Remaking Guangzhou
Geo-identity and Place-making on Sina Weibo

Abstract
This study uses the concept of ‘place-making’ to consider the formation of geo-identity 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. This study aims to explore how Weibo sustains political engagement through maintaining Guangzhou people’s sense of belonging to their city. By collecting data from a Weibo group over a period of twelve months, I argue that Weibo politics does not only take place during contentious events, but are sustained within the realm of everyday life. This study has the potential to contribute to the limited knowledge of Weibo use during non-contentious period in China, hence, broadening the notion of popular polity in the age of social media.

Introduction
Even though new social media services like Sina Weibo seem to have empowered citizens to challenge state authority in China, critics argue that the technology has so far failed to deliver structural reform and ongoing engagement by the citizenry. However, the Chinese government has used the Internet for its own advantage (The Economist, 2013; Sullivan 2014). Current scholarly works mainly focus on Weibo’s role in state–public contentions (Sullivan, 2012; Sukosed and Fu, 2014; Tong and Zuo, 2013; Hang and Sun, 2014); fewer works, consider sustainability; that is, how popular politics is sustained over time. What happens when there is no major social or political controversy? What do people do on Weibo?
This study considers the construction and negotiation of ‘geo-identity’ on Sina Weibo as a possible way to sustain political engagement. 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 comes close to people’s everyday lives and social practices; it offers an alternative metric to assess political engagement and citizenry. In this study, Guangzhou was chosen as suitable site noted for its specific social transformation during the economic reform era, as well as its ongoing tension with China’s central government. I argue that Weibo politics do not only take place during contentious events, but are maintained within the realm of everyday life.

This article first reviews Guangzhou’s social context and conceptualises it as a place that requires constant ‘(re)-making’ due to the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) effort to create a homogenous national identity. By moving this argument forward, the second section considers Weibo’s role in enacting Guangzhou’s geo-identity and introduces a Weibo group as the case study. The third details the research methods. This study collected Weibo entries that were posted by the Weibo group (weiqun) named ‘Eat Drink Play Fun in Guangzhou’ (EDPF) over a period of twelve months. The data provide nuances and insights about Guangzhou people’s ongoing political engagement and practice. The fourth section concludes with major findings.

**Guangzhou - a ‘defensive’ place**

Guangzhou is the capital city of Guangdong, the first Chinese region to launch the economic reforms. Cantonese is the local dialect and Guangzhou is geographic distance from the political centre of Beijing, but close to Hong Kong and Macau. Guangzhou’s experience throughout the
economic reform era contributed to the formation of a distinctive local identity. Historically, Guangzhou has been perceived as arising ‘in the middle of nowhere’ (Faure, 2007: 17). The distance between Guangzhou and the political centre at the north, has seen it even deny one of the mightiest military powers ever, the Qin Dynasty (221 – 206 B.C.), to fully conquer and penetrate the region. The ways of life, ritual practices and economic activities, which are given by the natural landscape, define a strong sense of local difference from northerners (Faure, 2007: 17). Throughout the reform era, Guangzhou embraced Hong Kong’s media culture (Fung and Ma, 2002) and it has been the ‘transfer terminal’ for business investors, migrant workers and other travel and business personnel to the Pearl River Delta regions (Vogel, 1989). The changing demographic structure, however, intensified the tension between the locals and new migrants over employment, social security and even family stabilities (Cheung, 2002).

At the same time, the CCP’s intention to construct a homogenous national identity across China further triggers a sense of displacement in Guangzhou. One of the key policy initiatives in 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 exempted from this policy during 1980s and early 1990s to attract Hong Kong investors (Xinhua, 03 July 2010). This, however, is changing. 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 organised on Weibo (Wong, 26 July 2010). The government was forced to withdraw the proposal.
The pro-Cantonese protest illustrated two mechanisms at work. On the one hand, the Chinese government attempted to conquer the folk traditions and historical contingency of Guangzhou and making the city as what Edward Relph (1976) would term as ‘placeless’; the notion of ‘placelessness’ indicates ‘the transcending of the past by overcoming the rootedness of social relations and landscape in place through mobility and in the increased similarity of everyday life from place to place’ (324). In the case of China, Tim Oakes (2000: 671) points out that the government ‘has been accused of marginalising any local or regional cultural variation that did not fit with its agenda of integration, modernisation, and development’. However, on the other hand, such a process of marginalisation interrupts people’s daily routines and ways of life; the interruption triggers resistance which makes local as a more salient scale for Chinese people to assert their cultural identity (Oakes, 2000: 671). The pro-Cantonese protest illustrates Guangzhouers’ assertion of their geo-identity and their efforts to defend the place’s subjectivity from the imposed process of homogenisation. Clearly then, the concept of place merits further discussions as it contains complex social dynamics, competing ideologies and power contestations.

Scholars argue that the concept of place goes beyond the definition used in cartography as a point or a space that is marked by border lines on a map (Blu, 1996; Sen and Silverman, 2014). While place is grounded in a fixed physical location that contains certain specifications (Agnew, 2011), it is a complex construction of human histories, social meanings and personal and interpersonal relations, which constitute the experience and collective memories among those living there (Kahn, 1996; L. Ma 2003). This is why Prieto (2011: 18) believes that,
No matter what the starting point … and no matter how much of a tendency we have to forget this basic fact, human identity … is inextricably bound up with the places in which we find ourselves and through which we move.

The formation of geo-identity, however, does not merely rely on the understanding of some internalised histories there; the sense of self is often derived through our interactions with the “outside” (Massey, 1994: 169). People’s experience of a place is therefore, appeared to be a combined understanding about the rootedness of social relations and natural landscape there as well as their experience in dealing with the outside world. Since the meanings and experiences of a place are not fixed but in a state of flux; people’s sense of self and belonging with the place also undergo constant re-imaginations and re-negotiations (Sen and Silverman, 2014). This relates to the activities of place-making. Feutchwang (2012: 10) defines place-making as ‘the centering 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’. Since a place contains people’s memories and experiences of changes, place-making is a process of identification that constructs the unity among people over time.

Traditionally, place-making activities such as the sharing of literature, tales and myths, music and dance and social rituals are performed routinely either in a public or a private sphere (Feutchwang, 2012). Therefore, the advancement of digital technology renders new opportunity to expand the form and scope of place-making. Speaking Cantonese is such an example. While the use of Cantonese is discouraged and even marginalised in Guangzhou, digital media provides a new venue for Guangzhouers to continue their linguistic practice online. Place-making in such a context is a counter culture that Guangzhou’s geo-identity should be considered as subversive
and defensive. Weibo offers a venue to sustain the job of place-making by avoiding direct confrontations with the state. I turn now to discuss Weibo and the Weibo group of EDPF.

**Weibo and EDPF**

Weibo was first launched by Sina.com in 2009. By the end of June 2014, weibo services in general had 275 million users (CNNIC, 2014). Sina Weibo has more than 500 million registered accounts and 50 million active accounts (AFP, 2014). With the diffusion of mobile technologies, it is reported that more than 70 per cent of Sina Weibo users access their account via mobile devices. 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). It is probably for this reason Weibo becomes the major conduit for public communication and information sharing over the years. A number of studies discussed Weibo’s role in mobilising popular actions and dissents against state authorities in China (Poell, de Kloet and Zeng, 2013; Tong and Zuo, 2013; Huang and Sun, 2014), others noted the deliberative practices among Weibo users during controversial social incidents (Wang, 2013). However, it turns out that the government has also been utilising Weibo to develop more sophisticated mechanisms of online control (The Weiboscope Project; Ng, 2013). As a result, ‘the Chinese people are individually free, but collectively in chains’ on the Internet (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013: 339).
While current Weibo scholarship tends to locate the platform within the intensified social stratifications; Weibo should also be located within China’s 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 (J. Wang, 2007: 9). At the same time, the rise of locative based services (LBS) in recent years energises a renewed interest in ‘shifting the focus away from placeless flows and back to geography’ (Nitins and Collis, 2013: 69) in the field of social media research. The trend has yet to receive thorough attention in the field of China digital media. Therefore, bringing together this renewed scholarly focus on ‘geography’ and responding to the long-standing quest in understanding the political capacity of China’s Internet, this study uses the concept of ‘place-making’ to examine the formation of a political self and community on Weibo.

A Weibo group (weiqun) is an online community formed by individuals who share common interests and concerns. Weibo first launched this service in 2010, and has a separate website for its weiquns (http://q.weibo.com/). According to the homepage, as accessed on 6 August 2014, there are more than one million weiquns created and 63 million users have joined these services, and there are 6,716 celebrities (ming xing) using weiqun. Weibo users can create their own weiqun and search for and join those they find interest in. One of the most popular forms of weiqun is ‘city group’. On weiqun’s homepage, users can select their ‘current city’ and a list of recommended city groups will appear. There is no official figure on the number of city Weibo groups in Guangzhou. Through my own Weibo account, I have come across 16 of these Guangzhou-focused Weibo groups. These groups share news and information about Guangzhou
and provide guidance and advices to their followers who live in the city. EDPF (http://www.weibo.com/gzlifes) is the largest group in terms of number of followers (1,185,442 followers as by August 2014).

Just like its global SNS 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 ‘Guangzhou local group’, ‘Things that even Guangzhouers do not know’, ‘Bargain at Guangzhou’, and ‘Eat around Guangzhou’. It seems like the inter-group relationship is not competitive in nature. Instead, they attempt to formulate a network of identity. Weibo’s algorithmic networking function helps its users to recognise the online presence of their geo-identity and to develop a sense of belonging to the city.

Methods and Findings
This study examined the collected posts from EDPF 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 per cent confidence level and +/- 3 per cent confidence interval, a sample of 968 was drawn (every 8th post was sampled).
Place-making is not merely the action to (re)construct a place but Feutchwang (2012) sees it as a process to trace the ‘salient parts’ of people’s lives and social routines there. A coding scheme was developed based on this definition with a focus on the questions of,

Q1. Which parts of Guangzhou’s daily lives are presented by EDPF; and

Q2. How does EDPF present these dimensions to construct a sense of belonging for its followers?

Q1 guided the coding scheme and Q2 guided the analysis. Table 1 below summaries the results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category/label</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>‘This restaurant at Guangzhou’s old town district serves traditional Cantonese dim sum, many seniors and college students do yum cha there. Only costs ¥15-20 per person’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Experience</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>‘Guangzhou is such an interesting place, you might complain about it all the time; yet, you will allow others to complain about it and never want to leave this place your whole life’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure, event and tourism (LET)</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>‘The yellow rubber duck has come to Hong Kong! Let’s go check it out’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantonese (language)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>‘Cantonese is so important for our younger generations’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social issues</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>‘Sexual harassment takes place on public transport all the time. Please be wary of people who do this kind of thing’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantaged groups</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>‘This poor child has been missing for several days now; please spread the message and report to the police if you have any information’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular culture/celebrity</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>‘Who is your favour TVB actress’?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human interests</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>‘Guangzhou metro system was suspended’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As people’s experience of a place is derived through their combined understanding of the social culture and natural environment there and their experience in dealing with outsiders, I examined how EDPF presented these two types of experience. I argue that EDPF ‘remade’ Guangzhou by presenting it as a place that is different from the rest of China. EDPF achieved this by linking Guangzhou’s traditional culture with the immediate social conditions with the help of Weibo’s technical functions.

The majority of posts were typed in Cantonese expressions rather than the official Mandarin expression. The use of Cantonese has profound significance as it shows EDPF maintains Guangzhouers’ subversive discourse since the 2010 pro-Cantonese protest. As mentioned, the protest triggered collective resistance against the CCP’s intention to eradicate Cantonese broadcasting. Since the written expression between Cantonese and Mandarin can be quite different in terms of syntactic structure and word choice, EDPF’s use of Cantonese is not only an attempt to display Guangzhou’s cultural uniqueness but also an effort to sustain the protest momentum and subversive discourse since 2010.
Apart from the deliberate linguistic choice, EDPF constantly display Guangzhou’s cultural products and link them with the immediate living conditions and experience in Guangzhou. In the Food and the Leisure, Events and Tourism (LET) categories, for example, the majority of EDPF’s posts are significantly local. In the Food category, only 5 out of 202 posts mentioned a waisheng (regions outside of Guangdong in mainland China) cuisine; the majority of the posts focus on the local Cantonese cuisine. In the LET category, less than 10 out of 127 posts recommend a waisheng tourism destination, and the rest recommended destinations that are either nearby Guangzhou (such as Hong Kong and Macau), or inside Guangzhou. EDPF exploits Weibo’s visualisation feature to map the locative ‘boundary’ of identity. Nearly all of the 968 samples collected for this study have visual images or audio materials attached. Visual materials make geo-identity visible by mapping the locative boundary of the geo-community: what is traditional, what a Cantonese dim sum’ looks like and which buildings have post-colonial aesthetics in Guangzhou. These local attributes enact a resistance discourse that rejects Guangzhou as a placeless place in China; instead, EDPF presents Guangzhou as a place with distinctive local subjectivity.

There is another layer of significance about the terms ‘local’ and ‘traditional’ as EDPF makes them the metaphor for financial affordability. For example, posts about the local cuisines rarely mention dishes from premium restaurants or five star hotels; instead, they emphasise bargains and budgets. 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 these financial attributes highlights the daily struggles, emotions and living experiences in Guangzhou during its economic restructuring. From 2010 to
2011, the price of food experienced severe inflation. The prices of rice (up 11.2%), meat and poultry (up 15.7%), fishery (up 14.1%), which constitutes basic everyday living, all went up. The place-making process offers a solution to providing an immediate life trajectory to address daily necessity (food) and personal desire (leisure and entertainment).

In addition to displaying Guangzhou’s local culture and linguistic practice through Weibo’s visualisation and typing functions, EDPF also organises Guangzhouers’ experience with Hong Kong and waisheng to constitute a collective sense of self and belonging. There were 78 posts in the sample containing news and information about Hong Kong, and most of them were 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 for new television dramas. The Hong Kong television drama series *Triumph in the Skies II* (June – July 2013), for example, was discussed in 10 different posts. The drama series is about the struggles and experiences of a group of young Hong Kong pilots in pursuit of their career goals. The series detailed their challenges in pilot training, coping with personal relationships, dealing with family and social pressures in contemporary Hong Kong. The discourse of upward looking individualism in a competitive job market speaks to the daily struggles of many young graduates in Guangzhou. A television production such as *Triumph in the Skiers II* provides functional advices to its audience for coping with their daily lives, and provides aspirational resources for those preparing for life and career. Online discussion topics included rumours surrounding the lead characters, the audiences’ prediction of endings, sharing the theme song, and a diagram that illustrated the complex romance and personal relationships of the main characters. On average, each of these posts was reposted more than 200 times and received more than 100 replies.
The popular engagement of *Triumph in the Skies II* contrasted with a national blockbuster at the time, *Lost in Thailand* (December 2012). The film was arguably the most successful indigenous production in Chinese film industry, with gross earnings of over US$200 million (China’s domestic market) in seven weeks (Hunt, 2013). It attracted global attention. The film, however, was only mentioned once in the sample (65 Replies and 175 Reposts), and twice in the overall data. This does not indicate that Guangzhouers were disinterest in *Lost in Thailand*, but the data indicate that, firstly, the scale of production is irrelevant to the emergence of a media culture at a local level, and, secondly, that Hong Kong popular culture constitutes an important part of Guangzhouers’ daily conversation and lives while national productions remain as momentary media sensation and celebration.

In contrast to the lack of attention to a national production, Hong Kong’s prominent 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 Guangzhouers of their Cantonese identity. Hong Kong culture is not merely a preference; Hong Kong differentiates Guangzhou. A post (30/3/2013, reposted 101 times) that talks about childhood, for example, read, ‘such a wonderful childhood with TVB’. Another one (25/2/2013, reposted 241 times) extends the idea and listed 60 reasons for loving Guangzhou. The top three reasons were 1. Guangzhou is close to Hong Kong; 2. It is far away from Beijing; and 3. It has the most outspoken media in China.
These posts show the organisation of a political self and the construction of a community through the process of cultural consumption. As Fung and Ma (2002: 76) note, Guangzhou audiences have learned about values such as ‘individualism, consumerism, and sceptical of authority’ through their consumption of Hong Kong’s television dramas. Hong Kong bridges mundane media consumption and cultural practices in Guangzhou with relatively liberal civic values. Hong Kong’s media culture not only recollects Guangzhou’s unique economic role during China’s economic reform, but, more importantly, it highlights Guangzhouers’ self-perceived liberal and diverse social and political values, which contrast to the CCP’s ideology of constructing a united and homogenous national identity. EDPF’s emphasis on Hong Kong’s media culture frames Guangzhou as a place of resistance to political domination and ideological homogenisation.

These liberal values derived from Hong Kong’s media and cultural products also characterise EDPF’s treatment of waisheng, although this is done differently. Massey (1994: 120) argues a place reflects the overall changing social condition and social relations there; because of that, I argue that people’s sense of a place also reflects their changing norms and values. Since Guangzhou is the administrative center of Guangdong, it has become the transferring terminal for millions of migrant workers. For example, 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). The influx of waisheng people transformed Guangzhou’s demographic structures and living conditions and hence, the attitudes toward this social change constitute an important part of Guangzhou’s geo-identity.
Posts about *waisheng* often fall into the genre of news and current affairs. EDPF reposts news reports from the mainstream media in the ‘Disadvantaged group’ and ‘Human interests’ categories. EDPF did not produce these posts as they have in other categories; it merely selected and reposted articles from news websites. Some of the news stories are serious current affairs (such as murders, disasters and corruption), and some are light-hearted news (such as funny or unusual incidents). There were 53 posts about *waisheng* in the abovementioned three categories. 44 were negative and 9 were positive.

While news coverage about crime, assaults and animal cruelty sustain the perception (of Guangzhou) that society outside of Guangdong is ‘barbaric and uncivilised’, Guangzhou itself appears more developed and advanced; these posts also focus on the struggles and hardships of individuals living there. The making of an uncivilised *waisheng* place and a culturally and socially affluent Guangzhou carries a ‘self-reflection’ discourse. Instead of emphasising on the superiority of Guangzhou over *waisheng*, these posts illustrate Guangzhouers’ contradictory perceptions of migrant workers: on the one hand, migrant workers are still stereotypically perceived as dirty, with no manners and rude; on the other hand, many Guangzhouers know it is inappropriate to treat them unfairly. A post (11/10/12) for example, covered a story about a woman insulting a street cleaner by deliberately throwing rubbish onto the street in Chongqing (a multiplicity in western China). By emphasising the rude behaviour of the woman who represents the affluent middle class in China, this post highlighted the unequal inter-class relationships in China. EDPF’s negative treatment of the woman serves as a critical reminder that migrant workers in Guangzhou are facing similar unfairness; hence, demanding Guangzhouers to express more respect and compassion to migrant workers and other disadvantaged social groups.
A social norm that focuses on social liberty and equality gradually developed through the longing of Hong Kong’s liberal social system and the self-reflection of the unjust social culture across China (including Guangzhou). EDPF puts this norm forward as the ‘benchmark’ to define Guangzhou’s geo-identity, as it is something for all Guangzhouers to follow.

**Conclusion**

This study has explored place-making activities on Weibo and found that such activities are not merely the technical alternative to construct and negotiate a geo-identity, they are inherently political. The findings have clearly revealed that place-making offers a concept for understanding the internalisation process of resistance and to contextualise this process within the broader socioeconomic transformation in China. Hence, Weibo’s function here is far beyond expanding the reach and scope of news and information as it constantly construct and negotiate people’s sense of self and belonging to a local place.

This study has shown that a Weibo group like the EDPF provides the shared online space for its members to interact and communicate. This shared space is supported by the shared cultural resources and social understanding of Guangzhou. EDPF strategically presents Guangzhou’s social and cultural aspects by framing them in relation to issues of economy, employment and social and political systems. A geo-community takes up the role to guide its members throughout China’s economic restructuring on a daily basis. This research demonstrates that Guangzhou’s unique culture and history are not the main resources to construct and reinforce people’s sense of solidarity; instead, these cultural resources are framed within the
immediate life experience (such as inflation) and memories (social changes during the economic reforms) in Guangzhou.

While Weibo articulates the significance of local place in people’s everyday lives, the concept of place also suggests an alternative path for thinking about Weibo and politics. A local place provides insight into ongoing political practices and engagements in a seemingly ‘apolitical’ manner. Weibo data are not placeless as they are shaping and being shaped by people’s embodiment processes with their physical locations. Therefore, a critical approach to exploring the formation of geo-identity networks on Weibo can help to explore the formation of citizenry networks and political practices. Despite the CCP’s persistent effort to promote a unified and a homogenous sense of the nation-state, the concept of place remains as the container to manage Chinese people’s sense of self and belonging. Overall, Weibo politics is inherently an online practice of the everyday.

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