Abstract

Though some studies have focused on how media is an essential component of good governance, there is very little existing literature on the most recent media platform – social media – and the realization of good governance in China. This thesis tries to fill in the gap and to demonstrate the ways local governments in China have used Weibo – the most popular Chinese social media platform – to improve their governing and to fulfill the criteria of “good governance” proposed by different parties internationally.

This thesis uses the case study of a local government Weibo account – the Ma’anshan Release and analyzes the contents of its posts, reposts and private messages. It concludes that through the Ma’anshan Release, the Ma’anshan local government shows a notable level of responsiveness, responsibility, effectiveness and efficiency, and transparency, as well as efforts for preventing the abuse of power and corruption. All these criteria are in parallel with the variables proposed in current studies of good governance. It also proposes that the Ma’anshan Release is not an isolated case; its practices can be found in different jurisdictions in China. Thus, Weibo as a social media tool can help local governments in China contribute to the realization of good governance.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Peiyu Ye.
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To Ming

“Always.”
Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1999, a “72-hour Internet Survival Contest” was held in China. Twelve participants from Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou were locked up individually in separate rooms with only a Windows 98 computer. They were given 1500 Yuan (roughly 187 US dollars by the exchange rate of the day) to survive for 72 hours solely dependent on the Internet (meaning ordering food or any necessities, or chatting with people online). By the end of the contest, one participant gave up; the other eleven all “survived”, though none of them actually completed their previous plans through the Internet in these three days (People’s Daily Online, 1999; Sina News, 2000).

The contest is remembered down to the present. As George Chan¹ – a noted netizen and user of Zhihu (a Quora-like forum in China) – said, “media reported at that time ‘it will be our future when people can survive solely on the Internet’. Nobody believed this. They said you would have to be insanely good at computers to survive. Now, perhaps we should hold a ‘non-Internet 72-hour survival contest’ instead, to see who can live without the Internet”.

The function of the Internet today is no longer limited to “survival” anymore. The impact of the Internet as communications bridge that significantly speeds up information flow, transforms “the spatial and temporal organization of social life”, and creates “new forms of actions and interactions” (Thompson 1995, 4) has profoundly changed society. In recent years, the rise of social media further changes the game: information is no longer held exclusively in the hands of

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¹ George Chen’s answer to question “What are some predictions ten years ago that seemed to be impossible by then, but were realized now?” can be found on Zhihu at https://www.zhihu.com/question/36925599.
the government; citizens (who are now called “netizens” – citizens of the net) also share the power that Internet and information give mankind.

In an authoritarian country like China, the power that netizens hold is essential because it allows the possibility for a relatively equal conversation between the government and its people. It makes the concerns of the public easier to be heard, and the doings of the government to be understood by ordinary citizens. It also forces the government to be more transparent, accountable, responsive and effective. All these practices can contribute to the realization of good governance in China.

This thesis focuses on the relationship between Weibo and good governance in China. It argues that Weibo can make an important contribution to the realization of good governance especially at a local level because it helps facilitate the interactions between the local government and local residents by holding the government potentially more responsible, responsive, transparent, efficient, effective and accountable while empowering the general public and making their voices easier to be heard by the government. This thesis uses the case of the *Ma’anshan Release (Ma An Shan Fa Bu)*, an official Weibo account owned and managed by Ma’anshan Municipal Party Committee in the central province of Anhui, and it looks into ways Weibo can contribute to good governance, and how the case of Ma’anshan can demonstrate these criteria.

This thesis is divided into six chapters.

After the introduction, chapter two reviews current studies related to this thesis. It begins with how the Internet empowers people in China, and then discusses the different uses of the Internet by the central and local government as covered in the scholarly literature. This literature provides important concepts which lay foundations for further discussion of media and governance. I also examine the concept of governance, as well as the relation between media and governance in the
current academic sphere. By looking through literature, I discover that there are certain gaps of current studies since only a limited number of literature mentioned social media and governance. Thus, I propose my own research questions for looking at ways local governments in China can use social media to fulfill good governance.

Chapter three focuses on the empirical background before the widespread use of official Weibo. It recognizes that online communication is a new form of the long Chinese tradition of xinfang (an administrative system for the Chinese government to hear complaints and suggestions from “the mass”) and it credits two channels of online communication before the emergence of social media – government websites and online forums. Both channels have flaws and, as I argue, social media – particularly Sina Weibo – is an important medium in this thesis. It also gives a full description of Sina Weibo and official Weibo.

Chapter four is the case study of Ma’anshan, where the Weibo account the Ma’anshan Release demonstrates how Weibo can contribute to good governance at a local level.

Chapter five briefly mentions three similar cases of official Weibo, which show that the case of Ma’anshan is not isolated and has its national significance. It also includes the limitation of this thesis.

Chapter six draws a conclusion.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The existing scholarly literature offers two other interpretations which lay the foundations for the discussions of this thesis. These are the empowerment of the common Chinese people by the Internet and the distinctions between central and local government practices.

2.1 The Internet in China and its Technological Empowerment

Throughout history, Chinese people always sought to communicate with the authority – be it local or central – to resolve their issues and express their concerns. However, the government usually has an upper hand with the information, power and authority it holds. The widespread use of the Internet technology does not alter this tendency completely in China, yet it brings changes to this process, and makes it easier for the general public to talk to the rulers.

The Internet came to China in the late 1980s in order to make academic exchanges between universities more convenient. It was provided to the whole country for commercial use in 1994, and has been flourishing ever since (Tai 2006).

Current studies of the Internet in China are ample and wide ranging in perspective and conclusion. Many focused on the economic impact of the Internet, including how it opens up new opportunities for enterprises (Zheng 2008, 31), that of consumers’ behaviors (Martinsons 2014, 29; Sun & Wang 2014, 36) or that the Chinese government also benefits from the development of the Internet economically (Yu 2014, 15; Zheng 2008, 32-37). Other studies have revealed how the Internet influences the young generations in China in both positive (Clark 2012) and negative (Bax 2014; Jiang 2014; Szablewicz 2014) ways.

A major part of current studies on the Internet in China has concentrated on the control of information (Kluver & Chen, 2005) which has severely violated people’s right to express freely. Related technologies that are used by the government are examined, including how the censorship
system in China works (Bei, 2010; Beech 2015; Dou 2015; Tai 2014, 63; The Economist 2013). Other studies dig deeper into the attitude that the Chinese government holds when implementing strong control (Kalathil & Boas 2001; Tsui 2003; Endwshaw 2004; Zhou 2005, 6).

These statements have their virtues. Chinese officials indeed hold a “monster complex” towards the Internet, and view it “as an evil monster that, if not brought under total control, may constitute the biggest danger to their rule” (Zhou 2005, 3). However, control and censorship are not the full picture. Many scholars also notice a dual attitude the Chinese government takes: besides a compulsion to exercise total control, it also recognizes the changes the Internet can bring towards economic, political and social development, and senses a must to provide Internet service to the general public under the circumstances of globalization (Tai 2006). Thus, the Chinese government has to promote use of the Internet while controlling it.

These studies on the dual attitudes are important because they recognize the power that the Internet gives the people. In these studies, the government is no longer the sole player in this game; people are empowered with advanced technology and more information so that they can also join the stage. The power dynamic shifts towards the “people” side, and it therefore forces the government to react and respond to the challenging situation. As a result, the state and the people ended up in a tangled game of “tug-of-war”, where neither side has enough strengths to pull the opponent towards the end of the rope.

From the people’s side, Zheng Yongnian (2008) states plainly that “the Internet has empowered the state but not society in some areas; but in other areas, it has empowered society but not the state…. in some areas, the Internet empowers both the state and the society” (10). Yang Guobin (2009) points out the false image that many westerners have, that “because of governmental internet control, Chinese Internet users do nothing but play” (15) and shows “how
Chinese people have created a world of carnival, community, and contention in and through cyberspace and how in this process they have transformed personhood, society, and politics” (5-6). Zhou Yongming (2005) also believes “the creativity, will and intentions of the people … have opened up new vistas of political participation” (146). Other scholars also mention the rise of a Chinese civil society with the help of the Internet. “The Internet is redefining existing social relationship and fostering new ones under different social settings. This is where we see the greatest hope for the Internet as an empowering tool for Chinese civil society” (Tai 2006, 162).

On the other end, “the more confident PRC regime has adopted a more proactive policy” towards the Internet compared with the late Qing dynasty when it sought to ward off the impact of telegraphy (Zhou 2005, 232). Through its daily policy implementations, the Chinese government has discovered that it is possible “to offer services to citizens without necessarily empowering them; control still resides in the hands of the government” (Esarey & Kluver 2014, 85).

To sum up, this situation where the state and its people play a never-ending cat-and-mouse game exists until the present days, and both sides are evolving through the process. Still, the essence of the “cat-and-mouse” game has changed. Netizens in China as the “mouse” constantly challenge the state with Internet technology, while the state as the “cat” tries to lead the mouse into a situation beneficial for both while tying the mouse to a leash.

2.2 Decentralization and the Power of Local Governments

However, the tension of the “leash” appears to be different between central authority and various local governments. The old Chinese phrase that “Heaven is high above and emperor is far away” can be applied here: while administrative orders and regulations on the Internet technology and information freedom from the central level are tight, it can hardly reach every local government to ensure all of them see their best interests in those orders and do their utmost to
implement the policies. As a result, local governments’ perspectives on Internet technology can be quite different from the central’s, and they are in the position where they are capable of enjoying more freedom of their own to innovate with the Internet.

Many administrative theories can be seen here, most noticeably the theory of centralization and decentralization. Lieberthal and Lampton (1992) discussed the decentralization process in China – particularly that of financial and fiscal system – from a historical perspective. Yu & He (2012) summarized Bob Jessop’s introduction to “meta-governance”, which requires the state to “dethrone its own supremacy, reflexively decentralize its power” (42-3). Zheng (2010) defines China’s central-local relationship as “de facto federalism” because it allows “each level of government [to] make final decisions in certain fields”, with their “primary responsibility over the economy and, to some extent, politics within their jurisdictions”, so that “it is increasingly becoming difficult, if not possible, for the central government to unilaterally impose its will on the provinces and alter the distribution of authority between levels of government” (172).

Another theory points towards the incentive of local government. “The Target Management Responsibility System” is used to evaluate subnational officials’ performances and achievements, and to “determine promotions and raises” partially (Teets 2015, 88). In order to meet the criteria and requests of the system, many local officials are more motivated towards policy innovations despite political risks and uncertainties, and they are willing to implement more proactive policies in order to satisfy their local citizens.

In short, Zheng (2008) proposes that “the state must be disaggregated” in order to “clarify the role of the Internet in mediating relations between the state and society”. He claims that “The state is composed of different blocks, such as key individual leaders, factions, bureaucracies, and levels of government. All these actors have different preferences and interests related to Internet
development. Each actor might use the Internet for its own purpose” (preface, xvii). This gives an explanation on why there is a difference in the usage of the Internet between the central and the local.

2.3 Governance and “Good Governance”

This thesis tries to demonstrate the connections between social media (Weibo in particular) and good governance in China. What do we mean by good governance here?

The word “governance” does not have a long history compared with the word “government”. Yet, they were often used interchangeably. In 1989, when describing the failure in Africa’s development, the World Bank attributed the problems to “a crisis of governance” and defined “governance” as “… the exercise of political power to manage a nation’s affairs” (60). After the World Bank, “governance” was widely used in the research of political development.

Moreover, the concept of governance has broadened, and it not only refers to governing related to the government per se, but “abstractly to all processes of governing”, with a focus on “the formal institutions of government with recognition of more diverse activities that blur the boundary of state and society” (Bevir 2012, 5). The emphasis of governance started to include complex interactions involved in governing, including multiple stakeholders and players – such as civil society, corporations, the public sector as well as others. New terms involving various aspects of governance started to emerge, including “global governance”, “good governance”, “cooperate governance”, “collaborative governance”, etc.

Particularly, “good governance refers to governing systems which are capable, responsive, inclusive, and transparent”. “Improving governance should include more people having more of a say in the decisions which shape their lives” (Clark 2011). Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006) defines “good governance” as “… refer[ring] to the
management of government in a manner that is essentially free of abuse and corruption, and with due regard for the rule of law”.

The World Bank goes one step further to quantify “good governance” in its “World Bank Worldwide Governance Index”, which uses the following indicators to measure the level of “good governance” in each country: control of corruption; government effectiveness; political stability and absence of violence/terrorism; regulatory quality; rule of law; and voice and accountability.

In China, the studies of good governance have prevailed for the past decade. Current studies have focused on good governance and civil society (Yu 2002; Yu & Guo, 2012), local governance (Yu 2003), governance and Chinese politics (Saich 2004; Yu 2014), collaborative governance (Jing 2015) and the relationship between good governance and globalization (Yu 2008; Deng & Guo, 2011). Many scholars argue over whether the concept of good governance can be applied to China, or whether it could be realized without a strong society or the existence of a civil society – here, the definition of “civil society” varies among different Chinese scholars. Yet in general, it is a western concept which emphasizes state-society relations and “the total of civil organisations or civil relations outside of the state or government” (Yu 2000, 2). However, it seems that the Chinese government is one of the strongest motivators behind the prevalence of “governance” with their proposal of establishing a “service-orientated government”. The concept has been presented since 2003 and it was made to the 2012’s “Five-Year Plan”. The emphasis of governance rather than government and the change in governments’ functions here demonstrates the focus of the current Chinese state.

2.4 Media and Governance

To achieve good governance requires the government to listen, to be responsive and transparent, and to deal with public issues with effectiveness. It also necessitates that other
stakeholders should be fully informed and able to express their opinions. All these entail efficient communication. Thus, media (television, newspaper, the Internet, etc.) plays an essential role during the process towards good governance.

However, relationship between media and governance has been a relatively understudied area (BBC World Service Trust 2009, 24) in both political science and journalism. Many researchers find it hard to keep pace with the “rapidly changing landscape” in media, “with its explosion… including FM radio, digital media, mobile phones and blogs” (ibid., 28).

An absolute majority of the current studies on the relationship emphasize that media is essential for governance, though they phrase it differently. DFID (2008) believes that media issues “have relevance to all aspects of the governance framework”, including state capacity (legitimacy), state accountability and state responsiveness. BBC World Service Trust (2009) emphasizes that “a free and pluralistic media” is essential to governance because it “is the first line of defense of people’s rights”, allows “free flow of information” which “is crucial to ensuring that resources are allocated appropriately and that through that appropriate resource allocation, good things happen in the lives of poor people”, and can hold government accountable (8). Odugbemi and Norris (2010) examined the three functions of news media regarding governance: as watchdogs to contain corruption (382), as agenda-setters to “raise awareness of social problems by informing elected officials about public concerns and needs” (386) especially during emergencies and disasters, and as gatekeepers to “bring together a plurality of diverse interests, voices, and viewpoints to debate issues of public concern” and to “educate citizens and facilitate rational debate and informed public opinion” (390). Rawnsley (2008) argues that media is important for good governance because “a fully informed critical public opinion is essential for … conform(ing) or challeng(ing) the
prevailing political order” (119) as it not only “offer(s) a voice to a range of actors located both inside and outside the political process” but also serves as “political actors in their own right”:

“Media not only contribute to and provide a vital service to governance, they are political actors that are centrally involved in the process of governance. They help to disseminate the policies and positions determined by political elites and governments, and they frame the political debate and mobilise civil society around the requirements of the legislative process. In short, they can and often do make and break governments.” (121)

Meanwhile, some studies link specific media forms with governance. For instance, Hong Hyehyun (2013) uses a dataset of a national survey on the United States for his quantitative research and finds out a positive relationship between public trust of the government and the use of government websites and social media. However, his discovery does not apply to specific websites or social media platforms, nor does it take other countries into consideration. Hassid & Brass (2014) found that China as an authoritarian country is more responsive to political scandals compared with democratic Kenya through a content analysis of newspaper articles.

However, the literature on media and governance is still limited in depth (especially those in English) compared with other journalism or political science spheres. There are only a few studies mentioning the most updated form of media – social media (blogs, microblogs, etc.).

For instance, Noesselt (2013) provides analytical data on the usage of microblogs by different Chinese provinces and various government agencies without focusing specifically on one case. He calls the use of microblog “a governance strategy”, and argues that “…the Chinese government practices a new strategy of deliberation and consultation so as to increase the political system’s efficiency and legitimacy” (451). Schlæger and Jiang (2014) conduct seven interviews with local government officials, microblog users, a university professor and a service provider company
employer, to reveal how the adoption of government microblogs may lead to change in local governance as the “beta-institution” – a “semi-institution” which contains temporary and experimental rules and practices and may one day becomes stable and regular institution – could “in the long run lead to organizational change through the delivery of individualized services through commercial platforms” (205). However, they did not distinguish between “government” and “governance”, nor did they give examples of actual microblog use, but limit their work to interviews.

2.5 Media, Governance and Democracy

The concept of democracy cannot be ignored in all studies related to China, particularly when the academic field of media or governance is mentioned.

Some scholars believe that media, especially the Internet, can make China less authoritarian and more democratic (Yang 2009; Tai 2006) considering that the Internet facilitates the information flow and empowers the people. Some even expect that a “Weibo Revolution” could bring democracy to China (Yang 2013). Meanwhile, “authoritarian consultation”, and in recent years, “online consultation” also shows up in several studies (Bella & Wu 2015; Fishkin, He & Siu 2006).

On the other hand, governance in China is also closely related to democracy. As a concept involving multiple players including civil society, NGOs, private sector and others, all of which are viewed to have potential implications for democracy (He 1997), the realization of good governance in China may bring changes towards a democratic country.

However, though the concept is of crucial importance to both the academia and the future of China in reality, I chose not to address this concept as a focal point of this thesis. I believe that democracy has been over-addressed in Chinese studies and has become an idealistic symbol to
criticize or even attack the Chinese government. Whether or not “democracy” as a western concept can be applied to the Chinese context notwithstanding, if a democratic country cannot or will not deliver public goods to its citizens, it is still a failure. I believe, as a pragmatist, it is always important to address people’s needs and concerns in reality first rather than arguing over ideological terms. Thus, this thesis will not address the concept of democracy, and will use “good governance” instead.

2.6 Research Questions

This thesis tries to fill in the gap of current literatures. It takes the example of Weibo, the most widely-used social media platform in China, to illustrate how the communication between state and the people goes. This thesis asks the following research questions:

1. In what ways can Weibo contribute to good governance?

2. How can the case of Ma’anshan Release demonstrate the above indicators?
Chapter 3: Online Communication

It took China only about three decades to go from the commercialization of the Internet to the current fever of social media. Although this short process does empower the people and help cultivate a relatively equal conversation between the state and the public, we have to bear in mind that long before this process, these conversations already existed. Xunzi, an ancient Chinese philosopher said, “Emperors are like a boat, and the people water. Water can both carry the boat and overturn it.” Since ancient years, the rulers of China knew that they had to take the voices of the people into account, listen to and communicate with them in order to gain legitimacy and to keep ruling status.

Upon entering the modern age, for an authoritarian country like China without the western criteria of “one person one vote” (Bell, 2015) democracy, the government is perceived as legitimate if it “…improv[es] the public welfare and [be] responsive to the needs of its citizens, [be] competent to assure law and order, and deliver[s] public services, [be] able to create an enabling public environment for productive activities and equitable in its conduct” (Azeez 2009, 218). All the requirements necessitate an unimpeded information flow between the state and the general public. Thus, the practice of keeping a communication channel is carried on until today’s China to maintain legitimacy and to keep the state stable.

This thesis concentrates on the interactions on Weibo as a social media platform and communication channel, but it also recognizes online channels before the existence of Weibo. I give credit to previous channels in order to discuss why I focus on social media (especially Weibo) as the suitable focal point of this thesis for state-people interactions.
3.1 Before Online Communication

Before the information era, the Chinese government had their ways to interact with people and respond to their requirements and needs, ways that can be divided between two: top-down methods and bottom-up methods.

Bottom-up methods are rare in China, as the Chinese government holds a firm hand in dealing with any cases with potential to threaten the state or to lead to chaos. Petitioning, or xinfang, known as “letters and visits”, has a long history in China as a bottom-up method. Its definition by the State Bureau for Letters and Visits is as follows:

“Citizens, legal persons or other organizations give information, make comments or suggestions or lodge complaints to the people's governments at all levels and the relevant departments of the people's governments at or above the county level through correspondence, E-mails, faxes, phone calls, visits, and so on, which are dealt with by the relevant administrative departments according to law” (*Regulations on Letters and Visits*, 2005).

Citizens who have questions and concerns over public issues can call, write letters to, or go to relative governmental agencies personally to reflect their concerns. Almost all government agencies and units have their own xinfang offices, and the officials will report the problems to their superiors and have the problems solved.

However, xinfang does not have a positive reputation in China, as citizens were sometimes viewed as yuan ‘min or “people with grievances” (Reynolds 2009) if they xinfang. They were seen as someone who cannot seek justice through other ways, and are using xinfang as a last resort. Besides, the institutional cost – such as time and energy – of the general public to xinfang or to petition was high (Minzner 2010, 162), and thus is discouraging for many people to use. What’s more, xinfang does not have enough power to force the government agencies to respond: once a
problem or concern is expressed by a common citizen, there is almost no way to know whether the issue has been reported to related offices and appropriately solved. As a result, the method of xinfang as a bottom-up method of the communication between the state and the public has a lot of defects.

On the other hand, top-down methods to listen to the voices of the people are more popular in China. State agencies take the initiatives to conduct surveys, hold consultative meetings or hearings, and invite attendees from all classes of the society in order to collect professional and public thoughts and opinions (Liu 2004). However, these consultative methods are held according to the governments’ interests and agendas, not the people’s. Also, incidents and urgent matters cannot be scheduled, but opinions still have to be exchanged. Therefore, a more effective and daily-basis method of communication need to be implemented and the arrival of the Internet brought new chances.

Since the term “online communication” can be divided into a large number of categories including shopping reviews or travelling experience sharing, I define “online communication” in this thesis as: the communication related to public interests and social/political issues and concerns that happens online between government agencies/authorities at all levels and the public.

3.2 Before Social Media

Before the current fever of social media, there existed (and still exist) two online communication channels, namely “government websites” and “online forums”.

3.2.1 Government Websites and “Mayor Mailbox”

Government websites started to be established by the administrative order of the “Government Online Project” or “zhengfu shangwang gongcheng” in 1999. The result of this project was that by the end of 2005, more than 90 percent of government agencies at all levels
have created their own official websites. “Many city government websites included information of general use to local people (e.g. weather forecasts, entrance exam updates, links to local news media, telecom providers, companies, and schools), provided phone numbers and addresses of local government agencies, announced new regulations and projects, and began providing downloadable forms” (Hartford 2005, 218-219).

Besides the above functions, the most important part of government websites which facilitates the interactions rather than staying as a “one-side” announcement board is the “Mayor’s Mailbox” on the websites, which allows the citizens to ask questions, lodge complaints and offer their advices and suggestions. Different agencies in different locales (national or local) run the mailbox in distinctive ways. Some block the mailboxes as “not for the public’s view”: the initiators drop their words into the mailbox, and they may or may not see any response; general public usually see neither the communication nor the response. In other cases, selected questions from common netizens and the answers from government agencies will be posted online for the general public to view after it has been solved.

Various field research has been done considering “Mayor Mailbox”. Empirical case studies were conducted in the city of Nanjing and Hangzhou. Distelhorst & Hou and Hartford all agree that the “Mayor’s Mailbox” is an “important information source for government managers” (Hartford 2009, 217) and through this website function, “local service institutions in China are comparably responsive to similar institutions in democracies” (Distelhorst & Hou 2014, 1).

However, there are problems concerning “Mayor Mailbox”: for the most part, the Mailbox works as a black box. The initiators do not know whether or not their questions are viewed or addressed, while the general public do not know the existence of the communication at all. Thus, it gives the government the “liberty” to choose between what they would like to deal with and
what to ignore. This does not encourage citizens to participate in governmental decision makings or political consultations as they know their efforts in making suggestions or lodging complaints may well be in vain.

3.2.2 Online Forums

Online forums grew together with the “Government Online Project”, but it was not an administrative decision. A more commonly known name for “online forums” is BBS – Bulletin Board System. It functions, from the consumers’ perspective, as a website with several boards under different topics of discussion. People post under certain boards and others can reply or comment.

Different from “Mayor Mailbox” which was initiated by government officials, online forums are primarily self-organized, though few are government-based, such as the Strengthening-China Forum under the People’s Daily. Other popular online forums include: Douban, Xici Hutong, Tianya, Shuimu for Tsinghua University and Weimin for Peking University, as well as the recently-strictly-scrutinized Baidu Forum. A variety of topics of discussion can be spotted on those online forums, ranging from daily check-in, mutual help, entertainment for the most part (music, books, films, TVs, etc.) to economic news and political concerns. Zhou Yongming (2005) did his research on military websites in Chinese cyberspace, and his observation is that most members of these BBS forums are “… very well informed nationalists” and that these discussions “… cover topics over a wide spectrum” (229).

Online forums are important for netizens to comment on government doings at all levels and to voice out their concerns because members of the BBS forums can post online more freely than the “Mayor Mailbox”. It gives netizens a place to openly discuss issues with those whom they share similar concerns or interests with. On occasions, when the discussions grew too heated and
online consensuses were formed, it is possible for the government to pick up their discussions and to respond accordingly.

However, this practice is not a reliable source for the government to collect public opinions, as they are scattered and disorganized. Many discussions end up in unsolved quarrels or personal attacks between citizens. Also, as third-party service providers, forum managers and operators have the freedom and authority to censor (in another word, delete) certain posts they viewed as inappropriate. This makes online forums an easy target for enterprises and governments at all levels to regulate and control, and thus strongly discourages the netizens to use online forums.

Today, online forums are still in use, though not as popular as it was a decade ago.

3.3 Social Media

The new fashion in the whole communication industry is social media.

Online forums are one kind of social media, as it allows anyone who registers to post and reply. However, online forums are generally website based, and do not encourage mobile use, which strongly lagged behind the current technology especially after 2010, when smartphone social media began to rise (Howard et al., 8).

Compared with government websites or online forums, social media has several advantages. First, it breaks the limitations of certain websites concentrating on certain topics, and allows anyone to freely jump on the bandwagon of any discussions. Second, social media, which originates from blogging and are now transferring to microblogosphere, emerged as platforms/tools to share ones’ personal lives, which was a brand-new trend at the time when it was born (Shirky 2008). Third, social media rose with the popularity of smartphones, and it took advantages of mobile phone applications, which is easy to access without the presence of computers. Finally, social media allows participants to join in with any forms they prefer: text,
pictures, music or videos, which is more than what government websites or online forums could offer. For these reasons, social media outgrew government websites and online forums and became the place where most people gather together.

Blogging, as the initial form of social media, used to shock traditional media professions as it lowered the threshold for entering the journalism industry. In China, Fanfou was the first blog website that became popular. Later, the growth of Renren, 163 Blog, Souhu Blog and Sina Blog marked a milestone for media when everyone can be a producer.

Yet, this threshold was not low enough for everyone until the age of microblogging, when people do not have to write lengthy articles to express their opinions as what they did using blogs – a few words or even a picture will do. Twitter and Facebook are two pioneering microblog platforms that are used in western countries, and shortly afterwards when both were banned from China, localized platforms started to emerge.

“Microblog” is translated to “Weibo” in Chinese, and is used to describe the method of blogging, which is “micro” or “tiny”, meaning short in content. It could be found originally among different platforms, such as People’s Microblog, Tencent Microblog and Sina Microblog. Yet since 2013, many microblog service providers such as Tencent and 163 Blog started to retreat from the market. By the first half of 2015, the market share of Sina Weibo has reached above 70% of the whole market (CNNIC 2015, 37). “Weibo” started to be used to describe Sina Weibo exclusively.

This thesis will focus on the online communication between the state and the public on Sina Weibo (Weibo).

3.3.1 Sina Weibo

Sina Weibo was created as the Chinese version of Twitter, but its features now go far beyond Twitter.
Each post on *Sina Weibo* is allowed to have 140 Chinese characters (about 250 English words). Each post can be reposted (with 140-character comments) and liked, and is allowed to have comments unless the owner manually shut down the comments section. People can also choose to add photos (maximum nine, with or without watermark), videos (no length limit) and locations to their 140-character posts. *Sina Weibo* also offers “long post” function, which automatically transfers people’s long post (no words limit) into a picture and attaches it to the post.

Accounts on *Sina Weibo* are all public, and posts and comments on it can be viewed publicly mostly – unless the person chooses to keep it private (either only to him/herself, or only to his “friends” or “followers” on *Sina Weibo*).

People could privately message other account owners. However, they could also choose to shut down their “private message” function so that they are no longer able to receive private messages from strangers. It is usually used as a way to control spams.

The majority of the *Sina Weibo* users are individuals – in September 2015, the number of Weibo’s Monthly Active Users (MAU) was 222 million, with 100 million Daily Active Users (DAU), both of which represented a 30 percent increase compared with last September (*Sina Weibo* Data Centre, 2015). However, similar to its western counterpart – Twitter, *Sina Weibo* started to be used by politicians and government institutions soon after its birth, which is called “official Weibo account” or in Chinese, “zhengwu weibo”.

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2 Weibo has lifted the limitation of wording by Feb 28, 2016. At the time this thesis is finalized, people can post on Weibo without words limitation. However, if the post is too long, it will be folded and can only be viewed completely when click on “more” or “full context”. The length of the post matters because it is one distinctive feature that separate microblog from other social media platforms. Briefness is one of the most important factors that attracts Weibo users.
3.3.2 Government Use of Weibo

The Chinese government’s first use of Sina Weibo was on November 21, 2009 in Kunming, Yunnan Province in Southwest China, when a mass incident broke out in a wholesale market. Yunnan Provincial Government created the first official Weibo account – Weibo Yunnan – in order to cope with the incident and to release latest news on investigation results. This was seen as a milestone of official Weibo.

Starting from then, many official Weibo accounts were created across various platforms. Yet, in recent two years, official Weibo accounts started to concentrate on Sina Weibo due to its overwhelming popularity, and the practices of using official Weibo have been fixed and institutionalized to a certain extent by some administrative regulations. Though there is no unified definition of official Weibo, I define it as “Sina Weibo accounts that are created, owned and managed by Chinese government agencies and units, as well as individual government officials at all levels”. This definition excludes official media accounts such as the Sina Weibo account of “Qiu Shi Magazine” or that of “People’s Daily”.

By the end of 2015, the number of official Weibo accounts on Sina Weibo reached 152,390, with 114,760 belonging to official institutions and agencies and the rest to individual government officials. In 2015, all official Weibo accounts posted online for 250 million times with nearly 100 million original posts, and were read by their followers for more than 111.7 billion times (The People’s Daily Public Opinion Office, 2016).

The study of official Weibo accounts has been flourishing in China, but more from an administrative perspective rather than an academic angle. In western academia, official Weibo has been an even more understudied area compared with the study on media-governance relations. Noesselt (2014), Schlæger & Min (2014) and Esarey (2015) all tend to hold a positive attitude
towards official Weibo and believe that it serves to increase state efficiency and legitimacy and may lead to future institutional change. Yet, no current literature has given specific and real examples of the connections between official Weibo and local governance. Thus, this thesis tries to fill in the gap and to demonstrate how local governance is realized through the case study of the *Ma’anshan Release*. 
Chapter 4: Weibo and Governance at the Local Level: A Study of Ma’anshan

The following chapter investigates how local governments use Weibo to interact with its citizens. Using the “Ma’anshan Release” (Ma An Shan Fa Bu), the official Weibo account owned by Ma’anshan Municipal Party Committee in Anhui Province, I explore how the practices of local governments are becoming more open and responsive to the idea of “good governance”.

4.1 Methodology

This study examines the contents of posts and reposts of the Ma’anshan Release on Weibo by collecting data on netizens’ comments, the number of posts, reposts, likes and comments. In addition, I also consult analytical reports on the Ma’anshan Release published by “Public Affairs New Media Institution” and “People’s Daily Public Opinion Monitoring Office” and a written interview (2015) given by the manager of the Ma’anshan Release. In particular, the first two accounts were established in a joint partnership between Sina Corporation, government officials and academics to provide a comprehensive analysis of the current official Weibo environment.

The reason why Ma’anshan was chosen for this case study is simple: there is nothing special about the city. Many of the current case studies on media-local government relationship in the scholarly literature have focused on coastal cities or relatively developed cities such as Tianjin (Woodman 2011), Nanjing and Hangzhou (Hartford 2005) as well as Wenzhou (Custer 2011). However, Ma’anshan is a third-tier city in China with a GDP of 135 billion CNY per year and a population of 2.3 million people (as of 2014). Statistically speaking, the city is not as economically developed as other Chinese cities, and is not nearly as populated, leaving the impression that it is not noteworthy. However, its official Weibo account stands out for its ranking as the 42nd among all official Weibo accounts nationwide (The People’s Daily Public Opinion Office, 2016). Despite its relatively lower GDP and population, the high ranking on Weibo makes the city a case study
worth analyzing to examine further how the government and the public in a very local and low-profile city communicate in an online medium.

4.2 The City of Ma’anshan and the Ma’anshan Release

Ma’anshan is located in the western area of Anhui Province bordering the city of Nanjing in Jiangsu Province. It was established as a municipality in October, 1956. Currently, it has a population of 2.3 million and an area of 4049 km², with three counties (Dangtu, He County and Hanshan County) and three districts (Huashan, Yushan and Bowang) under its jurisdiction. In 2015, Ma’anshan’s an annual GDP was 135.7 billion CNY (approximately $2 billion USD) while citizens had a per capita disposable income of 25,648 CNY (approximately $3901 USD).³

The Ma’anshan Release is an official Weibo account managed by the Publicity Office of Ma’anshan Municipal Party Committee. It was created on November 21, 2011, has 141,148 followers and has made 34,592 posts on its Weibo account as of February 3rd, 2016.

According to The 2015 People’s Daily’s Annual Report on Official Weibo Impact, the Ma’anshan Release was ranked 42nd among all 152,390 official Weibo accounts nationally, and ranked first among all municipal official Weibo accounts in Anhui Province, a huge compliment for a relatively small city in China.

While 141,000 followers may appear to be a large number for the Ma’anshan Release, these numbers do not stand out against other Chinese cities. In comparison, Beijing Release has 7 million followers. However, Zhao Xinxin, one of the managers of the Ma’anshan Release, revealed in a written interview with the Public Affairs New Media Institution that she does not think the number

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³ A brief Introduction to Ma’anshan can be found at the official website of Ma’anshan Municipal Government. [http://www.mas.gov.cn/content/detail/544b10c4f05b4b5055c36805.html](http://www.mas.gov.cn/content/detail/544b10c4f05b4b5055c36805.html)
of followers is the most important criteria for examining the activity of Weibo accounts in third and fourth-tier city. As Zhao argued, “We now have more than 100,000 followers, which means one out of twenty residents in Ma’anshan is following us. I think we have reached the limitation for a city with [a population of] two million people. What we need to do is to shift our focus from trying to build up more followers – although this is certainly important – to putting more effort in interacting and communicating with followers.”

4.3 Early Interactions

One of the first steps that the Ma’anshan Release took was to “humanize” the Weibo account and let its followers realize that there are “actual people” behind the online account.

Zhao mentions that during the early stage of running this Weibo account, one follower posted under the comments section of the Ma’anshan Release with a simple “Good Morning!” In response, Zhao replied with a smiley face emoji and wrote “Good Morning to you too!” This greatly surprised the follower who replied, “OMG you are a real person and you know how to comment!” (See Figure 4.1)

![Image of Weibo interaction]

Figure 4.1: Ma’anshan Release’s comments section; the red box reads “OMG you are a real person!”
This situation provides an example of how the *Ma’anshan Release* interacted with people in the early stage of its creation. This practice of interaction is still carried out today, but the level of interaction has increased significantly, and many of its interactions qualify as examples of good governance.

### 4.4 Examples of Good Governance

Building on the current literature on good governance reviewed in Chapter two, I compare the theoretical standards of good governance outlined here with the practices on the *Ma’anshan Release*.

The varying indicator of good governance which has been proposed by different parties include: giving people a larger voice in public issues; “capable, responsive, inclusive, and transparent” (Clark 2011); free of abuse and corruption (OECD); transparency (Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch 2012, 562); control of corruption; government effectiveness; political stability and absence of violence/terrorism; regulatory quality; rule of law; as well as voice and accountability (World Bank Worldwide Governance Index).

The eight examples given below are chosen to show the following key points about the relationship between social media and good governance. First, Weibo is an important social media platform that contributes to the practices of good governance in China. Second, the posts by the *Ma’anshan Release* not only fit within the scholarly criteria mentioned above, but also contribute to the good governance in China through the account’s ability to be “responsive”, “transparent”, “effective”, “giving people a larger voice”, and potentially preventing the “abuse of power” and “corruption”.
4.4.1 Example One

In the first example, one follower tagged the *Ma’anshan Release* in a Weibo post stating that the cargo elevator of their residency broke down several times. Residents suspected that the elevator itself was in poor quality but the Municipal Bureau of Quality ignored their inquiries.

In response, the *Ma’anshan Release* contacted the Bureau itself, forcing them to address the matter. The Bureau eventually published their reports, explaining the causes of previous breakdown and reassured the quality of the elevator (see Figure 4.2).

![Ma’anshan Release's post. Jan 15, 2016 at 17:30PM CST](image)

**Figure 4.2: Ma’anshan Release’s post. Jan 15, 2016 at 17:30PM CST**

In this case, the *Ma’anshan Release* as a government-run platform succeeded in asking certain government bureaus to follow-up on local concerns – something that individuals’ attempts could not previously achieve. When examining the case, public communication through Weibo forced other government units to respond and to be accountable to its citizens.
In addition, it only took less than six hours for the individual to receive a response after posting their message through Weibo. This short response time demonstrates efficiency of using the right communication platform.

4.4.2 Example Two

On December 30, 2015, one follower tagged *Ma’anshan Release*, reporting the danger of potential traffic accidents due to the presence of large trucks driving at night.

The *Ma’anshan Release* contacted the Municipal Bureau of Urban Management, and a law enforcement squad went to the site, investigating the origins of these trucks and ordered the owners to clean the mess. It took only 13 hours from the time the person reported the problem on Weibo for the issue to be resolved.

![Ma’anshan Release’s post. December 31, 2015 at 08:58AM CST](image)

*Figure 4.3: Ma’anshan Release’s post. December 31, 2015 at 08:58AM CST*
This post is similar to example one, where an individual sought to contact a government agency through the *Ma’anshan Release*. The difference, however, is that example two is a suggestion rather than a complaint, which means the author of this post took the initiative to resolve the issue instead of feeling forced to file a grievance against the government. Example two demonstrates the responsiveness and efficiency of local governments to respond through Weibo.

### 4.4.3 Examples Three and Four

Another online user tagged the *Ma’anshan Release* in a Weibo post reporting that an old truck was parked in front of a residential building for more than two years without anyone coming to claim it. The *Ma’anshan Release* contacted the Bureau of Public Security, who, after confirming the truck was abandoned, moved the truck away.

![Figure 4.4: Ma’anshan Release’s post, Jan 18, 2016, 09:24AM CST](image)

*Figure 4.4: Ma’anshan Release’s post, Jan 18, 2016, 09:24AM CST*
In a similar event, another user tagged the *Ma’anshan Release* and reported that due to the heavy snow, an old tree collapsed and fell on some nearby electrical power lines. The *Ma’anshan Release* immediately contacted the Municipal Administration of Power Supply and they sent their emergency squad on site to solve the problem.

*Figure 4.5: Ma’anshan Release’s post, Feb 1, 2016, 09:09AM CST*

These two cases are examples in which citizens are encouraged to report their concerns to government agencies, especially important issues of safety which may not have been reported in the past, usually because the time and energy to report is very high. Weibo reduces the institutional costs of *xinfang* and lowers the threshold of reporting problems for common citizens. Meanwhile, in some cases, citizens do not know which departments to report problems to. In example four, the author of the post used “related units” rather than naming specific bureaus, which is likely to be because that individual did not know which unit is in charge of electrical repairs. In this case, the *Ma’anshan Release*, as one of the many government agencies, helped forward the message of the concerned individual to the relevant agency who could address the problem.
4.4.4 Example Five

In some cases, the *Ma’anshan Release* also functions as a channel to contact private enterprises when they cannot be reached by the general public due to various reasons.

For instance, in January 2016, a strong cold wave hit Ma’anshan. It snowed for several days and the temperature dropped to -10°C. This led to severe problems in public transportation, water supply (many water pipes were not built to resist such a low temperature, causing the pipes to freeze and burst) and other dangers.

The problem was especially severe for Ma’anshan Capital Water Company, the division which provides water services across Ma’anshan. The company received more than 3000 water-related emergency phone calls per day during the wave (see Figure 4.6). It was difficult for many citizens to even get through to the hotline and report their problems to the company. Thus, many resorted to Weibo, posting their home address, the nature of the emerging repairs needed and tagging the *Ma’anshan Release* in their posts on Weibo.

![Figure 4.6: Ma’anshan Release’s post, Jan 26, 2016, 17:11PM CST](image-url)
The Ma’anshan Release later admitted that Weibo is a more effective way to contact the company when the emergency hotline cannot be reached (see Figure 4.7). Using Weibo as a method of communication reinforced the needs of the public and urged other stakeholders who provide public services to react to the needs of Ma’anshan residents.

Figure 4.7: Ma’anshan Release’s post, Jan 27, 2016, 08:46AM CST

This case is significant because unlike examples one to four, example five is not restricted to government agencies, but now also involves other private enterprises. As discussed in Chapter two, “governance” includes not only the government, but other stakeholders; and the Ma’anshan Release successfully established a communicative bridge which connects different stakeholders together. In doing so, it was able to respond to the demands of the citizens swiftly, efficiently and responsibly.

4.4.5 Example Six

In March 2016, the news that some illegal and contaminated vaccines had been sold to eighteen different provinces in China travelled quick across the country and cause a great panic among parents. The Ma’anshan Release took the initiative to report the current situation of
Ma’anshan’s vaccine storage (see Figure 4.8) two days after the media report was released nationally.

Later, the Ma’anshan Release posted a screenshot of a private message it received (see Figure 4.9), which shows one netizen suggesting that the local Ma’anshan vaccines storehouse should do a thorough self-check of their refrigeration system (which was believed to be the origin of the contaminated vaccines) and publish the results.

The Ma’anshan Release accepted the suggestion from this netizen and contacted Ma’anshan Food and Drug Administration. The results of self-audit were published that afternoon (see Figure 4.10) which shows that the situation in Ma’anshan was under control and there was no need for the public to be concerned.

**Figure 4.8:** *Ma’anshan Release’s post, March 22, 2016, 06:35PM CST*
Figure 4.9: Ma’anshan Release’s post, March 23, 2016, 11:59AM CST

Figure 4.10: Ma’anshan Release’s post, March 23, 2016, 04:48PM CST
Although the nationwide case of vaccine contamination has not been solved yet, the response by the *Ma’anshan Release* demonstrates the positive ways in which the local government reacts to emergencies, keeps the public informed and how local official Weibo accounts should be more rigorously used to open up the state affairs and be more transparent with the public. These higher levels of transparency in turn will force government agencies to be careful about their future actions and can become a tool to prevent the abuse of power and corruption. Thus, the *Ma’anshan Release*’s Weibo account helps facilitate the realization of good governance in China.

### 4.4.6 Example Seven

Example Six demonstrates the level of openness and transparency forced by the *Ma’anshan Release* on local government agencies while example seven shows how the actions of private sector companies and service industries are also oversaw by regular citizens through the *Ma’anshan Release*.

Ma’anshan East Railway Station is the High Speed Railway Station which was put into full use in December 2015. One follower messaged the *Ma’anshan Release* and reported that the manners and attitudes of ground staff were very poor, which severely jeopardize the image of the city (see Figure 4.11). The *Ma’anshan Release* contacted the station and they promised they would look further into the situation and make appropriate changes based on their investigation.

This example demonstrates that although the *Ma’anshan Release* is run by the municipal party committee, its essence as a social media platform gives it the power to comment on other stakeholders’ doings and make them accountable for their actions, which in turn helps them better serve the people.
4.4.7 Example Eight

As a Weibo account run by the publicity office, the *Ma’anshan Release* also oversees and provides guidance for other official Weibo accounts which belong to various Ma’anshan government departments. However, not all official Weibo accounts have been actively and fully utilized; many are even abandoned.

The *Ma’anshan Release* posted and asked its followers to collect the names of those official Weibo accounts that are inactive (see Figure 4.12) within Ma’anshan city jurisdiction.
After this message, thirteen official Weibo accounts were identified as becoming inactive and were publicly exposed within a short period of time (see Figure 4.13). Within 20 days, two of them started to post and interact with their followers again.

This most recent finding has been a new feature of the Ma’anshan Release. Therefore, it is still too early to see what the effects of such actions will be. Regardless, it is clearly that the Ma’anshan Release has taken a leading role in urging local bureaus and departments which did not put attention to communicate and interact with the netizens to become active again. This could
be seen as an action to urge those agencies to be more transparent and prevent them from abusing their power since they were forced to open up and communicate with netizens. It also gives the people greater opportunities to have their voices heard.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I use eight examples of the *Ma’anshan Release* to demonstrate what a local level governmental Weibo account can do to help facilitate the exchange of information between the government and the public, and how these interactions and communications qualify as “good governance”. I have found out that the practices of the *Ma’anshan Release* demonstrate that local government can be “responsive” (in all cases), “transparent” (in case #8), “efficient” (in all cases), “responsible” (in case #1, 4, 5, 6), “prevent the abuse of power and corruption” (in case 5 and 8), and “give people a larger voice in public issues” (in case 5 and 8) through their use of official Weibo. All these indicators contribute to the growing idea of “good governance” in China and reveal that the local government of Ma’anshan can be fulfilled by a good, accountable government that serves the interest of the people.
Chapter 5: Other Cases and Limitations

The case of Ma’anshan is not an isolated and unique case nationwide. Many other official Weibo accounts which belong to different local governments and its affiliated agencies have also contributed to good governance through their daily practices.

5.1 Other Cases

The following cases were collected through the Weibo account “Official Weibo Observation”. It is created and managed by the Institute of Media and Public Affairs in the Communication University of China. The majority of its daily posts are related to official Weibo management. It also gives explicit analysis in practices on different official Weibo accounts, criticizing inappropriate posts, pointing out insufficient interactions and praising positive examples of communication.

The three examples presented below are randomly chosen cases reported and analyzed by Official Weibo Observation. What I found is that same as the Ma’anshan Release, these three cases also contribute to “good governance” through the variables of “responsiveness”, “transparency”, “prevention of the abuse of power” and “efficiency”.

5.1.1 Example One: Suzhou Government-People Link

On March 26, 2016, a policeman in Suzhou, Anhui Province stopped his car in the wrong direction of the road while on duty. His behavior severely violated the traffic security rules and was captured in pictures and posted online by one netizen. The Public Security Bureau of Suzhou looked into it and the policeman was fined. The case was also circulated around the bureau as a lesson to remind all policemen (see Figure 5.1) to behave themselves both on and off duty.

In this case, the wrong-doings of government officials were watched and reported by the general public. The abuse of power as a policeman was immediately criticized and corrected. Also,
the result of the case was posted online, which demonstrates a transparent process of dealing with public affairs.

Figure 5.1: Suzhou Government-People Link’s post, March 28, 2016, 15:45 PM CST

5.1.2 Example Two: Inquires of Politics in Yinchuan

One Weibo user reported that the water in a forest park in Yinchuan, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region seems to be contaminated by unrecognizable white substances (see Figure 5.2). The Landscaping Administration of Yinchuan sent their experts on site and made investigations. The result of the investigation was posted separately (see Figure 5.3), stating that the white substances came from a kind of pesticides which were used to keep the trees surrounding the lake healthy, given that the weather had started getting warmer and pests had begun to be more active.
This case is similar to Example two of the *Ma’anshan Release*, where individuals sought to make inquiries through official Weibo. By being efficient, responsive and transparent through Weibo, *Inquires of Politics in Yinchuan* is able to end to public affairs swiftly.
5.1.3 Example Three: the City of Lincang, Yunnan Province

A residency in Lincang City where many retired government officials live together, experienced several days of their water supply cutting-off without getting any responses. They were going to xinfang to their old units before someone posted the situation online. Wang Zirong, a civil servant of the Taxation Bureau in Lincang city, saw the post and reported it to several related government agencies (see Figure 5.4). The situation was solved the next day.

Figure 5.4: Wang Zi Rong’s Post, March 17 2016, 16:44PM CST

This case is different from all other cases mentioned in this thesis because it includes another category of official Weibo accounts: that of individual government officials’. In this case, individual state officials and government agencies all cooperated online and offline with the
connection established by Weibo to solve public concerns. Traditional Xinfang was replaced by communication on Weibo, and it was efficient and transparent.

5.1.4 Conclusion

These three cases were randomly chosen from “Official Weibo Observation”. They all contribute to “good governance” because they demonstrate the standards of “responsiveness” (all cases), “transparency” (all cases), “preventing the abuse of power” (example one) and “efficiency” (all cases).

The existence of cases other than the Ma’anshan Release shows that the practices of the Ma’anshan Release are not isolated or unique. There is a national trend of using official Weibo as a communication platform to facilitate the exchange between the state and the people, and to better serve the people. Good governance can be found in all these practices.

5.2 Limitations

The case study of the Ma’anshan Release as well as three other cases presented above might fill the gap in current studies of the media-governance relationship, but they also have several flaws that need to be addressed.

First of all, there are a few more indicators proposed by different parties that cannot be matched with specific practices on all Weibo accounts. For example, there is no post which can demonstrate the “rule of law”, or “regulatory quality”, both being proposed by the World Bank as two important variables for good governance. Thus, it might be safer to say that the case studies that this thesis have analyzed partially contribute to some standards of good governance, but not all.

Second, the case studies are limited to the content-analysis of posts and reports. Without access to the backend of these Weibo accounts or interviews with official Weibo managers, the
picture I tried to draw here is not complete. Also, there is, regrettably, another source that I cannot get hold of. Hou È, a senior researcher at the Institute of International Communication in Tsinghua School of Journalism and Communication, published his *Asking about Governance in Yinchuan* ("*Wen Zheng Yinchuan*") in November 2015, which explicitly analyzed the case of the “*Inquires of Politics in Yinchuan*” (the official Weibo account of Yinchuan Municipal Party Committee in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region). The book is devoted to discussing the management of official Weibo, and how Weibo can be combined in governance, which would be of great value to this thesis. However, I couldn’t get hold of this book since it is not widely published even within China. Thus, I would urge any future researchers and scholars to try to find the book.

Third, all the case studies listed here are only examples of local official Weibo, not central government’s account. During the early stages of writing this thesis, I did some analysis of the central government’s media outlet “*People’s Daily*” and tried to combine my observations into this thesis. However, the practices of most central accounts are too propagandistic and controlled to show signs of good governance, and were thus excluded. However, this does not mean that the central government cannot take the lead in realizing good governance through social media interactions. In the current media environment, central government Weibo might find it difficult to openly criticize the state or take any lead. In time, their practices might change, but we will have to wait and see.

Finally, as BBC (2009) states, “The nature of media – and the rapidly changing environment it operates in – makes research especially hard to undertake” (27). This is one of the biggest reasons why there are not so many researches done on media-governance relations. Even a slight change in the social media platform provider (*Sina Weibo* for instance) will change the whole picture a great deal. For example, a change in word limitations on Weibo might bring changes in users’
demographic – but we don’t yet know. Thus, this thesis focuses solely on the most current stages of Weibo development, and we have to wait and see its future implications.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have tried to demonstrate how Weibo has become a platform to facilitate online communication between the government and the public at the local level, and how this communication is an important contribution towards good governance.

I began with a review of current theories on the media-governance relationship, and then incorporated two other theories as foundations: how the Internet empowers the people, and how decentralization affects local governments’ practices and policy implementations. I then recognized methods of state-society interactions before the arrival of the Internet, as well as two previous online communication methods: “Mayor Mailbox” and “Online Forum”, before giving a full picture of the current version of social media.

Furthermore, I offered eight different examples of the Ma’anshan Release as case studies to demonstrate how local government communicates with the people, and I found out that through the Ma’anshan Release, Ma’anshan local government shows their responsiveness, responsibility, effectiveness and efficiency, increasing level of transparency and the potential for preventing the abuse of power and corruption. All these criteria correspond to the current studies of good governance. I also chose three random cases of other official Weibo accounts through the Official Weibo Observation to show that the Ma’anshan Release is not an isolated and unique case and these practices of Weibo have their national significance.

Thus, I come to the conclusion that Weibo can contribute to the realization of good governance at the local level in China.

Having already stated the limitation of this thesis in Chapter five, I hope, for future research, that this thesis could provide an alternative way of thinking in addition to the western concept of democracy. As I stated in Chapter two, I do not view democracy as an absolute necessity when
talking about China. The western way of democracy does not necessarily prevent the occurrence of a failed state; an authoritarian country is also capable of providing public goods and serving its people. The indicators of good governance listed by various parties internationally can be the alternative benchmark to evaluate the practices of the Chinese government, and the Internet, particularly social media and in China, Weibo, can help contribute to the good governance. Therefore, I hope more research can be done in the future on social media and good governance, in order to change our perspectives on China.
Bibliography


Appendices

Appendix A: Where to Find Them?

This is a list of Sina Weibo accounts’ URL which appear in this thesis.

Inquires of Politics in Yinchuan (Wen Zheng Yin Chuan) http://weibo.com/wzyinchuan

Landscaping Yinchuan (Yin Chuan Yuan Lin) http://weibo.com/ycsyl

Ma’anshan Release (Ma An Shan Fa Bu) http://weibo.com/masfb

Official Weibo Observation (Zheng Wu Wei Bo Guan Cha) http://weibo.com/hooue

People’s Daily (Ren Min Ri Bao) http://weibo.com/rmrb

Public Affairs New Media Institution (Zheng Wu Xin Mei Ti Xue Yuan)

http://weibo.com/zhengwuxueyuan

Suzhou Government-People Link (Su Zhou Shi Zheng Min Lian Xian) http://weibo.com/szzmlx

The People’s Daily Public Opinion Monitoring Office (Ren Min Wang Yu Qing Jian Ce Shi)

http://weibo.com/renminwangyuqing
Appendix B: Translations of Weibo Posts in this thesis

i. Figure 4.1: *Ma’anshan Release*’s comment section

@Ma’anshan Release: replied to @Man Xue Ru Die: *Xiao Bu* is just a legend! (September 12, 08:19)

@Busier than Ants: Getting up early means a good mood with good weather. (September 12, 08:18)

@Man Xue Ru Die: replied to @Ma’anshan Release: OMG you are a real person and you know how to reply! (September 12, 08:16)

@Ma’anshan Release: replied to @Man Xue Ru Die: Good morning to you too! (September 12, 08:15)

@Man Xue Ru Die: Good Morning! (September 12, 08:15)

ii. Figure 4.2: *Ma’anshan Release*’s post. Jan 15, 2016 at 17:30PM CST

@Ou-Way: @Ma’anshan Release: *Xiao Bu*, several months ago, I told you about the problems with the cargo elevator in the 6th Unit in *Shi Dai Hua Fu* in Dangtu County. You told me to ask the Bureau of Quality, but there was no response. I got off work today and the elevator was broken down again. It’s a small residency, we ourselves cannot get any reply by contacting the bureau ourselves.

@Ma’anshan Release: #Ma Shang Ban The investigation results of @The Municipal Bureau of Quality are as follows: 1) Those several break-downs in 2015 were because one household tried to transport construction materials, so they hold the elevator for a long time, which confused the elevator’s shut-down system. 2) The break-down this morning was caused by a small plastic bag sticking to the screen. 3) The two elevators were all examined with full certificates.
iii. Figure 4.3: Ma’anshan Release’s post. December 31, 2015 at 08:58AM CST

@Dan’Er-Ding Ding: The crossroad at Road #205 and Bing Jiang Park is not lit at night. I was waiting at the crossroad tonight for five seconds and there are four trucks passing by. There was dirt flying everywhere. This crossroad has been opened for more than half a year, and now it is almost exclusively for trucks and cargos. There were three deaths in two major incidents at this crossroad for the past half year. Hope related units could come and investigate. Thank you @Ma’anshan Release.

@Ma’anshan Release: Hello. I have already contacted the Municipal Bureau of Urban Management. An emergency squad was sent last night to investigate. We found out that there are two un-licensed construction plants transporting residue soil illegally nearby. We have already ordered them to stop construction work and to clean up the road. Thank you for your reports. We will continue to try to improve the living quality of the Ma’anshan people.

iv. Figure 4.4: Ma’anshan Release’s post, Jan 18, 2016, 09:24AM CST

@Leo Runner: This car (see in picture) has been here for two years. No one claimed it. Should it be removed? @Ma’anshan Release.

@Ma’anshan Release: @Ma’anshan Public Security Bureau Please go and check if it is abandoned.

@Ma’anshan Public Security Bureau: Thank you for your concerns! We’ve already sent our policemen to investigate. It is indeed abandoned. We will remove it soon.

v. Figure 4.5: Ma’anshan Release’s post, Feb 1, 2016, 09:09AM CST

@Cui Ye Shuang: There is a tree collapsing on the electronic wires because of the heavy snow. The location is between Unit 4th and 9th in Yushan Village. Please @Ma’anshan Release send someone to check.
vi. Figure 4.6: Ma’anshan Release’s post, Jan 26, 2016, 17:11PM CST

@Ma’anshan Release: We just heard from @Ma’anshan Capital Water Company that they have received more than 8000 phone calls on water-related emergency (nearly 3000 per day). We understand that everybody is worried, and our telephone operators are working hard.

vii. Figure 4.7: Ma’anshan Release’s post, Jan 27, 2016, 08:46AM CST

@Qing Ka Olge: The water pipeline is burst. We’ve tried to phone for a whole day yesterday but it was all busy! Today was the same. Please help us. @Ma’anshan Release [Our address is] Fangzhi New Village Unit 25.

viii. Figure 4.8: Ma’anshan Release’s post, March 22, 2016, 06:35PM CST

@Ma’anshan Release: [Title: Ma’anshan Food and Drug Administration conducted an urgent inspection] After the Shandong illegal vaccines incident, the administration conducted a thorough inspection among all stored vaccines in downtown Ma’anshan as well as in three counties. We also inspected 38 related vaccination points. There is no suspected cases or traces of illegal vaccines in Ma’anshan.

ix. Figure 4.9: Ma’anshan Release’s post, March 23, 2016, 11:59AM CST

Suggestions from the citizen (whose name was covered for protection)

“I hope you can contact all related units and agencies to check the refrigerator and power system in our vaccine storage warehouse, and publish the results to the public. Thank you!”

“I saw [the previous report]. That was not about refrigerator but on the vaccines themselves.”

“And what if the power is cut off? Do we have any emergency protection measures?”
x. Figure 4.10: Ma’anshan Release’s post, March 23, 2016, 04:48PM CST

@Ma’anshan Release [Title: You can be sure of safe vaccinations at the following places.] These days, I got a lot of questions on the situation of Ma’anshan’s vaccine storage. Both the @Ma’anshan Food and Drug Administration and I myself are keeping an eye. We will keep the public informed of our inspections and investigations. Here is a list of safe vaccinations houses.

xi. Figure 4.11: Ma’anshan Release’s post, March 26, 2016, 05:01PM CST

@Ma’anshan Release (in the picture): “Can the staff at the Ma’anshan East Railway Station be worse? Do they know how to serve the people? The staff called people “idiots” because they got in the wrong elevator. They said “don’t you know you should come early?” when doing security checks. Should these be the proper attitudes? It wasn’t even the first time. I take high speed railway every week. At every other station, I feel I am being treated with respect and warmth. Why should my hometown be any difference? What would other people think of us when they are treated like this? This should be the front door of Ma’anshan!”

xii. Figure 4.12: Ma’anshan Release’s post, Jan 13, 2016, 10:14 AM CST

“Dear Followers, please tell me the name of those official Weibo accounts in Ma’anshan that has been “zombie-lized”. We should name and shame them!”

xiii. Figure 4.13: Ma’anshan Release’s post, Feb 4, 2016, 18:58 PM CST

@Ma’anshan Release: Stop sleeping! Come back and be alive! (Following with a list of government bureaus, including: @The Bureau of Urban Planning; @The Food and Drug Administration; @The Agricultural Administration; @The Communist Youth League of Ma’anshan; @Ma’anshan High-Tech Industrial Development Zone; @The Administration of Commodity Price; @The Environmental Protection Bureau; @The Bureau of Economy and
xiv. Figure 5.1: Suzhou Government-People Link’s post, March 28, 2016, 15:45 PM CST

@Suzhou Government-People Link: [A Policeman parked his car at the wrong way] According to the netizens, on March 26, 2016 at 2:00PM, at the crossroad of Yinhe Road and People’s Road, a policemen parked his BYD car in the middle of the road at the wrong direction, and got off to wipe the car for five minutes. The Public Security Bureau of Suzhou immediately investigated into the problem and responded to the public’s concerns on March 28th.

xv. Figure 5.2: Inquires of Politics in Yinchuan’s post, March 17, 2016, 19:05 PM CST

@Shenqi De Yi ZY: On March 14th around 7pm, there are audiences reporting that they saw unknown white substances in the water. They were wondering whether the water quality was deteriorated.

@Inquires of Politic in Yinchuan: Hello! The results of the investigation on the problem you reflected has been published. Please check our website.

@ Shenqi De Yi ZY: Thank you! I forgot to name the location, but the staff of the Landscaping Bureau went to investigate anyway. Thank you for your dedicated working attitudes!

xvi. Figure 5.3: Investigation Result of Landscaping Yinchuan, March 17 2016, 16:44PM CST

@Landscaping Bureau of Yinchuan (in the picture): First of all, thank you for following us. Regarding the problem you reflected, the results of the investigation are as follows.

Given that the weather have started getting warmer and pests have begun to be more active, the Forest Park started spraying on trees in the park with pesticides. The pesticides consist mainly
of sulphur and lime. They were blown into the lake by the wind and looked like white substances. These substances will not endanger the water quality or aquatic lives.

We have given more explicit guidance to our ground staff and we will try to avoid the reoccurrence of the incident. Thank you again for your questions and concerns.

xvii. Figure 5.4: Wang Zi Rong’s Post, March 17 2016, 16:44PM CST

@Wang Zi Rong: Regarding the electronic cut-off in Hua Xu Residency, if nobody privately messaged me on the night of March 21st, and if I hadn’t contact the Municipal Management Bureau through Wechat, we would see more than ten retired officials went to xinfang the next day. It wouldn’t look good. With the help of Wechat and Weibo, the communication channel between the government and the citizens is more open.