Remaking Guangzhou

Political Engagement and Place-making on Sina Weibo

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Abstract: This study uses the concept of ‘place-making’ to consider political engagement on Sina Weibo, one of the most popular microblogging services in China. Besides articulating state-public confrontation during major social controversies, Weibo has been used to recollect and re-narrate the memories of a city, such as Guangzhou, where dramatic social and cultural changes took place during the economic reform era. The Chinese government’s ongoing project to create a culturally indifferent ‘national identity’ triggers a defensive response from local places. Through consuming news and information about leisure and entertainment in Guangzhou, the digital narration of the city becomes an important source for Guangzhou people to learn about their geo-identity, and the kind of rights and responsibility attaching to it.

Keywords: Geo-identity, Guangzhou, place-making, political engagement, Sina Weibo

Acknowledgement: The author would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions and constructive comments.

Even though new social media services like Sina Weibo (microblog) seem to have empowered citizens to challenge state authorities in China, critics argue that those ‘victories’ are merely momentary and that the technology has so far failed to deliver structural reform and ongoing citizenry engagement; instead, the Chinese government uses the Internet for its own advantage (The Economist, 2013; Sullivan 2014). While the majority of the current scholarly works locates Weibo within China’s social stratifications, that the source of contention is due to the asymmetric power-relationship between classes; not to dismiss this conceptualisation, Weibo should also be located within the asymmetric spatial arrangements, in particular, the tension between the Central State and local places. After all, China has one of the world’s oldest and most enduring systems of territorial scale hierarchy that its spatial administrative management system can be dated centuries (Oakes and Schein, 2006).

By collecting online post from a Weibo group in Guangzhou – Eat, Drink, Play, Fun in Guangzhou (EDPF) – this study considers how the construction and negotiation of geo-identity on Weibo enacts possible political participations in Guangzhou. ‘Geo-identity’ refers to people’s sense of self and sense of belonging to a geographic place. ‘Place’ is a useful analytical concept because it gets close to people’s everyday lives and social practices. As Prieto (2011, p. 18) argues, ‘human identity is inextricably bound up with the places in which we find ourselves and through which we move.’ ‘Place’ offers alternative metrics to assess political engagement and citizenry. The
‘place’ in this study is Guangzhou, the capital city of the southern province of Guangdong, noted for its specific social and cultural transformations during the economic reform era as well as its ongoing tension with China’s Centre government. This study focuses on the kind of ‘political participation’ that is outside of the conventional settings of party politics and argues that Weibo politics are accumulated through people’s consumption of material and cultural products, and are practiced within the realm of everyday lives.

The essay will first provide a brief social background of Guangzhou and conceptualize it as a ‘place’ that requires constant (re)-making to sustain its local identity. Moreover, Guangzhou’s identity is ‘defensive’ in that it is reactive to the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) effort to create a singular Chinese national identity. By moving this argument forward, the second section considers Weibo’s role in enacting popular politics in China and introduces a Weibo group as the case study. The third section outlines the study’s design and method. This study collects posts that are posted by a Guangzhou’s Weibo group (weiqun), EDPF, over a period of twelve months. The data provide nuances and insights about Guangzhou people’s ongoing political engagement and practice. The last section will conclude with major findings.

1. Guangzhou - a ‘defensive’ place

Guangzhou is the capital city of Guangdong, the first mainland Chinese region to launch economic reform. It is geographically and culturally close to Hong Kong and Macau. Cantonese is the local dialect, and Hong Kong’s media and cultural products constitute a part of many Guangzhouers’ everyday lives (Fung and Ma, 2002). Throughout the reform era, Guangzhou has been the transit terminal for migrant workers, investors and other business personnel to the Pearl River Delta regions (Vogel, 1989). For example, there were more than 28 million migrant workers transited at Guangzhou in a period of 40 days before and after the Chinese Lunar New Year in 2013 (Ye and Li, 2013); this figure tops the nation. At the same time, tension between local Guangzhouers and new migrants (also migrant workers) intensifies over employment, social security, and even family stability (Cheung, 2002).

Furthermore, the CCP’s ongoing project of constructing a national identity across China triggers a sense of displacement in Guangzhou. One of the key policy initiatives of the CCP since the 1950s was to promote Mandarin (putonghua), which is based on the Beijing dialect. The policy has been enforced across major cities in China. Cantonese was exempt from this policy during the 1980s and early 1990s for the purposes of attracting Hong Kong investors (Xinhua, 2010). This, however, is changing. It is compulsory now for schools in Guangzhou to teach in Mandarin. In 2010, the Guangdong government considered replacing Cantonese broadcasting on the Guangzhou Television Network with Mandarin. This proposal triggered widespread public anger in Guangzhou and a street protest with more than 1,000 people was organized on Weibo. The incident reinforced a sense of displacement and dispossession among Guangzhouers. There is a shared sense that local Cantonese culture and identity are diminishing as they are giving way to a standardized national identity which is indifferent to regional specifics.

Guangzhou is as an example of ‘place disruption’ during China’s process of economic reform when the flow of financial, human and media were making local places less relevant. As Tim Oakes (2000, p.671) argues, China’s nation-state ‘has been accused of marginalizing any local or regional cultural variation that did not fit with its agenda of integration, modernization, and development’. However, Oakes insists that this is not the end of local places, instead,
marginalization makes the local as a ‘more salient scales for asserting cultural identity’ (p. 671). The relevancy of place in people’s daily lives and routines, therefore, make it as an important site to organize social meaning and sense of belonging. As Manuel Castells (2009, p.453) puts it, ‘the overwhelming majority of people, in advanced and traditional societies alike, live in places’. The attempt to disrupt a place is an eventual attempt to interfere daily routine and the sense of self, which, as Castells argues, can never permeate smoothly.

A place goes beyond the definition used in cartography (a point or a space that is marked by border lines on a map), in fact, as Blu (1996) points out in her study of Native American tribes, many local places are not even indicated on maps. Stephan Feuchtwang (2012, p.4) also argues that, ‘places do not have to be territorial… A territorial place is open … even when they are clearly bounded, their boundaries are not physical enclosures’. Places, however, are not merely given by the natural landscapes, nor are they purely assigned for administrative purposes. According to Miriam Kahn (1996, p.167), places are ‘complex constructions of social histories, personal and interpersonal experiences, and selective memory’. Place, therefore, should be understood by humanity and subjectivity defined through the constant interactions with ‘outsiders’. As Doreen Massey (1994, p.169) argues, ‘the identity of a place does not derive from internalized history. It derives, in large part, precisely from the specificity of its interactions with the “outside”’. Therefore, instead of viewing Guangzhou as a static place that resides on its historical and cultural ‘ uniqueness’, I focus on how Guangzhou’s transformation during the reform era contribute to the formation of a geo-identity through the process of place-making on Weibo.

Place-making is using the process of marking of a place to make sense of the world, to construct a sense of self and a sense of belonging. Feuchtwang (2012, p.10) defines place-making as ‘the centring and marking of a place by the actions and constructions of people tracing salient parts of their daily lives as a homing point in their trajectories’. A place’s transformative experience and its natural, humanities, and historical features trigger memories of lives, knowledge of the past, and hence, form an anticipated trajectory of the future. Place-making is a process of identification and the construction of unity, it helps to transform the individual ‘selves’ to a collective ‘us’. Traditionally, place-making is done so through literature, tales and myths, music and dance, and social rituals that are performed routinely either in public or private spheres. Again, even the most mundane practices can sometimes be deemed to be outside the collective national agenda. Speaking Cantonese in Guangzhou is such an example. Place-making in such a context is therefore a counter cultural practice. The nature of Guangzhou’s geo-identity should be considered as resisting and defensive. The claim of a place-based identity transforms into a form of political participation and citizenry engagement, to assert the right and responsibility over the place. Weibo offers such a venue to do so and to avoid direct confrontation with the state. At here, the discussion turns to Weibo and and the Weibo group of EDPF in GZ.

2. Weibo and EDPF in GZ

Weibo was first launched by Sina.com in 2009: the number of Weibo users reached 330 million by the end of June 2013 (CNNIC, 2013). Other major online providers, such as Netease, Tencent and Sohu have launched their own weibo (Sullivan, 2012). This Twitter-like service allows its users to share messages of up to 140 Chinese characters. Moreover, users can share visual images and video, attach URLs, and re-post and ‘LIKE’ messages that they find interest in. Unlike Twitter, 140 Chinese characters can convey nuances and a great deal of information (Sullivan, 2013). Weibo
becomes the major conduit for public communication and information sharing over the years. A number of scholarly works focus on the political dimension of Weibo in articulating state-public contentions in China (Sullivan, 2012, 2014). In particular, many works interested in how activists use Weibo to mobilize popular support and even collective action on issues such as the environment (Sukosed and Fu, 2013), land disputes (Tong and Zuo, 2013), and urban home owners’ protests (Huang and Sun, 2014). Besides contentious politics, Wang (2013) also notes that Weibo enacts public deliberations over controversial social issues. At the same time, Weibo also sees new phase of state repression and online control. Ongoing projects (such as Weiboscope at the University of Hong Kong) and individual scholarly works (such as King, Pan and Roberts, 2013; Ng, 2013) have focused on tracking down ‘deleted posts/comments’ from Weibo. King, Pan and Roberts (2013, p.339) argue the purpose of censorship is to ‘reduce the probability of collective action’. As a result, ‘the Chinese people are individually free, but collectively in chains’ on the Internet (p.339).

Current scholarships on Weibo develop interactive frameworks that capture the interplays between technology, individuals, and institutions in China. However, the line of inquiry resides upon the assumption that the Internet is placeless, that information no longer anchored to specific locations. Analysis has tended to focus on technology’s interaction with social class, which is defined by asymmetric political and economic power in China; but this neglects asymmetric spatial power between local places and national space and how geographic environments interact with the Internet. Given the rise of locative based services (LBS) in recent years, there is a renewed interest in ‘shifting the focus away from placeless flows and back to geography’ (Nitins and Collis, 2013, p.69) in the field of social media research. Mark Graham (2014, p. 99) in particular argues that the Internet is not a placeless cloud but it is ‘characterized by distinct geographies’. Such a trend has yet to receive thorough attention by researchers in the field of China digital media. Therefore, bringing together this renewed scholarly focus on ‘geography’, and responding to the longstanding quest in understanding the political capacity of China’s Internet, this study suggests the concept of ‘digital place-making’, the process to use digital technologies to reconstruct and renegotiate a physical place on the virtual sphere, as an analytical framework to examine the formation of a political self and community on Weibo.

Weibo launched Weibo groups (http://q.weibo.com/) in 2010 to facilitate information sharing and communication on selected topics of interest among Weibo users. There are many different types of Weibo group, Shi and Chen (2014) for example, discussed about the Weibo group for people living with HIV/AIDS, and how Weibo group enact mutual support among group members. Besides common interest (or shared grievance), another popular genre is ‘city group’; these groups shares news and information about city lives. There is no official figure on the number of city Weibo groups in Guangzhou. I have observed and followed 16 of them. ‘EDPF’ (http://weibo.com/gzlifes) is the largest group in terms of its number of followers (1,195,292 followers as in October 201e). Besides EDPF, other groups include: ‘Guangzhou Community’, ‘Guangzhou local group’, ‘Things that even Guangzhouers do not know’, ‘Guangzhou’s children’, ‘Eat Around Guangzhou’, ‘Funny Cantonese’, and ‘Playing out in Guangzhou’; these groups also commit to providing local affairs, news and information to Guangzhouers. EDPF is chosen for study because it has the largest follower base, which indicates the scale of its impact and the degree of popular engagement with its contents. Just like its global SNSs counterparts, connectedness is a critical dimension of Weibo. Weibo’s networking function such as ‘Accounts that we both have followed’, and ‘My followers have also followed’ sections indicate the ‘mutual-
following’ and ‘mutual-promotion practices’ between city groups and their followers. For example, EDPF has followed other Guangzhou city groups. It seems like the inter-groups relationship is not competitive in nature. These groups seem to formulate a network of identity. Weibo’s algorithmic networking function helps its users to recognize the online presence of their geo-identity, and to develop a sense of belonging to the city.

3. Methods and Findings

The unit of measurement was a single post generated by the EDPF. This study does not consider the messages generated by individual Weibo users because it primarily interests in how EDPF, as an online community, produce a Guangzhou identity. This study manually1 collected EDPF’s posts over a period of twelve months, from 1 July 2012 to 30 July 2013. EDPF was first launched (according to its ‘welcome post’) on 20 July 2012. A total of 7,355 posts were retrieved. The method of systematic sampling was used, with 95 percent confidence level and +/- 3 percent confidence interval, a sample of 968 was drawn (every 8th post is sampled). Given this study only interests in those posts produced by EDPF, unlike other Weibo studies that collected Weibo users’ comments (such as Wang, 2013; Shi and Chen, 2014), the data set did not contain any commercial spam, duplicated posts, or pure emotional stickers posts. Initially, I had little knowledge about what story the data set would tell me at the outset. The data exploration led to the development of the conceptual framework and the analytical design of this study.

In order to examine the research question of how EDPF construct a Guangzhou identity, the study generated two subsidiary questions: SRQ1. How EDPF present Guangzhou’s city space and social culture on Weibo? SRQ2. How such a process of identification enacts participation and communication on social, economic, and even political issues. SRQ1 guides the coding schema and SRQ2 guides the analysis of the results. The study categorized each post in accordance to the topic of its content. The categories, as shown in Table 1, highlight the act of ‘digital place-making’ by EDPF as each category represents a different aspect of Guangzhou’s city space and social culture. Posts in the sample fall into ten categories:

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Label (Number of posts)</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example - posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Food (202)</td>
<td>Information about food and dining places</td>
<td>Best places to get traditional beef balls dishes in Guangzhou.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. City Experience (71)</td>
<td>Discussion about Guangzhou’s nature and social changes</td>
<td>Guangzhou’s autumn is ‘magical’ because some people wear summer clothes, some wear winter clothes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Leisure, Entertainment and Tourism (LET) (127)</td>
<td>Information about entertainment venues and tourist attractions</td>
<td>Local animation festival, including cosplay, at Xiguan (an old town of Guangzhou).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 The researcher copies and pasted Weibo posts from EDPF’s home pages and stored the data into a separated document to run the sampling and the coding procedures.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5. Social issues (58)</th>
<th>News about social incidents around China</th>
<th>A 13 years old girl at Guangxi committed suicide because she felt she is not beautiful enough.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. Disadvantaged groups (39)</td>
<td>Raising social awareness about marginalized groups (including animal welfares)</td>
<td>Posts about missing person Posts about homeless dogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Popular culture/celebrity (51)</td>
<td>Discussion about celebrities, music, and film and televisions</td>
<td>The URL link to the ‘Memorising Leslie Cheung’ concert.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Human interests (183)</td>
<td>Interesting news and odd spots around the world</td>
<td>News: a sexual assault incident in Shanghai’s subway.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Expression (35)</td>
<td>Emotional post about the city life</td>
<td>Cherish your friends, they are too important to loss in our lives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given the researcher, myself, is a native Cantonese speaker, I used the coding schema to code the entire sample set. The process and experience of reading through every post help me to detect the main discourses from each category. SRQ2 leads the data analysis phase and the data analysis comprises two parts. The first part concerns the content of each post and makes reference from the content to the context. This research method has been used in Tong and Zuo’s (2013) study of Weibo and mass incidents in China. This method is useful to locate the content of the Weibo post within a broader social and economic context. While the categories in Table 1 highlight different aspects of Guangzhou (such as food, events, and media consumption), there are important discourses behind the framing of each category (the way EDPF presents Guangzhou and leads the discussion on Weibo). The second part interests in the textual representation of each post and relate them to Weibo’s technical functions. This method helps the analysis to focus on the ‘interaction’ between Weibo’s technical functions and pre-existing social cultural resources. This allows the analysis to consider the ‘geo-identity’ dimension and locate the discussion of ‘geo-identity politics’ within the broader social economic conditions in China.

4. Findings and Discussions

As mentioned, a place’s experience trigger memories of lives, knowledge of the past, and hence, form an anticipated trajectory of the future. In order to do so, EDPF first constructs a sense of solidarity and unity through recollecting Guangzhou’s social and cultural characteristics. The Food and LET categories dominate EDPF’s online posts and the contents are significantly ‘local’. In the Food category, only 5 out of 202 posts mentioned a waisheng (Chinese regions outside of Guangdong) cuisine as the majority of the posts focus on the local Cantonese cuisine. In the LET category, less than 10 out of 127 posts have recommended a waisheng tourism destination. The majority of the post recommended destinations that are either near Guangzhou (such as Hong

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2 One of the most famous and well-respected Hong Kong Canton-pop and film stars since the 1980s, who has committed suicide in 2003 due to depression.
Weibo’s visualization functions help the identification process. Visual materials or audio materials are attached to nearly every collected sample in this study. Visual materials set the locative ‘boundary’ of identity and it helps making identity visible and tangible. For example, EDPF’s posts about food and heritage buildings rely heavily on visual displays, as they provide concrete visualization of what is ‘traditional’: what a Cantonese dim sum looks like and which buildings have ‘post-colonial aesthetics’ in Guangzhou.

Moreover, EDPF makes the local culture as the metaphor for ‘financial affordability’. Posts about the local cuisines rarely mention dishes from premium restaurants or five star hotels; instead, they emphasize on bargains and budgetary. The same goes for leisure and entertainment choices, where most of the mentioned tourist destinations and events are relatively cheap (because of the short travel distances) or free. The implicit focus on the financial attributes highlights the daily struggles, emotions, and living experience in Guangzhou during its economic restructuring. From 2010 to 2011, the prices of food experienced the severe inflation: the prices of rice (up 11.2%), meat and poultry (up 15.7%), fishery (up 14.1%), which constitute the basic everyday living all went up. EDPF is guiding its addressees, Guangzhou’s low-end middle class youth who are coping with studies, employments and living pressures in general, through the contents of food, leisure, and entertainment. The place-making process offers a ‘solution’ to provide an immediate life trajectory to address daily necessity (food) and personal desire (leisure and entertainment).

Second, EDPF makes Guangzhou as a ‘different’ place in China through linguistic choice. The majority of posts is typed in Cantonese expressions instead of Mandarin. Although both languages share the same Chinese characters, written Cantonese can be quite different in terms of syntactic structure and word choice. As mentioned, Guangzhou schools are required to teach Mandarin, written Cantonese is an act of self-acquisition and learning. The online practice of typing Cantonese is political because it resists the government’s tuipu policy and dispute the claim that Mandarin is the only legitimate language in China. It is personal because it speaks to people’s everyday lives. Linguistic autonomy on Weibo therefore marks Guangzhou as a a place with its unique cultural and political subjectivity, and it defies the CCP’s will of linguistic standardization and cultural homogenization.

Third, EDPF extends Guangzhou’s cultural subjectivity in relation to Hong Kong, its geographically and culturally related neighbour. 78 posts in the sample contain news and information about Hong Kong, and most of them are found in the LET and Popular Culture categories. The video sharing function on Weibo for example, allows the recollection of old Cantonese pops, or the trailer of new television dramas to be experienced on EDPF. Hong Kong and Guangzhou have had close trading and cultural interactions. However, there is also a more profound implication of media preferences and choices. In contrast to the absence or the lack of attention of national media (such as CCTV), Hong Kong’s presence indicates a Guangzhou identity that is driven by a sense of cultural belonging (the Cantonese culture) rather than a sense of belonging to the nation (China). Hong Kong’s Cantonese media culture continues to remind Guanzhouers about their Cantonese cultural identity. A post (30/3/2013, reposted 101 times) that talks about childhood, for example, reads, ‘such a wonderful childhood with TVB’. Another one

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1 Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) is the second largest, free-to-air, commercial television station in Hong Kong. Most of the Hong Kong popular films and television programs that Guangzhou consumes over the years are produced by TVB.
Research Papers, Case Studies and Policy Papers

(25/2/2013, reposted 241 times) extends to the idea and listed 60 reasons of loving Guangzhou, the top three reasons are: 1. ‘Close to Hong Kong’; 2. ‘far away from Beijing’; and 3. ‘Guangzhou has the most outspoken media in China’. These posts show the organization of a self and the construction of a community through the process of cultural consumption. As Fung and Ma (2002, p.76) note, Guangzhou audiences have learned about values ‘such as individualism, consumerism, and skeptical of authority’ through their consumption of Hong Kong’s television dramas. Hong Kong ‘bridges’ the mundane media consumption in Guangzhou with the relatively liberal civic values. Hong Kong highlights Guangzhouers’ self-perceived liberal and diverse social and political values, which contrast to the national agenda set by the CCP. This, again, frames Guangzhou as a place of resistance to political domination and ideological homogenization. Hong Kong also helps Guangzhouers to construct an anticipated social trajectory for the future – to continue to defend its social liberty and diversity.

Fourth, A Guangzhou place is in constantly re-making by comparing itself with other mainland regions. Post about waisheng often comes in the genre of ‘news and current affairs’. EDPF has been reposting news reports from the mainstream media in the ‘disadvantaged group’ and ‘human interests’ categories. Some of the news stories are serious current affairs (such as murders, disasters, and corruption), and others are light-hearted entertainments (such as funny odd spot news). There are 53 posts about waisheng in the above mentioned two categories. 44 are negative news, 9 are positive news. While news coverage about crime, assaults and animal cruelty emphasis on the perceived attributes (by Guangzhouers) of the social culture outside of Guangdong is ‘barbaric and uncivilized’, which makes Guangzhou as socially and culturally more developed and civilized place; the negative depictions of a waisheng place also highlight the vulnerabilities of individuals who are living in those environments. A post (11/10/12) for example, covers a story about a woman insulting a street cleaner by deliberately throwing rubbish on the street in Chongqing (a multiplicity in western China). By emphasizing on the rude behaviour of the woman, this post also points out the unequal inter-classes power relationship in China. The stereotypical depictions of waisheng is then not simply an act of ‘discrimination’, quite the opposite, EDPF is drawing on Guangzhouers’ awareness about the wellbeing of the underclass and the issue of social equality. This is an act of ‘scale-jumping’ that EDPF scales up Guangzhou’s social norm and value to address a national issue. The treatment of waisheng indicates that EDPF is integrating Guangzhou’s local subjectivity to a national arena.

5. Conclusion

Digital place-making is not merely a technical alternative to construct and negotiate geo-identity, it is inherently political. Place-making offers a concept to understand both of the internationalization process of resistance, and to contextualize this process within the broader socioeconomic transformation in China. The tension, however, does not arise from materialistic and economic inequalities, but it is the asymmetrical spatial power between the nation and city, as the former is an expression of domination and control; the latter represents people’s daily survival and dignity. Weibo’s function here is far beyond expanding the reach and scope of news and information, but Weibo brings memories to live, links past to present, making one’s identity visible, tangible, and therefore, functional.

While Weibo articulates the significance of local places in people’s everyday lives, the concept of ‘place’ also suggests an alternative path to think about Weibo and politics. Instead of merely
in the papers, local place provides insight about the ongoing political practices and engagements in a seemingly ‘apolitical’ manner. Instead of taking information on Weibo as ‘placeless’, a critical approach to explore geography on Weibo can help to explore the formation of citizenry networks, as place is the container of people and life. Weibo politics is inherently an online practice of the everyday.

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Wilfred Yang Wang is a PhD Candidate at the Creative Industries Faculty of Queensland University of Technology, Australia. His PhD dissertation investigates the construction and negotiation of Guangzhou’s geo-identity on China's microblogging service of Sina Weibo; the study proposes a 'geographic approach’ to assess China’s online culture and politics. His research interests include digital media, social movement, identity politics, framing analysis, and human/cultural geography of the Internet.