subscription fee). Verified accounts include four sub-categories: individual accounts who are real-name authenticated individual users; official accounts which covers organizations of government, enterprises, higher education, the media and so on; accounts for different interest groups, such as entertainment, sports, relationships, animation, food and so forth; and finally, we-media accounts which in order to be valid need to contribute to a specific area continuously, and, prior to the application, have a total click rate over one million a month. Weibo now signs those verified accounts with a 'V' (for 'verified') icon in different colours: a blue V for official accounts (followed what Twitter did), and an orange V for individual accounts.

In her article about Twitter and the interpretative flexibility of microblogging, Jose Dijck drew up a list of six potential activities that microblogging enables. In that article, she wrote that Twitter could be used in the following scenarios: conversation and dialogue; collaboration and exchange; self-expression and self-communication; status updating and checking; information and news sharing; marketing and advertising (Dijck, 2013b: 227). Following this classification,

individual Weibo users mainly perform functions like status updating and checking, self-expression and self-communication, conversation and dialogue on Weibo, while official accounts often carry out information and news sharing, marketing and advertising.

With regard to each Weibo, users can like, comment, forward and favourite. Among all of those choices, 'like' expresses approval of the content; 'comment' is a way to show approval and interact with the micro blogger; 'forward' could help to spread the content; 'favourite' is useful for further review. The comment function in Weibo differs from Twitter: users can glimpse over, and like or reply to what others have commented. With the continuous promotion and optimization of its mobile apps, the four functions mentioned above enable more and more users to enrich their interactive experiences of Weibo. Apart from that, the rewarding function through which users could give tips to those high quality content creators and the promotion of streaming shows live also makes the interaction among Weibo users more diversified.

In April 2016, China Internet Network Information Centre (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2016a: 21) released their *2015 Annual Report on Chinese Social Networking Applications Users' Behaviour*, in which they reported the main functions of Weibo users in 2015, as shown in Figure 2.3. From it we could have a detailed idea of what Weibo enables its users to do.

Unlike what is happening outside of China, where Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are dominating the global social media ecology, none of these were available

behind China's firewall since 2009. However, Chinese internet users are not lacking local services to choose from, most of which are specially tailored for the Chinese market (Sullivan, 2014). Among all of the domestic social media sites in China, Sina Weibo is one of the leading platforms. Till now, six years after its launch, Weibo has been deeply integrated into users' everyday lives, and caters for users with a wide range of media needs (Zhang and Pentina, 2012).

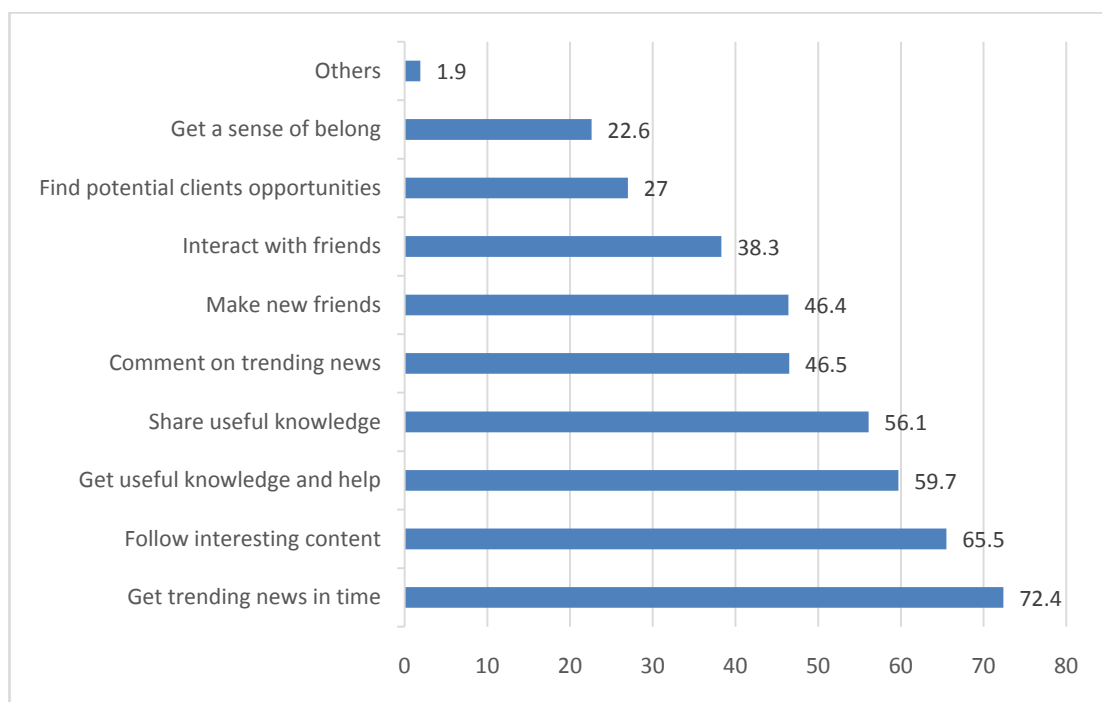


Figure 2.3 Activities Weibo Enables Its Users to Do

Data source: *2015 Annual Report on Chinese Social Networking Applications Users' Behaviour* (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2016a: 21)

There are several reasons behind the popularity of Weibo among youth in China. In the first instance, because of the differences between Chinese and English writing. With 140 words Chinese could express more than English does. Therefore, Weibo users can post nuanced messages and even cite the other's comments in their own

posts. As a result of that, it is much easier to follow and participate in online conversations using Weibo. Furthermore, Sina Weibo is more interactive than Twitter. This is due to the fact that 'one can comment on anybody's posts on Sina Weibo and follow the chain of comments under the original posting, as well as make a comment while forwarding the post' (Svensson, 2014: 172). Lastly, during six years' of development, Weibo has evolved. Several new functions have emerged which 'contain more features and have been adapted to local conditions and tastes' (Sullivan, 2012: 775). For example, short videos, and long articles in the form of photographs could be inserted in a Weibo. Overall, these characteristics have supported Weibo in becoming increasingly informative and attractive to Chinese netizens. And Weibo has become one of the most popular mediums among Chinese internet users, especially among youth.

Judging from the daily trends on Sina Weibo, and popular Weibo users – most of whom are celebrities such as actresses and TV personalities – Sullivan (2012) concludes that the Chinese internet is dominated by entertainment. This conclusion concurs with a former study on trends within China's social media, which shows that: popular trends on social media are created almost entirely due to retweets of media content such as jokes, images and videos (Yu *et al.*, 2011). Another recent study on digital inequalities/divides on Sina Weibo has similar findings:

Two groups of people are more visible on microblogs than others: celebrities and opinion leaders. A majority of those with the most followers on microblogs are in the entertainments business, which

testifies to the rise of celebrity culture in China [...] The category of opinion leaders includes a diverse group of people: traditional and new elites such as public intellectuals, business people and media professionals (Svensson, 2014: 169-70).

Similar to what happened in the developed countries decades ago, a young generation growing up with new technologies has appeared in China now. This generation was born and brought up in contemporary China which is at a stage of rapid social transformation. They have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, and many other gadgets and tools of the digital age. Also, Prensky (2001: 1) proposes that as a result of a staggering growth of economy along with the emerging development of technologies around them, this generation of digital natives 'think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors'.

2.4.3 Business models of Weibo

As a microblogging start-up, since its launch Twitter has challenged the conventional advertisement-based or subscription-based business model. It is a dilemma for social networking sites to find a balance between building an audiences base and making revenue streams. It is no exaggeration to say that in developing a strategy, '[c]hoosing a business model seems subordinate to building a user base' (Dijk, 2013b: 232). However, unstable and unfeasible as its business models are now, the venture capitalists of these social networking platforms are apparently profit-oriented. To put it another way, no one has the intention to operate their websites in a non-commercial space at all.

As I mentioned before, as a social networking site, Weibo was launched in 2009. It was not until early 2012, four years into its launch, when Weibo started to monetize their service which began with a membership subscription. Since then, Weibo's business models have constantly improved. It was as early as 2011, during the Global Mobile Internet Conference (GMIC), that the then-CEO of Weibo, Charles Chao, claimed that Weibo had monetization potential in six categories: interactive and targeted advertising, social gaming, real-time searching, wireless value-added service, e-commercial platform and digital content licensing (Wu, 2011a). The emergence and success of WeChat since 2009 posed a huge challenge to Weibo. Around 2013, Weibo experienced an obvious decline in both its monthly active users and total users. However, after a number of strategic partnerships and several new functions since 2015, Weibo maintained its competitiveness. Currently, Weibo remains the most popular microblogging platform in China. Following social networking sites in the west, such as Facebook and Twitter, Weibo relied on the strategy that a large and loyal user base was the key to its sustained profitability. And mirroring what happened in Western countries, commercial and profit logics dominate the Chinese internet and Chinese social media (Fuchs, 2016: 20). Weibo is no exception in this aspect.

Obviously, Weibo users are well aware of the commercial and profit-driven motives of the platform. At the same time, not all of Weibo's business models are unfavourable to its users. In fact, users benefit a lot from some of its ways of monetization. For example, it is much more convenient and precise for ordinary users to learn from users posting interactive and targeted advertising. And at the

same time, by building Weibo into an e-commercial platform, small business could take advantage of cost-saving online advertising which was impossible before the social media era.

In her book about the history of social media, Dijck pointed out three ways of making money that the traditional cultural industry primarily used: 'profits derived from sales of reproduced goods (CDs, books, DVDs), profits from viewing or subscription fees (TV programs, cinema, video rental), and profits derived from advertising, which is basically the selling of audience attention juxtaposed to, or interspersed with, cultural or entertainment content' (Dijck, 2013a: 39).

It is a truism to say that in the traditional broadcasting media era, only advertising could enable free content and free services to be achievable and sustainable. In the social media era, as a result of user-generated content and various competitors, Weibo choose not to use pop-up ads to prevent user discontent. However, this does not mean that there are no advertisements on this platform. In fact, frequent users of the platform view advertisements from time to time, most of which are about tourism, ticket selling, wedding photography, healthcare and so on. These targeted or customised advertisements appear on users' web pages randomly (once you might see wedding photography but the next time ticket selling), generally speaking users have four options to deal with advertisements like this: do not show this ad again; reduce recommendations for this post; reduce recommendations of this kind; and report this post as a junk to Weibo secretary (an official account responsible for dealing with complaints and reports from users). As a consequence of emerging marketing strategies used in promoting products in the

social media era, what used to be an '[a]d culture is gradually turning into a recommendation culture' (Dijck, 2013a: 40).

There is not much difference when talking about the business model between Weibo and many other participatory media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, QQ, LinkedIn, and Twitter to name just a few. In Ethan Zuckerman's point of view, diverse as the functions of these sites are, all of these websites are all running on a dominant business model – 'the companies provided users with tools, and the users, following their own interests, generated content that sustained advertising' (Zuckerman, 2015: 133). During an interview with a Weibo product manager, researchers found that not only Weibo, but most of the social media platforms in China, are based on business models that 'generate income by using their data to target advertising' (Stockmann and Luo, 2017: 193). Therefore, social media companies are likely to have more profit and income once their user base is big enough. This is verified by Weibo, because by the first quarter of 2017 around 80 percent of Weibo's total revenue was received from online advertisements (Armstrong and Wang, 2017). So far, this business model, preferred by other social media platforms, is still the dominate one to Weibo.

Subscription fee is another model. By paying a subscription fee, premium members of Weibo could enjoy more privileges compared with ordinary users. Among those privileges, Weibo VIPs can create customised homepages, restore recently deleted posts, and benefit from special rights during Weibo games. As we mentioned previously, this was Weibo's earliest strategy to begin monetizing its business in early 2012. At the writing of this thesis, the subscription fee for premium members

of Weibo is 15 RMB (around £2) a month or 108 RMB (around £13) a year. According to the *2016 Annual Report of Sina Weibo Users*, by the third quarter of 2016 the daily active users (DAU) of Weibo had reached 132 million, and among those 7.5 million were premium members (Sina Weibo Data Center, 2017). From the percentage (5.7%) of premium members we can tell that there is not much difference among Weibo and other social media platforms: users are not going to pay for a subscription as long as they can use services for free. However, considering the enormous existing customer base of Weibo, subscription fees are still a non-negligible way of monetization.

Apart from subscriptions and advertising models, Weibo has explored several other profitable business models relating to the exploitation of user-generated content during the Web 2.0 era. As a social media platform which is a 'provider of software, [...] and services that help code social activities into computational architecture' (Dijck, 2013a: 29), Weibo is not only a marketing place for its users; at the same time it has the potential to provide valuable content to its users while playing the role of a meeting place. At present, besides traditional content in a microblogging platform, Weibo also provides the following: User-generated short videos including videos on education, food, sport, information and entertainment, both from official accounts and from ordinary users; the streaming of live shows which followers can send virtual gifts to which can then be converted into real money to live streamers; and paid digital content. In December 2016, Weibo introduced a new function named 'Weibo Q&A' for key opinion leaders (KOLs) and celebrities, following a trend of paid digital content in the online world. Followers can ask questions to any

one they like, and any of the others who are interested in this question could pay one RMB to see the answers. Weibo deducts 10% of the total revenue, and the rest will be divided evenly between the users who ask and answer the question.

To date, Weibo has built a mature commercial system which can meet the needs of clients at different levels: from personal customers, small and medium-sized enterprises to brand-name customers. In January 2017, Charles Chao mentioned that 2016 was the most glorious year in Sina's history, especially in Weibo's history (Zhang, 2017).

2.5 Charity in China

As a result of the connections with religious beliefs, such as Confucianism and Buddhism, charitable work and charitable giving has been a deep-rooted tradition among its people, in the history of China. Statistics show that more than 4, 000 charitable organizations, most of which were non-governmental, existed in China in 1948 (Xu, 2005, cited in Yan *et al.*, 2007: 80). However, charity witnessed a decline in the Maoist era (1949-1978) where it was regarded as a tool of the ruling class to control poverty-stricken people in capitalist societies. Instead, a socialist welfare system which differed greatly between rural and urban areas was introduced. People living in rural areas became the members of communes which provided collective, but basic welfare to members across the country after 1958. While residents in urban areas could get cradle-to-grave protection closely associated with their occupations – namely work units (*danwei*, 单位). This welfare system was a product of specified period of history, and it continued till the starting of the Reform and Opening-up, in 1978, in China.

Since 1978, the Reform and Opening-up that started in China was not limited to economical areas. On the subject of social welfare, China is slowly transforming its 'once-socialist structural welfare system to a residual welfare system in which the state plays a minimal role, while non-governmental sectors – including the market, NGOs, family, and individual – are expected to fund and provide the major portion of social welfare' (Yan *et al.*, 2007: 83). As a result of this policy, China experienced a shrink of social resources invested in social welfare. For example, the percentage of national fiscal revenue spent on social relief decreased from 0.58 percent in 1979 to 0.23 percent in 1988. At the same time, charitable organizations in China rapidly increased. For instance, by 2005, 'there were about 1,000 charitable foundations, 731 NGOs that were dedicated to charitable activities, and more than 70, 000 Red Cross branches' (ibid: 86). In 2004 the promulgation of Regulations on the Management of Foundations (*jijinhui guanli tiaoli*, 基金会管理条例) implied that the Chinese government approved the set-up of private foundations (*fei gongmu jijinhui*, 非公募基金会) in the name of the public good (MCA, 2004). In the *2005 Report on the Work of the Government*, the then Premier of the State Council Wen Jiabao (2005) declared that the '[Chinese government] will support the development of charities'. It was the first time that Chinese government publicly stated their attitude towards charities, which meant that they realised the benefits of the social function of charity and philanthropy during the reforms of social system in contemporary China. A year later, in 2006 the total amount of donations to charities reached ¥10 billion. After that, the number of private charitable

foundations in China increased six-fold between 2005 and 2012 (Lai *et al.*, 2015: 1084).

However, due to a lack of formal public supervision of the charitable organizations in China, their public credibility and accountability is a controversial issue – especially when major natural disasters happen. Scandals about the misuse of charitable contributions, and occasionally corruption within charitable organizations are not uncommon in China, and usually cause negative outcomes for these organizations. For example, the Guo Meimei scandal³ which happened in 2011 created credibility and controversy issues surrounding the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC), and spread to other charitable foundations in China as a whole. Although the RCSC denied its connection with Guo shortly after the incident happened in July 2011, the credibility crisis became a controversial issue in the public eye after that. Continuous actions were adopted by the RCSC to guarantee information transparency within the organization, and to relieve public doubts. For instance, the RCSC invited a third party to supervise the ways that donations were handled. Guo was arrested in 2014 as a result of running an illegal gambling ring in Beijing, and apologised to the RCSC and the public shortly after that. Thereafter, the RCSC issued official statement to claim that the organization was innocent, and were victims as much as the citizens in this incident. However, this statement failed to prevent the public's strong distrust towards the RCSC. Comments like 'I will never donate to the RCSC' were not rare in online communities in 2014, three years

³ Guo was a verified user on Weibo and claimed herself as 'Business General Manager of the Red Cross Commerce'. Her lavish lifestyle judging from pictures she posted on Weibo drew people's scepticism about her connection with the Red Cross Society of China. Shortly after this scandal, there was a public scandal regarding the China Red Cross Society, and donations plummeted.

after the scandal took place. Cheng (2016: 3252) believes that this incident reflects the '[low] trust towards institutions (i.e., the RCSC, governments, official media, and other NGOs) at a societal level' in China.

From Table 2.1 about Charitable Donations in China (2008-2014), we have a general glimpse of the growth of charitable donations in China since 2008. There is a need to clarify that due to China suffering severe snow and ice storms, the Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008, the Yushu Earthquake, and Zhouqu Debris Flow in 2010, the donations for both of these two years were higher than average. Because of the Guo Meimei scandal in 2011 mentioned above, and other scandals about the China Red Cross Society, there was a confidence crisis surrounding the Red Cross Society and philanthropy in China. The direct consequence of this was that ordinary people's desire to donate reduced greatly, which is observable from the GDP rate from 2011. Although China suffered from the Ya'an Earthquake in 2013, as a result of negative reports, donations only reached 0.17% of the GDP in that year.

Table 2.1 Charitable Donations in China (2008-2014)

Year	Total value (billions¥)	Yearly growth rate	GDP (billions¥)	GDP rate
2008	107	246.28%	31,675	0.33%
2009	63	-41.12%	34,563	0.18%
2010	103	63.81%	40,890	0.25%

2011	85	-18.12%	48,412	0.18%
2012	82	-3.31%	53,412	0.16%
2013	99	21.06%	58,802	0.17%
2014	104	5.3%	63,591	0.16%

Sources: Information from National Bureau of Statistics of People's Republic of China (NBSC, 2016) and China Charity Information Centre (China Charity Information Centre, 2016).

In spite of the growth rate of China's charitable donations as shown in the table, there are still dramatic disparities between China and Western developed countries – no matter the total amount or an average level. For example, in 2012 charitable donations in the US reached 31.62 billion dollars which accounted for 2.0 % of that year's GDP. The GDP in China that year was nearly half of the US, however, the total charitable donations was one twenty-fourth of those in the US. In 2014 the estimated total amount donated to charity by adults in the UK was £10.6 billion which was 0.5 % of the GDP that year (Charities Aid Foundation, 2015). China's total amount of charitable donations was almost the same as the UK's during the same year, but only 0.16 % of that years' GDP.

2.6 The Disaster-Relief Mechanism in China

There is a need for a general understanding of the disaster-relief mechanism in China, because it is quite different compared with Western countries. China, with its vast territory, and diverse climatic and geological conditions, is vulnerable to frequent, and the majority of, natural disasters. Reports conclude that in China

different disasters like earthquakes, mudslides, forest fires, and biological disasters and so on, affect 300 million people every year on average during 1990 to 2008 (The State Council, 2009). Based on years of lessons and experience of disaster relief, China have adopted national disaster management mechanisms during the different stages of a disaster: preparedness, timely response, recovery and so on.

In 1950, shortly after the foundation of PRC, the China Communist Party Central Government established a Central Committee on Disaster Relief (*zhongyang jiuzai weiyuanhui*, 中央救灾委员会) to coordinate disaster management and relief work across China. In 1978, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (*minzhengbu*, 民政部) was founded to implement disaster management among rural areas in China. In 1998, the Ministry of Civil Affairs received the power to coordinate all disaster management work at a national level. Since then the ministry has started to play a pivotal role in disaster relief and management work in China. In 2002, the National Disaster Reduction Centre (NDRC) was set up under the Ministry of Civil Affairs to serve as an information sharing platform during disasters. Besides that, it also provides policy consultancy services and technological support for disaster affected areas. On top of these regular mechanisms, the Chinese government established many *ad hoc* leading panels whenever hit by severe natural disasters. For instance, the Earthquake Relief Headquarters of the State Council (*guowuyuan kangzhen jiuzai zongzhihuibu*, 国务院抗震救灾总指挥部) was founded with Premier Wen Jiabao as the head, instantly after the Wenchuan Earthquake happened on 12th May, 2008. This *ad hoc* mechanism existed for a long time after the quake, so as to continue with reconstruction and recovery work in the earthquake-affected area.

Another earthquake happened in 2010, in Yushu, north-western China's Qinghai Province, the Earthquake Relief Headquarters of the State Council immediately organised emergency aid and disaster relief work at a national level. Since then this institution became a regular means of preparing for similar disasters. Not only that, the State Headquarters of Flood Control and Drought Relief (*guojia fangxun kanghan zongzhihuibu*, 国家防汛抗旱总指挥部) and the State Headquarters of Forest Fire Control (*guojia senlin fanghuo zhihuibu*, 国家森林防火指挥部) were founded and retained.

By drawing lessons from past experiences, the Chinese government has found an effective way to unite the government, the armed forces, businesses, and civil society together to prepare for, and to reduce the impact of natural disasters including recovery and reconstruction following disasters. In all, the following are the established norms during China's natural disaster management stages: prioritizing prevention and preparation measures, providing a clear assignment of duties within the bureaucracy, demonstrating an openness to international aid and media coverage, deploying armed forces and promoting advanced technology.

However, despite the above mentioned characteristics, the Chinese government does not realise the importance of the role of non-government organisations (NGOs); although experiences in Western countries have proven significant during disaster management. Or, to put it another way, the one-party political system in China does not allow for the growth of these NGOs due to the concern that it might be utilised by people against its regime. Due to the governments' strict control and constraint over NGOs, they can only play a very limited role during disaster relief.

Government-organised NGOs (GONGOs), such as the Red Cross Society of China and the China Charity Federation, are exceptions. As a result of that, central government is now overloaded with excessive responsibilities during periods of disaster management (Chen, 2012: 130-146).

2.7 Two Stages of Individualisation in China

Modernity in China arose as a response to a threatening external challenge. China's national economic development paradigm changed a lot at the macro level from 1978: the 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' within China, or a turn 'from socialist modernity to a capitalist one' (Liu, 2011a: 190) in the eyes of outsiders. This open-up and reform coincidentally occurred at the same time as the neo-liberal globalisation in the US and UK and many other Western countries. Although China did not use western-style liberal democracy, and the operation mode of neo-liberalism, it was undoubtedly influenced by institutions and conceptions during this period of neo-liberal globalisation. At the same time, the severe shock brought by the shift in direction from a planned economic system to a market economy system impacted ordinary people's lives profoundly. In his sociological analysis of the production of depression in China, from the point of social construction, Hsiao (2016) concluded that a complex network formed among industry, government, academia and the media which constructed 'depression' within the Chinese context.

In the wake of China's reform and open-up, started in 1978, traditional values which existed in China for thousands of years began to diminish from people's daily lives. Since then, the constant flow of commodities, labour force, money and information, together with increased opportunities and risks for each individual in

the era of globalisation have broadened peoples' worldview tremendously. Unlike their mobility-restricted precursor in China's collective economy, the success of individuals is measured by their economic position in society, namely by the amount of money they possess. The changing of economic factors has affected individuals' morality, rationality and sense of identity. As a result of that, people were separated from those conventional values, norms, sentiments, and practices of daily living associated with their normal structural positions. This was confirmed by research on Yi minority entrepreneurs in Liangshan city, the southwest part of China (Heberer, 2005 cited in Liu, 2011a: 45). In late modernity, 'opportunities and dangers are perceived and processed by individuals themselves rather than by predetermined aggregates such as families or communities' (ibid: 19).

There is a received wisdom which is still influential among Chinese people – 'Chinese culture places group interest over individual interest and the individual belongs and remains secondary to the group or the collective' (Yan, 2010a: 493). This differentiation between individual and group interest in China is reflected in the five core elements of Chinese culture which constitute the Chinese individual. As Francis Hsu concluded more than six decades ago: the central importance of the father-son relationship, the estrangement between the two sexes, the ideal of the large family, an education system that teaches children as if they are adults, and parental authority and power (Hsu, 1948 cited in Yan, 2010a: 493). Important as the group interest is now, however, things are starting to change slightly towards individualisation.

From a sociological point of view, individualisation is a 'process resting on institutions' (Beck, 2014: 93), and it 'represents another dynamic of global change in addition to the world risk society' (ibid : 92). According to Beck, 'Individualisation [...] is a product of the state, mainly the welfare state, which addresses its rights and services to the individual.... [T]he social state enforces individualisation and empowers it' (Gane, 2004: 156). At the beginning of the 21st century, Ulrich Beck pointed out that 'the daily struggle for a life of one's own has become the collective experience of the Western world' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 22). Based on his research and reflections on the development of Western society, Beck concludes that '[w]e live in an age in which the social order of the national state, class, ethnicity and the traditional family is in decline. The ethic of individual self-fulfilment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society' (ibid: 22). After three decades of reform and opening-up since 1979, we cannot find much difference between China and Western countries in this respect. Both contain the 'struggle for a life of one's own'. Compared with the Mao era, when it was a trend across the country to put an emphasis on collective units (work units in urban areas and people's communes in the countryside), nowadays more and more people have shifted their focus to their families (mostly the nuclear family) and themselves.

The work of Yan (2009b) demonstrates that the modernization process in China is a combination of what happened during pre-modern, modern and post-modern eras in the West. On the one hand, Chinese society has demonstrable features of social changes which belong to the modern era and even pre-modern eras in the West.

Furthermore, Chinese society bears features of individualisation in the age of second, or reflexive modernity, as shown in works of Anthony Giddens (1991), Zygmunt Bauman (2001a), and Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) to name a few.

The individual has become a basic social category in China. After living in China over a decade, former *The New Yorker* reporter Evan Osnos (2014: 40-42) pointed out an interesting phenomenon: people born in the 1970s in China were called the ‘Me Generation’ (*wo yi dai*, 我一代) by older generations. According to his observation, the ‘language of individual’ could be found in movies, fashions, and music since 1980s. For instance, lyrics started to use ‘me’ instead of ‘us’ which was quite uncommon before the 1970s. Even China Mobile – a company that supplied mobile signals – was reinforcing this message by using the slogan ‘My Turf, My Decision’ to attract young users.

Although employing the same phrase, Osnos’ interpretation was slightly different from the original use of ‘Me Generation’, which first appeared in a news report in 2007. In that passage ‘Me Generation’ referred to a cohort of youth, mostly only children in their 20s, who were ‘self-interested, apolitical’ and full of ‘pragmatism’ (Elegant, 2007). Generally speaking, unlike former generations, the ‘Me Generation’ in China put an emphasis on personal happiness and individual realisation. Despite discrepancies on the specific age categories of the ‘Me Generation’, the appearance of it signifies that Chinese society has experienced ‘an ethical shift from collective-oriented values to individual-oriented values’ (Yan, 2010b: 2). The

rise of the individual in China is not solely limited to youth, but it is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Individualisation is a major theme in contemporary sociology, where individuals should be regarded as 'social beings in their own right rather than as members of some predefined social group, class or category' (Fine, 2005: 253). However, this theme is not unique in modern social theories at all, the importance of the individual and the social process of individualisation also received attention from classical sociologists, such as Durkheim (1973) and Simmel (1971a). Notwithstanding, modernization made individualisation possible, because according to Beck, modernization leads to triple 'individualisation':

[D]isembedding, *removal* from historically prescribed social forms and commitments in the sense of traditional contexts of dominance and support (the 'liberating dimension'); the loss of *traditional security* with respect to practical knowledge, faith and guiding norms (the 'disenchantment dimension'); and – here the meaning of the word is virtually turned into its opposite – re-embedding, a *new type of social commitment* (the 'control' or 'reintegration dimension'). These three factors – removal (or liberation), loss of stability and reintegration – [...] constitutes a general, ahistorical model of individualisation (Beck, 1992: 128, italics in original).

Individualisation has long been a part of China's state pursuit of modernity since the late 19th century, as a response to imperialism and colonialism from Western

countries. However, before the foundation of People's Republic of China, most of the time individualisation remained at a discourse level among many educated elites. For instance, one of the leaders of late Qing dynasty Liang Qichao once argued that: each Chinese individual has a dual-self – 'the small self' (*xiaowo*, 小我) and 'the big self' (*dawo*, 大我). The small self should be based on his or her personal interest, while the big self is centred on the interest of the nation. What is more, the small self should always be submissive to the big self, and individuals should always sacrifice their small self to preserve and protect the big self whenever needed (Chang, 1971 cited in Yan, 2010a: 493). In his research on China's path to individualisation, following Beck's explanation of the triple individualisation, Yan did a comprehensive analysis on China's individualisation since 1949.

1976, when Chairman Mao died marked the end of Maoist socialism. Yan summarized individualisation between 1949 and 1976 as 'a partial individualisation'. Through a series of state-lead socialist transformation projects, such as the women's liberation movement, the promulgation of Marriage Law, ideas like romantic love, gender equality, marriage freedom, and independence, individualist ideas were disseminated widely and accepted by ordinary people. Such movements, together with ideological campaigns which attacked traditional cultural values, such as Confucian ethics, greatly influenced the whole country. As a result, individuals broke away from the previous all-encompassing social categories, and then joined the new collective units. The whole process was precisely in accordance with Beck's 'triple individualisation' explanation: liberation, disenchantment, and re-embed or reintegration.

The initial aim of socialism transformation movements was to liberate individuals from traditional constraints, and transpose their loyalty from traditional social categories such as the extended family, kinship organisation and local community, to the state. However, experiences of freedom from the structures of the traditional patriarchal family also brought a rising wave of individualism, and ironically changed China under Maoism into a society of partial individualisation. There was initially a reflexive correction to the mistakes of Maoism socialism in post-Mao China, but the correction gradually went the other way of the Maoist path, especially in the economy. This change of direction eventually led China towards a market economy system. By the beginning of the 21st century, China had developed a twofold social transformation: ‘the rise of the individual on the one hand and the individualisation of the social structure on the other’ (Yan, 2010a: 495).

In their book about the influences of modern technologies on human behaviours, Rainie and Wellman (2012) proposed that ICT development brought about three revolutions: the social network revolution, the internet revolution and the mobile revolution. They also pointed out that people have altered their interactions with each other as a result of these series of revolutions – rather than embedded groups, people nowadays have become progressively networked as individuals. Therefore, the *networked operating system* (named after the way in which it describes how people connect, communicate, and exchange information) is called ‘networked individualism’. In this system, atomised individuals are at the autonomous centre, while interacting with diverse others and doing several things simultaneously. To a

great extent, this ‘networked individualism’ which flourished since the widespread use of the internet, and many other accompanying technologies, helped to cultivate individualisation in contemporary China.

2.8 Indifference and Empathy in China

In the eyes of westerners, Chinese people are famous for their indifference. As early as in 1922, during his visit to China, Bertrand Russell was astonished to find that callousness is one of the chief defects of Chinese people. He reached the conclusion that ‘the callousness of the Chinese is bound to strike every Anglo-Saxon’ (Russell, 1922: 209). In 1939, in his book *My Country and My People*, Lin Yutang identified that in China indifference is regarded to have ‘survival value’. It is a conscious product of the social culture and social environment. A form of self-protection made necessary by the absence of legal protection. For example, the traditional parting instruction of the Chinese mother to her son usually is ‘you should not meddle in public affairs’ (Lin, 1939: 45-49).

A society of strangers is regarded as the main characteristic of modernity by scholars from different disciplines. For example, ‘a rapid and sustained growth of a population that became increasingly mobile (over ever-greater distances) and urban in form’ (Vernon, 2014: 19) created a society of strangers in Britain by the middle of nineteenth century. Thus, people are living in a society with an ‘increased number of interactions among strangers’, as a consequence of modern life, and ‘part of the very essence of mobility’ (Friedman, 1990: 70). The rapid population expansion was not a problem for China when, at the end of the eighteenth century,

there was a population of 240 million people. However, the freedom to be mobile, and urbanization was not a reality until 1978 under the ‘open and reform’ policy.

Contrary to the society of strangers, China has always been a ‘society of familiarity’ for thousands of years, especially in rural areas. For example, Fei Xiaotong’s book, written in the 1940s, gave a detailed analysis of Chinese rural society. It was a perfect illustration of the ‘society of familiar’:

People in rural China know no other life than that dictated by their own parochialism. It is a society where people live from birth to death in the same place, and where people think that this is the normal way of life. Because everyone in a village lives like that, distinctive patterns of human relationships form. Every child grows up in everyone else’s eyes, and in the child’s eyes everyone and everything seem ordinary and habitual. This is a society without strangers, a society based totally on the familiar (Fei, 1992: 41).

After the founding of PRC, the Household Registration System (*hukou*, 户口) began, since 1955, to constrain migration within China, especially between cities and rural areas. The Household Registration System is characterized by its high degree of separation between urban and rural areas. This urban-rural dual control system aims at ‘solidifying administrative control on population migration’ (Wu, 2011b: 33). As a result of economic reforms, such as Reform and Opening-up, a series of reformations on the household registration system since the early 1980s made it easier for rural people to work in cities, and caused a new phenomenon called

‘migrated workers’ in modern China. This reformation played an important role in China’s shift towards becoming a society of strangers.

In the Maoist era (1949-1978) of China, courageous behaviour (jianyi yongwei, 见义勇为) was a highly praised personal quality. For example, a soldier from the People’s Liberation Army named Lei Feng (1940-1962), who was a modest, selfless, committed individual to the communist party and the Chinese people, is a role model in China to this day. After the death of Lei Feng in 1962, Chairman Mao called people across China to ‘Follow the examples of Comrade Lei Feng’. Up to now, this slogan is well-known to every household in China. Each year the 5th March marks the official ‘Learn from Lei Feng Day’ and involves various community school events to commemorate Lei Feng, and most importantly to remind people to follow his example. In spite of that, as China has been becoming a society of strangers over the last three decades. There are more news stories about indifference among people, and media reports, in the meantime, increase the visibility of particular issues and have the potential to alter social behaviour patterns to a great extent.

One of the most influential events that we cannot afford to overlook is the Peng Yu Case which happened in Nanjing, in 2006. Around 9:30 AM on 20th of November, 2006, a 64-year-old retired worker Ms Xu Shoulun was waiting for the bus. Two buses came at the same time. Xu hurried to the second bus with less passengers⁴.

⁴ Considering heavy traffic and the population in Nanjing, public transport is usually over-crowded and runs later than timetabled. Therefore, in this case, that Ms Xu chose the bus with less passengers is understandable. Although things have improved a lot to this day, when the case happened the bus must have been very overcrowded. In addition, unlike buses in the UK, while

When passing by the back door of the first bus, 26-year-old Mr Peng Yu was getting off the bus, and the two inadvertently collided. Noticing Xu had fallen to the ground, Peng helped her up and rushed her to the hospital for treatment, and her niece and son joined them later. In the hospital, Peng paid 200 RMB (around £20) in medical expenses. Xu was diagnosed with a fractured femur and had to undergo femur replacement surgery. She and her family demanded Peng to pay these additional medical costs but were refused. As a result, Xu filed a claim against Peng in court, alleging Peng was responsible for her fall in January 2007. Three hearings were held in April, June and July respectively. Three days before the third hearing, Peng contacted local media and described himself as a Good Samaritan who was blackmailed by the sufferer.

This controversial story quickly went viral over the internet, and attracted attention from many different kinds of media. On 4th September, in spite of a lack of evidence proving Peng had caused Xu's injuries, the Nanjing court 'found that "experience from everyday life" sufficiently proves that no one would in good conscience help someone [pay the medical expenses without asking a repayment] unless they felt guilty' (Young, 2013: 693). The court held Peng responsible for 40 percent of Xu's injuries, and required Peng to pay 45, 876 RMB (around £5,000) in compensation. This verdict received widespread media coverage, and engendered public outcry over this controversial outcome. Peng appealed to a higher court after the first verdict. On 8th of October, Xu and Peng agreed to settle the dispute out of court, and the case was withdrawn. According to Nanjing Municipal

taking buses in China, passengers buy their tickets and board the bus by the front door, and disembark through a back door.

Committee, Municipal Law Committee Secretary Liu Zhiwei, the details of Xu and Peng's agreement are: Peng Yu compensated 10,000 RMB (around £1,200) to Xu Shoulun, neither Peng nor Xu are allowed to disclose relevant information or make any comments in the media (television, radio, newspapers, magazines, internet, etc.). Note that the first verdict was made void once the case was withdrawn (Xu and Wang, 2012). Liu also indicated in an interview – five years after the verdict – that the story the public knew about Peng Yu was wrong, on the contrary, Peng Yu did collide with Xu Shoulun and caused her injury. Later analysis of this case confirmed Liu's statement (Zhu *et al.*, 2014).

However, the consequences of the Peng Yu case were beyond people's imagination, because Peng was seen as a man 'attempting to be helpful but ending up as the victim of extortion' in the diffusion of this event. Four years after the first verdict, there were still voices that claimed this case was a symbolic event which indicated moral decline in contemporary China (Wang, 2011). As media reports showed, the Peng Yu Case was the most-cited one when similar events happened, and courageous and helping behaviour in China decreased dramatically in the following years after the case. For example, according to available statistics, more than 30 similar events happened in China when senior citizens fell on the ground out for different reasons but no one dare to help them between 2008 and 2017 (Hu, 2017). Based on 26 cases of similar extortion, Yan named phenomena like this 'the Good Samaritan's new trouble' (Yan, 2009a). Of course, controversial events like these tend to attract more attention from the media and its audience, and the number of people such news items reach is not sensational considering the total population in

China, yet the continuous appearance of similar reports confirm the influences of these cases on the public. People's indifference towards sufferers are understandable when considering that many people wanted to offer a helping hand in similar events, yet also fear being take advantage of for their kindness.

Another case which attracted nation-wide attention is the 'Xiao Yueyue tragedy' which happened in 2011: A two-year-old toddler – named Yueyue – was knocked down by a van and then run over by other vehicles, and ignored by 18 passers-by before the toddler was rescued by a cleaning lady, in Foshan, a southern city in China (Mackinnon, 2011). The poor toddler died a week later, leaving people to debate whether indifference or fear of extortion was to blame for this tragedy (Branigan, 2011). By drawing a comparison between the Xiao Yueyue tragedy and Kitty Genovese in the US, one study concluded that as emergency situation, the unexpectedness and uncommonness of urgent situations makes those who lack the experience and knowledge of how to handle it; furthermore, the unpredictability of an accident requires bystanders to make judgments and decisions instantly; lastly, an emergency requires immediate action(Wang, 2012). All of these features put people who view the incident under great psychological pressure, and therefore it is more difficult for them to make the right decisions. Most of the time people do not know whether or not to help, or even if they can help. Therefore, we reach the conclusion that indifference is more of a psychological than a moral phenomenon.

Indifference in contemporary China can be blamed on several reasons. To start with, the first verdict of Peng Yu Case showed that disbelief existed in unselfish compassion, and thereafter created public fear of civil liability while rendering

emergency aid. Furthermore, the media strengthened the image of a Good Samaritan in peril, which played an important role both in the construction of the illusion of moral decline, and in the alteration of the public's social behaviour. Five years later, when the Peng Yu Case was entirely cleared, there were still comments online which insisted that Peng was innocent (Netease, 2012), which reconfirmed the public's low-trust towards institutions in contemporary China. Thirdly, reports of scammers⁵ faking road injuries for compensation reduces people's enthusiasm to be courageous in case it is a scam (Wu, 2007a). On top of that, there are even scholars who blame China's One-Child Policy, which has in their opinion 'produced significantly less trusting, less trustworthy, more risk-averse, less competitive, more pessimistic, and less conscientious individuals' (Cameron *et al.*, 2013: 953).

The indifference I talked about in this section seems contradictory when considered against the development of charity in contemporary China, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter. However, an individual's conception of himself is ordinarily many sided and internally contradictory. Needless to say China is a country experiencing rapid transformation. After thirty years of reform and opening-up, the behavioural norms, ethics, values and moral reasoning of Chinese people has undergone radical changes. The often-contradictory accounts of China's moral landscape originates from the complexity of the society itself (Yan, 2009a: 11). On top of that, according to Sznajder (1998: 136), modernity in society 'is a

⁵ This kind of behaviour is named *Pengci* (碰瓷) in Chinese. People fake an injury from a car accident, and threaten to sue the drivers, with the purpose of demanding compensation from them. *Pengci* has become common in urban areas since 2007 as a result of the popularity of moto vehicles in cities. Most of the scammers are senior citizens.

modernity which allows for seemingly contradictory features (like altruism and individualism) to exist together’.

Summary

This chapter is the background chapter of this thesis. In general, two categories of background were discussed: first, research on social media, particularly the story of Weibo in China; second, some other closely-related research background in this study which include: charity, the disaster-relief mechanism, individualisation, and indifference and empathy in contemporary China.

This study is about the mediation of distant suffering among social media users in China, with the Weibo user as an example. More concretely, this study aims to show how users discursively construct their moral agency with regard to distant suffering and sufferers, as learned about through social media. Therefore, first the origins and the developing history of social media in China were discussed in this section. I also listed former research in social media studies within China, and abroad, to illustrate how social media have been studied within academia. More specifically in this research, the development of Weibo, its scales, its business models and the activities enabled on Weibo were examined in this section to provide some necessary background before proceeding.

Within the context of China, besides social media, notions connected with the topic of this thesis were also mentioned in this chapter. Suffering most of the time, if not always, has a connection with charity. Therefore, charity in China and the characteristics of the disaster-relief mechanism in China were talked about in this

section. It is true that watching suffering on the media implies the desire to offer a helping hand from the audience, yet it also leads to indifference as a result of information overload, or compassion fatigue. Because of modernity, China is experiencing a special stage of individualisation which has caused social transformation, and led to the rise of individualised perspectives and, at the same time, individualisations of the social structure. As a result of individualisation in China, indifference towards suffering is becoming a disputable issue across different media platforms. The seeming contradiction between charity work and indifference towards suffering within China actually reflects on one of the internal contradictions of modern society.

CHAPTER 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Mediapolis and Mediation

3.1.1 *Everyday life as mediapolis*

We cannot escape the media nowadays: they are ubiquitous, daily, and an essential part of our everyday lives. Much of our knowledge about the world is acquired via the media, therefore, media have become an indispensable part of our modern lives. It is no exaggeration to say that '[w]e live with and through media' (Gillespie, 2005: 1). Within a single generation homes have become media-rich, with families acquiring multiple televisions, radios, game machines, computers, music systems and telephones – these objects typically shifting from household possessions into the realm of personal possessions – that accompany us wherever we go. Through everyday engagement with friends and family, with the community, the political system, the nation and beyond, we draw upon, and increasingly rely upon, a never-ending flood of images, ideas and information about people who are more distant in space or time than those close to home (Livingstone, 2005: 10). Unlike face-to-face interactions, today's digital media have created new forms of interactions which do not 'involve dialogical conversation in a shared locale' (Thompson, 1995: 261).

It is not impossible for us to evade the presence of media and media representation, but it definitely entails active effort. In general, media have involved in every aspect of our lives: we rely on media for information, entertainment, and for interaction. Media are so central to our everyday lives that they have become the 'general texture of experience'. In the words of Giddens

(1991: 188): all individuals actively and selectively, although not always in a conscious manner, incorporate many elements of mediated representations into their conduct on a day-to-day basis .

The work of Anthony Giddens indicates that one characteristic of our modern age involves dramatic forms of time-space convergence. This was largely made possible by the development of technological ways of communication. Before Morse's invention of the electromagnetic telegraph, for instance, distance in space between people also caused a delay when relaying information (distance in time). Subsequently, the transmission of information did not require physical mobility, information could be communicated faster. Thus, Giddens praised the electromagnetic telegraph as a distinctive transition in human history, parallel to the invention of the wheel or paper, or any other technical innovation (Giddens, 1984: 123).

As a result of this, media 'define a space that is [...] increasingly integrated into the fabric of everyday life' (Silverstone, 2007: 5). It is in this mediated space, through endless mediated experience made possible by modern communication technologies, we learn about the world. Thus, the majority of 'orientation and procedure within which the world is constructed by the media and within which the other appears' (ibid: 7) is defined as the *morality of the media* by Silverstone. Media are not only the products of human activities, but at the same time 'people understand the world and their positions in it through the media' (Livingstone, 2009: 5). No wonder Silverstone (2007: 5) once wrote: 'The media [...] both construct a world, and are constructed within and by that world'.

According to Silverstone (2007: 31), this mediated space of appearance ‘in which the world appears and in which the world is constituted in its worldliness, and through which we learn about those who are and who are not like us’ is a *mediapolis*. Mediapolis does not refer to a specific location, and it does not need specific regulation by national institutions. Rather, it ‘emerges in the interaction of human beings within the space of mediated appearance’ and in the deterritorialised but intensely social environment (ibid: 31). Thus, the mediapolis becomes a *moral space* in which mediated images are resources for audiences to connect with: such images portray otherwise invisible and distant others. Consequently, this moral place invites a moral response from its audiences as if they are physically present. It is no exaggeration to say that ‘[the media] constitute the resources and the space within which the moral agency of the viewer is constructed’ (Kyriakidou, 2011: 40). However, the visibility enabled through mediated appearance in mediapolis is just the beginning of a complex process called mediation. The mediation of the world requires the participation, engagement and responsibility of its audiences to play their parts during the process.

Except for those who have suffered in public and massive atrocities, most people do not have first-hand experience, but mediated experience of such suffering. Apart from that, through mediated representations in various media, more and more people started to experience the world beyond their neighbourhood. This is especially related to the advancement of modern communication technologies. Mediated information, however, has passed through several layers of filtering and

interpretation, due to technological and political reasons, before reaching an audience.

In essence, the production of mediated information entails three parts: producers, texts and audiences. Every part plays a role in this continuous process. Early media studies place more emphasis on the earlier stages of this process, namely how events are selected and represented, however, that does not mean that we should overlook audience reception. During suffering events, media coverage does not necessarily generate audience attention or action, which really matters for far away sufferers. Therefore, in this thesis I place more emphasis on the social media users when the suffering of distant others occurs.

3.1.2 Mediation as a theoretical framework

Mediation has long been a complex word in English (Williams, 1985: 204). In media studies, scholars defined mediation from the perspective of its ethical implications, namely in relation to the media's capacity to associate its audience culturally and emotionally with distant 'others' (Chouliaraki, 2006: 19). As such, mediation 'provides a framework for the definition and conduct of our relationships to the other, and especially the distant other – the other who only appears to us within the media' (Silverstone, 2002: 762).

Previous theoretical and empirical studies have tried to operationalise mediation by focusing on the different aspects and stages of mediation. For example, Thumim in her thesis offers a comprehensive classification scheme of mediation in which she identified four directions of mediation use: first, a focus on the role of

technology in the making of meaning; second, a focus on the broader (reception) contexts within which media meanings come to be; third, to focus attention to the close readings of the processes which shape representations that are produced and displayed in the media; and fourth, a focus on who mediates, which explores the idea that members of the public might communicate with each other without media professionals as intermediaries (Thumim, 2007: 38-40). The four directions of mediation listed by Thumim are not mutually exclusive or incompatible, yet they emphasise different stages in the production of meaning, and contribute different amounts of attention to producers, texts and audiences.

For John Tomlinson, mediation is fundamentally 'a matter of bridging time and space in communication' through mediated experiences. Experiences provided by modern communication technologies (Tomlinson, 1999: 152). For Roger Silverstone, 'mediation indicates the specific character and dynamics of, especially, the electronic media in enabling arguable distinct forms of communication in public and private cultures' (Silverstone, 2002: 778). Mediation is a technological enabled process of communication and meaning construction, which is both technological and social. Modern communication technologies, principally broadcast technologies of the twentieth century, provide the basis of mediation. Mediation extends beyond a point of contact between media texts/images and their readers/viewers. The work of mediation does not end with the appearance of the world on the screen: it involves continuous actions of engagement and disengagement. Mediation is, in essence, a complex process of 'circulation of

meaning'. What is more, it depends on the work of the participant (Silverstone, 1999: 13; Silverstone, 2007: 108).

Mediated appearance and representation of others enable individuals to know the world beyond the confines of their local neighbourhood. Therefore, to be optimistic, social life is becoming more global in its reach. Consequently, contemporary individuals 'live in the world' in a completely different way compared with previous generations, when globalised broadcasting technologies were not available. Although everyone is still living a local life due to physical constraints, 'phenomenal worlds for the most parts are truly global' as a result of mediated experience combined with 'the transformations of place, and the intrusion of distance into local activities' (Giddens, 1991: 187).

Mediation is like translation, except possibly in the special case of self-translation, where the process is never complete, and never entirely satisfactory. From the point of hermeneutic motion, George Steiner describes translation as a four-fold process which involves trust, aggression, appropriation and restitution. It is always contested because no translation can be perfect, and the same goes for mediation (Silverstone, 1999: 14). In spite of the above mentioned limitations, it is absolutely impossible to be physically present in every scene of suffering even in today's globalised world. As a result of that, just like translation matters, mediation is still the best way to inform oneself about the world, especially in cases of far-away suffering.

Faced with many diversified sources of direct and mediated experiences about the outside world, today's highly mediated and globalised era requires people to choose between many available options, as references, to build their self-identity. This process is never random or passive. In this process, pre-established habits and the avoidance of cognitive dissonance have their own say about what decisions to make. That is to say, mediated distant others and locally surrounded people now play more or less the same role in the construction of individuals' agency.

3.1.3 Research traditions in media studies

Media research is not at the centre of current sociological research. Although theoretical research on the social consequences of media emerged back in the middle of the nineteenth century, media research remained marginal in sociological research until the middle of the 20th century. Nick Couldry(2004: 116) concluded that present media studies could trace its origins from five different, although not mutually exclusive, research traditions: first, US mass communications research which followed the traditions of the experimental social sciences; second, critical Marxist commentary which was based on critiques of capitalism; third, semiotic analysis which centred on media texts; fourth, critical research which focused on media audiences in particular; and fifth, anthropological research into media which adhered to the practices of symbolic anthropology. All of the above mentioned research traditions have different theoretical focuses, and there are sometimes cross-currents between one forms of tradition to another.

In spite of the complexity of media research traditions, Couldry proposed a new paradigm of media research which understands media as practice with the aim 'to

decentre media research from the study of media texts or production structures (important though these are) and to redirect it onto the study of the open-ended range of practices focused directly or indirectly on media' (Couldry, 2004: 117). Although differences between activities and practices are not very clear, 'practices can be seen as repeated activities that have become a pattern' (Rantanen, 2005: 12). This paradigm provides the possibility of raising and solving new research questions in media studies, while at the same time distinguishing it from the former research paradigms of literary criticism.

In media studies, the term 'audience' more often than not relates to 'an assembly of listeners or viewers who come together, if only virtually, through shared consumption of film, television, radio, the internet music or advertising. The term is also sometimes extended to include readership of newspapers and magazines' (Gillespie, 2005: 1). The concept of 'audience' began with 'the crowd gathered in one spot to view or listen' (McQuail, 1997: 37). Although true in its beginning, the concept of 'audience' grew larger in scale, more dispersed and more impersonal during its later development. Communication is not just a simple transmission of messages between senders and receivers, on the contrary, it involves more complex circuits of information which engage audiences in the construction of their social worlds. To study audiences is a good way to understand the power of media and their paradoxical role in society. There are two broad research traditions in media studies: one focuses on '*media effects*' in which audiences are passive receivers; the other concentrates on '*media uses and interpretations*' which treats audiences as active and powerful consumers and participants (Gillespie, 2005: 2).

In modern society, every one of us becomes an audience, of some kind of media, from time to time. 'Being a member of an audience is no longer an exceptional event, nor even an everyday event. Rather it is constitutive of everyday life' (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 68-69). The mass media audience is 'a vast aggregate that attends to the same message at the same time' (McQuail, 1997: 37), however, social media users are not only viewers but also participants. In terms of the relationship between sender and receiver during the communication process, there are more commonalities between information source and receiver, and the attitude of social media users are more likely to be 'morally committed in one way or another' (ibid : 41). Therefore, users are essentially participants. The use of the concept of 'practice' is to demonstrate 'what viewers *do* and *say* with regard to the suffering of faraway others' (Kyriakidou, 2011: 74, italics in original), therefore, the term 'practice' conceptualises social media users as participants in the mediapolis.

3.2 Suffering, Distant Others and the Mediation of Suffering

3.2.1 Suffering

Suffering normally consists of various forms of representation. Generally speaking, people could have 'feelings of depression, anxiety, guilt, humiliation, boredom and distress' while experiencing 'bereavement and loss, social isolation and personal estrangement' (Wilkinson, 2005: 16-17). Any combination of these above mentioned feelings and experiences could be regarded as suffering. In most cases, suffering could happen at the mercy of material deprivation, perpetration of social injustice and the denial/withdrawal of one's civil liberties. Mayerfeld distinguishes between two kinds of suffering: on a psychological sense and on an 'objectivist'

sense. Psychological meaning refers to how an individual feels. Generally speaking, to suffer is to feel bad. The 'objectivist' sense of suffering refers to 'calamity or misfortune [...which] is somewhat vague and partly subject to dispute' (Mayerfeld, 1999: 11). Suffering could occur in different aspects of people's everyday lives, but it is more often treated as a personal issue which has the potential to disrupt, even to damage one's personhood.

At the beginning of his book on the sociological interpretation of suffering, Wilkinson remarked: '[w]herever humanity records its voice, then it always speaks of suffering' (ibid: 1). Considering the pain suffering involves and the damage it causes to our bodies, minds, and even spirits, it is comprehensible that people cannot keep silent or remain unaffected while witnessing suffering, no matter whether it is through direct or mediated experiences. However, although in recent years more information on poverty, war, catastrophe and many other disasters are available to us, the social sciences have failed to 'give due consideration to what the *experience* of suffering actually *does* to people', namely 'what it means for people to suffer these in *experience* remains woefully deficient' (ibid: 3, italics in original).

Conditions of modernity have been identified as a potential source of anguish, distress and human misery for many decades. Sociologists have criticized the social and cultural conditions of modernity. On the whole, they have argued that 'a society dominated by forces of rationalization and capitalist relations of production [...] leaves [people] with no moral inclination to engage in a politics of compassion' (ibid: 116). In the analysis of capitalist society by classical sociologists, such as Karl

Marx, Max Weber and Ferdinand Tönnies, the capitalist society was regarded as 'dominated by the relentless pursuit of profit and cold calculating forces of rationalization [therefore] leaves no public space for the emotional warmth of community, neighbourliness and compassion' (ibid: 108). Besides that, Tönnies remarked that 'in modern societies an intensifying social experience of individualisation serves to erode the emotional ties that once bound us to a moral duty of care towards society' (Tönnies, [1887] 1955 cited in Wilkinson, 2005: 116).

In spite of the above accusations about capitalist modernity from classical sociologists, we could also find a similar emotional paradox in Emile Durkheim's sociological concern to explain how the same social processes that give rise to self-centred egoism and the torment of anomie may also involve us in 'a border pity for all sufferings' and 'sympathy for all that is human' (Wilkinson, 2005: 110). In addition, though our minds might be crowded by selfish concerns, nevertheless we should have faith in 'the power of the imagination to place us in the suffering situations of others, so that we are moved by sympathy into taking moral and political action on their behalf' (ibid: 114).

In an age of intensifying forces of globalisation, by providing a better account of what actually happens to people experiencing suffering, the media not only reflects a moral demand to reinterpret the meaning of modern history of our multicultural age, but also voices a concern to 'humanise' the ways we relate to one another as global citizens. Few people would deny that modern societies are comprised of social systems that lead people to treat one another and the natural world with cruelty and indifference. However, at the same time, many display a

‘compassionate temperament’ that indicates the presence of cultural conditions in which some individuals acquire a heightened sensitivity to the experience of pain, and a developed imagination for the suffering of others (ibid: 120-121).

Key figures in the Age of Enlightenment tended to believe in the power of ‘reason’ in two ways: first, ‘to free people from the shackles of ignorance and superstition’, and second ‘to guide them in practical attempts to transform the natural and social world’ (Wilkinson, 2005: 111). However, there are limitations in these kinds of representations: on the one hand, they fail to depict the division of opinions between writers of the Enlightenment; on the other hand such representations wrongly propose that the prevailing view of the Age of Enlightenment was the sole commitment to the development of a rational-scientific world-view. Besides the above, we should take heed of arguments such as ‘the prosperity of reason in the eighteenth century was less the triumph of rationality than of reasonableness’ (Gay, 1969, cited in Wilkinson, 2005: 112). Through 200 years of global development under conditions of modernity, social relationships in the public sphere were ‘increasingly disciplined according to the rules of rational-technical efficiency and commercial exchange’, rather than resting upon on the strength of ‘fellow-feeling’ (Wilkinson, 2005: 116).

While suffering is normally focused on individuals in the media, yet social suffering is a collective phenomenon.

On the conceptual level, terms like *trauma*, *suffering*, and *cruelty* are linked to discourses of modernity.... Suffering itself has been harnessed

by the economic engine of modernity – capitalism. In the mass media, the victims of genocide are frequently condensed into an essentialised portrait of the universal sufferer, an image that can be commodified, sold, and (re)broadcast to global audiences who see their own potential trauma reflected in this simulation of the modern subject (Hinton, 2002: 25-26, *italics in original*).

Social suffering ‘results from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems’ (Kleinman *et al.*, 1997: ix). Social suffering is more of a cultural representation which is usually shaped by social experience, and political and professional processes formed the responses to types of social suffering. It is the view of Alexander (2012: 3) that ‘to transform individual suffering into collective trauma is cultural work’.

3.2.2 Distant others

The goal of this thesis is to explore how social media users make use of resources about suffering accessed online to make sense of and become involved with distant others. Mayerfeld points out that ‘[w]here there is suffering, there exists a demand or an appeal for the prevention of that suffering. [And] this demand does not issue from anyone in particular, nor is it addressed to anyone in particular’ (Mayerfeld, 1999: 111). But the media have the potential to ensure that we are not ignorant of the suffering of other people in other parts of the world by sharing the information of suffering others. Therefore, the media influence our moral conscience and alter our understandings of our moral obligations towards others (Tester, 1994: 89-93).

The term 'distant others' in this thesis does not refer to 'specific groups of people occupying a particular part of the world but to persons who are constructed as being both geographically, socially/culturally and morally distant from spectators' (Scott, 2015: 451). Or, put it another way, distant others are 'the other who only appears to us within the media' (Silverstone, 2007: 110).

With the advancement of media technology, in the television era it was not rare to find people's non-involvement with distant suffering. The sheer volume and persistence of dramatic images of human suffering as a routine part of news media ('infotainment') has more potential to convince people that they are utterly powerless to change the world than to nurture 'a compassionate training of imagination' (Wilkinson, 2005: 125). For example, 'through the medium of television, large numbers of people can be presented with narratives on human suffering and yet remain unmoved and unmotivated to do anything on behalf of the victims of atrocity, terror and violence' (Ignatieff, 1998 cited in Wilkinson, 2005: 124). This may be due to the privileged amounts of time and space that news media give to spectacles of human misery, thereby curtailing the potential for empathy to exert a positive impact upon contemporary politics. '[F]eelings of compassion towards the suffering of strangers are all too easily mixed with values and interests that divert attention away from what suffering does to people and one's responsibility to take actions on their behalf' (Spelman, 1997 cited in Wilkinson, 2005: 126).

'[P]rogress towards "civilization" depend not only upon the advancement of science, rationality and social contract, but also, and perhaps above all, upon the

cultivation of greater amounts of humanitarian feeling' (Wilkinson, 2005: 112). Personal experience of suffering could remind us of our common humanity and responsibility towards one another. Contemporary moral philosophers, such as Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum maintain that 'when it comes to convincing people to take moral responsibility for alleviating the suffering of others, an education in sentiment is far more effective than commands of reason' (ibid: 121).

3.2.3 Mediation of Suffering in a Social Media Era

Suffering is not uncommon in everyone's daily live. Most of the time suffering is more of a personal experience rather than a collective one. Or put it another way, suffering is mostly un-sharable with others. In a nutshell, suffering could happen in any part of our lives. Despite its characteristics, stated above, as social animals it is human being's instinct to respond to similar life experiences. In the case of suffering, seeing suffering does not necessarily lead to action. Yet to perceive the others' suffering is a necessary premise before we could take any action.

Effective information communication is critical before, during, and after disasters. 'A so-called 'natural' catastrophe [...] always includes – beforehand (before they occur), at the time (when they occur), and afterwards (when dealing with the damage) – human and social dimensions' (Wieviorka, 2012: 3). For example, before disasters, it is crucial to ensure that forecasts and warnings reach targeted individuals in order to diminish the damage caused; during disasters, effective information exchange on the situation of those who are affected is vital for any rescue operation; after disasters, donations and post-disaster reconstruction requires accurate information to proceed. Although radios and televisions could

broadcast forecasts and news to far-away people, the emergence and popularity of social media makes it possible to improve and guarantee the transfer of information. What is more, the instant and interactive exchange between sources and users which is peculiar to social media make researchers optimistic about its potential to promote disaster communication.

In research conducted on the framework for social media use in disaster planning, response, researchers discovered five user bodies: individuals, communities, organisations, governments and news media. Besides that they also found fifteen functions social media has been (or might be) employed for during disaster communication (see Figure 3.1) (Houston *et al.*, 2015).

Disaster social media use	Disaster phase
Provide and receive disaster preparedness information	Pre-event
Provide and receive disaster warnings	Pre-event
Signal and detect disasters	Pre-event: Event
Send and receive requests for help or assistance	Event
Inform others about one's own condition and location and learn about a disaster-affected individual's condition and location	Event
Document and learn what is happening in the disaster	Event: Post-event
Deliver and consume news coverage of the disaster	Event: Post-event
Provide and receive disaster response information; identity and list ways to assist in the disaster response	Event: Post-event

Raise and develop awareness of an event; donate and receive donations; identify and list ways to help or volunteer	Event Post-event
Provide and receive disaster mental/behavioural health support	Event Post-event
Express emotions, concerns, well-wishes; memorialise victims	Event Post-event
Provide and receive information about (and discuss) disaster response, recovery, and rebuilding; tell and hear stories about the disaster	Event Post-event
Discuss social-political and scientific causes and implications of and responsibility for events	Post-event
(Re)connect community members	Post-event
Implement traditional crisis communication activities	Pre-event□ Post-event

Figure 3.1 Functions of Social Media: Pre, During, and Post Disasters

Data source: Social Media and Disasters: A Functional Framework for Social Media Use in Disaster Planning, Response, and Research (Houston *et al.*, 2015)

The power of social media during emergency situations has been recognised by scholars and authorities. Compared with conventional reporting sites and non-local news media, social media are normally significantly faster when breaking news, therefore, social media could be regarded as a complement to traditional communication channels. For example, after the 2010 Haiti earthquake, both Haiti-

based non-governmental organisations and other relief non-governmental organisations increasingly used Twitter to provide updates, relief aid, and to raise donations (Gurman and Ellenberger, 2015). Another example is what happened shortly after Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, when the World Health Organisation (WHO) Representative Office in the Philippines established Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts as part of its emergency risk communication (ERC) plan to reach the public (Cool *et al.*, 2015). Because of its ability to reach a large amount of users and to disseminate real-time emergency-related information, social media showed great potential during the emergency response phase. In a study on the functions of Twitter during and after super-typhoon Haiyan in 2013, researchers found that the content of Twitter played three different roles at different phases of this disaster: it functioned as a channel to disseminate information about the typhoon and its impacts, then as a venue to mobilise relief and response beyond the typhoon's infected area, and lastly as a place to share emotions (David *et al.*, 2016).

With the help of modern technologies, it is possible for human beings to learn the news – be it good or bad – at a much faster speed. For instance, back in 1945 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt of the United States died, and in 1963 when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, people could only gather around radios and televisions respectively for the breaking news. However, when the awful events of September 11th happened, in 2001, ordinary people could be informed of what was happening through more 'nonstandard news sources'. This is a new trend in the history of news production, because this time 'the first draft of history was being written, in

part, by the former audience' (Gillmor, 2004: 58). Besides that, a research study on UK television audiences found that 'non-news factual television programming offers spectators a more proximate, active and complex mediated experience of distant suffering than television news' (Scott, 2014: 3).

Technology has played an important role during disaster response in different phases of human history. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, as a result of the integration of the widespread use of the internet and geospatial technologies, such as remote sensing (RS) and global positioning systems (GPS), 'online disaster response communities' (Laituri and Kodrich, 2008: 3037) started to form. Two of the most devastating natural disasters – the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, in 2005 – witnessed the formation of on-line disaster response communities. Later disasters since then further justified the existence and the necessity of this virtual community in which internet users have been turned into sensors of disasters. Although there are latent drawbacks, the online disaster response community showed its strengths, as shortly after its existence: people could donate money quickly and efficiently after disasters happened; and information could be disseminated and exchanged instantly on different kinds of online platforms. Despite the above mentioned functions of the online virtual community, technology is just an instrument which depends on its users to decide how to make use of it.

Thanks to the development of communication technologies, firstly reality television, then the common use of cameras on mobile phones, combined with always-on technology, and later the various SNSs which could post pictures and videos via Wi-

Fi, media exposure is becoming increasingly common. The widespread use of smart phones gave rise to a new pattern of continuous mediated interactions, variously known as '*constant touch, perpetual contact, absent presence, or connected relationships*' (Wajcman, 2015: 139, italics in original). As Bauman (2001b: 51) said, 'Living in a globalising world means being aware of the pain, misery and suffering of countless people whom we will never meet in person'. As noted by Levy and Windhal (1984, cited in Westerman *et al.*, 2014: 175), shared thoughts and discussions after exposure to suffering can be seen as a positive type of audience involvement. Similar research has demonstrated that thinking about and sharing media content indicate increased involvement' (Perloff, 1985, cited in Westerman *et al.*, 2014). Research on the effect of digital communication tools' on immigrant activism in Austin, Texas, the United States found that: digital tools 'are best for raising awareness [but] are less able to incite people to participate in offline activism' (Harlow and Guo, 2014: 473).

In today's global media environment (contemporary mediated environment), realise it or not, everyone is to some extent positioned as 'the others of others' (Orgad, 2011: 401). SNSs communication has the potential to encourage humanitarian action and to cultivate cosmopolitan sensibilities (Madianou, 2013). According to Forch and Pinchevski (2009, cited in Madianou, 2013: 250), 'the architecture of peer-to-peer communication and the involvement of citizen journalists and even of the sufferers themselves can increase the authenticity, veracity and legitimacy of the [humanitarian] campaigns, thus turning SNS into sites of witnessing'.

Countries across the globe are vulnerable to hazards and disasters, whether it is natural, technological or wilful. There has been a growing amount of cross-disciplinary literature on hazard research in the past two decades, especially after several impactful disasters in the first decade of the 21st century. When media were not in common usage, most of the disasters were known only by those directly affected. No matter the severity of disasters and the number of sufferers, they were just invisible to faraway audience. Nowadays, 'Journalism is transforming from a twentieth-century mass-media structure to something profoundly more grassroots and democratic' (Gillmor, 2006: XII).

As an emerging form of societal-scale computer supported cooperative activity, ICT-supported public participation is a force to be reckoned with in a disaster context. Research found that many disasters have long post-impact phases of rescue and recovery which includes relief, restoration and reconstruction, while have temporal and single impact on the audiences. As a result, ICTs could be used in post-disaster community and ecological recovery because of citizen-based, peer-to-peer communications they could bring (Palen and Liu, 2007). High involvement in and after disasters by members of the public is not a new phenomenon. Involvement could be recognised as part of human's nature, as social animals. For example, in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a citizen-originated communications ecology emerged.

As Signe Rousseau states, celebrities play an important role in providing a 'short-cut' to ethical decision making in a contemporary world characterised by an abundance of information (2012, cited in Scott, 2015: 452). Celebrities help to

shape our mediated experience of distant suffering, positioning themselves as mediators between audiences in the 'safety zone' and faraway sufferers. Svensson's study on microblogging in China confirmed that a large number of Chinese celebrities are engaged in social issues and charity work (Svensson, 2014: 169). However, Scott's study on UK television audiences proved that celebrities were unsuccessful in 'cultivating a cosmopolitan engagement with distant suffering' (Scott, 2015: 450). Svensson put an emphasis on celebrities' engagement in charity work, but not many participants in Scott's study were fans of celebrities which could explain the differences in these two studies.

The suffering that audiences see through the media has the potential to move them into action. Based on the perspective of cultural analysis in social movement theory, Yang (2009a: 40) analyses the mobilization of internet incidents – a new form of collective action which are an integral part of the countermovement against the 'great transformation' in contemporary China. According to Yang, the occurrence of internet incidents is a process of emotional mobilization in China. He pointed out two styles of emotional mobilization: a humorous one, and one that appeals to the sentiments of sadness and sympathy.

Compassion fatigue and rumours are two problems we cannot overlook during the mediation of suffering in SNSs era. 'The populist psychology thesis of "compassion fatigue" is built upon three overlapping concepts: information overload, normalization, desensitization' (Cohen, 2001: 187). Rumours after disasters are frequent occurrences in China's micro-blogsphere. However, they are not only focused single disasters but are instead chances to express collective emotions (Sun,

2011). For example, many Weibo users mentioned their disgust over corruption which they felt was a cause of the bullet train accident in 2011 (Tong, 2013).

Many studies have been done on the instant use of social media after disasters by scholars across the globe (Palen and Liu, 2007; Liu *et al.*, 2008; Palen, 2008; Hughes and Palen, 2009; Qu *et al.*, 2009; Vieweg *et al.*, 2010; Qu *et al.*, 2011; Tong, 2013; Cheng, 2014), be it natural disasters like earthquakes, typhoons, tsunamis and landslides, or human-caused disasters, like train collisions, boat capsises, mismanaged mine disasters and so on. In a case study about microblogging use after the 2010 Yushu earthquake in China, Qu *et al.* (2011) found that during the disaster and its aftermath, Weibo posters used Weibo for four main purposes: situation updates, opinion expression, emotional support, and calls for action. Another study carried out after the Oklahoma Grassfires and Red River Floods in 2009, in the United States, pointed out that Twitter could be used in enhancing situational awareness, and indicated that microblogging could be used as a source of information updates during different phases of disaster response (Vieweg *et al.*, 2010).

In addition to various studies on the use of social media, such as Twitter and Weibo, by ordinary users after a disaster, some were conducted on a specific groups of people as well. For example, in other countries when promoting a specific social networking site, 'Sina has actively recruited celebrities, opinion leaders and bloggers, and also singled them out through the practice of verification' (Svensson, 2014: 176). However, the work of Scott (2015) shows that celebrity humanitarianism which ensues from celebrity-mediated encounters with distant

suffering may in fact be less important than is often assumed. Some humanitarian campaigners and organisations have used social media to reach potential donors and to raise awareness for their causes (Madianou, 2013). The ‘increased audience reach together with a high degree of disintermediation’ (ibid: 250) are the reasons why social media attracts so many humanitarian campaigners.

It has been confirmed by other studies that although social media could be regarded as an information source, knowing does not necessarily lead to action. In her work on audience reaction to human rights appeals, Seu (2010: 439) points out that there are three gaps between knowledge and action which we cannot afford to overlook: ‘[...] gap one, what happens between the distant suffering and its representation; gap two, between the representation of distant suffering and their reception by audiences; and gap three, between audiences’ reception and action’. The roles that media could play during the mediation of suffering are various, however, limited research has been done on audience engagement with mediated suffering.

3.3 Agency and its Formation

3.3.1 Agency

Knowing or seeing the other’s suffering, no matter whether it is mediated or face-to-face, is different from any other kind of experience. Let us imagine that you went to see a stand-up comedy show after work; you laughed uproariously with the rest of the audience during the show, and left the theatre after having a wonderful night. You might share one of the jokes you heard from the show with your work colleagues over the next few days, and you might also recommend the

comedian to your colleagues. Besides that, we could hardly think of any other influences this experience could exert on you. However, experiencing the suffering of distant others through media representations is fundamentally different, because it bears moral implications for viewers. For example, Kyriakidou(2011: 38) listed four of the most common responses people have when facing suffering on screen: actions of compassion avoidance or denial – people might switch off the television or change to another channel; they might continue to watch the news and find themselves filled with compassion or anger; they might choose to forget the news after turning off the television, or they might discuss what they saw with their family members or friends; and finally they might be motivated to donate and contribute to relief efforts.

Any of the above mentioned choices involves agency because the audience needs to take some kind of decision. Such activities, in Roger Silverstone's words, 'implies some kind of responsibility' (Silverstone, 2007: 108), therefore, media have moral significance. Several disciplines deal with the concept of 'agent and agency' in the social sciences, such as philosophy, education and sociology, and different disciplines have their own specific perspectives. As expected, the terms agent and agency are theory-laden. Agency 'is the capacity or power to act or to make meaning on one's own behalf relatively free of influence from social forces and the will of others' (Sturken and Cartwright, 2009: 431). In her thesis about how viewers discursively construct their agency towards distant others whose suffering they learned through the media, Kyriakidou's(2011: 12, *italics added*) defines agency as that which 'entails the expression of *affective involvement and judgements*, as well

as its manifestation through *social action* in response to distant suffering. [Agency] is articulated through the ways audience *think about* and *engage with* the media that report this suffering'. She continues to argue that:

[V]ievers' agency vis-à-vis the suffering of others [...] is not only constituted through what the viewers sees and how she or he feels in relation to suffering; it is also expressed through how viewers remember and tell stories about suffering witnessed through the media; it is further mediated by the audience beliefs about the media and the trust they attribute to them (ibid: 29).

Above all, agency is the exercise of power through social practices. Kyriakidou followed Couldry's theory to conceptualise mediation as audience practices, and argued that we could explore the viewer's agency through the concept of media practices in which 'practices are flexibly understood here as both *talk about the media and actions instigated by the media*' (ibid: 31, italics added). As previously touched upon in the introduction, Kyriakidou's conceptual framework to study audience agency with regard to distant sufferers is composed of two media practices: media witnessing and media remembering. 'Media witnessing [is] the discursive articulation of the viewer's position as a spectator of suffering' and 'media remembering [is] the discursive reconstruction of stories of suffering witnessed through the media' (ibid: 39).

The underlying assumption of Kyriakidou's analytical framework and methodological choice is that: 'individual identity and agency are socially

constituted and articulated through discursive practices and social interaction' (ibid: 14). In this case, examining audience discussions about the others' suffering is the best way to explore their agency with regard to the distant suffering.

3.3.2 Three tensions in the formation of moral agency

The phenomenon that natural disasters, particularly those happening outside where the reporters originally come from, attract different amounts of attention has been noted for a long time. For example, by covering news reports on U.S. television from January 1972 to June 1985, Adam (1986) found that the amount of attention U.S. television news devoted to a natural disaster showed no relationship to the severity of the disaster (which usually used the death toll in a disaster as the index). On the contrary, geographical proximity seemed to play an important role in this broad pattern: Western Europe attracted the most attention indisputably, and then Eastern Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and Asia. Using the data collected, a shocking equation of relative coverage was found: 'the death of 1 Italian would equal those of 3 Romanians, 9 Latin Americans, 11 Middle Easterners, and 12 Asians' (ibid: 117). Furthermore, cultural proximity, political economy and social interest also played a role, which could be accounted for by a country's popularity with U.S. tourists. In a nutshell, the globe is comprised of areas of priority, and thus more attention is allocated to human death that happens in some parts of the world compared with others.

It is not surprising for people to discover that there are 'hierarchies of place and human life' during the reporting of suffering across the globe, and consequently disaster reporting invites various kinds of audience engagement with the sufferers,

and allows for different relations between audiences and sufferers. In other words, in the tradition of the western media, when emergencies happened in Western countries or Western people got hurt, they normally drew great attention from the media. As a result of the ethnocentric characteristic of the media, the articulation of the viewer's moral agency turns into a complex process which involves different kinds of audience engagement, and different relations between the audience and the sufferer. Kyriakidou (2011: 54) recognises three tensions concerning the formation of the audiences' moral agency vis-à-vis their relationships with the distant others: the viewers' engagement with the scene of suffering; their attitudes towards the media; and their relationship with the distant sufferers. To put it in more concrete terms: '(1) the tension between emotional involvement and rationalised detachment from the scene of suffering, (2) the tension between hospitality and apathy towards the distant others, and (3) the tension between audience responsibility and complicity with the media' (ibid: 54).

3.3.2.1 Viewer engagement with scenes of suffering

Viewer's engagement with scenes of suffering refers to an individual's emotions and judgements towards mediated suffering. Emotional involvement relies on identification with the suffering of another, and that the audience exerts their imagination based on sources of suffering supplied by different media. In Boltanski's words, instead of observing suffering from the outside, the audience needs to 'return into himself, go inwards, and allow himself to *hear* what his *heart* tells him' (Boltanski, 1999: 81, italics in original). In other words, emotional involvement requires an '*internal report* [which] seeks to depict what takes place in

the heart of the reporter, the states through which the heart passes', rather than an '*external report*' which describes suffering like a pebble skimming over a body of water (ibid : 86, italics in original). By and large, emotional involvement is the active *and* affective immersion of the audience experiencing the suffering of others through the media, and it is about the audiences' emotions and judgements on suffering confronted on the media.

In his book about distant suffering, Boltanski distinguishes three modes of audience emotional commitment while witnessing distant suffering: the mode of denunciation, the mode of sentiment, and the aesthetic mode. The denunciation mode involves indignant accusation and denunciation which directs audiences' attention away from an unfortunate person's suffering, but towards the persecutor (ibid: 57); the sentiment mode expresses sympathy and tender-heartedness towards the unfortunate which are inspired by a benefactors' act of charity and the unfortunate's gratitude towards this act of kindness (ibid: 77); and finally the aesthetic mode could be understood as the shock or horror of an audience while facing the unfortunate's suffering in a transformed form of sublimation (ibid: 115). Besides the three forms of emotional responses mentioned above, Höijer (2004: 523) identifies another two forms (of 'compassion' in Höijer's terminology): shame-filled and powerlessness-filled. Shame-filled compassion relates to an audiences' ambivalence and the contradiction between witnessing another's suffering from a more comfortable situation. Shame might lead to anger or denunciation towards oneself for not engaging with distant suffering; while powerlessness-filled compassion

depicts audiences' impotence and powerlessness to alleviate the suffering of individuals perceived as victims.

Shame and powerless while confronting another's suffering can lead to detachment from the scene in a rationalised way. Overexposure to scenes of suffering within comfort zones, such as one's home might cause information overload, and lead to 'selective oblivion' or 'normalization and routinization' of suffering on the media. Combined with the inability to immediately act upon scenes of suffering, it is possible for people to feel numb, and, eventually, desensitized in response to suffering. In the end, audiences remove themselves from scenes of suffering, and this disengagement is conceptualised as 'compassion fatigue' (Moeller, 1999; Cohen, 2001; Seu, 2003). Or, to put it more bluntly, this is compassion *avoidance* more than compassion fatigue: where audiences actively look away from hopeless and incomprehensible situations (Cohen, 2001: 194). Compassion avoidance in essence is a kind of denial which refuses to face, trust and accept suffering from the media. Different people may respond as laid out in the emotional responses mentioned above, and yet various forms of emotional engagement and detachment may arise in the same person at the same time.

3.3.2.2 Complicity with and responsibility towards the media

A second source of tension concerns the mediation of the audiences' moral agency, and relates to the degree of audience trust and judgements placed on the media as an adequate resource for the understanding of far-away others. Everyday life and the media are becoming more and more inseparable. A specific characteristic of

modernity is our increasing trust in abstract systems. In this way, 'one can no longer conceive of the everyday without acknowledging the central role that increasingly the electronic media (but also books and the press) have in defining its way of seeing, being and acting' (Silverstone, 2007: 110).

According to Silverstone (ibid: 129-130): any media attempt to claim a reality or a truth involves a complicity among producers, subjects and audiences. Complicity could be seen as a refusal to confess that the process that they participated in is inadequate. More specifically, producers are well aware of the limitations of reporting practices, and often choose not to reveal the limitations of given knowledge to their subjects and audiences, whether consciously or unconsciously. Subjects are often in vulnerable situations compared to producers, therefore, they do not have a choice apart from following the rules of the reporting industry. With regard to audiences, as participants in the mediapolis, they are complicit when they refuse to challenge the media's representational claims, or remain silent and accept such reporting uncritically even when realizing its limitations.

Media images of the suffering others give an audience the illusion of seeing the crisis as fully as the sufferer. As a result of that, the audience tend to believe that all the information provided is necessary and sufficient for their judgements about the outside world. However, the audience may recognise that '[t]he mediated symbolic is not imposed upon us as a space of no escape', on the other hand it is out of the audiences' choices to choose on a daily basis. This choice involves agency, and agency 'involves the possibility of challenge and refusal' (ibid: 133). In other words, the audience might understand the media-saturated culture and take

responsibility for it consequently. However, it does not rule out the possibility that the audience might begin to doubt, challenge and finally change the media-saturated culture.

It not uncommon among audience that there is a lack of suspicion or scepticism towards various media reports in different platforms. However, instead of accepting whatever is transmitted by different media, the audience should be more critical and alert. Audiences could become suspicious about 'the emotions, desires, and intentions which accompany representations of suffering and, more radically, about the very existence of the unfortunates whose misery is shown' (Boltanski, 1999: 151). As a result of this media scepticism, some audiences might intentionally choose to avoid facing distant suffering. However, in this case, it is an audiences' responsibility to become more sceptical about media reports. They should be willing and able to engage in media materials critically, to realise the inadequacy of mainstream mediated representations, and at the same time to grasp the particularities of the reported suffering.

Responsibility is normally an expression of power, however, in this case, audience responsibly is a kind of accountability without power. In mediapolis, accountability cannot be avoided, because after all, 'our ultimate responsibility as citizens goes wider than the media's representation of the world: it reaches to the world which the media represent' (Silverstone, 2007: 135).

3.3.2.3 Hospitality and apathy

The third source of tension, during the construction of the audiences' moral agency, moves between two extremes of unconditional hospitality and lack of concern. Specifically in the relationship between the audience and distant others in respect of their suffering.

Hospitality in this thesis is understood as 'the ability and willingness of the viewer first, to welcome the presence of the other on the screen, and second, to understand their predicament' (Kyriakidou, 2011: 58). Silverstone (2007: 136) argues that if justice is the first virtue of social institutions, then hospitality is the first virtue of the mediapolis. Jacques Derrida distinguishes between absolute or unconditional and conditional hospitality (Derrida, 2000: 25). According to him, true hospitality is not constrained by urban or national self-interest; does not involve or depend upon invitation. However, true hospitality is not without risk. It is the same in the symbolic spaces of the mediapolis where the abuse of hospitality is not uncommon. Therefore, it is reasonable to acknowledge that, except in complete self-representation, mediated representation always involves a constrained, limited and restricted form of hospitality (Silverstone, 2007: 140-141).

Silverstone treats the capacity and expectation of welcoming strangers in one's symbolic space, with or without anticipations of reciprocity, as a specific characteristic of being human. Hospitality is a primary ethic in a globalised world, and '[i]t goes to the heart of our relationship with others. Indeed it is constitutive of such relations' (ibid: 139). In mediapolis which is full of reports of 'hierarchies of

place and human life', it is not reasonable to expect an even distribution of hospitality among victims of suffering from different cultural, political and social backgrounds. Therefore, the relationship between the audience and the sufferer during the mediation of distant suffering might range from unconditional hospitality, to conditional hospitality, and to complete indifference.

3.4 Media Witnessing

3.4.1 Media witnessing in mediation

Witnessing is an intricate concept. This term involves all three aspects of a basic communication triangle: the agent who bears witness; the utterance or text itself; and the audience who witnesses. Thinking in this way, the following sentence is not as strange any more: 'the witness (speech-act) of the witness (person) was witnessed (by an audience)' (Peters, 2009: 25). In today's world as a result of the widespread use of different media, witnessing has become a 'general mode of receptivity to electronic media reports about distant others' (Frosh, 2006: 265). Being witnesses of mediated events in this media-drenched world requires more from audiences than encapsulated by the words 'viewer' or 'spectator', because witnessing requires participation.

Media witnessing contains within itself three different practices: audiences become witnesses who could experience events which happened elsewhere, as experienced vicariously through media; audiences also witness how victims perceive/witness events themselves; and audiences are witnesses of any witnessing text generated from the event (Kyriakidou, 2011: 84). As a result of that, media witnessing is 'the witnessing performed *in*, *by*, and *through* the media. It is

about the systematic and ongoing reporting of the experiences and realities of distant others to *mass audiences*'(Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009: 1, italics in original).

The way people perceive the world beyond their immediate experience has changed profoundly since the introduction of electronic media, such as telegraph, radio, and film, in the twentieth century. At first, before technological rivals emerged, television was a transforming media among all of those others because of its ability to transmit a superabundance of audio and video information. The acceleration of communications enabled by television, both in speed and in quality, introduced 'a new modality of perception into the world' (Ellis, 2000: 1). The emergence of television brought a 'pervasive sense of liveness and intimacy' to its audience. As a result of this we cannot use 'I don't know' as an excuse anymore when something awful has happened, even if it occurred far away from us. The proliferation of digital media has strengthened the sense of liveness and intimacy among its users due to its characteristics, such as real-time updates and multi-channel diffusion.

The audio-visual information gained from television, and other new media after television form the basis of the emotional characteristics of witnessing. Unlike the pain observed in drama shows which 'offers terror without danger, pity without duty', the facts obtained from suffering news 'impose moral and political obligations' (Peters, 2009: 39). The liveness of the suffering portrayed by different media is emotionally compelling, because it provides an opportunity for the audience to experience the real suffering of others. This 'simultaneous suffering'

enabled by mediation makes moral requests for the audience to actively alleviate such suffering. Therefore, it forms a 'horizon of responsibility'.

Drawing on Kyriakidou's analysis of media witnessing as an analytical concept, we can inspect how audiences position and experience themselves as moral agents with particular regard to the mediated suffering which makes emotional and moral claims towards them, implicitly and explicitly (Kyriakidou, 2011: 82-87). In my research I am going to explore how social media users, as moral agents, experience the world in response to mediated suffering on social media.

Experiences of witnessing *through* the media pose the question, 'How do audiences position themselves with regard to scenes of distant suffering to distant others?' The impulse to become involved when confronted with mediated suffering, and the resulting sense of powerlessness in alleviating it, is a common paradox among audiences. This kind of contradiction almost exists in every type of mediated suffering. This paradox also exists in one of the tensions during the formation of moral agency among audiences as I mentioned before in Section 3.3.2: emotional involvement and rationalised detachment.

As witness of witnesses to events that are portrayed *in* the media, audiences need to make use of their own imaginations to form connections with far away others who otherwise would be unknown to them without the mediation. These imagined connections are of great importance in establishing audiences' positions toward distant others. The aim of communication and mediation is to transcend distance, however, even in today's media-saturated world, distance remains a problem for

everyone. To say the problem of distance is important is because that distance connects with proximity. The distance between audiences and mediated suffering, to some extent, makes audiences become doubtful about what they have seen through different media. By analysing two modes of representation in contemporary mediation, Roger Silverstone concludes that mediated distance 'swings between incorporation (that is denial of both difference and distance) or annihilation (that is denial of both a common humanity and closeness)' (Silverstone, 2002: 770). He also proposes the concept of 'proper distance' to dignify the importance of proximity in the nourishment of the imagined connections. *Proper distance* 'refers to the importance of understanding the more or less precise degree of proximity required in our mediated interrelationships if we are to create and sustain a sense of the other sufficient not just for reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation and responsibility, as well as understanding' (Silverstone, 2007: 47).

Audiences as witnesses to witnessing *by* the media relate to the tension between audiences' complicity with, and responsibility towards the media. Witnessing as a practice involves a transformation from *experience* to *discourse* about the experience for others who are not present. However, the process of this transformation is not always accurate as people wish. Fallibility and the potential misunderstanding during the transformation from *experience* to *discourse* is called the 'veracity gap' (Peters, 2009: 27). The veracity gap is quite common among broadcasts due to the similarities between broadcasting communications and witnessing. On top of this veracity gap, there is *otherness* caused by the distance between the audience and actors of tragedy. The pervasive sense of liveness and

intimacy brought by modern communication technologies could ease this distance to some extent. The tension of the veracity gap reflects the complex relationships between ‘the audience and the witnessing texts’, in which witnessing texts have the ability to help the audience learn about what is happening in the world, and at the same time requires imaginative engagement with the others from the audience (Frosh, 2006: 271).

3.4.2 Media witnessing among television audiences

Media communication is a kind of social activity which involves, but is not limited to, the production, transmission and reception of symbolic forms of people’s experiences; it also involves the implementation of resources of various kinds (Thompson, 1995: 18). In today’s media-saturated world, the majority of us encounter suffering of others in a secondary way, through different mediums, rather than directly. This is especially true in a globalised world when media project images of disasters across the globe immediately after they happen. One investigation into media reception has shown that the process of media products reception is much more active and creative than the passive recipient myth suggests (Hanna *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, we cannot treat recipients of media products as ‘passive onlookers whose senses have been permanently dulled by the continuous reception of similar messages’; and we cannot view the process of reception as an ‘unproblematic, uncritical process through which products are absorbed by individuals’ (Thompson, 1995: 25).

The late-modern world, also termed ‘high modernity’ by Anthony Giddens, that we are now living in has changed profoundly in contrast to preceding phases in human

history. Unlike pre-modern eras when life went on at a comparatively slow rhythm due to the fact that information failed to be instantly transmitted, life is mobile, innovative, and of a quicker rhythm. For instance, the influence of distant happenings on proximate events becomes more common under the influence of different kinds of media. Among which, 'the increasingly intertwined development of mass printed media and electronic communication' (Giddens, 1991: 25) is of great importance since the origin of high modernity. Mediated experience, in this sense, played a vital role in individuals' understanding about the outside world, and caused a so-called '*intrusion of distant events into everyday consciousness*' (ibid: 27, italics in original).

By conducting semiotic analysis on the verbal texts of distant suffering on western television news, such as BBC World Television, Danish National Television and so on, Lilie Chouliaraki identified three different modes of news reporting – adventure news, emergency news and ecstatic news. According to her, different news reporting requires different moral involvement from the audience. For example, the key feature of adventure news is that 'its stories of suffering claim objectivity at the expense of emotionality' (Chouliaraki, 2006: 106), therefore, this kind of reporting claims no emotional involvement; while emergency news entails a 'demand for immediate action on distant misfortune' (ibid: 118); and ecstatic news establishes a relationship of identification between the audience and the sufferer through shared 'positive' emotion.

Paying particular attention to participants' emotional engagement with faraway disasters and their sufferers, Maria Kyriakidou (2011) researched Greek television

audiences. From this she classified four different types of witnessing with regard to audiences' witnessing positions: affective witnessing; ecstatic witnessing, politicized witnessing, and detached witnessing.

There remain no stable definitions of affect which can mean a lot of different things (Thrift, 2004: 59). In the context of witnessing distant suffering, audio-visual information from different media normally pay attention to the body or emotion of the sufferer (Zembylas, 2006). In other words, importance is placed on the stimuli to instigate audience bodily response. This way of viewing affect is pertinent to my study because I am researching witnessing responses to events like the Changchun-stole infant incident which involves different levels of affect. Therefore, affect in the context of this thesis is regarded as 'a *process* in which one body acts upon another, and a *product* in the sense of a body's capacity to affect and be affected' (ibid: 309, italics in original). In this sense, generally speaking, affect is mainly unconscious, unpredictable, and includes unstructured subjective responses towards different stimuli. Brian Massumi distinguishes between affect and emotion by stating that they 'follow different logics' which 'pertains to different orders': in this distinction affect is irreducibly bodily while emotion is a subjective content (Massumi, 1996 cited in Zembylas, 2006: 309-310). However, affect and emotion are two inseparable concepts: affect attains the level of emotion once it receives conscious attention/reflection from an individual. These terms are different, but are intrinsically intertwined.

Firstly, affective witnessing requires emotional involvement from the audience. Involvement which incorporates a 'spontaneous or natural feeling of empathy and

compassion' (Kyriakidou, 2011: 154) as a result of seeing images of personalised stories of suffering. Therefore, in Luc Boltanski's words, affective witnessing demands not only an 'external report' which describes unfortunates' suffering, but also includes an 'internal report' (Boltanski, 1999: 86) which depicts an audiences' subjective understanding of the suffering of the others from a distance. Furthermore, in affective witnessing, there is 'an apparent collapse of distance between the spectators and the distant others on the basis of the perceived sameness in the face of the human pain' (Kyriakidou, 2011: 157). As a result of the disappearance of distance, viewers are willing to engage with, and to understand the far-away others; which means that viewers normally have a true feeling of remorse towards others' predicaments, and tend to show their hospitality to the sufferers. Last, in affective witnessing viewers are 'in a relation of collusion with the media representations of the suffering in accepting the media as a sufficient way to fully engage with it' (ibid : 162). Generally speaking, a paradox exists in the viewers' relationship with the media: on the one hand, television viewers complain that media representations of suffering are affecting their judgements, but at the same time it is through such representations that audiences get the chance to know about the outside world.

Ecstatic witnessing is the second type according to Kyriakidou's typology of media witnessing. It can be regarded as an extreme case, of affective witnessing, but it has its own characteristics as well. Ecstatic witnessing requires emotional involvement from the audience, to a more intensified degree compared with affective witnessing because of devastating disasters being witnessed by the

audience. Besides that, the urgency of witnessed suffering presents audiences with a sense of instantaneous proximity as if it is happening in front of their eyes. What is more, these devastating incidents feature or connect with death. The September 11 attacks were an example of the ecstatic witnessing among television audiences in Kyriakidou's study. Consequently, the commonality of the experience of human pain is coupled with the fear of death, and annihilating time and space differences between the viewer and the sufferer. Furthermore, any other distinctions between people, such as nationality, cultural identity and social status, becomes unimportant. The commonality shared as physical human beings, and horror felt in the face of death, whether experiencing or viewing second hand, link the audience and the sufferer together. As a result of that, ecstatic witnessing tend to show 'unconditional hospitality towards the people [who are] suffering' and demands 'unquestioning acceptance of the media coverage' (ibid : 166). In this extreme case, the difference between 'us' and 'other' vanishes.

The third type is politicised witnessing. There is no space for individual agency in politicised witnessing, because viewers' emotional involvement shifts from specific victims to the event as a whole. Furthermore, their involvement connects with 'the search for the causes and the attribution of blame and political responsibility for the events witnessed' (ibid : 176). Besides that, during the discussion and debates following the incident distinctions between the viewer(s) and the sufferer(s) becomes clear, and the audience show conditional hospitality towards sufferers at a distance. The paradox among audiences' attitudes towards the media exist in the case of politicised witnessing as well: audiences showed their scepticism towards

mediated representations, and critically engaged with the media. For example, the Hurricane Katrina was one of the best instances of politicised witnessing among Greek television audiences.

The former three types of witnessing construct viewers as moral agents who can potentially bear emotional responses towards the suffering others. I say potentially because the final type of witnessing – detached witnessing – positions the viewer as a ‘disengaged spectator of the suffering’ (ibid : 188) in terms of the suffering of others. People avoid or cannot feel affective expressions in this kind of witnessing. Furthermore, the experience of witnessing a suffering is composed of a series of events without any involvement of personal emotions from the viewer. Lastly, the viewer uses ‘spatial deixis’ to rationalise the distance between them and the faraway suffering others. Detached witnessing is mainly found among young participants in Kyriakidou’s study.

3.5 Media Remembering

Kyriakidou (2011: 88) defines media remembering as ‘the discursive reconstruction of viewers’ memories of the events witnessed through the media’. Her emphasis on ‘discursive’ suggests that the practice of remembering is not only a reproduction of suffering witnessed through the media, but more importantly a *reconstruction* of media reports which have the effect of ‘turning memories of distant suffering into stories through discourse’. What Kyriakidou is interested in is not *what* suffering news is remembered by people, but rather *how* this news is put together. Her conceptualization of remembering originates from work on collective memory and discursive psychology.

For instance, Maurice Halbwachs was the first sociologist who pointed out that our conceptions of the past are not preserved, but reconstructed on the basis of the present. Although admittedly, it is the individual who remembers and has memory Halbwachs insists that individual memory 'is not completely sealed off and isolated. A man must often appeal to other's remembrances to evoke his own past... Moreover, the individual memory could not function without words and ideas, instruments the individual has not himself invented but appropriated from his milieu' (Halbwachs, 1980: 51). He also notes that individual memory is 'a part or an aspect of a group memory' (Halbwachs, 1992: 53). This social context is understandable when considering that individual and collective, personal and societal are by no means separable, on the contrary, they are interdependent (Middleton, 1997: 72). In the eyes of Irwin-Zarecka (1994: 4), 'as a set of ideas, images, feelings about the past, [collective memory] is best located not in the minds of individuals, but in the resources they share'.

The concept of collective memory by Maurice Halbwachs not only highlights 'the mutually dependent relationship between individuals and society', but also maintains that 'it is through this interactive relationship that people come to construct their memories as social members' (Kyriakidou, 2011: 88). According to Halbwachs (1992: 38), 'our individual thought places itself in [social] frameworks and participates in [collective] memory that is capable of the act of recollection'. He also maintains that '[c]ollective frameworks are [...] the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord [...] with

the predominant thoughts of the society' (ibid: 40). In essence, collective memory is a reconstruction of the past by taking the present into consideration.

The work of discursive psychology also focuses attention on the socially constructed nature of memory. This field regards remembering as a process which combines 'present, past and future in a single task through which we construct a discourse that allows us to objectivize our experience' (Achugar, 2008: 7). Middleton and Edwards (1990: 11) demonstrate in their book that 'remembering together [is] an enterprise achieved in acts of communication' and that 'remembering is achieved and represented in people's talk with each other'. These ways of communicating are both *constructive* and *action-oriented* at the same time: they are constructive because 'they offer a particular version of things'; they are action-oriented due to the fact that any version of events are not just interpretations from memory, but rather also involve the intention to do something, such as complaining, praising, justifying and countering (Edwards and Stokoe, 2004: 500). Consequently, media remembering is not only a practice of recollection, but makes judgements on events that people have remembered. In this view, memory becomes 'not only the simple act of recall but social, cultural, and political action at its broadest level' (Zelizer, 1998: 3). In their articulations of memories about distant suffering, people not only reconstruct events but 'position themselves in relation to the social world and others' (Kyriakidou, 2011: 90).

Collective memory 'allow[s] for the fabrication, rearrangement, elaboration, and omission of details about the past' (Zelizer, 1998: 3). Collective memory, on the one hand, has a close connection with individuals' sense of collective identity, while on

the other hand, entails moral imperatives which form the basis of the normative order (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994: 9).

Summary

The present chapter reviews the main literature of this study. As shown in Chapter 1, this thesis is about the discursive construction of social media users' moral agency towards distant suffering, and sufferers who appear on social media during. In other words, it is about the mediation of distant suffering among social media users within China. Section 3.1 is an introduction of Roger Silverstone's concept of 'mediapolis' which shows that the characteristic of modern life are full of the mediated appearances of far-away others, and predicts moral responsibility from the audience. On top of that, this section also talks about mediation as a theoretical framework of this thesis, and briefly introduces relevant research traditions in media studies.

Section 3.2 presents the definition of suffering and distant others in this thesis. Suffering could happen in different aspects of people's everyday lives, and usually causes damage to individuals. Distant others in this thesis refers to those who only appear to us through the media. In this highly mediated world, in the social media era, the observation of other's suffering bears more significance for audiences or users than at any other time in history. Furthermore, I review literature on the mediation of suffering in the social media era. The roles that media play during the mediation of suffering are numerous, at the same time there is a need to do more research on audience engagement with mediated suffering.

Section 3.3 is about the concept of 'agency', and introduces three tensions in the formation of moral agency: the engagement of the viewers with the scene of suffering in media reports, the viewer's complicity with and responsibility towards the media, and the viewer's hospitality and apathy with regards to the suffering others.

Section 3.4 and 3.5 introduce media witnessing and media remembering – two media practices which are central in the expression of the users' moral agency. Media witnessing shows the way social media users position themselves as observers of distant others' suffering. Media remembering denotes social media users' reconstruction of memories of the events witnessed through the media. In articulating how they see and remember distant suffering, the users also articulate their sense of agency. Media witnessing and media remembering enable the analysis of how social media users embed distant suffering in their everyday lives, and how they articulate their sense of possible moral agency.

CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Contexts

The internet could be regarded as a new medium for social interactivity and intimacy. The widespread use of internet technology has brought profound changes to all walks of life. For example, given the increasing ubiquity of SNSs in youth's everyday lives, checking SNSs has started to replace checking e-mails in social, informal contexts. Correspondingly, a new relationship has been established among people who are linked by technologies in the virtual realm. At the same time, a sense of co-presence is constructed and strengthened between people who are separated in the physical world. So far no consensus has been made on whether the virtual interactivity happening online could replace real life interaction. However, it is becoming an unstoppable trend that people are 'integrating technologies of the internet into their lives as extensions of everyday communication' (Ryan, 2012: 72). This is particularly true among young people. In short, as time goes on, new platforms based on the internet are constantly emerging, and they have blurred pre-existing boundaries of space and time.

Compared to decades ago, some new characteristics have emerged to communicate suffering news. During the traditional mass media era, information was transmitted from the top down, and ordinary citizens were just passive recipients. Yet people nowadays have become the originators of information, and they have the capacity to tell reporters or others what is happening in their neighbourhood or town. The 'two-way interaction and production of knowledge from the bottom up' (Klinenberg, 2013) has undoubtedly brought revolutionary

development in information transmission. There are both inherent and external reasons which we cannot afford to ignore when considering the origin of this phenomenon. On the one hand, as in Beck's (1992; 2002) theory of 'reflexive modernization/the second modernity', risk society, individualisation and cosmopolitanisation are the three components of the modern world that we are living in, and 'represent the radicalised forms of a dynamic of modernization' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2010: XIV). Therefore, more items of suffering news are being shared across the world, and at the same time this kind of news often involves people from different countries or different cultures. For example, the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami is a perfect illustration of the situation people are faced with. Due to modern technologies, citizens across the globe can give a timely helping hand to one another. For instance, during the 2011 Japan Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, human and financial support came instantly from countries all over the world.

There has been a growing body of research on the mediation of suffering since the beginning of this century. At first researchers mainly employed textual analysis (Höijer, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2006) in their studies. This emphasis on reporting texts undoubtedly leave sufferers – who are supposed to be the priority of suffering news – out. Unlike the television era, the internet has brought many new features to the mediation of suffering. Thus, studies on how suffering is mediated in the internet era become necessary.

With the growth of this topic, we are glad to observe a shift emerging from textual-based towards an audience-centred approach (Kyriakidou, 2008b; Kyriakidou, 2011;

Ong, 2011b; Ong, 2012; Kyriakidou, 2014; Scott, 2014; Kyriakidou, 2015; Scott, 2015). However, due to the relative youth of this field and the development of different mediums, there are still some topics which are under-researched. For instance, in a study on the mediation of suffering among television audiences, Ong gathered data pertaining to social media in the context of Typhoon Ondoly in 2009. But he found that these data 'could not fit within the scope and limitations' of his broader research data focused on television (Ong, 2011b: 73).

This research intends to explore the meaning and motivations behind participants' practices and online experiences, rather than to produce statistically generalised findings. The point of departure of qualitative research is based on the assumption that 'the social world [...] is actively constructed by people in their everyday life' (Gaskell, 2000: 38). Therefore, qualitative methods are more suitable. Qualitative interviews provide the basic data for 'the development of an understanding of the relations between social actors and their situation. The objective is a fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to the behaviour of people in particular social contexts' (ibid: 39).

For most people, distant suffering is a mediated experience yet an everyday occurrence. Designed as a platform for people to create, share or exchange different kinds of information, social media has played an important role when distant suffering happens. By using social media, both professional reporters and ordinary netizens could provide immediate, first-hand information and commentary on distant suffering events as they unfolded. Previous studies have found that social media is important during the dissemination of distant suffering.

For instance, Weibo, one of the most popular social media platforms in China, was mainly used for the following four purposes after an earthquake in 2010: situation updates, opinion expression, emotional support, and calls for action (Qu *et al.*, 2011).

The initial goal of this study is not to focus on macro-level organisations' decisions of mediated sufferings, but rather concentrate on the audience's choices. As another researcher implied while researching Chinese youths' use of technology, it is necessary to take into consideration 'all of the other forms of interactions they engage in and how the social structures of contemporary Chinese society influences meaning making' (Wang, 2013: 54).

4.2 Research Methods

Unlike quantitative research which normally results in, and emphasises, generalised outcomes, qualitative research is more concerned with meanings and interpretations. The purpose of qualitative research is to provide in-depth descriptions or explanations of specific phenomena. Just as Gaskell (2000: 41) put it: 'the real purpose of qualitative research is not counting opinions or people but rather exploring the range of opinions, the different representations of the issue'. In this thesis, the fundamental assumption is that the self is discursively constructed. In other words, the identity and agency of individuals are socially constituted and represented through discursive practices and social interactions (Billing, 1987, cited in Kyriakidou, 2011: 14). Consequently, researching how social media users discuss far-away suffering enables the investigation of the construction of their agency with regard to distant others.

4.2.1 Focus group

4.2.1.1 Focus groups in social science research

I used focus group discussions as the main research method in this study. Considering the theoretical assumptions of this thesis as mentioned in Chapter 1, the employment of focus groups as the main research method was suitable for two reasons: first, focus group discussions give participants a good opportunity to express their attitudes; second, through group interaction during the discussion, common-sense discourses can be articulated more vividly, thus we can explore the ways meanings and knowledge are discursively constructed. The construction of social media users' moral agency are discursively articulated through media witnessing and media remembering, focus group discussions make the interaction among social media users possible, and therefore became the best option in this study.

Focus groups as a research method originated from marketing research as early as in 1920s. By the 1980s focus groups were widely used in anthropology, communication studies, education, political sciences, psychology, public health, sociology and many other disciplines (Morgan and Spanish, 1985: 404; Morgan, 1997: VII; Wilkinson, 1998: 183-184). Could any group discussion be named a 'focus group'? According to Krueger and Casey (2009: 2), a focus group has been defined as a 'carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment'. The process of focus groups relies on a trusting, open environment between participants and moderators. Therefore, focus groups could not be used for building consensus,

educating, or for evaluating the impact of an educational event. There are some exceptions, such as in pedagogical research where researchers play less of an active role in group discussion. For example during storytelling research Parfitt (2014) used discussion groups as an educational tool where participants learnt from the experiences of one another.

David Morgan (1996: 130) defines focus groups as ‘a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher’. He points out that in this definition there are three essential components namely: focus groups are a research method; the interaction between participants are the source of the data; and the researcher plays an active role in the group discussion. Focus groups could be used as a self-contained research method or in combination with other research methods to collect data. Focus groups are ‘particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way’(Kitzinger, 1995: 299).

The origin of focus groups was ascribed to focused interviews, a research method used by Pau Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton on radio morale programs in 1941. According to Merton (1987: 564), there were both continuities and discontinuities between focused interviews and focus groups: a focus group is a ‘modified version’ of a focused interview in his mind. And he treated this phenomenon as an instance of ‘obliteration by incorporation (OBI)’ – the obliteration of sources of ideas, methods, or findings by their incorporation in currently accepted knowledge – during the transmission of knowledge (Merton, 1979: IX).

Between individual and group interviews, there is no consensus as to when one method is likely to be more effective. Bryman concluded that the focus group contains elements of two methods: the group interview and focused interview. Focus groups add 'the element of interaction within groups', thus it is 'more focused than the group interview' (Bryman, 2012: 502).

Essentially, a focus group is a group interview among people who have the same or similar experiences. Yet, there are several differences between two of them:

- a. Focus groups typically emphasise a specific theme or topic that is explored in depth, whereas group interviews often span very widely.
- b. Sometimes, group interviews are carried out so that the researcher is able to save time and money by carrying out interviews with a number of individuals simultaneously. However, focus groups are not carried out for this reason.
- c. With a focus group the researcher will be interested in such things as how people respond to each other's views and build up a view out of the interaction that takes place within the group (Bryman, 2012: 501).

As Myers (2000: 201) states: it is not surprising that sometimes participants' views are frequently 'complex, unstable and apparently contradictory' during focus group discussion. It is understandable in that discussion usually has different meanings for the researcher and participants: for the researchers, group discussion is a way of gathering opinions; while for the participants, expressing opinions is a way of interacting with a group of people – previously acquainted or not.

It is no exaggeration to say that the size of group is central to the success of the focus group method. From former scholars' studies we could conclude that ideas on the ideal size of focus group vary: at one extreme end are studies conducted with three participants, at the other exist groups with as many as twenty people. After using focus groups in a series of research projects, Peek and Fothergill (2009: 37) found that focus groups that included 'between 3-5 participants ran more smoothly than the larger group interviews [...] due to time constraints and the amount of information that participants wanted to discuss'. Krueger and Casey's idea on the size of the focus group is that 'the group must be small enough for everyone to have opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide diversity of perceptions' (Krueger and Casey, 2009: 6). On the practical side, to manage larger focus groups with more than 6 participants is difficult because a focus group with more participants means that it is difficult for people to have enough involvement, which fails to stimulate discussion among participants. Apart from that, it is difficult to transcribe larger focus group discussions due to its group sizes. However, group compositions should be based on the goals and context of different research projects instead of following absolute rules in terms of structuring focus groups (Peek and Fothergill, 2009: 41).

Former scholars have different opinions on the selection of group participants: some believe that pre-existing natural groups are necessary; while others advocate using newly-formed groups in which people are unknown to each other. Although with the same purpose in mind – to guarantee the quality of the data collected – scholars have different considerations for selecting different participants. The

traditional focus group comprises of previously unacquainted people. However, sometimes groups composed from prior familiarity have advantages. No matter which kind of participants are selected, we should bear in mind that each group has its own strengths and weaknesses. Kitzinger and Barbour(1999) have argued that there is no 'one-size fits all' template for focus group methods, and instead favoured a design which considered the political, theoretical and practical features of the research problem at hand.

For researchers who work with pre-existing groups (Kitzinger, 1994; Holbrook and Jackson, 1996; Krueger and Casey, 2009) – usually friends, classmates, colleagues – the naturalness of the discussion among group members could enhance the quality of the research data. Furthermore, on a practical side, it is comparatively easier to recruit formerly known members to come forward for the discussion. On the other hand, the pressure of discussing an issue with acquaintances tends to make participants give 'culturally expected views' instead of honest and spontaneous ideas of their own. Apart from that, the leading pattern in naturally occurring groups might make some participants' unwilling to voice their opinions. Both of these social pressures may contaminate the reliability of data collected. Whichever way researchers choose, a group composed of homogenous people is preferable during focus groups.

The reason to recruit homogenous rather than diverse people for focus groups is understandable. Individuals tend to censor their ideas in the presence of diverse people in social status, educational levels, power, or even personal characteristics to the extreme. As a result of that, the quality of data cannot be guaranteed if the

group is composed of people with high different characteristics. To access the views of a diverse population by using focus groups, it is necessary to conduct multiple sessions (Grude-Schuck *et al.*, 2004).

When considering how many interviews are sufficient for a qualitative research study, generally speaking, there tends to be a saturation point. 'Saturation' here means that at some point no new ideas emerge in the data, for example, repetitious information will appear during discussions, and thus we can say that group numbers are sufficiently high enough. With regard to the number of focus groups to conduct, Morgan (1996: 144) suggested that ideally after three to five groups most projects would reach a saturation point, which means that little new information would emerge because the mediator could predict what participants would say according to the former discussion. Yet, he also indicated that the diversity of the participants in each group, the range of the topics being discussed and 'the degree of the structure in the interviews' will increase the number of the groups needed to get satisfactory results (Morgan, 1997: 44). Gaskell holds the view that the exact saturation point during a study depends on the nature of the topic, on the numbers of different milieus that are considered relevant, and on the resources available. Bearing efficiency and available resources in mind, Gaskell recommends that the upper limit for a single researcher is 'somewhere between 15 and 25 individual interviews and some six to eight focus group discussions' (Gaskell, 2000: 43).

Besides that, Gaskell treats the interview as a 'joint venture', which is an interaction that involves an exchange of ideas and meanings between researchers

and respondents instead of a 'a one-way process of information passing from one to another' (ibid: 45). Therefore, we could draw the conclusion that the involvement of moderators or facilitators in focus group is of great importance, because they play the role of 'catalyst' for social interaction among the participants. Not all groups are fully capable of self-management, which shows the importance of a proper moderator during focus group discussion. After each group, I made sure that the participants who finished would not disclose the details of the research to those who might be part of a future discussion group.

4.2.1.2 The strengths of focus group discussions

Focus groups, as a means of qualitative data collection, have been used by social scientists, such as sociologists and psychologists, for more than half a century. However, it is not until the last decade of the 20th century that they became a widespread method in social research (Wilkinson, 1998). Calder (1977, cited in Morgan and Spanish, 1984: 255) has identified three different types of focus groups within market research: exploratory, clinical, and phenomenological. Exploratory focus groups are used primarily as means of generating an hypothesis; clinical groups provide insights into participants' unconscious motivations; and phenomenological groups give the researcher access to the participants' common sense conceptions and everyday explanations.

We should bear in mind that, as just one of the research methods in social sciences, focus groups have limitations: it is ineffective to measure the knowledge or authentic perspective of individuals due to pressure from social norms; it is not

designed to identify an individual's views on sensitive topics; it does not yield generalised data in the same way as surveys by researching a small sample of people. However, by depicting several of its disadvantages, there remain some advantages of this research method that we should not overlook. As a consequence of group dynamics during focus group sessions, data collected through the social interaction of the group are much richer than those one-to-one interviews. That is the uniqueness of focus groups.

Focus groups have the advantage to 'offer the chance to observe participants engaging in interaction that is concentrated on attitudes and experiences which are of interest to the researcher' (Morgan and Spanish, 1984: 259). On top of that, this group-based research facilitates 'the interaction of participants without excessive control from the researcher and can produce novel or unexpected insights which may not be generated via other methodologies' (Holbrook and Jackson, 1996: 136). In general, focus groups 'are a particularly good choice of method when the purpose of the research is to elicit people's understanding, opinions and views, or to explore how these are advanced, elaborate and negotiated in a social context' (Wilkinson, 1998: 187). What is more, '[r]educing researcher influence/ control can be seen as a benefit of focus group research for researchers who are primarily interested in participants' own meanings and understandings, and who encourage participant-directed interaction, rather than constraining it' (Wilkinson, 1998: 190).

Kitzinger (1994, cited in Bryman, 2012: 513) drew attention to two types of interaction in focus groups: complementary and argumentative interactions. In studies of media audiences, focus groups are popular for the following reasons:

‘first, focus groups generate discussion, and so reveal both the meanings that people read into the discussion topic and how they negotiate those meanings. Second, focus groups generate diversity and difference, either within or between groups’ (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 96).

4.2.2 *Digital ethnography*

Digital ethnography is a consequence of the rise of digital technologies. Compared to the utilization of online scholarly research portals and social media in academia (Carrigan, 2016), the infiltration of technologies into sociological research methods is still limited (Murthy, 2008). In the highly digital world we are living in, as more and more social interactions move online, the sociological ‘field’ should and can also shift beyond the confines of traditional physical configurations. For example, digital technologies, such as online questionnaires, emails, blogs and social networking sites, could be used as field sites to carry out digital ethnography.

In most cases, the presence of ethnographers in a virtual field site is ‘invisible’ in accordance with the ‘uniquely unobtrusive nature’ of digital ethnography, however, that does not mean the internet is a ‘neutral observation space’ for the ethnographer. On the contrary, ‘a researcher’s data selection and analyse are always biased by agendas, personal histories, and social norms’ (Dicks et al., 2005, cited in Murthy, 2008: 840). By investigating social networking sites, ‘ethnographers can “invisibly” observe the social interactions of page members, gleaning a previously unavailable type of ethnographic data’ (Murthy, 2008: 845).

As discussed in Chapter 1, the new characteristics of the mediation of distant suffering through social media are also one of the research questions in this thesis. Consequently, besides focus groups, I also conducted digital ethnography among Weibo users since 2014 right after the fieldwork stage. During this digital ethnographic stage, I played the role of 'participant as a researcher'. I focused on collecting social media users' discussions on suffering news. These discussions were mainly accessed through comments on Weibo in response to suffering news. The data collected through online ethnography (see study results in Chapter 6) was of great importance, considering the fact that social media kept evolving during the period of this study.

4.3 Fieldwork

4.3.1 Three incidents used in this research

During the focus group discussions, according to the design of research questions, three disasters (two natural disasters and one human-made event) were used to stimulate participants to join the discussion and to help them to recall other similar disasters. The three stimulating events are as follows:

A. Ya'an Earthquake in south-west China in 2013

In the morning of 20th April, 2013, an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.0 hit Ya'an, Sichuan Province in southwest China – not far away from Wenchuan where the devastating earthquake struck in 2008. By 24th April, this earthquake claimed 196 lives, 21 were still missing, more than 13, 500 were injured, and 2.3 million people were influenced by

the earthquake in some way(Xinhua, 2013a; Xinhua, 2013b). It was the most severe earthquake in China since the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake.

B. Boston Marathon Bombings in 2013

On 15 April 2013, two bombs ripped through the spectator area of the Boston Marathon, an annual race that has taken place in the Boston area since 1897. The bombings occurred at 2:49 PM EDT, exploding seconds apart near the finish line. Three people were killed and 282 were injured (Potts, 2013: 106). One of the deaths was a graduate student named Lv Lingzi from China. Both individuals and the US government turned to the internet for information of this incident. The FBI even asked the public to send in any photos or videos of the marathon and its aftermath to aid them in their investigation.

C. Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013

Typhoon Haiyan, known as Super Typhoon Yolanda in the Philippines, was one of the strongest tropical cyclones ever recorded. On November 8th 2013, it devastated portions of Southeast Asia particularly in the Philippines. It is the deadliest typhoon on record in Philippines, killing at least 6,300 people in that country alone. Haiyan is also the strongest storm recorded at landfall.

The three disasters listed above were reported differently on Chinese social media. They touched and involved social media users from China in various ways, and with different aims. The three disasters were selected as triggers during this study for

the following reasons: first, relatively speaking, these incidents were three of the most reprehensible occurrences that had happened not long before group discussion – two in April, one in November 2013. The recent occurrence of these tragedies tended to leave a deep impression on social users, and therefore it was assumed that they could stimulate more discussions around the topic of news and suffering. Furthermore, the incorporation of three disasters in the discussion was based on assumptions that regarded social media as a mediapolis. Accordingly, a media landscape includes various events rather than isolated suffering, so three recent reports were chosen on purpose. Third, two events that happened outside of China were intentionally selected because the aim of this study was not confined to Chinese social media users' mediation of suffering within China, rather it aimed at gathering the perspectives of suffering reports from across the globe. As it will be shown in the empirical chapters, in spite of the deliberative choice of these three events as a starting point for discussion, many other similar or relevant events came to the participants' minds.

4.3.2 Details of the fieldwork

In order to familiarize myself with the procedures of focus group discussion, and to test the validity of the topic guides for participants, I recruited three master students from the University of Warwick as volunteers to do a pilot study before the start of the fieldwork in China. All of these three participants came from China and were heavy social media users when the pilot discussion took place. Each of these three participants had lived in the UK for over half a year when the pilot study was carried out, therefore, their patterns of media witnessing and media

remembering are slightly different from their counterparts back in China. However, through the pilot study, these participants gave their feedback on the design of the topic guide, which was helpful to the successful implementation of the final focus group discussions. Apart from that, their discussions are additionally meaningful for further comparative studies between Chinese people who have and have no life experiences of living in a foreign country.

The final focus groups in China were composed of pre-existing clusters of second-year undergraduates. A total of 21 students⁶ (17 female and 3 male) among a total of 85 (57 female and 28 male) students majoring in Social Work at Shandong University of Technology⁷ volunteered to participate in the discussion (see 'Appendix 4: Profiles of Participants in This Study' for details of these participants). Gender is a significant category in studies about suffering and mourning (Ong, 2011b). In order to avoid the 'peacock effect' (Krueger and Casey, 2009) during discussion, and to observe the difference between male and female attitudes toward social media, the four male students were in the same group. The other seventeen female students were divided into three groups according to their own preferences. The discussions were conducted in the department's group work laboratory, with which all of the participants are familiar, thereby creating a relaxed and informal environment. All of the focus groups in this study were around an hour in length, and were digitally recorded and then transcribed

⁶ I did not keep a record of the ages of the participants in this study. When the fieldwork was taken they were all second-year undergraduate students, which leads me to predict that they were between 20-22 years old at that time.

⁷ The researcher got his BA at this university.

verbatim for later analysis. Field notes were taken instantly after each discussion, and were kept for reference during a later stage of data analysis.

I conducted all of the transcriptions myself. The total length of the transcriptions are 34,740 Chinese words. In the data analysis Chapters I only translated useful extracts into English. In this study, I also served as a moderator in all of the group discussions. I positioned myself as a figure of authority for all groups, and was equally respectful and polite during all interactions to put people at ease. At the beginning of each focus group, I briefly introduced the goal of the research, and explained why the discussions were being recorded, and that the data would later be analysed.

The reasons why university students were selected as participants in this research are clear: first, they are the main body of internet and social media users in China. When the fieldwork was taken, 52.5 % of Weibo users were aged 20 to 29 (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2013: 18). Second, it is a convention to choose university students as a sample population, as shown in the work of Zhang and Leung (2015: 1011). Among 84 articles in the top six journals in communication studies during 2006 and 2011, 54.8 % chose university students as their participants. Third, students were chosen based on convenience and practicality. Young people tend to be more receptive to new ideas and new things than their elderly counterparts. The decrease of family or community's constraints on individuals give young people more freedom and autonomy. That is one aspect of individualisation for Chinese youth nowadays. It is almost a general phenomenon across different cultures that youth are always standing at the forefront of dazzling

social changes. Therefore, youth are of great importance in understanding social changes and uncertainties during transitional times. That is another reason why youth were chosen as the participants in this study.

Three disasters, two natural and one human-made, were used to stimulate participants to join focus group discussion. The Boston Marathon Bombings and Ya'an earthquake in Sichuan, China were chosen, because they took place around the same time, in April 2013, and both became the focal point on Weibo at that time. Typhoon Yolanda occurred in the Philippines and was selected due to its severity and timing. It happened a month before the fieldwork carried out and was one of the severest catastrophes happened in 2013 around the world. The aim of this thesis is not to gather social media users' responses toward any specific suffering incidents, rather it is to investigate the way users formulate their moral agency with regard to suffering others within mediapolis – where the suffering of others is a matter of common occurrence. These three events were used to encourage participants' discussions about the questions in this research.

Three sets of photographs about the disasters (with three photographs in every set) were given to the students to start the discussion. During the discussion, all of the participants were asked whether they could identify which disaster the pictures represented. Two groups immediately recognised the Boston Marathon Bombings, and all of them identified Lushan earthquake in Sichuan. However, only one group recognised Typhoon Yolanda in the Philippines. The male group was the only group which could recognise all three disasters. According to Loizos (2000: 93), the use of video, film and photographs as research documents are reasonable in several ways:

images offer restricted but powerful records of real-world, real-time actions and events; they can be used as primary data visual information for complex theatrical and abstract research questions; and 'the visual' and 'the media' become 'social facts', and play a big part in social, political and economic life which cannot be ignored. This is especially true in a 24/7 online world among youth social media users.

4.4 Data Analysis

Analysis of the data collected is critical to research success. Considering that focus groups could generate voluminous, large amounts of data in a short time, '[i]f the analyst was also the focus group moderator and has transcribed at least some of the text, she/he will arrive at this stage with a fair knowledge of the data' (Bloor *et al.*, 2001: 63). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative analysis occurs at the same time as data collection. Krueger (1994, cited in Rabiee, 2004: 657) suggests to 'consider a continuum of analysis ranging from the mere accumulation of raw data to the interpretation of data: raw data; descriptive statements; interpretation'.

Bryman and Burgess hold the view that, unlike in quantitative research, data analysis in qualitative research is not a separate phase. Rather, 'research design, data collection and analysis are simultaneous and continuous processes' (1994b: 217). 'The research process, then, is not a clear cut sequence of procedures following a neat pattern, but a messy interaction between the conceptual and empirical world, deduction and induction occurring at the same time' (Bechhofer, 1974: 73, cited in Bryman and Burgess, 1994a: 2). During the qualitative research process, an interactive interplay between data and the researcher's interpretation

of that data is quite common. Researchers normally need to move backwards and forwards between different phases of reflection and interpretation.

'Generation of concepts' is one of the most frequently mentioned aspects during qualitative data analysis. Data analysis in qualitative research, however, does not necessarily lead to the generation of new concepts. It is possible that, on some occasions, researchers will relate his or her observations to pre-existing but not clearly-defined notions (Bryman and Burgess, 1994a: 6-7). As clues to the generation of new concepts, Woods (1986: 133-134, cited in Bryman and Burgess, 1994a: 7) recommends being sensitive to repetitious incidents of words, irregularities, unusual occurrences and how people say things (for example, if accompanied by droll laughter, embarrassment or anger).

While classifying data gathered from informants, Howard Becker introduced two basic criteria: 'whether they were directed by the researcher or volunteered by the informants, and whether they were given to the research in isolation or conveyed as part of a group in which both researcher and informants were participants' (Becker, 1958 cited in Morgan and Spanish, 1984: 260).

According to Norman Fairclough, 'there are three analytically separable elements in processes of meaning-making: the production of the text, the text itself, and the reception of the text' (Fairclough, 2003: 10). He also mentioned that '[w]hat is "said" in a text always rest[s] upon "unsaid" assumptions' (Fairclough, 2003: 11). Interpretation is a complex process which involves three parts: understanding, judgement and evaluation, and explanatory.

4.4.1 *Discourse analysis*

According to David Howarth, discourse analysis originates from disciplines such as linguistics and semiotics, but it has been influenced by many adjacent disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. There are at least three reasons for the growing interest in discourse analysis within academia: to begin with, traditionally, there was a growing dissatisfaction with positivist approaches as mainstream methods in social sciences. Furthermore, this positivist approach delayed the influence of the turn to language in the social sciences, which started in the late 1950s and 1960s, under the influence of the linguist Noam Chomsky (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 9). Discourse analysis is also a result of the emergence of new approaches, such as hermeneutics, critical theory and post-structuralism. The revival of Marxist theory and the spread of psychoanalytic discourse in the social sciences contributed to its development as a research method. Finally, the widespread use of discourse analysis in linguistics, since the 1970s, and its adoption by scholars and researchers in cultural studies and literary theory have expanded people's understanding of discourse and developed a new way of doing discourse analysis – critical discourse analysis. All of these factors lead to the popularity of discourse analysis at present (Howarth, 2000: 1-2).

Like many other complex concepts in social sciences, the meaning, scope and application of discourse varies according to the different theoretical systems in which it is integrated. Discourse analysis entails not only ways of thinking about discourse, but also ways of treating discourse as data (Wood and Kroger, 2000: 3). While talking about discourse analysis, according to Norman Fairclough and Ruth

Wodak (1997: 258, italics in original) discourse is 'socially *constitutive* as well as socially shaped: it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people'.

According to Jonathan Potter (1997, cited in Wood and Kroger, 2000: 3), discourse analysis 'has an analytic commitment to studying discourse as texts and talk in social practices'. The focus of discourse analysis is not on language as an abstract entity (a tool for description), but as the medium for interaction (a way of doing things). Language is so central to all social activities, as a kind of social text(s) they 'do not merely *reflect* or *mirror* objects, [...] they actively *construct* a version of those things, [...] they *do* things' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 6, italics in original).

James Gee also believes that language serves many functions in our lives, among which giving and getting information is not at all the only one. Language enables people 'to do things and to be things', therefore, 'there are important connections among saying (informing), doing (action), and being (identity) (Gee, 2014: 2). Consequently, language is also action which has social and political implications, and needless to say analysis of discourses becomes the analysis of what people do.

The analysis of action requires an exploration of its functions. In discourse analysis, 'action' refers to anything that can be done using words (language in a general way), therefore, 'function' means 'what it is that people are doing in and with their talk and text (or more casually, what the talk and text is doing)' (Wood and Kroger, 2000: 7). Wood and Kroger further distinguish several types of the function of language, for example, linguistic function (to connect phrases), pragmatic function (to convey non-semantic meaning), or social function. Apart from that, functions

may be specific or global depending on different contexts. In discourse analysis, analysts are interested both in the content (what is said) and functions and effects (what is done and how it is done) of different discourses. In other words, discourse analysts aim to 'identify the function of the talk not only by considering its content, but also by taking it apart to see how it is structured and organized' (ibid: 28).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) does not only focus on social texts – both spoken and written – as its objects. In the eyes of critical discourse analysts, discourse is a form of social practice. These discursive practices 'both *constitutes* the social world [including social identities and social relations] and is *constituted* by other social practices' (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 61, italics in original). The emphasis on 'critical' infers 'embedding the data in the social, taking a political stance explicitly, and a focus on self-reflection as scholars doing research' (Wodak, 2001: 9). Therefore, a fully critical account of discourse requires 'a theorization and description of both the social processes and structures which give rise to the production of a text, and of the social structures and processes within which individuals or groups as social historical subjects, create meanings in their interaction with texts' (ibid: 3). As a result of that, critical discourse analysis is concerned with three concepts: power, history and ideology, among which it is particularly interested in the relationship between language and power. Although power does not derive from language, people could use language to challenge, to overturn, and to alter distributions of power both in the short term and in the long run.

Although data collection and data analysis are a vital part of discourse analysis, they do not represent the whole of discourse analysis as a field. '[D]iscourse analysis is itself an interpretation [...] of the interpretive work people have done in specific contexts' (Gee 2014: 141). All analysis are open to further discussion and dispute. Generally speaking, discourse analysis is not only about method, it is also a 'perspective on the nature of language and its relationship to the central issues of the social sciences' (Wood and Kroger, 2000: X). In sum, discourse analysis is a conceptual enterprise.

Unlike other forms of qualitative analysis which are concerned about 'what the discourse might reveal, [...] discourse analysis focuses on the discourse itself'. What is more it 'rejects the assumption that there is a world (internal or external) that can be known separately from its construction in discourse and thus takes the view that it is inappropriate to use replicability and accuracy as criteria' (Wood and Kroger, 2000: 28).

Agency, as a sociological concept, is of great importance in critical discourse analysis. In the scene of suffering, according to Lilie Chouliaraki, agency is about 'who acts upon whom'. There are two dimensions with regard to the meaning of agency in this context: 'first, agency refers to how active the sufferer appears on screen and, second, it refers to how other actors present in the scene appear to engage with the sufferer' (Chouliaraki, 2008: 220). These two aspects of agency shape the relationship between the sufferer and spectator in the following ways: spectator as an ordinary watcher; and when the spectator is invited to feel for, or even to act upon the misfortune of others.

According to Anthony Giddens (1991), contemporary life in late modern society is characterised by its reflexivity. 'A critical awareness of discursive practices and an orientation to transforming such practices as an element in social struggles [...] is a normal feature of everyday life. The critical analysis of discourse is therefore firstly a feature of contemporary social life' (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 260).

Following the principles of critical discourse analysis, combined with the research questions, I am going to explore two analytical categories in this research: the discursive means of the construction of the audience's agency and the discursive strategies of involvement and attachment of the audience with distant others.

Focusing on the question of 'how are the relevant social actors represented in a particular discourse', Van Leeuwen (1996: 32-70) identifies several variables to address it. I am going to employ Van Leeuwen's framework on the representation of social actors in discourse to analyse the construction of the audience's agency in this thesis. The following discursive practices are especially relevant in this analysis: (1) nomination (social actors to be represented in their unique identity) and categorisation (social actors represented in terms of the identities and functions they share with others); (2) functionalisation (social actors to be referred to in terms of an activity, namely what they do) and identification (social actors to be defined in terms of what they are which includes three types: classification, relational identification and physical identification); (3) personalisation (social actors represented as human beings) and impersonalisation (social actors to be represented by abstract nouns or concrete nouns which does not show the semantic feature of human, includes two types: abstraction and objectivation); (4)

individualisation (social actors to be represented as individuals) and assimilation (social actors to be represented as groups, which includes aggregation and collectivisation).

In addition to the four sets of social practices, exclusion (the omission of specific social actors in the discussion) is also an important aspect in critical discourse analysis, because what is absent in discourse is as equally important as what is present. Van Leeuwen further distinguishes two different kinds of exclusion: suppression (radical exclusion where no traces of the social actors can be found at all) and backgrounding (where traces of the excluded actors were mentioned in the text).

Involvement/detachment are important strategic aspects of self-presentation in different discourses. In discursive practices, strategies of involvement aim at 'expressing the speakers' inner states, attitudes and feelings or degrees of emotional interest' specifically towards the person portrayed in the utterance or talk; and at the same time also aim at 'engaging the hearers', both emotionally and cognitively (Tannen, 1989, cited in Reisigl and Wodak, 2001: 82). Strategies of detachment are realised by expressing distance discursively. Involvement and detachment are closely related to the genre of discourses, and further the field of social action to which the genre is connected. According to Reisigl and Wodak (2001: 82-83), discursive involvement can be achieved by various linguistic means, for instance, via linguistic markers of emphasis and intensification. Involvement can be expressed by repetition of texts and discourses at all levels. Involvement can also be shown through gestures and facial expression and many other non-verbal

ways. Most importantly in this thesis, I focus on the verbal way of expressing involvement via intensity markers, such as emphasising and amplifying particles (words such as ‘really’, ‘very’, ‘only’, ‘absolutely’, etc.); exaggerating quantifiers (a word or phrase which indicates a number or amount being referred to); and intensifying verbs (not least modal verbs that are used if we believe something is/is not certain, probable or possible) and verb phrases, adjectives and adverbs that encode speakers’ emotions, feelings, moods and general dispositions. Generally speaking, narratives and conversations result in a high degree of involvement. Direct speech and free indirect speech tend to express a speaker’s involvement, and encourage the involvement of the hearer(s); while the use of indirect speech by a speaker(s) is an indicator of distance. I will further discuss the linguistic choices of participants in the empirical chapters.

4.4.2 *Thematic analysis*

As shown in Section 4.2, this study used a combination of focus groups and online ethnography in the collection of the data. Correspondingly, in addition to using discourse analysis as a means of analysing focus group discussions, I also employed thematic analysis to study the materials collected through online ethnography. I followed techniques suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003: 102) in my thematic analysis. Thus, the process of identifying themes was based on the following standards: repetitive topics, themes that differ from former research literature, and new subject areas that arose which showed the latest characteristics of mediation of suffering on social media. Themes also became apparent by observing intensive and repetitive reviewing of the research summaries and notes during data

collection, rather than using coding techniques which are common in grounded theory.

4.5 Translation Strategies

For some qualitative research, translation is a stage that researchers are unable to escape. This has become a common phenomenon in this globalised world, especially when researchers are conducting their studies in a different source language other than the target language they are going to present the research in. For example, when data collection and analysis is not in the same language (the trend is to collect data in another language and then to present the results in English), the same is apparent for cross-culture projects which might need to be translated into a number of languages. As a result of this translation stage, a series of follow-up problems submerged, such as: whether or not it matters methodologically if the act of translation is classified or not, and who does the translation, and so forth (Temple and Young, 2004: 161).

In social science studies, researchers influence the research process, and this is particularly the case in qualitative studies due to its interpretative characteristics. The researchers' personal background, such as gender, socioeconomic status, philosophical worldview, cultural background etc., will unavoidably impact the whole research process: from selecting the research topic to interpreting the findings. Language, the importance of which academics have realised for a long time, is important in describing and constructing the social world we live in. Therefore, while doing cross-culture research, translators undoubtedly make an impression on it. Objectivity is of great importance in every research stage. Some

researchers hold the view that, '[i]f the research is objective, it does not matter whether they carry out the translation or if someone else does' (ibid: 167).

Researchers have employed different strategies to solve the problems caused by translation. For example, some researchers suggest that the only valid way to ensure translation accuracy is to utilise different researchers to check recordings and transcriptions (Emmel, 1998, cited in Regmi *et al.*, 2010: 19). This method is effective for researchers working as a group, yet it is not achievable for those who are conducting projects on their own. Therefore, I did not use that translation method in this study. In addition, it is also possible that sometimes researchers could not find an appropriate equivalent/substitute word in the aimed language while translating, this is especially true while doing cross-culture research.

Some other scholars suggested two strategies for translating qualitative research. First is 'literal translation', namely that data collected in the source language should be transcribed verbatim in its original language, and then translated into the target language accordingly. After that, checking and rechecking transcripts aid reliability. Second is 'elegant free translation', where only the key themes or quotes are transcribed and translated. Literal translation adds rigor to the research but is time-consuming; elegant free translation is time-saving, yet involves the risk of misrepresenting key information (Regmi *et al.*, 2010: 20-21).

Language is an important tool in describing and constructing the social world we are living in. All of the focus group interviews and the other ethnographic data collected during this study were originally in Mandarin. After weighing the pros and

cons of the two translation strategies described above, and considering the time and financial constraints of this research, and that I was familiar with the data from being present during its collection, I did all of the translations during the writing of this thesis. During translation, it was important to me that I tried my best to make sure that all translated fragments were understandable to English readers and close to their original meaning.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

A simple misinterpretation about ethical issues in research is that they only exist during the data collection phase. However, ethical considerations surface during different phases of a research process. As summarized by Creswell (2012: 57), in qualitative research the researcher should consider ethical issues ‘prior to conducting the study, at the beginning of the study, during data collection, in data analysis, in reporting the data, and in publishing a study’. From the designing of this research, I kept in mind that the primary responsibility of the research was to protect all of the participants from any harm that might arise from their participation. I took several measures to ensure that none of my volunteers would come to harm by participating in this research.

Firstly, before the focus group discussions, I informed all of the participants about the aims and methods which were going to be used in this research (see the ‘Study Information Sheet’ in Appendix 2). At the same time I requested their consent to participate in the focus groups, I made sure that each person understood that participation involved digitally recording their discussions (see the ‘Interview Consent Letter’ in Appendix 3). As a researcher who needs to collect data from his

participants, the idea that ‘no moral judgment towards any of the opinions made by the participants’ was kept in mind throughout the research. For the project as a whole, I strictly followed a statement of ethical practice by the British Sociology Association and additionally abided by the University of Warwick institutional ethical standards. Therefore, I paid special attention to participants’ confidentiality, anonymity, and other private matters, during the focus group discussions and later data analysis.

During the fieldwork, I offered participants the opportunity to use a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality so that their anonymity was fully guaranteed (no one accepted the offer). Participants had the option to refuse participation at any stage of the research. The date, time and place of the focus group discussions were previously agreed with the participants in order to avoid any unnecessary inconvenience to them. As a methodology based on the philosophy of pragmatism and interactionism, I treat ‘participants and the data they provide with value, dignity, respect and confidentiality’ (Corbin and Strauss, 2015: 28) throughout the research process.

During the process of data analysis, data and information gathered from the focus group discussions were treated with the strictest safety and confidentiality. No one had access to the original digital recordings and transcriptions besides the researcher. During the writing of this thesis, if the participants’ opinions were quoted, their original names were changed to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity. All personal information as well as references to people/places will not appear in any publications of this research.

4.7 Limitations

4.7.1 *Selection of the participants*

As shown in Section 4.3, the participants in this study were all second-year undergraduate students in their early 20s studying Social Work. As a result of the gender ratio in this subject, as previously mentioned in Section 4.3.2, among all of the 21 participants only three were male. Furthermore, all of the participants came from the same province where the university is located. When I began, participant selection was based on the feasibility of conducting the research, however, the composition of the groups might not be able to provide a complete picture, in terms of gender, age, occupation and socioeconomic background, of the research questions and therefore constrain the explanation power of the theoretical framework – as shown in the empirical chapters later.

One of the reasons why I decided to do online ethnography was to remedy this shortcoming in the design of the research. Nevertheless, it is almost impossible to guarantee all of the comments that I gathered are from young social media users although about 52.5 % of the Weibo users are aged between 20 to 29 (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2013: 18) in this research. This leaves room for a future study which I will discuss in detail in the concluding chapter. Former researchers have concluded that the hallmark of good qualitative research is ‘particularity rather than generalizability’ (Greene and Carcelli, 1997, cited in Creswell, 2013: 204). My main concern in this study will be on one particular group of young university students who are also social media users.

4.7.2 *The identity of the researcher*

Researcher identity is a common issue amongst those who research their own culture, as an outsider (a student from a university based in the UK in my case) in social sciences. As Chinese, I treated myself as an insider who shared the same cultural background with the subjects in this research. However, my status as a PhD student from a British university created distance between me and the participants from time to time. As the moderator during all of the focus groups I was present in all discussions, and occasionally I was regarded as an outsider – a European – by the research subjects. For example, during one discussion of the participants' reactions towards suffering news, WL in focus group 3 asked me, '[i]n *your* place, in Europe, when a country is suffering, will all the European Union, all the European people donate to help?' In this case, WL treated me as a member of the European Union although I was just studying in a British university when the research was carried out and did not consider myself to be Chinese.

Distance between myself and the participants was definitely not what I wanted during this research, because they might then have had some reservations while expressing themselves during the discussions, and to obtain data in the most 'natural' and 'real' state felt key to the success of this study. Most of the time, the participants of this study treated me as a graduate from their department – as an insider. Consequently, they found it unnecessary to expand upon certain statements which are commonplace among young university students. Therefore, the discussion could be considered as 'natural', within the confines of an artificially created research situation.

Summary

The present chapter is about the methodology selected for this study. I discussed relevant research contexts in section 4.1, through a basic analysis of an academic turn from media texts to media reception. This section points out the necessity of broadening the research of distant suffering from traditional media to social media in this digital era. Section 4.2 talks about the research methods. Based on the theoretical assumption that users' moral agency is discursively constructed and elaborated through social interaction, focus group discussions were used as the main research method in this study. Data collection in qualitative research normally requires a mix of different methods, this study is no exception. Online ethnography was also used to collect data for the analysis of new characteristics of the mediation of distant suffering through social media.

Section 4.3 is mainly about the details of the fieldwork in this study, which includes: three trigger events (photographs) used at the start of each focus group, the scale of the study, and the type of data finally collected. Section 4.4 is about the analytical principals of the analysis of empirical data collected, based on a combination of discourse analysis and thematic analysis. Discourse analysis was used mainly to analyse focus group discussion materials to observe how social media users, or at least those who participated in this research, position themselves as witness of distant suffering and how they reconstruct memories of similar events witnessed through the media. Thematic analysis was used on materials collected online to explore the latest characteristics associated with the mediation of distant suffering through social media.

Because all of the original data in this study was in Mandarin, translation became unavoidable and extremely important in the writing of the thesis. I conducted the translation myself, and tried my best to ensure the objectivity and validity of the translation. Translation strategies that I considered were discussed in section 4.5. Section 4.6 is about the ethical considerations of this study. Since the topic in this study is about the construction of the users' moral agency while witnessing and remembering distant suffering, I discussed the important of avoiding harm to participants, and the means by which I protected participant's privacy. The limitations of this research design mainly on the selection of the participant and the identity of the researcher is discussed in the last section, section 4.7, of the chapter.

CHAPTER 5 WITNESSING AND REMEMBERING ON WEIBO

I am going to analyse the empirical focus group discussions in this chapter to see how social media users position themselves as witnesses of the distant suffering available on social media and to address how they remember distant suffering. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, the two media practices – media witnessing and media remembering – allow the analysis of the ways in which social media users position themselves as witnesses of distant suffering during their everyday life, and further enable the articulation of their moral agency. In the next two sections, I am going to focus on these two media practices respectively.

5.1 Media Witnessing

In this section, I am going to analyse the focus group discussions to have a look at how social media users position themselves as witnesses of mediated distant suffering. Following Kyriakidou (2011), the analysis of this part will be based on the assumption that the audiences' experiences of witnessing could be analysed with reference to the three tensions in the formation of their moral agency towards the others at a distance (as I examined earlier in Section 3.3): the tension between emotional involvement and rationalised detachment with the suffering reports, the tension between complicity with, and the responsibility towards, the media, and the tension between hospitality and apathy towards the distant sufferers.

The purpose of this analysis is to further the study of audiences' witnessing from mass media to social media. From former studies in this area, we learned that media witnessing involves moral engagement, and the audiences' moral agency depending on a combination of different factors during the mediation process: the

mediated events; the textual representation of the events by the media; and also the social, economic and cultural background of the audiences involved. Will this conclusion work in the digital media era? Or will there be any new characteristic that comes to light among uses of digital media? That is what I am going to explore in this part.

The first three of the four types of media witnessing among the Greek television audience in Kyriakidou's study, which I mentioned in Section 3.4, are not quite clear in this study about the mediation of distant suffering among Chinese youth. I am going to discuss the reasons of the lack of affective witnessing, ecstatic witnessing and politicised witnessing among Chinese social media users in detail later. Now let us firstly have a look at the detached witnessing among young social media users in China.

5.1.1 *Detached witnessing*

In detached witnessing, social media users position themselves as onlookers at the mediated suffering they are witnessing. Therefore, the suffering at a distance turns out to be something that happened far away which has nothing to do with the users at all. Distant suffering becomes something irrelevant to the audience in their everyday life, and fails to enter their moral space of concern. In Section 3.4, I concluded that there are four types of media witnessing among television audiences based on the former study: affective witnessing, ecstatic witnessing, politicised witnessing and detached witnessing. During media witnessing by social media users, it is difficult to find any emotional involvement of the users with the sufferers at a distance, or any indignation about the events being witnessed.

In detached witnessing, social media users described themselves as disengaged spectators towards distant suffering and sufferers. Generally speaking, in detached witnessing, those suffering stories are described in an emotionless way, which indicates the lack of emotional engagement with the report or the sufferers. Furthermore, media stories are told as a sequence of events, which shows that the suffering of distant others is irrelevant to the user's everyday life. On top of that, there is a sense of distance between the users and the sufferers within the users' narrations, which indicates that these stories fail to enter the users' moral space of concern.

5.1.1.1 Rationalised detachment from the suffering events

There is a lack of emotional involvement of the social media users as a moral agent in this kind of media witnessing. There is no trace of any emotionally charged verbs or expressions throughout the participant's descriptions. All of the viewer's statements of the suffering events are 'external report[s]' (Boltanski, 1999: 86) which are just the descriptions of the events and the unfortunate's suffering. Apart from that, I could not find any emotional responses from the viewers. This is shown in the following quote when participants were discussing the Boston Marathon Bombings in 2013:

Moderator: Now let's have a look at this set of pictures. It happened on 15th April in Boston, US.

ZZ: Marathon explosion.

Moderator: OK, could you please depict this event to us?

ZZ: It happened in a marathon race, near the finishing line, the terrorists set the bombs off which caused severe damage, very severe

damage on the spot. The police went out in force. Have they caught the terrorists? Yes, I think so. People on the spot were in chaos, and there were broken limbs, there were broken limbs at the scene. I remembered that a passer-by was frightened to death by a head blown off.

Moderator: Has anyone else recognised these pictures?

Respondents: No. (In a quite low voice.)

ZZ: It was the headline of many websites back at the time.

(FG 4, female, line 31-34)

In this group with six participants, only one respondent (ZZ in the above extract) recognised that this event is the Boston Marathon Bombings. From her description of this event, we could find some emotional depictions, such as: 'the bomb caused *severe damage, very severe damage*', 'a passer-by was *frightened to death* by a head blown off'. But these are external descriptions about what happened on the scene, rather than the discussant's emotional reactions towards the event and the sufferers (such as: I was *shocked/touched* by the scene). In the discussion of the Ya'an earthquake, SY in focus group 1 mentioned: '*I have seen all of these (three pictures about Ya'an earthquake)*. However, I simply could not call to mind what *exactly the incident is*.' So the respondent's emotional responses and involvements towards the event and suffering others are totally missing in their discussions.

Apart from that, the respondent's depictions of the victims are expressed in an abstract way: '*People* on the spot were in chaos'. From her generalised description, we could not identify any specific victims, and we even could not find any 'ideal victims'⁸(Moeller, 1999: 107) which are common among people's narrations about

⁸ In Moeller's book, females and children and the other disadvantaged groups are regarded as 'ideal victims' in unjustified or innocent suffering.

suffering events. Although there is an account of the suffering in the scene, it is constructed as a generalised sequence of images: 'there were *broken limbs*, there were *broken limbs at the scene*'. The participant's description of this incident is a narration of a sequence of events: '*It happened in a marathon race, near the finishing line, the terrorists set the bombs off ...*'

The lack of specificity in the above description of the faraway suffering is one of the characteristics of detached witnessing, during which social media users just narrated the distant unfortunates in generalised terms, thus not involving any affectional responses towards both the event and the sufferer at a distance. This indefinite description of distant suffering fails to connect viewers with sufferers, therefore the suffering is unimaginable for the viewers in their 'zones of safety' (Chouliaraki, 2006: 10), namely their ordinary mediated everyday life. The lack of emotional engagement is the reason for the detached witnessing, but at the same time is the result as well. Audiences were caught in this vicious circle: they did not involve themselves emotionally with distant suffering because these events are far away from the audiences, while at the same time it is the faraway suffering that caused unemotional responses.

5.1.1.2 Complicity with the media

In Kyriakidou's theoretical framework, the viewers' attitudes toward media which broadcast the stories of suffering constitute an important part of their articulation of the moral agency. In her research, she found that detached television audiences tend to 'place themselves at the receiving end of the media output, on which they

have no responsibility themselves' (Kyriakidou, 2011: 198). Susan Sontag holds a sceptical view towards the mediated representations about the world; according to her: 'What is called in news parlance "the world" [...] is (unlike the world) a very small place, both geographically and thematically' (Sontag, 2003: 17). Unlike Sontag, in this study, I found no trace of scepticism from social media users towards what they have learned through different platforms with regard to these three triggering events in the beginning of the focus group discussions.

It was not the user's desire to engage with the suffering of others in detached witnessing; at the same time, they had no interest in making any evaluation about the role of the media in broadcasting suffering events. They positioned themselves as passive consumers of social media posting, which was the same as was seen with detached television audiences. Because in detached witnessing, the audience are emotionally disengaged with both the distant suffering and the sufferers, there is a lack of interest among the audience in making any judgements about the role of the media and their reporting.

Moderator: Could you describe this incident (the Boston Marathon Bombings) to us?

LG: After seeing this set of photos, what comes to my mind firstly is the girl from Beijing Institute of Technology, she was studying in Boston when the explosion happened. There were many other celebrities who were present at the scene and witnessed the bombings. That's all what I know about this incident. I heard, from my friends in Boston, all of the universities in Boston were closed at that time.

SJ: I would like to add that the celebrities on Weibo he just mentioned. One of them is Wang Shi⁹ as I know, he was at the scene when the explosion happened. I saw the news about Boston Bombings on Weibo,

⁹ Wang Shi (王石) is a Chinese businessman, he is the Founder and former Chairman of China Vanke, the largest real estate enterprise in China. He is a keen marathon runner.

and noticed that Wang was there, so I clicked on his Weibo and read through the comments under his account. That's my impression about this event.

HZ: Well, about this event, I saw it once on news, all I know is that there's an explosion during the running. That's all I know about it, I have no idea who planned it.

(FG 2, male, line 50-55)

As shown in the above quote, the second respondent, SJ, saw the news about the Boston Marathon Bombings on Weibo and learned the news from the comments in Weibo celebrity Wangshi's account. The depiction of the incident turns out to be a reconstruction of the Weibo celebrity's discursive activities. With regard to the information from Weibo, in spite of the other participant's comments, he showed no hesitation in accepting them. In the same way, what emerged in LG's mind was also *'There were many other celebrities who were present at the scene and witnessed the bombings'*.

5.1.1.3 Conditional hospitality depends on immediacy

The use of indefinite terms (such as ZZ in group 4 when saying *'People on the spot were in chaos, and there were broken limbs, there were broken limbs at the scene.'*) rather than specific individuals renders the distant sufferers as fleeting images which exist just on different social media platforms or different media terminals. To some extent, by logging off the website or turning off one's smart phone, the viewers could shut down the connection between themselves and the sufferers. However, that is not always the case in detached witnessing. There is a distinction between relevant and irrelevant suffering in the viewers' minds. The measure of relevance is the social media users' feeling of distance, both geographical and

emotional, between themselves and the sufferers. It is indicated in the following extract, when the discussants are talking about their understanding about the Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013.

Moderator: Could you tell me what is depicted in this set of pictures?

WL: Is this a tsunami? I just remember that there was a tsunami happened in the Philippines. But I don't know much about the details except there was a tsunami.

LJ: Well, what I want to say is: it's true we are learning Social Work, and our teachers asked us to pay more attention to all kinds of news, however, actually I failed to do that. Normally in our dormitory, several of them will be watching news while using the internet. I rarely do that unless the news pops up and the news happens to be interesting to me.

QR: I don't know much about this event.

JF: I don't know anything about these events before this discussion, however, after learning what happened to these sufferers, I have great sympathy for them. But, they are too far away from me. I could do nothing more except feel sympathy towards their suffering.

LFF: I feel sorry for those victims of the news I caught online, be it natural disasters or man-made misfortunes, and have a sympathy with them. As regards Ya'an Earthquake in this April, I have many friends who are university students in Sichuan, I still remember one of them was in his classroom when the earthquake happened. He took several pictures of his classroom and buildings on campus, and posted them online. Well, for those outsiders like us, the typhoon is just a normal disaster: we just know that someone at a distance is suffering and needs help. However, after noticing that someone you are familiar with is suffering is different: what if they lost their lives in the earthquake? You must feel true sorrow for the loss of your friends' lives.

LJ: Well, I don't know much about these events in daily lives. But I remember what happened in Qingdao last month¹⁰. Actually, death is around us. It reminds me the fragility of human lives. I feel sorry for these people.

¹⁰ A month before the group discussion, an oil pipe leak explosion happened in Qingdao – another city which is about 300 kilometres away from the city where these participants' university is located – which caused 55 deaths, and 9 missing, besides which about 200 people were injured in this incident.

WL: It seem to me that these news items about suffering are happening around the world from time to time. But some of them don't mean anything to me at all except I might feel sorry for the sufferer after catching the news. But if the events are happening around us, we'll know something about them. For example, we know nothing about the US one; we know something about the Philippines one; we definitely know what happened to the China one, but not quite clear. If you ask me what happened in Qingdao last month, I could tell you the details. Basically, I tend to pay more attention to these that happened around me. But there's nothing I could do to help them, and I don't have the intention to offer a helping hand either.

(FG 3, female, line 60-74)

According to JF in the above extract, her lack of engagement with the disaster was justified due to that 'they are *too far away from me*. I could do nothing more except feel sympathy towards their suffering'. What is more, WL mentioned that 'Basically, I tend to *pay more attention to these that happened around me*'. LFF mentioned another event – Ya'an Earthquake – just because she had friends who were living in Ya'an when the earthquake happened: '*I have many friends who are university students in Sichuan, I still remember one of them was in his classroom when the earthquake happened. He took several pictures of his classroom and buildings on campus, and posted them online*'. It was her friends' social media postings that left her with a deep impression about the disaster. She continued to made a comparison between Typhoon Haiyan and Ya'an earthquake: to Typhoon Haiyan, she was just an '*outsider*', '*we just know that someone at a distance is suffering and needs help*', she could do nothing else except that. On the contrary, with regard to Ya'an Earthquake, it is totally different because she had friends who might have been hurt in this disaster, she got nervous and involved emotionally with it: '*what if they lost their lives in the earthquake? You must feel true sorrow for the loss of your friends' lives*'.

In the discussion above, two respondents (LJ and WL) talked about the oil pipe leak explosion which happened in Qingdao a month before the discussion, which is not far away from where the discussion was held. Both of them were very emotional when talking about this event, WL even sorting her knowledge about the three stimulating events according to the geographical distances: *'we know nothing about the US one; we know something about the Philippines one; we definitely know what happened to the China one*, but not quite clear. If you ask me what happened in *Qingdao* last month, I could tell you *the details*'. By using data set from the New York Times and Network TV News coverage on foreign disasters from 1964 to 1996, Van Belle (2000) concluded that geographic proximity (as measured by the air-travel distance between the national capital of the affected country and Washington, D.C.) and social and cultural proximity (gauged by the number of tourists to the affected country) both correlated positively with the amount of media coverage. From the participants' discussion, we could find that geographic proximity and social and cultural proximity not only relate to the amount of media coverage, but also influence the audiences' engagement with the sufferer. In detached witnessing, the viewers are neither emotionally nor morally engaged with the distant sufferers.

The reactions of LJ in the above discussion cannot be ignored: instead of confessing that she had no idea about what happened in the typhoon, she made an analysis on the reasons why she could not tell what the pictures are about. *'It's true we are learning Social Work, and our teachers asked us to pay more attention to all kinds of news, however, actually I failed to do that'*; her analysis sounds like a confession

which reminds people that not recognising the discussed event is rather shameful. Throughout her analysis, her concern was not for the suffering itself but for the questions the discussion raised for her.

Compared with other traditional media such as television, social media should have its advantages because it emphasises interactions among users and it has the characteristic of the immediacy of updating. However, in detached witnessing, this advantage of social media is not obvious. As in this research, I did not find much difference in the audiences' attitudes towards traditional media and social media in detached witnessing. In detached witnessing, distant sufferers are not welcome in the moral space of the users; at the same time, social media users are indifferent towards distant others. Detached viewers are indifferent bystanders who are indifferent towards distant sufferers, and who lack emotional engagement with distant suffering. In a nutshell, in detached witnessing, the distant others fail to get into the moral space of the social media users.

5.1.2 Reasons for detached witnessing

The reasons for the lack of the affective witnessing, ecstatic witnessing and politicised witnessing – which are obvious in the group of television audience – among social media users' discussions are varied. However, they are understandable considering the fact that all of the participants in this study are young university students who are in their early twenties. In this section, I am going to explain the specific reasons for the detached witnessing, namely the lack of the other three forms of media witnessing, among Chinese youth.

First of all, as young people without any income, participants in this study need to rely on their family for their tuition fees and living expenses. This lack of economic independency gives the participants the sense of powerlessness towards the suffering at a distance, because after all, money donations are regarded as the most common and desirable mode to alleviate suffering. As university students, the participants in this study are busy with their studies every term. People in higher education would not feel awkward about their lifestyle: during term time. They are centered on lectures and seminars; there are a variety of extracurricular activities after class; at the end of each term they need to prepare for examinations or writing essays; when finally the holiday arrives, it is supposed to be relaxing, so of course no one wants to discuss these gloomy events.

Furthermore, fragmented information on social media made full imagination and engagement with distant others difficult to achieve. In affective witnessing – and its extreme case of ecstatic witnessing – among television audience, emotionally charged verbs and expressions, representations of personalised stories of suffering and the construction of commonalities between the audience and the victims appear frequently in the discursive articulation of the audience (Kyriakidou, 2011: 151). However, on Weibo, which is full of fragmented narratives during the mediation of suffering incidents, it is difficult to have a coherent and comprehensive understanding of any specific incident only when the users keep following reports about it. It is a result of the ways of reporting through Weibo when short videos were still not common, and reports were mainly based on texts and photos. Although for social media, the digital age meant ‘accelerating

information updates, immediate information exchange' (Han, 2016: 20), the fragmented narratives made it demanding and difficult when detailed information was necessary to have a fully understanding and emotional engagement towards far-away suffering others.

The reason for the lack of politicised witnessing among Chinese youth is that young people in China nowadays are not as interested in politics as their Western counterparts are. Based on the *2014 Chinese Internet Social Mentality Survey*, a study about social groups' expressions of extreme emotions in the social media space found that people born in the 1990s are more likely to be politically apathetic, while those born in the 1980s tend to be emotionally non-extremists (Gui *et al.*, 2015: 89). One distinct characteristic of the politically apathetic group is that the majority of the content they produce online relates to individual issues, such as information searching, personal mood-sharing, daily life recording and amusement information etc. This echoes what I discussed earlier in Section 2.7 about the emergence of the 'Me Generation' and the enhancement of individualisation in China, especially since China's reform and opening-up started in 1978 under the influence of neo-liberal globalisation.

Besides the aforementioned reason, we could try to understand the lack of politicised witnessing among Chinese youth towards the three stimulating events from another angle. We need to turn to Lewis Coser's analysis of the group-binding functions of conflict:

[A]ccording to Simmel, [...] members of the same stratum or caste are drawn together in a solidarity resulting from their common enmity to and rejection of members of other strata or castes. In this way, a hierarchy of positions is maintained because of the aversion that the various members of the subgroups within the total society have for each other (Coser, 1956: 35).

In this case, occasional conflicts between China and USA, and between China and the Philippines, together with the patriotic education that Chinese youth accepted give them the impression that anything that has happened in the above two countries has nothing to do with them; sometimes they choose intentionally to overlook or even enjoy the misfortunes of others in some extreme cases.

National identity could be roughly defined as a sense of belonging to a particular territorially based nation or 'homeland', and of sharing a common set of rights, duties and traditions (Anthony Smith, 1991, cited in Thompson, 1995: 50). In his analysis of the origins of national consciousness, Benedict Anderson concluded that the development of printing played some role in the rise of nationalism. By using the Protestant Reformation in Western Europe as an example, he argued that the fixity of spoken vernaculars through printing and the promotion of some of these vernaculars into official languages led to the emergence of 'imagined community'. These virtual communities promoted the rise of national consciousness, and thus set the stage for the modern nation (Anderson, [1983] 2006: 37-46). In the history of human society, most of the time the boundaries of our moral universe were just limited to the borders of tribe, language, religion, or nation. The knowledge that

‘we might have obligations to human beings beyond our borders simply because we belong to the same species is a recent invention, the result of our awakening to the shame of having done so little to help the millions of strangers who died in [the 20th] century’s experiments in terror and extermination’ (Ignatieff, 2006: xii).

Due to the instantaneous and global reach of visibility that modern media technologies have achieved, it is harder and harder to sustain indifference or ignorance towards suffering news. Actually, television is not the first medium which altered audiences’ sense of space and of time, and thereafter sense of belonging. Both newspapers and radio have the same function as well. In all, these media gave individuals the feeling that we belong to groups and communities that are constituted partly through media (Thompson, 1995: 35). However, in spite of the worldwide dissemination of the news about suffering nowadays, it does not mean that the audiences’ capacity to think about the suffering of far-away people is significantly larger. ‘In a modern life – a life in which there is a superfluity of things to which we are invited to pay attention – it seems normal to turn away from images that simply make us feel bad. Many more would be switching channels if the news media were to devote more time to the particulars of human suffering caused by war and other infamies’ (Sontag, 2003: 104).

Unlike how nation-states function in the real off-line world, there is no borderline in the online world. However, we cannot leave behind the cultural and social background in which the individual is involved to check the link between individuals and the media. In other words, although globalisation could be regarded at the outset as ‘the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide

interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life, from the cultural to the criminal, the financial to the spiritual' (Held *et al.*, 1999: 2), the online world, however, fails to reflect the spirit of globalisation sometimes. As seen in China, the emerging individualisation is embedded in the political-economic conditions of the transforming Chinese state. It is wishful thinking to believe that having the chance to be connected with others necessarily leads to worldwide interconnectedness.

The lack of economic independency of the participants in this study fails to encourage them to engage with mediated distant suffering. The fragmented information learned from Weibo makes the full understanding and emotional engagement with the suffering others even harder to reach. Contemporary Chinese young people are not paying close attention to political issues as their counterparts do in Western countries. National identity gives the participants a sense of belonging to the same group; however, the occasional conflicts between China and US and the Philippines not long before the fieldwork was carried out led the young participants in this study to hold a hostile attitude towards people in both the above countries. No wonder they are emotionless toward suffering news that happened in these two countries. All of the factors working together made detached witnessing the most obvious media witnessing among young social media users in China.

5.1.3 Unwitnessed suffering

I treat unwitnessed suffering as an extreme case of detached witnessing. John Thompson describes one phenomenon during the process of media reception: '*the mundane character of receptive activity*', by which he means: 'the reception of

media products is a routine, practical activity which individuals carry out as an integral part of their everyday lives' (Thompson, 1995: 38, italics in original). In today's highly media-saturated world, it is not uncommon to find that the reception of media products has become 'a *routine* activity...an integral part of the regularised activities that constitute everyday life' (ibid : 39, italics in original). This routine witnessing is especially common among social media users in the social media era, when different platforms are flooded with fragmented information as a result of the instant update and immediate exchange characteristics of social media.

In human history, it is not strange to see that 'the scale of war's murderousness destroys what identifies people as individuals, even as human beings' (Sontag, 2003: 55). This is how war looks as an image from far away. In the same vein, large-scale disasters have the same ability to destroy people's identities as individuals. When large-scale disasters happen, generally speaking, victims, grieving relatives and news consumers have their own sense of nearness or distance towards disasters.

In most cases, victims in large-scale disasters are strangers to us – the viewers from faraway. As in Georg Simmel's analysis on strangers: 'The stranger is close to us insofar as we feel between him and ourselves similarities of nationality or social position, of occupation or of general human nature. He is far from us insofar as these similarities extend beyond him and us, and connect us only because they connect a great many people'(Simmel, 1971b: 147). Strangers are not really perceived as individuals, but as strangers of a certain type. It is due to the fact that '[f]or a stranger to the country, the city, the race, and so on, what is stressed is [...] nothing individual, but alien origin, a quality which he has, or could have, in

common with many other strangers' (ibid: 148). This generalisation of the sufferers makes the emotional engagement of the viewer with the sufferer almost impossible. Consequently, distant sufferers were removed from the viewer's moral space of concern.

As a result of the routine media witnessing among social media users and the impersonalisation of the social media reports when large-scale disasters happen, there is a kind of suffering which does not raise the social media users' interests at all. In this study, I name this type of media practice as unwitnessed witnessing, and treat it as an extreme case of detached witnessing. For example, SY in the following extract:

Generally speaking, while using Weibo, actually there were many news items about the typhoon in the Philippines when it took place, I just skipped the news once I saw 'the Philippines', so I have no clear idea about what happened there. I don't know the exact reasons why I did that. It's possible because, you know, these countries are too far away from me. Even if I follow the news, it works only for a short period of time. I mean, I can't remember it in the long run.

(SY, FG 1, female, line 186)

SY chose to neglect all of the information on Weibo about Typhoon Haiyan on purpose because it is '*too far away*' from her. She is not the only one who neglects suffering news from foreign countries during all of the discussions. For example, WP from group 4 mentioned that 'I pay more attention to Chinese events. I used a

mobile app named NetEase News¹¹ for a while, but I just followed news which happened in China and *overlooked that international news*'.

For social media users like them, the connection with the outside world was cut off by themselves intentionally. Suffering news about faraway places was pushed to their media-terminals, be it PC or mobile phones, which means they had the opportunity to witness these events. However, it was their own choice to ignore similar news. Naturally they chose not to include distant sufferers in their moral space of concern. Therefore, we cannot expect them to do anything towards suffering at a distance.

5.2 Media Remembering

Media remembering is the 'the discursive reconstruction of viewers' memories of the events witnessed through the media' (Kyriakidou, 2011: 88). In this section, I am going to use media remembering as an analytical focus to explore the focus group discussions among participants. The analysis in this part is not simply concerned with how participants store and retrieve their memories about the mediated distant suffering; rather, I put an emphasis on 'the broader discursive frameworks these memories are embedded in and reconstructed through' (ibid: 206). In other words, this section will focus on the various ways that events are constructed in the discursive articulation of the social media users in media remembering.

¹¹ NetEase was founded in 1997, and was a key pioneer in the development of China's internet services. It still operates e-mail services, advertising services, music services, and online PC and mobile games now in China.

From the above exploration of participants' witnessing of the three stimulating disasters, we could see that Ya'an earthquake was recognised and talked about by the majority of the participants, and also most of them could make a connection between this event and themselves with long and lively discussions. However, the other two events could not invoke the participants' involvement to such extent, although one of them occurred relatively more recently to when the fieldwork was carried out (Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines happened in November, the other two in April). Besides that, participants tended to change the subject from distant suffering to the disasters' influences on themselves from time to time in the discussions of the latter two events. It is even true to say that many participants mistook the typhoon for a tsunami.

The widespread usage of the internet and internet-mediated communications have brought great changes to our daily lives. According to Paul Connerton (2009: 87), 'computer usage immerses individuals in a hyper-present, an intensified immediacy which, by training the viewers' attention on a rapid succession of micro-events, makes it ever more difficult to envisage even the short-term past as "real", since the present comes to be experienced as a narrowly defined time-period unlinked from past causes.'

To remember nowadays is more and more about recalling a picture. Susan Sontag believes that photographs could lead to 'cultural democracy', because it is 'the only major art in which professional training and years of experience do not confer an insuperable advantage over the untrained and inexperienced', largely due to the role that chance (or luck) plays in the taking of pictures (Sontag, 2003: 25). In the

social media era, as a result of the popularity of smart phones with high-definition cameras, a new mode of 'visual communication' is growing up. In the old days, photography had more to do with memory. Now, photographs simply become an integral part of people's everyday lives. Besides that, social media makes images an equal to texts and voices. People are enjoying sharing selfies and memes online and few people seem to feel tired of this 'online carnival'. So ordinary and ubiquitous they are, visual images – as forms of expression and communication – are playing the roles that words and languages used to play in our lives.

Kyriakidou argues that in the viewers' narration of distant suffering, they constructed a 'moral hierarchy of remembering [which reflects] the significance they attribute to the stories remembered, as well as their moral engagement with the suffering victims' (2011: 207). In this study among Chinese young social media users, during the mediation of distant suffering in the digital era, I found a similar moral hierarchy during the users' remembering of distant suffering: at the bottom end are those banal disasters which the users could not remember at all, or which are disasters which are remembered through their own memories or own interpretations about the suffering rather than the mediated representations. In the middle of the moral hierarchy of remembering are those iconic disasters which existed in the users' collective memories. At the top of the moral hierarchy of remembering are those events which have a close connection with viewers themselves.

5.2.1 *Banal disasters*

5.2.1.1 Unremembered suffering

It is a typical modern experience to be ‘a spectator of calamities taking places in another country’(Sontag, 2003: 16). And this experience expects moral reactions from the spectator or the social media users who gain knowledge of these incidents on different social media platforms. Generally speaking, showing empathy towards mediated sufferers is a common reaction that we could expect from the audience. However, empty empathy is not uncommon under some special circumstances nowadays. According to Kaplan, empty empathy is ‘empathy elicited by images of suffering provided without any context or background knowledge’(Kaplan, 2005: 93). These images which lead to empty empathy are always fragmented; thereafter they fail to inspire the viewers to connect the image with their personal experiences. As a result of that, these images are always treated as ‘unreal’, even though the viewers know the event that the image depicts is really happening somewhere around the world.

By ‘unremembered suffering’, what I emphasise here is not the state of a blank of the participants’ memory while discussing some specific suffering event, but rather how these claimed-to-be unremembered or forgotten events are talked about during the discussion, namely how these events are rearticulated through the interactions of participants in the group. ‘Remembering *is* an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself’ (Sontag, 2003: 103). It is meaningless to talk about *remembering* without mentioning *forgetting*. It is a wildly held view that remembering is usually a virtue while forgetting is necessarily a failing (Connerton,

2008: 59). That is exactly why it is always embarrassing to confess that you have forgotten something, especially for some particular professions such as politicians. But we cannot overlook the implication of 'forgetting': what is forgotten is just as important as what is remembered. The absence of memory is 'as socially constructed as memory itself, and with an equally strong intervention of morally as well as ideologically grounded claims to truth' (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994 cited in Kyriakidou, 2014: 1479). The ways in which participants associated with the unremembered events could tell us about the ways they position themselves with regard to suffering and sufferers at a distance. Such as is shown in the following extract:

Moderator: Now let's have a look at a set of pictures, could you recognise what happened in the picture? This is an event that happened in April in Boston, US. (Everyone looks at the pictures silently and whispers from time to time.) Have you run across these pictures during your use of social media?

LF: (Nervous laughter.) No, I've never seen these pictures before.

Moderator: That's fine. Let's move to the next set of pictures. It is also three pictures which depicted an event happened in April in our country.

SK: Oh, yes, I know. It's an earthquake.

Moderator: Do you still remember where did this earthquake happen?

SK: Where did it happen? (Lost in thought)

ZX: I really have no idea (whispering). But I should know it. It's just on the tip of my tongue.

SY: I have seen all of these (three pictures about Ya'an earthquake). However, I simply could not call to mind what exactly the incident is.

(FG 1, female, line 54-70)

When discussing the Boston Marathon Bombings, LF from group 1 confessed '*I've never seen these pictures before*' after nervous laughter. When talking about Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, LG from group 2 mentioned that '*I can't recognise this event from the pictures. I know there was a typhoon in the Philippines, but I just didn't follow the news. I can't think of anything just by hearing the name of the Philippines. It's only after SJ said that I know it's the Typhoon Haiyan*'.

On the other hand, there is another case about the unremembered sufferings. Some respondents mentioned that they have seen so much of similar disaster pictures that they could not tell exactly what the event they are discussing is about. This point is best exemplified in the following case: '*Well, for me, I've seen too many pictures of this kind, I could not tell it from the others. There are too many pictures like this one*' (HR, FG 1, line 82). The respondent here use the commonness and similarity of the media images in media coverage of similar disasters as an excuse to justify why she could not distinguish the event from the others. This 'constructed banality of suffering' (Kyriakidou, 2011: 225) renders these sufferings indistinguishable to the social media users.

5.2.1.2 Remembering through auto-biographical memories

In this type of media remembering, the reconstruction of mediated distant suffering was through auto-biographical memories instead of mediated memories.

With regard to Ya'an Earthquake this April, I have many friends who are university students in Sichuan, I still remember one of them was in his

classroom when the earthquake happened. He took several pictures of his classroom and buildings on campus, and posted them online.

(LFF, FG 3, female, line 71)

Similarly to the above respondent, when LFF was talking about Ya'an earthquake, all that she remembered were stories about her friends, including her friends' social media postings. Similar issues were echoed in the following extract:

WL: Was this earthquake the one happened at 8pm, no, 8am. My little brother was studying in Sichuan at that time, I heard from him that there was an earthquake, he could feel it in Chengdu ¹². But, from my impression, the effects of this earthquake were not as significant as the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake. People did not pay much attention to it.

LFF: It occurred to me that I was back at home during that earthquake, and I saw it on the TV news. I saw it on TV, the first picture (the car accident during earthquake relief work), the next scene turned to his widow wife at home. That's my impression about an earthquake I saw on TV, but I am not sure whether it is this one that we are talking about.

LJ: Yes, I remember that. After I woke up, you told us that you heard from your little brother that there was an earthquake, and you said what happened in their dormitory, people rushed out without being properly dressed.

(FG 3, female, line 57-59)

In the attempt to reconstruct the Ya'an earthquake, both WL and LJ in the above extract were talking of their personal memories about the event. What is being lost in their discussions is the specific context of the media event. This is the same in LG's narration about the Boston Marathon Bombing in focus group 2. After seeing a set of related pictures, he mentioned '*I heard from my friends in Boston that all of the universities in Boston were closed at that time.*' LG's understanding of this event was mainly from Weibo celebrities who were at Boston when the incident happened, and from his friends who were studying in Boston. It is evident that

¹² Chengdu is the capital city of Sichuan Province, which is just 120 kilometres away from the epicentre of Ya'an Earthquake. That earthquake was felt strongly in Chengdu.

many users reconstruct the event through their personal memories rather than any mediated memories. Consequently, there is an absence of the distant sufferers in the users' discussions.

5.2.1.3 Remembering through reinterpretations

Susan Sontag believes that people tend to remember by recalling pictures instead of stories in this modern world we are living in. However, there is a problem with this new way of remembering: 'The problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding, and remembering' (Sontag, 2003: 79). From the focus group discussions, I found that many participants reconstructed their own interpretations with regard to the disaster events. What they depicted was not the specific event they were discussing, but some personal reinterpretations from their memory reservoir of similar media coverage. This is indicated in the following quote:

Moderator: What about this event, what's your impression about this set of pictures happened in the Philippines?

GY: Was it that tsunami?

Moderator: Could you tell us in detail about it?

GY: I don't remember the details.

Moderator: What about the others?

ZZ: I think it's in Canada rather than in the Philippines. (The others laugh)

ZJ: It seems like a tsunami to me. But ...

WP: It feels like a tsunami to me, I just have no idea what happened in particular.

(FG 4, female, line 41-43)

ZJ in this group reinterprets Typhoon Haiyan as a tsunami, while ZZ insists that this event took place in Canada although I have told them it happened in the Philippines. They are trying to make a connection between the pictures showed to them and a similar reservoir of media images accumulated in their heads.

Looking at this picture, the soldier in the picture, it seems like he died during the relief operation of the disaster. All of his comrades were standing there filled with grief at his death, at the time they also expressed their admiration towards the soldier who passed away.

(SK, FG 1, female, line 83)

Actually what the picture the SK mentioned in the above extract was a car accident that happened on the soldiers' way to the disaster area during the Ya'an earthquake. Because of the steep mountain road, the car these soldiers in which these soldiers were travelling fell off the cliff. Several of the soldiers lost their lives in this accident. Compared with SK's narration, it is evident that this incident has faded from her memory, and her reconstruction of this accident was based on her former media memories. A similar issue is echoed in LFF's narration of this accident in focus group 3. According to LFF, *'I saw it on TV, the first picture (the car accident during earthquake relief work), the next scene turned to his widow wife at home.'* It is clear that LFF mistook this accident for some other stories she had come across on television.

From the former extracts in this part, we could tell that in this type of media remembering, the specific event had faded away from the discussants' memories; they were merely assembling a series of similar events which they accumulated from the media. Or, to put it another way, they were reinterpreting the event

according to their own memories. What tends to be missed in media remembering through reinterpretations is the specific context of the event without which the discussants could not understand the predicament of the distant sufferers, and which will influence their intentions to take actions towards similar suffering events in the future.

5.2.2 *Iconic disasters*

Although the triggering events in this study were treated as banal disasters which could not resonate with the participants, there was a category of disasters that were considered as the referring frames of the participants during their discussion. In addition, they made a comparison between the recent disasters and this category of disaster from time to time in their discussions. In this study, this limited category of disasters which left deep impressions on the participants were called iconic disasters.

An icon is 'an image that refers to something outside of its individual components, something (or someone) that has great symbolic meaning for many people. Icons are often perceived to represent universal concepts, emotions, and meanings. Thus an image produced in specific culture, time, and place might [...] have the capacity to evoke similar responses across the culture and in all viewers' (Sturken and Cartwright, 2009: 36). Iconic disasters always attract extensive media coverage as a result of their extraordinariness. Afterwards, iconic disasters turn into points of reference in the audiences' memories when talking about similar events. Generally speaking, iconic disasters have the ability to cause similar reactions, cross the boundaries of time and space, from their audiences.

In their salient book about the history of live broadcasting, Dayan and Katz (1994: 5, italics in original) argue that ‘media events’ are ‘*interruptions* of routine [which] intervene in the normal flow of broadcasting and our lives’. In the mass media era when the above book was published, media events were always grand events which could mark extraordinary historic moments. Based on the definition of media events, a kind of new media event is evolving in the social media era: these events may not seem as important as former historical media events, but they could also be regarded as media events in a broad way. This kind of media event is termed as a ‘new media event’, which does not only need new media technologies, but actually is ‘a new ecology of multimodal communication’ (Qiu, 2009: 223). The distinctive feature of this new ecology is that it enables former passive audiences to become active participants. There are other researchers who have criticised the narrowness of media events, and therefore propose the concept of media disasters, which ‘are publicly signalled by different media as major, often traumatic and, on occasion, historically momentous happenings, also frequently exhibit high media performativity, circulate potent symbols, and invoke and/or mobilise solidarities’ (Cottle, 2006: 421).

Several of the iconic events mentioned during the focus group discussions include: The 2008 Chinese winter storms which affected large portions of southern and central China as a result of a series of heavy snows, ice and cold temperature. This series of storms happened around the traditional Chinese Spring Festival and caused transportation disruption and extensive damage to half of China, and it was the worst winter weather in more than half a century in China. The 2008

Wenchuan earthquake which took around 70,000 lives and was the deadliest earthquake to hit China in the last four decades. The 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster in the Soviet Union and the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan. For example, in the following extract, ZX mentioned the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake.

Moderator: Are there any other disasters that you could think of?

ZX: The 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake. I still remember that it was in May, and we were going to take the high school entrance examination, our teachers encourage us to do volunteer work to offer a helping hand. Also, they told us to collect earthquake-related materials to prepare for the writing in the forthcoming examinations.

(FG 1, female, line 146-149)

Flashbulb Memories are ‘memories for the circumstances in which one first learned of a very surprising and consequential (or emotionally arousing) event’ (Brown and Kulik, 1977: 73). Flashbulb memories are a mixture of personal circumstances and historic events in memory. When people hear the news about a shocking significant event, they not only remember details about the event, but also their personal circumstances when they heard about it (Pennebaker and Banasik, 1997: 4). Personal flashbulb memories are not always accurate as this sounds; it is understandable due to the fact that memories are always reconstructed by their retainers. However, by relaying one’s flashbulb memories to others, people could have the feeling that they have included themselves in the event. For example, it is not surprising to find that almost everyone who was over 12 years old at the time of the 9/11 attacks could tell their stories of where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news. To members of the same generation, flashbulb memories provide shared reference points and the sense of a common past,

therefore they endow collective memory 'not only with a substances but with a frame' (Dayan and Katz, 1994: 212).

Moderator: Are there any other similar events you could think of after seeing these pictures?

SJ: Well, what I could think of are two films by the director Feng Xiaogang¹³: *AFTERSHOCK* and *BACK TO 1942*. I saw *AFTERSHOCK* when I was still in high school, we just had an examination, after that the school showed the film to us unexpectedly. I went to the cinema to catch *BACK TO 1942*. That's what flashed in my mind after seeing these pictures.

LH: For me, what I could think of is the tsunami in Japan, the earthquake, actually is a nuclear disaster. And the Chernobyl Disaster in 1984 or 1986, which caused long-term radiation disaster to local citizens.

LG: I couldn't think of any natural disasters. What came to my mind is that during the summer vacation there was news that a pedlar was beaten to death by workers from the local Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureau¹⁴ (Chengguan, 城管). And of course including the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake. That's all, nothing else.

HZ: Yes, there are many natural disasters, such as these typical ones mentioned by you guys. But what occurred to me was the coup in North Korea¹⁵. Local people must have suffered a lot because of it.

(FG 2, male, line 92-102)

In the above quoted discussion, when asked about any other similar events that came to the participants' mind, all of these three respondents in this group mentioned one or two iconic disasters. However, it is necessary to point out that while narrating the events, the social media users have included themselves into

¹³ Feng Xiaogang is a highly successful film director, screenwriter and actor in China. His *Aftershock* (2010) depicts the aftermath of China's 1976 Tangshan Earthquake – one of the worst disasters in terms of the number of casualties in the history of PRC; *Back to 1942* (2012) is about the major famine in central China during the Sino-Japanese war.

¹⁴ The Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureau, commonly shortened to *Chengguan*, is a local government agency that has been established in every city in Mainland China. The agency is in charge with enforcement of urban management of the city, which includes local bylaws, environment protection, pollution control, and many other municipal affairs.

¹⁵ The 'coup in North Korea' here means the execution of Jang Song-thaek, previously one of the most powerful men in North Korea; he was accused of plotting to overthrow the state in 2013.

the narration. In other words, what the audience remembered is a mixture of mediated and autobiographical memory when talking about these iconic disasters. For example, when talking about the Wenchuan Earthquake, ZX in group 1 also mentioned that *'we were going to take the high school entrance examination, our teachers encourage us to do volunteer work to offer a helping hand. Also, they told us to collect earthquake-related materials to prepare for the writing in the forthcoming examinations'*, these temporal references (*'we were going to take the high school entrance examination'*) in the participant's personal memories combined with media images composed her memory about this iconic disaster.

Those banal disasters in social media users' memory as I discussed in Section 5.2.1 were incorporated into the users' pre-existing frameworks of meaning based on accumulative reservoirs of media reporting in their everyday life. Those disasters either made no impression on the users or were reconstructed through the users' autobiographical memories or reinterpretations. Unlike those banal disasters, in the process of media remembering, iconic disasters were reconstructed as extraordinary and spectacular, and were absorbed into public memory. Furthermore, the social media users' narrations about these events included themselves as participants when these events happened. In other words, social media users' memories about these iconic disasters were a combination of both their personal experiences and mediated images. Therefore, dissimilar to what happened to media remembering of banal disasters, this kind of media remembering brought the distant sufferers into the social media users' moral space.

5.2.3 *Disasters closely related to the user*

5.2.3.1 Nationalism in media remembering

Broadly speaking, nationalism is 'collective identity, cultural cohesion, social solidarity, and political autonomy' established as a historical, economic, cultural, political, and ideological consequence. It is a 'strong common consciousness' and 'a powerful political movement' as well (Wu, 2007b: 117). In contrast to other scholars' emphasis on the political aspect when mentioning nationalism (Tok, 2010), I am going to focus on the cultural side in this part.

It is true that social media have added new dimensions to human interaction, but 'the relationships we maintain through them are generally those that we also maintain through face-to-face contact'(Hinton and Hjorth, 2013: 54). When talking about actions after seeing suffering news, the spectacle of suffering and misery does not always make viewers feel for the sufferers. As an emotional bond, 'compassion is not a natural, innate or inevitable ethic, [it] is socially and historically specific' (Tester, 2001: 19-20), and 'we are more likely to help someone in need when we "feel for" that person' (Batson, 1990 cited in Slovic, 2007: 83). No one would deny the fact that the use of the internet and social media gives people the opportunity to become more connected with each other than before. Nonetheless, under some specific situations, people's attention is still mainly on people and places with which they are familiar.

People's attitudes shown online are closely connected with their behaviour in the offline world. The virtual world that more and more people are indulging in is

exactly the reflection of the real world. 'Social media contains offline modes of engagement: it is never entirely just an online phenomenon. ...The relationships that people have online are always shaping, and shaped by, the offline' (Hinton and Hjorth, 2013: 3). Nationalism culture has a long history in various countries, and it is supported by traditional media in those countries as well. As a result of that, people's online behaviour cannot avoid the influence of it. It is no exaggeration to say that 'national culture inheritance shapes the content of the web, [and]it also influences user participation on the net' (Curran *et al.*, 2012: 11).

The very existence of the nation-state is predicated upon the assumptions that there is a political 'imagined community' of theoretically uniform 'citizens' who, despite being in different places and social positions, have many similarities in the meantime, such as watching the same programmes and sharing a similar set of legal rights and obligations (Anderson, [1983] 2006). It is a widely accepted statement for many people that with the help of modern communication tools – radio, television, and the internet and so on – the space of 'imagined communities' has expanded to the whole world, rather than within the framework of nation-state. However, data from this research demonstrated that imagined communities do not necessarily lead to actions. Precisely speaking, modern digital communication tools provided the opportunities to learn about the outside world for ordinary people, yet it is up to the users themselves to decide whether they would like to take an action or not.

As a consequence of past national humiliation visited upon it by Western and Eastern imperial powers from the 1860s to the 1940s, China has become a strongly

nationalistic society (Morozove, 2010 cited in Curran *et al.*, 2012: 11). With the access to the internet continuing to expand, there are multiple voices and multiple nationalisms in China nowadays (Breslin and Shen, 2010). Some scholars believe that the internet became a key platform for Chinese nationalism-from-below or cyber-nationalism (Liu, 2006).

An example is the Japan earthquake on 11 March, 2011, which triggered a tsunami and damaged a nuclear plant in Fukushima. Shortly after the calamity, a diversity of voices could be heard over Chinese cyberspace, particularly on Weibo. The most widely held dispute was whether the Chinese government should help to alleviate the suffering in Japan. People's opinions on this issue were varied: the majority believed that 'human beings are without borders when facing natural disasters', thus Chinese people should help its neighbour to survive this tragedy; others, who could not forget Japan's past invasion of China during the Second World War, expressed the view that Japan deserve this disaster and they gloated over it; the rest of them asked Chinese citizens to be rational, and distinguished Japanese right-wing politicians and militarists from the ordinary people who are suffering (Liu, 2011b).

During the discussion among participants in focus group 4, WP pointed out that she *'tends to pay close attention to China news and rarely follows the foreign news'*. GY also mentioned the same habit when seeing news: *'Some of the news I caught, severe as it was, I couldn't remember it anymore now because it was so far away from me'*. We could see the differences between participants' attitudes towards

domestic news and foreign news. This comparison between domestic and foreign suffering news is even elaborately described in the following extract:

Moderator: After learning these three sets of suffering news directly or indirectly, have you ever thought about to do something to alleviate the suffering, such as donating or things like that?

LG: No, I haven't thought about that.

LH: Yes, I have. However, we didn't have activities like donations in our university.

Moderator: You may have thought about helping these distant sufferers. But you could not find a proper channel to do that.

LH: Yes.

SJ: Personally, for me, I don't think there is a need to help those foreign countries. I have been thinking of donating some used clothes or books to secondary pupils in Western mountain areas, such as Qinghai or Gansu. I definitely will do that...

LG: After second thoughts, I figured out why I don't want to help. Firstly, most of the charity organisations are not accountable in my mind. Secondly, for those we can rely on, I really don't know how to contact them. Anyway, the Chinese government is much more powerful and wealthy. Money won't be a problem if the government decides to chip in. Common citizens are much poorer than the government in my mind.

(FG 2, male, line 69-76)

SJ said that '*there is no need to help those foreign countries*' in the discussion. He kept mentioning that he had intended to donate second-hand books and clothes to help the pupils in poverty-stricken areas in north-western parts of China. From my own experience, I am inclined to keep track of suffering news that happened in China even though I am studying in the UK thousands of miles away. For instance, as the time of writing this chapter, a cruise ship with 458 Chinese passengers on board capsized on China's Yangtze River on 1 June, 2015. During that period of time, the first thing I would do every morning was to check the latest news about this

incident: the casualties in this incident, the situation of those victims, the investigation progress of the accident and so on. To some extent, I could feel a kind of connectedness to those unknown, suffering people in my home country. There are still some other cases: such as on 26th December, 2014, I did not realise it marked the tenth anniversary of the South Asian tsunami. However, on every 12th May I would think of the devastating earthquake that happened in China in 2008.

5.2.3.2 Local disasters

When asked what other similar suffering news they could think of instantly, what the participants referred to mostly are iconic media disasters, such as the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake. But there are still many instances of local remembering in the participants' narrations: for example, participants in three out of four focus groups mentioned an earthquake that happened in Yantai several days before the fieldwork was carried out; the 2013 Qingdao Sinopec oil pipeline explosion a month before the discussion; some even mentioned one of their classmates who suffered from leukaemia as shown in the quote below:

JF: The first one that occurred to me was a classmate in our university who was diagnosed with leukaemia. Because it's just around us, and I have seen people donating, so I am sure it's true. Besides that, I have noticed this news on Renren and re-posted it. Donating or re-posting the news on Weibo, Renren or any other SNSs made me feel that I could help him to some degree. It is unlike people who suffered in other countries or who lived far away from me, for them what I could offer was just sympathy. It might be because they are not near enough to me, therefore, they could not make me feel I have the obligation to help them. Such as the Sinopec oil pipeline explosion a month ago, you know, it's so near to us, and I have friends who lived there. I did not feel the fear or the suffering in the beginning, yet after seeing the reports and hearing what my friends said, I can tell it must be quite scary on the spot.

(FG 3, female, line 83)

LJ and WL in the same group also showed their preference towards local disasters during their discussion about the Qingdao Sinopec oil pipeline explosion:

LJ: Well, actually I don't know much about these events in daily lives (triggering incidents in the discussion). But I do remember what happened in Qingdao last month. I think death is around us all the time. I remember that in one of our classes, our teacher told us the tragedy about a man from Weifang¹⁶ who went to Qingdao after answering a call. He died in that explosion. He was still a living man in the morning, but died on the same day in Qingdao. It reminds me the fragility of human lives. Death is not far away from us. I feel sorry for these people who died in this explosion.

WL: It seems to me that this suffering news is happening around the world from time to time. But some of it doesn't mean anything to me at all except I might feel sorry for the sufferer after catching the news. But if the events are happening around us, we'll know something about them. For example, we know nothing about the US one; we know something about the Philippines one; we definitely know what happened to the China one, but not quite clear. If you ask me what happened in Qingdao last month, I could tell you the details. Basically, I am inclined to pay more attention to these things that happened around me. But there's nothing I could do to help them, and I don't have the intention to offer a helping hand either.

(FG 3, female, line 72-74)

From LJ's narration, we could see her emotional response towards the suffering news she remembered (*'I feel sorry for these people who died in this explosion'*). In her narration, we could find one victim in this explosion represented through discursive specification and particularisation (*'a man from Weifang'¹⁷ who went to Qingdao'*) which composed the personalised story of this suffering. The use of pronouns (*'us'*), the choice of verbs (*'feel sorry for'*), and her expression about the

¹⁶ A prefecture-level city in Shandong Province which is just 100 km away from Qingdao, where the explosion happened.

¹⁷ A prefecture-level city in Shandong Province which is just 100 km away from Qingdao, where the explosion happened.

fragility of human lives (*'Death is not far away from us'*) are all the construction of commonalities with the victims. All of LJ's narration was in line with 'affective witnessing' among the television audience in Kyriakidou's study (Kyriakidou, 2011: 151), from which we could see her emotional engagement with this suffering and the sufferers. Similar uses could be found in WL's narration about her memory of the same incident as well.

Summary

There are two sections in this chapter. In section 5.1, the experience of witnessing distant suffering on social media is treated as a mediated practice involving the construction of the users as moral agents. As discussed earlier in Chapter 3, media witnessing is studied through the participant's involvement with media reports, trust towards the media and hospitality to the sufferers across media practices in the mediapolis. In this section I analysed the empirical data based on Kyriakidou's framework (Kyriakidou, 2011). However, unlike her research results of four different media witnessing – affective witnessing, ecstatic witnessing, politicised witnessing, and detached witnessing – on a Greek television audience, in this study I found that only detachment witnessing was the most obvious among young social media users in China. In detachment witnessing, the users positioned themselves as indifferent onlookers of the distant suffering; I could not find emotional engagement between the users and distant suffering and sufferers. In other words, as a result of this type of media witnessing, the victims failed to be included into the moral space of the users. The reasons for the lack of the other three media witnessing among television audiences were also discussed in this section: the lack

of economic independency of the participant, the fragmented information obtained on social media, and Chinese youth's lack of interest' in political issues and so on. Finally, an extreme case of detached witnessing was proposed in this section: unwitnessed suffering which was the intentional result of the young social media users to disconnect themselves from suffering news that held no interest for them.

Section 5.2 talks about Chinese youth's media remembering in the social media era. Media remembering is understood as the discursive reconstruction of the users' memories of the events they witnessed before. Like Kyriakidou's research among Greek television audiences, I found a similar moral hierarchy of remembering in this study. At the bottom end of the social media users' moral hierarchy are those banal disasters which are unimportant to the audiences, which include those forgetting disasters, and those disasters they remembered through autobiographical memories or personal reinterpretations. In the middle are those iconic disasters which existed in the users' collective memories. At the top of the moral hierarchy of remembering are disasters which are closely related to the users, such as those disasters which remind the users of the national recognition and those local events.

CHAPTER 6 SUFFERING AND MEDIATION

In the last chapter, I discussed how Chinese young social media users' agency is shown through the practices of media witnessing and media remembering. Now I am going to focus on another theme of this study: the audiences' actions towards distant suffering and sufferers, and the reasons some of the users employed to justify their inactions toward distant suffering and sufferers. Furthermore, I will analyse Chinese social media users' attitudes toward the concept of 'cosmopolitanism'. Finally, the new features of mediation of suffering in the social media era will be discussed.

6.1 Actions of the Social Media Users

This section aims to analyse the kinds of agency that Chinese young social media users apply to themselves with regard to distant suffering. In other words, in this part I am going to focus on how social media users position themselves as public actors after learning those suffering events happened far away. The analysis is mainly based on the users' actual responses in relation to relief of distant suffering and the victims during the focus group discussions. The discussion is not restricted to the three triggering disasters in each group, but includes any other incidents that the participant could remember.

From the focus group discussions, I found that people's actions towards mediated distant suffering are rather restricted, both in terms of the extensiveness and the diversity of the forms. Noticing suffering information from social media does not necessarily eventuate in action. During the networked media era, to which kind of content people would give their attention depends on a set of factors. In relation to

suffering news, relevance to the users played a pivotal role on whether they would pay attention and take action subsequently. For instance, in the same circumstances people tend to pay more attention to the content in their mother language. However, the possibility of democratisation of information through technology does not give an assurance of action. It relies on many more factors.

The development of the media and communication technologies has reordered space and time, and therefore has transformed and is still transforming the modern world we are living in. One of the most important characteristics of modern communication is that 'it takes place on a scale that is increasingly global' (Thompson, 1995: 149). As a result of the uncoupling of space and time, today it is not uncommon for individuals to orient their actions towards distant others – those who do not share the same spatial-temporal locale but become visible through communication technologies. The properties of individual human beings 'do not exist in isolation but arise as a consequence of social life, yet the nature of that social life is a consequence of our being human and not, say, plants' (Rose et al., 1984: 11). It is an ideal situation that by forming various virtual communities, we are potentially connected to almost everyone all the time. Therefore, physical and social spaces have become disconnected in the mediated world.

Whether the social media users are going to show sympathy or not toward suffering others, be it nearby or distant, depends heavily on whether they have experienced suffering. Suppose, for instance, you kicked a stone and you shouted: 'It really hurts!' For those who have had similar experiences, they might say some comforting words to make you feel comfortable. Yet, for those who have no prior

experiences of this at all, what is waiting for you might be their mockery. It is the same for those social media users who ran across suffering news online.

Viewers' responses to certain suffering images are various; sometimes contradictory viewpoints could even appear among the same group of viewers. For example, in a course named 'The Politics and Aesthetic of Crisis' in the University of British Columbia, a journalism student showed a clip from a documentary about Rwanda ethnic conflicts in which women were interviewed about the violence that happened during the war. The convener herself had an emotional response towards the clip and found that she could not bear to listen and to see those physically and psychologically damaged women. However, several students in the class had quite a different response: they argued that, from a pretty objective point of view, the director of the documentary had exploited these victims and produced a voyeuristic and sensationalised work. Based on these different responses, Kaplan concluded that 'informed empathetic response' and 'vicarious trauma effects' exist side by side among views of sufferings (Kaplan, 2005: 92-93).

Similar conclusions were found in some other studies. For instance, Höijer(2004: 519) noticed that responses towards distant suffering are different among males and females and among different age groups. Generally speaking, '[w]omen react with compassion more than men, and elderly people much more often than younger people'. Another example is Susan Sontag's conclusion on photos of an atrocity. Sontag believes that there is only one language in photographs, and it is expected potentially for everyone to understand. However, she maintains that atrocity photographs 'may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry

for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness [...] that terrible things happen' (Sontag, 2003: 11-12).

Among television audiences, telethons about suffering play a fund-raising role by asking the audience to support the charities and to make donations through cash contributions or in-kind contributions. Tester (2001: 118-120) concludes that telethons draw the audience into action in three ways: first, telethons suggest that something can be done to alleviate the suffering and misery no matter how great they are. Furthermore, the celebrities in the telethons set an example and guarantee the authenticity and social validation of these actions. On top of that, the telethons give the television audience a sense of community with seemingly similar individuals. For all these reasons, the telethons have the potential to turn the audiences' moral responsibilities into actions toward far-away others. The coverage of suffering news on social media may not be as dense as a telethon provides on television, yet it has the same capability to change the users' potential moral responsibilities into practical actions.

6.1.1 Reposting

Reposting of the relevant Weibo about distant suffering is a form of participation which gives social media users a sense of involvement in the alleviation of the suffering and misery of distant others. As a result of that, reposting gives users a feeling that as individuals they could help to relieve others' suffering.

Reposting is regarded as a way of helping suffered others by many social media users. Quiet and without a straightforward outcome as this kind of help is, those

who reposted the related Weibo always have the expectation that the others – be they from the strong or weak network ties – might notice it and give a helping hand subsequently. This is especially true when users cannot confirm the genuineness of the news as a result of the lack of ‘gatekeepers’ in social media era. However, under this circumstance, not all of the participants in this study behave in the same way. Considering that social media never lacks rumours from time to time, users’ diverse reactions toward this action are anything but astonishment.

Moderator: Have you seen any of the news about distant suffering during your daily uses of social media?

Respondents: Yes (everyone unanimously), quite often.

Moderator: What do you usually do after catching these news items?

HR: I repost them, or comment first, and then repost them.

SY: I tell the others in the dormitory¹⁸.

LF: And then the whole dormitory discusses the event collectively.

SK: Well, for me, I might write some words of blessing and then repost it.

ZX: I might just mutter to myself most of the time (the others laugh). If it’s something unhappy, I might feel sorry for the victims and curse the perpetrators; otherwise I just keep the good and happy mood to myself.

LS: Well, it depends. If it’s something unfair, such as these sad stories about people’s livelihood, normally I would get furious on seeing them. I talk and discuss them with my roommates and everyone becomes angry with them too.

(FG 1, female, line 34-53)

From the above discussion between participants in focus group 1, we could see that reposting the suffering news they saw on social media is a common behaviour

¹⁸ Unlike in the UK where university students could choose to live in separate rooms on campus or not, universities in China are boarding schools, and students need to share a dormitory with the others. There are four-bed rooms, six-bed rooms, and eight-bed rooms in different universities. In this study, all of the participants are living in six-bed dormitories.

among participants. After all, it is not going to take much of their time, all that is needed is just a click of the mouse, which is a 'low investment' (Barker and Brooks, 1998, cited in Tester, 2001: 112) in terms of time and money from the social media users in this study. It echoes with the following extract, QR in focus group three exemplified what I discussed above:

QR: Although it is really hard to judge whether the suffering information you run across online is reliable or not, I would like to repost the Weibo most of the time when I notice them. What if they are real? After reposting, it could reach more people, which might be helpful to the sufferers. There's no other actions that I will take except repost the Weibo to let more people see the news. I hope I could be helpful to some extent just in case they are real suffering news items rather than some rumours.

(QR, FG 3, female, line 29-31)

It is one of the conclusions from Daniel Miller's online course that social media fails to be a direct reflection of people's lives. For example, many people who are reticent about their private lives choose not to post photos online often (Miller *et al.*, 2016). In other words, we cannot reach the point of understanding someone completely just by glancing over his/her online profiles. Therefore, it is advisable to bear in mind that not all of the social media users who ran across suffering news are going to repost them.

SY from focus group 1 mentioned an interesting and particular phenomenon while reposting Weibo: *'the original poster will donate one RMB once you repost the Weibo. I will repost this kind of Weibo whenever I ran across them.'* It is quite common that the users who are low investors when facing distant suffering tend to have much less to say about their involvement. However, reposting Weibo related

to the suffering events gives the participant a feeling that they are helping as a public actor with regard to the mediated distant suffering.

6.1.2 Discussion

The social media users' actions towards faraway suffering are understood in this thesis in a broader way. In particular, with regard to information about distant sufferers, discussion among people with similar interests is action too. Luc Boltanski argues that 'spectators can actively involve themselves and others by talking about what they have seen and how they were affected by it' (Boltanski, 1999: 1). This kind of response is 'morally acceptable'. There are also other researchers who believe that 'thoughts and discussions after exposure can be seen as a positive type of audience involvement' (Westerman *et al.*, 2014: 175). Consequently, discussion could be held to be a way the social media users show their individual agency toward distant suffering and sufferers.

'Appropriation' is a translation of the German term *Aneignung* by Paul Ricoeur (1981: 185), which means 'to make one's own what was initially "alien"'. John Thompson (1995: 111) borrowed this term to refer to 'the extended process of receiving messages'. The appropriation of the messages conveyed by media products extend well beyond the initial reception activity and reception context. It is quite common for individuals to discuss the media messages they received, through which process the message gets circulated among individuals who may or may not be involved in the initial reception process. In the modern world, while different kinds of information are increasingly diffused on a global scale, the appropriation of media products is always a localised phenomenon. As Thompson

(ibid: 174) concluded: 'The globalisation of communication has not eliminated the localised character of appropriation... the circulation of information and communication has become increasingly global while, at the same time, the process of appropriation remains inherently contextual and hermeneutic.'

In the following group discussion, we could see that it is quite habitual for social media users to talk about these unpleasant news items with their peers, in most cases their roommates living in the same dormitory or their family members back at home. This is understandable, considering the limitations of young undergraduates' social circles.

Moderator: Have you take any actions toward these kinds of news?

HR: Actions? Well, generally speaking, there's nothing we could do at all: we talk and discuss that, we become angry with that, that's all. Such as those corruption cases released recently, and the sexual abuses of the left-behind school children which happened quite often recently. There's nothing we could do except for discussing the news among ourselves.

SY: There's another case: the original poster will donate one yuan once you repost the Weibo. I will repost these kind of Weibo whenever I run across them.

SK: Yes, that's it: discussion and repost, there's nothing else we could do.

ZX: It's almost the same for each of us. We're powerless towards these things.

LF: Whenever suffering news happened, in our dormitory, the first one of us who see it would read the news to the others, after that the whole dormitory would talk about it. And nothing else.

(FG 1, female, line 101-108)

In the end, discussions about distant suffering among social media users not only give the users an opportunity to show their personal agency toward suffering

others, but also unite the users with each other and with the social media through participating different media events. Just as LS (group 1) mentioned in the discussion *'I talk about them and discuss them with my roommates and everyone becomes angry about them too.'*

6.1.3 Donation

In this study I confine the participants to university students to learn the mediation of distant suffering among Chinese youth. The reasons for choosing university students as participants are quite clear (as stated in Section 4.3); first, because the majority of social media users in China are students and furthermore, the practicability of the research being taken into consideration as well. During the discussion of the users' actions towards distant others, both actual practices (what they actually did when facing mediated disasters) and potential practices (what they would like to do if choices were given) were asked about. The inclusion of these two different kinds of questions aimed at identifying what types of actions the users took on and what kind of actions they considered as available to them.

Moderator: Have you try to make some donations towards these victims?

SY: Yes, I have. But, as a student, I am not powerful enough.

HR: It reminds me of when I was in senior high school, the school often organised us to donate second-hand books, clothes, and money as well. But now, I don't have the impulse to go to the affected area to help them.

Moderator: What about being a volunteer? Have you thought about that?

More than one respondent: I have that idea, but I am too young to do that. Besides that, no one is going to organise us.

SK: So all we could do is just make some donations to them.

ZX: Sometimes I will think that: why can't I go (to the disaster-affected area)? If I were not a student, I may have time to go.

(FG 1, female, line 109-118)

Monetary contributions are treated as the most ordinary and desirable method in suffering alleviation. However, for the participants in this study who are university students without economic independency, donating money is not a habitual option after seeing suffering news, no matter whether on social media or through the other media. For example, SY in the above extract mentioned she had made monetary donations before, however, she confessed that *'as a student, I am not powerful enough'*. Most of the time, what they could do were things within their abilities, such as reposting or discussion with their friends as mentioned above, although many of them showed their eagerness to offer a helping hand, such as when HR remembered *'the school often organised us to donate second-hand books, cloths, and money as well'*. This choice of donating second-hand stuff to these affected areas is confirmed in the following quote:

SJ: Well, for me, there is no need to offer any international aid (everybody laughs). I am a frequent visitor of a website on basketball within and beyond the border of China, I learned from the website that there are many middle school students in Qinghai Province and Gansu Province who are still living in poverty. I have planned to post some of my second-hand clothes and books to them. I haven't done that yet. But anyway, I am going to do that as soon as possible. Otherwise, this stuff is useless in my home. It's better to make that useful by donating it to those who need it.

(SJ, FG 2, male, line 73-75)

6.2 Justifications of the Inactions

It is true that the social media users have different options of taking actions with regard to different suffering. Reposting, discussion and donation are three of the typical actions at a distance among the participants in this study. However, there are still participants who claim they are unresponsive to the moral appeals of those suffering disasters. Consequently, an ambivalence appears in the construction of the social media users' moral agency: on the one hand, there is a moral expectation towards distant suffering through the practices of media witnessing and media remembering, on the other hand, the users find different reasons to justify their inactions toward mediated distant suffering. In this section, I am going to analyse the excuses that social media users employed to justify their inactions with regard to faraway others.

Before moving to the analysis of the empirical material, there is one thing that needs to be made clear here: equal intimacy for all does not exist in the world at all. Time and energy for every human being are limited. Therefore, the social media users' time which 'is spent *watching* suffering does not necessarily translate into time *spent* with suffering' (Tester, 2001: 102, italics in original). John Peters makes a detailed explanation of this problem in his book about the history of communication: '[O]ur capacity to communicate is limited is a sociological truth; it is also a tragedy' (Peters, 1999: 271). With limited time and energy, it is understandable that most of us as independent individuals could only afford to pay close attention to people and events which are not far away – both geographically and emotionally – from us.

6.2.1 *Scepticism*

It is true that we know the world through different media nowadays; however, the media 'invite denial as much as they encourage engagement' (Silverstone, 1999: 120). Denial is understood as 'an unconscious defence mechanism for coping with guilt, anxiety and other disturbing emotions aroused by reality' (Cohen, 2001: 5). Through denial, people could intentionally block out information which is unwanted or unbearable. Lack of action towards appeals is definitely a kind of denial of responsibility caused by mediated representations of the outside world. Scepticism about information resources and lack of trust towards helping institutions in the alleviation of suffering becomes a strategy of denial, which distance the social media users from the scene of suffering and from the sense of moral responsibility.

6.2.1.1 Scepticism about online information

The accuracy of information on social media is a critical issue we need to pay attention to. With regard to user-generated content in various social media platforms, owing to the absence of gatekeepers, its accuracy and credibility become one of the most important issues that we cannot afford to overlook, especially during emergent events when information accuracy is crucial to the subsequent actions. For instance, it is not uncommon that, during natural disasters, requests for assistance continued to spread online between users even after the victims have been rescued (Acar and Muraki, 2011: 398). The wide spread of inaccurate or outdated information could only hinder the response speed and efforts, and thus make things worse during an emergency.

From the following discussion we could see that participants' earliest responses after hearing suffering posts were to repost without hesitation. However, as time goes by, due to the uncertainty of the trustworthiness of suffering news online, participants became more and more cautious. Most of them tend to find confirmation from the other channels, then decide what they will do afterwards. For example, GY mentioned: 'Generally speaking, I don't feel like reposting them, because *I am not sure about their reliability*; after all, there are many rumours on Weibo, so it pays to be careful'. ZJ has the same worry: 'After seeing them on Weibo, I will *try to confirm these kinds of news from the other websites*'.

GY: When I see suffering news, firstly I will have a look at the comments, because normally you could find some solutions from the comments. But, generally speaking, I don't feel like reposting them, because I am not sure about their reliability; after all, there are many rumours on Weibo, so it pays to be careful. After that, I will have a look at some other sources of news, and would follow the news once I could find relevant reports.

ZJ: In the beginning, I tended to repost instantly whenever I saw suffering events on Weibo. But slowly, after seeing them on Weibo, I would try to confirm these kinds of news from the other websites, and then decide what I will do next.

ZY: If I just ran across one suffering news item on Sina Weibo, I would have reservations about it. However, if I saw it both on Sina and Tencent Weibo, I have accounts on these two platforms at the same time, I might believe the reliability of the news.

WP: I am in favour of ZJ's way of handling these kinds of news.

(FG 4, female, line 20-23)

6.2.1.2 Lack of trust about institutions

Apart from the scepticism about online information, mistrust about the charitable institutions could also be found in the discussion. For example, in focus group 2,

when asked if they took any actions after seeing suffering news online, one of the respondents first said he had no impulse to offer a helping hand at all. But after listening to the others' discussion, he added this:

LG: I've reconsidered why I don't want to take any action to alleviate the suffering in the first place. It's because, in my impression, most of the charitable organisations are not reliable at all. Furthermore, for those reliable organisations, I have no idea how to contact them when disasters happen. What's more, the Chinese government is the most wealthy and powerful one in the world. Money won't be a problem whenever the government is involved in the disaster alleviation work. Ordinary people are much poorer than the government. That's the reason why I said I don't want to donate at all.

(FG 2, male, line 76)

From the above quote, we can see that LG doubts the trustworthiness of the charitable organisations in China; in his eyes, *'most of the charitable organisations are not reliable at all'*. This doubt leads to his reluctance to make any donation. As I mentioned earlier in Section 2.5, criticisms of the misuses of money and aid contributions were quite common in China. This is especially true after the Guo Meimei scandal which happened in 2011 brought about a credibility controversy for the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC), and spread to other charitable foundations as a whole. LG in this quote might use this excuse to justify his inaction, but the problems within these charitable organisations as shown above deserve more discussion. GY from group 4 also mentioned her mistrust towards charitable institutions in China (*'as a result of China Red Cross Scandal, people really don't know who they could trust and what they could do to offer a helping hand during disasters'*).

The participants' mistrust of the handling of charitable donations invalidates the effectiveness of their actions at a distance, and leads them to believe that these actions are needless and useless. This generalised mistrust about charitable institutions is deeply embedded in the disaster-relief culture in China in recent years. The fluctuation of charitable donations in China (2008-2014) as shown in Section 2.5 confirmed this point.

6.2.2 Powerlessness

Arguments about the social media users' powerlessness toward distant suffering were proven by the long geographical distance between the user and the sufferer and the lack of reliable helping channels in the participants' discussions. Constructing themselves as powerless common people, participants justified their passivity and unresponsiveness during the alleviation of suffering at a distance. As a result of this strategy, their personal agency as public actors with regard to distant sufferers was reduced to the minimum level.

6.2.2.1 Long distance between the user and the sufferer

By extending the argument that 'television construes the nation as an "imagined" community by homogenizing differences internal to the nation state', Chouliaraki (2006: 10) argues that a community which is 'beyond the nation' – the 'imagined' community of the West – was construed by establishing a broader 'we' through transnational news among Western audiences. Subsequently, 'we' inhabits the transnational zone of safety, while those living in the zone of suffering are 'the West's "other"'. A similar distinction between 'we' and 'other' was found among

the participants; however, in this study ‘we’ means all of the Chinese people and ‘other’ means all of the rest outside China.

The geographical distance that separated the social media users from the mediated unfortunates undermines the users’ impulses to act upon seeing them. Just as Silverstone puts it: ‘We may not have quite reached [...] an age in which globalisation is becoming a force significantly to undermine the nation’ (Silverstone, 2007: 83), both mediated experience and non-mediated experience are culturally specific. For example, as the two participants discussed in the following extract:

GY: I think, with regard to news, I am more interested in the news around us. Such as between domestic news and foreign news, I usually pay more attention to domestic news ... Some of the news I caught, severe as it was, I couldn’t remember it anymore now because it was so far away from me.

Moderator: So, we pay more attention to news happening around us.

Respondents: Yes.

WP: I agree with you. I used to follow NetEase news every day. Normally there were domestic and foreign news daily. I tend to pay close attention to China news and rarely follow the foreign news.

(FG 4, female, line 50-52)

These two participants in this group made a distinction between ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’ news, and showed that they were more interested with news that happened around them rather than foreign news or news that happened far away. GY said: ‘Some of the news I caught, severe as it was, I couldn’t remember it anymore now because it was *so far away from me*’. WP also mentioned that she ‘*tends to pay close attention to China news and rarely follows the foreign news*’.

This showed the importance of distance in invoking the users' responses towards distant suffering.

6.2.2.2 Lack of reliable channels

'[T]hroughout the history of Western humanitarianism, campaigners have always relied heavily upon emotive descriptions of bodily pain and personal experience of injustice, injury and loss as a means to draw public attention to their concerns' (Wilkinson, 2005: 121). That is the same situation in China when disasters have happened. However, while asking about their reactions towards far-away suffering, although many participants showed their enthusiasm to offer a helping hand, due to the lack of reliable channels, most of them could not do anything at all. Just like in focus group 1, more than one respondent expressed notions like *'I have that idea, but I am too young to do that. What is more, no one is going to organise us'*. This is especially true considering that all of the participants are university students who are in their early 20s and who are in need of care and protection from both their families and society. There are similar expressions in almost every group: the following are some extracts:

LH: I wanted to take some effective action to help, such as make some donations. However, it seemed that our university did not organise any activities like calling for donations at all.

(LH, FG 2, male, line 71)

Moderator: So, let's say, as long as circumstances allow, would you like to be volunteers or to make donations towards these far-away sufferers?

WL: Definitely. If our university is going to organise us to do such things, I definitely will do all that I can to help.

JF: Actually all of us are eager to help, but it might because we lack enough reliable channels to help the sufferers. If you are going to offer your help on your own, it might be not safe for females like us. Or, let's say you want to make a donation, what you care about is how to make a good use of the money and help the sufferer through an effective way, rather than being used by people who just want your money.

WL: Besides that, as an individual you will normally feel powerless by making a donation, then you will feel there's no need to offer a helping hand at all. However, if there's a reliable organisation to do this, you will feel that I offer what I have, all of the others do their part, then we become powerful in the end as a group to be helpful.

(FG 3, female, line 75-79)

Moderator: Could you tell me how did you guys get involved in such events: for example, did you make any donation after the earthquake?

ZZ: No, because nobody came to our university to raise funds for the earthquake. However, we would donate when people in our university are badly hurt or are seriously ill.

ZY: Well, if someone comes to raise funds, we definitely will make donations. But no one came at all, so we have no idea how we can help them.

GY: With regard to the channels to make donations, we don't know much about it now. Maybe it's because the information on how to donate did not circulate among us, therefore we have no idea what can be done to help them. There are many efficient ways online now, for example you could wire the money directly to the victims. But, as a result of the China Red Cross Scandal, people really don't know who they could trust and what they could do to offer a helping hand during disasters.

WP: For me, it's because not enough public attention was given to these incidents. Just like before when we were in high school, like the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, our school organised us to donate, and of course everyone would follow suit. However, there's no need to donate to these less harmful earthquakes such as the one happened in Jilin and Yantai several months back, because local municipal governments could cope with that successfully.

LC: Well, it seems to me that we just don't know through which way we could donate to the victims.

ZJ: I think that there's a close connection between the disasters' damage level and donations. Such as back in the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, everyone in our country was mobilised to donate and offer

assistance to the relief work to their best ability. In contrast, this Ya'an Earthquake was less damaging than the 2008 one, therefore people are not so active in contributing, and the university did not organise any special activity to ask for donations at all.

(FG 4, female, line 61-67)

As shown in the above extracts, expressions like *'our university did not organise any activities like calling for donations'*, *'we lack enough reliable channels to help the sufferers'*, *'it seems to me that we just don't know through which way we could donate to the victims'* and so on are not uncommon among the participants in this study. The mention of the obstacles they meet to their wishes to contribute when disasters happen diminishes their willingness to offer a helping hand to people in need, and at the same time justifies their inactions towards far-away others. Besides that, positioning themselves as common people who lack proper channels to offer help toward suffering others minimised the participants' sense of agency as public actors.

6.2.3 Compassion fatigue

As human beings, we use our own private feelings to measure and judge people and the world. Most of the time, individuals tend to feel pity for the misfortunes of those who share similarities with them. In other words, visibility is not the condition sufficient to lead to action towards the other's suffering. Normally, it is the feeling of relevance to the sufferers which gives spectators the willingness to act upon the other's misfortunes. In the words of Chouliaraki (2006: 11), pity is a 'socially constructed disposition to feeling' rather than a 'natural sentiment of love and care'. People's emotions towards distant others are shaped by the values they

grow up with and by the media which tell them who the sufferers are and how people should relate to them.

The internet allows us to maintain relationships over distance and to learn news about faraway others. The use of social media makes it much easier to connect with people from faraway places. In his book written in 1997, Cairncross noted that: with the death of distance, people will be able to become better informed, and it will be possible for ordinary citizens to learn about people in other countries because of the communications revolution, which makes information more readily accessible than ever before (Cairncross, 1997). After decades of use, the internet has diminished the importance of geographic proximity.

An overwhelming amount of information sources are available nowadays, sometimes even leading to information overload, which has caused trouble for people to get the information they want efficiently. However, we can only rely on a small range of trusted news sources. Or put it another way, we are getting used to using one source or another. Many young people in China turn to social media as their main, if not sole, source of news and current events. They rarely have time to watch TV or to read newspapers, because their time and attention are limited and they can only absorb certain amount of information each day.

‘Compassion is a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune’ (Nussbaum, 2003: 301). It has three cognitive elements: a belief that the suffering is serious rather than trivial; the belief that the person does not deserve the suffering; and the belief that the possibilities of the person who

experiences the emotion are similar to those of the sufferer (ibid: 306). Compassion requires 'individual actors to orient themselves towards others and, in particular, towards what others appear to be experiencing. If those others are not seen to be experiencing suffering or misery, then compassion can remain at a latent level. [...] Compassion means an orientation towards others in order to work out what ought to be done, and if those others provide no clues or no incitement then it is possible to believe that nothing needs to be done' (Tester, 2001: 64-65). Compassion is normally supposed to be a 'moral sensibility or concern for remote strangers' (Höijer, 2004: 514), however, as Tester put it: 'where there might have been engagement and compassion, there is instead weariness and apathy' (Tester, 2001: 15).

In seeing more and more suffering news through different sources, it is hard for people to feel compassion sometimes. It is not unusual to see that donors are tired of repetitious reports of events; some of them even could not feel any sympathy towards, or feel connection with, people who are suffering, no matter if they are once-in-a-decade or once-in-a-lifetime events. When people are getting weary of chipping into crises that never seem to go away, a 'discouraging contagious compassion fatigue' (Sciolino, 1991 cited in Moeller, 1999: 9) is going to happen. As defined by Tester, 'compassion fatigue means becoming so used to the spectacle of dreadful events, misery or suffering that we stop noticing them. [...] Compassion fatigue means being left exhausted and tired by those reports and ceasing to think that anything at all can be done to help. [...] Compassion fatigue means a certain

fatalism. It leads to the conclusion that this is just the way things are and nothing can be done that will make a difference' (Tester, 2001: 13).

The following quote, from a discussion after seeing the three sets of stimulus pictures, is indicative of the participants' position of compassion fatigue:

Moderator: Are there any comments after seeing these three sets of pictures?

ZJ: Personally, I think I did not pay enough attention to current news. I mean I should pay more attention to news instead of doing meaningless things on Weibo. I couldn't recognise any of the news by looking at these pictures...

Moderator: No, no one has the right to restrict your rights on how to Weibo, what I mean is ...

ZJ: But after the discussion, I know what I should do on Weibo from then on.

Moderator: What about the others?

ZY: It seems to me that I really have got used to these kind of news. (In a very low voice)

ZZ: I am already becoming numb to these kinds of news.

Moderator: So, you've seen too much of these kinds of news.

LC: It seems to me that we human beings are really weak. We never know what's going to happen tomorrow. Today we are having this discussion here, but who knows what about tomorrow. So we really can't afford to waste our life and time.

(FG 4, female, line 44-49)

Compassion comes unconsciously by seeing the sorrow of another: the 'amiable virtues' of humanity, sympathy, and pity relate to the ability of a spectator to sympathise with an actor (Peters, 2005: 118). However, a form of '*psychological numbing*' may result from our inability to appreciate losses of life as they become larger' (Slovic, 2007: 85, italics in original). According to Moeller, the causes of

compassion fatigue are multiple. Sometimes there are just too many catastrophes happening at once, and formulaic coverage of similar types of crises make people feel that they really have seen this story before. Another reason is that sometimes a crisis seems too remote, not sufficiently connected to people's lives (Moeller, 1999: 10-13). Sontag (1977: 20) makes it clear that: '[t]he shock of photographed atrocities wears off with repeated viewing', it is the same for suffering news in other forms, such as videos going viral online and endless pushing of the breaking news through different channels. Repeated contacts with suffering issues via different media have various influences on audience.

By and large, compassion fatigue itself is a 'result of inaction' (Moeller, 1999: 52) and **it is** going to cause inaction as well. For example, in the above extract, ZY said that '*I really have got used to these kinds of news*', and ZZ mentioned that she is '*becoming numb to these kinds of news*'. There is no surprise in expecting that by saying that, the participants minimise their roles as public actors.

6.2.4 Non-necessity

Given the increasing frequency and severity of disasters, the Chinese government is perfectly clear that its political legitimacy and the country's social stability rest on 'the effectiveness of official disaster response and reduction efforts' (Yeophantong, 2016: 247). Consequently, the government designed rapid response strategies for relief assistance, and invested extensively in the institutionalisation of comprehensive coping mechanisms to enhance disaster preparedness. Considering the characteristics of China's disaster-relief mechanism (see Section 2.6), the following respondent's reactions towards faraway disasters will be comprehensible.

According to LG in the following extract, there is no need for ordinary people to interfere as long as Chinese government takes actions, because in his mind the government is strong and wealthy enough to cope with any disasters. This kind of understanding is not uncommon among Chinese people. The comparison between *'the most wealthy and powerful'* country and *'ordinary people'* turned LG into a powerless individual in front of a strong state, and made him believe he could rely on his powerful country to cope with any disasters. And naturally there is no need to do anything when suffering happens.

LG: What's more, the Chinese government is the most wealthy and powerful one in the world. Money won't be a problem whenever the government is involved in the disaster relief work. Ordinary people are much poorer than the government. That's the reason why I said I don't want to donate at all.

(LG, FG 2, male, line 76)

6.3 Social Media Users' Views on Cosmopolitan

The etymology of the word 'cosmopolitan' is from the Greek *kosmos*, 'world', and *polis*, 'city'. Therefore, it is acceptable to treat a cosmopolitan as a citizen of the world. It is necessary to mention that the literal translation of 'cosmopolitan' in Chinese is 'citizens of the world'. For John Tomlinson(1999: 185, italics added), being a citizen of the world means 'having a *cultural disposition* which is not limited to the concerns of the immediate locality, but which recognised global belonging, involvement and responsibility and can integrate these broader concerns into everyday life practices'. However, we need to bear in mind that the sheer increase in mobility on a global scale which the globalised process enabled is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the emergence of a cosmopolitanism disposition. It is

due to the fact that, as a cultural disposition, cosmopolitanism firstly involves a willingness to be open towards and to engage with the other rather than just physically in different places. Just as Chouliaraki put it: 'Under conditions of mediation, we should think of cosmopolitanism as a generalised sensibility that acts on suffering without controlling the outcomes or experiencing the effects of such action' (Chouliaraki, 2006: 13).

At the end of each focus group discussion, all of the participants were asked an open-ended question: What is your view on the statement that 'everyone is a cosmopolitan nowadays?' I did not supply any specific definition on 'cosmopolitan' to the participants, so it is an examination of their own understandings and views of this concept. The purpose of this question was to explore different ways participants employed to construct their own agency as public actors in today's highly mediated and globalised public space. It turned out as expected that this question provoked interesting discussions among the participants. Generally speaking, there are three different views on this concept, judging by all of the participants' responses.

6.3.1 Approval on account of common problems

For some participants in this study, the concept 'cosmopolitanism' is accepted without controversy. This is especially true when people are facing global common problems, such as economic and environmental problems. For example, in the following quote, in focus group 4, ZJ mentioned '*the globalisation of economy*' and 'people across the globe need to *work together to protect the environment and the ecosystems*'. WP also talked about 'with the acceleration of *economic globalisation*,

the world is becoming a village'. Furthermore, LS in focus group 1 also mentioned '*the subprime mortgage crisis*' and '*the problem of global warming*' to show her approval of this concept.

ZJ: From my point of view, with the globalisation of economy, the whole world is becoming a village nowadays, and the connections between different countries are more and more intense, which was impossible many years back when there were clear-cut distinctions among countries. What is more, people across the globe need to work together to protect the environment and the ecosystems. So, for me, the concept of cosmopolitanism is in line with the global development trend.

LC: I feel that the world is composed of different countries, since each individual belongs to his/her country, I feel that there is a kind of inclusive relationship between individuals and the world. And also, there are various issues in the world about the benefits each individual could get, so I agree with this statement.

WP: Well, personally I think we are all living on the earth, therefore all of us are a big family. Not to mention the common phenomenon that people are migrating from one country to another, which was very rare before. In other words, with the acceleration of economic globalisation, the world is becoming a village where everyone is living together. So, bit by bit, the differences among people are diminishing.

(FG 4, female, line 102-105)

LS: I think I could accept this statement. For example, the subprime mortgage crisis back in 2008; although caused by the United States, it indeed influenced the world economy. On top of that, the problem of global warming is a universal problem as well, no country in the world could solve it on their own. Wherever you come from, we need to work together to protect the environment, and consequently to solve the problem. So I quite agree with it.

(FG 1, female, line 191)

On top of that, there are participants who approach this problem from the perspective of access of information. Some are in favour of this concept, considering the fact of the use of the internet gives them the freedom to trace whatever online information they are interested in, therefore giving them the

feeling that they are global citizens nowadays. For example, as the following extract shows:

HR: I am quite in favour of this statement. Because with regard to the information online, I am not only following news about our country, at the same time, I am focusing on these items of foreign news and international news as well.

SK: I quite agree with this opinion. Everybody is talking about internalisation nowadays; whenever you see disasters that happened in another country, you could make a comparison with things that happened in China. I am quite concerned with what happened to the far-away sufferers.

(FG 1, female, line 185, 189)

6.3.2 'Too idealistic to realise'

But there are some other participants who hold different opinions on the acceptance of the concept. For them, cosmopolitanism as a concept is 'too idealistic to realise'. In their eyes, the existing discrimination (gender, ethnic and regional discrimination) and disparity (regional development gap) between different countries and regions renders cosmopolitanism a '*utopian ideal*' (LJ, group 3) and '*too idealistic to realise*' (ZZ, group 4). This point are indicated in the following two quotes:

LJ: I take this statement as a utopian ideal. We could not reach the state of cosmopolitan unless every country across the globe was as developed as the US. Look at where we are: there are disparities among different countries in the world, such as the development gap between the United States and South Korea and us. For me, I think it's unrealistic to talk about global citizen.

QR: Well, for me, there are good and bad sides once we reach the stage of 'cosmopolitan'. On the positive side: it will be equal for everybody, there will be no racial discrimination and regional discrimination any more.

(FG 3, female, line 114-115)

ZZ: I think this statement sounds like too idealistic to realise.

ZY: I agree with you. It would not be tricky to reach the state of cosmopolitan. Because there are gender discriminations, ethnic discriminations ... Even now in Beijing, Beijing natives discriminate against people who have migrated there'.

(FG 4, female, line 106-107)

From the perspective of access of information, there are some participants who clearly stated that foreign news could not leave any impression to them due to the fact that these news are too far away from them. On the contrary, they tend to pay attention to news that has happened around them. This distinction between participants' attitudes towards access of information is similar to the participants' differences among media witnessing of distant suffering. For example, SY mentioned that *'things that happened overseas were too far away from me', 'I would like to pay more attention to news that happened around myself'*.

SY: I might hesitate a little bit to agree with this declaration. Generally speaking, while using Weibo, actually there were many news items about the typhoon in the Philippines when it took place, I just skipped the news once I saw 'the Philippines', so I have no clear idea about what happened there.

Moderator: But why?

SY: Well, I don't know either. Maybe, back at that time I just felt that things that happened overseas were too far away from me: normally you noticed the news, you had a look at what happened, but finally it hardly made any impression on you at all, you forgot it completely. On the contrary, once similar things happened in China, it is totally different: I would like to pay more attention to news that happened around myself. Such as these news items about the elderly citizens and children who exist in our daily lives. If it was bad news, you would say I would not behave in that way, they could teach you a lesson.

(FG 1, female, line 186-188)

For the users who hold this view towards cosmopolitanism, they themselves are constructed as passive receivers of the media for whom there is no need to show any sense of agency in global public affairs. The lack of responsibility to far-away others is made clear here as a result of the nonexistence of a shared moral space.

6.3.3 Acceptance with additional conditions

In terms of national identity, participants' opinions on the concept of cosmopolitanism were based on additional conditions. However, according to Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 25): 'the upsurge of local nationalisms and the new emphasis on local identity should be seen as an unmistakable consequence of globalisation, and not [...] as a phenomenon that contradicts it. ... What happens within your own life has a lot to do with worldwide influences, challenges and fashions or with protection against them'. In the following extract, ZX mentioned that *"There is no way to talk about 'world citizen' until we solve the Diaoyu Islands Dispute and the Taiwan Problem"*, while LF could only accept this concept *'if these superpower countries (such as US and Japan) are not going to bully China'*. It is obvious from the above extracts that the users' agency with regard to the distant others is pervaded with discourses about their agency within their own nations.

ZX: I don't agree with it. (The others laugh.) China still has many problems of its own, such as the Diaoyu Islands Dispute¹⁹ and the Taiwan Problem²⁰. I hate the US and Japan, I feel that they treat China

¹⁹ Diaoyu Islands are a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea controlled by Japan. Both Taiwan and mainland China claim their ownership of the islands as well. Textbooks in mainland China treat the islands as indisputable territory of China. It is one of the disputes between Sino-Japan relations.

²⁰ Taiwan Problem is the key issue in China-Taiwan relations, namely between People's Republic of China (PRC) and Republic of China (ROC). To put it simply, people in PRC regard Taiwan as its

as their 'imaginary enemy'. I discussed this problem a lot with my father at home. I become angry with the Americans and the Japanese whenever mentioning this problem, we cursed them' during our discussions. (The others laugh again.) I don't think they treat China equally, they look down on the Chinese. There is no way to talk about 'world citizen' until we solve the Diaoyu Islands Dispute and the Taiwan Problem.

LF: I could accept this idea if these superpower countries (such as US and Japan) are not going to bully China. But they keep causing problems for us, such as the Diaoyu Islands Dispute and the South China Sea crisis. Whenever things like these happen, I become irritated.

(FG 1, female, line 190, 192)

In a nutshell, it seems that only when talking about global issues, such as global warming or ecosystem destruction, participants in this study are in favour of the concept of 'cosmopolitanism'. Considering that China is still a developing country, unlike what has happened in Western countries, Chinese citizens do not have many connections with foreign countries. For example, the total number of visits abroad by UK residents has increased from 55.6 million in 2010 to a peak of 65.7 million visits in 2015 (Office for National Statistics, 2016). The number of visits abroad by Chinese citizens in 2014 was 107 million (CNTA, 2015). Considering the population base of the UK and China, it is plausible to draw the conclusion that the percentage of Chinese people who have international connections is much lower than that of the UK. Therefore, when global public affairs are happening, it is understandable that Chinese people are not as enthusiastic as their western counterparts.

Previous research has shown that the socioeconomic status (SES) position of a family, such as the parents' occupation, income and level of education, is influential

unrecovered territory after the Chinese Civil War back in the 1940s. This idea is especially popular among young Chinese who are prone to nationalist fervour.

in determining children's personal development(Feng, 2011). This is especially true in China, where parents attach more importance to their children than of themselves and would like to strain every nerve to be helpful to them. A study on the relationship between family capital and Chinese college students' choice of major has shown that people with higher social-economic status have more chances to accept high-ranking tertiary education. Students from high SES families, namely those with high political capital, economic capital and cultural capital, tend to choose majors with high employment rates and high income, and vice versa (Fan *et al.*, 2015). The participants in this study major in social work which unfortunately falls into the low employment and low income category. Of course, it is an arbitrary decision to say they are from low SES families, but the conclusion from the above-mentioned research is referential to some extent.

After analysing China as a whole and the family background of the participants in this study, it is comprehensible why the participants' views towards the concept of cosmopolitanism are so varied. Fundamentally, the starting point of the building of the participants' agency was to reach the identification between themselves and the sufferers. In other words, the articulation of the social media users' agency with regard to distant others across the globe begins with their formation of agency as members of a community.

6.4 New Features of Mediation of Suffering through Social Media

In this section, I am going to focus on the analysis of the new characteristics of the mediation of suffering events in the social media era in China. This section is based on the ethnographic material collected among Chinese young social media users,

especially Weibo users during 2014 and 2016. Repetitive themes in the analysis, themes that are different from the relevant literature and the obvious new characteristics are what I pay close attention to in the analysis.

6.4.1 *Filter bubble phenomenon*

In this era of instant information, thanks to the always-on nature of the internet, there are endless, even excessive, amounts of information waiting for us to check whenever we want. However, once people become dependent on social media as their own source of information – which is not uncommon among young people who are addicted to using social media – it might cause an imbalance in the information that they receive. In December 2009, Google declared it would adopt ‘personalised search’ for every one of its users. After that, more and more websites have been employing invisible algorithms to decide what is more interesting to their users. For example, the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg, once said in 2010 that any websites that were not customised to particular users were going to be old-fashioned. As a result of this insidious customisation of these social media platforms, social media users’ worlds are becoming more and more personalised, therefore, ‘important but complex or unpleasant issues [...] are less likely to come to our attention at all’ (Pariser, 2011: 18).

Eli Pariser named this evolution of the internet – instead of showing the wide world to its users, but rather constraining them to a familiar neighbourhood – as ‘filter bubble’. Facing this reality, we may not be surprised to hear comments like ‘the users of Facebook are not the customer, but the product’. Rather than expand our horizons, these invisible algorithms are limiting people’s access to information, and

finally narrowing their range of experience about the outside world. We should bear in mind that there is no such thing as a free lunch; social media platforms are providing services, while the users are providing their personal information. Many social media platforms record and calculate their users' using behaviour, and consequently present the intended information to them. The result is that, as time goes by, social media users might suffer from 'information malnutrition' (Hung, 2015). In other words, generally speaking, social media users might have the illusion that they know everything about the world while the truth is that they just get more and more information which is exactly what they want.

It just reminds us that when talking about the relationship between television and our knowledge about the world around us, Neil Postman remarked that television created a new type of information: disinformation – '[which] does not mean false information, [but] means misleading information – misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented or superficial information – information that created the illusion of knowing something but which in fact leads one away from knowing' (Postman, [1985] 2006: 107). Consequently, social media in this aspect has the same function as television in altering the meaning of 'being informed'.

Filter bubble is a new phenomenon in the media use of today's highly mediated world. People cannot afford to overlook this during the use of social media, especially among those who use social media as their main sources of information. However, this problem could be alleviated if users use different social media platforms, or more ideally, learn information through different media. Actually this is quite common among social media users; in this study. I am going to discuss the

media convergence and the media ecology in the social media era later based on the media use behaviour of the participants in this study.

6.4.2 *The short life span of suffering incidents*

Compared with media in the pre-digital era, social media have caused suffering incidents to become transient and fragmented'. Consequently, such events enjoy a very short attention span on average, and 'an ongoing topical event can be forgotten very quickly' (Han, 2016: 82) on social media. Weibo is no exception in this aspect. An empirical study on the lifespan of online information shows that the half-life (the amount of time at which an event will receive half of the attention it will ever receive after it has reached its peak) of a Weibo event is eight days, equal to the lifespan of Bulletin Board System (BBS) information (Liang, 2014). With regard to a single post on social media, the lifespan is much shorter. For example, former studies find that the lifespan of a tweet is 2.8 hours (Rey, 2015). As a result of the fragmented information on Weibo, it is not uncommon that an event has already faded away from public attention before users could get enough information to have a general understanding of it.

In the history of communication, 'in any communication environment, input (what one is informed about) always exceeds output (the possibility of action based on information)' (Postman, [1985] 2006: 68). However, the creation of telegraph and later technologies which brought an abundant flow of information has dramatically changed 'information-action ratio'. Later in the book, Postman further used the example of a seven-hour-long, written-style debate between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas in 1858 and its patient audience to prove the power of

typography in controlling the character of the public discourse in the mid-nineteenth century. The scene described in Postman's book is beyond our imagination at present: an audience that has grown up with television and internet culture rarely has the comprehension and concentration durability that their ancestors did back in the 1850s. This is partly due to the reason that 'plain language' used by these two media has changed the structure of current discourse.

There is too much information to digest and absorb in this age of instant information. Society has evolved into a smart society which will scroll automatically from time to time. The internet is like a 24-hour all-you-can-eat buffet restaurant that serves every type of news. In terms of suffering news, due to its newsworthiness, newer technology provides a nonstop feed: as many images of disaster and atrocity as we can make time to look at.

In this media-saturated world, everyone who connects with the internet will get endless information from dawn to dusk. As a result of the accelerating information updates, immediate information exchange and always-on characteristics of social media, there could be a continuous emergence of events to the users to the extent which exceeds their ability to accept and digest the information. Little by little, what the users become addicted to is refreshing and receiving countless items of information instead of tracking the progress of these events.

6.4.3 Social media as a safety-valve institution

Just as the writing of this thesis took place, another tragedy aroused the attention of ordinary users on Weibo. In this section, I am going to introduce this incident

first, and then I am going to explore the typical reactions of Weibo users to this incident as an example to show the ‘safety-valve institution’ function of social media during the mediation of distant suffering news.

The term ‘safety-valve institution’ is coined by Lewis Coser. According to Coser, the availability of safety-valve institutions ‘leads to a displacement of goal in the actor: he need no longer aim at reaching a solution of the unsatisfactory situation, but merely at releasing the tension which arose from it’ (Coser, 1956: 46). It denotes ‘institutions which serve to divert feelings of hostility onto substitute objects (or which provide substitute means for such diversion), or which function as channels for cathartic release, and not to use it to denote institutions which provide for the carrying out of direct conflict’ (ibid: 164). Without safety-valve institutions, interactions between certain groups tend to become more restricted, and conflicts are inclined to be more serious.

6.4.3.1 The incident

The tragedy I am going to discuss in this part happened in the afternoon of 23rd July, 2016, in Beijing. A family of four – three adults and a child – was driving through the Siberian tiger enclosure at Badaling Wildlife Safari Park which is the largest wildlife park in China. From the video posted by @CCTVNEWS on Weibo, we can have a basic idea of what happened on that day: At 15:00:00 a white sedan pulled over inside the Siberian tiger enclosure. At 15:00:10 a middle-aged woman (Ms Zhao) got out of the car and walked towards the driver’s seat and talked to the driver (her husband). At 15:00:23 the woman was mauled by a tiger. The driver got

out of the car and tried to intervene immediately. At 15:00:30, a second woman (Ms Zhou – Ms Zhao's mother), also got out and went to rescue the first woman.

The above scene was caught by the CCTV camera in the park and was posted on Weibo later. The following news reports said that Ms Zhou was killed on the spot by another tiger, and Ms Zhao was saved but was severely injured. On 24th July, at 16:40 China Central Television (CCTV) News Channel posted the shocking footage on its official Weibo account and attracted thousands of comments in a short time. Despite some people showing their compassion to the suffering family, however, the majority of them fell into the other category to accuse and scoff at the young woman. Instead of showing their sympathy towards the family's suffering, most of the users denounced the stupidity of the daughter in the video who got out of the car arbitrarily at the risk of the other's security. Many of them criticised her and claimed that she got what she deserved, but felt sorry for her mother who tried to save her daughter at the expense of her life.

Reactions from people were totally beyond the expectation of different media. Sensing the wrongness in people's understanding of this incident, in the next couple of days, several review articles were posted at different platforms try to lead the direction of public opinion. Paradoxically, without following suit, commentators started to blame these official accounts. For example, tens of thousands of comments said that @People'sDaily was shaming itself by posting articles like that.

On 24th August, a month after the incident, the investigation team released the report about this incident: Ms Zhao was hurt because she did not comply with the rules and ignored warnings from workers of the Badaling Wildlife Safari Park; Ms Zhou ignored the rules and carried out improper rescue measures, finally causing her death (GC, 2016). Although this incident was not regarded as a 'production safety responsibility accident' by the investigation group, which means the Safari Park was not responsible for this accident, it was suggested that the park should learn from the other wildlife parks and take safer measures to guarantee tourists' rights.

6.4.3.2 Analysis of people's reactions

In his analysis about the emotional mobilisation in online collective actions in China, from the perspective of cultural analysis in social movement theory, Yang argues that the mobilisation of online collective action is fundamentally interaction in online form. By using two internet incidents which appeal to the sentiments of sadness and sympathy respectively, he concludes that online interaction is actually a process of emotional expression and communication (Yang, 2009a: 59-60).

Just as our bodies are programmed to consume sugar and fat due to their rareness in nature during human evolution, we are biologically programmed to be attentive to stimulating stuff when accepting information (boyd, 2010: 30). As a result of its newsworthiness, suffering news is always the priority of various news institutions, from traditional news to today's social media. A fundamental change is that users are not passive receivers or consumers any more in this social media era. What is

more, they have become ‘pro-users’ or ‘pro-sumers’ (Curran *et al.*, 2012: 123) due to the interactive nature of the online world. Passive receivers of news and information have become active participants in the production and dissemination process.



Figure 6.1 Screenshots of Two Posts by @CCTVNews and @People'sDaily

Figure 6.1 showed two screenshots from @CCTVNews' Weibo account (posted at 16:40, 24th July, and captured at 19:13, 27th July) and @People'sDaily's account (posted at 22:51, 26th July, and captured at 17:18, 27th July). @CCTVNews posted

the short video which showed the accident. There were 91,007 comments within three days in the screenshot. The screenshot showed ten of the most supported comments. The comment which won the most thumbs up reads: 'What's wrong with this woman? She asked for it! Does she want to chat with the driver? She's stupid!' The second one reads: 'I feel sad for the one who died in this accident, however, the Park is innocent'. The third one is: 'First, the Park has done its job to remind the woman not to get out of her car. Second, the workers tried their best to save the woman. So, the woman did stupid thing and asked for the punishment!' Only one of the comments in the screenshot showed sympathy to the old lady who died saving her daughter.

The screenshot from @People'sDaily could show us more about social media's role of safety-valve in this incident. @People'sDaily posted an article trying to lead the direction of public opinion on Weibo. The title of the article is: Don't Let Public Opinion towards This Incident Become another Tiger That Hurts People. Surprisingly, this post attracted more condemnation from users. Besides blaming the female in the accident for failing to follow the rules, many comments also criticised the post of this article by @People'sDaily. In the end, this incident became a chance for users to vent their rage towards people who do not obey rules and towards official social media accounts for their improper actions.

6.4.4 Media convergence and media ecology

6.4.4.1 Media convergence

The situation of media convergence in China is fundamentally ‘a response to the challenge posed by digital media because the government perspective deems the increase in online communication, especially the microblog (China’s version of Twitter) to be a new ideological battleground’ (Yin and Liu, 2014: 563). The convergence of traditional media with new media is running smoothly in China (as I mentioned in Section 2.1). Most of the traditional media in China have opened their new media services now.

Many researchers insist that with the advent of the internet, particularly with the use of Weibo and We-Chat and other SNSs, the traditional media are losing their power to new media. However, Zeng’s research showed that more than 87% of the respondents chose to wait for the authoritative reports from traditional mainstream media when important events happened. He also indicated that although Weibo offers everybody a ‘microphone’, without the help and guidance of the traditional media, it is mute in Weibo users’ hands (Zeng, 2013: 3-6). Consequently, the convergence between traditional media and new media is a win-win situation to both traditional and new media platforms.

The *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2015* has similar findings. The most counter-intuitive finding of the report, based on a survey of more than 20,000 people in 12 relatively wealthy countries, is that the vast majority of people across all ages still get most of their news from television. Even young people in the 18-24

demographic, much touted by messaging-app makers and social network executives as a hungry new audience, prefer TV news to news via social media. TV comes out strongest for accuracy, even if you take into account the fact that it is the most widely used news medium in most countries. The report said that social media users value TV most for its accuracy and reliability (RISJ, 2015).

It is a truism to say that the modern world we are living in is saturated with different kinds of media. Most of the time, it is through mediated visibility that we learned about the world around us. Soon after the emergence of the internet in the United States, researchers realised its impact on interpersonal communication. Some of them hold the view that new forms of communication which become possible by using the internet are going to replace some of the traditional ones. 'The appearance of every new form of technology [...] has commanded the interrogation of its effects on existing forms of technology' (Dutta-Bergman, 2004: 661). Therefore, it is understandable that the appearance of new media is unavoidably going to cut down the time individuals spend on existing media. In some extreme cases, sooner or later a new medium is going to displace existing media.

Besides China, media convergence is not uncommon across the globe. For example, the report from a new media use census carried out in the US in 2015 reveals the following: in spite of the popularity of many of the newer entertainment media formats such as online videos, mobile gaming and social media, watching TV and listening to music continue to be the media activities tweens and teens enjoy the most and do most often. But what has changed is that 'in many cases, "old" media

are being consumed in “new” ways. In fact, mobile devices now account for 41% of all screen time among tweens, and 46% among teens’ (CSM, 2015).

Things are almost the same in the UK. The rapid diffusion of the internet and mobile internet brought a landmark change in teenagers’ media habits in the UK. The growing access to the internet at any time and in any place, and a blurring of television content across channels and devices, has brought a landmark change in media use behaviour. ‘Children are now seeking out the content of their choice. They still find traditional TV programmes engaging but are increasingly watching them online and on-demand or binge watching box sets’ (Coughlan, 2016).

As a result of media convergence in the social media era, users have the ability to get a huge amount of information within a short time. They can get themselves informed as long as they have the desire to do so. What is more, users have access to content from traditional media without leaving their new media platform. This change in the ways of receiving information is meaningful in many aspects.

6.4.4.2 Media ecology in social media era

Preserving biodiversity plays an important role in preventing species extinction. For example, most temperate deciduous forests have three levels of plants: Lichen, moss, ferns, wildflowers and other small plants can be found on the forest floor; shrubs fill in the middle level; and hardwood trees like maple, oak, birch, magnolia, sweet gum and beech make up the third level. Of course, sometimes we could find conifers like spruce, fir and pine trees mixed in with the hardwood trees in the

temperate deciduous forests (NW, 2016). The variety of these plant species helps to preserve the natural ecosystems in harmony.

The distinction and division between mass media and social media is not rare in the area of academic media study. For example, Mark Poster (1995) made a distinction between a 'first media age' of radio, television and the telephone and a 'second media age' of interactive, decentralised computer-mediated communications (CMC). As varied and diversified as media research in academia are, the distinction between 'new' and 'old' media does not mean much difference for ordinary people. In spite of the many new characteristics of new media, the number of people still sticking with traditional media is not small. Some of them may not have the need to use the new media, while some others may lack the necessary ability. In most cases, in ordinary people's everyday lives, there is a mixture and combination of both old and new media use which composed the media ecology. Media ecology is never static in this digital media era.

Whenever a new form of medium emerges, there will be a discussion on whether the new medium displaces or complements existing forms of media. In terms of the relationship between the internet and older forms of media, many studies have found a decreased use of older media with the introduction of the internet. At the same time, there are many other studies which presented 'complementary relationships between the internet and older media' (Jung *et al.*, 2012: 971-972). A phenomenon known as 'functional displacement' was found in the media studies as well: if the functions between the new and old types of media are similar, the

new media are likely to displace older forms (Ferguson and Perse, 2000; Henke and Donohue, 1989 cited in Jung *et al.*, 2012: 972).

However, at the same time there is '[t]he notion of *channel complementarity* [which] suggests that new media forms perhaps co-exist with traditional media forms in fulfilling specific communicative functions' (Dutta-Bergman, 2004: 670, italics added). For example, newspapers have their advantages when contrasted with the rest of the other media forms. Compared with television or radio, newspapers can produce more content. On top of that, 'the multi-sectioned structure by which [newspapers] are organized allows editors to present conflicting ideas or opinions in forms that managers in other media do not make available' (Klinenberg, 2002: 192-193). This is especially true while comparing with the local television news: the printed media, such as newspapers, have the potential to offer more space for extended and varied treatment of important issues. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that 'the papers produced more depth, diversity, and detailed reporting in their packages of heat wave stories' (ibid: 192).

The originally developed tools of social interaction – social media – have become a vital source of information, especially with smart phones and Wi-Fi becoming in common use across the globe which makes always-on and instant news possible. From the discussions in this study I found that social media platforms like Weibo played an important role during the dissemination of distant suffering news in China. However, when looking back to those disasters again, what users remember intensely usually is not from these social media.

In a study on the interpersonal communication after 9/11 via telephone and the internet, Dutta-Bergman (2004: 663) noticed that: '[a]n individual who is interested in one type of issue is perhaps likely to be interested in the coverage of that issue on a wide variety of media platforms'. I have similar finding in my research during the group discussions. It is true that one participant during the discussion mentioned that he learned all of the three triggering disasters firstly from Weibo, there are still some others who got the news from the other channels. Such as in group four, a participant who does not use any social media could recognise two disasters by just looking at the photos. The reason is simply that she is obsessed with checking news online.

ZZ: I don't use Weibo, I seldom use Qzone, but I like checking news everyday online. More than ten times every day.

(FG 4, female, line 17)

Also, in group two there are another two participants who got the news from some other sources. HZ learned of the Boston Marathon Bombings from TV, while SJ heard the news from his tutors of an optional course.

Moderator: Do you know anything about it (Boston Marathon Bombings)?

HZ: I don't know much about this case. But I have seen this piece of news on TV. I cannot remember clearly now, except that there was an explosion in Boston. With regard to who plotted it, I really couldn't recall now.

Moderator: Now let's have a look at the third one. It happened in the Philippines this November.

SJ: Oh, the typhoon.

LG: I cannot recognise that. I heard there was a typhoon in the Philippines, but I did not follow the news.

Moderator: You can think of it after I mentioned the Philippines?

LG: No, no, no. I cannot. I learned about that after he said.

Moderator: Could you depict this disaster to us?

SJ: Well, actually I did not pay too much attention about it. I took an optional module. The tutor mentioned the typhoon once. And then I read some news online about the international aid to the Philippines. That's all.

(FG 2, male, line 54-61)

From the above extract, we can see that Weibo is an important part of the media ecology. However, widely spread among young netizens as it is, it cannot take the place of the other media forms. Many users got news from Weibo, but there are still many users who do not believe the reliability of the Weibo news, and get informed from the other media.

Summary

There are four sections in this chapter. In Section 6.1, I discussed participants' actions towards online suffering news. In the social media era, social media users have more chances to run across suffering news; besides those traditional actions like talking and discussing with friends around them and making donations towards affected areas, reposting suffering news is another effective way they could use to offer a helping hand towards distant suffering and the sufferer at a distance. In Section 6.2, I talked about strategies applied by participants to justify their inactions toward distant suffering. Section 6.3 is about Chinese young people's attitudes towards the concept of 'cosmopolitanism'. Participants agreed that in terms of dealing with problems on a worldwide scale, cosmopolitanism is a

reasonable concept and they would like to accept it. However, in the other areas, participants' perspectives towards this notion were diversified.

Section 6.4 analyses the new characteristics during the mediation of distant suffering by using social media compared with former traditional media. In other words, these characteristics are what emerged during the use of social media in the mediation of suffering news. Filter bubble phenomenon is a result of invisible algorithms used by social media platforms, which leave the users with an illusion that they could get informed about the wider world by using social media. The fragmented features of that information acquired online causes the short life span of suffering news during the mediation process. Social media could function as a safety-valve institution during the mediation of distant suffering. As a result of the interactive trait of social media, users have the chance to interact with others, during which process their feelings were expressed as well. From the analysis, we could see that many social media users took the chance to vent their rage towards people who do not abide by the rules and towards official social media accounts for their improper action. Besides that, media convergence is a trend for traditional media to coexist with new media, and at the same time, the coexistence of traditional media and new media leads to the media ecology in the social media era, which is of great importance to everyone.

CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

7.1 Discussion

In his book on the media and modernity back in 1995, John Thompson classified three different types of interaction: face-to-face interaction, mediated interaction and mediated quasi-interaction. Co-presence and a shared spatial-temporal reference system are the key features of face-to-face interaction. Media interaction involves the use of paper, electrical wires and many other media to transmit information among specific individuals who are separated in space, in time or in both. The social relations established through books, newspapers, radio, television, and the other mass communication media are mediated quasi-interaction. Unlike the former two types of interaction, mediated quasi-interaction is oriented towards an indefinite range of potential recipients; as a result of that, mediated quasi-interaction is usually mono-logical instead of dialogical in face-to-face interaction and mediated interaction(Thompson, 1995: 82-87). Of course, this classification of interaction is not exhaustive, and Thompson himself did not preclude the possibility of the emergence of new forms of interaction with the development of new communication technologies.

At the same time as the writing of Thompson's book, a revolutionary change in the history of the development of media and communication was taking place across the globe. With the widespread use of the internet and, what is more, with the advent of Web 2.0 in the mid-2000s and the universal use of social media, a new form of interaction emerged. In contemporary society; the use of social media could reach an interaction which goes beyond the dichotomy of mono-logical and

dialogical relationship between message sender and message receiver, on the one hand, and towards indefinite or specific individuals at the users' wish, on the other hand. Furthermore, this kind of interaction enabled by social media could overcome the 'boundaries of time and space' (Lovink, 2008: 118). Consequently, a new form of interaction became possible in this new mediated space rendered by new communication technologies, especially by social media.

Different forms of media brought a new visibility which is no longer constrained by the spatial and temporal properties of the situated visibility of co-presence. As a result of this mediated-visibility, 'distant others could be rendered visible in virtually the same time-frame, could be heard at the very moment they spoke and seen at the very moment they acted, even though they did not share the same spatial locale as the individuals to whom they were visible' (Thompson, 2005: 37). The rise of the internet and other networked social media has strengthened this new visibility. Mediated-visibility could reach 'a kind of presence or recognition in the public space, which can help to call attention to one's situation or to advance one's cause' (ibid: 49). To be human is to be social. We shall not lose sight of the fact that the inevitable factor of modern life is our increasing reliance on internet and other forms of digital communication technologies. The emergence of social media and smart phones has reshaped communication practices for people across the globe.

In human history, due to its newsworthiness, suffering news was brought to the audience through different forms of media: from face-to-face interaction in the beginning to mass communication media, which include telegraphs, newspapers,

books, radio, television, internet, etc. Under the auspices of the media, encountering suffering is becoming a daily experience of each individual in the highly mediated world. Two decades ago, scholars on the consumption of television pointed out that '[t]o watch television [...] is to be exposed to violence, suffering and death' (Robins, 1994: 457). The arrival of television, especially the live television coverage of the faraway suffering, has brought the disasters that happened in zones of dangers into zones of safety. For example, the '1985 Live Aid Concert' made the 1984 Ethiopia famine world-known. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that some scholars concluded that the former barriers of citizenship, religion and geography which divided individuals' moral space into those we were related to and those who were beyond our knowledge were breaking down. Consequently, television became 'the privileged medium through which moral relations between strangers are mediated in the modern world' (Ignatieff, 1985: 57). Just as Keith Tester points out by citing the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut's denunciation of Holocaust revisionism:

[W]hen it comes to the problem of world hunger, we are in a different situation from our ancestors because we do not have the defence of ignorance. Whereas our ancestors could claim, probably in all good conscience, that they did nothing about famine in Africa or slaughter in Asia because they knew nothing about it, we cannot develop that kind of argument without lying to ourselves. We know, we know we know and everybody else knows that we know (Tester, 2001: 4-5).

Up to now, in this age of accelerating information updates, immediate information exchange and ubiquitous connectivity, suffering news is still the hot topic in diverse social media platforms. As Greg Bankoff (2003: 5, italics in original) observed over a decade ago: '*Natural disasters* seem to have increasingly caught the attention of the western media in the late twentieth century, carrying reports and images of drought, flood, famine, earthquake, volcanic eruption, typhoon, tsunami and the like into suburban homes on an almost daily basis'. Media functions as bridges to link the sufferer and the audience, just as Höijer (2004: 515) concludes that 'it is through the media that we [...] meet depictions of the suffering of distant strangers'. Media are central to the heightened awareness about disasters and others' suffering which are emblematic of the modern world.

In a book that perhaps did more than any other to put the role of the media on the agenda of public debate in the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore argued that 'the medium is the message'. What they meant by this was that it was not so much the content communicated by the media that mattered, but *how* they communicated that content and, in doing so, how they worked *on* us, messaging and shaping our capacities in various ways with marked consequences for the organisation of social relationships (Bennett, 2005: 52). In the distribution of suffering in social media era, social media as medium means a lot to both the sufferer and the audience – namely, the social media users.

We cannot afford to overlook the fact that the diverse selections of social media platforms do not necessarily result in better communication among the users, and that technological innovations do not unavoidably lead to better forms of

interaction. John Peters argues that: 'If success in communication was once the art of reaching across the intervening bodies to touch another's spirit, in the age of electronic media it has become the art of reaching across the intervening spirits to touch another's body' (Peters, 1999: 224-225). There is nothing to be surprised at seeing Peters put an emphasis on the body-related communication because the use of electronic media does not require the co-presence of the communicators' physical bodies any more: 'Our faces, actions, voices, thoughts, and transactions have all migrated into media that can disseminate the indicia of our personhood without our permission' (ibid: 228).

The research of sociology covers aspects like social order, social structure, social policy etc. which range from the micro to the macro level of the society. The core concerns of sociological inquiry include 'the themes of class and stratification, power, privilege and inequality'(Thompson, 1988: 359) over decades. Different kinds of media have occupied and prevailed in different aspects of our daily lives, providing us with a continuous flow of information. Few people would deny that the contemporary world we are living in is highly media-saturated. Therefore, we should not lose sight of the connection between the 'development of communication media' and the 'rise of modern societies'. This is especially true after the internet and mobile internet, which altered the spatial and temporal dimensions of social life fundamentally, becoming popular in our lives. Media occupy a central role in our lives from the dawn of modernity to the present day, accordingly sociology should pay more attention to the development of the media.

Globalisation is a phenomenon unique to the contemporary world since the second half of the twentieth century. Roland Robertson (1995: 30) argues that globalisation involved the reconstruction of 'home', 'community' and 'locality', and local can be regarded as an aspect of globalisation rather than as a counterpoint to the global. Globalisation, as a process of 'time-space compression', has undoubtedly reshaped relationships among individuals across the world. With modern communication technologies, everything that happens far away could be brought to our eyes at an unprecedented speed. In the domain of globalisation, the relationship between people from 'the zone of safety' and 'the zone of suffering' is asymmetrical. Daniel Cohen once wrote: 'Globalisation [...] creates an image of new closeness between nations that is only virtual, not real' (Cohen, 2006: 166).

Social media have the ability to make a new form of interaction which across the boundaries of time and space possible. As a result of the mediated-visibility enabled by social media, suffering events beyond the restrictions of the local and the immediate have filled social media users' daily lives. However, seeing suffering is different from any other media experiences, because it assumes a moral responsibility for the viewers to act upon and to alleviate the other's suffering. How do social media users position themselves as moral agents with regard to distant suffering and the sufferers in the contemporary highly mediated world? That is the main question I planned to solve in this thesis. In other words, this thesis aims to explore the ways social media users adopted to construct their moral agency in relation to the suffering of far-away others.

The concept of mediation was comprehended as a series of media experiences enabled by modern communication technologies. Two mutually related media practices – media witnessing and media remembering – were introduced in the thesis to analyse the ways social media users discursively construct their sense of moral agency with regard to online information of distant others. In this thesis, media witnessing is the discursive construction of the receptivity mode of distant suffering media reports among social media users, while media remembering is their discursive reconstruction of those witnessed events. Focus group discussions with three triggering media disasters were employed to investigate how social media users construct their moral agency in the mediation of distant suffering events.

7.2 Contribution

The initial goal of this thesis is to explore how social media users make use of the online resources to make sense of distant suffering and get involved with distant others based on media stories embedded in public discourses. Also, the thesis examines the new features of the mediation of distant suffering in the social media era. This study adds to the growing body of scholarship examining the role social media played during the mediation of suffering. On top of that, this study extends the range of studies on the mediation of distant suffering from the West, where existing theories and analysing frameworks have been developed and codified, to the East, where new issues keep emerging. In this section, I am going to review the main findings of this thesis across the research questions.

7.2.1 *Media witnessing*

Media witnessing was understood as the discursive construction of the social media users' experiences of distant suffering through social media. Focusing on the three tensions in the formation of the user's moral agency, namely the relationship of the social media users with the scene of suffering events, the media and the distant sufferers, the analysis of the focus group discussions found that detached witnessing was obvious during witnessing distant suffering through social media in this study.

In detached witnessing of distant suffering, young participants showed no emotional involvement toward far-away suffering events; they accepted the media reports about the suffering events with no traces of scepticism, and they only showed conditional hospitality depending on immediacy with regard to the sufferers. The conclusion echoes with Kyriakidou's study among Greek television audiences, from whom she found that '[i]t was mostly the younger respondents that would more often construct themselves as detached from suffering and describe themselves as "*mere spectators*" to the events taking place on the television screen' (Kyriakidou, 2011: 188, italics in original).

The reasons for young social media users' detached witnessing were examined in this section. The lack of economic independency of the participant in this study left them with a sense of powerlessness towards media reports of distant suffering, therefore they had no enthusiasm to engage themselves with those disaster events. The fragmented information learned on social media failed to urge the participants to build the connection between the sufferer and themselves. On top of that,

contemporary Chinese youth paid no close attention towards political issues, combined with the occasional conflicts between China and the US and the Philippines driving their hospitality away from those faraway sufferers in the triggering events of this study.

Unwitnessed witnessing was proposed as an extreme case of detached witnessing at the end of this media witnessing practice among young social media users. This routine witnessing was common among the users who were flooded with endless similar fragmented information about suffering, which finally pushed the users to filter and to pay no attention to similar information intentionally. In the end, they saw suffering events from time to time online, but did nothing at all.

7.2.2 *Media remembering*

Media remembering was employed as the discursive reconstruction of the social media users' memories of those witnessed suffering through social media in this study. The examination of the focus group discussions indicated a moral hierarchy during the users' remembering of distant suffering: at the bottom end are those banal disasters. Generally speaking, these disasters failed to leave any impression on the users as a result of their banality or frequent occurrence. Disasters which were remembered through the social media users' own memories or interpretations rather than the mediated representations were also in this category.

In the middle of the moral hierarchy of media remembering were those iconic disasters which existed in the users' collective memories. Among the participants in this study, the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake social was commonly referred to as an

iconic disaster. The 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster in the Soviet Union and the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan were also mentioned as a result of their extraordinariness in the participants' memories. In the discussions, media users' memories about iconic disasters were a combination of both their personal experiences and mediated images.

At the top of the moral hierarchy of media remembering were those events which have close connections with viewers themselves. In this study, those disasters which could remind the users of the national recognition and those local events fell into this category as a result of the close connection with the users these events could leave them with.

7.2.3 *Actions at a distance*

The issue of actions at a distance were analysed with the purpose of figuring out the ways in which social media users construct themselves as public actors with regard to distant suffering and distant others. Viewers' responses to certain suffering images were various, therefore, their actions were in various forms too. Reposting of those Weibo related to distant disasters or sufferers was regarded as a way of helping suffering others by many social media users in this study. Discussion after exposure of disasters was held to be an action which could involve the viewers with the sufferer, and was morally acceptable towards suffering events. Donation was the most common action due to the reason that monetary contributions were treated as the most ordinary and desirable method for alleviation of suffering. The donation of second-hand stuff to those affected areas was also accepted as an action towards distant suffering.

The participants also listed several argumentative strategies to justify their inaction towards distant suffering in the focus group discussions. First, the participant brought up the culture of mistrust, such as scepticism about online information and lack of trust towards the charitable institution, to explain their inaction in the discussion. Furthermore, they continued to construct a sense of powerlessness as a result of the long distance between the sufferer and themselves and a lack of reliable channels to offer help to the sufferer to show the support for their choices of inaction. Compassion fatigue and lack of necessity to offer help due to the speciality of China's disaster-relief mechanism were also mentioned as the participants' excuses for inaction.

7.2.4 Different views on cosmopolitanism

The participants' views on the concept of cosmopolitanism in today's highly mediated and globalised public space were asked at the end of the focus group discussion. Not surprisingly, their attitudes towards this concept were varied. Some participants in this study accepted this concept based on the common problems that people are facing now, such as the global economic and environmental problems. Some others hold the view that cosmopolitanism as a concept was too idealistic to realise. The third theme on this question was contingent on some additional conditions which were closely related with the participants themselves. The various views on the concept were understandable when considering that fundamentally the starting point of the building of the participants' agency was to reach the identification between themselves and the sufferers.

7.2.5 *New features of mediation through social media*

In the social media era, the mediation of suffering events among the users had its own features as a result of the particularities of different social media platforms and social media as a new media form in contemporary situations. First, due to the invisible algorithms employed by various social media platforms, a filter bubble gave the users an illusion of omniscience and self-satisfaction when collecting information through social media. However, the fact was that it confined the users into a community with endless homogenous information coming to their attention. Second, as a result of the accelerating information updates, immediate information exchange and always-on characteristics of social media, the lifespan of suffering events on social media was rather limited. Therefore, it was difficult to attract attention from the users. Third, during the daily use of social media, many users took the chance to vent their rage towards people who do not abide by the rules and towards official social media accounts for their improper action. Finally, media convergence of the traditional media with social media and the new media ecology caused by the coexistence of traditional media and social media was of great importance to everyone.

7.3 Reflection

It is not unreasonable to treat media text as a tool to inspire some kind of response from the audiences. For example, according to John Reith, the founder of the British Broadcasting Corporation, the role of BBC is to inform, educate and entertain people. This manifesto has become the template for public service broadcasting in Britain and influenced many other public broadcasting systems

across the globe (Higgins, 2014). This manifesto does not only mean single-direction broadcasting from the BBC to its audiences, but also expects responses from them which manifests as 'education'.

To this extent, it is reasonable to understand the media as something similar to a dialogue between the media content producers and the audience, except that there is no need for the audience to give their feedback instantly. It also shows that audiences are not just passive receivers of what the media offer them. On the other hand, they are active consumers and participants during different kinds of dialogical media contexts. This is especially true when considering the moral duties of the audience towards the others.

My role as a social media user has positioned me as an insider with the participants during this study. It is my hope that I have shown a true story of the mediation of distant suffering among social media users. It is not my intention to present a complete picture of how social media users across the globe treat mediated distant suffering, if such is even possible. During their anthropological study of social media about why people post online, Miller and his team (2016) found that social media is used differently among people from different parts of the world. Therefore, it is really challengeable to generalise the conclusions from the participants of one research projects to other populations. However, it is justifiable when considering that the primary goal of social sciences studies is to help people appreciate the diversity of the world we are living in and that the key idea behind qualitative research is to learn about the issue from participants. This qualitative research, of course, cannot make grand claims with regard to the majority of

Weibo users in China, needless to say social media users on a broader scale. However, my goal is to provide one possible perspective into the under-studied aspect of Weibo and social media, and to contribute to the research of the ethical role that social media plays in our daily lives.

Compared with Kyriakidou's empirical finding of four types of media witnessing among television audiences in Greece, I only found detached witnessing among the participants in this study. However, I do not think it means that the generalisability of Kyriakidou's analytical framework is limited. I have listed the reasons for the obviousness of detached witnessing among Chinese young social media users in Section 5.1. This is a result of the characteristics of the young participants in this study and types of information that people could get from social media nowadays. Of course, if possible, I hope in the future I could carry out more research among participants from the different age groups and different socioeconomic backgrounds when conditions allowed. I am going to discuss that in detail in the next section.

My original plan was to focus on figuring out the mediation of distant suffering among microblogging users in China, thus the ideal participants of this study were young Weibo users in China. But, shortly after the fieldwork in 2014, I found that in spite of its high penetration rate among young people, there were still some non-users amongst the participants. Furthermore, as the media ecology develops in this rapidly changing modern world, different new social media platforms emerged during the writing process and attracted users from Weibo. Actually, Weibo witnessed a retrogression both in its total active users and frequency of usage after

2014. As a result, I decided to expand the research to the social media sphere to learn about the new features of mediation of distant suffering through social media. That is the origin of the question about the last research question in this thesis.

7.4 Future Trajectories

As shown in Section 7.2, this study confirmed the applicability of Kyriakidou's analytical framework about the mediation of suffering. However, as a result of the limitations I talked about in the methodology chapter, I hope I could have the chance to further this study in the following directions in the future.

The choice of research participants in this study indicates that a comprehensive selection of participants, which includes people from different walks of life, different ages, and different subjects and so on, is necessary to keep the diversity of participants in further study. At the same time, the broader scope of participants could help to generalise the applicability of the analytical framework and improve the research conclusions.

Comparative study among participants from different backgrounds is another important perceptive which deserves consideration in the future study. The pilot study of this research was carried among three Chinese participants who were doing their master's degrees in the UK when the pilot discussion took place. All of them were heavy social media users and had lived in the UK for over half a year when the pilot study was carried out. From their discussion, I found that their patterns of media witnessing and media remembering were slightly different from their counterparts back in China. It is meaningful to carry out comparative study

among participants from different cultural and national backgrounds to check the analytical framework used in this thesis, even to reach new conclusions and to move the research of mediation through social media to next stage.

As discussed in Chapter 3, witness itself is a complicated concept which involves a three basic communications triangle: the agent who bears witness, the utterance or text itself and the audience who witnesses (Peters, 2009: 25). Former studies on mediation have been done on media text (Chouliaraki, 2006) and the audience (Kyriakidou, 2008a; Ong, 2011a), based on television texts or television audiences. This study is an attempt to expand the mediation of suffering among social media users who are the audience in the social media era. In the future, the study of mediation of suffering could try to include the sufferers into the analytical framework. Or to do some research with a combination of different aspects in this 'communication triangle' to reflect the truth about mediation on a more comprehensive scale.

There are no 'right' stories in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2012: 53), and the aims of the researchers are to give an accurate reflection of what the participants said. In this process, however, it is unavoidable that the study is going to be reflecting the history, culture and personal experiences of the researcher. After the best of my efforts, this thesis is what I believe – not the whole of the final truth, but a truth important to me. I have tested and supported the truth as fully as time and my ability allow. In the beginning, social media are products of technological development combined with the users' needs. As time goes by, social media become the tool that users have employed to learn the world and their relationship

with others. It is my hope that this thesis might serve as a catalyst to attract people's attention to the mediation of suffering in the social media era, and to studies on social media as well.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Topic Guide during Focus Group Discussion

1. Warm up questions:

(1) When did you start to use Weibo? What is your mainly purpose to use it?

(2) Which kind of information do you focus on Weibo?

2. Memory/ knowledge of the events:

(1) Do you know what this event presented in the pictures is?

(2) Can you describe what happened in the event?

(3) Are there any stories about the events that you remember intensely?

3. Participation in the events:

(1) Have you made any donations towards these events?

(2) Do you have any idea about the present situation in the affected area or the affected person?

4. News consumption:

(1) Are there any similar events come to your mind?

(2) Where do you usually get your news?

(3) Which kind of news you are most interested in?

(4) Do you usually discuss what you see from the news with the others?

Appendix 2: Study Information Sheet

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this study: Watching the pain of distant others through social media – Weibo users' discourses of distant suffering in China. This Information Sheet explains what the study is about and how we would like you to take part in it.

The purpose of the study is to explore the ways Weibo users talk about distant suffering and position themselves in relation to it. This study is sponsored by China Scholarship Council and the University of Warwick.

In order to elicit your views, we would like you to participate in the focus group discussion by the researcher involved in the Study at the University of Warwick. If you agree to this, the discussion, which last approximately one hour, will be audio recorded and will be transcribed for later analysis.

The information provided by you in the focus group discussion will be used for research purpose only. It will not be used in a manner which would allow identification of your individual responses. The audio will be transcribed, and in the transcription pseudonyms will be used to break the link between data and your identity.

At the end of the study, all of the recorded audios will be destroyed, yet the anonymised transcription of the group discussions will be stored in order to make it available for later analysis.

All reasonable travel and subsistence expenses that you incur through taking part in the Study will be reimbursed, but please keep all receipts.

Once again, we would like to thank you for agreeing to take part in this Study. If you have any questions about the research at any stage, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Tong Xiyan

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University of Warwick

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Appendix 3: Interview Consent Letter

I, the undersigned, have read and understood the Study Information Sheet provided by Tong Xiyan.

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the Study.

I understand that taking part in the Study will include being participated in a focus group discussion and the discussion will be audio recorded.

I have been given adequate time to consider my decision and I agree to take part in this Study.

I understand that my personal details such as name and living address will not be revealed to people outside of this project.

I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages and other research outputs but my name will not be used and no direct link between the words and my identity could be found.

I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any material related to this project to Tong Xiyan, department of Sociology, University of Warwick.

I understand that I can withdraw from the Study at any time and I will not be asked any questions about why I no longer want to take part.

Name of Participants:

Researcher Signature:

Date: _____

Appendix 4: Photos used in the Focus Group Discussion

1. Photos about Ya'an Earthquake in China, 2013



2. Photos about Boston Marathon Bombings, 2013





3. Photos about Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, 2013



Tacloban coast 2012



Tacloban coast 2013



Appendix 5: Profiles of Participants in This Study

Pseudonym	Group	Gender(F/M)
HR	1	F
SK	1	F
ZX	1	F
SY	1	F
LS	1	F
LF	1	F
HZ	2	M
LG	2	M
LH	2	M
SJ	2	M
JF	3	F
WL	3	F
LJ	3	F
QR	3	F
LFF	3	F
ZZ	4	F
ZJ	4	F
GY	4	F
WP	4	F
LC	4	F
ZY	4	F

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