LIGHTEN UP:
HOW THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT MANAGES POLITICAL CRISES ON SOCIAL MEDIA WITH ENTERTAINMENT-ORIENTED NARRATIVES

by

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For my parents, who supported me with endless love, inspirations, and healthy food.

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ABSTRACT

News travels quickly on social media and can easily develop into a political crisis. Investigating the crisis management strategies of authoritarian governments would greatly enhance our understanding of authoritarian resilience in the digital age. This dissertation argues that existing researchers have not fully integrated the interaction between governmental and non-governmental actors into their models, nor have they quantified the impact of online information on public opinion. Based on knowledge of the communication management discipline and with knowledge of computer-assisted software, this dissertation develops cybernetic models that describe the interaction logic of the four most important actors in the crisis management process on the largest social media platform of China, Sina Weibo: The government, the government-hired 50 Cent Party, the general key opinion leaders, and the ordinary "netizens" (internet users). Posts and comments on Weibo are collected and analyzed using computer-assisted software, and their influence on public opinion is weighted based on their visibility to the public.

An important yet understudied strategy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) emerged and is named the entertainment-oriented narrative. It has three forms: (1) likening the reality to an unreal TV show or a fictional scene; (2) using cute emojis and anthropomorphism to represent crisis-related concepts; and (3) framing the country as a pop star (idol) and encourage citizens to defend it regardless. The CCP uses these three tactics to trivialize the importance of crisis events, deflect public criticism, and discourage the public from critical thinking. Case studies show that this strategy has become a regular practice of the CCP and worked effectively when the crises do not seriously and massively affect local citizens' lives.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Authoritarian resilience in the digital age

In the early 1990s, the world witnessed a digital social media revolution with the advent of the internet. In contrast to traditional media, which does not have the power to publish news without the permission of editors or government officials, social media allows for the easy dissemination of information and the relative freedom of internet users (hereafter netizens) to create content and exchange ideas (Berman & Weitzner, 1997). Many incidents were published on online platforms before the government could control them and subsequently evolved into crises. The year 2009 saw "Twitter revolutions" in Moldova and Iran, where tech-savvy citizens used Twitter to organize protests (Schectman, 2009). One year later, during the Arab Spring, revolutionary claims on Twitter and Facebook helped shape massive offline protests by challengers that eventually toppled multiple governments (Bennett, 2004; Stepanova, 2011; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). In the era of digital social media, it has become an essential issue for authoritarian governments to control online information, deal with crises events, and guide public opinion in a timely manner so as to maintain the stability of their rule.

The Chinese government has been a first-mover in the world in trying to exert control over the digital experience of its people (McKune & Ahmed, 2018). The "Great Firewall" uses a combination of technologies to block access and monitor certain foreign websites by domain name and IP address. IP-based protocols can be monitored and blocked, and connections can be encrypted and decrypted (Griffiths, 2019). When people try to bypass the "Great Firewall" to access foreign websites, the proxy servers of the VPNs they use to "climb the wall" can be jammed, and their personal information is then exposed to surveillance police. In several cases, Chinese netizens were arrested for browsing foreign web pages (Haas, 2017).

In order to cope with unpredictable crises online, the regime also established cyber-surveillance and communication offices, hiring millions of people to patrol the internet on a daily basis (King et al., 2013; Guan, 2015). As MacKinnon puts it, China is a "networked authoritarian" (MacKinnon, 2011). The networked system is like water management, where information is seen as valuable but dangerous water that should be monitored at all times. Tsai (2016) adds a great deal of detail to this system, showing that it is structured as a pyramid, with the top agency being

the Network Bureau of the Central Propaganda Department (CPD), with each layer below closely connected and there is always one person at each level to ensure smooth communication. With such a structure, a cyber crisis can be immediately detected and responded to no matter at what level it erupts.

With these advanced technologies and organizations, China has surpassed many authoritarian countries in terms of monitoring and censoring online public opinion. Scholars argue that the Chinese government's current high level of legitimacy and political stability, while fundamentally due to economic and political success, is also due to various efforts in information control and crisis management (Schneider, 2018). These efforts were so successful that other authoritarian countries have actively sought cooperation. In 2016, Russia partnered with China to bring in technology to create its "sovereign internet" project. The two resilient authoritarian regimes held high-level meetings in Beijing and Moscow and co-hosted a cybersecurity forum (Soldatov & Borogan, 2016). In 2017, at the fourth World Internet Conference (organized annually by China's State Internet Information Office), officials from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Thailand, Laos, Serbia, and the United Arab Emirates gathered together to sign agreements with China to import its censorship technologies (Viney et al., 2017). China's methods and experience of monitoring and controlling citizens will sooner or later be transmitted to these countries, affecting the democratic life of millions of people.

However, looking closely at major crises in China in recent years, it is clear that censorship is not the entirety of crisis management. In 2018, one of the major Chinese drug producers was found to have violated standards in making vaccines, affecting more than 215,184 children (Lancelet, 2018). Related news reports were widely circulated on Sina Weibo (hereafter Weibo), a central Chinese social media platform, and became the most sensitive topic among the Chinese public throughout the summer (Hernández, 2018). In 2019, anti-government protests were rocking Hong Kong, and pictures of incendiary bombs flying through the streets, bloodied protesters, and riot police patrolling metro stations have been widely disseminated on Weibo. In early 2020, the city of Wuhan was locked down overnight due to the COVID-19 outbreak. In the next few months, Weibo was the primary way for more than five million Chinese citizens trapped in hospitals, parks, under bridges, at stations, and in various communities to ask for help. In 2021, during the Henan floods, after the government claimed no deaths in the subway stations in Zhengzhou, the capital

of Henan Province, survivors took to Weibo to debunk the official lies, detailing how people around them died one by one (Kang, 2021; Davidson, 2021).

These crises caused severe economic and social losses and sparked intense public debate as they have not been fully censored. The manifestation of public sentiment around these crises raises the question if the government relies on other instruments in addition to censorship. When the government does not censor all the sensitive content, how would it deal with the content online to minor the political risks and instability?

1.2 Censorship and beyond

Censorship is one of the primary and most effective crisis management measures, yet it is not without limitations. On the one hand, when a crisis event occurs, information can be generated and shared faster than its removal (BBC, 2020). With the emergence of the internet and digital social media, it has become increasingly challenging to block information from the public. On the other hand, governments actively avoid the complete deletion of information for a variety of reasons.

First, social media is an excellent place to gather up-to-date and authentic information from all levels of the society in order to set long-term agendas, estimate power relations, gather opinions to make adjustments to new policies, identify potential challengers, and address citizen grievances while avoiding collective political activism (Wang & Way, 2010; Chen & Xu, 2014; Lorentzen, 2014; Truex, 2016). If all anti-government information is censored, the central government may miss the opportunity to correct the mistakes of local governments, thus allowing local public anger to be directed at the central government, with serious consequences (Huang et al., 2016).

Second, complete censorship of a crisis can have backlash effects as the netizens become aware of the censorship (Huang, 2018; Robert, 2020; Chang et al., 2022). It makes citizens more interested or concerned about crisis events, leading them to seek external links (such as Google search) for more reliable information initially unavailable in their daily lives (Stockmann, 2012; Epstein et al., 2017; Pan & Siegel, 2020). In this process, whether the citizens will be exposed to other information unfavorable to the authoritarian government is unpredictable and uncontrollable, and the risks are hard to measure (Huang et al., 2016; Steinert-Threlkeld et al., 2020). Therefore, the government would usually provide partial information about a crisis event to the public instead of censoring all related information. In this way, the public is less likely to turn to unofficial

sources (Yang, 2009; Bruce, 2016), and the government could control which content is delivered to its audience.

A third limitation of the censorship mechanism is that it has become a way to confirm the veracity of crisis events. In China, when a rumor about a political scandal is not true, the government usually does not immediately censor it. The local government will investigate and issue investigation reports to clarify the truth and alleviate public concerns. Only when the rumor is true does the government quickly censor related posts and ban keywords on social media platforms. Thus, in the absence of further evidence, the public will judge the truth of a rumor based on whether it has been censored. Completely censoring news of a crisis event only causes the public to find ways to pay more attention to the event (Roberts, 2020), which negatively affects the government's stability of rule.

Selective censorship, on the contrary, encourages netizens to self-censor by creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear (Bi, 2020). Without clear regulations and examples of what would be censored, the public is forced to guess at the boundaries of censorship, the cost of being censored, and all the troubles and persecutions that might follow (Pearce and Kendzior, 2012; Tang et al., 2012; Stern & Hassid, 2012; Stern and O'Brien, 2012). When citizens become accustomed to self-censorship, their mindset changes, and they would become apathetic and disinterested even when they have access to uncensored sensitive content (Chen & Yang, 2019; Robert, 2020). This drastically reduces the cost of censorship and stability maintenance. In the government's view, it is a better strategy than the complete, "coarse censorship" (Robert, 2020). Of course, selective censorship is not without any risk. It is like walking a tightrope: if the leaders remain vigilant and successfully practice power control over social media, they will gain a wealth of information, the ability to identify and eliminate risks promptly, a high degree of legitimacy, and a more sustainable government (Levitsky & Way, 2002; Nathan, 2003; MacKinnon, 2011; Little, 2012; Gehlbach & Sonin, 2014; Gehlbach et al. 2016). If they fail to control the outbreak of crises, as some leaders in the Arab Spring did, then they may end up forced to resign, go into exile or serve life sentences in prison. As Lorentzen (2014, p.413) puts it, "media control is … fundamental to determining whether such regimes survive or fall."

Scholars agree that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) does not use complete censorship in most crises but rather sets different levels of censorship priority for different types of information. For example, online communications that only happen on the local level and demand

local changes would be tolerated until they evolve to the national level and demand changes in the national system (Tong & Zuo, 2014). Some topics that are not seemingly political, such as environmental protection, have a better chance of survival (Rauchfleich & Schäfer, 2015). Messages expressing anger at certain political events, such as territory disputes, are acceptable as long as the anger is not directed at the Beijing government (Cairns & Carlson, 2016). Above all, any online messages that may incite offline collective action are prone to censorship, while other information may encounter a more moderate disposition (King et al., 2017).

Despite the proliferation of research on what does and does not get censored, there is still relatively little research on what the government would do with information that survives censorship. It is unlikely that the government will ignore the rest of the information after censorship, leaving the public freely discussing and expressing their opinions until the crisis subsides. So how does the CCP deal with the information visible to the public? What steps does it take to maintain stability if information online becomes, or is likely to become, risky and worth managing?

As linguistic analytical technology has developed in recent years, more and more scholars have devoted themselves to this area. Nevertheless, their findings are often unable to connect or are even contradictory. For example, some of them note that the CCP uses argumentative speech to steer citizens to disagree with each other on policy agendas which would leave them disorganized and less likely to form a coalition to oppose governmental policies (Chen & Xu, 2014; Shadmehr & Bernhardt, 2015). This is named the "divide and rule" (分而治之 fen er zhi zhi) strategy. On the other hand, some scholars argue that the CCP uses a non-argumentative tone to divert public attention from salient topics, avoiding direct conflict or inflamed emotions (King et al., 2017). This dissertation argues that there are two gaps, or oversights, in the existing literature. The first is the lack of study of the interaction between the government and the public, and the second is that all text messages are collected as if they have an equal level of influence online. Addressing these two issues should help the literature more accurately and systematically identify and analyze the CCP's crisis management strategies on social media. The following subsections discuss these two oversights and provide relevant recommendations.

1.2.1 The interaction

In the political science discipline, scholars are generally more interested in the decision-making processes of politicians and political organizations in case of a crisis. They view the media as an institution to evaluate the crisis management efforts of these figures (Offe, 1976; Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997; Boin et al., 2015). The public's reaction is measured by the development and outcome of the crises, and the termination of a crisis signals good public acceptance and successful crisis management (Boin et al., 2009).

However, a crisis does not disappear with a single official move but has to go through multiple rounds of interactions between the official and the public before it is finally resolved. The public's reaction is crucial for the government to determine the next step of its crisis management strategy. If the officials insist on handling a crisis in the same way at every stage of its development and no matter what kind of public outcry they encounter, the crisis tends to escalate and become so severe that even complete censorship will not quell the public's anger or stop them from talking about it.

In fact, the Chinese central government is well aware of the importance of interaction. In the government-organized summer camps and online certification courses for the "50 Cent Party" (五毛党, wu mao dang), commentators are trained to grasp the direction of various topics accurately and to use "appropriate tactics" when responding to various comments in order to maintain online stability (Zhang & Feng, 2019). Even within the same event, the messages that the commentators are expected to disseminate should change depending on the context. The training design proves that crisis management should not be treated as single-round or uni-directional.

Nonetheless, the existing literature on political crisis management on social media tends to examine a crisis as a whole. The steps in the process are not often documented, and the government's final strategy is recognized as its only strategy. Data collection methods also reflect the lack of attention to interactions, as most researchers only gather relevant posts and do not include the comments made to those posts. Even when researchers do collect comments, they usually do not provide context. For example, King's team (2017) collected all texts from a specific set of Weibo accounts and leaked governmental emails and categorized them into different types. However, there is no tag indicating whether a text is a post or a comment, and the authors use the term "comments" and "posts" interchangeably in the paper. In this context, the claim that the "50

Cent Party" mainly posted distracting comments to ease tensions online is less convincing since we do not know which comments responded to which posts.

Context is important. Angry comments that occur at the beginning of an event represent a very different meaning than at the end of an event. Posts that remove the context are also much less meaningful to the study. For example, when an official post urging people not to spread "rumors" appears at the beginning of a crisis, the public is likely to remain calm and wait for the official solution to the crisis. If this post appears at the end of a series of crisis management actions, however, the public is highly likely to become angrier and escalate the crisis because it implies that the official is not trying to solve the problem but rather is planning to silence the public by classifying all questionable voices as "rumors." Meanwhile, the strategic choices for crisis management may be established gradually from several rounds of crises. Both the government and the netizens could learn from previous rounds and take different or the same actions based on the efficiency of the strategies. Such multiple rounds of crisis management may include multiple cases, and examining only one case might lack context and lead to misinterpretation.

Scholars have not included multiple rounds of interaction in their crisis management models perhaps because of technical limitations. Computer technology for linguistic analysis has only developed in the last few years to enable researchers to collect information flexibly. Before that, keyword searches were almost the only option. For Sina Weibo, the keyword search results only include posts. Consequently, researchers often have access only to the content of posts, not the comments. With the rapid development of analytical techniques, it is time to take into account the interaction in political crisis management studies.

It might also be helpful to look at other disciplines that emphasize interactive processes. For example, this dissertation argues that the field of crisis communication, also known as crisis management, deserves a closer look. Scholars in this field stress that the public should be viewed not only as passive recipients of information but also as people who can make their voices heard (Austin et al., 2012; Zhao et al., 2018). Moreover, the public should not be seen as merely a group of people as opposed to government and business organizations, but rather as a mixture of groups with a variety of interests that will have different expectations and reactions to the same crisis. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate and include the public's characteristics and emotions in the models.

The literature that studies China's selective censorship usually treats the public as a whole with aligned interests, with the only distinction being made between the general public and the 50 Cent Party. However, it is tough to distinguish between general netizens and government-hired commentators. Except for King's team, which was able to identify the 50 Cent Party members using the leaked official emails (2017), other researchers generally assume that the "public" follows the same patterns. In this regard, the crisis communication discipline offers many inspirations. The social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC) model categorizes the public on social media into three groups: influential content creators, passive followers, and inactive netizens (Jin and Liu, 2010). It argues that organizations should respond to these three types of public differently in times of crisis. The Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) model argues that the process of crisis communication should not be a top-down approach and that the public should have an equal place in the model (Jing et al., 2010). The networked crisis communication (NCC) model regards crises as "social constructions" (Utz et al., 2013, p. 41) that are influenced by both organizations and individuals. Nonetheless, the ICM and NCC models primarily discuss how organizations should respond to the public based on their emotions. A model that contains multiple social actors and clarifies their relationships is still missing (Pang et al., 2009).

Crisis communication scholars have also developed various models to examine how business organizations can communicate with the public and manage crises, all of which contribute to understanding and analyzing the government's choices. The image repair theory (IRT) summarizes five general approaches for an organization to repair its public image and maintain its reputation: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, mortification, and corrective action (Benoit, 1997). The situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) states that an organization should decide the crisis response strategies based on different crisis situations (Weiner, 2006). For example, a company could victimize itself in a natural disaster and use denial of the rumor to pacify a crisis (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2010). The crisis and emergency risk communication (CERC) model views the crisis as a dynamic process and argues that it should be treated based on its development (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). The underlying assumption is that the public will have different expectations at different stages of the crisis. For instance, when a crisis is just initiated, the public wants to see that the company can handle the crisis, so the company should use self-efficacy and reassurance strategies. However, when the

crisis draws to a close, the company should discuss responsibility and lessons learned to meet the need of the public.

For data collection, crisis management scholars tend to collect comments under the posts to evaluate the public's reaction to the company's strategies and their effectiveness. Based on the research questions, most studies are case studies that only collect a few posts from the social media account of a few companies over a brief period of time, typically two to three days after the crisis. Comments under the posts are usually classified only into three categories: support, oppose, and neutral (Zhang et al., 2020). Therefore, the captured interactions between the public and the organization are momentary, event-specified, and organization-specified.

Interdisciplinary studies that combine political science and crisis communication are scarce. It is partly due to the diverse definitions of a "crisis" in social, economic, and political spheres (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997). While sociologists talk about natural disasters and human relationship crises, economists investigate unemployment, and political scientists are more interested in nuclear wars, shortage of oil supplies, and revolutions in transitional Communist states, to name a few. Crisis communication research has been dominated by studies of Western companies and brands and has thus been criticized for managerial and western bias (Heath, 2010; Fraustino & Liu, 2018). Nonetheless, this dissertation believes that the crisis management literature could still shed some light on how to incorporate the interactive process into models of political crisis management. Scholars could build on the crisis communication models and construct the process of crisis management and public opinion guidance more as a multi-round game that emphasizes the role of various public groups and their ability to learn from previous experiences.

1.2.2 Influence of visible information

After highlighting the role of the public in political crisis management, we realize that online messages may have different levels of influence on public opinion. A netizen's perceptions and expectations of a crisis event are likely to change as receiving new information, such as reports carried out from new perspectives, analyses by opinion leaders, and attitudes of other netizens. When studying public opinion about elections on Facebook and Twitter, political scholars use the term "visibility" to represent the opportunity for an individual's post or comment to get viewed through social media platforms (Kalsnes, 2016). The most visible contents are those that enjoy the

most views, retweets, comments, and likes, designed by the social media platform algorithms to reward individual users for staying engaged (Bucher, 2012; Kumar, 2020). In political events, the posts and comments seen and discussed by more people would have a more significant impact.

The Chinese government seems to agree with this viewpoint, as a Chinese internet censor revealed the governmental policy of paying more attention to the most widely disseminated information (Bi, 2020). The rationale is simple: while governmental public opinion offices are heavily staffed, they still do not have enough time and energy to control information when a major crisis breaks out and therefore must prioritize censorship or other management strategies to the riskiest – which means the most visible – information (Bi, 2020; Gu, 2020a). A post with zero retweets has almost zero chance of reaching the public, while a post with 10,000 retweets has a much higher chance of being seen by netizens. In this way, it is relatively easy to tell which post is more worthy of government attention. Another advantage of this approach is that censors no longer need to pre-judge which contents would be more important, nor do they need to identify the various new phrases created by netizens who try to get around keyword censorship. They could focus on a limited number of posts that are widely retweeted.

To examine the CCP's criteria for judging risk, I implemented a field experiment on Weibo. I used two private accounts to copy the content of three widely circulated posts. The posts contained politically sensitive topics or harsh criticism of the government, such as Xinjiang human rights issues and reports on corrupted local officials. I record the outcome of the posts after a week, as shown in the table 1.1 on the next page. The one-week period was mainly to allow enough time for the post to spread. In some cases, the number of retweets and comments on the post only suddenly started to grow a few days after it was posted. In fact, the original blog's posts were deleted on the 1st, 3rd, and 4th day they were sent out, and my posts were not deleted until the 6th day. The rest of the posts that survived past a week have not been deleted until now.

The original posts that contained sensitive content were quickly censored, while my two copied posts with zero to low retweets and comments survived. This result demonstrates that, at least in the eyes of the CCP, similar texts could have different levels of threat to political stability, which is determined by their influence on the public. Also, the censorship machine does not automatically delete content by their texts, but instead focuses on those who enjoy high visibility among ordinary netizens.

Table 1.1 Treatment of the same content posted by different accounts

Account	*Followed*	*Followers*	*Post*	*Retweet*	*Comment*	*Like*	*Outcome*
Original blog	410	12,550	1	4,860	932	6,228	Censored
			2	3,216	1,525	6,643	Censored
			3	3,970	2,375	4,430	Censored
My account 1	661	1,058	1	53	22	378	Censored
			2	69	16	23	Survived
			3	45	11	8	Survived
My account 2	104	12	1	0	0	4	Survived
			2	0	0	0	Survived
			3	1	0	3	Survived

The typical data collection process in the existing literature does not reflect the concept of visibility. With keyword-searching on Weibo, scholars generally assume that each message that survived censorship has an equal impact online. A comment that ranks first under a post is given the same weight as a comment that ranks 5000th; a post that is not retweeted, commented on, or liked is given the same weight as a post that enjoys 10,000 retweets. Of course, the analytical approach is closely related to the research question. Such an approach is appropriate for current research questions. When we want to explore the concrete strategies, the government uses to manipulate information during political crisis events, however, the concept of visibility could be beneficial.

The research question of this dissertation focuses on the specific means used by the CCP during political crisis events to manipulate public opinion. An essential assumption is that both the government and the public have limited time and energy to deal with online information. On the one hand, the CCP has limited human resources and very little time to respond when a crisis develops rapidly. Therefore, it must choose the strategies that are most likely to succeed and make them reach as many netizens as possible and as soon as possible. On the other hand, the public has limited time and attention to devote to social media. Most people cannot read all the posts and comments related to a crisis event; they will only read the posts that appear on the first few pages of their Weibo. Therefore, the content of these posts and comments is the key to the government's control of public opinion. In a crisis, the government would try to increase the influence of posts

and comments favorable to it. For example, the CCP demands Weibo to recommend certain posts to everyone, cooperates with opinion leaders to get them to spread pro-government content, and controls the content of the comment section by giving the 50 Cent Party tasks of going under designated posts and clicking "likes" to certain comments (Guan, 2015; Bi, 2020).

Another advantage of introducing visibility is that we can glimpse the government's tactics, the public's reaction to them, and their effectiveness. In the existing literature, assessments of opinion manipulation strategies are relatively scarce, and most of the literature stops at listing government practices. Are the tactics visible to the public? Do they work or cause a backlash? It is hard to judge since the data are collected without marking which comments correspond to which posts. In addition, the supportive comments could be made by a 50 Cent Party member or a robot instead of a general netizen. By focusing on the visible contents, however, we do not need to determine the commentators' identity or the purpose of their comments. We assume that as long as these comments are visible, they influence public opinion. The government has either promoted them, tolerated them, or failed to prevent them from gaining such influence. When putting the visible information in the context of events, related posts, and other visible comments, we may harvest valuable findings.

1.3 The entertainment-oriented narrative

There is not yet a universally acknowledged model to capture the government-public interaction, nor a standard for measuring "visibility." This dissertation makes a rudimentary attempt to build such a model and set criteria for "visible" posts and comments. In a nutshell, the model identifies four types of Weibo accounts that represent different interest groups. Some accounts have more power to influence other accounts' behavior, but none of them can make a decision solely on their own. Their decisions are dependent on the context, previous experience, and interactions with other accounts. A visible post must either appear on a list deliberately promoted by the government or bear more than a certain number of retweets and comments. A visible comment must appear under a visible post and have at least one "like." This dissertation scrapes data with the help of the computer software Python[1] and only collects posts and comments that meet the visible criteria. Then it categorizes the collected texts into different types with the

[1] It uses the Selenium library in Python. Details are in the third chapter.

help of a computer-based Natural Language Processing (NLP) model. The model details are in the second chapter, and the data collection/analysis details are in the third.

In the preliminary data analysis, an interesting yet less studied phenomenon surfaced, which ultimately became the subject of this dissertation. In all kinds of crisis events, a large proportion of visible information is entertaining. These posts and comments frequently use cute emojis in the middle of texts, highlight a funny moment in an event, portray a solemn or disturbing occasion as cute or hilarious, or interpret the relationship between a country and its citizens as a pop star and his/her fans. Without context, one cannot even imagine a crisis event is happening.

The phenomenon does not yet have a name. Some scholars in sociology and communication have already noticed its presence and called it pan-entertainment or fandom (Liu, 2019; Chen, 2021). However, these terms focus on slightly different aspects of the phenomenon in different events and cannot summarize the phenomenon uniformly. This dissertation names it the "entertainment-oriented" narrative and finds three tactics under this strategy. The detailed characteristics and basis of classification of the narrative, as well as its difference from pure entertainment terms/sarcasm/nationalist expressions, are illustrated in chapter four. The rest of this section infers that (1) the presence of such content is not a common practice among netizens, but a result of the intervention, and (2) it might be a government's strategy of crisis management. Conclusively, it deserves further study.

One of the hottest topics on Weibo in 2016 was the US presidential election. As the voting process and political campaigns conveyed democratic ideas, related reports could pose a serious challenge to the CCP. However, instead of censoring the topic, the Chinese government promoted related reports and discussions on hot topics, attracting public attention over six months. How did the CCP successfully handle this potential political crisis? I collected the most visible contents and categorized the data[2] with computer-based NLP technologies.

Three types of posts stood out: neutral, demonizing, and entertaining. Neutral posts provide objective and timely information to the public while keeping the government informed of its citizens' reactions. Demonizing posts depict democratic institutions as vicious, hypocritical, irresponsible, and hopeless. These contents are expected, as neutral news reports should serve as major information sources, and the CCP demonizes democracy to reduce

[2] The classification guidelines for neutral and cheerleading content were borrowed from King's (2017) codebook, while the categories for demonization and entertainment were customized.

dissatisfaction and stabilize its rule. However, the emergence of entertainment content was unexpected, as it accounts for the largest share of all categories in both the posts and comments. Notably, entertaining contents are clearly not satirical, nor do they discuss serious opinions in a joking tone. These entertaining contents either talk about reality in a cute tone, portray reality as a fictional activity related to entertainment, such as a TV show or TV episode, or compare the country to the stars and citizens to the fans of the stars. The abundance of light-hearted emojis between sentences gives these posts and comments an extraordinarily playful and relaxed atmosphere. All the political messages embedded in the events are distorted, obscured, denied, or ignored. In the face of such entertainment-oriented narratives, Chinese netizens no longer engage in serious discussions, do not care about the truth behind the election or protest events, and do not care about the meaning these democratic activities carry.

Table 1.2 Distribution (%) of visible content categories in the topics of the 2016 US election

	Neutral	*Demonization*	*Entertaining*	*Cheerleading*	*Others*
in Post	31.5	19.1	37.7	2	9.7
in Comment	24.9	9.4	31.4	17.9	16.4

To test whether this phenomenon is purely coincidental, I collected visible posts and comments on the 2020 US presidential election and did the same kind of data analysis. The result is presented in the table below. The overall distribution of different categories of posts and comments in the 2020 US presidential election is similar to that of 2016, with entertaining content leading the other categories in both posts and comments and neutral content coming in second. This outcome suggests that the massive presence of entertaining content in visible content on Weibo is not by chance.

Table 1.3 Distribution (%) of visible content in the topics of the 2020 US election

	Neutral	*Demonize*	*Entertaining*	*Cheerleading*	*Others*
in Post	23.91	19.56	41.3	2.17	10.87
in Comment	26.54	17.84	33.0	17.39	5.22

Another question follows: could the steady performance of entertaining content be regarded as a norm on social media platforms? Perhaps the sheer volume of entertaining content on international political topics has nothing to do with political considerations and is simply a common form of communication among Weibo users. After all, people tend to share interesting and enjoyable ideas on social media, and they also retweet and follow light-hearted content to forget the negative things in reality.

To answer this question, in December 2020, I selected the three most visible topics from each of five areas: international (social and political) events, domestic (social and political) events, sports, finance (international and domestic), and health. The areas are tagged with the help of the computer-based pre-trained model of Tencent[3]. Due to the then limitations of computer capability, I collected only the ten most popular posts under each topic and the 10% most "liked" comments under them, resulting in a total of 150 tweets and 17,037 comments. If there is no significant difference in the amount of entertaining content across different topic areas, it is likely to be a general practice on social media. If it is unevenly distributed across topics, there may be a hidden intervention mechanism. The result below shows that the entertaining content is not equally distributed across topic areas.

Table 1.4 Distribution (%) of entertainment-oriented content across topics, December 2020

	International	*Domestic*	*Sport*	*Finance*	*Health*
in Post	60	43.3	0	0	3.33
in Comment	42.86	31.43	22.54	7.8	5.2

According to the data analysis, the majority of content in international events is entertainment-oriented; more than 40% of the content in the domestic affairs area is also entertaining. On the health topic, only one post used an entertainment-oriented narrative, describing the blogger's day as an RPG video game. Among the hot topics in sports and finance, there were no entertainment-oriented narratives at all. The finance posts were all neutral reports of stock market prices, expert predictions of recent stock movements, analyses of company earnings, and the like. All posts in sports were about game results, team groupings, and neutral news of

[3] https://github.com/dbiir/UER-py.

sports stars. The entertainment-oriented comments in sports either talked about the Tokyo Olympics that happened in the summer or referred to the football players as stars.

Sports are often considered entertainment. If the entertainment-oriented narratives are just common practice to be funny on social media, they should spread evenly across topics, perhaps with a slightly higher share in entertainment-related topics. However, the result above demonstrates that, at least among Chinese netizens, entertainment-oriented content is unlikely a common form of communication. The three politically insensitive areas (which implies censorship is less necessary) had almost no entertaining posts. While there are visible entertaining comments in the sports domain, more such comments appear in international events and domestic affairs. If we suppose that the entertaining content in the latter two domains is naturally formed, we should conclude that Chinese netizens are more passionate and light-hearted when expressing their opinions regarding political events than daily entertainment. Common sense tells us that such speculation is not plausible in a country where people get arrested for their speech[4]. The entertainment-oriented content in hot topics is never created solely by netizens or concentrated in certain areas by chance. Commercial accounts also have no incentive to publish such content as there is no gain. Therefore, it must have been intentionally generated and disseminated by the government.

The question then becomes the motivation of CCP for doing so. This dissertation argues that the entertainment-oriented narrative might be a crisis management strategy. Events in the international political sphere convey democratic ideas that may influence Chinese netizens to demand the same treatment, while events in the domestic political sphere reveal social inequalities and official incompetence, thus threatening regime stability. Entertaining content might help ease tensions. In contrast, topics such as sports, finance, and health do not typically have the capacity to generate public outrage[5], so the government does not explicitly control their content or carefully direct public opinion. The result is the scarcity of entertainment content in these areas.

[4] Again, the entertainment-oriented narratives are pretty different from sarcasm or plain jokes in form, so in most cases it is unlikely to mix these categories. For detailed description of the entertaining-oriented narrative and its difference from sarcasm, please refer to chapter 3 and 4.

[5]The sport topics during Olympics can be a risk. Since the data was collected in December, it was fine.

1.4 Significance of the research

The variety of crises can be overwhelming (Rosental & Kouzmin, 1993). They can have dimensions from personal to local, domestic, and international. They can involve threats to the well-being of citizens, damage to organizations, discredit of national institutions, and conflicts between countries. In the digital age, when social media platforms are the largest and most direct venue for most citizens to explore the world, the survival of an authoritarian regime has increasingly become correlated with its success in handling online crises and keeping public opinion stable. Therefore, the study of crisis management strategies on social media is timely and valuable for deepening the comprehension of authoritarian resilience.

Crisis management, political communication, and authoritarian studies are three fields that have not been extensively connected. Although commonalities exist in some findings, systematic and shareable theories or models have not been established due to the lack of interdisciplinary research. This dissertation attempts to make a less mainstream move and integrates these fields to examine the crisis management strategies of the authoritarian country, China, on the social media platform Weibo. It argues that integrating these fields helps build a model that better depicts the process of the authoritarian government's interaction with the public on social media. The model allows for assessing citizens' reactions to government propaganda and whether they always react the same way across multiple events. The findings could help Chong and Druckman (2007a) answer one of their research questions: do citizens learn from experience. The integration also sheds light on the data collection criteria and analysis.

With the rapid development of computer-based analytical software and models, many exciting new research questions emerge in authoritarian resilience studies. Due to time, energy, and resource constraints, it would be impractical to try to provide an exhaustive collection of the CCP's crisis management strategies. This dissertation focuses only on one of the strategies, namely the entertainment-oriented narrative. Scholars have yet to examine the significance and impact of this strategy. In the literature, only a few scholars who have studied how Chinese companies deal with crises by making announcements on Weibo have found a form of it, which they named "acting cute" (Cheng et al., 2017). It is unclear whether some scholars who encountered this strategy did not recognize it as a particular point of study. Fortunately, the preliminary data analysis in the previous section has confirmed the worth of studying the narrative.

The dissertation proceeds as follows. The second chapter illustrates the theory and model of the communication procedure between the Chinese government and different groups of netizens. The third chapter explains how data is collected and analyzed, the definition of a crisis, and the standard of visible posts and comments. The fourth chapter introduces the definition of entertainment-oriented narrative, its difference from other entertainment-related terms, and its three tactics. The rationale of the CCP to use this strategy is discussed, and further information is provided to readers unfamiliar with the cultural background. The following three chapters are case study chapters, each examining one type of crisis event. Chapter five studies the application and effectiveness of entertainment-oriented narratives in democratic election and protest events. Chapter six takes a closer look at how the CCP used the narrative in the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter seven looks at entertainment-oriented narratives in major public policies that unexpectedly turned into crises in recent years. The final chapter summarizes the limits of the current study, discusses future improvements, and briefly anticipates the CCP's future tendencies in dealing with crises in light of current events.

CHAPTER 2. THEORY

A crisis is usually defined either as an event (Coombs, 2007; Lerbinger, 2012) or as a process that includes incubation, development, and aftermath stages (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Roux-Dufort, 2007). This dissertation regards a crisis as a process and argues that crisis management tactics could be different in different stages of a crisis. It could be challenging to quantify when an event becomes a crisis. Some events, such as massive protests, can be judged straightforwardly. However, many events need one to three days for the relevant posts to reach a large enough group of netizens before it can be defined as a crisis. By that time, there is a good chance that it has passed the incubation stage and entered the development stage. Therefore, this dissertation records an event after it becomes visible on social media and focuses mainly on the development and aftermath stages of the crises.

Crisis management is a process consisting of multiple participants. This chapter first analyzes the characteristics of participants and then builds a cybernetic model for each participant to elaborate on the sequence of behaviors and decision-making mechanisms of each participant. After that, it presents several hypotheses that can be tested in later case studies.

2.1 Actors

An actor is a participant in an action or process that should have at least some resources to influence the decision-making process (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997). This dissertation refers to actors as active or passive participants in the crisis development and management processes on Weibo. Four actors are identified based on their power. The top actors are the accounts of CCP departments, officials, and institutions. The second tier actors are the public accounts and netizens who follow the direct order of the government. They are either hired by the CCP or in cooperation with it. Third, the general public accounts and influencers who do not follow the direct order of the government. Fourth, ordinary netizens. These four categories can encompass all types of accounts on Weibo[6].

[6] Bot accounts should not count here. In fact, their posts and comments are rarely visible, and the visible ones are not attached to any crisis event. Therefore, they are left out.

The power relationship between actors is roughly pyramidal, as illustrated below. When a dispute or conflict of interest arises between different actors, the powerful actor could punish the other actor by means including and not limited to: deleting the other actor's posts, temporarily banning the other actor's activities on Weibo, permanently shutting down the other actor's account, making a warning call in reality, and arresting the other actor. Notably, in this dissertation, power does not equal influence, and many powerful government accounts struggle to gain visibility. Nonetheless, they can prevent other actors from influencing the public through threats, bans, or arrests.

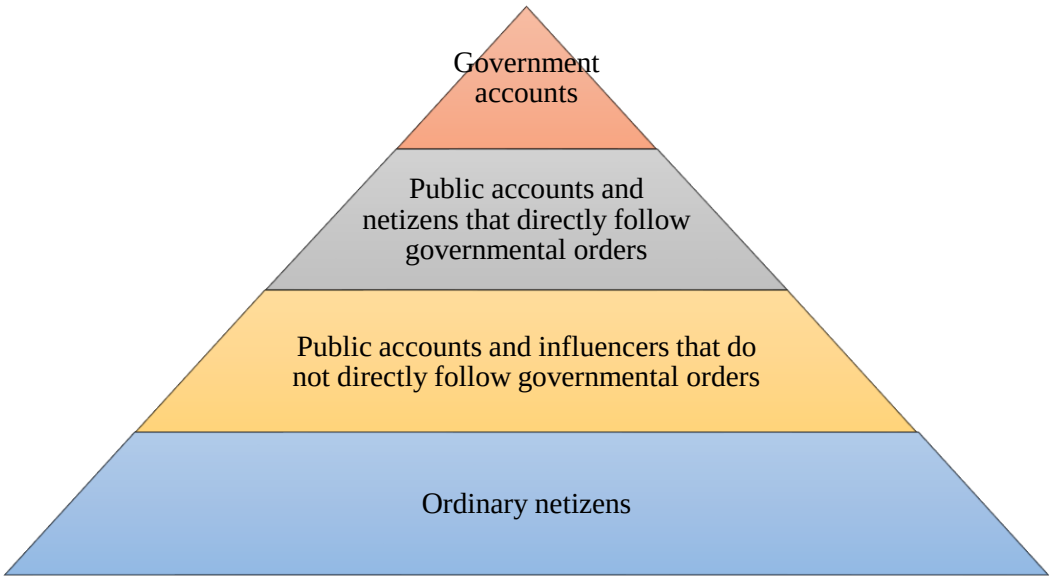

Figure 2.1 The power structure of actors

At the top of the pyramid are the governmental actors. They include central and local departments, official media agencies, internal CCP journal offices, and Communist Party think-tank scholars. They opened Weibo accounts generally for three reasons. First, to make young netizens more willing to retweet and comment, spreading news or government statements far and wide. Second, to bring the regime closer to netizens, making the government more popular among young people. Third, to quickly grasp the framing of events in a crisis, guide public opinion, and thus take control of the situation. Usually, when one account posts a statement or generates a hot topic, other accounts retweet it with a supportive view.

Government accounts care about public opinion because gaining public popularity is one of their main political tasks on social media. Ironically, since the lives of CCP officials are so far apart from ordinary people, the propaganda they endeavor to produce tends to be divorced from reality, making netizens realize that the officials do not understand the hardships of citizens. Therefore, these accounts are often sources of political crises. For example, on Youth Day 2020 (May 4th), the government broadcasted a video "The New Wave (后浪, hou lang)" simultaneously on China Central Television (CCTV) and all local TV stations in mainland China, showcasing a series of celebrities expressing positive sentiments of recognition, encouragement, and their envy of the possibilities and potentials young people have (Yuan, 2020).

The video immediately provoked public outrage. People criticized the video for depicting only a small group of elites and ignoring the vast majority of poor, disaffected young people who lacked upward mobility. As one popular commentary put it, "the ocean is so deep that only the topmost waters can become waves." An action that was intended to strengthen young people's identification with the government turned into a political crisis. To date, "New Wave" remains an ironic, critical term among netizens.

Actors on the next level are public accounts and netizens that follow direct orders from the government. The public accounts have more than 500,000 followers and five articles with more than one million views per month. Weibo marks them with a red "V" at the end of account IDs. Due to the color of the mark and the loyalty to the government, they are called "red" public accounts, also known as "big red VIPs (红色大 V)." Almost every red public account is in cooperation with or under the control of the government. According to a leaked official document from the central department of CCP (Gu, 2020a), the Internet Information Offices at all political levels hold weekly meetings to discuss which articles or information should be published by the government and which should be given to red public accounts. Another document shows that each municipal level should cultivate five red public accounts, and each county (city, district) should cultivate its own red public accounts (Gu, 2020b).

While their relationship with the government makes them less persuasive in a crisis, red public accounts have other uses for the government. For example, they serve as information sources when the official accounts cannot divulge the source materials. For instance, in the 2020 COVID-19 epidemic, the city of Dali in Yunnan Province withheld mask supplies supposed to be sent to Chongqing (Huang & Xu, 2020). To preserve the dignity of the Communist Party official

system, the city of Chongqing could not directly argue with Dali online. Several red public accounts in cooperation with Chongqing sent out screenshots of information available only to government insiders, guiding the public to question the legitimacy of Dali officials' actions. Consequently, the Dali Health Bureau was criticized by the central government, and the director was dismissed.

Red public accounts are not part of the government establishment and are essentially commercial. Their ultimate goal is to earn money. The collaboration with the regime has enormously benefited them since they are almost free from censorship, and the posts assigned by the government would immediately be retweeted and commented on. Many red accounts actively show their good relationship with powerful official institutions to attract followers and commercial partnerships. Nonetheless, the commercial characteristic makes them care about public opinion. Without conflicting with government requirements, they will try not to arouse public resentment because most of their followers are ordinary netizens, and the number of followers largely determines their commercial value.

The other actor on the same level is netizens who could receive orders from the government. These netizens can be divided into those who are employed by the government and those who are not, but their interests and behaviors are very similar. The government-hired netizens, also known as the "50 Cent Party," are mainly visible in the comment section of the hot topic posts, making pro-government or distractive statements. The netizens that are not hired by the government can be further divided into "Little Pink" or nationalist fans, the difference being that the level of organizations within the latter group is significantly higher.

Whether employed by the government, these actors have two common characteristics. First, they are subject to censorship, but there is no serious consequence. The 50 Cent Party members can quickly free their accounts through internal channels. The nationalist fans often possess more than one social media account, sometimes up to hundreds. Therefore, they do not suffer significant losses when Weibo closes one or two of their accounts due to abnormally frequent retweets and comments. Even if they lose their major accounts because of pro-government posts, they consider it a necessary cost to defend their beloved country (Jung, 2012; Elfving-Hwang, 2018). Second, even if their actions cause mental or physical harm to ordinary netizens, they would not be held responsible. Weibo does not take any action against them and instead often bans the victim's

account. As a result, these actors do not care about public opinion. After all, their major task in most crises is to attack those netizens who criticize the government.

The 50 Cent Party members act for their salary, and the nationalist fans act out of passion. Therefore, the latter group became the most fearless government followers, the "Cyber Red Guards" (Liu, 2017). Their fearlessness is largely a result of being brainwashed by collectivism and patriotism, believing that all the violence and irrational behaviors are the proud sacrifices for the country. When the government faces the raging anger of the public in crisis events and makes them scapegoats, most fans will not deny it. While bearing the public blame, they feel good for their sincere love and devotion to their love (Liu, 2017; Chen, 2020).

Moving to the next pyramid level, we see the actors who do not have a long-term relationship with the government: the general public accounts and influencers. They include individuals, teams, media organizations, corporations, public institutions such as libraries, museums, art galleries, and the like. Similar to the red public accounts, their main goal is to earn money. However, their posts are not free from censorship and would not immediately be pushed up to hot topics by commentators and nationalist fans. To increase their commercial value, they need to achieve a balance between attracting followers and not being censored. Consequently, their Weibo content can only take a cautiously middle-of-the-road approach, striving to be popular with the public without offending the authorities. For example, when a herd of wild elephants in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province, was forced to leave their habitat and trespass into human activity areas because of massive local deforestation, the wild animal protection influencers chose not to explore whether local deforestation was legal or reasonable. Instead, they told scientific stories related to elephants on Weibo, in which the elephants appear intelligent and cute.

Ordinary netizens are at the bottom of the pyramid. The individuals have very little influence on their own, but their collective power cannot be ignored. Since there are no commercial interests to consider, they usually post to record their daily lives and express their opinions on social news without particularly polishing what they post as the general public accounts do. However, Weibo accounts are registered with personal phone numbers and real names, which means netizens can be identified and questioned by state authorities or even arrested if they are reported by online control commentators. Even if not physically endangered, criticism of the government or expression of politically incorrect stances can also result in banning the netizen's Weibo account. This netizen will lose the entire social media network that has taken considerable

time and effort to build up. Therefore, ordinary netizens will try to minimize their risk of being targeted by the government. They are not intimidated to express an opinion but will choose appropriate tactics to engage in discussions of sensitive topics.

Meanwhile, netizens also post interesting or funny content in their daily lives when there is no crisis. After all, Weibo is a social media platform where people come to communicate and make new friends. Moreover, after a published post or comment is retweeted, commented on, or liked, the human brain perceives these signals as a reward mechanism (Bucher, 2012), which secretes dopamine that makes people happy (Kumar, 2020). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that some netizens carefully prepare their content, especially comments under popular posts, to be liked by others.

To sum up, there are four groups of Weibo actors in the political communication process. The table below summarizes their characteristics by four indicators: their risk of being censored or punished, whether they care about censorship and punishment, the commercial value of their accounts, and the reputation of the account in the eyes of the public.

Table 2.1 Concerns of the actors

Level in the power pyramid	*Actor*	*Under the risk of censorship?*	*Try to avoid censorship?*	*Concerned about business gains?*	*Concerned about public opinion?*
1	Government	No	No	No	Yes
2	Red public	No	No	Yes	Yes
	Red netizens	Yes	No	No	No
3	General public and influencers	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4	Ordinary netizens	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

2.2 Modeling crisis management on social media

Scholars have long been attempting to model the communication process. In 1948, Shannon provided the first general model that describes how a message could be created by an information source and then transmitted to a receiver (Foulger, 2004). Weiner (1948, 1986) added a feedback loop from the receiver to the information source to build an interactive model, but the model still concentrated on the delivering path of the message instead of the behavior of actors. Foulger (2004) built an ecological model of communication to include the media as a mediator between the information creator and receiver. While the possibility of consumers learning from information visible in the media and changing their behavior accordingly was proposed, Foulger did not succeed in concretizing and integrating this concept into the model.

In constructing crisis management and political communication models, scholars are inclined to make the organization's actions the core of the model. Most models include the crisis identification and evaluation, as well as the development and implementation of interventions before, during, and after a crisis (Egelhoff & Sen, 1992; Pearson & Clair, 1998). However, actors other than the corporation or the government are often ignored. Even for models that examine crisis intervention strategies, the step after "the delivery of strategies" is "the end of the crisis" (Borda & Mackey-Kallis, 2003). A crisis is naturally considered as managed once the organization implements responses.

This dissertation argues that a competent crisis management model, especially in the context of digital media, should represent at least some of the following elements. First, there are multiple actors in the crisis management process, and their behaviors could influence the success or failure of the intervention strategies. Second, crisis management is not a one-round game. It has multiple rounds of idea exchange and solution discussions until the crisis is over. Third, since the interests of each actor usually do not change drastically over time, their logic of decision-making should remain relatively static in each round of the game. Fourth, the actors and their stances are publicly visible, which means that an actor's decision may be influenced by interactions between other actors. Fifth, actors engage in the next round of communication knowing the results of the previous round, and there is the possibility that they revise their decision-making process based on experience. To meet these characteristics, a model needs to reflect that each actor influences the environment while being influenced by it, and that the feedback gained from each round can be used as a guide for the next.

The model that best satisfies these requirements is the cybernetic model. Cybernetics is the study of control, communications, and information processing of all kinds of systems (Wiener, 1948). The word comes from Greek and means "governance" or "to steer, navigate or govern." A cybernetic system has three core concepts: self-regulation, feedback, and control (Ashby, 1961; Delobelle, 1975; Carver & Scheier, 1982; Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997; Vohs & Baumeister, 2016). Self-regulation assumes that the actors have subjective motivation throughout the process and are responsible for their actions. Feedback means the feedback loops in the system to collect positive or negative feedback from the previous actions and use them as inputs in the future.

Control means a controller or several controllers in the system that contain critical logic for decision-making and instructions for the next steps, which govern the whole system. Together, they build a system that functions independently with pre-defined rules while interacting with the external environment. Cybernetics research has been applied in numerous fields, such as animal studies, psychology, information science, artificial intelligence, meteorology, biology, and social sciences (Davut, 2020).

An outstanding advantage of the cybernetic model is its ability and flexibility to describe and explain complex decision-making procedures. In reality, actors' choices often appear to be irrational and inconsistent. Some actors gradually revise and fix their strategies over multiple rounds of crisis management, while others do not. Even if a strategy proves to be successful, low-cost, and politically beneficial, actors could still refuse it. Some actors change their behavior when a crisis escalates, while others stay the same. These confusions imply that there are cost and benefit calculations in the decision-making process that cannot be directly observed or accurately estimated by researchers. The interactive nature of the game makes things more complicated, as one decision could affect two or more other actors who have different or even opposite demands. Traditional quantitative models tend to become overly complex in integrating these factors. In contrast, the cybernetic model allows for a relatively straightforward and generalized model structure. It also facilitates a systematic but non-rational analysis that explains real-world decision-making when leaders deal with fundamental value conflicts and the intense uncertainty (Steinbruner, 1974, 2002).

That being said, a cybernetic model that includes all actors and their behavior simultaneously would still be overwhelming. Therefore, this dissertation builds cybernetic models for each actor separately. The model will detail the actor's behavioral logic during one round of

crisis management, while the aftermath phase is implicit in the feedback loop from the end of this round to the beginning of the next one. The following subsections introduce these models in the order of the power pyramid.

2.2.1 Government accounts

In a crisis, the government may go through a series of complicated decisions before making a move. After identifying a crisis, it needs to judge whether this crisis needs a response. However, since this step is often not directly observable and is not the focus of this dissertation, it is excluded from the model. This dissertation assumes that a crisis requires an official response after it bursts out on social media.

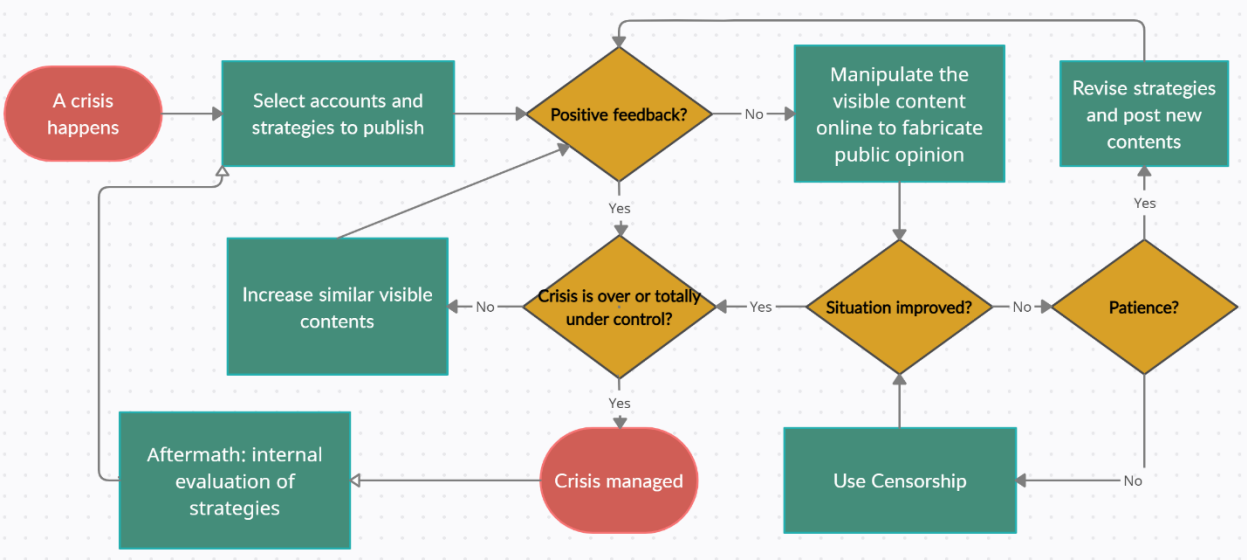

Figure 2.2 Cybernetic model for government accounts

After a crisis took place and attracted public attention, the Chinese government needs to choose a specific combination of strategies to deal with it. Both the chosen strategies and the identity of the official or institution that uses the strategies would affect the subsequent development of the crisis. For example, the higher the political level to which an official account belongs, the higher the public expectation of the seriousness of its statements.

The regime selects an account to publish relevant posts and push them to hot topics to increase the impact of its tactics on public opinion. The next important step is to collect feedback

to evaluate the effectiveness of its tactics. The feedback is mainly composed of retweets and comments of ordinary netizens on the crisis. If the public accepts the framing of the event and the packaging of the rhetoric, the regime enters a positive feedback loop. It would continue to post similar content on Weibo until the crisis is managed. If not, the government would mobilize its internet commentators and the red public accounts to manipulate visible information related to the crisis, trying to convince the public that the majority of netizens have a positive view towards the event. If the public changes their attitude based on fabricated visible content, the situation is brought under control, and the regime only needs to post similar content until the crisis is over.

However, if public opinion is not successfully steered in the desired direction, the government must decide whether to use censorship or to modify the tactics. If it decides to adjust its tactics and publish new posts, it enters another round of gathering feedback. This adjustment may last multiple rounds before the government figures out a way to pacify public concerns. If too many adjustments were made without any improvements, the government would use censorship. After one round of censorship, the regime judges whether the situation has been improved. If public opinion is under control, no further measures are needed. Otherwise, the harshness of censorship needs to be upgraded. Normally, the first round of censorship only involves the comments under the popular posts. Later, the influenced content might include the retweets of the posts, the posts themselves, or even the entire hot topic.

It is uncertain after how many failed attempts the government would use censorship. Sometimes, it will censor related information immediately after one failed attempt. More frequently, however, it will try more than twice, using tactics until the crisis becomes so severe that censorship must be used. Very rarely, it would even stop censorship and launch another strategy to manage the crisis. The decision and timing of censorship do not clearly depend on the speed of information dissemination, the nature of the crisis, or the level and impact of the event. Rather, it is more like a judgment that needs to be made anew in every crisis since each crisis involves different decision-makers.

The presence of multiple decision-makers in the crisis management process often results in the simultaneous application of censorship and various strategies. Take the previously mentioned “New Wave” crisis as an example. The Communist Party launched videos glorifying modern youth in an attempt to please them, only to be criticized for not being aware of the suffering of this population. The incident quickly evolved into a heated discussion across Weibo about the

CCP members' disconnected life from the public and how they get the resources to live such a high life. The CCP urgently requested a local level Communist Youth League to re-film a video of the "True New Wave," which highlighted teachers, delivery men, letter carriers, plumbers, railroad workers, construction workers, vegetable vendors, cleaning labors, among the others. An interesting phenomenon arose: a large number of nationalist remarks praising the CCP appeared under the original "New Wave" video; meanwhile, the same volume of comments appeared under the new video, praising it and criticizing the original video for being out of touch with the masses.

The rate of increase in comments under both videos was unusual, and it seems likely that both were the achievements of the 50 Cent Party. This implies that these commentators worked for two different government departments who are perhaps in competition. It is impossible to speculate the true situation without further information, but it suggests that the government actor is not a complete unity in crisis management. Nonetheless, the two departments followed the instructions of the higher level of government. The proof is that both the new and the old videos were suppressed at the end of the crisis, along with all the ironic pieces made by ordinary netizens.

After a crisis is contained, the government may learn from the experience and improve its strategies in the next crisis of its kind. The model uses loops with hollow arrows to describe this process. In some long-lasting crises, the government has enough time to find an effective strategy, enabling it to handle the next crisis more efficiently. Even if a crisis is not successfully managed, the regime learns that certain strategies are not useful in such circumstances and thus avoids wasting time in the future. Such feedback plays an a priori role in the next round of the game, helping actors make a better judgment. On the other hand, if the government actor does not learn from the experience, it would perform almost identically in the next rounds, regardless of the results of the previous round. We shall confirm its patterns in the case studies.

2.2.2 Red public accounts and pro-government netizens

The first step in crisis management for a red public account is to accept the government's mandate. In many crises, the CCP requires the red public accounts to "test the waters (试水, shi shui)," publishing certain statements to see how the netizens react. Even if these statements anger the netizens, the anger will only be directed at the red public accounts and will not endanger the authority and reputation of the government.

After the red public accounts publish the post in their own language that meets the government's requirements, they collect feedback from the netizens. If the feedback is positive, they will continue to complete the tasks until the crisis is over. Even if the feedback is negative, they must consult the government before taking any action. If the government insists that they remain firm in their political stance, they will not withdraw the statements despite the decreasing followers. Of course, their compliance would be rewarded. The CCP would organize political meetings and training for them, enabling them to participate in various activities organized by the Central United Front Work Department and the Central Internet Information Office. Particularly loyal and active red public account users could be promoted to model workers, members of the Youth Federation, and even elected as government committee members at the levels of city, county, and province (Tian, 2019).

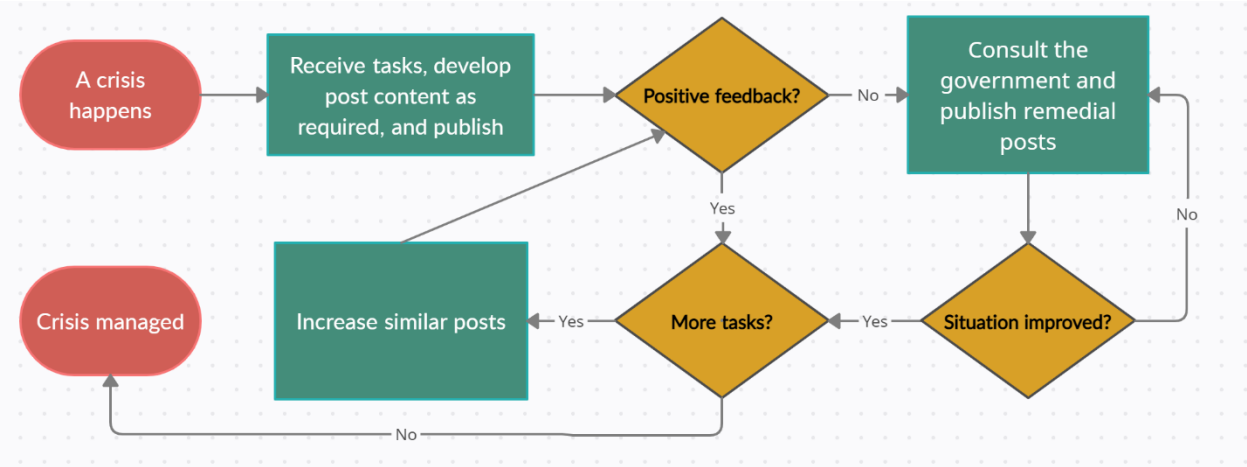

Figure 2.3 Cybernetic model for red public accounts

That being said, very few red public account users can take advantage of the opportunity to enter the government system. Most of them must still rely on the number of Weibo followers to earn commercial revenue. Therefore, if the government agrees to allow them some freedom to express their ideas, they will make remedial posts to appease ordinary netizens. Normally, they argue that their previous posts were disappointing due to a lack of information, and now they have changed their minds. If these posts successfully saved their reputation, they can move on with the government's mission. If the netizens do not buy the argument, they need to continue to please them (or argue with them to appear justified) to keep the number of followers from dropping.

In some crises, the central government is not eager to issue a task to the red public accounts. At this point, if someone offers money to invite these accounts to publish a post with specified content, they might accept it. They will use certain tactics that make these posts seem ambiguous and forgivable, making money without risking contradicting the government's possible attitude. For example, in the case of an idol's visit to Yasukuni Shrine, netizens were surprised to find that many patriotic and pro-CCP red public accounts published posts to defend the idol, saying that he did not mean anything bad. After the CCP took a serious stand that such things are unacceptable, these accounts immediately announced that, after receiving pictures and more information from followers, they found that the idol was truly unforgivable.

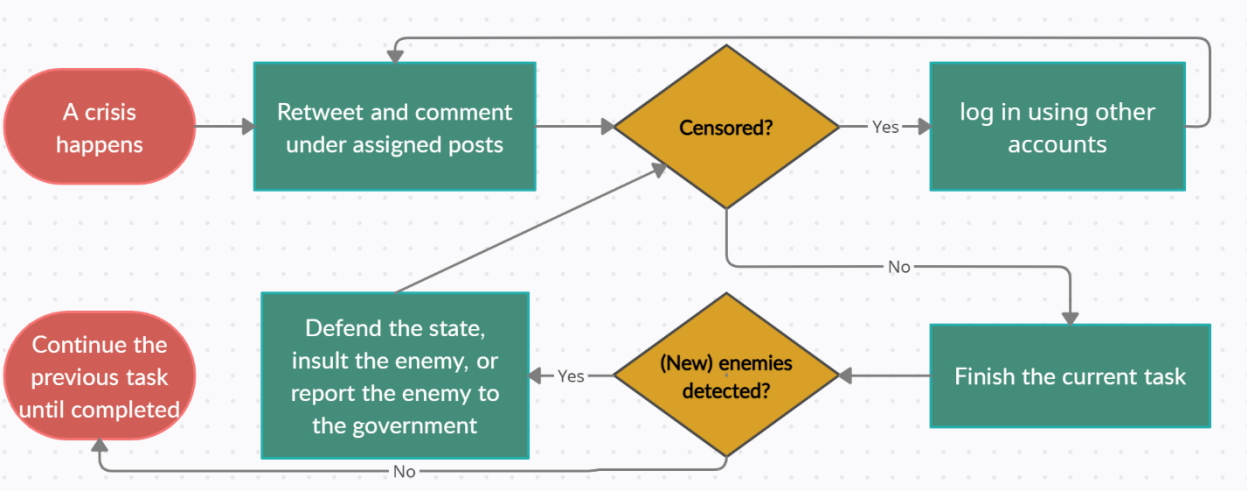

Figure 2.4 Cybernetic model for 50 Cent Party and nationalist fans

The behavior logic of the 50 Cent Party and nationalist fans differs from that of red accounts in only one aspect: they do not often reconcile with ordinary netizens when they receive negative feedback on the content they post. When the accounts are blocked, they could quickly create a new account or unblock the old account to continue working for the government.

To control the comment section of a given post, these pro-government netizens have two actions to perform. First, to send comments to "occupy the comments section" (Gu, 2020b) by liking the comments; second, when a critical comment is so popular that it appears in the visible information, they need to attack it. This attack is divided into two methods: replying to the comment or starting a new comment in which the critical comment is mentioned. Since replies are

usually less visible to the public, the 50 Cent Party and nationalist fans prefer to post their own comments in which unfriendly remarks to the government are named and denigrated.

While the work usually goes smoothly, there are still challenges. One frequent challenge is that they must identify which comments in the comment section should be pushed up to the visible message. In order to make their expressions more diverse and more like ordinary netizens, the 50 Cent Party members usually receive only an outline of instructions from their superiors and need to create the comments by themselves. It is very time-consuming to guess which of the various comments are the work of their peers.

Another difficulty is that sometimes the pro-government netizens will argue with their peers over the minutiae. This kind of incident happens more often among nationalist fans. As their attacks on ordinary netizens are nitpicking in nature, even the patriotic remarks of their peers may be suspected as mockery. Once a quarrel starts, they may mistake each other for ordinary netizens. This would be a serious drag on both sides and make the public laugh. In order to better complete the work issued by the government, they need some strategies to identify the "military friendlies (友军, you jun)" in an efficient manner.

2.2.3 General public accounts and influencers

General public accounts and influencers need to think about how to engage their followers without offending authority. After their carefully written post is published, the first feedback comes from the government - whether the post has been censored. If censored, the general public accounts immediately modify the way they wrote and publish a new post. They keep trying until the post survives the censorship.

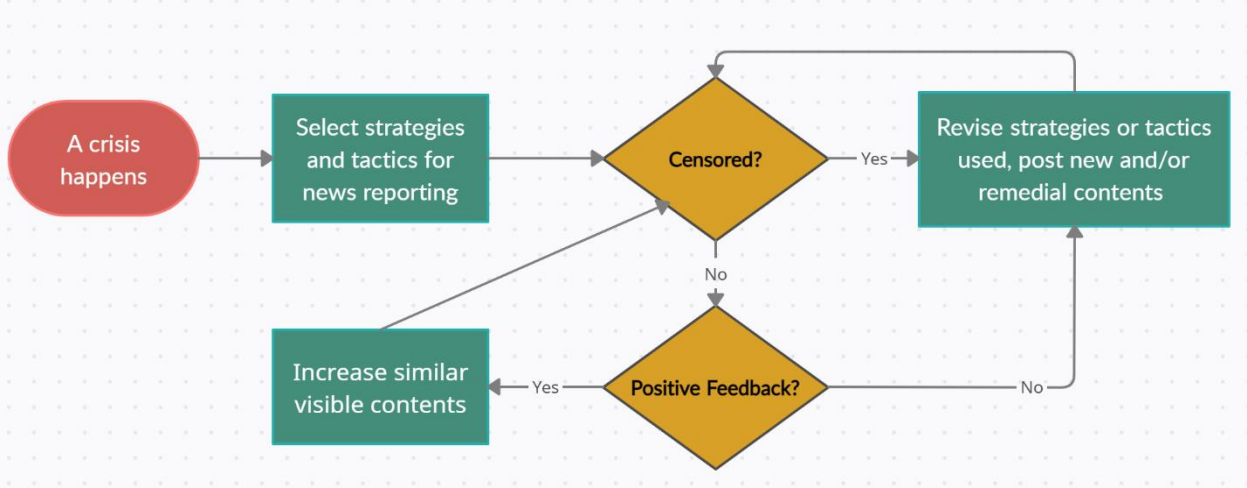

Figure 2.5 Cybernetic model for general public accounts and influencers

The next challenge is that posts that survived the censorship may not be appreciated by the followers. Sometimes followers get frustrated that the posts are not critical enough. In such cases, the general public accounts and influencers need to continue to revise their posts while slightly changing their approach to the event to retain followers. Until followers like their posts, they can feel comfortable continuing to post similar content. As soon as they reach this point, the crisis event becomes an opportunity to gain more followers and increase the commercial value of their accounts.

An interesting phenomenon is that, while these public accounts try their best to keep a balance of seriousness and entertainment in publishing content in order to survive censorship and attract more followers, they may choose the public over the government in a big crisis. It is like a gamble: if they represent public opinion, the CCP may not dare punish them because that would stir up more public anger. Even if the government censors their account, they win public support because they speak the truth for the people. Once they create a new Weibo account, their commercial value can be quickly restored or even increased. Of course, there are also many influencers who chose to follow the government's political stance during the great crises to ensure the survival of their accounts. This logic loop is highly case-dependent, and the timing to gamble is flexible. Sometimes the influencers realized from the beginning that the crisis was bound to be huge, so they firmly supported the public and rebelled against the government from the beginning, even if it meant banning or blowing up their accounts. On other occasions, they decided to stand with the people during the development of the event when they found out that the crisis seriousness

was steadily increasing. This decision-making process only occurs in several major crises, and there is no definite pattern of behavior for these accounts. Therefore, I do not incorporate it in the model.

2.2.4 Ordinary netizens

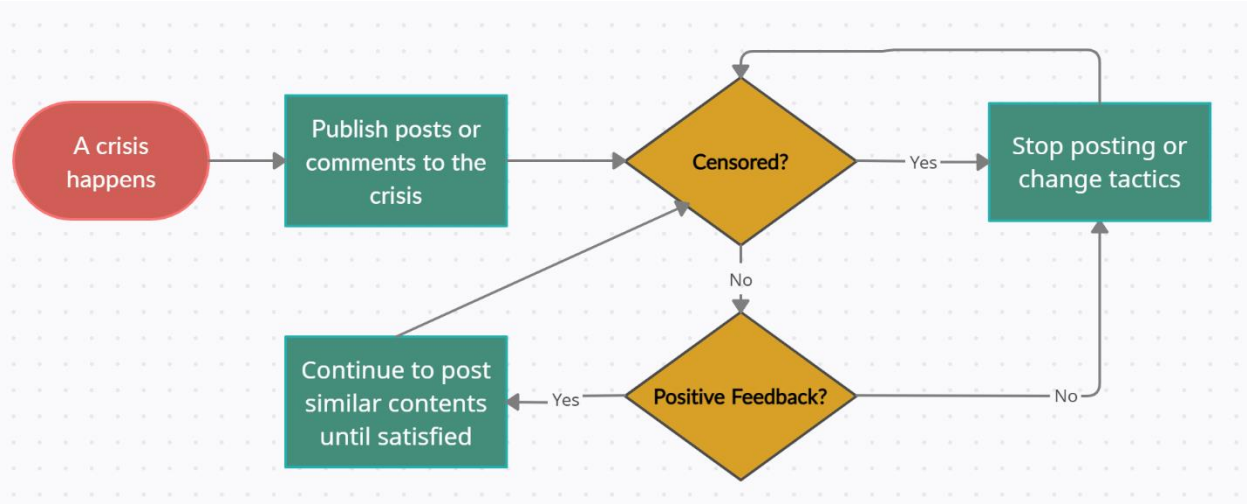

Figure 2.6 Cybernetic model for ordinary netizens

Because China restricts access to news coverage, netizens get much of their knowledge of the outside world from official news. For every potential crisis event, if they choose to believe everything the CCP tells them and take a stand in support of the government, they are likely to enter a positive feedback loop. Their comments will not be censored, and they will get many likes. They may stop speaking at this point, or they may be encouraged by these likes (and occasional retweets) to continue commenting below the relevant posts.

If netizens have other sources of information and then believe that the government's reporting has been unfair or that it has handled the incident in an unsatisfactory manner, they will dissent online. Such dissent usually faces three results: first, censorship; second, although the content is not removed, it is not visible: no one likes it, and it stands alone in the sea of information. In this case, netizens either stop posting their comments or change their strategy to package their comments in a form that will not be censored. Notably, due to the ambiguity of censorship rules, Chinese netizens can only refer to the words used by the visible posts and comments – that is, the

content that survives censorship and is popular among other netizens – when deciding how to re-organize their opinions.

A third possibility is that, due to the risk of being held accountable for voicing support for criticism against the government (e.g., liking the post or comment in question), netizens choose to express support for posts and comments they deem as less risky, i.e., the most visible content. Thus, a self-reinforcing cycle is formed: powerful actors use censorship, online commentators, and nationalist fans to shape the content of visible information; disempowered actors mimic these contents to make their voices heard or express support for such content. In the next round of crises, netizens will remember the lessons of the previous round and self-censor, directly modifying their opinions with tactics that have proven to be prudent. In this way, the government successfully shapes public opinion in both the short and long term.

That being said, this mechanism is based heavily on the nature of the crisis. For many crisis events, public outrage is so great that netizens simply ignore the cost of censorship or the risk of arrest by police and insist that the agency or official responsible be punished. In such cases, massive censorship is usually used if officials are unwilling to address the problem in good faith. For example, when Xi Jinping amended the constitution in 2018 to abolish term limits for the presidency, angry netizens sent out various forms of protest online on a massive scale (Jiang, 2018). The result was a "blow-up" that swept through Weibo, forcing anyone who satirized or protested the amendment, or even those who just retweeted the content without posting their opinions, to disappear altogether from the social media platform.

Ordinary netizens do not necessarily care when a crisis ends. Even if they were proactive when initially concerned about a crisis, their attention tends to shift to a new event before the crisis is managed as long as they have expressed themselves and released their passion for public affairs. The end of a crisis thus does not appear as an endpoint in the model. Instead, the end of ordinary netizens' engagement in a crisis comes when they are satisfied with their activities or forced to move on to other issues due to censorship.

2.3 Hypotheses and limitations

This chapter sets forth cybernetic models to describe how each actor behaves in crisis management. In general, an actor makes a move, collects feedback from other actors, and decides the next action accordingly. The value of a crisis management strategy can be assessed by where

it emerges in the model and the extent to which it contributes to crisis resolution. In this section, I derive three hypotheses that can be tested in later case study chapters.

First, in addition to fixing the crises, a successful crisis management strategy should meet the needs of the actors and address their concerns. The more needs a strategy fulfills for an actor, the more frequently it would be used. If a strategy meets multiple actors' needs, it would be highly visible on social media since everyone is using it. This hypothesis could be tested by analyzing the visible information and check the characteristics of the strategies. Notably, as the government controls the content of visible information, we expect to observe the strategies that satisfy its need – to pacify the public and discourage criticism in a way that does not backfire.

Second, the success of a crisis management strategy is mediated by the relevance of the crisis to the public. The underlying assumption is that people tend to care more about the events that could happen to them and are less likely to be persuaded to drop their concerns. In such cases, any attempt to shift focus might invoke public anger and criticism. As social media is populated primarily by young Chinese, domestic events that pose a threat to students, the middle class, and children should be of most concern. In contrast, international events, especially the democratic political processes, should receive less attention because the Chinese netizens cannot imagine themselves in the midst of these events. The corresponding null hypothesis is that the public is equally interested in all events regardless of their location, the people involved, and the event's significance.

Third, the actors learn from the past. They would improve their crisis management strategies and perhaps even revise their decision-making process. If this is true, we should observe that strategies that have repeatedly been proven unsuccessful in previous crises will not be used on a large scale in the future. Actors will keep changing their strategies until they find the ones that work, and then they will use these strategies steadily for specific kinds of crises. If nothing works in a crisis, censorship is on the way. We can test this hypothesis by comparing the strategies applied in the same kinds of crises at different times.

The theory and related model's objective is to deepen scholarly understanding of the crisis communication process on social media. Nevertheless, they are not without limitations. One salient limitation is that we cannot test who deleted the online content. Even if the social media platform censored the content, the visible public notification always appears that the person who posted it decided to withdraw. That person could send a new message denying the deletion and clarify that

the removal of the post is due to censorship, but in most cases, he or she would remain silent. Whether a message disappears because of government intervention or personal trepidation brings different implications, even the change of the models.

Another limitation is that the environmental factor is not adequately integrated into the models. The environment refers to a presence that is outside the event but has a potential influence. For example, the government yielded to public opinion during a crisis and punished corrupt officials as demanded. After a few weeks, it suddenly shut down hundreds of Weibo accounts for no apparent reason, all of which were found to be the most influential critics of that crisis. This kind of retaliation, while not occurring in any round of crises, will make actors more apprehensive about expressing their opinions in the future. General public accounts, for instance, may choose to stop posting similar content in the next crisis for fear of offending the government even when they receive positive feedback. In this way, the government changes the behavior of actors and the model structure through the environment.

Unfortunately, whether or not actors engage in self-censorship remains beyond direct observation. A person could delete a message and then claim to have not done so in order to set up an image of a fearless warrior fighting for free speech. A sudden decrease in online activities could well be due to personal reasons. Without further information, the only way to reduce misinterpretation of phenomena and misconstruction of models is to perform careful and rigorous case studies.

CHAPTER 3. METHOD

This dissertation uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to approach the research question. It sets the standard for crisis events and "visibility" of online data and collects only the visible data for each crisis event. The data is then analyzed using computer-based software.

The first section defines the criteria and rationale of visible posts and comments, then introduces the data scraping technique. The second section shows steps of data categorization using computer-assisted models. The third section provides a general summary of the collected data and briefly analyzes the indications. The fourth section explains the necessity of the case study and the principles for case selection. The last section addresses challenges and limitations encountered in the process.

3.1 Data collection

All data is collected on the social media platform Weibo between January 2016 and October 2021. As mentioned in previous chapters, it was only in late 2014 that the CCP put its pro-youth policy on the agenda and opened accounts for various departments on Weibo. In 2015, these accounts clumsily learned how to infiltrate the lives of young people. In 2016, the first signs of the government's massive attempt to guide public opinion in potential crises were evident in its coverage of the U.S. presidential election. Over the next five years, the CCP went through a variety of crises, from international to local, providing enough quantity and diversity of data for scholarly research. By tracking the CCP's behavior during various crises, the public reaction to this behavior, and the corresponding decisions the CCP made, we can gain a deeper understanding of the government's incentives and strategies to manipulate online agenda setting.

Weibo is the largest and most interactive social platform in China. Official departments at all levels have opened accounts on Weibo, making it possible to observe the interaction between the private and official sectors. Platforms like Baidu Tieba, on the other hand, are more like forums where officials do not intervene, and it is naturally impossible to observe the interaction between netizens and officials there. In addition, when people encounter various difficulties, especially those that cannot be solved in reality, they turn to Weibo for help. In major events, such as the

COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters, Weibo has become an officially recognized center for information integration. The data collected from this platform is the most extensive, authentic, and direct.

3.1.1 Selection criteria for posts

Visible posts of crisis events are saved for data analysis. Two types of posts are considered visible. The first type appears on Weibo's "Hot Topic List" (热门话题榜, re men hua ti bang) and has more than 100 retweets or comments. The second type does not appear on the Hot Topic List but has more than 5,000 retweets or 1,000 comments.

The Hot Topic List is arguably the most authoritative and visible ranking of events on Weibo[7]. It covers all uncensored events in all aspects of society and is therefore intensely monitored by the government (Bi, 2020). Unlike Twitter's trending topics, Weibo's Hot Topic List is not tailored to users' interests or geographic location. The List bar containing ten hot topics automatically appears on the right side of each Weibo user's page and remains static as the user scrolls down the page to view the content. While netizens are free to create whatever topics they want using two hashtags, such as #me with the national flag#, the appearance of a topic on the Hot Topic List is necessarily the result of money, a series of massive public attention, and political considerations. The cost for an entertainment or business topic to stay on the list for an hour, for instance, is approximately $35,000 (*Economic Daily*, 2017).

While money is an important factor in pushing a topic up the List, the government is the ultimate force that determines whether a topic makes the List. Netizens have summarized three main ways in which the regime reduces the visibility of topics: (1) topic-pressing (压话题, ya hua ti), in which a topic never appears on the List despite great social attention; (2) topic-dropping[8] (撤话题, che hua ti), which means that a topic appears briefly on the List but is soon removed; (3)

[7] Weibo has two trending lists: the "Real-time Hot Search List (实时热搜榜, shi shi re sou bang)" and the Hot Topic List. Hot Search List requires a link to be clicked in a specific place, and ordinary netizens have no idea how to find it. Over the years, the Hot Search List has become a list for the fans to support their idols, while the Hot Topic List responds to the concerns of society at large. In 2019, because the fans of a young idol Cai Xukun claimed that the Asian music king Jay Chou was not as famous as Cai, tens of millions of netizens who grew up listening to Jay Chou's songs decided to push him onto the top of Hot Search List, making Chou's idol-ranking over Cai. However, the first problem they had to face was to find out where the Real-time Hot Search List was (Ma & Xiang, 2019).

[8] This is also named "hot search dropping" (撤热搜, che re sou), because most netizens do not tell the difference between a hot topic and a hot search and use the two terms interchangeably.

topic explosion (炸话题, zha hua ti), which means that a topic is classified as sensitive content after it has appeared on the list for a period of time, and is no longer allowed to exist. Meanwhile, many topics enjoy fewer than 100 comments but still hold a place on the List because they serve the CCP's propaganda mission. Netizens call this phenomenon "forced referral (强推, qiang tui)" since they are forced to see these topics whenever they log onto the Weibo platform.

The CCP does not often push topics to the List. It is reasonable to assume that there is also a cost for the regime for promoting a topic onto the List, such as paying for it or providing other forms of benefit in exchange. After more than five years of observation, I have found that there are only three situations where the CCP actively promotes topics with low visibility onto the List. First, on a Communist holiday or anniversary, such as Mao's birthday or the fall of the Gang of Four. Second, when the police have accomplished something that should be welcomed by citizens, such as arresting a corrupt official or solving a major drug smuggling case. Third, when a crisis event is causing the public to become highly dissatisfied with the government. This suggests that the CCP screens the topics on the Hot Topic List based on political risk. By collecting posts under the topics on the List, we would better comprehend the government tactics in crisis management.

Once a topic is approved as a hot topic, Weibo will open a page for it and assign a topic host. The topic hosts are typically who pushed the topic onto the List, and their identity can significantly help us determine how the topic got on the List. For example, if the host is the "Weibo TV series," the topic is most likely a marketing tool for a broadcasting TV series and paid by an entertainment company for its placement on the List. If the host is the "Communist Youth League," the topic is associated with the Communist Party and is almost always political propaganda.

Topic pages contain up to seven pages of posts in total, with the most popular posts at the top. Depending on the length of the posts, a topic will have between 18 to 24 posts per page. However, most posts have no retweets, comments, or likes. It is difficult to judge how much impact they have on public opinion. Including them in the dataset would compromise the study's rigor, so only the posts with more than 100 retweets or comments. With this level of netizen discussion and interaction, such posts should be able to influence public opinion, at least to some extent.

In practice, this standard works well. For each topic, the discussion tends to concentrate on only a few posts. Netizens incline to retweet and comment on those posts that are most visible compared to those with less visibility. The table below shows that, even for a topic with more than two billion reads, there were only five posts with more than 100 retweets and comments.

Table 3.1 The most popular posts under the hottest topic of August, 2021

Posts	*Retweet*	*Comment*	*Liked*
1	754,336	346,403	10,916,176
2	7,781	38,899	1,260,766
3	3,608	7,289	163,652
4	336	793	8,826
5	44	327	49,370
6	8	11	19

Many topics, especially those that could threaten political stability, were excluded from the Hot Topic List regardless of the amount of attention they attracted. In addition, many of the original reports of the events were not tagged with any topic because the posters were uncertain about where the events would go. Consequently, even if the topic later gained attention and someone created a related topic, those initial, most influential posts would not be included on the topic page. Therefore, this dissertation collects all posts outside the Hot Topic List with more than 1,000 comments or 5,000 retweets[9]. With more than 246 million daily active netizens on the platform (Sina Weibo, 2021), this is not a particularly demanding requirement.

3.1.2 Selection criteria of retweets and comments

For retweets, only the "hot retweets" (热门转发, re men zhuan fa) of each visible post are collected. Most posts have four to nine hot retweets, and below them are the latest retweets in reverse chronological order. This dissertation did not collect the latest retweets because too many of them contain no information of interest. Most of the retweets are simply "retweeted," "re," or without any text or image. This kind of information is difficult to classify (e.g., is "retweeted" an act to support the original post? Or does it support the retweeted content it is forwarding?) and is thus an invalid message. In addition, the visibility of retweets is low because the most recent retweets are constantly changing as long as someone retweets the post. In short, it is inefficient to collect retweets.

[9] This criterion was initially only 1,000 comments, without retweet requirement. But one of the methods the CCP uses to downgrade these popular posts' influence is to block their comment section, this dissertation added the requirement of 5,000 retweets so as not to miss them when collecting data.

The reason to collect retweets is for comparison with the comment content. For some posts, the retweets and comments are the exact opposite of each other, with the comments full of pro-government appraisal and the retweets being scathingly critical. In such "comment-trolled" situations, the retweeted content serves as a good tool to identify this contrast, reminding us that this post may need a closer look to confirm why its comments were controlled. Meanwhile, retweeted content can also help us better understand the context of events. For example, when a government account sends out a post praising the government for making a good policy, it could be hard to find background information in the comment section. The retweets are likely to describe the details of the crisis-related event and how people fought to make the policy happen.

The visible comments under visible posts are collected. On Weibo, comments are ranked by the number of likes they receive. This dissertation defines that a visible comment must receive at least one "like," which proves that someone sees it and agrees with its opinion. It is difficult to verify the influence of a comment with zero likes, so these comments are assumed to be invisible.

The data collection procedure unveils that the number of "liked" comments is not linearly correlated with the total number of comments. No matter how many comments a post had, the number of liked comments always floated around 300. This may be related to the way comments are fed to the netizens. On Weibo, when people click on each post, nine comments are automatically displayed. If people want to see more comments, they have to click the "view more" option to see the first page of comments – 45 comments composed of nine read comments and 36 new comments. After that, each click on "next page" brings 15 new comments. It is unreasonable to assume that normal people would read all the contents under one post. They must stop clicking on the next page at some point.

A simple analysis of the liked comments is shown in the table 3.2 below. Of all the posts collected, regardless of domains or background, the maximum number of comments that received at least one "like" was 396. Therefore, collecting 396 comments under each post would cover all the visible comments. Since the 396th comment is on the 25th page of the comment section, this dissertation sets the computer program to click 24 times on the "next page" button on Weibo before crawling data. After data is collected, the comments are sorted in descending order based on the number of likes. The zero-liked comments are removed, and the dataset of visible comments is finalized.

Table 3.2 Examples of comments and liked comments in a post

Post	*Total comments*	*Liked comments*	*Page-turns*
1	2,421	346	21
2	6,395	138	7
3	14,636	290	17
4	27,979	231	13
5	30,400	396 (max value)	24
6	200,128	288	17
7	346,357	303	18

During data collection, comments may suddenly drop to zero. This happens mostly to official accounts that publish policies or government reports but meet heavy criticism. A common coping option is to clear all comments and turn off the comment function. Sometimes, comments are not entirely censored. The official account could turn on the "featured comments (精选评论, jing xuan ping lun)" function and (by manually selecting them on the backstage) leave only the comments that are favorable to them. In such cases, the comments collected before censorship are treated as missing data, but the "featured comments" are treated as visible comments. In qualitative analysis, these posts (and their comments) would be highlighted as the government's reaction to negative feedback.

3.1.3 Data collection method

Crawling data on Weibo is not considered illegal so long as the person follows three rules (Zhang, 2017). First, the person does not violate the robots protocol, also known as robots.txt. Second, the person cannot use a crawling tool to attack or hack the site. Third, the person cannot use the crawled data for commercial purposes or unfair competition. This dissertation carefully follows all these rules, respects the website's privacy, and uses data only for academic research.

All the posts and comments were collected from Weibo with the help of the computer software Python. Since Weibo is a dynamic website, the Python library *selenium* and the chrome Firefox were used to go around the encryption system. After logging in to Weibo with a purchased

account[10], the computer program would "open" a Firefox browser, "log in to" Weibo, and "locate" the Hot Topic List based on the addresses (URLs) we provided. Then it "clicks" on each topic and collects the full text of posts on the webpage[11]. The data is then cleaned using Python *bs4* (*BeautifulSoul*) and *pandas*. Only the posts with more than 100 retweets or comments are saved and imported as Excel files.

This program is executed every two hours[12]. During data collection, there are times of internet breakdowns and other unexpected issues that cause information loss. Fortunately, many Chinese technical startups crawl Weibo Hot Topics and share them online as a way of adverting. The Institution of Social Network and Data Mining (SNDM), for example, provides a 24-hour rolling record of Weibo Hot Topic data, updates the record every 30 minutes, removes duplicate topics, and saves the data in the MySQL database[13]. I check the SNDM database daily to ensure nothing important is missed.

Capturing events that do not appear on the Hot Topic List is more taxing. I followed various accounts of government organizations and departments, red public accounts, general public accounts, key opinion leaders, and influencers. They are dedicated to different social, political, and economic topics, and at least half of the key opinion leaders and influencers are left-leaning liberals. A Python program using the similar techniques mentioned above would "click" on the "following" list of my Weibo account, go to every account that I followed, and collect the posts with more than 5,000 retweets or 1,000 comments[14].

Due to resource constraints, such a data collection procedure is only performed three times a day. The execution times are set at 8:00 a.m., 5:00 p.m., and 11:00 p.m. in China and are designed to collect all events that happened in the morning, afternoon, and evening. Of course, posts may be censored within hours of their occurrence. However, when an event is censored, the general

[10] Weibo does not block IP but does block the accounts. Therefore, multiple accounts were purchased to handle this issue. They were registered back in 2011, when no real names or phone numbers were required, thus ensuring no real person would be tracked by the government.
[11] It is complicated to realize these functions, and Python libraries such as *lxml* (*xpath*) is needed. Fortunately, there are plenty of open-source codes. This dissertation primarily draws from the following: https://cuiqingcai.com/5630.html, https://github.com/cyLi-Tiger/weibo-crawler, https://blog.csdn.net/qq_41441896/article/details/104706930, https://github.com/lwgkzl/weibo-crawler-, and https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/29436838.
[12] The function is realized using the *os* and *time* libraries in Python and the Windows Task Scheduler. Tutorial is available at https://blog.csdn.net/Python_sn/article/details/109331377.
[13] In 2020, theysht down business and left all resources at https://github.com/interestingcn/weiboresoubowuguan.
[14] Regardless of whether the account created or retweeted these posts, all posts that appear on the webpage would be collected.

public accounts and influencers usually talk about it subtly or post screenshots of the posts. If all of them do not discuss it, there is a high probability that ordinary Chinese netizens have not seen this event either. Such an event is considered invisible and would not be collected.

Notably, at this stage, the collected posts have not been classified based on whether they are crisis events or not. Since the dissertation is only interested in the visible information of crisis events, it is crucial to define a crisis event. Relevant criteria, processes, and findings are described in the following section. After identifying the visible posts related to a crisis event, the dissertation feeds their address (URLs) to Python to collect the first 25 pages of comments under each post. Eventually, only the visible comments are imported as Exile files.

The number of comments and retweets of a post always keeps changing. Due to technical and resource limitations, this dissertation, when performing data analysis, only saves one last version of each post and its comments. Of course, if a dramatic change in the content of popular comments/retweets is noticed, the post would be highlighted for potential further study.

3.2 Data categorization

The primary research interest of this dissertation is the entertainment-oriented narrative. Therefore, the analytical focus is to distinguish its tactics from other types of content. With the definition of the narrative (see chapter four for details), three criteria are used to decide whether a message belongs to the narrative or not. First, the message must contain one or more entertaining expressions, such as an entertaining phrase, emojis, or memes. Even the harshest posts and comments with entertainment-oriented narratives contain multiple emojis that make the content playful. Second, it directly or indirectly helps reduce the crisis. Third, it discourages critical thinking and serious arguments by acting harmless or attacking others while acting cute.

This dissertation subdivides the entertainment-oriented strategy into three tactics. The first tactic compares reality to a make-believe show or drama, the second primarily uses cute emojis and expressions to look harmless, and the third makes extensive use of idol fans' jargon to cut off the possibility of rational discussion. The first tactic is named "reality fictionalization," the second "*moe* tactic," and the third "fan jargon." These tactics all aim to dissuade sober communication on social media platforms while creating a relaxed atmosphere and thereby prevent a potential crisis (or a threat to personal safety) from becoming a real one. More details, rationale, and examples of the criteria are dedicated in the fourth chapter.

3.2.1 Crisis vs. Non-Crisis

Based on Chinese official documents, there are two types of cyber crises: the major ones and the general ones (Gu, 2020). Major ones include those that affect political security, have a high degree of topical sensitivity and public attention, or have been inquired by central or provincial government leaders. They should involve large interest groups and raise serious concerns among the media and the public, such as public security incidents, accusations of officials or governmental institutions, and natural disasters. General crises refer to sensitive topics that may be spread by influential media and social media platforms.

This dissertation has pretty broad criteria: As long as an event draws attention on social media and causes (or has the potential to cause) people to question or even challenge the authority, and the CCP takes measures to deal with it, it is considered a crisis event. In this way, both the major and the general crises are included. Events that did not attract public attention or were so wholly censored that Chinese netizens were unaware of them were not included in the database because their impact on public opinion is small or difficult to measure.

All events are manually classified to be a crisis or not. In a nutshell, there are 194 crises which contain 367 events and 888 topics. Among the crisis posts, 551 appeared as an event emerged, 1,208 appeared as the event developed, and 328 appeared when the event was coming to an end. Among 9,072 visible posts, 2,087 relate to a crisis event[15]. On average, each crisis consists of 1.89 events, each event generates 2.42 topics, and each topic possesses 2.35 posts.
About 44.23% of the posts (923 posts) were promoted onto the Hot Topic List, while the rest (1,164 posts) were popular among netizens.

As demonstrated below, 2019 and 2020 witnessed more crises than other years. The reason may be the public outcry caused by the Hong Kong protests, the sudden outbreak of the pandemic, and the slightly relaxed censorship standards due to the need to screen the SOS messages on Weibo from COVID-19 patients.

[15] The total number (9,072 posts) may seem daunting, but given that they were collected and categorized over a six-year period and that it was relatively easy to distinguish between crisis and non-crisis, it was not a difficult task to accomplish.

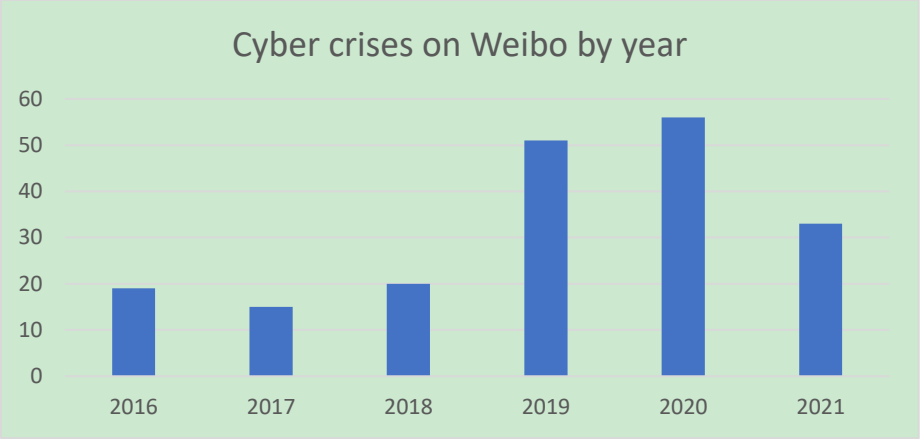

Figure 3.1 Histogram of crises on Weibo, 2016-2021

When collecting posts, Python records their retweet and comment numbers. The table below shows the average number of retweets and comments each post in the subcategories has. Please note that the comments in the table refer to all comments under a post, not only the visible (liked) ones. The hotness of discussion of crisis and non-crisis posts seems to correlate with whether they are on the Hot Topic List, but the two types of posts perform in opposite ways. On average, when a crisis post is off the List, it has more retweets and comments than on the List. A non-crisis post, on the other hand, has significantly fewer retweets and comments when it is off the List. The data confirms that the government controls the List and carefully screens topics so that the events that the public cares about the most do not become more visible. When a post has nothing to do with a crisis, the government does not need to control its visibility, and the post makes to the List based on its influence.

Table 3.3 The average number of retweets and comments of each post

	Retweets	*Comments*
Crisis, on the List	10,547	6,823
Crisis, off the List	21,640	8,530
Non-crisis, on the List	12,781	1,061
Non-crisis, off the List	4,329	873

3.2.2 Posts

All the crisis-related posts are manually classified into two categories: entertainment-oriented or not[16]. Then, they are manually labeled to be using one or more tactics under the entertainment-oriented strategy. The classification follows the principles mentioned at the beginning of the section and the detailed definitions in chapter four. Coding 2,000 posts in three years is not intense, ensuring the accuracy of the sorting process. Of course, given the complexity of reality, challenges still exist. The problems encountered and the solutions are described in the last section of this chapter.

The labeled posts are saved into an Excel file in chronological order. There are twelve columns. The first column is the ID number for each post, and the second column is the content of this post. The third column is the year that the post occurred, ranging from 2016 to 2021. The next three columns list the ID number of the crisis, to which event the post belongs, and at which stage of the crisis the post appeared. The stage value could be 0 (not a crisis), 1 (the emergence of the crisis), 2 (the developing procedure of the crisis), or 3 (the closing stage of the crisis). The seventh column uses a binary value (1 or 0) to indicate whether the post is on the Hot Topic List or not. The eighth presents the related topic (posts not on the List are coded as 0). The next two columns record the number of retweets and comments the post possesses. The last two column records whether the post uses entertainment-oriented narratives (1 or 0) and which tactics it used (from 0 to 3). The identity information of the ID who made these posts is recorded in another file and has the ID number for each post as the key column.

3.2.3 Comments

Due to the massive quantity of visible comments, this dissertation uses Natural Language Processing (NLP) models to label them. In NLP, human language is separated into fragments so that the computer can understand and learn the grammatical structure of sentences and the meaning of words.

Among all NLP models, the Bidirectional Encoder Representation from Transformers (BERT) is famous for its efficiency and accuracy. It was released by Google in October 2018 and

[16] Originally, there were more categories, such as neutral, critical to the government, seriously supporting the government, and others. But due to the resource limitations, this dissertation decides to focus on the entertainment-oriented narrative and leave other categories for potential future studies.

has since then set new records for 11 natural language processing tasks, even exceeding human performance. This dissertation uses BERT and BERT-like models, such as fast-bert (Trivedi, 2019) and WoBERT (Su, 2020), in Python.

Many NLP projects have datasets with tags or labels set in advance. For example, the sentiment categories in sentiment analysis. However, this dissertation wants to apply an innovative task that cannot be found online. Therefore, the first thing is to construct a dataset and tag/label it. This dissertation randomly drew 6,000 comments from the comment dataset. Three columns were added in Excel indicating whether a comment uses the three tactics of the entertainment-oriented narrative. These columns are binary and are manually coded following the definition mentioned at the beginning of this section and in chapter four. Then, these comments are randomly divided into the training set (4,800 comments), the validation set (600 comments), and the testing set (600 comments)[17].

The prepared Excel file is then imported into Python to be a dataset with the format needed for the Bert model. The model is defined using *bert-base-chinese,* and the tokenizer was specified to be *WoBERTokenzier,* which proves slightly better performance than other Chinese tokenizers like *chinese-bert-wmm* and *jieba*. Then the model is trained. The K-fold cross-validation (k=5) and easy stopping were applied. The hyperparameters were adjusted[18]. The scores for model evaluation are calculated using the *sklearn* library.

Since this is a multi-label task, f1 scores are more informative than the accuracy score. As the data across categories is imbalanced (slightly more comments are labeled as *moe* than the other two), macro average f1 scores are used to weigh each category equally. The final model has a global accuracy score of 0.93. The macro f1 score for the first category (reality fictionalization) is 0.96, for the second (*moe*) is 0.91, and for the third (fan jargon) is 0.97. The ROC curves are 0.93, 0.89, and 0.95. These scores suggest that the model is excellent[19].

The outstanding outcome suggests the simple language structure and the distinctive characters of the tactics. Moreover, some tactics were initially invented with natural language

[17] Professionals advise to split the datasets in the ratio of 8:1:1 or 7:2:1 (March 19, 2022). Some scholars argue that the training set should be smaller than the test set to achieve better model performance (Malato, 2020). This dissertation follows the traditional approach and uses the ratio fo 8:1:1.
[18] Some other parameters: epochs=5, batch size=128, learning rate=0.0001, confidence threshold = 0.5.
[19] Multi-label classification often meets the overfitting problem. In addition of cross-validation and early stopping, other measures were also tested to prevent the overfitting problem, such as setting dropout=0.3, label smoothing, and reduce model dimension using other pre-trained models. But their effect was not significant.

processing in mind. In China, it is common for commercial brands to use NLP analytical software to capture the attitude of Weibo netizens toward specific celebrities in order to determine whom to invite to be their advertising endorser. The fans of pop stars then began to develop their jargon in response to the algorithms. Their principle in constructing utterances makes the language more explicitly recognizable to machines, not more readable to humans. Therefore, it is not surprising that the NLP tools accurately identify the tactic.

After training the model, the next step is to apply it to the rest comments. The model gives a score for each comment. For example, a comment with a score of 0.83 means a category has an 83% chance to fall into this category. The dissertation codes the comments accordingly. Comments with scores between 30% and 60% were examined manually and based on the context. If a decision still cannot be made, the comment would be excluded from the dataset. Fortunately, only 254 comments were omitted.

The finalized Excel files of comments have eight important columns. The first column is the ID number of the post that the comment responded to. The second column is the post's content, providing context for the comment. The third column is the comment's text content. The fourth column is the number of likes the comment received. The next three columns represent whether the comment uses one or more of the entertainment-oriented tactics. The eighth column is binary and indicates whether the comment is an entertainment-oriented narrative or not. This value is 0 if all previous three columns (tactics) are 0, and 1 in other cases. The rest columns document information that is not the research interest of this dissertation, such as the ID of the comment maker, the date and time the comment was made, how many replies it received, the text of the first ten replies that received the most likes, the ID of these repliers, and the date and time these replies were made.

To summarize, 423,977 comments were coded, and 37.59% applied the entertainment-oriented narrative strategy. On average, each crisis post possesses 203.15 liked comments, and 76.37 of them are entertainment-oriented narratives. At the stage of crisis emergence, there are 113,579 comments, and 42,603 of them are entertainment-oriented narratives. At the stage of crisis development, there are 271,985 comments, and 104,654 of them are entertainment-oriented narratives. At the stage of crisis closing, there are 38,413 comments, and 12,118 are entertainment-oriented narratives. The following table displays the numbers:

Table 3.4 The average number of comments under each post by crisis stage

	Visible comments	*Entertainment-oriented narratives*
Emergence of the crisis	206.13	37.51%
Development of the crisis	225.15	38.48%
Closing of the crisis	117.11	31.55%

When a crisis emerges and develops, the related posts receive approximately the same level of public discussion in the comments section. More than a third of visible comments could be categorized as entertainment-oriented narratives. When the crisis is about to end, the number of comments and the percentage of entertainment-oriented narratives drop. The difference between stages highlights the necessity of rigorous case studies. We need to delve into the context and details of the crises to understand the crisis management techniques of the Chinese government and how the public reacts to them.

3.3 Case selection

However accurate and mighty the NLP models are, there are undoubtedly limitations. No one can achieve absolute precision using the software. For individual researchers, time and effort cannot meet the requirement to fully code the dataset to train a perfect model. The computer cannot directly answer the research question, even with the most accurate models. Case studies are therefore necessary.

The case study method provides intensive research and rich information about the events and increases knowledge about political, social, and psychological phenomena. It contributes to causal mechanism exploration and hypothesis testing. By comparing different units and studying the units that violate theoretical predictions, case studies help scholars improve their model and generalize their statistical findings with less bias.

The case study method in this dissertation is observational, longitudinal, and mainly descriptive. The materials generally follow a "crisis – events – posts" structure, where each event is a single unit. Related posts are grouped under it to provide information on all its perspectives. Events of a similar kind are grouped across time and region to study a specific category of crisis. The observation focuses on the background and development of each event, the interactions

between different actors, the evolution of the cybernetic models of the government-related actors, and the change of proportion of strategies and tactics.

One advantage of the case study method is that it provides context. While the quantitative method can also compare events across time and space, a case study enables us to capture the details of the events and allows for more in-depth analysis. We have more information to speculate on the causality of event developments and understand why the events of the same type of crisis and strategic responses could result in very disparate outcomes. More importantly, we can focus on the behavior of a single actor and check whether it has revised its strategies based on previous success or failure. As time moves from 2016 to 2020, the actors could even revise their cybernetic model structure, adding or dropping some steps. For example, in 2016, there was no step in the government accounts' model that assigns specific opinion control tasks to red public accounts. This step emerged in later years and gradually became static in the model.

Another advantage is that the case study allows us to estimate the effectiveness of the tactics from a variety of perspectives. In most cases, we can collect the comments under the crisis response posts. However, the quantitative method cannot do much when the government does not allow netizens to comment. In that case, we can find the public opinion under the influential posts published by public accounts immediately after the censorship of comments. Meanwhile, there are times when the government is rigid in responding to a certain crisis due to internal political considerations. In this situation, we could refer to the red public accounts known to cooperate with governmental agencies. Their attitude towards the crisis reflects the information the government wants to convey to the public. It is hard to identify which post is sent under what initiatives without a case study.

The case study method also provides us a chance to analyze the popular posts that are summary in nature appropriately. With the quantitative method, a post should fall into one of the crises and events. A post that covers different times, spaces, and crises is difficult to categorize and counts once for every event it mentions. However, the special characteristic of summarization it implies is ignored. With the case study method, such a post could be put in the summary section and provide valuable insight into the common points of different crises.

There are many kinds of crises with which the Chinese government needs to deal. This dissertation selects some most influential, most visible, and most representative events and groups them into three big categories. The first kind is "election and protest," which occurs from 2016 to

2021 across the globe and contains intensive democratic information. The second kind includes the major disaster in recent years – the COVID-19. The third kind is major public policies in recent years that unexpectedly met resistance in a wide range. All three types of crises have incited public concern and anger over the loss of lives and rights caused by underreporting, misreporting, and non-reporting of the events. Almost every event highlights corrupt and incompetent officials and a political system that selectively tolerates them. If any of the events are not controlled, they are very likely to form a bigger threat to the regime. Learning about how the CCP handled each event and the effectiveness of those strategies and tactics will not only answer this dissertation's research question but also inspire future scholars.

3.4 Challenges and limitations

3.4.1 Challenges

It is inevitable to face anticipated and unanticipated challenges in collecting and analyzing data. For this dissertation, the challenge mainly occurred in data collection and manual coding. Due to stringent control of speech, Chinese netizens have developed all kinds of ways to circumvent censorship, which poses a variety of challenges.

First, the use of aliases is pervasive. In order to avoid keyword censorship, netizens use all kinds of homophones, similar sounding words, associating other words from the whole word, associating other words from a single word and then re-forming the word, using other expressions with the characteristics of the associated word, continuing to associate new words with the characteristics of the associated word, and so on. For example, when netizens want to talk about Zhou Yongkang (周永康), a political opponent of Xi Jinping who was expelled from the Party in 2014 and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2015 for corruption and bribery, they would generally refer to him as "Master Kang (康师傅)," the brand name of a famous instant noodle company in China. Later, to avoid this sensitive character, netizens used "instant noodle" to refer to Zhou. However, this term also seemed too obvious and was frequently discovered by human censors, so people switched to "dry and crispy noodle" because it sounds close to instant noodle. Since the most famous dry and crispy noodle in China is Little Raccoon, the pronoun became Little Raccoon. Consequently, Zhou Yongkang, a term seemingly completely unrelated to Little Raccoon, became

associated, and people who searched the content of Weibo only by Zhou's name would never see the large number of Little Raccoon stories hidden under the iceberg.

These inflected genius ideas bewilder the censors as well as the researcher. Once, I saw many comments criticizing "catnip," which is apparently a word referring to someone. I found the original post based on the tag of the comments and discovered that "catnip" was referring to Gou Zhongwen, the director of the Chinese General Sports Bureau. Because "gou" has the same pronunciation as "dog," netizens often refer to him as "dog bureau." How did it evolve to catnip? After asking around, I learned that some netizens had their accounts closed for using the term dog bureau. Since "bureau (局, ju)" and "chrysanthemum (菊, ju)" are homophones, they started to call Gou Zhongwen "dog chrysanthemum." After that, since dog reminds of cat and chrysanthemum reminds of flower, dog chrysanthemum became "cat flower." Furthermore, since cat flower is not a word that exists in Chinese, they switched to catnip. The creativity that emerged to avoid the suppression of speech is without limit. The only issue is that the emotions of the messages are often hidden in these coded terms, and the model does not automatically recognize them.

Netizens also apply a lot of abbreviations and jargon to outrun censorship. A common way is to combine the first letter of the pinyin of each character to refer to a term. For example, "Forever God (永远的神, yong yuan de shen)" is abbreviated as "yyds." Another way is "double folding," which means first to shorten the sentence and then use the abbreviation of pinyin. For example, the term "you betrayed the working class, you bastard" is first shortened to "you-betray-work-bastard" and then "ybwb." It can also be simplified to "you (), you ()," which looks like a fill-in-the-blank question. Such a form indicates that everyone knows what to put in the parentheses even though it is left blank. Ironically, such a form can still be censored and reported by government accounts and the 50 Cent Party, and new ways of bypassing censorship are bound to emerge.

Since netizens are so creative and may create different variants of a term in large numbers in a short period of time, it is unlikely that researchers would fully understand their meanings. Fortunately, netizens also face this problem and have created the "chick dictionary" (https://jikipedia.com/) as a solution. The dictionary provides the definition, common variants, the origin, and two example sentences for each term to ensure that the user understands the term correctly. This dissertation uses this dictionary in the coding process to determine the jargon's explanations and the context in which they were invented.

Aside from the word-camouflage issue, the second challenge is the prevalent use of irony. Without knowing the event background, people would think the contents are earnest. Even when the background is known, it could be still hard to judge whether a message is ironic. For example, is the post "The moment has come upon us. Our family is ready to sacrifice…Never give trouble to our country!" ironic or solemnly nationalist? The post was created in the early period of COVID-19. The blogger lives in Wuhan, a city in a state of lockdown with extreme shortages of food and medical supplies. To find out whether he was disappointed with the government or earnestly patriotic, I searched his recent posts and their comments. However, netizens who commented under his posts also failed to tell his emotion, as the comment section is a mix of scolding the government and patriotic slogans. Maybe this post expressed mixed feelings at that very moment. Fortunately, for the quantitative analysis in this dissertation, we can simply code it as "not entertainment-oriented" without bothering to classify it further.

Third, the use of memes is ubiquitous. On Weibo, memes are pictures with text and should not be confused with emojis. Chinese netizens put text in memes hoping that censorship software can no longer detect them. The forms of emojis are relatively fixed; the text in a meme could be unique from person to person since everyone is inclined to type their innovative sentences on the original, blank meme. It is doable to use software to read the textual information, but that would lose the information hidden in the picture of the meme. A common practice for many scholars is to drop the memes from the text (Kong, 2019). This dissertation copied this method but replaced the memes with texts ([memes]) in the dataset, illustrating that there was originally a meme. When necessary, memes are saved in NVivo[20]. Fortunately, almost all visible comments have more than just emojis or memes, and they contain enough textual information to determine their category of strategy/tactics.

3.4.2 Limitations

The biggest limitation may be the inconsistent data collection methods. When the data collection procedure started in 2016, I possessed little knowledge of Python or machine learning theories. A rather comprehensive data collection method became available in 2019 with the development of NLP technologies (BERT came out at the end of 2018). However, a large amount

[20] Python can also store and locate Weibo pictures using *selelium*, *PIL* (*Image*) and *glob*. This dissertation used NVivo because of limited knowledge and computer resources.

of data from 2016 to 2017 was not fully collected due to resource limitations. As Weibo automatically blocks most posts published over half a year, most information is not re-collectible. Nevertheless, this dissertation argues that the 2016 and 2017 data are still valid and valuable. An impressive amount of data is collected and manually categorized. Although only the 100 most liked comments under each post were collected, they are still the most influential comments and are most able to guide public opinion. Therefore, these two years' data is kept in the dataset and would be used in case studies.

Another limitation has to do with the omitted posts. Outside of the Hot Topic List, posts with slightly less than 5,000 retweets, such as those with 3,000-4,000 retweets, are not collected. Unfortunately, we would never know the impact of this omission on my study. I choose 5,000 retweets as the starting point of data collection because there are so many posts with less than 5,000 retweets - dozens of them every day - and they would expand the already very large database by several dozen times. With my limited energy and ability, I do not have the confidence to handle that magnitude of data. That being said, I remain optimistic that the omission should not have too much impact on the research. I care about the most visible data, and these posts do not have a high priority.

Lastly, the dissertation does not look at posts that do not respond to a crisis event, assuming that they have nothing to do with crisis management. However, it could be a good strategy for the government to fill the Hot Topic List with irrelevant, soft, relaxing topics during a crisis. It could be distracting and entertaining at the same time. Future scholars might want to track how the Hot Topics change during a crisis and whether seemingly irrelevant topics serve to mitigate the crisis.

CHAPTER 4. THE ENTERTAINMENT-ORIENTED NARRATIVES

This chapter presents a comprehensive overview of entertainment-oriented narratives. The first section examines the purpose of the strategy. The second section outlines three types of narratives and their tactical goals. The third section provides statistical analysis for the strategy and then for each of the three types of narratives, examining when, by whom, and to what extent they are used. The final section summarizes the findings, discusses the limitations, and advocates for further case studies.

4.1 Purpose of Entertainment-oriented narratives

This dissertation argues that entertainment-oriented narratives are invented to serve three main purposes. First, they intend to relieve anxiety. The control of public anxiety is an important topic in crisis management. When the atmosphere is too tense, it can be a challenge to convince panicked citizens to follow the orders of an authoritarian government, and the result may be severe loss of life and property. The 2021 Henan flood is a good illustration. When people trapped in the floods saw Weibo videos of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) blocking the entrances to several already flooded subway stations to cover up the casualties, they refused to follow PLA's commands. In response to this serious development, Weibo quickly pushed several videos to Hot Topics, showing many people happily and busily catching fish in the floodwaters with the help of the PLA. The text accompanying the videos was also very light-hearted, using smiley emojis and sunshine emojis and describing the fishing activities as a "unique competition for a regional talent show." Such entertaining posts were more effective in reassuring the public and restoring their trust in the PLA than posts that unilaterally praised the PLA's heroic relief efforts.

The second purpose of entertainment narratives is to distract the focus from the crisis events, downplay the responsibility of political figures in the crisis, and thus deflect public criticism and questions about the government. In the COVID-19 crisis, for example, incompetent CCP officials who were supposedly responsible for the crisis appeared, at best, briefly in media reports and then disappeared again. As the public angrily demanded the arrest of these officials and even the ouster of Xi Jinping, who was slow to respond to the events, Weibo censored the content and began promoting light-hearted topics, such as showing how nurses taught COVID

patients to dance and funny things that happened to people while they were in quarantine. The events that were of most concern to the public gradually changed from the ills of the CCP bureaucracy and the responsibility of officials in the spread of COVID-19 to the happy daily life in the mobile field hospitals. Public attention was diverted, and the anger eventually subsided. By the fall of 2020, when COVID-19 was largely under control in the country, there was no longer any mass public interest in indignantly demanding that the officials involved be punished.

The third purpose of entertainment-oriented narratives is to discourage critical thinking. This can be achieved by creating a relaxed and unserious atmosphere or by directly attacking the critic. Of these two means, the former expresses that there is no need to take an event or an argument too seriously. As Neil Bozeman says in *Amusing Yourself to Death* (1985), no matter how tragic the evening news is, American citizens continue to watch news programs the next day in a calm state of mind because they are aware that a news program is "a form of entertainment, not education, reflection or catharsis" and "cannot be taken seriously ..... is all in fun" (p. 88). The entertainment-oriented narratives not only protect the government from public criticism but also ordinary netizens from criticism by other netizens and persecution by the government.

4.2 Three types of narratives

This dissertation defines that entertainment-oriented narratives (EoN) fall into three main types: narratives dominated by (1) reality fictionalization, (2) *moe (anime*-like cuteness), and (3) the jargon used by pop star ("idol") fans. Each of these three types has its own origin, development, and characteristics, achieving the purposes of entertainment-oriented narratives in slightly different ways. If we consider the entertainment-oriented narrative as a strategy to manage crises, the three types can be considered three tactics for doing so. Since some key concepts are unique in East Asian culture, it would be hard to find an appropriate English name for each of them. This section tries its best to illustrate the characteristics of these concepts with examples so that readers unfamiliar with East Asian culture can understand.

4.2.1 Reality fictionalization

Reality fictionalization casts real-life events as plays, movies, TV episodes, concerts, and talk shows – anything but reality. News is described as "the latest episode," and people in the news

are described as actors, singers, show hosts, and Disney fur characters, among other things. A typical post would start with "the latest US/UK/EU episode," and typical comments would reply, "I have my snacks ready," "what a good drama," and "this show is terrible; I want my money back."

While this looks much like framing – both use metaphor, hyperbole, and irony – they are essentially different. The framing theory argues that a political event could be reported to the public from different perspectives (Entman, 1993; Druckman, 2017a). A frame could use exaggerated metaphors to highlight the characteristics of a policy in order to guild the public to support or oppose it. For example, politicians prompt the public to vote against the immigration bill by describing refugees as an "impending tsunami" (Burgers et al., 2016). However, the goal of the fictionalization of reality is to make the public see an event as unimportant. Through light-hearted rhetoric, the public is led to believe that others will ridicule them if they discuss the events seriously or empathize with people in the events.

Reality fictionalization indicates that the crisis is not directly relevant to the audience and should not be treated earnestly. It creates distance between netizens and the event so that inhumane practices would not be strongly resisted. A direct effect of this kind of narratives is to persuade the public not to take events seriously but simply to "eat melons and watch the show (吃瓜看戏, chi gua kan xi)." They do not sympathize with the real-world victims and tend to interpret other people's sufferings in a callous and playful way. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe can be portrayed as an unexpectedly long soap opera, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was described as a mixed martial arts (MMA) tournament. The 2019 Hong Kong protesters were called cockroaches, and the video of them being caught and beaten by police was called "the best advertisement for cockroach removal." When two soldiers from Taiwan's Marine Corps drowned during a military exercise, netizens compared them to lame magicians who failed to perform an underwater escape.

Another trick is that, since the entire framework suggests an untrue story, publishers often include fake or completely wrong information in the news. For instance, when a car of the Beijing government violated traffic regulations and hit several bicyclists near Tiananmen Square, hot topics used "Speed Racer" and "Mad Max" as metaphors for the bicyclist, accusing them of riding too fast and getting into a traffic accident. In this way, the public does not have a reason to become discontented, and the government is safe from the crisis.

4.2.2 Moe

Moe (萌) is a Japanese word that means the kind of "cuteness" associated with big-eyed cartoon characters. The original meaning is germination or sprouting. In order to be *moe*, a thing should be so cute or vulnerable that a desire to protect and nurture it will sprout in the audience's heart. On Weibo, two forms of the moe tactic are used: moe anthropomorphism (萌え擬人化) and moe emojis.

Moe anthropomorphism is commonly used in anime and manga, where non-humans are given a cute appearance or other moe qualities (Galbraith, 2010). Scholars believe that moe culture can de-stress people and make them laugh at tedious and painful things (Jiang, 2011). The Japanese have long been using the moe tactic to portray controversial concepts as lovely, friendly, and harmless. In the 2008 animation series *Hetalia*, Japan personalized countries to educate the young generation about world history. In the story of WWII, countries in the war were just a bunch of young men playing together, some of them with dirtier clothes than their companions. Japan and Germany were portrayed as handsome and funny, and the Holocausts perpetrated by them were unsurprisingly untold.

The Japanese government has also tried to use the moe tactic to defuse government crises. In 2021, the Japanese government officially decided to discharge nuclear wastewater into the sea, which still contains the radioactive substance tritium. To pacify the worried and angry citizens that the radioactive tritium was safe, the nuclear disaster recovery team produced a brochure portraying the radioactive tritium as a cute character. The person in charge of the recovery team admitted that this image was chosen to create a sense of "approachability" for tritium (the Guardian, ..).

For decades, the CCP has despised Japanese animation. Nevertheless, as the generation that grew up watching Japanese anime and reading Japanese manga became the backbone of society, the Chinese government came to realize the utility of moe in the political field. In the early 21st century, the CCP began to fund artists to create a positive comic character of the country (Li & Huang, 2021). Many artists used the image of a dragon, but the final winner was a cute rabbit. In 2015, the Xinhua News Agency and the Communist Youth League of China (CYLC) jointly recommended the animation of *Year Hare Affairs* (那年那兔那些事 [those years, that hare, those stories]) on Weibo, where China was depicted as a rabbit. In the following interview, the author stated that the rabbit won the national image contest because it looked more harmless and adorable

than a dragon (Lin, 2015). The young Chinese soon learned to defend the country using this moe character. When the CCP is criticized, Weibo netizens always send out the animated rabbit picture with the text “What bad intentions can such a cute thing have?” to make the critics look heartless and vicious.

When dealing with online crises, the Chinese government proactively uses moe anthropomorphism to propagates its coercive policies. Police dogs, handcuffs, armored vehicles, birth control rings, and other things have all had various moe images. Nuclear weapons are portrayed as talking mushrooms, bullets as peanuts, and country-to-country conflict as two cute little animals or countryballs fighting without causing any wound.

The “non-real” effect of the moe anthropomorphism is, to some extent, similar to reality fictionalization. Nonetheless, the emphases are different. The focus of reality fictionalization is to disinterest people by denying the reality of crisis events, while the focus of moe is to forcibly add elements of cuteness and harmlessness to objects so that people could love them.

Ordinary netizens are also actively using the moe tactic on social media. This may be a lesson learned from interactions with the government and other actors. When netizens find their neutral or critical comments are censored, they are likely to consider applying some tactic in the next round of interaction to avoid being censored again. Since the moe narrative is being used by the government on a large scale, it should be approved and low-risk. In the next round of crises, when netizens find that comments using the cute narrative could survive censorship, they will conclude that it is safer to employ this tactic than plain text to express sarcasm and criticism. In the future crisis events, they would use the moe narrative from the start.

The doge emojis (the fourth and fifth emojis on the left of the last row of the figure below) are the most iconic symbols of this kind. This series of memes became popular in 2010, when Atsuko Sato, a Japanese netizen, posted a photo of her pet dog making a curious sidelong glance and misspelled the word “dog” as “doge.” The doge meme icon is widely considered to refer to something funny and unserious, like a joke. Chinese netizens often add it at the end of comments or posts to express that their views are not serious and do not deserve to be held accountable by authority. It is so universally used that “dog’s head to save life (狗头保命, gou tou bao ming)” has become an idiom of the contemporary Chinese internet.

Figure 4.1 Typical face emojis on Weibo

For the government, it feels like it has succeeded in taming the netizens, making their expressions cute and less offensive. It is certainly supportive of this outcome. However, the majority of netizens are not really docile. They gradually added a sarcastic, conspiratorial meaning to all the cute expressions. Smiling faces created to represent happiness can also indicate impatience, mockery, and dismissiveness. An emoji with a bouquet of flowers to express appreciation can be used to say “I am so happy to see you dead, let me put this flower on your grave.” The emoji “hug,” which used to show love and support, could express unspeakable anger at criminals protected by influential officials or organizations. For example, in protest against the China Central Television (CCTV) protecting a male sexual harasser, a netizen wrote, “Zhu Jun baby, fly with confidence, CCTV mommy always follows you [hug] [hug].” In such cases, emojis express netizens’ feelings about social crises in a gentle and seemingly harmless way.

Figure 4.2 The screenshot of the Zhu Jun comment

This practice among netizens eventually affected the government. The kinds of moe emojis they used became gradually fixed, such as police, thumbs up, sun, flowers, and red hearts. Any emoji with a smiley or laughing face was rarely used. Nonetheless, the texts of their posts still

contain moe features, such as deliberately pretending to be a child with a lisp, and using affectionate words translated from Japanese to address government parties in crisis events.

4.2.3 Fan jargon

When browsing Weibo, the term "阿中哥哥 (a zhong ge ge [A-Zhong brother])" comes up a lot. The character "阿 (a)" is a prefix used to designate a close and beloved young man, and "中 (zhong)" refers to China. However, the word "哥哥" does not refer to "brother" in the sense of kinship but is a translation of the Korean word "Oppa," which can mean a brother, a lover, or a husband. South Korean fans use this endearment to refer to their favorite pop stars to show their affection. The term "A-Zhong Brother" follows that pattern of fan jargon and makes the nation of China into a pop star to idolize.

In China, the use of fan jargon in crisis management is ubiquitous. Mistakenly equating idols with Western pop musicians and ignoring the political structures behind the idol industry will lead to seriously biased conclusions about China politics. To understand how the idol culture has played a role in political crises, one must first understand its history and development. This subsection shows the CCP has made the country an idol in concept, how this decision has created the nationalist fan jargon, and how the jargon works.

4.2.3.1 Making the nation into a pop-star idol

East Asian countries use the English term "idol" (Korean: 아이돌, aidol; Japanese: アイドル, aidoru; Chinese: 爱豆, aido) to refer to pop-stars, like the ones in K-pop music and dance. Everything about these stars is carefully crafted by entertainment companies (Elfving-Hwang, 2018). The personality they display in public is not real, but is designed to meet the needs of the market. An essential part of an idol's job is to maintain the designed personality in any form of media exposure. Therefore, their social media accounts are usually controlled by the company experts who can ensure that the post contents are consistent.

A critical characteristic of idols is their "parasitic social relationship" with their fans (Jung, 2012). The entertainment company carefully induces fans to develop a family-like connection with their idols and strengthen this connection over time so that fans will passionately and irrationally

support their idols, no matter what happens, at any expense (Earl & Kimport, 2009; Jenkins, 2012). Next, the entertainment company announces that the amount of career support an idol can receive depends on how much money fans spend for him or her. Fans' affection for the stars can drive them to spend money without hesitation to meet the purchase goals given by the company. In 2014, a Chinese fan raised a total of 1.8 million RMB to buy 36,000 CDs for his idol; in 2015, a Japanese fan bought five truckloads of CDs to help his idol gain career resources (Guanchao.com, 2015). This kind of emotional kidnap proved so successful that all East Asian countries quickly copied this business model.

Fans' passion expands far beyond product purchases. They get actively involved in social and cultural activities for their idols, such as fundraising, donating to charities, volunteering in emergencies, and protesting against media reform of laws and policies (Jenkin, 2006). They are also active online, defending their idols against critics by posting hateful comments on the critics' web pages, sending horrific photos and threatening letters to them, or even using violence to attack them in person.

In China, young fans of South Korean idols have long been stigmatized and scorned by the government and the public as "the brain-damaged (脑残, nao can)." Their public image has been childish, politically insensitive, and feminine. In 2010, Chinese fans of a K-pop idol group argued with the police over minor issues, and the Chinese netizens rallied in one of the largest gaming forums at the time, the Baidu Tieba of "World of Warcraft," calling for a "Holy War (Jihad) against the fangirls. " They claimed that "the Jihad never dies before the brain-damaged ones die out (脑残不死，圣战不止)." The idol group's official website and fan forums were paralyzed, and the South Korean governmental website was also down for four hours. In response to this series of cyber-attacks, one of the Chinese official media, the Global Times, commented (Wu, 2010): "There are no idols before the state."

However, the CCP soon discovered that nationalist slogans were not as attractive as carefully tailored idols. In 2013, when a Taiwanese idol singer Zhang Hang received a Republic of China flag from a Taiwanese student on stage during a performance in the UK, a mainland student shouted out "no politics today" on the spot (Zhang, 2013). In order to compete with the idols for the passion and attention of the youth citizens, in January 2014, the Communist Youth League of China (CYLC) adopted a Five-Year Development Outline, vowing to focus on forming

a youth ideological guidance system with methods that are "more attractive, affectionate, and infectious" (Lai, 2019). In the same month, the CYLC opened its official account on Weibo.

The CYLC did not succeed at first. On the eve of National Day, 2014, it launched the first attempt in the digital age to interact with netizens, encouraging them to take a photo with the national flag and post their love for the country on Weibo. However, only a handful of people responded to the campaign, and most netizens remained critical. The turning point came in January 2015 when the CYLC invited a Chinese idol trained in South Korea to take a photo with the national emblem and post it on Weibo. The post was quickly occupied by the idol's fans. They flooded the comments section with emojis of the national flag and red loving heart. The CYLC realized the potential of this passionate population and soon invited two other Chinese idols for a photo in the Great Hall of the People, a state building that only allows senior officials to enter. After the photos were published, more than 110,000 messages from fans followed the CYLC's Weibo account, praising the country for being as young, beautiful and, powerful as these idols. By this time, the Communist Party had confirmed its use of idols to garner support from young people. As the then director of the new media department of CYLC stated in a public training session (Bo, 2015), "We concluded that the only thing that can defeat the brainwashed fans of Western publicists is the brainwashed fans of idols."

Of course, idol fans did not suddenly fall in love with the country. Scholars argue that what the fans really care about is the reward or punishment their idol would receive. By inviting idols to events, the government sends a clear signal that only those idols who can turn their fans into nationalists will receive more resources (Lai, 2019; Zhang & Negus, 2020). If fans do not support the state, idols may be deemed useless and be blocked or banned. In an authoritarian state, the political sensitivity of fans is as crucial as their purchasing power to ensure the survival and popularity of idols.

While idols and fans were docile, the CCP was not satisfied. First, no matter how obedient idols are, they still cannot be fully controlled, and their ability to mobilize fans could backfire at any time. For example, when an idol was reported to have visited the Yasukuni Shrine with a smiling face, his fans massively defended him online, even questioning the government's nationalist education. Second, the market size of fan economy-related industries will exceed $640 billion in 2020 and is expected to exceed $1 trillion in 2023 (Ariadne Consulting, 2020). Why should such a huge economic benefit go to the entertainment companies instead of the government?

In addition, since idols are products that rely on the management of entertainment companies, there is no reason why the nation of China could not become an idol. Entertainment companies can create huge fan bases through pyramidal marketing and brainwashing, and so can the CCP.

In 2016, the Global Times published an article that changed its 2010 slogan, "there are no idols before the state," to "the state is the biggest idol." At the same time, many Chinese netizens pushed past China's internet firewalls and launched massive nationalist campaigns on Facebook and Instagram. The comments they left personified China as an idol, claiming that "my brother (idol) has been on the stage for thousands of years and has the most seniority in the world." The term "A-Zhong Brother" was used in public for the first time, and the fans created a profile for him, listing his name, age (5000), appearance (the Chinese map), and much more. Scholars consider this the moment the birth of fan nationalism (Liu, 2019). Since then, the government has begun to educate the public that ordinary citizens should love and defend their country as much as the "brain-damaged" fans.

The Chinese government soon got a taste of being embraced by fans. Fans dedicate purchasing power national flags, official mascots, patriotic songs, movies, and TV shows of Communist history. When the official accounts publish posts commemorating national holidays, such as Party Day, Army Day, and National Day, fans immediately retweet them, usually at a volume of 200,000 or more. When other netizens criticize the government, the nationalist fans flood the relevant topics, praising the central government, criticizing those who expressed their resentment against the government as "enemy fans," and reporting them to the government. In 2019, during Hong Kong's anti-revision movement, nationalist fans scouted netizens who expressed support or sympathy for Hong Kong protesters, argued with them, sent death threats via private message, and publicized detailed personal information of these people on Weibo and WeChat. The fans also proactively reported to these people's workplaces, schools, and local police stations, demanding that anyone who did not defend the country be fired by companies, expelled from school, or even arrested.

Fans are able to accomplish these massive tasks because they are highly organized. Kim (2011) argued that the power structure of idol fans could be "as authoritarian as that of political groups," where the lower-ranking fans tend to follow the orders of higher-ranking fans without asking any questions. There is also a widespread ethic of responsibility among the fans that makes them believe they must be committed to supporting their idols, or else they are traitors (Lee, 2015;

Zhang & Fung, 2017). In China, a fans organization is usually organized by the pyramidal structured QQ chat groups and WeChat groups. The entertainment company contacts the top chat groups to assign tasks, and the members in these groups pass the information down to lower-ranking groups to ensure that work is accomplished on time and precisely.

On Weibo, the fan organization typically holds several to dozens of teams, the most important of which is the highly organized data group (数据组, shu ju zu), under which each sub-team has a clear responsibility. For example, the retweet team (轮博组, lun bo zu) retweets every post the idol publishes online. The comment control team (控评组, kong ping zu) controls the comments under every post related to the idol, aiming to leave a positive impression to the public and eradicate negative comments. The anti-criticism team (反黑组, fan hei zu) searches the idol's name on social media platforms non-stop every day to identify the "enemy fans" (黑粉, hei fen) who criticized the idol, and then report them to the data group so that the latter could initiate cyberattacks on the enemies. Yan (2016) has described these fans organizations as military organizations, ready to enter the public opinion battlefield at any time.

4.2.3.2 Fan community: Worldview and key terms

While supporting and defending their idols, fans developed a unique form of language in the fan community. According to Oxford Languages, jargon is "special words or expressions used by a particular profession or group and are difficult for others to understand." Indeed, this jargon is deliberately invented to prevent outsiders from understanding the language so that the insiders can immediately identify their peers (Boggs, 2019). Jargon covers all aspects of fan behavior, from single words to combined sentences, idiomatic phrases, self-generated idioms, abbreviations, and more.

Different fans would have slightly different terms based on their idols' experiences, but one thing is common: a worldview in which pop stars should be idolized and treated as a god without reason. In this worldview, every human being is a fan of at least one idol, and those who attack and criticize idols must do so to please idols of their own. For example, people who criticize the Chinese government are highly likely fans of the United States. Therefore, a message can be categorized as nationalist content or entertainment-oriented narratives based on the worldview it

conveys. For example, “Love China forever [fist]” is nationalistic, and “Love A-Zhong Brother [heart], all enemy fans go away [anger]” is an entertainment-oriented narrative.

The most widely used terms reflect the worldview of fans and are relatively easy to identify. For example, “true master (正主, zheng zhu)” refers to the real idol a person supports. Fans believe that the idol is their master and that every person follows an idol. Therefore, they often ask about the identity of the true master of the enemies when arguing online. Because the word corresponding to “master” in Chinese is “slave,” this term has been criticized by people who do not have an idol to love.

Since idols should be defended at all costs, the priority of fans when their peers are criticized by the public (for stupid comments) is not to protect them but to cut off relationships. The fan base will announce that the fans who express critical opinions about the star are nothing but wolves among sheep – “enemy fans (黑粉, hei fen)” or “cloaked enemy fans (披皮黑, pi pi hei).” These enemy fans would pretend to love idol A and act obnoxiously, thereby damaging idol A’s reputation, but are in fact fans of idol B. In fan jargon, the word “黑 (hei [black])” means the action of slander and disinformation. An enemy fan is therefore a person who slanders and criticizes an idol maliciously. For example, once the public questions a nationalist fan’s speech, other fans would immediately identify him or her as an enemy fan whose real idol is the “Eagle-chan (鷹酱, ying jiang)[21]” instead of the A-Zhong Brother.

There are many other important terms that are frequently used to defend the Chinese government. For example, fans often regard themselves as “life fans (生命粉, sheng ming fen)” and “only fans (唯粉, wei fen)” of the CCP. Some of them also identify themselves as “CP fans (CP 粉),” which refers to someone that view the married couple of Xi Jinping and Peng Liyuan as idols, or “family fans (家族粉, jia zu fen),” which refers to people who support every “family member” of the whole Communist Party. The variants and functions of these terms will be discussed in detail in the case study chapters.

[21] The moe nickname for the United States. Since the white-headed sea eagle is the national bird, the *Year Hare Affairs* animation used the eagle as the moe anthropomorphic image of the United States. The “small eagle” has then become the nickname for it. The word “-chan (ちゃん)” is Japanese. It is added to the end of a word to address fondness (and contemp or mockery).

The most important terms to describe activities are “chart-hitting (打榜, da bang),” “fan-supporting (应援, ying yuan),” and “anti-smears (反黑, fan hei).” The term “chart-hitting” originally referred to the fan organizations’ act of pushing the idols’ songs up the music charts using money. On Weibo, chart-hitting means to promote a topic or a post to the most visible spot of the hot topic chart using massive retweets, comments, and likes. Fan-support is translated from Japanese, 応援 (ōen), and refers to the cheering activities for their idols at concerts. One of the most common types of fan-support is “da call (打 call),” which is a transliteration of Japanese “コール.” On Weibo, fans put their cheers and slogans in massive retweets and comments. The term “anti-smears” describes the activities to defend the reputation of their idols against the rumors sent by the enemy fans. The “China anti-smears station (祖国反黑站, zu guo fan hei zhan)” is a site established for A-Zhong Brother. On this site, nationalist fans spontaneously post and spread various texts, pictures, and videos to praise the achievements of patriotic groups, such as Olympic athletes and soldiers at the national border fronts. Their principal interest, of course, is to expose “enemy fans” against the nation, such as the netizens who supported the independence of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang.

By making the nation an idol, the CCP reaped blind support from a massive amount of fans with the enormous organizational capacity to defend the idol they love. The fans cultivate a cyber-culture where one has to prove one’s love for the country before any argument can be made, and the correctness of the argument is based on the degree of love. When the country has been criticized, there is no need to think about whether the country is wrong or where it can be improved. All critics are classified as “enemy fans” who should be blocked, censored, or arrested. For example, when a teenage girl committed suicide in 2017 because of forced marriage, the first thing that nationalist fans did was to search the records the girl left on Weibo. The logic is that if she was not a fan of A-Zhong Brother, she deserved to die.

Scholars often argue that so-called fans are actually employed by the government because an average netizen would not have enough resources to identify different political opinion holders (Chen, 2021). Unfortunately, the lack of information online makes it challenging to distinguish fan groups from other patriotic groups, such as the Fifty Cents Party, the Self-Sufficient Fifty Cents Party, and the Little Pinks. The public tends to recognize all these groups as government watchdogs without distinguishing them.

During a crisis event, groups that use fan jargon may experience awkward moments. On the one hand, ordinary netizens rarely buy into their argument, resulting in this tactic being less effective than the other two in mitigating a crisis. On the other hand, many male netizens who passionately support the government have a contemptuous attitude toward women and consider the government's act of incorporating them as an insult (Liu, 2019). These male netizens make up a large portion of the red public accounts' followers. Consequently, the red public accounts rarely retweet the posts or reply to the comments that use fan jargon, reducing the narrative's influence.

Nevertheless, the government continues to cultivate its fan community. The reason may be that the government intends to try out whether fan jargon can be gradually adopted by netizens, just like the moe narrative. It is also possible that the government sees these fans as low-cost, low-maintenance fighters rather than crisis-mitigating measures, so the ability of fan jargon to de-escalate a crisis is not a concern.

4.3 Data analysis

This section examines who uses entertainment-oriented narratives, when, to what extent, and at what stages of a crisis. The first subsection gives the analytical results of the entertainment-oriented narratives, and the second to fourth subsections give analytical results of each of the three types of narratives. Each subsection presents the data distribution in the post and comments, data visualization, and interpretation. At the end of this section is a summary of findings and a discussion of limitations.

4.3.1 The entertainment-oriented narratives in general

From 2016 to 2021, government-related accounts published 602 crisis-related visible posts, 300 of which used entertainment-oriented narratives (EN). Red public accounts made 421 posts; 256 contained EN. General public accounts made 680 posts with 297 EN. Ordinary netizens made 384 posts, and only 74 contained EN. In general, the red public accounts are the most frequent users of the entertainment-oriented narratives in posts (60.81%), followed by government accounts (49.83%), general public accounts (43.68%), and then ordinary netizens (19.27%).

When the data is broken down by year and crisis stage, the difference between actors becomes evident. The statistics table below shows that, between 2016 and 2019, the government

gradually reduced the number of entertainment-oriented narrative posts from 61.43% to 31.58% and red public accounts from 67.86% to 53.6%, while the general public accounts gradually increased EN posts from 53.57% to 62.16% and ordinary netizens from 12.2% to 36%. In 2020, the situation reversed: the number of EN posts from government and red public accounts increased precipitously while posts from general public accounts and ordinary netizens plummeted.

Table 4.1 Entertainment-oriented narratives proportions in posts

		2016	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*
Government	average	0.6143	0.6066	0.5441	0.3158	0.6197	0.4930
	emergence	0.7647	0.5625	0.5000	0.3455	0.5909	0.3810
	development	0.5435	0.5882	0.5581	0.2414	0.6623	0.5143
	closing	0.7143	0.7273	0.5455	0.4167	0.5581	0.6000
Red pub	average	0.6786	0.5641	0.6667	0.5360	0.6571	0.6220
	emergence	0.6667	0.5000	0.3750	0.4565	0.5000	0.6190
	development	0.6471	0.5484	0.7333	0.5811	0.7407	0.5909
	closing	0.8000	1.0000	0.7500	0.6000	0.7059	0.7059
General pub	average	0.5357	0.5224	0.4386	0.6216	0.2539	0.3893
	emergence	0.1818	0.5385	0.3750	0.4230	0.1538	0.1538
	development	0.5574	0.5000	0.4242	0.6733	0.3107	0.4301
	closing	0.7500	0.6250	0.6250	0.6190	0.2800	0.5833
Netizens	average	0.1220	0.2667	0.2931	0.3600	0.1007	0.0645
	emergence	0.0000	0.2222	0.3636	0.2759	0.0417	0.0667
	development	0.1111	0.2353	0.2927	0.4688	0.1341	0.0000
	closing	0.4286	0.5000	0.1667	0.2857	0.1053	0.1429

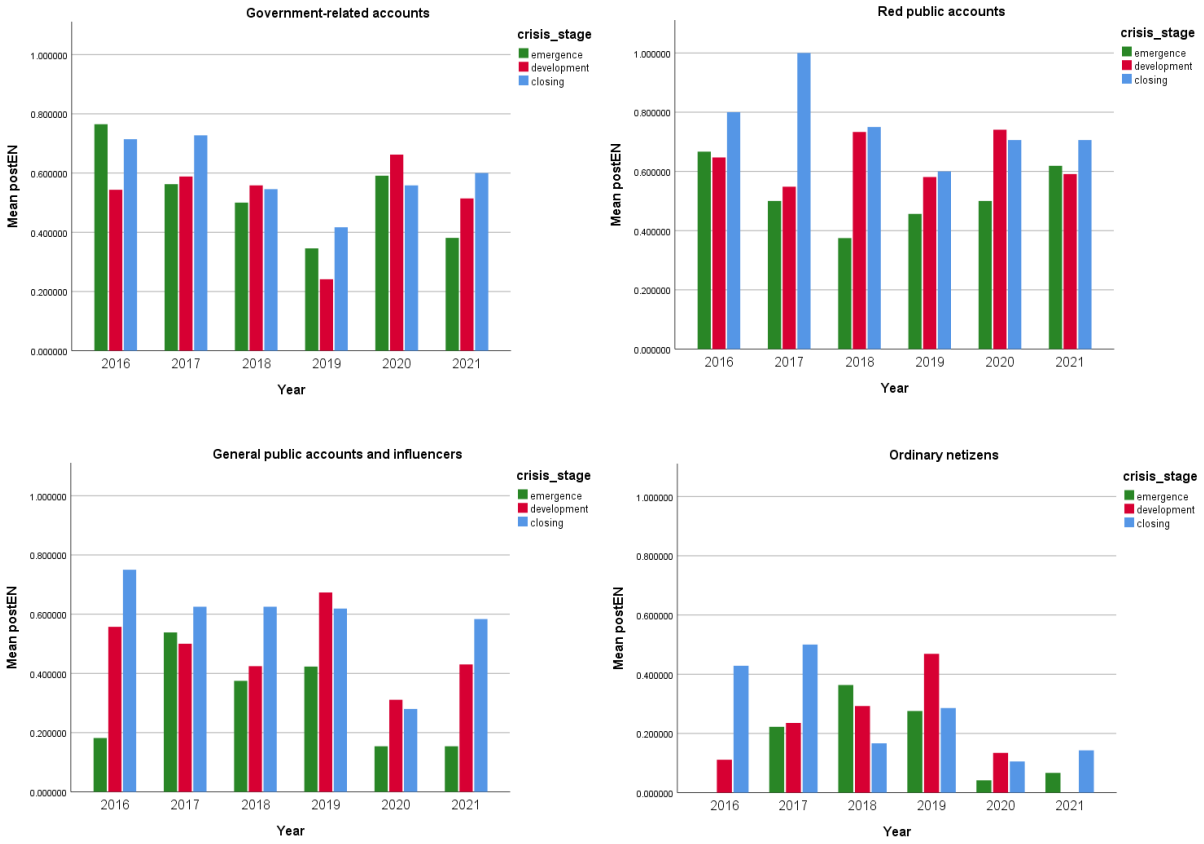

Figure 4.3 Barplots of entertainment-oriented narratives proportions in posts

The differences and connections among the actors can be clearly and directly seen in the figure. In 2016, the government and red public accounts used EN at about the same rate, while general public accounts tended to be cautious at the beginning of events. This difference may be because the red public accounts used EN with the government's authorization, while general public accounts did not have such internal information and could only gradually estimate the benefits of EN from the practices of the government and red public accounts. By 2017, the frequency of EN application of general public accounts increased and remained stable. By 2020 and 2021, general public accounts suddenly reduced the use of EN significantly, which was similar to ordinary netizens' practice. The behavioral change of the general public accounts over the years indicates their effort to meet official standards to avoid censorship while paying attention to netizens to ensure the size of their followers.

The most reasonable explanation for the sudden drop in EN usage among netizens in 2020 is the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic outbreak was the biggest crisis for the Communist regime

in the last few years, affecting millions of people and causing public outrage. The speed of censorship could not keep up with the new criticism generated (Allen, 2019) and its criteria were slightly relaxed, resulting in the survival and wide distribution of a large number of neutral posts. The sudden and massive use of entertainment-oriented narratives by the government-related and red public accounts in 2020 proves that they regard them as the most effective strategy in times of significant crises.

Derived from the visualization, the COVID-19 may have forced the government to revert to the heavy use of EN. Before the pandemic, it gradually reduced the number of EN posts. It might also be the case that something extraordinary happened in 2019. Without digging into the cases, no conclusion can be drawn.

While general public accounts re-increased the publication of EN posts in 2021, the netizens published even fewer EN posts. It would take longer for individuals to recover emotionally from the trauma of the pandemic. It is also possible that their original use of EN was to mimic the government and the red public accounts (which is true according to the graph), and the distrust that arose during the pandemic caused them to resist EN.

The proportion of EN in comments is generally lower than in posts. While the proportion of the EN comments under governmental and red public posts remained relatively stable, the number of EN comments under general public accounts and ordinary netizens' posts dropped from 2018 to 2020. While the government accounts doubled their publication of entertainment-oriented narratives posts in 2020, the comments under these posts changed from 42.57% to 42.85%, which can hardly be regarded as a meaningful increase. Even though the government published massive EN posts, the public did not follow suit to make the situation more manageable. They still tend to discuss the crises neutrally and seriously. The proportion of EN comments under red public accounts was higher than that of governmental accounts, suggesting that netizens may have different expectations of the government and red public accounts.

Table 4.2 Entertainment-oriented narratives proportions in comments

		2016	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*
Government	average	0.5754	0.5500	0.6283	0.4257	0.4285	0.5040
	emergence	0.6892	0.5775	0.5804	0.5076	0.5430	0.5362
	development	0.5538	0.5486	0.6860	0.4038	0.4303	0.5049

Table 4.2 continued

	closing	0.4792	0.4880	0.3281	0.3408	0.3073	0.4249
Red pub	average	0.7346	0.5734	0.7383	0.5612	0.7403	0.6123
	emergence	0.6629	0.5563	0.6343	0.5053	0.7772	0.6447
	development	0.8029	0.5800	0.7729	0.5930	0.7685	0.6316
	closing	0.4472	0.4670	0.6976	0.4751	0.4191	0.4588
General pub	average	0.4372	0.4605	0.4305	0.2396	0.1576	0.2550
	emergence	0.5221	0.3631	0.2749	0.3786	0.1976	0.2220
	development	0.4305	0.4990	0.5169	0.2034	0.1322	0.2662
	closing	0.3549	0.3607	0.3736	0.3009	0.1785	0.2007
Netizens	average	0.1502	0.1739	0.2349	0.1404	0.0781	0.1704
	emergence	0.1675	0.0710	0.2088	0.0955	0.0711	0.1435
	development	0.1211	0.2346	0.2464	0.1654	0.0693	0.2136
	closing	0.2095	0.1011	0.1794	0.1956	0.1863	0.1570

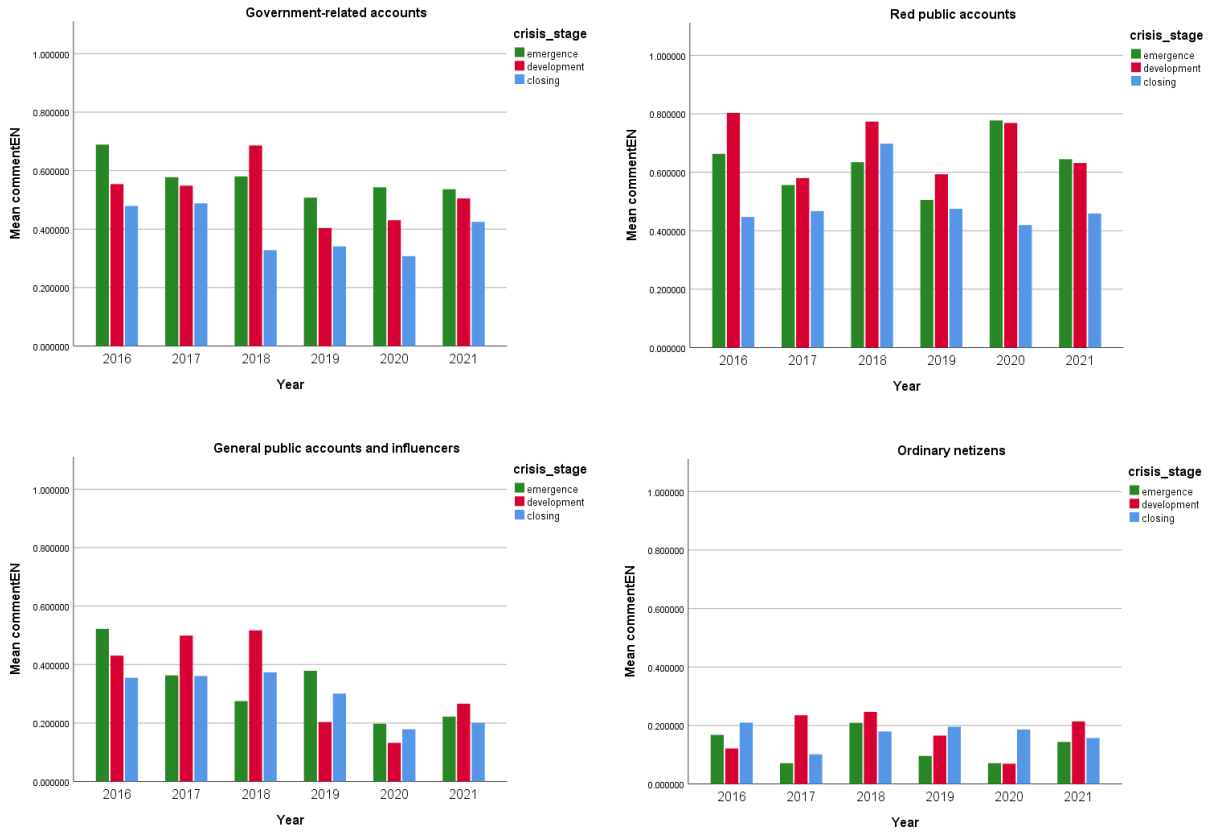

Figure 4.4 Barplots of entertainment-oriented narratives proportions in comments

It is obvious from the graph that EN is used more heavily in government and red public accounts, both in posts and in comments. This phenomenon indicates that this kind of narrative is not naturally presented but deliberately created and launched by the government. The EN comment proportion of the ordinary netizens should be close to the "natural" distribution of the narrative.

Notably, comments under government posts tend to use more EN in the starting stage of a crisis than in the development and closing stage. On the other hand, other accounts almost always receive fewer EN comments in the starting stage than in the developing stage. Perhaps this is because the government had the most eager (or loyal) followers who would apply whatever narratives the posts used. Perhaps the government deliberately controlled the content of visible comments, making netizens believe that other people were not seriously concerned about the crisis, thus guiding public opinion.

4.3.2 Reality fictionalization

From 2016 to 2021, the government accounts published 20.85% of its posts using the reality fictionalization narratives. Red public accounts were the most enthusiastic about this kind of entertainment-oriented narrative, as 23.45% of their posts were written with it; general public accounts followed with an average of 22.74%. The netizens only wrote 4.62% of their posts using this kind of narrative, which is understandable because it is hard to view the crisis as a theatrical production when one was involved in it.

Table 4.3 Reality fictionalization proportions in posts

		2016	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*
Government	average	0.4562	0.3366	0.0972	0.1300	0.1182	0.1638
	emergence	0.5294	0.2500	0.0714	0.0909	0.1818	0.1905
	development	0.3043	0.3529	0.1163	0.0920	0.0649	0.1143
	closing	0.5714	0.3636	0.0909	0.1875	0.1395	0.2000
Red pub	average	0.6082	0.4419	0.0267	0.1872	0.0634	0.1454
	emergence	0.5000	0.5000	0.0000	0.1305	0.0882	0.0476
	development	0.4706	0.3548	0.0667	0.2027	0.0556	0.0455
	closing	0.8000	0.5000	0.0000	0.2000	0.0588	0.2941
General pub	average	0.3211	0.3661	0.1235	0.2747	0.1384	0.1790
	emergence	0.1818	0.3846	0.1250	0.0769	0.0615	0.1154
	development	0.2951	0.3478	0.1212	0.2673	0.1553	0.1398
	closing	0.4167	0.3750	0.1250	0.3810	0.1600	0.2500
Netizens	average	0.0000	0.0000	0.0377	0.1972	0.0195	0.0000
	emergence	0.0000	0.0000	0.0909	0.1379	0.0000	0.0000
	development	0.0000	0.0000	0.0488	0.2813	0.0488	0.0000
	closing	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.1429	0.0000	0.0000

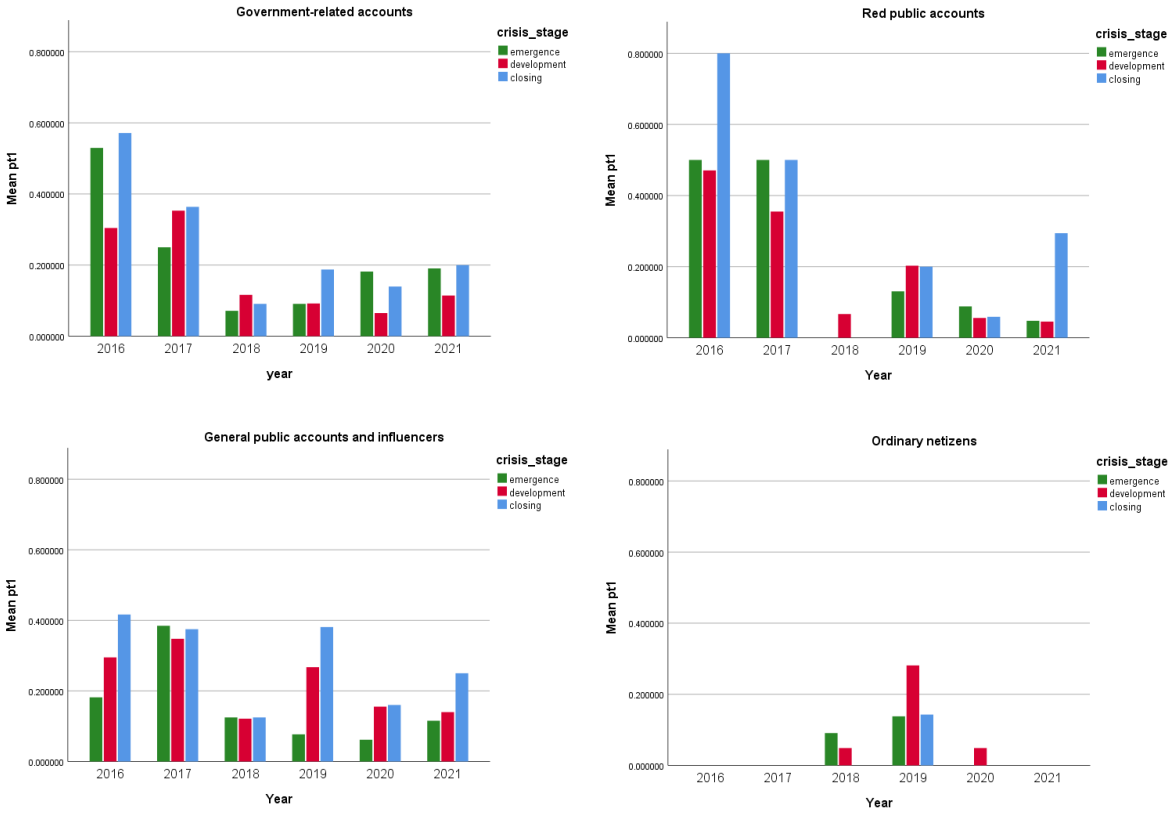

Figure 4.5 Barplots of proportions of reality fictionalization in posts

The graph shows that reality fictionalization is a fairly popular type of entertainment-oriented narrative. In 2016, the general public accounts gradually learned to use it, and by 2017, they were almost as active as the red public accounts. After three long years of learning, netizens finally used the narrative on a larger scale in 2019, and the EN proportion in their visible posts was even higher than that of the government and red public accounts. Perhaps the success of this tactic among the public has allowed the government no longer need to lead the usage of this tactic but can post content in a neutral or serious tone to maintain an authoritative image.

In 2021, while the general public accounts resumed the usage of reality fictionalization, netizens stopped doing so. They did not make one single visible post using this narrative. One possible reason is that the pandemic made them realize that the threat to their human rights was far higher than those Americans, Europeans, and Hong Kongers they had previously ridiculed. After discovering this fact, all the ridicule seems ironic.

Compared to posts, there are more reality fictionalization narratives in comments. The proportion of comments with reality fictionalization for each actor remained relatively consistent. Although there were changes from year to year, the rates were not drastic.

Table 4.4 Reality fictionalization proportions in comments

		2016	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*
Government	average	0.4390	0.3573	0.3916	0.3379	0.2164	0.3646
	emergence	0.4266	0.4702	0.4158	0.3892	0.2131	0.3822
	development	0.4756	0.4267	0.5339	0.3556	0.2800	0.4018
	closing	0.4085	0.2315	0.2372	0.2945	0.1544	0.3185
Red pub	average	0.5394	0.4946	0.2821	0.4562	0.2496	0.2692
	emergence	0.5129	0.5046	0.3665	0.4227	0.3274	0.3884
	development	0.6913	0.5278	0.2917	0.5083	0.2528	0.2971
	closing	0.4008	0.4563	0.2304	0.4208	0.2075	0.1821
General pub	average	0.3589	0.3267	0.1347	0.2168	0.0874	0.1390
	emergence	0.4325	0.3114	0.1042	0.2105	0.1005	0.1423
	development	0.4087	0.3589	0.1653	0.1594	0.0768	0.1639
	closing	0.2723	0.3022	0.1194	0.2773	0.0914	0.1125
Netizens	average	0.1045	0.0726	0.1083	0.0800	0.0537	0.0944
	emergence	0.1007	0.0502	0.0859	0.0454	0.0304	0.0552
	development	0.0835	0.1068	0.1248	0.0829	0.0288	0.1076
	closing	0.1274	0.0496	0.1031	0.0945	0.0653	0.1257

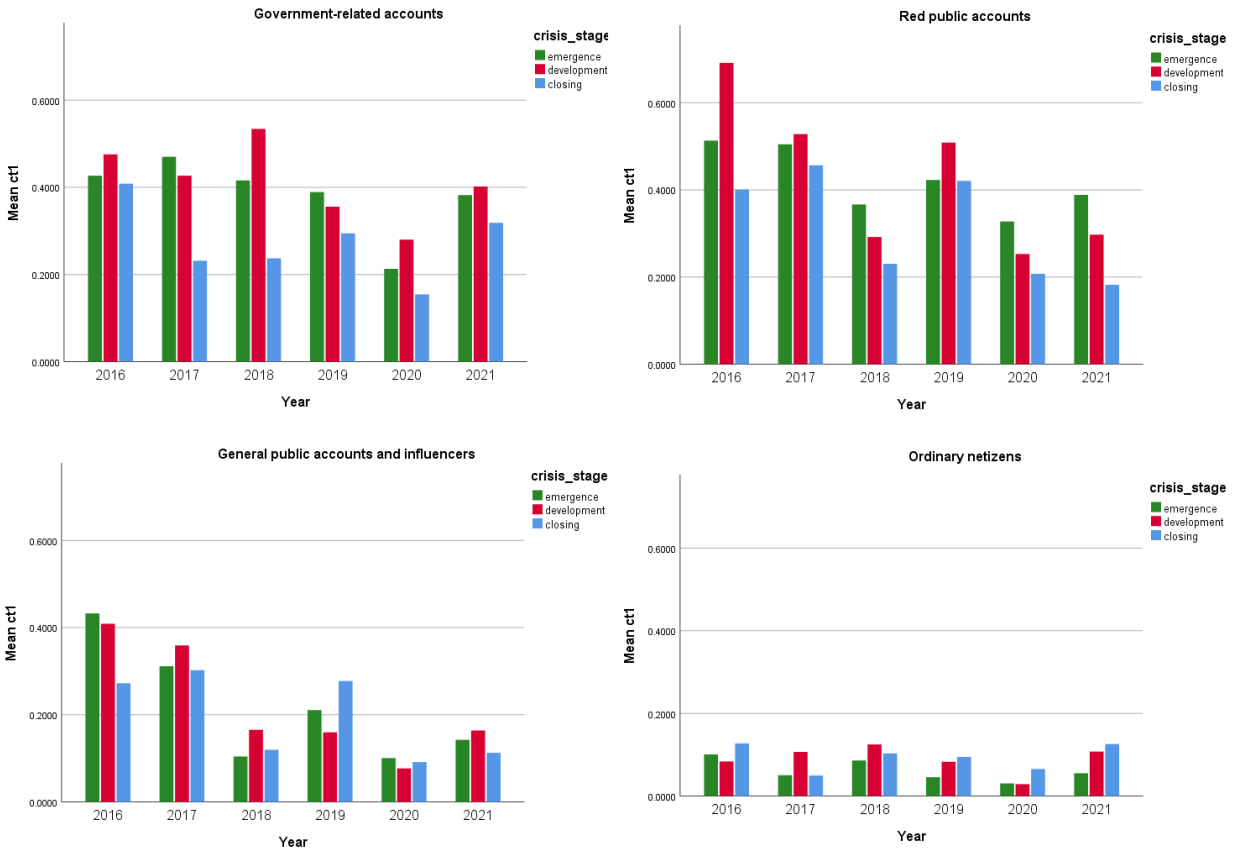

Figure 4.6 Barplots of proportions of reality fictionalization in comments

On average, 36.5% of the comments under governmental posts used the tactic of reality fictionalization. 39.31% of the comments under the red public posts and 33.17% under the general public accounts used this tactic. The commentators under the netizens' posts were not particularly fond of the tactic, at only 8.51%.

4.3.3 Moe

On average, 25.71% of the governmental posts, 32.74% of the red public posts, 22.55% of the general public posts, and 18.24% of the netizens' posts used the moe tactic. According to the barplots below, the use of moe in governmental posts increased strikingly in 2020 when the big crisis COVID-19 took place. Perhaps acting cute in such a circumstance could reduce the criticism the government receives.

Both the red public accounts and the general public accounts used the moe tactic frequently. The difference is that in the crisis of 2020, the general public accounts reduced the use of moe,

while the red public accounts did not change much. In the following year, the general public accounts increased the use of moe, while the red public accounts scaled it down instead. This suggests that the red public accounts used moe to manage the critics towards the government during the COVID-19 crisis instead of attracting more followers. When the crisis was over in 2021, there was no longer a need to use the tactic so massively. The moe narratives were not often used in posts when the crises occurred. The proportion of moe posts gradually increased as the crises developed and reached climax towards the closing stage.

Table 4.5 Moe proportions in posts

		2016	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*
Government	average	0.1738	0.3259	0.1394	0.1333	0.4996	0.2648
	emergence	0.2353	0.2500	0.1429	0.1636	0.5000	0.1429
	development	0.1739	0.2353	0.1860	0.1264	0.3247	0.2571
	closing	0.1429	0.4545	0.0909	0.1250	0.6744	0.3333
Red pub	average	0.2310	0.3312	0.3717	0.4155	0.3584	0.2570
	emergence	0.1667	0.3333	0.1250	0.3043	0.2647	0.3333
	development	0.2941	0.1613	0.3667	0.4865	0.3519	0.1818
	closing	0.2000	0.5000	0.5000	0.4000	0.4118	0.2941
General pub	average	0.1984	0.2600	0.1301	0.2991	0.1071	0.2628
	emergence	0.0000	0.2308	0.1875	0.1538	0.1076	0.1154
	development	0.2459	0.1957	0.0909	0.3465	0.0971	0.2581
	closing	0.3333	0.3750	0.1250	0.3810	0.1200	0.4167
Netizens	average	0.1619	0.3095	0.2176	0.1895	0.0665	0.0695
	emergence	0.0000	0.2222	0.2727	0.1724	0.0417	0.0667
	development	0.1111	0.2353	0.1951	0.1875	0.0610	0.0000
	closing	0.4286	0.5000	0.1667	0.2143	0.1053	0.1429

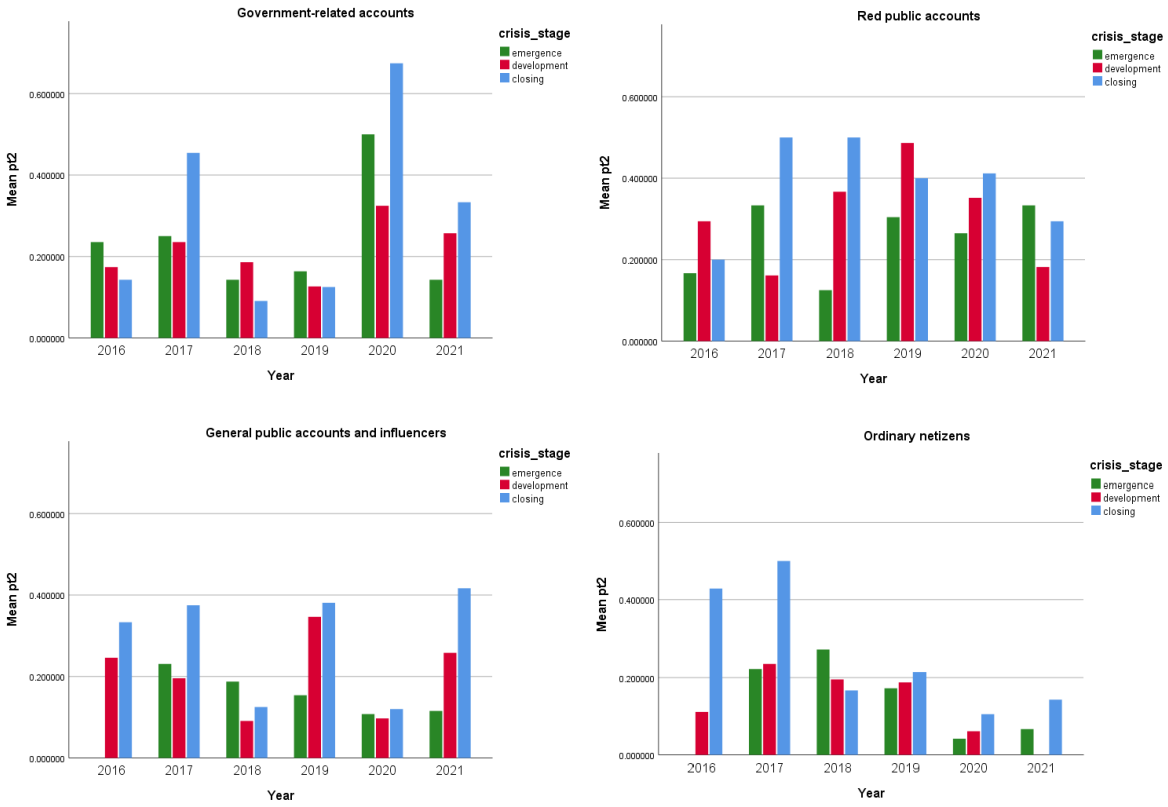

Figure 4.7 Barplots of proportions of moe in posts

There were on average 23.03% moe comments under the governmental posts, 27.83% under red public posts, 22.15% under the general public posts, and 9.88% under the ordinary netizens' posts.

Table 4.6 Moe proportions in comments

		2016	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*
Government	average	0.1882	0.1691	0.1884	0.2014	0.3093	0.2184
	emergence	0.2626	0.2053	0.2156	0.2203	0.2680	0.2005
	development	0.1875	0.1804	0.2077	0.2192	0.3463	0.2484
	closing	0.1146	0.1179	0.1354	0.1589	0.3011	0.1962
Red pub	average	0.1642	0.2230	0.2444	0.2738	0.3801	0.3876
	emergence	0.1228	0.1807	0.2415	0.2655	0.4502	0.3697

Table 4.6 continued

	development	0.1506	0.2366	0.2528	0.2871	0.3686	0.4054
	closing	0.2237	0.2473	0.2360	0.2644	0.3254	0.3817
General pub	average	0.2139	0.2472	0.3129	0.2432	0.1450	0.1568
	emergence	0.2545	0.2896	0.2409	0.2517	0.1508	0.1899
	development	0.2114	0.3075	0.3382	0.2000	0.1309	0.1426
	closing	0.1961	0.1658	0.3235	0.2821	0.1561	0.1545
Netizens	average	0.0670	0.0896	0.1268	0.1231	0.0546	0.1393
	emergence	0.0762	0.0556	0.1021	0.0785	0.0407	0.1088
	development	0.0376	0.1189	0.1499	0.1500	0.0273	0.1652
	closing	0.0821	0.0932	0.1281	0.1364	0.0855	0.1427

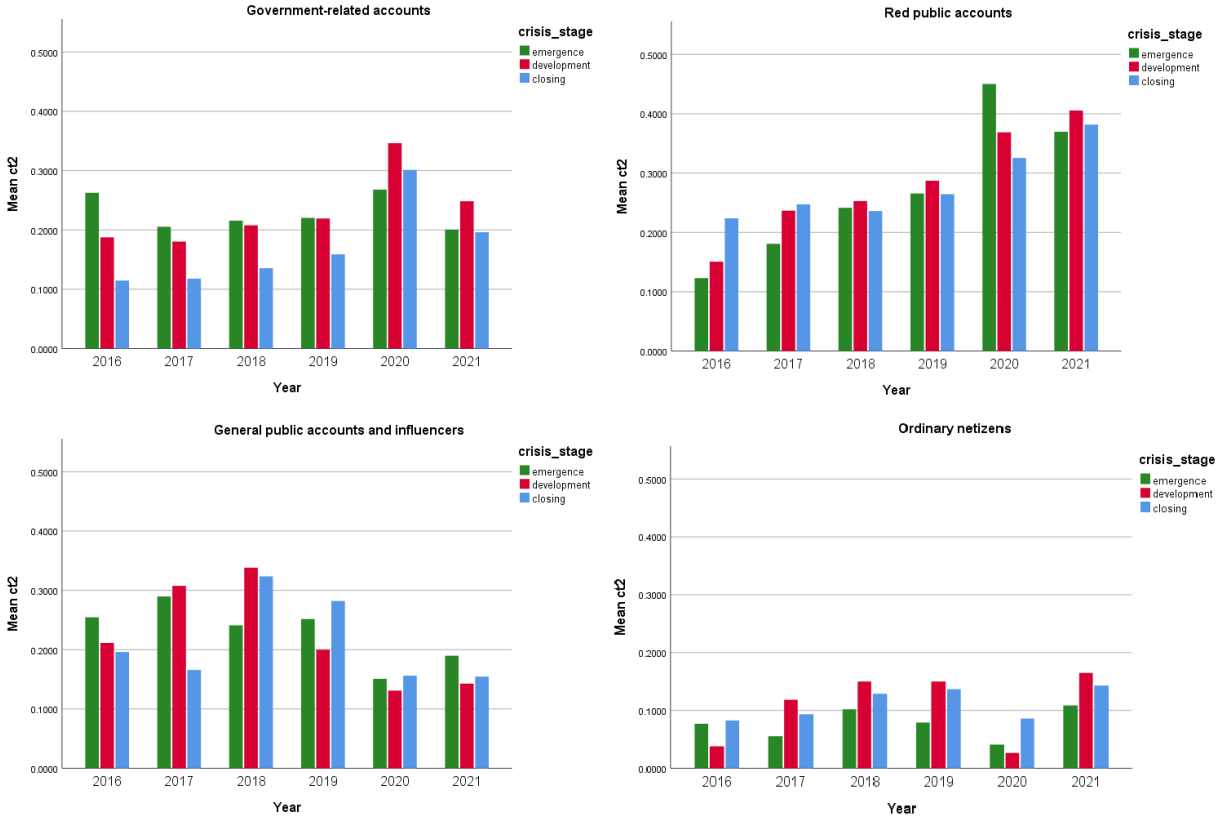

Figure 4.8 Barplots of proportions of moe in comments

The difference in the percentage of moe comments across the three crisis stages is not as pronounced as in the posts. Except for a slight increase in 2020, moe comments under the governmental posts were very stable, and the performance was almost consistent for each stage. Most moe comments appeared in the emergence stage of the crises, second in the development stage, and least in the closing stage. Nonetheless, there was a gradual increase in moe posts in the closing stage from 2016 to 2020. In 2021, the proportion of moe comments fell back to the same level as in 2016-2019, again suggesting that this tactic is a strategic tool for the government rather than something planned for increased usage.

The comments under the red public account posts have also shown stable performance. From 2016 to 2021, there has been a steady increase. There is little difference between each crisis stage, except for the emergence stage of 2020, which receives a more significant percentage of moe comments. If we assume that the number and extent of crises in the future would not be significantly different from these six years, the posts of red public accounts would likely continue to receive more moe comments in the future.

Except for 2020, posts from ordinary netizens received about the same percentage of moe comments in all years. This suggests that moe was considered a suitable means of protecting oneself from censorship even under the most reality-revealing posts. As long as China's censorship remains strict, the moe tactic should continue to be used steadily by the public.

4.3.4 Fan jargon

In the use of fan jargon in posts, actors tend to polarize. Governmental and red public accounts published many posts using fan jargon (25.68% and 34.33%), while posts from general public accounts and ordinary netizens barely used any (15.23% and 3.62%). In particular, the general public accounts had about the same level of usage of other tactics as the governmental accounts, but on this one, it created significantly fewer fan jargon posts than the latter. The table and figure below show that, in 2016 and 2017, fan jargon was still a relatively new tactic as all the actors did not use it on a large scale. In 2018 and 2019, red public accounts began to use the tactic in large numbers, especially during the development and closing stages of crises. In 2020, the governmental accounts also increased in posting fan jargon in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. In contrast, both general public accounts and netizens almost ceased to use this tactic after 2020.

Table 4.7 Fan jargon proportions in posts

		2016	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*
Government	average	0.0261	0.1213	0.3649	0.1815	0.4068	0.1410
	emergence	0.0000	0.1250	0.3571	0.1818	0.2727	0.0952
	development	0.0652	0.0588	0.2791	0.0920	0.4156	0.1714
	closing	0.0000	0.1818	0.4545	0.2708	0.4651	0.1333
Red pub	average	0.0569	0.0258	0.4633	0.4596	0.3983	0.2881
	emergence	0.1667	0.0000	0.2500	0.1522	0.2353	0.3333
	development	0.0588	0.0645	0.5333	0.4730	0.4074	0.3182
	closing	0.0000	0.0000	0.5000	0.6000	0.4706	0.2353
General pub	average	0.0197	0.0174	0.1301	0.1849	0.0333	0.0373
	emergence	0.0000	0.0000	0.1875	0.1538	0.0462	0.0385
	development	0.0492	0.0435	0.0909	0.1683	0.0485	0.0645
	closing	0.0000	0.0000	0.1250	0.2381	0.0000	0.0000
Netizens	average	0.0000	0.0176	0.0656	0.1445	0.0304	0.0000
	emergence	0.0000	0.0000	0.0909	0.1034	0.0000	0.0000
	development	0.0000	0.0588	0.0976	0.3438	0.0488	0.0000
	closing	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0526	0.0000

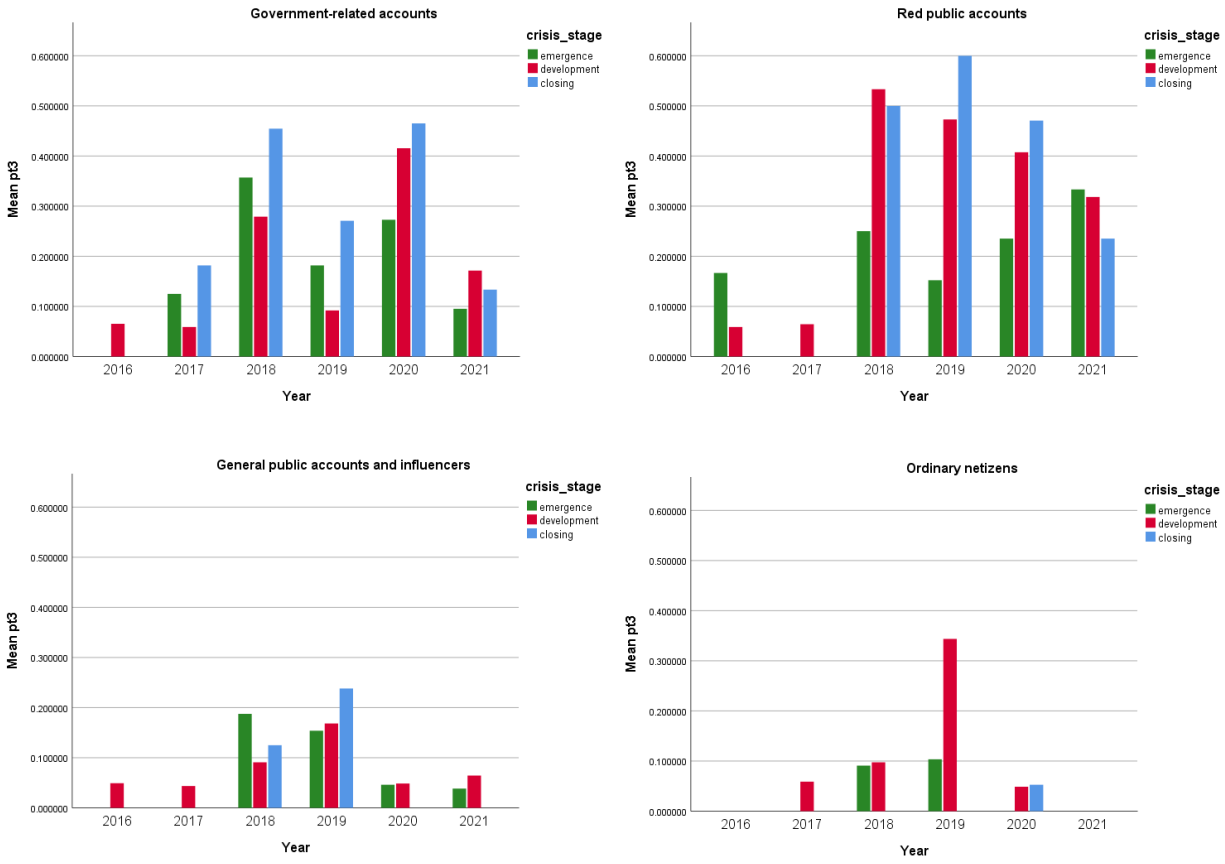

Figure 4.9 Barplots of proportions of fan jargon in posts

Across all data, ordinary netizens used a surprisingly large amount of fan jargon (34.38%) in the posts during the crisis development stage in 2019. Since the identity of a CCP fan is relatively easy to tell based on his or her posting history, it is less likely that the data be polluted by the CCP fans. Since this phenomenon only occurred once, it is more possible to be correlated to a specific crisis in which ordinary netizens actively acquired this tactic. A case study is needed to understand what happened at that time.

The proportion of fan jargon comments under netizens' posts is impressively low compared to other actors, which is consistent with the nature of the posts: posts that seek help would receive earnest comments, whereas posts that aim to entertain would receive entertainment-oriented narratives. As illustrated below, the red public accounts' posts unsurprisingly received most of the fan jargon comments, seconded by the governmental posts:

Table 4.8 Fan jargon proportions in comments

		2016	*2017*	*2018*	*2019*	*2020*	*2021*
Government	average	0.0204	0.1959	0.3844	0.3783	0.3982	0.1727
	emergence	0.0000	0.2269	0.3585	0.4247	0.5349	0.1722
	development	0.0511	0.1674	0.4498	0.3806	0.4027	0.1837
	closing	0.0000	0.2029	0.3231	0.3288	0.2556	0.1586
Red pub	average	0.0514	0.2599	0.4288	0.3774	0.5978	0.3743
	emergence	0.0272	0.1697	0.4301	0.3080	0.6597	0.4571
	development	0.1080	0.3182	0.4655	0.4207	0.6854	0.3625
	closing	0.0000	0.2724	0.3787	0.3889	0.4191	0.3073
General pub	average	0.0122	0.0795	0.2972	0.2400	0.1293	0.1534
	emergence	0.0000	0.0864	0.2152	0.3450	0.1251	0.1538
	development	0.0305	0.1555	0.3563	0.2009	0.1022	0.1141
	closing	0.0000	0.0000	0.2791	0.2265	0.1585	0.1924
Netizens	average	0.0000	0.0234	0.0412	0.1065	0.0308	0.0168
	emergence	0.0000	0.0000	0.0208	0.0701	0.0000	0.0000
	development	0.0000	0.0779	0.0717	0.1281	0.0553	0.0000
	closing	0.0000	0.0000	0.0335	0.1175	0.0355	0.0419

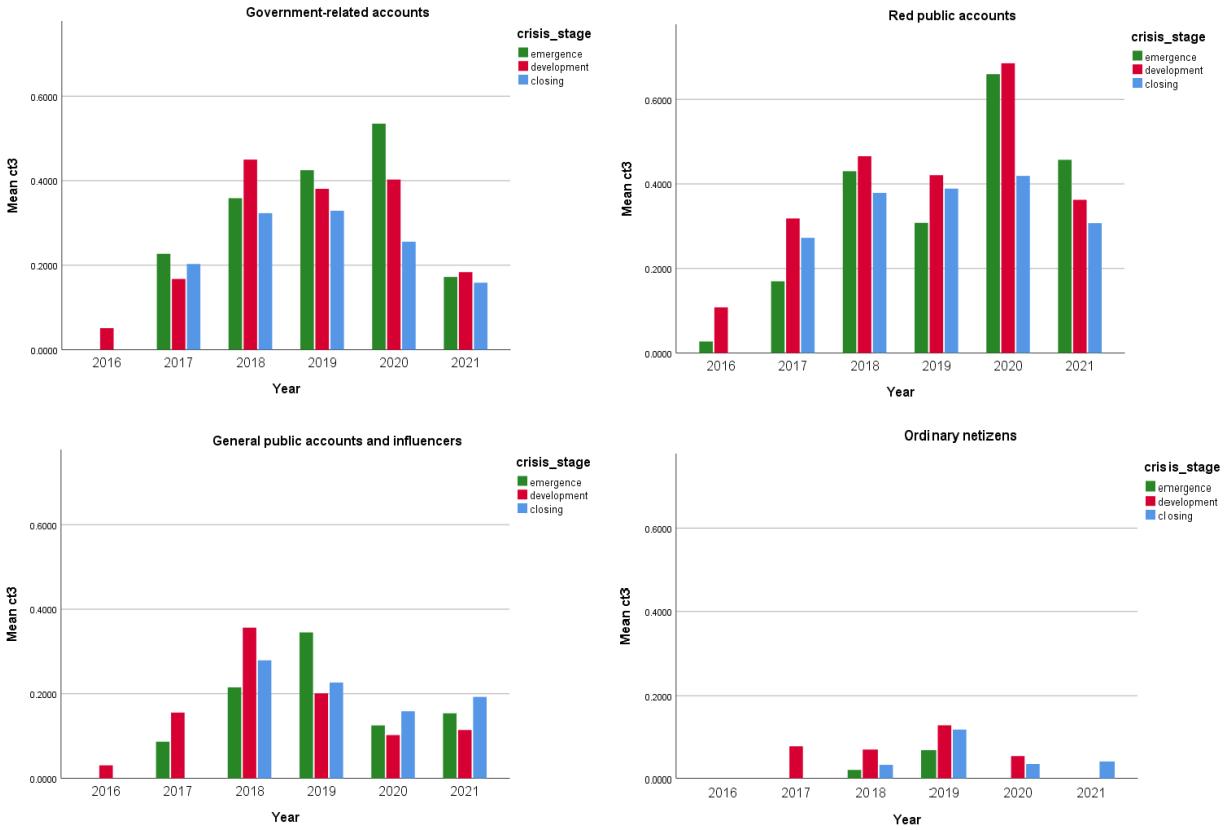

Figure 4.10 Barplots of proportions of fan jargon in comments

On average, among the comments the governmental posts received, 25.68% are written with fan jargon. For the red public accounts' posts, this number is 34.33%. Posts published by general public accounts received relatively fewer fan jargon replies, at 15.23%. Ordinary netizens' posts tended to avoid fan jargon and only received 3.62% of this kind of comment.

4.4 Summary and discussions

The descriptive and visualized data in this chapter provide many valuable findings. The extent to use entertainment-oriented narratives in posts and comments are significantly related to the identity of actors (government, red public accounts, general public accounts, and netizens), the year (2016-2021), and sometimes the crisis stage (the emergence, development, and closing stages).

In general, red public accounts were the most active actor in using EN in posts. The government accounts were second, the general public account the third, and the ordinary netizens were the least likely to use EN in posts. The same happens to comments – the red public account's

posts attracted the most EN comments, whereas the netizens' posts attracted barely any EN comments. Nonetheless, the amount of EN comments does not always vary according to EN posts. On multiple occasions, the amount of EN comments remained unchanged despite the increase in EN posts.

2020 was a turning point for actors. While the general public accounts and ordinary netizens suddenly decreased the amount of entertainment-oriented narratives posts, the government and red public accounts massively increased the publication of such posts. A reasonable speculation is that these changes are due to COVID-19, which occurred at the end of 2019. Faced with a nationwide, extremely long-lasting epidemic crisis with tragic victims, the Chinese population was simply not in the mood to use entertainment-oriented narratives. Their tweets were filled with anger, sadness, and pain. The general public accounts had to take into account public opinion and reduce their use of entertainment narratives. Contrariwise, the government and red public accounts had the priority to manage the crisis, which is why they insisted on EN massively even when public opinion was outrageous.

The closing stage of crises seems to have the most entertainment-oriented narratives posts but the least entertainment-oriented narrative comments. This phenomenon may be because, when a crisis event is about to end, the government gives the final disposition and uses entertainment-oriented narratives more extensively to avoid public criticism and make the crisis appear to be perfectly resolved. The public, on the other hand, is often not satisfied with the crisis management solution and therefore does not cooperate with the government in issuing happy assessments. Instead, they prefer to discuss the crisis in a neutral or earnest manner.

Among the three types of entertainment-oriented narratives, reality fictionalization was primarily used in 2016 and 2017, fan jargon from 2018 to 2021, and moe across all the years. Actors connected to the government have a very different attitude toward fan jargon than actors who are not. This is reasonable given the nature of the jargon: only nationalist fans are skilled in using these terms, and their tasks were to comment under governmental and red public accounts. Governmental and red public accounts also knew better how to respond to them with fan jargon, thus creating an interactive atmosphere. The general public accounts and ordinary netizens do not identify themselves as "idol-loving fans" and may feel confused at the jargon terms.

Albeit the rich findings, limitations of the data analysis in this chapter are apparent. First, we lack the information to explain specific patterns in the data. The regression analyses are

conducted based on the comparison of means, and some increases and decreases in data that we witnessed in visualizations cannot be explained by the means. Second, there may be other independent variables that should be included in the model. For example, the variable "year" in the model could represent two factors: time and events. When this variable is significant, it is hard to determine whether to interpret it as an effect of time (which means the actors learned from past experiences and changed their tactics) or an effect of certain events (some crisis events forced the actors to use the entertainment-oriented narrative strategy). It is impossible to confirm which mechanism was at work without case studies. In addition, the analysis in this chapter cannot answer whether the entertainment-oriented narratives are effective in solving crises. The only way we can find out is to perform rigorous case studies.

CHAPTER 5. ELECTIONS AND PROTESTS

Elections and protests contain democratic information. They demonstrate that citizens have the power to vote on national leaders and policies, protest social injustice, and initiate investigations of derelict officials. It is only logical that authoritarian regimes try to prevent their citizens from being exposed to such messages, lest they follow suit and jeopardize the regime stability. However, China has adopted a different approach. From 2016 to 2021, the most influential democratic elections and protests worldwide have enjoyed relatively high visibility on Weibo without undermining Chinese netizens' support for the government. How has the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) achieved broad information exposure without fear of erosion of regime legitimacy?

This chapter shows how the regime manipulates information to narrate things in its favor. Relatively open information regarding democratic processes becomes a source of regime stability. This chapter examines how Weibo has reported and commented on seven widely publicized elections and protests around the world from 2016 to 2021. These events are the US presidential elections in 2016 and 2020, the South Korean protests in 2016-2017, the South Korean presidential election in 2017, the Hong Kong protests in 2019-2020, and the Hong Kong local elections in 2019. By comparing events that occurred in different locations simultaneously and events that occurred in the same location but at different times, this chapter identifies significant patterns in the content of visible Weibo posts and comments.

Elections and protests are looked at together because they are tightly intertwined. In South Korea, for example, protests led directly to the ouster of then-President Park Geun-hye, which in turn led to an early presidential election for a new term. In Hong Kong, protests ultimately contributed to the landslide defeat of pro-communist groups in the regional elections. The close relationship between elections and protests makes it less meaningful to study them separately. Therefore, this chapter divides sections based on the physical locations of the events. The first section of the chapter examines the United States, second South Korea, and third Hong Kong. Each section provides context and development of the events, the identity of the Weibo accounts that reported the events, the types of entertainment-oriented narratives, the posts and the comments used, and statistics of these strategic choices.

5.1 the United States

5.1.1 The 2016 presidential election

While the Chinese government did not allow the presidential campaign coverage on television, various Weibo accounts regularly uploaded video clips and news reports about the election. The 26 posts from the government accounts enjoyed the highest visibility, whereas the red public accounts had eight visible posts, and the general public accounts had ten. No post from ordinary netizens was visible for this event.

Coverage of the election can be divided into three phases: before the election day, during that day, and afterward. The first phase had 28 visible posts and 4,560 visible comments. The third had 16 posts and 2,767 comments, while the second had none. This subsection will introduce the performance of posts and comments of each phase in chronological order.

Misinformation aimed at downplaying the legitimacy of democratic events had spread widely online since the very beginning of the election campaign coverage. From summer to late fall of 2016, visible posts broadcasted each political candidate making statements, delivering campaign speeches, and debating with each other. The photos and video clips attached to these posts were edited and translated without sound or subtitles in English, making it challenging to find the source and compare whether the edits distorted the truth. The news reports consisted mainly of conspiracy theories, fake news, and made-up images of political candidates. For example, the 2012 Benghazi attack was a planned murder. The Clintons were pedophiles who enjoyed frequent visits to a sex-slave island. Obama was a secret Muslim who founded ISIS.

Table 5.1 First phase posts data by accounts, US 2016

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*
Government	18	9	50%	55.55%	44.44%
Red pub	6	4	66.67%	75%	25%
General pub	4	3	75%	100%	33.33%
Total	28	16	57.14%	68.75%	37.5%

More than 57% of the visible posts contained entertainment-oriented narrative narratives in the first phase. More than half of these (9 out of 16) were posted by the government, 25% by

red public accounts, and 18.75% by general public accounts. Notably, despite the relatively small number of visible posts by red public and general public accounts, two-thirds and three-quarters of them contained entertainment-oriented narratives. On the other hand, the government account published most EN posts in quantity, but it published equally many neutral posts. Keeping a balance between EN and non-entertainment-oriented narrative posts might have helped maintain a solemn image of the government.

In 2016, the fan jargon tactic had not been invented, so there were only two tactics. The predominant tactic was fictionalization in the posts, appearing in 68.75% of all the EN posts, 100% of all three EN posts published by general public accounts, and three out of four EN posts from red public accounts. This narrative presented the campaign activities as "the latest episode of the drama" and predicted future developments in the election in the same way TV show commentary accounts predict storylines. The competition between Ted Cruz and Donald Trump running for their party's presidential nomination was depicted as "the magical development of the plot makes it highly likely that the second season of the presidential campaign would turn into a spy-type drama." When Hillary Clinton left the 9/11 memorial early, she was "praised" for her "non-stop fight for her career as a first-rate actress at her age, contributing a suspenseful drama-level performance."

Moe expressions were mildly used across all types of accounts. Most of them were various laughter (for example, laugh with the face covered, laugh out of tears, laugh with clenching fists) and doge expressions that expressed a lack of seriousness.

The comments echoed the posts. The table below demonstrates that almost 67% of the visible comments were entertainment-oriented narratives[22]. Netizens described their state as sitting in a chair with a melon or snack in hand, trying to sell extra melons and melon seeds to other netizens who were also "watching the show." In the first two days of November 2021, the comments still expressed "sympathy" to the US citizens. One most liked comment read, "Which actor would you choose? I choose to die [doge]." In late October 2016, as South Koreans demanded that the then-president step down, Chinese netizens frequently compared the two democratic events as two competing TV series. For example, "(The US election is) much more exciting than

[22] Note that comments do not strictly correspond to the tabular data of posts. For example, the EN comments collected did not appear only under EN posts, but also in the reply section of neutral posts. Fictional comments and moe comments also did not appear only under posts that have corresponding narratives applied. The data in the table corresponds only to all visible comments collected under visible posts of one account.

Korean drama [waive hands]! What a *Presidential Campaign* TV show this is!" "The Korean annual drama is trendy now. US drama, please, do not lose! [doge]" And "no worries, Trump and Hillary are performing so hard. The last few episodes must be amazing. High Rotten Tomatoes' score predetermined [applause]."

Table 5.2 First phase comments data by accounts, US 2016

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*
Government	2,588	1,773	68.51%	72.59%	28.03%
Red pub	1,340	896	66.87%	73.55%	29.58%
General pub	632	381	60.28%	60.63%	39.63%
Total	4,560	3,050	66.89%	71.38%	29.93%

Government public accounts received the highest percentage of entertainment-oriented narrative comments among the visible comments, followed by red public accounts and general public accounts. This ranking is the exact opposite of the percentage of EN posts made by these accounts. If the posts successfully guided the audience, then the general public accounts should receive the highest percentage of EN comments. If the posts did not influence the audience's way of thinking and describe the election, all accounts should receive similar percentages of EN comments. Why did the accounts that published the fewest EN posts receive the most EN comments instead? This dissertation proposes that the current result may be due to government intervention. The CCP may have removed neutral comments, giving EN comments the highest visibility, signaling to the netizens that it is safe and encouraged to post content in an entertainment-oriented narrative manner.

The first phase of coverage of the US election was steeped in lightheartedness. However, that fun ended abruptly as the actual voting day approached (which marked the second phase). On November 8th, visible coverage of the US election suddenly vanished from Weibo. Government and red public accounts stopped posting photos or videos, and text messages (which were neutral) were limited to a single sentence, such as "Voting has begun in this state." Attempts by ordinary netizens and some general public accounts to post reports and screenshots of the voting process failed to spread widely enough to be visible, with the most circulated post receiving only 335

retweets and 125 comments. The new trending hashtag these non-governmental accounts created was soon invalidated.

The silence on election day suggested that the Chinese government did perceive democratic elections as a crisis. The purpose of creating an entertaining atmosphere before the election was to keep netizens from actively gathering information and making their judgments, thus managing the crisis. The second phase of heavy-handed censorship proves that the CCP remained wary of the democratic message conveyed by the election. After all, no matter how disgraceful the political candidates and campaign process were portrayed, the fact that every citizen had the right to choose their leaders remained irrefutable and could have an ideological impact on the Chinese public and dissatisfy them with the authoritarian regime.

Another explanation is that the government could not confirm whether netizens have thoroughly embraced the narrative of reality fictionalization and viewed the election as a joke. Although general public accounts learned to apply the EN tactics, they received the lowest EN content in the responses among the three types of accounts. Since the government did not have a direct partnership with the general public accounts, it could not ask directly. Therefore, during the voting phase, the government decided to cut off all coverage of the event to reduce political risk.

After Donald Trump won the election, Weibo coverage of the US election gradually resumed. Fictionalization was still widely used in the third phase. For example, when some US citizens launched the "#NotMyPresident" protest against Trump, Weibo posts eagerly asked, "Is this the start of a new season, or just a post-credits scene?" and "Is this something that (people who did not pay) can watch for free?" Nevertheless, the percentage of visible EN posts dropped to 37.5% - almost a 35% shrinkage. Political candidates were no longer always mentioned as actors. Political ideas and election results were earnestly discussed, and information about the political demographics of US states also appeared in the visible posts.

The third phase saw a drop in the number of visible posts and comments compared to the first phase. As the tables show, while the government and red public accounts still published 50% EN posts in their total posts, the general public accounts only had one EN post. The percentage of EN comments received by all accounts shrank 20-30%, with EN comments comprising just under 45% of all visible comments. This could be due to a reduction of government intervention, as the elections were over, and there was no longer a need to aggressively promote EN, divert public attention, and trivialize the seriousness of democratic events.

Table 5.3 Third phase posts data by accounts, US 2016

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*
Government	8	4	50%	50%	75%
Red pub	2	1	50%	100%	100%
General pub	6	1	16.67%	100%	100%
Total	16	6	37.5%	66.67%	83.33%

Table 5.4 Third phase comments data by accounts, US 2016

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*
Government	1,368	606	44.3%	41.58%	59.08%
Red pub	274	144	52.55%	59.03%	45.83%
General pub	1,125	491	43.64%	52.14%	49.69%
Total	2,767	1,241	44.85%	47.78%	53.83%%

The decrease in the percentage of fictionalization in EN comments also supports the hypothesis that most entertainment-oriented narratives were deliberately created and disseminated by the CCP and were not a spontaneous choice of the ordinary citizens. When the CCP responded to the democratic election crisis, fictionalization dominated the public space and led the public to believe that the matter was not worthy of serious consideration. When the crisis was covered, the government did not continue to make EN content visible, and the EN data declined relatively. Moe expression is associated with securing the post or comment from being censored, so its emergence may indicate that the netizens were attempting to adhere to the rule of survival that is never clearly stated.

The declining proportion of fictionalization in EN comments supports the hypothesis that most entertainment-oriented narratives were deliberately created and disseminated by the CCP rather than spontaneous choices by ordinary citizens. When the CCP responded to the democratic election crisis, fictionalization took over the public space, leading the public to believe that the matter was not worthy of serious consideration. When the crisis was covered up, the government did not continue to make EN content visible, and EN data declined consequently. The main role of moe expression is to safeguard posts and comments from censorship, so its increased proportion in EN may indicate the attempt of ordinary netizens to secure their online statements.

5.1.2 The 2020 presidential election

Throughout the coverage of the 2020 election, the content in posts and comments for all kinds of accounts did not vary significantly over time. Therefore, this subsection will analyze the data as a whole.

Table 5.5 Posts data by accounts, US 2020

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*	*Jargon in EN*
Government	20	8	40%	37.5%	37.5%	25%
Red pub	16	13	81.25%	38.46%	61.54%	76.92%
General pub	3	0	0	-	-	-
Total	39	21	53.85%	38.1%	52.38%	57.14%

As the table above demonstrates, in the coverage of the 2020 election, there were only three visible posts from general public accounts, and posts from the ordinary netizens were entirely invisible. The biggest reason was the update of Chinese policy. In 2018, China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) released the "Negative Market Access List" that prohibited "non-public capital" (non-governmental institutions, agencies, corporations, and individuals) from engaging in internet news and information collection businesses (An & Yu, 2018). These businesses included but were not limited to the collection, editing, broadcasting, introduction, and distribution of news. The List also specified that non-public capital should not guide public opinion and political values in online forums or social media platforms. Consequently, the general public accounts fell silent and spent most of their time retweeting other accounts' posts.

Changes in permissions for accounts to report news may have affected the distribution of ENs. None of the general public accounts' posts was entertaining. Perhaps being excluded from the enfranchised has negatively impacted these accounts' motivation to respond to the government's call to post entertainment-oriented narrative content. Again, this is evidence that, at least when dealing with political crises, the first users of entertainment-oriented narratives were not general public accounts who did not rely exclusively on such narratives to gain followers and financial benefits. In stark contrast, more than 80% of posts from red public accounts contained ENs. While most red public accounts were not officially certified as "public capital," their

passionate participation in posting and the fact that they have never been held accountable attest to their strong ties to the government. It seems that the cost of being granted power by the government was to take over the responsibility of disseminating EN information to keep the government accounts relatively neutral throughout the reporting process.

The use of fictionalization was significantly lower in 2020 than in 2016, with a rate of merely 38%. The percentage of moe narratives among all EN posts - 50% - remained consistent (exact 50% in 2016), proving that it is a stable and effective tactic to avoid censorship.

Table 5.6 Comments data by accounts, US 2020

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*	*Jargon in EN*
Government	3,306	1,212	36.66%	39.03%	19.72%	43.15%
Red pub	4,016	2,701	67.26%	18.07%	29.95%	53.98%
General pub	461	23	5%	73.91%	34.78%	0
Total	7,783	3,936	50.57%	24.85%	26.83%	50.33%

Of the comments, government accounts received about one-third of the EN comments, and red public accounts about two-thirds. While the percentages of fictional and moe comments were reversed, both accounts received the largest share of comments incorporating fan jargon. Comparatively, general public accounts received 5% of EN comments despite not publishing any EN posts. This may hint at the government's success in guiding the public: even though the posts no longer used entertainment-oriented narratives, some netizens still have acquired this way of describing and thinking about political events. Nevertheless, only two narratives, fictional and moe, appeared in these EN comments, indicating that netizens' knowledge of the promoted EN types was still in 2016. This is, of course, another piece of evidence that the various ENs were created and delivered by the government.

The emergence and popularity of fan jargon in 2020 were impressive. It became the most commonly used EN of the three types. During the campaign period, posts likened the election to "China's most-watched idol-picking show," with Trump and Biden competing for the public's votes to debut as "the idol of US." Since the two candidates were both over 70 years old and the

hottest idol-picking show at the time was the "Incubator 101[23]," the US election was called "Septuagenarians 101." Some accounts even photoshopped a series of pictures of the show's live stream interface, presenting photos of the two candidates. Obama and Sanders also appeared in the pictures, sending cash prizes and socialist books to support Biden.

Biden has not been portrayed as an idol too often, perhaps because idols must be in their 20s in East Asian countries. In posts and comments of red public accounts, most netizens expressed confusion as to why someone like Biden, who has already served as Vice President of the United States and even won a Nobel Prize, would come to do something undignified as run for president. When reporting news about him, most posts still used realistic fictionalization, portraying him as an actor too old to remember what he was supposed to sing on stage. Some posts made his debate with Trump a comic talk, repeatedly emphasizing that political campaigning was a drama.

After four years as President, Trump did not lack fans in China. Netizens referred to him as "Trumbo[24] (川宝, chuan bao)," an abbreviation for Trump and Baby, or "Chuan-chuan (串串 [skewer])," a Sichuan cuisine that has similar pronunciation of "Trump-Trump." The netizens claimed to be establishing a "Trumbo anti-smears station" similar to the "China anti-smears station." Typical slogans in support of Trump read, "Trumbo fly with confidence, Trump fans always follow" (川宝放心飞，川粉永相随)" and "Charming Trump ~ Top-of-the-world Trump ~ Super savior Trump ~ Future-is-promising Trump (魅力无限特朗普~世界之巅特朗普~超级救星特朗普~未来可期特朗普)," and interspersed with many moe emojis such as red hearts, angel wings, and rainbows in the middle of the text.

Of course, such slogans were not serious, and Chinese netizens never supported Trump from the heart. They retweeted his campaign speeches without caring about the content. Red public accounts reposted his speech propaganda without subtitles with titles like "Watch Trump burn calories," a lyric sentence of a popular idol talent show song of the time. Such posts equated political speeches with mere sweating exercises. Similarly, the fan jargon posts equated the election to a battle between Trump fans and Trump enemy fans, completely discrediting the political and policy information they contained.

[23] The name and the content of the show were borrowed from the South Korean idol-picking show, PRODUCE 101, in which 101 female trainees competed for the top 11 positions to debut as idols.
[24] Do not mistaken it with "Trumpo (床破[broken bed], chuang po)" which is a pejorative reference to Trump.

Fan jargon took the place of fictionalization in 2020 for multiple reasons. First, after the covid crisis in 2019, the CCP has practiced this tactic to deal with crises and was pretty confident in its effectiveness. After all, if a tactic can handle an imminent domestic crisis, it should be able to manage a crisis far across the ocean. Second, while the fan jargon also entertains the crises, it does not deny the reality of the events. Throughout the coverage of the election, the fictionalization narrative could easily cease to work as long as the audience develops a sense of authenticity at some point. On the other hand, Fan jargon does not have this weakness. Even when a netizen resonates with the reality of a democratic event, he will relegate it to entertainment, and the narrative remains effective in preventing him from reflecting too profoundly.

Another important reason is that fan jargon could equate the right to vote for a national leader with the right to vote for an idol. This narrative does not deny the existence of the "one person, one vote" model of democracy but identifies it as an ugly, boring, pathetic farce controlled by capital. It moved from fiction to reality, successfully evoking greater ridicule and contempt for democracy and eliciting recognition of a dignified, orderly authoritarian government. In this way, the CCP no longer needed to censor the entire voting process. Chinese netizens, shaped by a jargon-based mindset, would no longer be swayed in their support of the CCP even if they were directly exposed to a democratic voting process.

Indeed, on the day of voting, the CCP covered the entire process with great passion. There were updates almost every hour on Weibo, and many Chinese netizens stayed up late to watch the vote counting. Most of the posts focused on Trump's claims and tacitly accepted them as true. Therefore, in the eyes of Chinese netizens, the voting machines were manipulated by Democrats (who were depicted as "Trump's enemy fans), the election received more votes than registered voters and even from dead people, and the result was rigged. While accusations of election fraud have come up in almost every US presidential election, never once has it been so loud. Red public accounts have gone to great lengths to expose netizens to the chaos in order to disillusion them with democracy and guide them to endorse the CCP: in any case, the Party is the greatest idol in the world.

On November 4th, after the voting result came out, Trump issued a statement, not only refusing to admit defeat but also saying that the election was "far from over" (Breuninger, 2020). Chinese netizens once again got excited. On January 6th, 2021, Trump supporters stormed Capitol Hill. Red public accounts posted photos of them clashing with police and referred to them as

“Trumbo’s life fans (who are willing to sacrifice their lives for the idol).” Many netizens used cheer emojis in the comment section to support these people to “fight against Trumbo’s enemy fans to the bitter end.”

Fictionalization was also widely used. Shortly before the rioters stormed in, some politicians did not immediately find a way out. Some Weibo comments compared this scene with Lord of the Rings when the fellowship of the ring was in Mt. Moria facing the Orcs, quoting the famous line from the Book Mazabul: “they are coming!” A few accounts reposted the news photos on Twitter showing fire, smoke, and the national flag, calling the riot “the only true blockbuster of the year.” When the photos of unmasked mobs walking in the hall of Capitol Hill were uploaded to Twitter, the Weibo posts published them with the title “La Liberté guidant le peuple,” suggesting that democracy and freedom equate to riot, chaos, and a loss of dignity. One netizen even created a satirical opera aria:

> 自由，好人无甚用处，坏人作恶的护身符。
> 民主，醉于程序美学，任由无底线者操弄。
> 看啊，那灯塔的背面疮痍满目！
> [Freedom, useless to good people, but a talisman for evil.
> Democracy, drunk on procedural aesthetics, manipulated by the shameless.
> Alas, the back of the beacon is full of sores!]

In the aftermath of the riots, the image of the United States as a nation took a serious hit, and the government and many of its citizens were embarrassed. By this time, the Chinese government no longer needed to denigrate them to make Chinese citizens reject democracy. Therefore, when the most truthful evidence to ridicule the US was available after November 6th, the percentage of entertainment-oriented narratives in visible posts and comments declined. This change once again validates that these narratives were crisis management tactics rather than spontaneous netizens’ thoughts published online.

Throughout the election season, entertainment-oriented narratives served their purpose well. First, they convinced the Chinese public that, while the US citizens have the freedom to vote, they can only choose between bad and worse, and the world laughs at them. Thus, the right to vote is not something to envy. Second, these narratives successfully kept Chinese netizens from realizing the ongoing discussions that could threaten China’s authoritarian regime, such as gender equality, education reform, fostering traditional industries and agriculture, and supporting

minorities and disadvantaged groups. The EN effectively led the public to look only at the negative aspects of the election, thus reporting on the democratic process that instead entrenched the CCP's rule.

5.2 South Korea

5.2.1 The 2016-2017 protest

The protests in South Korea, also known as the "Park Geun-hye Nationwide Resignation Movement" or "Candlelight Revolution" (Kim, 2016), lasted from November 2016 to March 2017. It was started by angry college students who saw political corruption when the daughter of Choi Tae-min, a businesswoman who had close ties with the then President Park Geun-hye, was able to enter one of the best universities in South Korea (Ewha Women's University) and graduate with good grades without attending class. The South Korean public soon found out that Choi Tae-min had not only abused her relationship with the President but also had been meddling in national affairs for 30 years. Five massive protests took place in November 2016, and four more in December. In early 2017, there was an average of one protest per week. The total number of participants was around 16 million, almost 31% of the country's population. On March 10th, 2017, Park Geun-hye was eventually impeached and removed from office.

The visible coverage of the series of protests on Weibo can be divided into two phases: before March 2017 and after Park's ouster in March 2017. During the first phase, Chinese netizens generally adopted a relaxed and happy attitude of "eating melons and watching the show." However, when the impeachment against Park was finally successful, there was no more joy on Weibo. The success of democratic protests in a neighboring country with the same East Asian political culture created very strong pressure and fear within the CCP. As a result, the tone of discussion about the whole event shifted steeply toward condemnation of South Korean citizens and sympathy for the corrupt president.

In terms of geography, culture, history, ethnicity, political system, and national development process, South Korea is closer to China than the United States and thus more likely to evoke Chinese empathy. The massive sit-in demonstration in which South Koreans gathered in the square in front of Cheong Wa Dae, where the presidential office is located, was also very reminiscent of the Tiananmen Square massacre in China. Thus, although many Chinese tourists

and international students shared various protest details through various means, most of the information was not visible on Weibo. Judging from the repeated cancellation of related trending topics on Weibo, it is likely that the Chinese government considered the South Korean protests a greater threat to its regime stability than the US presidential election, and had hence intentionally limited the opportunities for netizens to see relevant reports.

Nonetheless, visible coverage of the protests was only slightly lower than that of the US election, and there were more visible comments than in the US election, reflecting the great interest of the Chinese in this event. The table below shows that, compared to the US election case, the percentage of visible posts that used entertainment-oriented narratives decreased significantly. Except for the red public account, which still used ENs in 60% of its visible posts, the percentage of EN posts dropped to 50% for government accounts, and less than 40% for general public accounts. Ordinary netizens did not use any EN at all.

Table 5.7 First phase posts data by accounts, South Korea

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*
Government	18	9	50%	77.78%	33.33%
Red pub	10	6	60%	66.67%	33.33%
General pub	11	4	36.36%	75%	50%
Netizens	4	0	0	-	-
Total	43	19	44.19%	73.68%	36.84%

Remarkably, while only fictionalization and moe are listed in the table above, the rudiments of fan jargon also appeared in some posts from the red public accounts. For example, one post referred to the protests as “the biggest fan-support (应援) event you have ever seen.” When South Korean protesters began the Candlelight protests, in which each protester held a candle in their hand and gathered in squares and streets at night to demand Park’s resignation, two posts described them as “big live idol shows” and analogized the candles to flickering foam sticks used at pop music concerts. However, these narratives neither identified the key “idol” candidate who is necessary for fans worldview nor clearly divided the involved population into fans and enemy fans. Moreover, they had a counterproductive effect on Chinese netizens. Many young Chinese traveled to South Korea to join the protests because they wanted to “have fun.” However, as soon as they

actually participated in the protests, these ordinary netizens turned into serious and neutral narrators. They began to upload photos and videos showing the political organization of the protests, the demands of citizens, and the anger and frustration of the protesters. Consequently, the infancy of fan jargon quickly disappeared from Weibo.

After such failed attempts, fictionalization accounted for 70% of entertainment-oriented narratives. Identical to the portrayal of US elections, fictionalization discoursed the South Korean demonstrations as "the latest Korean drama." Since the protests coincided with the 2016 US presidential election, the term "US drama" was often applied. The difference lied in the ratio of attached photos. When covering the US election, visible posts often included news images in addition to textual information. When covering the Korean protests, however, most posts were text-only. Given that news photos would show the number and orderliness of the protesters, thus sending a direct, shocking signal to Chinese netizens, it is reasonable for the Chinese government to have only allowed texts that had little to do with the real situation to be widely disseminated.

Table 5.8 First phase comments data by accounts, South Korea

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*
Government	2,221	1,113	50.11%	61.54%	47.53%
Red pub	1,580	556	35.19%	66.19%	40.83%
General pub	1,361	471	34.61%	68.79%	40.98%
Netizens	465	184	39.57%	47.28%	58.6%
Total	5,627	2,324	41.3%	62.99%	45.48%

Only 41% of the overall comments were entertainment-oriented narratives. Most comments discussed the reasons for the protests, the concerns that the protesters might be suppressed by force, and the envy of the right to protest. Except for the comments under government accounts, which remained stubbornly 50% entertainment-oriented narrative, other accounts all had the majority of comments in a non-entertaining manner. This further proves that the comments under government accounts were deliberately pruned to create a scenario where the public was happy and not serious about the event. Their painstaking efforts did work to some extent: posts by ordinary netizens that did not contain any entertainment-oriented narratives also

received nearly 40% of EN comments, suggesting that netizens have proactively used this approach to view the pro-democracy demonstrations in the neighboring country.

However, after March 10th, with the impeachment of the South Korean president, the last bit of levity could not be sustained. Over the next few months, as Park was arrested, trialed, and pressed into prison to serve her 22-year sentence, EN completely disappeared from posts from government accounts. The EN posts of other accounts also dwindled dramatically and described the event with bland text, such as "the ending of a Korean drama," and no light-hearted words, expressions, or pictures depicting it.

Table 5.9 Second phase posts data by accounts, South Korea

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*
Government	5	0	0	-	-
Red pub	3	1	33.33%	100%	0
General pub	3	1	33.33%	0	100%
Total	11	2	18.18%	50%	50%

Table 5.10 Second phase comments data by accounts, South Korea

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*
Government	510	69	13.53%	50.72%	65.22%
Red pub	368	95	25.82%	81.05%	24.21%
General pub	333	80	24.02%	60%	60%
Total	1,211	244	20.15%	65.57%	44.26%

The fact that collective actions can lead to the forced ouster of a national leader was so threatening to CCP that it immediately began to defend that ousted leader. After Park's arrest, visible posts on Weibo were all memorializing her "rough first half of life." A flood of sympathetic comments emerged, emphasizing that she had served South Korea with dedication and had only been taken advantage of by a trusted friend. Some comments argued that even though President

Park's malfeasance was inexcusable, a "family scandal" should not be publicized and that the South Korean citizens should have remained quiet instead of making the matter known to the world.

As Park was trialed for her crimes and sentenced to decades in prison, Weibo was quickly full of slander against the people of South Korea, saying that they had "a culture of hatred characterized by long-standing grievances." Protesters were called disgusting, vicious, resentment-filled troublemakers. Other comments took a more radical stance, saying that the "riots" should be suppressed to stop the "stupid students" from disgracing the country. Ironically, such comments were soon censored because they contained sensitive words that could relate to the Tiananmen Square massacre and thus triggered the censorship machine.

The second phase's posts and comments, with or without entertainment-oriented narratives, attempted to distract from the fact that Park was impeached for harming national interests and civil rights. They tried to prove that a corrupt and abusive national leader like Park still deserved legitimacy. This attempt did not seem to be very effective, as ordinary Chinese netizens and general public accounts expressed their congratulations to the South Korean people who won their struggle. This was the first time that netizens received more EN comments than government accounts. Out of concern for their own safety, many comments used fictionalization and moe narratives when praising the protesters. Some comments implicitly stated a desire for democracy, saying, "I hope the same blockbuster would be released in China soon." The replies to such comments were usually only with a doge emoji or a heartfelt smile. Since these expressions were wrapped in entertainment-oriented narratives, they survived censorship.

5.2.2 The 2017 Election

Following Park's impeachment and removal from office in March 2017, Moon Jae-in was elected president of South Korea on May 10th as the Democratic Party's candidate with 41.4% of the vote ahead of rivals Hong Jun-pyo and Ahn Cheol-soo. It was a fairly smooth transition of power, and the Chinese government did not pay much attention to it. However, the enthusiasm of the Chinese public remains high. As a result, general public accounts became the most popular players in posting relevant visible posts.

Table 5.11 Posts data by accounts, South Korea 2017 election

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*	*Jargon in EN*
Government	6	2	33.33%	100%	0	0
Red pub	4	2	50%	50%	50%	50%
General pub	9	3	33.33%	66.67%	33.33%	0
Netizens	2	0	0	-	-	-
Total	21	7	33.33%	71.43%	28.57%	14.29%

Table 5.12 Comments data by accounts, South Korea 2017 election

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*	*Jargon in EN*
Government	931	198	21.27%	65.66%	51.52%	3.03%
Red pub	663	155	23.38%	61.94%	60.65%	21.94%
General pub	1,072	247	23.04%	61.54%	47.77%	0
Netizens	213	18	8.45%	55.56%	33.33%	22.22%
Total	2,879	618	21.47%	62.78%	51.78%	7.12%

The most significant feature of the coverage of this election was that, despite the abundance of fictionalization narratives, not a single post or commentary referred to the candidates as actors. There were two main reasons. First, Moon Jae-in was so far ahead of the other two candidates in the polls that China always assumed he would be the eventual winner. The entire election process was so free of suspense that it was impossible to build dramatic conflict. Second, and most importantly, Moon's reputation in China is extraordinary. In 1996, against public pressure from all over Korea, he resolutely defended six Chinese crew members who killed eleven Korean crews for resisting mistreatment, helping them to save their lives. As a result, he was attacked by a large number of Korean media as a "supporter of murderers" in the 2012 Korean presidential election, which he eventually lost to Park Geun-hye. In his daily life, he has also been portrayed as a man

who has worked tirelessly for the country, for the people, for tripping up Korean plutocrats, and for justice. Therefore, Chinese people generally have great respect for him. Equating him with an actor and mocking his political commitment as "acting" would anger the majority of the population.

Nevertheless, numerous accounts continued to use fictionalization. They stopped referring to specific politicians, but instead equated the entire country with the plots of South Korean crime films. It is true that South Korea has always had many political problems: corrupt officials, an inactive police system, a legal system full of loopholes, and gangs incredibly powerful in collusion with police and officials. These characteristics were all reflected in Korean movies, so it was fair and convenient to use these films to describe the real society.

The two most frequently mentioned films were "The New World" and "The Defender." *The Defender* was basically about the lawyer career of former South Korean President, Roh Moo-hyun, who was portrayed with great integrity in the film. Because of the tragic end of Roh Moo-hyun being driven to suicide by his political enemies after he left office, and the relationship between Moon Jae-in and Roh as both mentor and friend, this movie was equated to a documentary of the good side of Moon's life by the fictionalization narratives. The most liked comments argued that Moon Jae-in would end up tragically just like Roh due to the hopelessness of the democratic system. Meanwhile, *The New World* told a story of a cop and a gangster who sent each other undercovers. The successful undercover cop finally was despaired by the reality and joined the gangster completely and became the new leader. Chinese netizens equated this movie to the Korean reality and believed that this complex and dark society is what Moon was about to enter.

This kind of "lamentation strategy" worked. After Moon's election, and when it is most reasonable to cheer for him and cherish for the future, the majority of discussion on Weibo was about Moon's personal safety and the future retaliation he would get from politicians bred by capitalism and assassination from gangsters. Most Chinese netizens were so moved by the imaginary picture of Moon's future sacrifice for idealism that they sent out a large number of various emojis of crying faces. Some even sent out emojis of candles in prayer or mourning for him. Despite the fact that a highly respected politician had been democratically elected as national leader, the entire Weibo comment section was immersed in a pessimistic mood since "there is absolutely no hope in a democratic society." Up to this point, inspite of all the limitations of reality, the entertainment-oriented narratives has done its job skillfully. It avoided the hopes and

expectations that democratic elections in neighboring countries might have brought to the Chinese citizens, thus eliminating a possible crisis against the CCP.

5.3 Hong Kong

5.3.1 The 2019-2020 protests

The origin of the series of protests that took in Hong Kong in 2019 was the revision of the Extradition Law. Protesters were concerned that the Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB) would give the Beijing government a pretext to persecute political dissidents, undermining the region's already flawed democratic institutions. When the first sit-in protest took place on March 15th, the demand was purely anti-ELAB. Between then and June, the protests continued unabated, and on June 12th, 2019, police used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the protesters, and the police commissioner declared the clash a riot. Since then, the protesters' demands have evolved to the "five major demands" (五大诉求). In addition to the complete revocation of the ELAB, they demanded the "riot" definition be revoked, the arrested protesters be released, police misconduct during the clashes be investigated, and universal suffrage be introduced in local elections. Given that Beijing only reluctantly agreed to a few amendments to provisions of the ELAB, the clashes continued to intensify. In Hong Kong's November 24th local elections, the pro-democracy camp overwhelmingly defeated the pro-Beijing camp, winning 388 of the 452 seats.

The protests in Hong Kong were a much bigger crisis for the CCP than the US election or the demonstrations in South Korea. Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong citizens share the same race, appearance, language, history, and culture. Mainlanders can understand protesters' speeches, banners, and interviews without translation. The CCP's years of nationalist education (that Hong Kong people are compatriots and Hong Kong is China's territory), the patriotic films produced in Hong Kong (mostly about Hong Kong people's resistance to the oppression of the British colonialists), and the donations that Hong Kong people have always made whenever there was a disaster on the mainland, have given mainlanders a deep sense of identification with Hong Kong people. Moreover, because of its geographical proximity to many mainland cities, Hong Kong has a large number of mainlanders living in the region. Therefore, every move of HK people would attract more attention from the Chinese people, who also can break through the official blockade to get first-hand information. Thus, some of the tactics used in the US and South Korean cases,

such as tampering with graphic information and passing completely wrong or false news to netizens, do not apply to the HK case.

To resolve this crisis, the CCP must successfully guide its netizens to not sympathize with the HK protesters. It would be better if netizens could support the police who violently suppressed the protesters. In the process of achieving these two goals, entertainment-oriented narratives have made an important contribution.

The news coverage of HK demonstrations on Weibo can be divided into three phases. The first phase ranges from March 2019 to mid November, 2019, that is, from the first sit-in demonstration to the week before the local elections in Hong Kong. The second phase ranges from the week before the elections to the week after the elections. The third phase is after that until June 2020, after which the demonstrations were no longer active due to the establishment of the Hong Kong version of the National Security Law.

The HK event has received more attention than the US and SK events. As shown by the tables below, the posts and comments of the first phase alone have been able to match or even exceed the total number of posts and comments of the other events. In this case, although the government accounts published many posts, they still did not have as many visible posts as the red public accounts. This is understandable given that the HK event took place in 2019 when the government accounts have been shifting their pioneering role in guiding public opinion to red public accounts. General public accounts and ordinary netizens did not publish many posts due to the 2018 Negative Market Access List and the fact that all news was reported first by red public accounts.

While the government accounts only used entertainment-oriented narratives in one-fifth of their posts, the remaining three accounts used EN in more than one-third of their posts. Overall, a total of 35.71% of posts used EN. This value is not high compared to the 57% and 54% in the first phase of the US elections and the 44% in the first phase of the SK protests. This shows that Weibo accounts tended to use more non-entertaining narratives to report domestic democratic events. The non-EN posts deplored, condemned, and despised the HK protesters, dehumanizing them by calling them cockroaches (甲由; yuēyóu) or HK's poison (the word "独[dependent]" and "毒[poison/poisonous]" are homophones). Since the protester were no longer treated as human beings, the violence against them was more acceptable.

Table 5.13 First phase posts data by accounts, Hong Kong

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*	*Jargon in EN*
Government	25	5	20%	60%	40%	60%
Red pub	33	15	45.45%	73.33%	33.33%	46.67%
General pub	9	4	44.44%	50%	50%	50%
Netizens	3	1	33.33%	0	100%	0
Total	70	25	35.71%	64%	40%	48%

Table 5.14 First phase comments data by accounts, Hong Kong

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*	*Jargon in EN*
Government	2,342	981	41.89%	35.78%	24.87%	49.75%
Red pub	5,388	3,125	58%	32.8%	31.78%	37.82%
General pub	1,259	510	40.51%	34.51%	36.27%	29.8%
Netizens	273	55	20.15%	23.64%	36.36%	43.64%
Total	9,262	4,671	50.43%	33.5%	30.87%	39.52%

The practice of dehumanization was also very common in entertainment-oriented narratives, posts and comments alike. Fictionalization was used in 64% of EN posts and 50.43% of comments. It was popular with government accounts and red public accounts, who used it to write 60% and 73% of their visible posts. This narrative portrayed the repression of demonstrations as "tonight's Hong Kong blockbuster," in which the HK police were the main actors and the protesters were the villains, or, more precisely, prop-like presences. News photos of police violence against protesters were depicted as exciting action scenes, and the video of police holding protesters down and arresting them was described as dutiful civil servants working tirelessly to clean the streets. Fictionalization weakened the mainlanders' identification with Hong Kong people, avoided the moral condemnation the police might have received and diverted attention from the political conflict.

Ordinary netizens usually use the moe narrative to express flirtatious sentiments for self-protection. However, they learned to use it to attack protesters in the HK event. The moe tactic appeared in 40% of the visible posts and 30.87% of the comments, humiliating the protesters. The text between the cute emojis of smiling, laughing, eating melon, happy, loving, and hugging stated that Hong Kong would be a small fishing village without the Beijing government's favorable policies, and all HK people would starve to death within a week once the CCP pulled back its material support. If Beijing stopped "secretly supplying Hong Kong with money" and invested it in other provinces, Hong Kong's financial market would collapse overnight, as if this market only mattered to HK people.

Many posts and comments describe the relationship between Beijing and Hong Kong as that of a father and son. This could go back thousands of years to Confucianism, which stated that citizens should treat their rulers as their fathers and not question any of their demands. Obedience to the "father" was the only way to achieve a stable and peaceful society. Mainland netizens frequently used the meme of "kneel and call me father (跪下叫爸爸)." When they were unable to convince pro-Hong Kong netizens or provide valid reasons to attack the protesters, they often replied with a "you do not deserve to talk to your father (你不配和爸爸说话)" emoji.

Fan jargon was heavily promoted for use by government accounts, who applied this narrative to 60% of visible posts and nearly 50% of visible comments. Overall, 48% of posts and nearly 40% of comments used this tactic. After the term A-Zhong Brother (阿中哥哥)" was invented in 2016, this was the first time it was used massively in a positive, non-satirical way on Weibo. The "idol" in the jargon could be China as a concept (presumably excluding Hong Kong), the CCP, or the HK police. The "enemy fans" were either Hong Kong as a concept, the US (amazingly not the UK), or straight up HK protesters. Most of the posts and comments of this kind consisted of the following parts: first, praise the CCP, claiming how lucky and grateful the Chinese people are to be ruled by such a great and responsible idol. Second, recount the tragic history of A-Zhong Brother of being repeatedly bullied (invaded and colonized) by powerful rival idols (Western countries). Third, express their steady support for their idol at any cost. Fourth, liken HK or HK protesters to enemy fans or pawns controlled by enemy fans clubs and then disparage or threaten them. Sometimes, there would be one more step to repeat one's love for the CCP or A-Zhong Brother.

The three EN tactics were not used to enhance communication. On the contrary, they were used to rejecting communication. Coupled with playful texts and careless attitudes, they could only hurt and irritate the already exhausted protesters, further tearing apart the relationship between mainlanders and HK people. Nevertheless, that seems to be the CCP's aim. As long as mainlanders did not emotionally support the protesters, HK people would lack support, mainland rule would be stable, and the crisis was under control. The EN posts made by the government and red public accounts did seem to intentionally guide ordinary netizens to use EN and think in EN terms. The more the netizens did so, the more likely they would cut off communication with HK people due to unpleasant communication outcomes. In that way, they would end up only resonating with the CCP and the police.

The strategy of dividing the population with a joyful atmosphere paid off in November. On November 13th, 2019, clashes happened between protesting students and police around the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU). Police surrounded HKPU and fired tear gas inside, while protesters threw petrol bombs and bricks outside in return. News photos showed flames flying through the air and a complete loss of order at the scene. In response, Weibo netizens showed a surprising amount of unified joy and anticipation. At first, the phrase "the latest Hong Kong drama" was used frequently, but fan jargon quickly replaced fictionalization. Police throwing Molotov cocktails at HKPU was commented on Weibo as "students having a concert and police providing props to incite the atmosphere." The seriousness and danger of the conflict were completely ignored.

The protesters set fires, made dangerous chemicals, and fired steel balls and air guns on campus. The police pushed into the campus with armored vehicles and threw flashbangs, concussion bombs, and rubber bullets. Meanwhile, mainland netizens were more concerned with tapping into the entertaining perspective of the event. When the protesting students ran short of food, the mainland netizens quickly sent out plenty of pictures of grilled meat, hot pot, and other delicacies. They even went out of their way (against Chinese law) to post them on Facebook using VPNs to mock the HK students' tactless efforts to fight the A-Zhong Brother.

HK police actively interacted with the red public accounts, even playing several Cantonese songs outside the campus to satisfy their requests to "see a live performance." It was a special moment on Weibo. First, it was a clear interaction between the government and the netizens, which was relatively uncommon. Second, the government recognized and (spiritually) honored the

netizens for their various vicious activities against the protesters that were carried out via EN. Many general public accounts and netizens were excited and proactively joined in this "festival." Not all of them used EN when they tried to be funny. Nevertheless, the most popular posts and most liked comments contained many entertaining narratives.

When the students eventually fled over the wall, red public accounts sarcastically threatened, "If you run away with the money you collected for your idol, watch out for the police!" The threat was well-founded. Thousands of protesters were arrested on the campus of the HKPU on November 29th, and more than 500 were arrested outside the city district.

Red public accounts immediately posted the news on Weibo with some "hurray!" emojis. This time, however, netizens did not follow the red public accounts' cue to find ways to mock the student protesters. This may be because some opinion leaders expressed disgust at the entertaining activities and pointed out that the CCP also started out as protesters. A more likely reason is that, after the excitement of being recognized by the government, netizens found themselves without any substantial rewards. For example, visiting Facebook still resulted in a warning that it was illegal. In addition, they needed time to understand the results of the HK local elections.

5.3.2 The local elections and beyond

The tone of government accounts and red public accounts changed abruptly starting a week before the local elections that were held on November 24th. A central government account published a benevolent post talking about how Hong Kong being part of the motherland and how the CCP has historically developed a series of favorable policies for this particular city. The post ended with a call for Hong Kongers to vote for the pro-CCP political parties in local elections for "prosperity and stability." Red public accounts followed suit, linking the concept of prosperity to voting for the pro-communist parties. Both posts received a flood of copy-and-paste fan jargon replies, typically reading "Trust A-Zhong, Trust Hong Kongers [shakes fist] [cheers]."

However, this shift in position and sentiment was so sharp that ordinary netizens failed to keep up. They expressed great confusion. What was the point of previous cyber insults if HK people could be regarded as fellow citizens? If the government really loved Hong Kong, why did it strongly encourage the netizens to engage in the "cyber military march out, not leaving an inch of grass (网络出征，寸草不生)" activities? What position should they take now? Many young netizens who actively campaigned for the "A-Zhong Brother" refused to reconcile with Hong

Kong or recognize HK people they have disparaged and abused as their compatriots. They left messages saying that the official attitude now was a stab in the back. This proves that at least some fans are not employed by the government but are ordinary netizens attracted by the fan jargon and fan worldview. Of course, such comments were not allowed to become visible. Several government posts quickly closed their comment section, leaving only "bloggers' chosen comments" that were worded in support of both the central government and Hong Kong.

While the government easily silenced the unhappy fans, it failed to manipulate the HK people who were actually going to vote in the same way. Perhaps because the Hong Kong protesters did not respond positively to Beijing's sudden release of goodwill, starting on November 21st, the wording of the government accounts became harsh again. The Shenzhen government account posted a video of an "anti-terrorist drill" playing rousing music and showing military forces on land, water, and air, which it claimed could reach strategic locations in Hong Kong within four to five hours. Although the headline read "anti-terrorism," the implication could not be clearer since the text read: "Choose wisely for your own sake."

During this week, neither general public accounts nor ordinary netizens posted any entertainment-oriented narrative content. Although the government accounts published a post with fan jargon, it quickly closed the comment section of the post due to negative reactions from fan netizens. The red public accounts, on the other hand, continued to stick to the entertainment-oriented narratives and posted two more EN posts. Although the table below shows that the EN content reached 25% among all visible posts, in reality, the overall atmosphere on Weibo was oppressive and the censorship level was strong.

Table 5.15 Short before local elections, posts data by accounts, Hong Kong

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*	*Jargon in EN*
Government	5	1	20%	0	0	100%
Red pub	5	2	40%	0	50%	100%
General pub	2	0	0	-	-	-
Netizens	0	0	-	-	-	-
Total	12	3	25%	0	33.33%	100%

The complete disappearance of the fiction is likely due to the formal (albeit modest) method used by government accounts to report the events in question, so other accounts are afraid to call it drama anymore. Moe was only applied to one post in the red public account. Fan jargon, on the other hand, appears in all EN posts, and apparently, at this stage, the government considers it the single most effective strategy for guiding public opinion and keeping it stable.

Table 5.16 Short before local elections, comments data by accounts, Hong Kong

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*	*Jargon in EN*
Government	198	35	17.68%	0	42.86%	65.71%
Red pub	332	102	30.72%	7.84%	21.57%	85.29%
General pub	290	49	16.9%	10.2%	55.1%	42.86%
Netizens	0	0	-	-	-	-
Total	820	209	22.68%	6.99%	34.41%	70.43%

As netizens were puzzled by the governmental attitude towards HK, the majority of comments were non-entertainment-oriented narrative. They followed the posts' content, praising the CCP's contribution to making Hong Kong a world-class city, expressing hope that Hong Kong would "choose a peaceful and prosperous future," or simply stating their "trust of the CCP and the country." In the rest 22.68% of comments that used EN terms, less than 7% of the comments used fictionalization while 70% used fan jargon. The posts published by general public accounts that did not contain any EN also received a total of nearly 17% of EN responses, indicating that the government's attempt to encourage people to think with an entertainment-oriented narrative frame were still effective to some extent. Nonetheless, only less than 43% of the comments under general public posts used fan jargon, indicating that ordinary netizens who were not red public accounts followers would prefer moe narratives to fan jargon even if they wanted to harvest more likes.

On November 24th, the Hong Kong District Council elections finally began amidst the worst social unrest since Hong Kong's return to China. The pro-communist political parties emphasized that the protesters were mobs and called on peace-loving, anti-violence citizens to

vote for them. The democratic parties, on the other hand, appealed to those who supported the protesters to vote for them in order to turn this election into a disguised support for the five major demands. The election turned out to be a landslide victory of the pro-democracy camp. With the historically highest voting rate of 71%, almost 90% of the district council seats went to pro-democracy candidates. Before the election, the pro-democracy camp had 124 District Council seats and the pro-CCP camp had 327. After the election, the pro-democracy camp got 388 seats and the pro-CCP camp suffered an unprecedented defeat, with only 86 seats left.

During the election, the pro-Communist Hong Kong Police Mobile Force Sergeant, Lau Cha Kei, went out of his way to spread a rumor that the pro-democracy party had cheated in the election and that over 1.6 million votes were counted as invalid. Although the rumor was debunked the next day, there was never a visible post or comment on Weibo to clarify it. Discrediting the democratic system and process and turning a blind eye to the truth was probably the best the CCP could do to maintain its prestige in the face of such a election result.

The election results shocked Weibo users. As the CCP downplayed the number of protesters and the severity of the protests, the general consensus on the mainland – at least on social media platforms – was that HK residents would "wisely" support the CCP. After all, no one thought a bunch of "cockroaches" chased around and arrested by police could accomplish anything, and no one expected Hong Kong as a whole to choose to support the annoying protesters over the loving, wealthy, and powerful mainland government. A large number of netizens voiced their bewilderment with question marks, exclamation points, ellipses, and interrobangs. Some of them eventually came up with the hypothesis that the government accounts and the red public accounts had been reporting the whole event in a biased manner.

In the last week of November, several general public accounts held by political scholars and commentators spoke out with reflection. Two of them boldly posted news photos of the previous demonstrations that involved millions of people. Prior to the local elections, despite not shying away from the demonstrations, reports on Weibo never published non-violent pictures. The orderliness of the demonstration and the sheer magnitude of its participants surprised ordinary netizens. This surprise quickly turned into anger at having been swayed by biased information for so long. The Hot Topic of "Hong Kong elections" was flooded with posts demanding explanations from government accounts and red public accounts, as well as posts expressing disappointment

and distrust. This was the moment when the CCP's control over the Hong Kong event was almost out of control, and when it was most urgent to manage this crisis.

Under such circumstances, fictionalization was useless because everyone has already realized that the Hong Kong event did not even happen "at the neighbor's house" like the South Korea event, but precisely "at home." That the whole city of Hong Kong repudiated the CCP's claims with a democratic process was not something that should be discussed in a bantering tone, unless the mocking object was the Communist Party. Likewise, the moe narrative was inappropriate and could lead to outrage and condemnation. The only tactic that could work was fan jargon, which is conceptually entertainment-oriented narrative but more flexible in wording than the remaining two tactics. Therefore, after the election, 100% of EN posts used fan jargon.

Table 5.17 Posts data by accounts, after local elections, Hong Kong

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*	*Jargon in EN*
Government	8	2	25%	0	0	100%
Red pub	13	4	30.77%	0	25%	100%
General pub	15	1	6.67%	0	0	100%
Netizens	2	0	0	-	-	-
Total	38	7	18.42%	0	14.29%	100%

According to the logic of fan language, everyone has an idol, and every idol has at least one support group that provides him or her with money and resources. To offset the significance of Hong Kong's election results, it was clear that the city could not be the equivalent of "A-Zhong Brother." Thus, the United States was once again pulled in as the mastermind behind the unrest of Hong Kong[25]. The demonstrators were described as "brain-damaged fans" of the United States. They pretended to be A-Zhong Brother's fans in order to hurt him and thus gain the approval and affection from the US.

[25] There were those who identified this "counterpart idol" as the United Kingdom, but since the UK was not of the same international stature as the US and that it was not China's number one enemy, the most common fan jargon texts still cited the US as the one behind HK protesters.

In this kind of fan jargon, the Chinese government was portrayed as defenseless, harmless, innocently hurt but still did not blame the HK fans for their stupid choices. This loving characterization was very effective for many netizens. They felt heartbroken for their idol and immediately reasserted their determination to defend him. Some netizens who had previously questioned the Chinese government's Hong Kong policies denounced their naivety in almost taking off their fans identity and cursed the US for its sinister intentions. Red public accounts took the opportunity to spread the "support for A-Zhong" activity to further stabilize the public and defuse the crisis.

Of course, entertainment-oriented narrative attempts only accounted for 18.42% of visible posts, and the vast majority of the visible posts were non-entertainment-oriented narrative. Hong Kong has a population of over 7 million. If these people chose to support the protesters, then either they were all brain-damaged fans, or the protesters were right in at least some of their claims. The CCP of couse cannot and would not recognize the rightfulness in the five major demands, so the only option left was to describe the whole Hong Kong as irredeemable. Consequently, most non-entertainment-oriented narrative posts claimed that all HK residents hated mainland and wanted the US to occupy China. These posts supported the use of police violence against protesters in exchange for a stable social environment. All mainlanders who tried to reconcile mainlanders with Hong Kongers were categorized as traitors who took money from the US, and were reported to the "Anti-smear station for A-Zhong Brother" (Lo, 2019). After the election, when the HKPU was partially burned down on November 29th during clashes between police and students, a typical comment wrote: "It would be better (to let the police) burn down all universities and secondary schools, Hong Kong people do not deserve higher education." Some posts even radically called for a massacre of Hong Kong citizens with military tanks because mainlanders only needed that piece of land, not the population on it.

Unlike posts, the comments saw a sustained decline of both entertainment-oriented narratives and hate speech. As shown below, while government accounts and red public accounts successfully guided a portion of public opinion, general public accounts and ordinary netizens received less than 5% of the total EN comments. This indicates that the suspicion of the government among netizens who did not buy into fan jargon has not dissipated. The effect of EN was not very high in the face of irrefutable facts.

Table 5.18 Comments data by accounts, after local elections, Hong Kong

	Total visible	*Total EN*	*EN percentage*	*Fiction in EN*	*Moe in EN*	*Jargon in EN*
Government	706	91	12.89%	13.19%	38.46%	51.65%
Red pub	1,565	280	17.89%	22.5%	37.14%	51.43%
General pub	1,520	73	4.8%	0	64.38%	39.73%
Netizens	169	3	1.78%	0	100%	33.33%
Total	3,960	447	11.29%	16.78%	42.28%	49.44%

While fictionalization was extinct in the comments under posts of general public accounts and ordinary netizens, the proportion of moe has steadily risen. This may imply that ordinary netizens tended to choose moe when they wanted to use EN but lack information on exactly which EN type was more secure, or were reluctant to use the kind of EN advocated by the government.

5.4 Summary and discussions

This chapter demonstrates how the Chinese government has used social media platforms to demonize the concept of democracy, exaggerate the suffering of people in democratic countries, and belittle democratic politicians and demonstrators, thereby leading citizens to reject democracy as a negative, evil, and hypocritical ideology. What is worse than possessing little knowledge about democracy is possessing wrong knowledge about it. When social media posts and comments made democratic events more like entertainment than serious activities, domestic audiences were led to believe that democratic institutions are incompetent and ridiculous. They therefore had no choice but to support authoritarian regimes.

That said, this does not mean that democratic events have no effect at all on the nationals of authoritarian states. As the three cases in this chapter illustrated, China as an authoritarian regime still tried to avoid the public from directly facing democratic events such as voting and protests. It would modify the entertainment-oriented narrative types in case of a successful democratic event to reduce the crisis.

Geographic distance may have something to do with the choice and effectiveness of tactics. Comparing three cases in this chapter, proximity to China seems to matter. The closer the case

country is from mainland China, the lower the EN content in visible content's proportion, and the higher the probability of false or biased reports to be detected. Therefore, fictionalization was used mainly when the democratic event was happening outside or far away from mainland China. In case of a domestic case, fan jargon would be a better choice guide public opinion. The general public accounts and the ordinary netizens, unlike the privileged red public accounts, were more likely to choose the moe narrative when they have not yet figured out the situation.

Democratic events and the concept of democracy cease to be too much of a crisis when a regime is able to master the discourse skillfully and adeptly, making citizens believe they are well-informed. Introducing the concept of democracy to such a country starts with dispelling misconceptions, which can increase the cost of spreading democratic ideas, complicate the process, and likely end up failing. China is not the only country that has done this, and it will never be the last. How to deal with such a reality in the digital era is an important topic in the contemporary world.

CHAPTER 6. THE COVID-19 CRISIS

The COVID-19 pandemic was undoubtedly the most severe crisis the Chinese Communist Party had encountered in recent years. After the virus crippled Wuhan, the government's cover-up of the outbreak sparked outrage among the public. From January to April 2020, people's suffering across the country has been exposed on social media platforms, and minor crises within the big pandemic crisis kept emerging almost daily. Many foreign media commentators expected this crisis to finally prompt the Chinese people to rebel against the authoritarian system.

However, the Beijing government has successfully dealt with this crisis. Scholars generally attribute this result to censorship and police, but these two measures are not limited. Although strict censorship existed from start to finish, many people still saw enough information to outrage them before the censorship. Police activities must be credited, but less than 1% of the total population affected by the pandemic was arrested. How exactly did the Communist Party cope with the unexpected crises time and again, both online and offline, and ultimately ensured its regime stability?

This chapter focuses mainly on the lockdown of Wuhan in 2020, the period when the crisis was at its worst, and uses Weibo data to provide a detailed account of what happened. Weibo was the officially certified platform for help during the crisis and gathered valuable information. While WeChat could block a large number of public accounts with ease, Weibo's censorship lagged slightly behind the speed of the public accessing the visible posts and comments. Therefore, it is most helpful and informative to use the data gathered by Weibo to study the CCP's crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6.1 Before the Wuhan lockdown

As early as mid-December 2019, Wuhan hospitals began to see patients with flu-like symptoms, often with high fevers and breathing difficulties. On December 30th, doctor Ai Fen of Wuhan Central Hospital sent out a lab report in her department's WeChat group, showing that a patient had tested positive for SARS coronavirus with high confidence. Dr. Li Wenliang shared this report in his classmates' WeChat group, alerting his peers that seven cases of SARS were diagnosed in the South China Fruit and Seafood Market. The next day, he was interrogated by the

Wuhan Municipal Health Commission and asked to write a "reflection and self-criticism on disseminating inaccurate information." On January 3rd, 2020, the Wuhan Public Security Bureau admonished Li Wenliang and seven other doctors for "spreading false statements on the internet." The news of eight "rumor-mongers" being punished was broadcast on CCTV news channels and various local TV channels to inform the public that there was no reason to panic. Ironically, on the same day, the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention obtained the complete sequence of the virus and submitted a report to the WHO (Associated Press, 2021).

Various files and documents show that Chinese authorities were informed of a SARS-like disease in December 2019. However, instead of informing citizens, they chose to cover up the problem (Illmer et al., 2021). On January 10th, the first expert team from Beijing came to Wuhan to investigate the coronavirus. In an interview, the leader, Wang Guangfa, said that the virus was "not human-to-human transmissible" and "preventable and controllable." His statement considerably relaxed the public's vigilance. However, the information provided to him by the Wuhan municipal government deliberately excluded many of the critical cases that led him to make such a judgment. One consequence of the concealment was that Wang was infected and began to show symptoms on the 16th (Zhao & Chen, 2020). When Chinese health officials determined at an internal meeting on January 14th that the virus could be transmitted from person to person, officials asked them to downplay the virus' ability to infect in media interviews to "appease the public."

Many explanations existed as to why officials were deceptive. The most widely circulated theory on Weibo was that the officials needed to maintain a harmonious atmosphere for the two sessions (the National People's Congress session and the National Committee meeting of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference), which started in Wuhan on January 6th, 2020, and closed on January 17th. If bad news broke out and caused the conferences not to run smoothly, local officials would be regarded by the CCP as incompetent and not loyal enough to the Party. Therefore, the officials had to cheat to save their careers. Another theory of a similar nature is that creating a festive Chinese New Year atmosphere and leaving leaders without worries has always been an essential indicator for CCP officials to get promotions. The 2020 Chinese New Year was January 25th, and any negative news would be frowned upon in the month leading up to and after that date. The essence of both explanations is the nature of the CCP: a governor needs to be accountable only to his superiors to secure their positions; thus, the concerns of the powerless

citizens are not a priority. When the pandemic went out of control, the officials who made the crucial decisions to conceal either continued to work in their original positions or moved to other positions without being punished.

At the beginning of January, top epidemiologists in Beijing heard about the emergence of a "SARS-like infection" in Wuhan and immediately called relevant colleagues to request more information. However, despite their repeated requests, it took the National Health and Wellness Commission ten days to send high-level expert teams to Wuhan to investigate the epidemic. Despite the first team led by Wang Guangfa did not find anything worth being alert for, other experts strongly advocated for another investigation. One week later, on the evening of January 18th, the second team that Zhong Nanshan and Li Lanjuan led arrived in Wuhan. At this date, Wuhan's large communities held massive dinner parties in the enclosed space that involved more than 40,000 families (around 130,000 people in total) without any prevention measures (Xiao, 2020). The next day, Zhong Nanshan confirmed that the virus in Wuhan was spreading from person to person.

On the 20th, Premier Li Keqiang and Vice Premier Sun Chunlan listened to the expert team's report and allowed Zhong Nanshan to publicly inform the nation of a SARS-like outbreak in Wuhan. Many experts stated that the situation was dire, if not horrific. A SARS expert, Guan Yi, gave a conservative estimate that the coronavirus infection could be ten times the size of SARS (Guan, 2020). President Xi Jinping did not attend any relevant meetings or meet with any experts (Li, 2020). However, he later claimed to have "personally directed and deployed" the entire epidemic prevention and control effort.

The experts emphasized that the local community must keep the public informed of the virus and rely on the joint efforts of all sectors of society to prevent and treat the disease. However, Wuhan officials did not make any public statement to their citizens. The top officials even attended a massive New Year's Eve Gala on January 22nd, one day before the Wuhan lockdown, as if nothing had happened. The Gala took place along a river. Just across the river, citizens who had previously been infected at the January 18th massive community dinner parties began to develop fevers, and their families were seeking help on Weibo.

At 2 am on January 23rd, presumably after the officials had finished watching the New Year's Eve Gala, the Wuhan municipal government sent a notice to its citizens' smartphones declaring a lockdown. As soon as the news broke, a mass exodus erupted in the city. Large numbers

of people who had not yet gone to sleep flocked to the high-speed rail stations to buy tickets to leave. Some drove more than 100 kilometers to get out after arriving at the airport to find their flights had been canceled (Liu-Chen, 2020). By 7 am, more residents woke up to the news and flocked to the high-speed railway stations. However, tickets were no longer available. Wuhan's highways to the outside world were also blocked by roadblocks and police cars, making it impossible for people to leave. Based on official estimates, about five million people managed to leave Wuhan at midnight.

In response, the Chinese government sanctioned these "fugitives" online and in practice. On Weibo, a Hot Topic rose quickly to condemn those who left Wuhan as selfish, cold-blooded, cowardly traitors and deserters and called on citizens to report them so that they could not spread the coronavirus elsewhere. In reality, the government required provinces and cities to strictly control and quarantine people from Wuhan. Consequently, vehicles with Hubei license plates became a focal point of residents and police everywhere. Once eligible vehicles were found, nearby residents would call the police and demand that the owners be quarantined, even if they had not returned to Hubei for years. Police locked up the vehicles and forced the owners into quarantined hotels where they had to pay substantial fees for heating and food. Many cities issued emergency regulations prohibiting vehicles with Hubei license plates from entering their territory, rendering truckers unable to get off the highway or enter rest stops on the side of the highway. Thus, they had to ask for help on Weibo for food.

Angry Wuhan netizens replied to these excessive controls on Weibo that it was not that they did not want to "live and die with Wuhan," but that they did not trust the irresponsible Wuhan government to protect their lives and human rights after the lockdown. In addition, Wuhan is one of the largest railroad hubs and air and road passenger hubs in China, directly adjacent to nine provinces. Every year, half of China's nationals would change planes, trains, ferries, and automobiles in Wuhan to return to their hometowns to celebrate the Chinese New Year. If any of these nationals brought the virus to the rest of China, the incompetent officials deceived the public that should be blamed, not the uninformed public. These arguments gained widespread support and sympathy. Netizens agreed that instead of encouraging the public to fight each other, the government should hold officials accountable as soon as possible. Related Hot Topics were flooded with discontent and thus more quickly removed.

Due to the epidemic's severity, 16 cities around Wuhan were also blockaded on January 24th. About 59.17 million Hubei residents were stuck in the same situation as the Wuhaners. Already unable to run away under police and military surveillance, coupled with the moral pressure on social media, people decided to stay home. The crisis still seemed to be under control at this stage, and the entertainment-oriented narrative was barely visible. Nevertheless, this was because most of the population was battling disease and did not have the time or energy to question the government. As the following sections show, after they secured their survival and cared about life around them again, the corruption and mismanagement at all levels of the Communist government quickly ignited public outrage. The CCP used entertainment-oriented narratives on a large scale in an attempt to downplay the crisis and divert attention. However, unlike in the election cases, netizens in this crisis have not responded as the government wished.

6.2 During the Wuhan lockdown

6.2.1 Incompetent officials and censorship

Since the lockdown, Weibo became the most prominent information platform for patients, residents, and medical staff to vent grievances, question the government, and ask for public help. As early as January 22nd, Weibo had established a mutual-help "Super Topic (超话, chao hua)" platform, where patient information posted could be transmitted directly to hospitals and nearby volunteer WeChat groups to ensure maximum communication effectiveness. This platform later became the officially designated help platform and recorded a wealth of information and follow-up stories for doctors, nurses, patients, and healthy but needy residents.

The second day of the lockdown was Chinese New Year's Eve. On what should have been the most joyous day of the year, many Wuhan residents reported on Weibo that they and (or) their family members began to experience fever, cough, and breathing difficulties. The affluent middle-class families and the elites of society's prestigious industries had to watch their parents, siblings, spouses, and children struggle with various syndromes. Elderly citizens without family members and other patients requiring regular treatment (for example, depressed patients, people with diabetes, and patients requiring kidney dialysis) were in the midst of survival challenges. They had to rely on Weibo Super Topic for help. Even when health conditions and community regulations allowed patients to walk to the hospital, the hospital hall was packed with people waiting to be

seen. Moreover, since inpatient beds were already fully occupied, those diagnosed as infected still had to return home for self-quarantine, often thus infecting their family members.

The situation in the hospital was even worse. As COVID-19 spread in Wuhan, the number of people infected rose sharply at a rate higher than that of SARS. On the day of Wuhan lockdown, Hubei provincial governor Wang Xiaodong said that Wuhan had sufficient material reserves and market supply. Almost at the same time as he held his media conference, Wuhan's major hospitals released posts on Weibo with the opposite content. Hospitals declared that front-line health care workers were in urgent need of all kinds of protective materials, from N95 masks to goggles, gloves, and anti-pollution boot covers. Due to the supply shortage, it was common in that period to see Weibo videos of medical staff having emotional breakdowns.

Facing the tragic development of the fight against COVID-19, the raging public opinion unanimously thought that, since the central government had admitted that the coronavirus was real, it would replace the malfeasant Wuhan officials, just like it did in the 2003 Beijing SARS case. On January 24th, Zhang Ouya, a senior reporter for the local CCP newspaper *Hubei Daily*, posted on Weibo that the Wuhan municipal government should immediately replace officials due to their unqualified leadership in the exceptional situation (Yang, 2020). His call was endorsed on Weibo, but it was clear that the CCP had no intention of doing so. On the same day of the posting, Zhang Ouya was forced to delete the post. The *Hubei Daily* issued a red-headed Party document apologizing to the Wuhan Municipal Party Committee and the Wuhan Epidemic Control Command for "the erroneous speech of one of our employees on his personal Weibo account." Netizens were shocked at this result, and the related hashtag "#Wuhan changes commander" was canceled one day later.

Unfortunately, the officials whom the central government protected at the expense of suppressing public opinion failed to deliver a satisfactory performance. On January 26th, the Hubei provincial government finally held its first press conference, which three senior officials attended. The Secretary-General of Hubei Provincial Party Committee, Bie Bixiong, sat on the left and wore a mask showing his nostrils, equal to not wearing one. The Governor of Hubei Province, Wang Xiaodong, sat in the middle without a mask. The Mayor of Wuhan, Zhou Xianwang, sat on the right, wearing a mask upside down and inside out. Their behavior exposed their lack of attention to the virus and that they were so well protected that they did not need masks to ensure their well-

being. Netizens posted the photos of the conference on Weibo, sarcastically saying that they were "three officials, none of whom can correctly wear a mask."

During a briefing on the annual production of masks in Hubei Province, the governor Wang Xiaodong initially claimed that Hubei could produce 10.8 billion face masks per year. Then he received a note from outside the camera and immediately said that he had made a slip of the tongue; the annual production capacity should be 1.8 billion instead of 10.8 billion. However, another note was handed to him in 30 seconds, and he corrected the capacity again to 1.08 million. Next, he said that disposable coveralls, masks, and other supplies were still in short supply, while Wuhan Mayor Zhou Xianwang said the shortage had been completely alleviated. These contradictory statements and the act of only reading aloud the information given to them on an ad hoc basis (and misreading twice) revealed two facts. First, they had a complete lack of knowledge about the areas they managed. Second, under the patronage of the central government, they did not need to worry that this lack of knowledge would lead to their removal from office.

After the conference began, angry netizens across the country published 28 visible posts satirizing the meeting as a tragic event comparable to a big car accident. Of these, 16 particularly bitter criticisms were deleted within six hours, and the rest twelve posts survived because of their vagueness and mild tone. Three of them used the "innocent face with question marks" emoji to euphemistically express their confusion and dissatisfaction with the status quo. Five used the "cover face and laugh-cry" emoji to express the feelings of not daring to scold officials directly but still feeling ridiculous about the situation. Most of the comments below these posts criticized the government without any moe narratives. At this point, no one compared the incident to a drama or fiction, and no one used fan jargon for purely patriotic purposes (those who did were being sarcastic).

While applying strict censorship, local officials also tried their best to divert public attention. One day after the media conference, on January 27th, Hubei province carried out a new policy that all donations must go through the Red Cross. With this rule, public pressure immediately shifted to the Red Cross, and the government officials' activities disappeared from media coverage.

6.2.2 The Red Cross scandals and four entertaining attempts

On January 26th, the same day as the Hubei province press conference, the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs has designated five organizations – the Hubei Provincial Red Cross Society, the Hubei Provincial Charity Federation, the Hubei Youth Development Foundation, the Wuhan Charity Federation, and the Wuhan Red Cross Society – to receive and distribute donations raised by corporations and individuals for the prevention and control of the epidemic in Wuhan. On January 27th, however, volunteers who went to the hospital to donate supplies were told that they could not accept the donation because of a new policy that all items had to be distributed through the Red Cross. In response, Ma Guoqiang, deputy secretary of the Hubei Provincial Party Committee and secretary of the Wuhan Municipal Committee, stressed that the policy was designed for the sake of openness and transparency (Hollingsworth & Thomas, 2020).

The China Red Cross Society is not affiliated with other local Red Cross societies. It is fostered, funded, and run by the Communist Party. In effect, it is a government department that acts at the will of the CCP, not the donor. In natural disasters, the Chinese government often provides the Red Cross with monopoly power on charitable giving. In Hubei's case, the right given to Red Cross not only did not guarantee openness and transparency but only delayed and appropriated substantial donations due to lack of expertise and low organizational capacity. Donated materials from around the world piled up at the Wuhan International Expo Center but never reached the hospitals and communities that desperately needed them. For days, tens of millions of dollars went unspent, and piles of protective gear lay in a vast warehouse in the Expo Center. At the same time, desperate medical personnel battled the virus unprotected (Ma, 2020). A reporter found that the Wuhan Red Cross had only 13 employees in total, one of whom was not actually on the job. Moreover, these staff members lacked computer skills and only manually recorded information about donations. This low-efficiency and error-prone way of working was not improved until the officials involved were punished for other incidents.

On January 30th, the Wuhan Union Hospital posted on Weibo for help, saying that the hospital's supplies were "not about to, but literally have" run out. On the same day, the Hubei Red Cross was forced to announce the use of donated supplies for the first time. According to its handwritten form, the Wuhan Union Hospital that treated the most COVID-19 patients and needed the most supplies received only 3,000 ordinary masks, while Wuhan Ren'ai Hospital, which was not a significant treatment provider, received 18,000 N95 masks. During an unannounced visit by

local reporters, Ren'ai Hospital admitted to having sold "extra" masks to make a profit of over 300,000 RMB. In the face of angry questions from the public, the Red Cross urgently changed the information about the masks from "N95" to "KN95" on January 31st, claiming that KN95 masks were not on the list of supplies for the prevention and control of COVID-19 and their distribution was therefore not problematic. Netizens soon discovered that the Ren'ai Hospital and its KN95 mask donor were business partners with the Hubei Provincial Pension Industry Investment Fund.

On February 1st, a reporter from China Central Television (CCTV) took a live broadcast of an unannounced interview with the Wuhan Red Cross and was stopped by a security guard when he tried to enter the warehouse to check on the distribution of supplies. After being rudely pushed out of the warehouse, the reporter met a staff member from Wuhan Union Hospital who had come to pick up supplies, who said that his department had only received a total of two sets of protective clothing and four masks yesterday. On the same day, another reporter that went to the Red Cross site filmed a man putting a box of 3M masks from the warehouse into a car with the license plate "E (鄂, abbreviation for Hubei) A0260W." The driver said the supplies were for the officials. In contrast, the two Wuhan Union Hospital medical staff that stood beside the car were empty-handed.

The two incidents broke out simultaneously and triggered substantial public attention. "E A0260W" immediately hit Weibo Hot Topic. Despite repeated censorship, it kept appearing in multiple Hot Topics in various forms, such as transcribing Arabic numbers into Chinese characters or removing the "E" in front and the "W" at the end. As netizens verified the car as an official vehicle of the Wuhan Municipal Government Office, it was frequently referred to as "Master Zhao's car[26]." Meanwhile, the blatant blocking of the CCTV reporter by the Red Cross led netizens to speculate whether the Wuhan officials had some vital secrets of the central government so that they would not be removed from office no matter how tough they acted. Some netizens posted and retweeted a screenshot from the movie *Kung Fu*, in which a gangster attacked police officers while shouting, "Is there still a king's rule? Is there still a law?" In this case, the fictional narrative was no longer used to trivialize the reality but rather was a risk-averse strategy that netizens were forced to use because the reality was not allowed to be explicitly discussed.

[26] The Zhao family (赵家人) or master Zhao (赵老爷) refer to the powerful Chinese interest groups, such as top-level bureaucrats (Zhao, 2016). This usage became popular in 2015, especially after the CCP prohibited the netizens from using it to refer to Deng Xiaoping's granddaughter.

The Hubei Red Cross Society issued an emergency statement, saying it was "deeply saddened, remorseful and guilty" about the supply problems in the distribution process. Since the statement did not admit any specific mistakes or mention any plausible solutions, netizens massively used the phrase "deeply saddened, remorseful and guilty" to mock the authorities, such as, "I am deeply saddened, remorseful and guilty for not eating tomatoes today. Furthermore, I would not be eating them tomorrow [laughs] [shy]!" In these cases, netizens used moe emojis not to express their pleasant mood, but to give posts and comments a better chance to survive censorship.

With the explosion of the Red Cross scandal, the government intensified its efforts to censor public opinion. However, public opinion was so boisterous that censorship was gradually failing to keep up with the speed of public criticism. At this point, it was vital to divert public attention to maintain the stability of Communist rule. From January 23rd to February 4th, as the CCP's reputation deteriorated, entertainment narratives gradually gained weight in the visible content.

The first attempt was launched on January 29th. A Hot Topic named "It is so moe during the lockdown that it made me laugh to tears" emerged, and many red public accounts and general public accounts were posted under it simultaneously. In these posts, Wuhan was described as a "little idiot," and the virus, with its Chinese name as "Guanzhuang virus," was affectionately called "A-Guan" and "Guanzhuang-kun." The virus was described as innocent, and the cause of the epidemic was attributed to Wuhan being a dumb kid who accidentally got sick. The anthropomorphic image of the virus was a cute young Japanese-anime-style girl in a nightgown utterly unaware of what was going on. Some people even started anthropomorphizing both the virus and Wuhan and paired them as a couple fighting but still inseparable.

The tone of the posts was like an adult coaxing a kindergarten child, with highly childish words and many words intentionally misspelled to match this context. Some examples after corrected spelling:

- Wuhan the little fool [cry][cry], stop being wayward and throwing tantrums, hurry up and recover [cry][cry]!
- Wuhan is a stupid little kid who accidentally made herself sick. Shh, with the protection of A-Zhong Brother, she will get better!

- A-Guan originally only wanted to live peacefully and happily in the small animals. Still, one day, they became fierce to protect their homes and could not control themselves to hurt those who were innocent.....

At first, from the retweets and comments these posts received, it seemed that the moe narrative was working well. Comments expressed their "love" for Wuhan in the tone of gentle reproach to a child. The joyful atmosphere was broken about 12 hours later by a general public account which took a screenshot of the above moe remarks and wrote: "(Are you) Nuts?" This "Nuts" post did not make it to the Hot Topic List but quickly became visible on Weibo due to the massive number of retweets and comments it received. Ordinary netizens generally found the Hot Topic disgusting. Many criticized the attempt to write about the disaster as an entertaining diversion as heartless. Wuhan netizens pointed out that it was utterly unacceptable to use an entertainment-oriented narrative to deny human suffering and death, and despicable that the moe narrative completely ignored that the negligence of officials was the leading cause of the disaster. The summarization of the sacrifice and dedication of the Wuhan people in a flippant tone as a bit of fool was cold-blooded, and a disaster shall never be whitewashed in any form. The Hot Topic quickly disappeared amidst tremendous opposition. Those public accounts that participated deleted their posts overnight.

Despite the failure of this attempt, the CCP did not abandon the practice of entertaining a disaster, probably because there was no better way to divert public attention. On January 30th, a netizen published a moe picture in which different parts of the country were painted as local representative food. In the picture, Wuhan was painted as an anthropomorphic bowl of hot, dry noodles that wore a mask and laid in the ward, while outside the ward window stood other kinds of food. The stinky black tofu represented Anhui province; the hot pot represented Sichuan province; the mushroom steam pot represented Yunnan province; the green onion represented Shandong province; and so on. In their hands, they held signs that read, "Hot dry noodles, go (get better)!" The cloud in the sky was in the shape of a loving heart. The author drew this picture to show her care and support for the Wuhan people.

Figure 6.1 The moe picture of support for Wuhan hot dry noodles

After this image was published, the Communist Youth League of China (CYLC) quickly created and promoted a Hot Topic of "show your fan-support (应援) for Wuhan" on Weibo. Red public accounts encouraged their followers to express their support for Wuhan by referring to their local food. For example, "Guangxi rice noodles [rice] cheering for Wuhan hot dry noodles [noodles]! [shakes fist]" or "Henan pan-fried baozi supporting for Wuhan hot dry noodles, cheers Wuhan! [love][love]." However, the focus of the discussion soon shifted from supporting Wuhan to the actual dishes. Some public accounts even posted cooking tutorials, taking advantage of the Wuhan crisis to attract new followers. When someone clicked into this Hot Topic, he or she would not see the suffering of Wuhan people, nor the concerns for Wuhan from other places, but only exciting and passionate discussions about how delicious the dishes (not even Wuhan dish) were, how to cook them, and where to find good local stores.

Once the Topic had waned a little in fervor, ordinary netizens began to question the superficiality of its content, arguing that food could not replace people, especially amid a serious disaster. Wuhaners protested online that they felt hurt when only irrelevant banter existed under what was supposed to be a Topic to support Wuhan. An otherwise heartwarming humanistic care

was thus ruined by the political need to divert public attention and the government-paid commentators who did not care about Wuhan at all.

While anthropomorphizing an abstract concept did not work out well, personifying a concrete object might have a different effect. On January 28th, a netizen posted on Weibo that bored netizens might want to watch the live broadcast of the construction process of the Fire God Mountain (火神山, huo shen shan) and Thunder God Mountain (雷神山, lei shen shan) hospitals. Shortly afterward, Hot Topics about these two hospitals began to emerge.

Fangcang (方舱 [square cabin]) hospitals, or mobile field hospitals, originated in the United States and were first used in the Vietnam War (Wang, 2012). After the COVID-19 outbreak, as the number of patients exceeded the capacity of existing hospitals, the Chinese government decided to set up fangcang hospitals to treat patients with mild symptoms. Construction of the two hospitals began on January 25th. The Fire God Mountain hospital was completed on February 2nd, and the Thunder God Mountain hospital on February 6th. In the shadow of the epidemic, it would be a loss not to allow the public to see such rapid construction and to make them aware of the superiority of an authoritarian government that can pool its resources to solve urgent problems. Therefore, CCTV opened a live platform to the national audience.

The live broadcast of Fang Cabin Hospital immediately caught viewers' attention nationwide. The number of online viewers kept climbing and reached 30 million on January 29th (Li, 2020). As the workers fought to catch up on the front lines, netizens cheered them on online while encouraging each other to endure the lockdown. However, the focus began to shift again. The machines and equipment gradually won the attention of netizens over the workers who operated them. On January 29th, each construction machine received a nickname from the CCTV who launched a "Hit the list to provide fan-support (打榜应援)" page and a Super Topic platform from Weibo. Given the technology and time required to prepare these pages, it is reasonable to assume that the anthropomorphization and idolization of the machines were done at the behest of the government and guided by online commentators.

The nicknames of the machines were moe: big yellow, little green, little red, little yellow, little-little yellow, and so forth. The forklift (叉车, cha che) was called "Cha-chan (叉酱, cha jiang)" in which "chan (ちゃん)" was a Japanese term of endearment for a junior or a familiar peer. The

mixer truck stirred cement and was called "呕 (vomit) 泥 (mud) 酱(chan)[27]." Steel pipes were called fruit bars, whereas excavators were called tattooed big brothers because of their vast size (even though there was no pattern on the excavators). The action of excavators lifting up steel pipes was therefore called gangster big brothers gnawing on fruit bars. Many netizens found this super moe.

Figure 6.2 The CCTV fan-support page for Thunder God Mountain hospital

The top section of the CCTV fan-support list page advertised: "Excavator super idol group debut! Come to support your idol vehicle!" The page created a "power value" system and ranked the machines according to this value in descending order. On the left side of the page were the

[27] The second character in the word "cement (水泥, shui ni)" is "mud (泥, ni)," so a mixer truck could be portrayed as "vomitting mud." Meanwhile, the nickname was a pun because the pronunciation of "呕泥酱 (ou ni jiang)" is the same to "Oni-chan" which is an affectionate term for "elder brother" in Japanese.

images of the machines, and on the right side were buttons of "Help it cheer." Netizens could click these buttons to increase the "power value" for the corresponding machine.

To this point, the live broadcast turned into a mixture of moe narrative with fan jargon. Nevertheless, ordinary netizens did not wait too long to express their astonishment. On January 31st, a netizen named "Daghe" spoke out that she felt it was inappropriate and undignified to focus on moe machine idols during a disaster where real people were suffering. She was immediately under the attack of self-claimed fan-girls of A-Zhong Brother. Although Daghe deleted the post shortly afterward, the fans found out her real-world information and demanded her workplace to "re-education" her about appropriateness.

Many netizens supported Daghe, declaring that they found the live stream uncomfortable. Some of them used Li Wenliang's example sarcastically, saying, "Is it time to admonish us?" More of them mentioned the girl who chased after a funeral vehicle crying "mommy" and the boy with congenital diseases who starved to death after his fathers had been taken to quarantine. While hospitals were being built, people were losing their loved ones in the real world. The government was forced to construct fangcang hospitals because there were too many patients and netizens realized that this should never be treated as a happy event. In the face of a major national disaster, the official media should not have interacted with the masses using fan jargon to obscure the core cause of the real crisis – the government-raised incompetent officials and the suppression of free speech. Some netizens were concerned that no one would care about workers who worked continuously on the construction sites in a context where machines were idols. Their investigation revealed that some workers suffered from delayed wages and insufficient masks and drinking water (Zhou et al., 2020). CCTV decisively canceled the Hit List interface as the situation was about to run out of control. On Weibo, the red public accounts stopped directing netizens to post under the Super Topics of each machine. Another attempt to entertain the situation failed.

The government finally understood that neglecting real people would lead to criticism. In their later attempts to deflect public attention from inept institutions and officials, they began to combine the moe narrative with reality when framing an entertaining event. Their next goal was to make the lockdown look light-hearted.

Blockades were set up across many towns and villages as the coronavirus spread to surrounding areas. Since villagers were not well informed and had a deep-rooted concept of visiting friends and relatives during the Spring Festival, village cadres came up with various

measures to thwart their plans to go out. The first measure was physical obstruction. Many villages dug ditches, piled up the soil, and set up roadblocks overnight to block the roads. The second was broadcasting. Rural China usually has a radio system through loudspeakers in which the village cadres could angrily scold villagers who tried to get out of their homes. The third was banners. In villages and towns, banners were often used to promote government policies, legal regulations, or CCP slogans. During the COVID-19 pandemic, harsh words against visiting friends and relatives were printed on banners in many places so that more people could see them.

Henan Province first pushed these three behaviors in its province onto the Hot Topic List. Zhejiang province followed suit and established its own Hot Topic of the same kind. Some of the videos showed the construction site of the trench digging with cute post-synthesized sound effects and crowd laughter, making it as entertaining as a talent show. It was not a concern whether the trenches would cause traffic accidents after dark or how those trapped in their homes by chains could get the necessary daily necessities. Some videos recorded broadcasts of village chiefs angrily berating villagers, and although the content was vulgar in language, it was funny with post-editing and cute subtitles. Many banners became popular because they rhyme. Since ancient times, rhyming has been regarded as a genre of humor and joy in Chinese. These slogans equated going out with death, but because of the genre, they seemed entertaining. For example:

- 带病回村，不孝子孙 [(If you) Return with illness to hometown, you are an unworthy son]
- 感染爹娘，丧尽天良 [(If you returned home and) Infect your parents, you have no conscience]
- 若嫌在家呆得长，想想当年张学良 [If you think you have stayed at home for too long, think about Zhang Xueliang[28]]
- 一人传染全家倒，财产跟着亲戚跑 [One person gets infected, the whole family down; all the properties would be gone (to your remote relatives)]
- 今天走亲又访友，明年家中剩条狗 [Visit relatives and friends today, next year the only survivor in your family would be your dog]

[28] Zhang Xueliang, or Chang Hsueh-liang, spent more than 50 years under house arrest due to his instigation of the 1936 Xi'an Incident against Chiang Kai-shek.

- 今天到处乱跑，明年坟上长草[Today run around, next year your grave grows grass]

The delightful content alleviated the anxiety and irritation of the public to some extent. Especially for the residents of Wuhan and its surrounding cities that were blockaded, these Hot Topics balanced their aggravation by informing them that they were not the only group who got locked inside their homes and experienced the hardships. This time, the moe Hot Topics was not out of touch with reality and showed that the CCP officials diligently tried to prevent and control the epidemic. The relative efficient management of the cadres presented a more approachable image of the cadres who stand with the citizens, not high above or against them. From this perspective, although serious events were still recorded entertainingly, and although the interests of vulnerable groups were still not emphasized, this attempt had a better effect than previous ones. Therefore, despite all sorts of mismanagement and corruption problems (Guan, 2020), public sentiment was relatively calmed, at least on Weibo.

Among these four rounds of entertaining attempts, one actor stands out. Red public accounts actively retweeted and commented on the first and second rounds of entertaining the lockdown. However, after the massive opposition to the Hot Dry Noodles event, they ceased to follow the third round of fan-support for the cement trucks. Given that the central government pushed the fan-support event and that the CCP fans actively participated, it is less likely that the red public accounts who also work for the CCP were forced to be absent. It is reasonable to speculate that, after being scolded in the Hot Dry Noodles event, these red public accounts immediately adjusted their priorities and stayed away from the fan support event. In the fourth round, they remained cautious. The accounts that initially retweeted the banner campaign were general public accounts. Only after the campaign proved to be popular did the red public accounts rejoin the retweets.

From these four rounds of entertaining attempts, we also see that the government is rigid in its strategy setting. Once it identifies a crisis management strategy as effective, it chooses this strategy even if there are backlashes. On the other hand, the red public accounts are much more flexible. After witnessing the general public accounts benefit from the banner campaign and that the ordinary netizens welcomed the entertainment-oriented narratives, they quickly adjusted their decision and joined the campaign.

6.2.3 The death of Li Wenliang and strict censorship

The crisis was far from over. Li Wenliang, the "whistleblower" whom the government admonished for spreading information about suspected SARS cases, was infected. The biggest crisis event of the CCP during the COVID-19 was about to erupt.

On January 8th, 2020, Li Wenliang was infected by coronavirus while treating patients. Due to limited medical resources, his illness was not confirmed until January 30th. On February 5th, his condition began to deteriorate. On the evening of the 6th, he was carried into the emergency room for resuscitation. Throughout the night of January 6th, almost all visible content on Weibo was Li Wenliang. An ordinary netizen posted a screenshot of the news story in which Li and seven other "rumor-mongers" were admonished, demanding that Wuhan authorities and all media outlets that had reproduced the story kneel and apologize. Another post created a Topic mimicking the police's question to Li in the warning, "Can you do that? Do you understand?" and wrote: "Cannot! Do not understand!" This post quickly surpassed 30,000 retweets and comments, with netizens expressing their outrage at the authorities and disappointment at the government.

At around 9:30 pm, news broke that an extracorporeal lung membrane oxygenation (ECMO) was delivered to the hospital. At the same time, a certified doctor passed out a message from an internal WeChat group that Li Wenliang had passed away. However, the hospital still intubated Li and subsequently resuscitated him via ECMO. At 00:00, a WeChat friend circle of a respiratory ICU doctor claimed that he saw the ECMO pounding Li's pale body, and it was meaningless since Li's heartbeat had stopped for so long (Hegarty, 2020). After numerous doctors repeatedly pleaded on Weibo to "let him go in peace and with dignity," the hospital eventually announced at 3:48 am that Li has passed away at 2:58 am. Although the official news of Li Wenliang's death came out at nearly 4 am January 7th, netizens generally believed he might have died as early as 9:30 pm January 6th. They questioned the resuscitation about being a political show and condemned the top officials who might have ordered the hospital to do so.

Dismay and anger began to rise sharply after 10 pm January 6th. The visible posts could be roughly classified into three categories. The first was lamenting the death of Li Wenliang as a man who had great foresight and cared for his country but ended up receiving a humiliating admonishment and no recognition. The second was a tirade on the culprits who covered up the epidemic, caused all the miseries of Chinese citizens, consistently deceived the citizens, and continued to try to deceive even in the matter of Li Wenliang's death. The third was a mix of

disappointment, reflection, and condemnation of speech control and authoritarianism. Fang Fang, who wrote the *Wuhan Diary* to document the lockdown, commented: "the whole China was crying for Li. So many tears were shed, enough to constitute a tsunami of sorrow." That night, these tears eventually converged into a roar: "Gimme freedom of speech (要言论自由)!"

This sentence was posted by an ordinary netizen. Initially, the post was a simple sentence without any hashtag. However, it quickly received more than 20,000 retweets and 9,200 comments, becoming one of the most visible posts of that night. This was a rare moment in the entire history of Chinese social media, as any posts with sensitive wording would cause people to back away for fear of police investigation and retaliation. An influencer created the topic "#I want freedom of speech# (我要言论自由)" based on this post. This topic entered the Hot Topic List, ranked around 50, and survived censorship until the next day. The account of the netizen who wrote the sentence has been completely deleted, while the account of the influencer who made the topic survived.

On February 7th, more people learned of Li Wenliang's death. A photo of a doctor bowing outside the ward toward the resuscitation room was extensively retweeted. People spontaneously went to the hospital where Li passed away to lay flowers. A group of geeks raised a tombstone for Li on the Ethereum blockchain to be free from CCP censorship. Netizens found out from Li's Weibo posts that he liked to watch a food blogger eat fried chicken legs, so that blogger filmed a special meal and donated all the income of that video to Li's family. In Wuhan, many people used flashlights and cell phones to shoot light beams into the sky, hoping to send Li to heaven. In Beijing, some people wrote "Farewell Li Wenliang" in the snow, and a man pushed himself into the snow after seeing this sentence, using his own body to press out an exclamation point (Shi, 2020).

The Chinese government has increased censorship speed, and most sensitive content disappeared overnight. Meanwhile, the Hubei Provincial Health Commission, the Wuhan Municipal Government, and the National Health Commission all condolences to Li Wenliang. However, mourning without holding any official accountable was not sincere and therefore had an insignificant effect in calming public fury.

On February 8th, the Fire God Mountain fangcang hospital officially admitted patients. At this moment, nothing could be more soothing and attention-distracting than a new hospital. Therefore, when the hospital opened its official account on Weibo, ordinary netizens were shocked to find that the account used an anthropomorphic, moe tone to introduce all the related news, calling itself "little Fire." When the most visible comment read, "Take your stinky little sister and

finish the job then close early and go home to sleep, you hear me?" it replied, "Got it," accompanied by a shy, finger-twiddling emoji. The tone of this conversation was intimate, like an adult talking to a child. That "little Wuhan idiot" set of moe narratives was back on the scene. On February 9th, the Thunder God Mountain fangcang hospital opened its official account on Weibo and called itself "Little Thunder Sister." It mimicked a young girl who liked to end a post with a cute fake cry emoji. In response, visible comments continued to mimic the tone of adults: "You both are so naughty [laugh to cry]!"

To this, netizens who have scolded the Wuhan little fool event and the moe machine idol event did not hesitate to open fire again. They retweeted the posts and comments of the two hospital accounts, pointing out that although the official hospital account does not necessarily have to be solemn, they should consider whether it is appropriate to show "retard-like" moe on such occasions.

The hospital accounts significantly reduced the moe narratives in their later posts, and the tone of the posts became like an average adult. The content of the posts also transformed from pure moe to substantive introduction of the interior facilities of the hospitals, the work of doctors and nurses, and patients' healthy diet. Netizens proved reasonable as long as the official accounts were not overwhelmingly using entertainment-oriented narratives. Later, the fangcang hospitals gathered patients to sing songs that praised the Communist Party. While some questioned the necessity and safety of this activity, the majority of netizens expressed their understanding of the patients' need for entertainment.

When the Weibo accounts of fangcang hospitals failed to delight netizens with entertainment-oriented narratives, the campaign to mourn Li Wenliang and demand freedom of speech developed from online to offline. The CCP did not hesitate in sending police to question and arrest the students and their families who participated in the campaign, and public outrage was forcibly quelled. It seemed that the Party was always prepared to use harsh tactics to maintain its rule, especially when the threat extended from the internet to the real world.

On February 9th, the Embassy of China in France posted an article that argued that labeling Li Wenliang as a "whistleblower" politicized the incident and was ill-intentioned. The article stressed that Li was a member of the CCP and would not want to be used to harm his own country. The Beijing government used the term "martyrdom" to describe Li Wenliang, implying that he belonged to the CCP, so those who supported him should not oppose the Party. Weibo also promoted some fan jargon that supported A-Zhong Brother, but it was hard to say what effect they

had. The subsequent calming of public opinion was more likely the achievement of online censorship and realistic police threats.

6.2.4 The Communist Idols and feminist backfire

Before the pandemic outbreak, on January 17th, 2020, the Communist Youth League of China (CYLC) had launched the Hot Topic "#A-Zhong Brother now has over 1.4 billion true fans," calling for Chinese citizens to express their fervent love for China as their idol. This Topic received massive retweets and comments in fan jargon, but the most visible contents were critical. Ordinary netizens generally thought that citizens are different from idol fans who give up the ability to think independently and that people should be the master of the country rather than being mere fans who follow the government blindly. In the face of such criticism, the CYLC used the "blogger's selection" function to filter unfavorable comments. Later, the retweets and comments became invisible. This hot topic did not have any further influence online.

One month later, on February 17th, when the COVID-19 pandemic was still severe, the CYLC launched another idol project to introduce "the virtual idols[29] of Tuan Tuan (CYLC's nickname)," Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman. Jiangshanjiao was a Japanese manga-style young girl while Hongqiman was a teenager. Although representing the CYLC, their clothing was pseudo-Chinese-style (the Chinese style imagined by the Japanese). The title page of the Hot Topic was written in a moe narrative: "Tuan Tuan's virtual idol is officially online, come and fan-support Tuan Tuan's idols now~!" Meanwhile, Jiangshanjiao opened her official account on Bilibili, the largest video sharing website for Chinese young people, especially anime fans, with the introduction written in a mixture of Chinese and Chinese translation of Japanese: "Sa ([so]), oh dou dou (Otōto [younger brother]) yo, come and form my fleet!"

Netizens instantly became extremely critical. First, it was inappropriate to represent a CCP organization with Japanese-flavored images and statements. Second, the poor quality of these idol images raised suspicions that project funds had been embezzled. Third, some patriotic youths pointed out that on February 17th, 1895, the Chinese Qing Dynasty's Beiyang Marine Division was wiped out in the Sino-Japanese War and lost to Japan. Therefore, it was a terrible idea of the

[29]Virtual idols originated in Japan and became popular across the globe. The CCP saw the propaganda potential in these two-dimensional or three-dimensional images. In 2017, CYLC had invited the popular Chinese virtual idol singer Luo Tianyi in an official video. This action was well received among the young Chinese, but Luo was just a folk singer and could not directly represent the Party.

CYLC to choose this date to launch two Japanese-style idols and let one of them mention the word "fleet." The fourth and most visible opinion was that, in the face of the national tragedy of the COVID-19 epidemic, when the messages for help from Wuhan and other places overwhelmed the social media platforms, such virtual idols seemed full of irony. Even young people who love Japanese animation and South Korean idol culture could not stop feeling disgusted. Previous attempts to dissipate the disaster with moe narratives and fan jargon were brought up again and criticized.

If the criticism had stopped there, the CYLC might have had a chance to revise its rhetoric and quell the outrage. Unfortunately, it crashed into a feminist moment on Weibo. Around February 7th, news broke of an acute shortage of sanitary products in the infected areas. According to official data, there were more than 100,000 front-line female health care workers in Hubei. According to the minimum standard, at least 600,000 sanitary pads were needed a month (Jian, 2020). Many female doctors and nurses spent 10 hours a day in protective clothing, embarrassed and tormented by their periods. When people from the rest of China asked for a permit for sanitary product donations (materials without a permit cannot legally be distributed to the donee), the male leaders of hospitals and government agencies rejected the idea since sanitary products "were not necessary government materials." One official even arrogantly stated, "People cannot even save their lives, and you still only care about your crotch!" In Chinese, the word "crotch" contains vulgar sexual innuendo. Although this insulting phrase was quickly removed by the official himself, it was screenshotted by a general public account who later posted it on Weibo. Angry female netizens created a Hot Topic "#RejectMenstrualShame#" to protest the discrimination as well as all sorts of oppressions against women in society.

On February 15th, Gansu provincial government media released a video on Weibo showing more than ten female nurses crying after their hair was shaved. The official account claimed that heads were shaved so as not to interfere with the wearing of isolation devices, and that all the females voluntarily sacrificed their hair to make it easier to go to Hubei to treat patients. However, the girls in the video were all crying in great sadness and were utterly unwilling to look at their shaved hair. When they were forced to take a cheerful photo together, many girls looked away from the camera. The video was met with angry comments on Weibo, all suggesting that the government had forcibly shaved the girls' hair for propaganda so that higher officials could benefit from this political achievement. A nurse netizen commented that there is no need to shave hair to

wear a protective suit. Public anger reached its peak after netizens discovered that the only person in the team who had not shaved his head was the male leader.

In this context, the emergence of Jiangshanjiao further sparked a fierce backlash. An ordinary netizen published a post, "Jiangshanjiao, do you get your period?" In the comment section of this post, she went on to ask a series of questions: Are you still a virgin? Do you dare to go out alone at night? Do you wear makeup to go into prostitution? Will you be forced to drop out of school because you called the police after your teacher sexually assaulted you? Would the police care if your husband beats you? Do you get higher test scores than men but cannot compete for the same job? Did you sleep with your boss to get promoted? Each of these questions was a problem that Chinese women often encounter in reality. A large number of retweets and comments from female netizens asked Jiangshanjiao questions that they have been asked. When the related Hot Topics began to be censored, netizens summed it up with what men often say to women who argue that they feel offended: Jiangshanjiao, it was just a joke for everyone, you are the one who was too sensitive, you know?

In this way, CYLC's attempt to launch an idol project during the pandemic failed miserably under the blow of reality. The joint Weibo account of Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman was wiped out five hours after their debut. Jiangshanjiao's Bilibili channel also disappeared. Albeit there were still some fans trying to defend their "idols," it was already doomed to whatever the CYLC tried to achieve. In contrast, the female netizens continued to be active. They collected a thousand questions asked of Jiangshanjiao and made a video called "Jiang Shanjiao, do you get your period?" Before it was censored, the video received 500,000 comments and millions of views on Bilibili.

The Jiangshanjiao event once again shows the rigidity of the government in making decisions in the development of a crisis. After the big failure of the fan-support of the cement trucks, it is surprising that the senior department of the central government still chose to use the entertainment-oriented narrative to alleviate the crisis. They either did not understand why the fan-support failed or did not have other strategies other than censorship to use. Meanwhile, red public accounts did not participate in retweeting the event. Some accounts even retweeted relevant critics and stated that Jiangshanjiao's image is overly Japanese, thus gaining more followers. This move proves that red public accounts are essentially commercial and would use every opportunity to gain benefit for themselves.

6.2.5 Comparing the bad to the worse

When domestic efforts to alleviate the crisis repeatedly backfired, China (CCP maybe or political elites (china is a country) turned its attention abroad. On February 19th, several government accounts highlighted the COVID-19 confirmed cases in South Korea, which rose rapidly after the first case was reported in the Shincheonji (New Heaven and New Earth) Church on February 18th. On Weibo, accounts forwarded a video of a speech by the founder of Shincheonji Church, Lee Wan-hee, in which he passionately stated that believers should not wear masks and that belief in God made them immune to the virus. Moreover, if they contracted the virus and died, it was God's will to summon them to heaven sooner, which should be desirable.

Red public accounts quickly followed up by comparing the COVID-19 virus to a zombie virus, lamenting that Korea was about to stage a real-life version of the South Korean zombie movie *Train to Busan*. They blamed the democratic system for Korea's ineffectiveness in fighting the epidemic. A democracy would protect the freedom of religion, which could only lead to various cults that poison innocent people, especially children. Therefore, the Chinese should be proud that there was no such freedom in China under CCP. Visible comments agreed that the problem of cults in South Korea, Japan, and even Taiwan was severe. The majority of information expressed appreciation for having been born in China. After all, being locked up at home is safer than being freely infected in a democratic country.

With good feedback on the news coverage of South Korea, the Chinese government eventually found an effective way to downgrade the crisis. As China became a successful example of containing the virus while the United States and many other Western countries did not, there was no reason to be unsatisfied with the Beijing government. There was not even a need to use entertainment-oriented narratives. Since then, every time there was a COVID-19 related crisis in China, there would always be some Hot Topics reporting on the out-of-control status abroad.

On March 26th, Wuhan residents lined up at the entrance of various funeral homes to receive ashes. Due to the overwhelming length of the lines, some relatives of the deceased had to wait for five or six hours before they could get a number to collect ashes. Many people were holding photos of their deceased family members. The CCP has responded with stringent censorship, with significant news websites banned from reporting relevant information. However, on Weibo, news that the families of the deceased were being watched by plainclothes police, that they could not receive the ashes of their family members without being accompanied by CCP staff,

and that they had to be accompanied by CCP staff for burial procedures immediately after receiving the ashes, became widely circulated before being deleted. More public outrage was imminent; the Hot Topic on Weibo suddenly became "Italian churches are full of coffins." By reporting on the seriousness of the outbreak in Italy and Spain and the misery of the dead (no funerals because their loved ones were in quarantine), the Hot Topics suggested that foreign countries were not handling the situation better than China. Therefore, people should not be too angry about the tragic situation in Wuhan.

From April to July, more than half of the visible posts on Weibo were devoted to the chaotic and tragic stories of foreign countries fighting the pandemic. The most intense and detailed coverage was about the United States. In the reports, ordinary people could not buy masks; capitalists hoarded masks and other medical supplies, driving the price sky-high; politicians harbored capitalists and their friends to reap huge profits. Stories such as President Trump's suggestion to inject disinfectants and stories of some US citizens who tried to do so were also visible on Weibo. The framing of the stories was similar: after expressing astonishment, attribute the reasons to the democratic polity and emphasize the superiority of China's non-democracy. Government accounts updated each foreign country's infected and death numbers daily, clearly showing that, although China was initially ineffective in fighting the pandemic, it has done an excellent job compared to others.

In August, people in Xinjiang took to Weibo to plead for help, saying that the methods used to fight the pandemic were too rigid and radical. The deaths of elderly, sick, and pregnant women were repeatedly reported as being caused by blocking communities. In response to Xi Jinping's claim that Chinese medicine effectively fights the virus, Xinjiang officials even broke into residents' homes in the middle of the night to wake them up, forcing them to take Chinese medicine and filmed videos as their political achievement. When Xinjiang residents complained or asked for help in their WeChat groups, police came to their homes and forced them to delete their statements in front of the police. When these things started to attract attention on Weibo, the visible comments under related posts said that "the beacon state (the US) has never managed a population of 1.4 billion, and even if Xinjiang belonged to it, it could never do any better than CCP." Netizens of other regions agreed with this statement. This crisis was successfully defused[30].

[30] The heavy-handed rule of the Xinjiang government was certainly the more important reason for the end of crisis, but this thesis argues that if netizens cared about Xinjiang as much as they cared about Wuhan, and found ways to

Over time, other countries' dismal performance in fighting the pandemic made this strategy consistently effective. For example, on February 12th, 2021, on Chinese New Year's Eve, a Hubei government account posted, "Wuhan Spring Festival flower market is abnormally hot," arguing that Wuhaners went to buy flowers because they were in the mood to decorate their homes again. The post sparked a wave of collective outrage. Netizens pointed out that Wuhaners have a custom of offering flowers on New Year's Eve to pay tribute to those who died the previous year. Due to the massive number of Wuhan victims of the COVID-19, many people were still snapping up flowers in the early hours of New Year's Eve, and the roads were crowded with cars heading to cemeteries. In the face of such a surging public roar, the government account immediately emptied its comment section and turned to discuss the Indian pandemic outbreak. Even though the Indian pandemic was not prominent at that time point, Weibo promoted several old posts recalling the Indian stories back in September 2020. This strategy successfully diverted public attention and convinced them that it was wise to put up with the CCP.

6.3 After the Wuhan lockdown: building correct collective memory

On April 8th, 2020, Wuhan reopened. The growing pandemic in foreign countries caused online and offline dissent to fade away in the following months. On June 2nd, President Xi Jinping said that the significant success achieved in China's COVID-19 battle should be attributed to "the remarkable institutional advantages of the CCP leadership and the Communist system." On June 8th, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Hua Chunying, commented that the anti-virus narrative "must not be tarnished by lies and misinformation, but should leave a correct collective memory" (Hua, 2020). The term "correct collective memory" was mocked by netizens and became an ironic buzzword.

Amidst a climate of controversy and disbelief, the CCP has steadily carried out its plan to establish a "correct collective memory." One of the main steps was to obliterate the voices of those Wuhan survivors if they did not actively support the CCP. Under such pressure, the woman who was once locked at home with her infected mother and had to knock a pot on the balcony of her home for help came forward to attack Fang Fang for writing the *Wuhan Diary*. As a result of documenting the daily life of Wuhan during the lockdown, writer Fang Fang was caught in a fierce

spread information and opinions despite the enormous censorship, then the situation could be different. At least the Xinjiang government might not have been too blatant in bullying the people there.

siege. Netizens have called her a liar, a traitor, and a lackey of imperialism. Her diary was regarded as a vilification of the Chinese government and a disgrace to the Chinese people. Some demanded that the government investigate her for subversion of state power. Ironically, back in February, Fang's *Wuhan diary* had been criticized by foreign Chinese media for being too moderate and supportive of the Communist Party.

In the following year, the CCP took control of the narrative of the COVID-19 crisis by erasing previous posts for help on Weibo, using paid commentators to attack Wuhan survivors online, and producing "anti-pandemic documentaries" that contained entirely fake or misleading details of reality. Li Wenliang, once an initiator of the greatest crisis during the pandemic, was demeaned and disappeared from the documentaries (BBC, 2020). His place was replaced by Zhang Jixian, a scientist that chose to report the SARS issue to the Communist Party instead of the citizens (Gao, 2020).

While the CCP may have succeeded in building a collective memory in its favor, the rigid internal management, the neglect of officials, the intention to conceal bad news, and a lack of humanistic care have not improved. Consequently, similar disasters happened multiple times. If there is anything that the CCP did learn from the COVID-19 crisis, it should be that entertainment-oriented narratives are not very effective in the face of major domestic disasters. Since 2020, the government accounts and red public accounts on Weibo have barely actively used any entertainment-oriented narratives in their posts when a disaster strikes.

CHAPTER 7. PUBLIC POLICIES

Policy initiation and policy change can be politically risky due to the potential for public discontent (Barlett et al., 2004). In China, policies are made and changed almost independently of the civilian population. The CCP prides itself on being the guardian of the people and packages its policies to benefit the country and its citizens. When a policy could receive controversial feedback, censorship online tends to be harsh. However, when the government perceives a policy as something that will be praised, it relaxes the censorship standard. Consequently, releasing a policy or change on social media can unexpectedly turn into a crisis.

This chapter discusses whether actors would use entertainment-oriented narratives in such crises. It examines three crucial policies of the CCP: the anti-corruption policy, the policy to combat local gang crimes, and the policy to control (plan) the population. The first two are President Xi's signature policies and are expected to receive a warm welcome from the people. The third has far-reaching impacts on the country's future and is presented as an action to save the nation. However, all these policies triggered public skepticism. The interaction between the CCP and the netizens serves as a valuable resource for future scholars to understand China's domestic affairs.

7.1 Anti-corruption policies

On November 15th, 2012, Xi Jinping was elected General Secretary of the CCP Central Committee and Chairman of the CCP Central Military Commission. On November 17th, He delivered a speech expressing his determination to "take out tigers, swat flies, and hunt down foxes" (打虎拍蝇猎狐, da hu pai ying lie hu). Tigers referred to corrupt senior officials, flies referred to corrupt civil servants at the local level, and foxes referred to foreign economic crime suspects at large. In the next eight years, the Party implemented the anti-corruption policy diligently. As of May 2021, the Discipline Inspection and Supervision Organs examined 3.8 million cases and punished more than 4 million people, including 392 senior officials at or above the provincial ministerial level, 22,000 officials at the department level, more than 170,000 cadres at the county level, and 616,000 cadres at the township level (Xiao, 2021).

The vast majority (more than 70%) of the Chinese public, regardless of their perception of Xi's other policies, strongly approved the anti-corruption policies (Cunningham et al., 2020). On Weibo, almost every news about the crackdown of an official would become a Hot Topic.
This thesis collected 114 visible posts related to anti-corruption policies from 2019 to 2021. Thirty-three of them were news about the fall of one or more corrupt officials. These posts had a total of 10,806 visible comments, meaning that each post had an average of 327.45 visible comments. This number is much higher than the number of visible comments under other crisis posts, indicating that the public paid extraordinary attention to this issue.

However, while public enthusiasm seemed extremely high, a closer look at the comments reveals a different picture. In the most popular comments, at least six other kinds of messages coexisted: shock, condemnation, demands for severe penalties, discontent with the current leniency of penalties, questioning the political system, and attempts to report other corrupt cases.

The "shock" comments refer to netizens expressing astonishment at the amount of money embezzled by officials, which often amounted to hundreds of millions of RMB, because they have never seen such a high figure in their lives. Given the Chinese custom of burning paper money for the dead and the fact that the denominations of paper money start in the millions, many people used the phrase "I have never even burned this much paper money" to describe the magnitude of the embezzlement. At the same time, the officials may have committed other crimes, such as persecuting women, harboring criminals, and disturbing social order, which also could shock netizens. The shock comments used fictionalization narratives extensively and depicted the corrupt officials as characters in anti-corruption movies and TV dramas. Notably, this was not to entertain the event but to help netizens understand and imagine the actual behavior of the officials, which was too far away from ordinary daily life.

The condemnation, demands for severe penalties, and discontent with the current leniency of penalties seem to have some causal relationship and should therefore appear in the comments simultaneously. In reality, however, the visible comments were generally short (less than 20 characters), and these three content types appeared independently in the vast majority of cases. The condemnation of the officials only abated that the officials had lost their conscience and deserved to be "struck by lightning" (天打雷劈[31], tian da lei pi). Those who want officials to

[31] This is a Chinese idiom that is used to describe a person who is so bad that even God cannot stand it and sends down thunder to kill him. It is generally used to curse people who are unforgivable.

receive heavy sentences often have only one word for it, either "death penalty" or some harsh penalties in ancient China, such as the "five horse tear apart (五马分尸[32], wu ma fen shi)" and the "execution of nine clans (诛九族[33], zhu jiu zu)." Comments that officials were sentenced too lightly had the most average length of the three categories, as netizens tended to emphasize the leniency of officials by comparing them to the crimes committed by average citizens who received the same type of sentence. This type of comment also used the most significant number of question marks of all the categories, reflecting netizens' incomprehension, doubt, and anger that officials were not punished as they deserved.

Comments that reflected on the problems of the Communist system were quite visible. These comments pointed out that it was not the arrested officials but the political system that created the environment for corruption. While these comments never attacked the CCP's anti-corruption policies, they were pessimistic and skeptical about the mechanics of the policies – when, why, and how to fight corruption. For them, an official was cracked down on and punished not because the central government authentically cared about local people but because the official's superior official was arrested and the successor senior official needed to purge his subordinates. In such a political environment, the removal of one corrupt official would not guarantee that the next one will be clean.

Comments attempting to report other corruption cases, while not numerous, were not too rare. The comments in this category usually report crimes committed by officials or gangs around them on the domestic level and attach their ID photos or long pictures of the case narrative. Although not directly related to the fallen officers in the post, these comments still enjoyed some visibility. They signaled that the fight against corruption was far from victory. Since it was not up to these brave whistleblowing netizens to decide when the reported officials would be investigated, it was ironic to see such comments and cheerful, congratulatory comments appear one after the other in the comments section.

The table below shows where the comments are located and the percentage of their content types. For example, of the ten most "liked" comments under all posts, the average number of

[32] An ancient form of death penalty in which five horses are tethered to a person's head and limbs, tearing the person apart alive.
[33] Nine clans include the families of the great-great-grandfather, great-grandfather, grandfather, father, self, son, grandson, great-grandson, and great-great-grandson. The execution is to kill all blood relatives and their spouses within the nine clans.

cheerful comments was only 10.3%. The shock comments took 39.7% of the top ten comments, while condemnation took 28.3%. Except for the completely non-existent comments of reporting other corruption cases, the percentage of cheerful comments was the lowest among the ten most liked comments. There were even more questions about the Communist Party's governing system than praise for anti-corruption policies.

Table 7.1 Content of visible comments under 2019-2021 anti-corruption posts

Position	*Approval*	*Shock*	*Condemn*	*Demand*	*Discontent*	*Question*	*Report*
top 10	0.1030	0.397	0.283	0.1909	0.114	0.1511	0
top 50	0.1697	0.3393	0.3499	0.1272	0.1485	0.1273	0.0318
50 to 100	0.2439	0.1917	0.2265	0.1307	0.2439	0.1481	0.061
100 to 200	0.1955	0.2085	0.1694	0.0912	0.2737	0.1043	0.0782
200 to 300	0.3598	0.2043	0.1022	0.0913	0.0511	0.0774	0.2043
after 300	0.3228	0.1744	0.0917	0.0885	0.0769	0.1134	0.1175

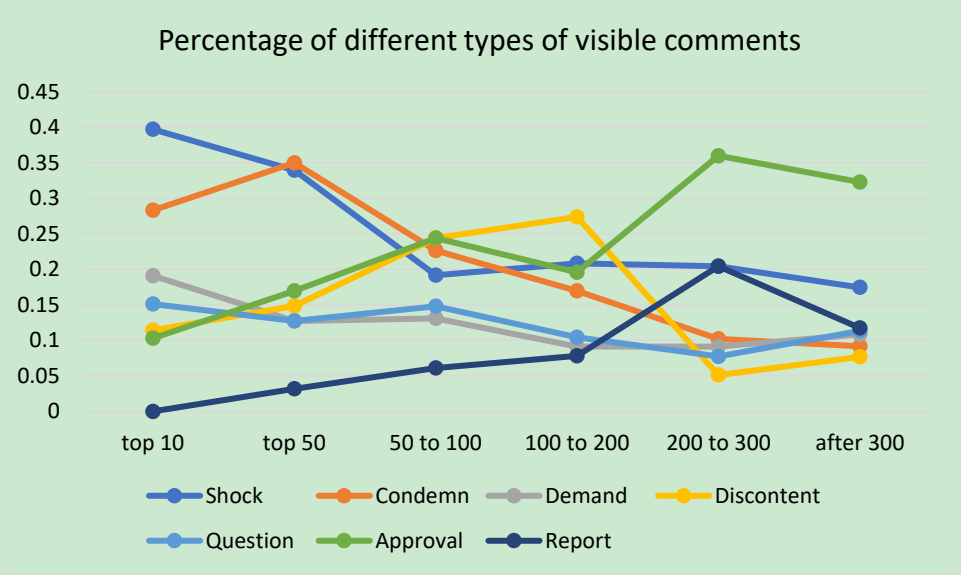

Figure 7.1 Percentage of contents of anti-corruption comments

The chart above shows a more evident distribution of the data. Shock and condemnation dominated the top 50 most visible comments, showing that most people were first shocked and

disgusted by the corruption before they had time to think about what needed to be done to hold officials accountable or prevent similar incidents from happening again. As the number of likes on the comments gradually declined, the comments that simply praised the government's anti-corruption actions (the green line) gradually climbed and occupied more than 30% of the comments that ranked after 200.

Despite the efforts of the government-employed 50 Cent Party to praise anti-corruption policies, the comment sections were not flooded with mere glorification. This suggests that the public preferred to "like" other types of comments since they better reflected their true feelings. As the number of retweets and comments increased, things gradually developed towards a crisis.

In this situation, many government accounts choose to close the comment section, leaving only a few "selected" comments praising the government. Some government accounts choose to entirely delete all comments because they could not even find a single positive popular comment. Moreover, some government accounts may also shut down the retweet section, leaving the post with only the number of retweets and no retweet content. With these tactics, government accounts prevent the grievances from influencing public opinion.

In response, the general public accounts and ordinary netizens actively used entertainment-oriented narratives in their posts, often containing screenshots of the policy post (just in case the government account deletes or edits the original post). The moe tactic was primarily used, followed by fan jargon. Reality fictionalization was rarely used. These expressions are ironic and encourage people to think deeply. Therefore, they should not be defined as EN but rather as a derivative narrative of EN that reflects the public's subjectivity. After the government created EN to make people quit thinking, people took advantage of the low-risk nature of EN and used it to continue the challenge against the government.

Since public policies are non-entertaining and related to the image of national institutions (in this case, the image of the national leader), the government accounts never responded to or countered the netizens' ironic attacks using entertainment-oriented narratives. The measure they most often use to mitigate the crisis is to fill the comment section with pro-government, nationalist statements (likely written and liked by members of the 50 Cent Party). The Red public accounts occasionally retweeted the anti-corruption posts in a serious and neutral tone, and the comments under them were relatively serious.

Table 7.2 Proportion of entertainment-oriented narratives in policy posts, 2019-2021

	Government	*Red public*	*General public*	*Ordinary netizens*
EN in Post	0	0	35.36%	75%
EN in Comment	unkown	21.35%	42.17%	54.47%

Nonetheless, in many cases, government accounts remained confident. Critical comments were not wholly censored. Despite some challenging voices against the CCP, citizens generally do not resist anti-corruption policies. On the contrary, reports on anti-corruption usually enjoy no visibility. It might be because these reports would remind the public of the enormous amounts of corruption and are therefore deemed as more threatening. The reports also may develop into offline collective action, which is unwanted by the government (King at al., 2017).

7.2 The crackdown on gang crimes

The "War to sweep crime and eliminate gangsters" (扫黑除恶专项斗争, sao hei chu e zhuan xiang dou zheng), or simply "Sweep Crime and Eliminate Gangsters" (扫黑除恶, sao hei chu e), was a three-year political campaign launched by the Central Committee of the CCP in January 2018 to "ensure that people live and work in peace and contentment, society is stable and orderly, the country is under the permanent rule, and the Party's ruling is further consolidated" (Xinhua Net, 2018). The campaign focused on ten types of crimes that threaten political security, such as gun selling, gambling, and drugs. Given that Xi's biggest competitor, Bo Xilai, had launched a highly acclaimed campaign in Chongqing to "fight crime and eliminate gangsters," the main objective of Xi's political campaign was also to gain recognition and stabilize his ruling position in the Party.

From 2018 to 2021, the Chinese government cracked down on more than 3,600 gangs and dealt with 89,742 cases of corruption involving gang crimes and the "umbrella" officials that protected these gangs (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). According to a public opinion survey conducted by the NBS in the first half of 2020, 95.1% of Chinese people were satisfied with the results of the Sweep-Crime-and-Eliminate-Gangsters (SCEG hereafter) campaign. At the

fourth plenary session of the 19th Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, Xi Jinping summed up the three-year campaign as "a great effort to tackle corruption" (Xinhua Net, 2019).

The SCEG campaign had indeed solved many cases that have accumulated over the years, among which the most influential ones on the online media were the case of a buried corpse in a playground and the case of Sun Xiaoguo. However, unlike the anti-corruption Hot Topics that skipped the process and directly reported the results to the public, these SCEG cases became visible on Weibo before the result was announced, causing widespread public outrage that was enough to provoke a crisis for the government. Since it was clearly inappropriate to use entertainment-oriented narratives in the face of the deaths of innocent citizens, the government accounts used a combination of censorship and formal announcements to calm the public before they turned to question the police system.

In 2002, a new playground with a 400-meter standard rubber track was constructed at Xinfeng Autonomous County First Middle School in Huaihua City, Hunan Province. The principal's nephew, Du Shaoping, was able to win the contract because of nepotism and caused serious quality problems due to embezzlement. Deng Shiping, a teacher at the school, told Du that he would report Du's corruption to the local government if he did not stop the embezzlement and provide the students with a quality playground. In response, Du killed him on January 22nd, 2003, and buried him at the construction site of the playground (Li, 2019). Deng Shiping's wife and brother reported the murder to the police on January 25th. However, because of bribes paid by Du and his relatives, the police who handled the case deliberately engaged in cover-ups and eventually terminated the investigation by classifying the case as a disappearance.

In April 2019, Du Shaoping was arrested for other crimes. Deng Shiping's son immediately wrote a letter of accusation to the government. Fearing that the government would ignore it, he then posted the letter on Weibo. The matter gained widespread attention as many students from the Xinfeng First Middle School came forward and confirmed that the report was accurate. After a week, the Weibo account of Deng Shiping's son was abruptly shut down. This caused widespread concern among netizens who demanded that the government protect Deng's family. The Hunan Provincial Public Security Department announced that Deng's son was under protection, but his Weibo account was not recovered.

On June 20th, the Hunan Provincial Public Security Department dug up the body in the playground of Xinfeng First Middle School and identified it three days later as that of Deng

Shiping (CCTV News, 2019). Deng's son published a post to inform concerned netizens about the case process. Later, he had an interview with reporters in which he expressed his understanding of being blocked online since it was "necessary to the case" (You, 2019). The netizens then stopped pressuring the government to let him speak and turned to express their condolences to Deng's family. They demanded that Deng Shiping be declared a martyr and that a statue of Deng be built in the playground. While some people questioned the efficiency and effectiveness of local judicial supervision, mourning and condolences for Deng Shiping dominated the absolute mainstream and did not cause a further crisis. On December 18th, Du Shaoping was sentenced to death, and the other 13 defendants received their sentence (Wu et al., 2019). Public opinion was thus pacified and shifted to another case – the Sun Xiaoguo case.

Almost at the same time that Deng Shiping's remains were discovered, Sun Xiaoguo's case became visible on Weibo. Sun Xiaoguo's parents were ordinary people, but his stepfather worked in the military. In 1995, he was sentenced to three years in prison for rape, but his parents helped him falsify medical records to escape the sentence. In 1997, he was sentenced to death for raping six girls (two of them in public) and causing injuries to four others. However, his death sentence was reduced to 20 years in prison due to his stepfather's connections in the police and judicial system, and he ended up being released early in 2010 for "good behavior." After his release, Sun Xiaoguo organized several local gangs in Yunnan and began committing crimes again. A local saying, "Xiaoping (Deng Xiaoping) is in charge during the day and Xiaoguo is in charge at night," vividly depicted his dominance in the area (Xiang, 2019).

In March 2019, as Sun was arrested for violent crimes, the sister of one of his victims reported her sister's grievance on Weibo, and several general public accounts retweeted the story. Netizens were shocked to discover that the case involved many high-ranking officials, such as the deputy party secretaries of several Yunnan cities, the mayors of several cities, and the President of the Yunnan Provincial High People's Court. At first, they suspected that Sun was the son of some important official, which could explain why so many officials took political risks to get him off the hook. However, they soon discovered that Sun Xiaoguo's biological father was just an ordinary employee in the government and that there was no indication that Sun's mother had had an affair. The officials agreed to cover up for Sun because Yunnan's bureaucratic system was designed to protect and shield corrupt officials, leading them to exonerate criminals at no political risk.

The fact that Sun Xiaoguo managed to escape the death penalty when his parents were not high-ranking officials highlighted the corruption of the judicial and prison systems in Yunnan Province and shocked netizens. A Hot Topic named “Sun Xiaoguo” was created and was blocked several times. The content under it was deleted repeatedly, yet netizens did not stop discussing the matter. While the red public accounts kept quiet, many general public accounts sided with netizens, calling for continued attention and ensuring that Sun Xiaoguo could not get away this time. Many Yunnan citizens expressed surprise that Sun was still alive, as the newspapers back then only reported on his death sentence.

By December 2019, the central government announced that 19 civil servants involved in this case had been sentenced to prison, and Sun Xiaoguo was resentenced to death. After that, the Topic of “Sun Xiaoguo” was no longer blocked and has existed steadily ever since. However, all the discussions about the corruption of Yunnan province and the collusion between government and gangs were gone. Less than ten posts remained under the topic, more than half of which were videos and posts from government accounts calling netizens to believe in the CCP’s determination to fight crime and eliminate evil.

Both Deng’s case and Sun’s case were caused by corruption within the police and legislation systems. They had a massive impact on public opinion and created a sense of distrust in the government at the local level. People began to question how many bodies were still buried under some playgrounds and how many Sun Xiaoguo still lived a happy free life.

As the reputation built up by the SCEG campaign was in crisis, the Central Committee of Political and Legal Affairs commissioned a director from within the system to make a TV series to send a message to the public that the CCP would not tolerate such corruption and crime. This TV series, “Storm to Sweep Blackness,” reflected the ideal shape of the SCEG campaign in which police officers and prosecutors from various departments fought against corrupt officials and ultimately delivered justice. Sun Xiaoguo’s figure was deliberately adapted into the story to inform the public that the central government had dealt with the case. The film was released in August 2021 and quickly became the number one popular drama in the country. Although not online, the government chose to deal with the crisis using an entertaining method.

Despite being one of Xi Jinping’s two signature policies along with his anti-corruption campaign, the SCEG campaign was not as popular. Since it exposed officials and gangs for far more shocking crimes than corruption, it has led to a corresponding increase in civil skepticism of

CCP's ruling. For example, many most liked comments of related visible posts asked, "These evil forces were not formed overnight, so why were they left alone until now?" Most of the responses to this kind of comment used the moe emoji of doge to avoid the risk of censorship and advised the commentators not to think deeply about the matter.

The biggest flaw in the SCEG campaign might be that the mechanism is top-down. The report of ordinary people and attention of social media would only be effective after the related officials have already been arrested. On the one hand, People who were not gangsters may be defined as such because of the needs of local officials. For example, when the local protest broke out in Ludian, Yunnan, due to unfair land acquisition disputes and corruption of village officials, the CCP official media characterized the conflict as a riot and people who participated as gangsters (Yang, 2018; Heng, 2018). Another example is the Procurator General of Shandong Province once mandated in a meeting that each town-level procuratorate must handle at least one case of SCEG criminal within a year or all performance for that year would be canceled (The Paper, 2018). It is hard to imagine how many wrongful cases there were with such a mandatory requirement. More importantly, once these cases occur, those who want to regain their innocence must wait until the day when the officials handling these cases are arrested.

On the other hand, some actual gangs would be defined as non-violent groups due to the corruption of local officials. The most typical example, and the one that has attracted national attention on social media, was the case of Ou Jinzhong.

October 2021 A murder case occurred in Shanglin Village, Putian City, Fujian Province, resulting in two deaths and three injuries. Local officials informed that the suspect, Ou Jinzhong, was still at large and may be holding the murder weapon. The news generated considerable controversy and discussion on the internet. In the official notification, Ou Jinzhong was a dangerous serial killer and a local criminal leader. However, on Weibo, villagers pointed out that Ou Jinzhong was a good man who has rescued stranded dolphins on the beach and has risked jumping into the sea to save children (Cha, 2021). According to the villagers, Ou went through official procedures to renovate his old house in 2017. However, when the old house had been toppled and a new one was ready to be built, his neighboring family occupied the land, forcing Ou's family to live in a rain shelter for five years. On October 10th, when he went to the land that originally belonged to him to pick up the roof of his shelter, he was verbally abused by the

neighbor's family who occupied the land. The villagers believed that Ou's behavior was on impulse due to the neighbor's chronic bullying.

Weibo netizens soon found out that Ou Jinzhong had indeed tried to post many requests for help previously. He had petitioned several times about the forced occupation of his housing site, and published a post in which he listed the contact information of various organizations he had reached out to, including all the CCP official media, several local media, the central and local Courts and police offices, the prosecutor's office, and the like. All of these messages went unanswered. In Weibo posts, he claimed that some village cadres accepted bribes and acted as the protector of his neighbors to prevent him from building a house for his family. The public's sympathy for Ou reached its peak when the boy who was saved by Ou back then posted on Weibo that Ou did not ask for any payment after saving him. A post that was quickly retweeted more than 16,000 times said: "Ou Jinzhong and his neighbor, who was the actual 'village villain,' if you cannot tell, you must be blind."

The "village villain" refers to the common name for the gangsters in rural areas. In December 2020, the CCP official media, Xinhua News Agency, published an article talking about the village villains could bribe local cadres to form a gang and use the family's power to gain political status and even dominate the local area, turning the village into an "independent kingdom" of the villains. Public data show that by the end of November 2020, China had cracked down on 1,198 gang-like organizations in rural areas, accounting for 33.4% of the total number of such organizations in the SCEG campaign. The Supreme People's Procuratorate iterated in August that the government should continue to prevent and rectify the village villains and promote a rural social security prevention and control system.

However, netizens soon discovered that the so-called "fight against evil" was nothing more than a slogan when the officials involved were not in the governmental planning of being arrested. The Putian police claimed that the neighbors of Ou Jinzhong were not village villains, nor were there any corrupt events. Immediately afterward, the government under the jurisdiction of Putian issued a reward notice, claiming that people would be rewarded 20,000 RMB for finding Ou Jinzhong alive and 50,000 RMB for finding him dead. Angry netizens pointed out that this was a "triad hunt directive." The government staff later denied that they were encouraging evil behavior and removed the notice (Gu & Fang, 2021).

On Weibo, all public accounts remained silent. Related posts were censored too frequently that ordinary netizens had to leave comments under the posts published by the police accounts. Most of the visible comments were sarcastic. For example, one of the hottest comments under the post published by Putian police said, "All those years when Ou Jinzhong suffered, the police were dead; after he fled, the police suddenly came to life and roamed the mountains. I guess many policemen are buried in the mountains over Putian, just waiting for good people to commit crimes!" Later, these official posts either opened the "select comment" function, leaving only positive comments, or simply deleted all retweets and comments. In reality, harsher censorship practices were also adopted. According to local villagers, the surrounding towns were blocked by the local police to make sure that reporters could not enter. Local villagers had to get in and out only with their ID cards to prove that they were not journalists.

On October 18th, Putian Public Security Bureau issued a notice, claiming that Ou Jinzhong resisted arrest and committed suicide. No one believed the official story. Everyone believed that the police killed him to hide the collusion between village villains and local officials. On Weibo, villagers said that Ou was still alive when he was arrested. In reality, Ou's family requested a forensic identification of the remains, which was refused.

For this case, the entertainment-oriented narrative appeared in only 4.45% of the visible comments under the government's post, all of which used moe emojis to make the discussion seem less serious. The public was apparently not in the mood to use entertainment-oriented narratives, and the government understood (probably from the 2019 COVID crisis) that using entertainment-oriented narratives under the wrong circumstance would only further ignite public anger. Because the CCP had no plans to investigate or punish the Putian government, it had to resort to strict censorship. The internet was quickly cleared of any discussion of Ou Jinzhong. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether the damage this case has done to the SCEG campaign will be forgotten completely.

7.3 Family planning policies

In 1970, the total population of China exceeded 800 million. In 1980, the Communist Party publicly advocated that families should have only one child; in November 1981, the Fourth Session of the Fifth National People's Congress proposed a population policy of "limiting the number of people and improving the quality of the population." In February 1982, the Party Central

Committee and the State Council issued the "Instruction on Further Improving Family Planning," emphasizing "the necessary incentives and restrictions to ensure the smooth implementation of family planning." In September, family planning was established as a basic state policy and written into the newly revised Constitution (Guo, 2007).

Over the next 30 years, China's demographic structure changed rapidly, which the Population and Family Planning Commission described as "tragic and glorious." By March 2000, the CCP still considered overpopulation to be the country's primary problem. Hu Jintao proposed that the main tasks were to stabilize the low fertility level, improve the health and education of children born, address the imbalance in the sex ratio among newborns, and actively design care policies for the aging population (Wu, 2011). However, census data showed that low fertility rates were accompanied by a declining working-age population, a decreasing number of women of childbearing age, and an increasingly aging population. According to the China Premium Database projections, the decline of the labor force would eventually lead to economic stagnation, which would immediately affect the citizen's life quality and thereby shake the rule of the CCP.

To consolidate political legitimacy, the CCP began to relax the one-child policy. In November 2011, China implemented the "two-only-two-child policy" which allowed couples to have two children if both of them were the only child in their families. Two years later, the policy was relaxed again to allow couples to have two children if one of them was an only child. However, by the end of May 2015, only 1.45 million of the country's 11 million eligible families had applied to have a second child. As this policy failed to raise the fertility rate effectively, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee held in October 2015 decided to fully liberalize the two-child policy. The government expected this policy to raise the number of births to three million per year by 2020 and create a new labor force of 30 million by 2050 (Hong, 2018).

According to official statistics, in 2016, after the implementation of the two-child policy, the number of births climbed to 17.86 million. However, this number slumped to 17.25 million in 2017, then fell to 15.23 million in 2018 and 14.65 million in 2019. On Zhihu, China's version of Quora, netizens who worked in hospitals said that the number of older mothers (over 40 years old) was several times higher than the previous years, but most women in the most fertile age range (between 20-40 years old) were not interested in having more children. Therefore, netizens speculated that the increase in the birth rate in 2016 was simply a retaliatory action against women whom the one-child policy had restricted for decades.

On November 14th, 2020, the Deputy Director of the Economic Committee of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference acknowledged that the full liberalization of the second child had not triggered a birth spike. The news quickly became a Hot Topic. General public accounts and ordinary netizens actively participated in the discussion, listing the reasons that led them not to want to have children: expensive housing, education, child care, and health care. Females generally stated that having children would make it harder to get hired and promoted and could lead to dismissal. On the other hand, males were more concerned about the little room for upward mobility. They argued that it made little sense to bring a child into the world if this child would only grow up to be an extra workforce that ultimately benefits the wealthy.

Feminists claimed that the root cause of the failure of the two-child policy was the preference for sons and the decline in the number of women of childbearing age. The Chinese tradition values boys much more than girls, believing that only a boy is capable of continuing the family line, while a girl is tantamount to being owned by her future husband. Female foeticide has been widely practiced in rural areas and small cities in most parts of China (Chen, 2014; Dou, 2016). In 2020, China's male population outnumbered its female population by 32 million (NBS, 2021), implying a large number of baby girls who were aborted or abused. There was also a significant decrease in the number of women of childbearing age in their peak reproductive years (20-29 years). Feminists pointed out that when society discriminates against women at all levels, from birth to education to employment to marriage, parents would tend to have sons to ensure that they do not lose money in their reproductive and parenting behaviors. In such an atmosphere, it was not that women refused to have children, but that most of the baby girls who could have grown into the next generation of women were killed at birth. Therefore, even if the survived women of childbearing age actively have more children, they could not make up for the shortfall. In societies with high levels of gender discrimination, this problem would only worsen over time, eventually causing the country to be unable to obtain a large enough workforce to maintain social stability and prosperity.

The disproportionate gender ratio in China is reflected in the demographics and cannot be denied. Adding to the problem is that a large number of educated women are not considering having more children because of the severe discrimination they face in school, work, and marriage. Aside from the obvious logic that pregnancy equals unemployment, their biggest concern is that China's legal and police systems fail to provide adequate protection.

Although China introduced an anti-domestic violence law in 2016, it rarely punished violators and was therefore considered void by the general public. Marital rape remained legal, and court restraining orders rarely got enforced (Lee, 2020). Instead of arresting male offenders, the police usually persuade women to endure. When a woman was domestically abused by her husband to the point of jumping off a building and escaping with multiple fractures and paralysis of her lower limbs, the court still did not allow her to leave her husband (Du, 2020). Meanwhile, any husband who harms or murders his wife could receive a lesser penalty or even exemption from punishment since the court considered the male as a "labor force" that could continue to contribute to society. On social media, female netizens have expressed frustration and fear at the status quo and said it is unbelievable that intimate relationships are being used as a shelter system for men to commit crimes legally. Younger females became more reluctant to enter into marriage because it often meant giving up their human rights. Given that China does not offer any welfare policies to single mothers (Wang, 2021), women who do not want marriage are also giving up the possibility of having children.

In the face of a fear of marriage on the part of young women of childbearing age, the government did not introduce policies to protect their rights. Instead, it introduced a "divorce cooling-off period" policy that further deprived the females of their human rights. On December 25th, 2019, the Party media, People's Daily, launched a poll on Weibo, asking whether the netizens support setting a divorce cooling-off period. A total of 210,000 people participated in the first poll, of which 116,000 disapproved it, only 57,000 supported it, and 31,000 said they would not get married anyway. Perhaps because the results of this poll were not satisfactory, the Party published another poll through China News Weekly. This time, a total of 175,000 people participated, of which 149,000 disapproved the policy and only 21,000 supported it. At the same time, general public accounts called on netizens to go to the government website and leave comments to let the government see public opinion. More than 200,000 people did so, but the government did not change its mind. In May 2020, the third session of China's 13th National People's Congress voted to adopt the Civil Code with a cooling-off period for divorce.

This policy triggered strong criticism from netizens. Many visible comments used moe emojis and rhyming phrases to express dissatisfaction with the policy in a playful tone. Some described that the Civil Code was so good that the leeks (referred to the citizens) grew feet and ran away overnight; some adapted poems from classical Chinese literature and rephrased them. For

example, the phrases “Never leave, never give up, so to live on (不离不弃，芳龄永继)” and “Do not lose, do not forget, so to live long (莫失莫忘，仙寿恒昌)” in *Dream of the Red Chamber* were turned into “Never get married, never have children, so to live on (不婚不育，芳龄永继)” and “Do not give birth, do not raise a child, so to live long (莫生莫养，仙寿恒昌).” These comments, full of moe emojis such as “happy,” “very happy,” and “doge,” were more visible than those that seriously discussed the dangers of a cooling-off period for women in divorce. The reason may be that the 50-Cent Party gave credit to these comments to create a relaxing atmosphere after the government’s brazen introduction of unpopular policies. Perhaps these moe comments were welcomed because they dissipated netizens’ anxiety and panic about the new Civic Code. The netizens might also have liked these comments because there was a risk to like the critical ones. In any case, this was a rare case where netizens took the initiative to use entertainment-oriented narratives to express an opinion contrary to the official account.

It turned out that the divorce cooling-off period, while successfully confining more women to their husbands, failed to promote the birth rate. In 2020, there were only 12 million newborns, and the official birth rate fell to an all-time low of 8.52%. Since these population figures have been officially delayed for several months, both citizens and overseas experts believed that officials had manipulated the data to make it look as good as possible (Luo & Zhang, 2021). Even so, the figures were not promising, indicating that a severe population crisis is on the horizon.

In response to this crisis, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the CCP announced the implementation of the three-child policy on May 31st, 2021. Xinhua News Agency launched a poll titled “Are you ready for the three-child policy?” In the poll, about 20,000 people out of 22,000 chose “not at all.” The poll was quickly deleted. Xinhua News Agency turned on the “selected comments” feature for its post on the three-child policy, leaving only 14 supportive comments out of the 326,118 comments it received.

Netizens were relentless in their derision of the new policy. When the official media Xinhua News Agency initially published the news post, it misspelled the word “育 (yu, [fertility]” as “肓 (huang, [seriously ill].” The post was screenshotted and mocked by ordinary netizens and the screenshots quickly became visible. As the word “肓” was homophonic with the word for panic “慌 (huang),” the most visible posts mocked that “they (referring to the government) panicked!” Happy netizens created new Chinese idioms based on the misspelling of the words and had fun for

several hours. There was no direct attack on the government. Nonetheless, Weibo quickly censored all related posts.

Under the Hot Topic "Three-Child Policy Is Coming," netizens continued their joyful journey of mockery. A general public account posted, "Do I not buy three Rolls-Royces because Rolls-Royces limit the number of purchases?" This post was retweeted by over 12,000 people and commented on by 3,000. In the comments section of the government account, CCTV News, the hottest comments compared Chinese people to animals like donkeys and pigs, mocking the government for treating its people less sincerely than farmers treat their livestock. One of the comments said, "In my hometown, if a pig does not get pregnant, the farmer will go to see what is wrong. Is the pigpen not big enough or with poor hygiene conditions? Find the problem, solve the problem, and the pigs will naturally give birth. We will not read the red official documents to the pigs to force them to give birth to more pigs." In general, the atmosphere on Weibo was light-hearted, revealing that the public was happy (schadenfreude-wise) to see the decline in the birth rate and the backlash of the government's family planning policies.

The visible comments under relevant posts fell into three categories. The first and dominant category listed various reasons why they were unwilling or unable to have more children and hoped that the government would make improvements soon. The second category listed various slogans used during the one-child policy period, such as "Only one child is good, the country would take care of you when you are old (只生一个好，国家来养老)" and "If you do not get an abortion, we demolish your house and take away your cattle (该流不流，扒房牵牛)." Every one of these comments used at least two moe emojis to reduce the offensiveness and critical nature of the content. But the message they conveyed was clear: the citizens who had suffered from the fertility policies have long been dissatisfied with them and were fully aware that the change of the policies happened not to protect them but to keep the economy growing and maintain the legitimacy of the CCP. Some comments mentioned that also the state should introduce welfare policies instead of forcing people to continue to have children. The third type of comment questioned whether China really needed that much population. They compared China with the United States and India and concluded that a small population could make a country prosperous, and a large population is not necessarily a good thing.

In 2021, there were only 10.62 million newborns in China. The official birth rate has once again hit a record low of 7.52 per thousand. The three-child policy has not had an immediate impact,

and based on the fact that the pressure on the Chinese people's lives has not been significantly reduced, it is less likely that the policy will improve the situation in the future. Unlike other crises discussed in this thesis, the population crisis and related policies did not stir up anger or condemnation on social media. Instead, netizens proactively took the news in such a joyful way that the government accounts seemed overly anxious. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the crisis is over. As long as the philosophy beyond the Chinese fertility policies remains restrictive and threatening instead of supportive and encouraging, the citizens would remain unwilling to have more children. This crisis is rooted in the CCP's arrogant and authoritarian attitude toward its citizens and does not and cannot be dissipated by entertainment-oriented narratives. How to deal with this crisis will be a long-term challenge for the Chinese government.

CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

8.1 Summary of findings

The research question of this dissertation is, during crisis events, what strategies the Chinese government uses to control uncensored information and guide public opinion on the social media platform Weibo. After combining knowledge from the fields of literature in political science and crisis communication, this dissertation attempts to integrate the concepts of interactivity and information visibility into cybernetic models.

In the models, four actors are identified. First, government accounts. Second, commercial accounts and individuals who cooperate with the government, i.e., red public accounts and fans. Third, commercial accounts and individuals who do not directly partner with the government, i.e., general public accounts and opinion leaders/influencers. This dissertation argues that these actors have different interests and that their decision-making process is interactive, mutually influential, and based on experience. This dissertation then defines criteria for visible information and, through the collection of visible data from crisis events, finds a narrative that is likely a crisis management strategy. Through further data collection and analysis, this narrative is identified as a strategy, and its three tactics' characteristics are summarized.

The strategy is referred to as the entertainment-oriented narrative. It aims to get people to abandon critical thinking in crises by connecting the events with the concept of entertainment. It leads people to ignore the corrupt and incompetent CCP officials and the rigid communist government system. Three tactics are found under this strategy. First, reality fictionalization, which describes the crisis events as a fictional TV series, thus leading netizens to adjust their mindset from focusing on real-world events to focusing on the next episode of a TV series. Second, the moe tactic. This narrative is often accompanied by cute expressions and words, which guide netizens to view the crisis event as cute, harmless, and non-offensive by creating a cute image for it. Third, the fan jargon. This tactic anthropomorphizes the CCP and government departments as pop stars and uses the fan worldview to brainwash netizens into loving these stars unconditionally and fighting other netizens for these stars.

This dissertation demonstrates the research value of the entertainment-oriented narrative as a strategy. The distance of the crisis event from the Chinese public is an important factor in

whether the strategy works. The entertainment-oriented strategy usually works when an event happens outside mainland China and does not work very well or even becomes counterproductive when the crisis happens in mainland China.

Four actors use the entertainment-oriented narrative and its three tactics differently. The government and red public accounts actively use the narratives; ordinary netizens rarely use this strategy; general public accounts fall between the three. Case studies reveal that the government hardly adjusts its crisis management strategy promptly. After it decides to use the entertainment-oriented narrative in one crisis event to eliminate the crisis, it does not adjust its choice and is likely to continue to use the same approach as before even when the public is criticizing. When a crisis has grown to the point where it can no longer be defused with entertainment-oriented narratives, the government account will use censorship.

In contrast, red public accounts are much more flexible. They adjust their tactics based on their effectiveness in the previous rounds of events. They could also update their decision at different development stages of an event based on their experience or observation. Their flexibility is related to their relationship with the government and the ordinary netizens. Having official inside information allows them to predict the success rate of the government's next actions and decide whether to join, stay away from, or criticize the action for profit. Having netizen followers allows red public accounts to get close to authentic public opinion (instead of the ones made by the 50 Cent Party) and thus make accurate predictions. In most cases, red public accounts align with the government and actively use entertainment-oriented narratives in crises. There is no specific pattern to their tactical choices, which presumably depend on the requirements of the government.

Netizens are the least resourced and least powerful of the four actors, and they receive the heaviest penalties for criticizing the government. In most cases, they choose to support the government, but they also criticize it when support is not reciprocated or when the social reality is too dissatisfying. After several years of observing the entertainment-oriented narratives, they found that using such narratives when expressing their opinions would reduce the risk of being censored or punished. Therefore, they use these tactics, especially the moe tactic, in their comments. When discontent reaches a high level, they use these tactics to mock the government, often causing the government to resort to censorship.

On the other hand, the general public accounts watch and act on the actions of the government and netizens. They will observe and learn from the narratives used by the government

accounts to avoid censorship, but they will adjust tactics when netizens' criticism of the event becomes significant. General public accounts generally do not initiate a crisis. Nevertheless, after a crisis breaks out, they are likely to actively follow up, create relevant topics, and try to make the crisis bigger to gain more influence, followers, and commercial interests.

8.2 Limitations and future improvement

This dissertation has many limitations and points for improvement. An important issue is that the theory and models were not sufficiently validated in case studies. The interaction process is not always easy to observe; actors' motivations are mostly left to speculation due to inadequate literature. To further test the theory and models, it is necessary to specifically observe the interaction processes between actors and find information that helps determine the actors' motivations. It might be helpful to focus on a large number of various types of accounts and do case studies. Due to limited resources, this dissertation does not systematically track and record this kind of information.

There are many other ways to collect data. First, should the content of retweets be included in the database? With the development of technology, this dynamic data should be collectible. Second, the current definition of visible information is still rough. For example, all "liked" comments are considered equally influential in this dissertation, yet a comment with 1000 likes should have a different impact on public opinion than a comment with ten likes. Exactly how to set the weight is a topic for future scholars. Third, the comments under a post are constantly changing, and this process reflects the competition for public opinion between actors, for example, between ordinary netizens and the 50 Cent Party. This dissertation does not have the technical power to collect the changes, but they are worth studying.

Moreover, there is a problem that has been mentioned at the end of the method chapter: this dissertation does not collect and analyze posts that do not mention crisis events. However, filling the Hot Topic List with everyday entertaining topics (e.g., "name your favorite fruit" or "what is your favorite outfit") during a crisis should be seen as another type of crisis resolution strategy, which includes the entertaining perspective but also would correspond to King's (2017) finding that the Chinese government uses a strategy of distraction. Future scholars could look into this by tracking changes in the Hot Topic List's topic content during crisis events.

Finally, when selecting the cases to study, the cases of "banned celebrities" were not included. When the CCP government arrests, bans, and punishes real idols (singers and actors), the stars' fans accuse the CCP of kicking them away after taking advantage of them. It could be interesting to investigate whether fan jargon in this case also becomes a means to fight the official narrative.

Six months after this dissertation stopped collecting data, the CCP has not changed its decision to use entertainment-oriented narratives to deal with crises. After Shanghai was locked down due to the Omicron infections, residents could not leave their community for medical treatment. A girl who had surgery and was waiting for her stitches to be removed had to stick her head out of the gate bars at the community entrance and let the doctor remove the stitches outside the gate. This news was classified as funny, and most of the content in retweets and comments were expressions of joy. Any comments expressing dissatisfaction with the policy were attacked and made invisible. While it is not clear what percentage of the data is EN, the strategy proves to be a regular choice of the Chinese government to deal with the crisis. By studying it, scholars would deepen their understanding in China's crisis management strategies in the digital age.

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After graduation, she attended the New York University and received a Master of Arts degree in International Relations. After one year of working in the world-class thinktank, Woodrow Wilson Center, in Washington D.C., Bingxin went to Purdue University for her Ph.D. study. Here, she obtained a dual-degree of Master of Science in Applied Statistics. In the COVID-19 pandemic, she moved to San Francisco, California, to live with her family. She plans to start her career in the bay area.