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Governance through information control: China's leadership struggles with credibility in social media

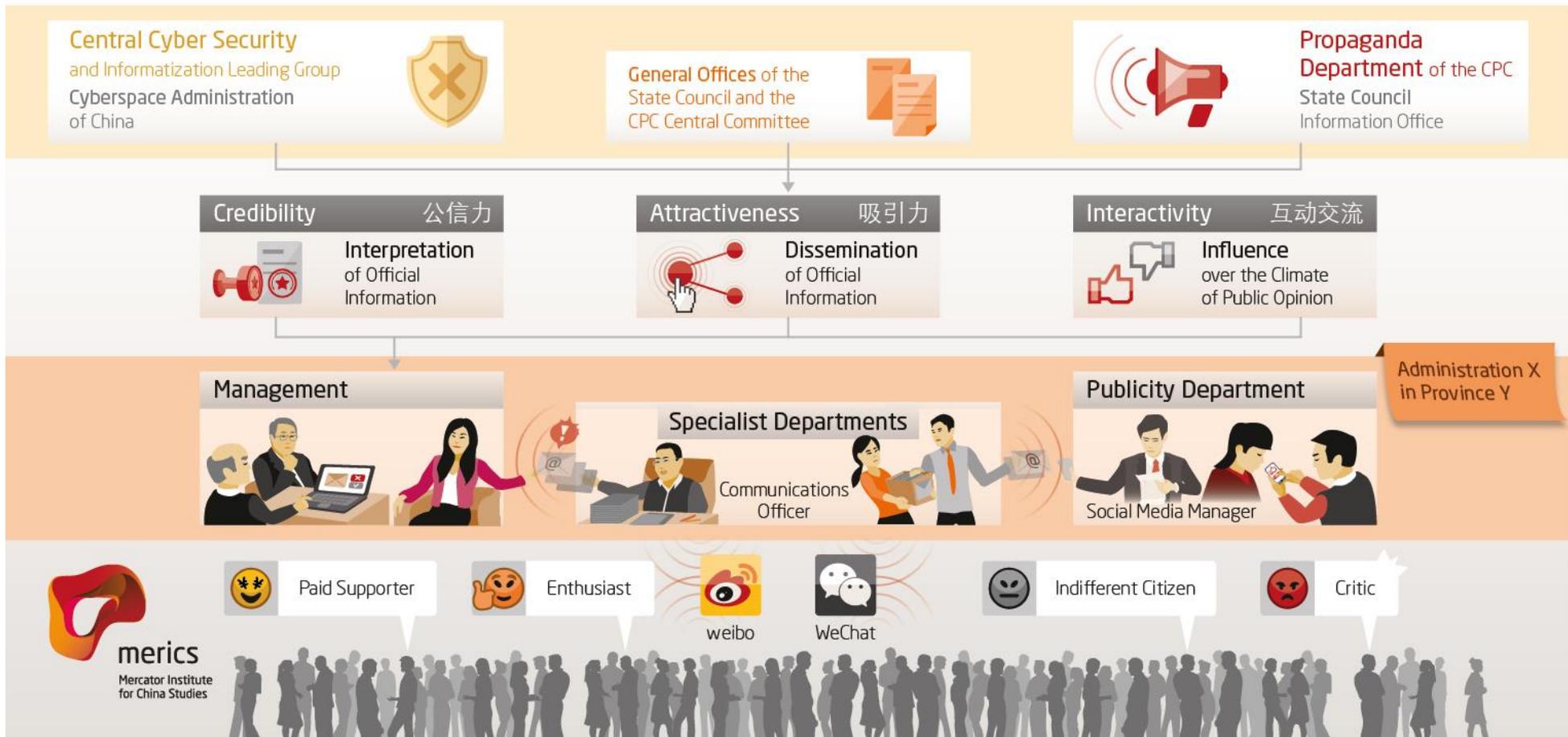
Staged propaganda, everyday tips, lack of interactivity.

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MAIN FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

- Hundreds of millions of Chinese use social media. The WeChat messaging app and Weibo, a platform similar to Twitter, are not only both enormously popular, but are also becoming a challenge to the Chinese leadership – **many citizens are now more likely to believe information obtained from their social networks online than from state news sources.**
- The Chinese leadership has realised it will not get public opinion on its side by censorship alone. It therefore developed a comprehensive strategy for its official social media communications within a short period of time.
- This strategy includes using carefully made infographics and visual elements designed to illustrate the activities of the state in an entertaining manner. **The Chinese government offers readers tips on everyday matters in an effort to present itself as a paternalistic, but non-invasive force in the lives of its citizens.**
- **Officials in China are presently unable to take advantage of one of the greatest strengths of social media: the ability to disseminate unfiltered content rapidly.** This is because information policy is a matter of national security for the Chinese leadership; all content must be reviewed carefully before posting to ensure that it meets ideological standards. This prevents fast responses, however, especially in the event of a crisis.
- **The central Chinese government has not mastered the language of the internet yet, instead preferring to stick with standard bureaucratic wording.** Rather than engaging in two-way exchanges with citizens, it uses the platforms predominantly for a one-sided dissemination of information.
- **Social media users might start perceiving the official reports as credible and even interesting if the Chinese leadership relaxed its grip on maintaining ideological control.** Some local authorities and individual cadres are seen in a better light on account of their more creative and interactive use of social media.

New Media in Old Party Mechanisms - How the Chinese Leadership Utilises Social Media



1 Social media is shaping public opinion in China

The huge explosions that occurred on 12 August 2015 in Tianjin, a major port city in north-eastern China, serve to illustrate the shortcomings of Beijing's communications system in a crisis. Whereas the first social media reports appeared within minutes of the initial blast, no official reports were made until three or four hours later, even though the extent of the damage could presumably have been reduced by sounding the alarm and taking protective measures earlier.¹ This example demonstrates that **what the Chinese public finds out about an incident and what opinion it forms is currently influenced more by social media than by the state-controlled media.**²

Anyone who is active in Chinese social media can sometimes gain enormous coverage with its help; prominent bloggers can reach up to 80 million people with a single post on Sina Weibo, a messaging app similar to Twitter. Private media-makers use the WeChat (微信) messaging platform, which has some 600 million active users, to send free newsletters to their subscribers every day.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has attempted to curb the growing influence of social media. Security agencies have arrested bloggers, and propaganda departments have imposed new restrictions on social media users and online entrepreneurs. However, state requirements such as mandatory registration of people's real names and censorship of content are usually slow to take effect and have not even been fully implemented by the platform providers themselves, who claim that they can only generate a profit if they grant their users anonymity and provide them with a wide variety of information.

This is why the Chinese government no longer relies on strict controls and censorship alone, but is now using social media specifically as a channel for political communication. At the end of 2011, central party and state institutions, the state-run media and individual party cadres began setting up government social media accounts (政务微博, 微信账户). By the end of 2014, there were more than 100,000 official accounts of this kind on WeChat, and Sina Weibo had 180,000 profiles for state agencies and agency representatives.³

2 China's leadership starts actively engaging in social media From censor to blogger

Social media platforms have grown enormously popular in China since 2009. For a long time, the Chinese government used social media platforms primarily to gauge public opinion. It also utilised Weibo and other platforms as a sounding board for dissatisfied citizens.⁴ The only direct influence exercised by the leadership so far has come from paid commentators dubbed the 'Fifty-Cent Army' (五毛党), who post government-friendly content on Weibo in order to steer debates there, for example.

In the autumn of 2011, Liu Yunshan, then head of the CPC's propaganda department, called for 'strategic positions' in social media to be occupied by party members for the first time; both cadres and state and party organs were instructed to set up their own accounts on popular platforms.

From Beijing's perspective, 'rumours' making their way around social media pose an increasing threat not only to the state's credibility, but also to its security.

At the end of October 2013, head of state Li Keqiang personally called upon official institutions to not just monitor social media platforms systematically, but also to get involved in unrestricted exchanges on them and that way prevent any doubts, misunderstandings and rumours from being spread over these channels.⁵ In the summer of the same year, President Xi Jinping had spoken of a ‘battle for public opinion’

(舆论斗争) and the necessity of preserving ‘ideological security’ (意识形态安全) with regard to the state’s official communications policy.

2.2 Communication as a matter of national security

Today, social media is an established part of the Chinese government’s comprehensive communications strategy. The goal of it is to disseminate officially authorised information quickly, including information on current events, in order to present the leadership as being credible, responsive and trustworthy.

Three powerful institutions are responsible for all communications work in their function as governing and supervisory bodies:⁶ the State Council Internet Information Office, the CCP Department of Propaganda and the General Office of the Central

Committee, which was expanded under Xi Jinping, who is both Party Secretary and President. The latter is also where the Task Force of the National Security Commission is located – an indication that information policy is seen as highly relevant in security matters. Regional governments and authorities have also made specific regulations for their social media communications.⁷ The various departments involved generally post between one and ten short messages per day. Where sensitive topics are concerned, the social media coordinators in the departments have to obtain authorisation from the Publicity Department first or even from the organisation’s higher management level for any content they want to post or for responses to users’ comments.

Although this does prevent any off-the-cuff action from being taken that could damage the image of the state or the party, it frequently makes prompt responses impossible due to the time needed to approve messages. Departmental employees must be extremely careful in drafting their posts, as any undesired wording could subject them to penalties and even consequences under civil law.

At the national level, state and party institutions concentrate primarily on sending two main messages in their social media postings (see Fig. 1):⁸ firstly, they portray leading party cadres as

representatives of the people who handle political challenges and regional or national crises competently, and secondly, the posts emphasise the concern of the Chinese leadership with national unity and the basic issues in citizens’ lives.

3 Political entertainment meets staged propaganda

3.1 Leading party cadres online: presented as competent and close to the people

China has traditionally classified biographical information on its political leadership as a state secret. **The media has therefore had to strike a balance between maintaining an aura of mysterious secrecy and representing leaders as being close to the people.** While the social media accounts operated by the Communist Party only report on Xi Jinping and party matters, the government accounts concentrate on Li Keqiang. Only the media accounts report on both areas.

Both party and government accounts present Li and Xi as hardworking statesmen who operate with confidence in the international arena. Since 2010, it has again been officially permitted to depict members of the top leadership in cartoons.⁹ This privilege is only resorted to in social media on specific occasions, however.¹⁰

The cult of personality surrounding Xi Jinping in the state media is actively promoted in the party's social media accounts. In addition to recurring images from his life over the years, which include his prominent wife, Peng Liyuan, social media posts regularly include quotes of Xi's words. His proximity to the people is demonstrated in photos of the President mixing with the common folk.

3.2 Politics online: selected facts and colourful pictures

The government wants to use social media to convey an image of Chinese politics that is both visionary and systematically planned. Professionally designed infographics are frequently used for this purpose (see Fig. 2). These images are intended to illustrate the complex domestic policy environment in which the CCP has to draft plans and make decisions, for example. The logical structure of the reports and the numbering of the measures to be taken are also meant to show that China's leadership is following a plan and has all the issues well under control.

At the same time, Beijing is attempting to use statistics such as graphics portraying rising trade volumes and new business or trade agreements to underline China's growing international significance.

In the case of political decisions that will affect people's day-to-day lives, the social media posts often include pictures conveying harmony and simplicity, but they also express the idea of visionary power.

The government accounts once displayed a photograph of a sign saying 'Dream' in front of a clear blue sky alongside new regulations on household registration, for instance. Information on planned health-care reforms was illustrated by a glass of daisies surrounded by scattered pills.

Fig. 1: Social media presence of the national party and state institutions analysed in this study

Account holder	Weibo		WeChat		
	active since	followers	active since	avg. no. of likes per post	subject of post with the most likes (in the period analysed)
Central government	2013	11.4 mill.	2015	1,611	holiday arrangement for military parade
Foreign Ministry	2011	74.3 mill.	2015	30	new ministry spokesman
CPC (target group: general population)	not represented at national level		2014	230	dinner invitation tips for cadres
CPC (target group: party members)	not represented		2014	3,633	health tip: benefits of jogging
CCTV	2012	36.4 mill.	2013	10,132	rural shooting
People's Daily	2012	38.0 mill.	2014	11,363	repentance speech by a corrupt cadre

Period analysed: 1 May – 15 June 2015

The images are often quite basic, with simple screen shots from CCTV and the fixed state logo showing up time and again in addition to other stereotypical symbols.

Officials still have their problems with the general tone of social media. Their texts are not adapted to the new media. The sentences are just as long and bureaucratically worded as statements intended for traditional channels of communication. So far, the leadership has failed to come to terms with the particular style of communication used in social media such as playful and humorous language and the element of interaction these modern platforms allow.

3.3 Crisis management online: awakening emotions rather than supplying information

Government agencies in the provinces often downplay crises, partly due to fear of punishment from higher-ranking offices. Moreover, they are often not given any clear communication guidelines from the propaganda units until two or three days have passed.

National government agencies are therefore unable to take advantage of the key benefits of social media: authentic reports from the field in real time. For that reason, it is usually posts from

citizens that give social media users an initial idea of events.

Fig. 2: An infographic posted via the social media accounts of the central government and the state-run media on Li Keqiang's trip to Latin America in May 2015



If no information is forthcoming from official sources, this creates room for speculation and unrest. **The government has been attempting to counteract this by presenting itself as an efficient crisis manager that is responsive to people's calls for help.**

One example of this strategy was seen during the events surrounding the demise of the Oriental Star, the cruise ship that capsized on the River Yangtze on 1 June 2015: the national social-media accounts posted numerous photo spreads depicting Premier Li Keqiang as the caring and concerned head of the government. The images portray him soaking wet on rescue vessels, with a sad and tired expression on his face and sharing instant noodles with emergency responders. The site of the disaster itself and the distraught eyewitnesses of the event are not shown.

The state media accounts also focus on 'everyday heroes' in the tradition of Lei Feng, the Chinese model soldier.¹¹ CCTV posted pictures of exhausted rescue workers after the cruise ship accident in an attempt to foster admiration and evoke sympathy – and to call attention away from the question of what actually caused the disaster. The strategy was only partially

successful. Most of the comments displayed under CCTV's Weibo posts were sympathetic to the official line, showing candles and heart icons. However, a number of microbloggers made repeated complaints of blatant sentimentality (一串感动, 煽情). They also pointed out contradictory facts and figures in the official reports, raised questions about the cause of the accident and asked who was to blame.

4 China's leadership presents itself as promoting a sense of national identity and providing sound everyday advice

The Chinese leadership has not limited its social media strategy to disseminating official statements or information on political events, however; it also sees itself as promoting China's national identity and providing practical tips to the country's citizens, for instance in the area of health and information technology.

The Beijing leadership wants to be regarded as a paternalistic, but non-invasive force in people's lives. **Government agencies and the state media additionally want to mobilise the population in support of the party.**¹² Both the party and state have realised they cannot solve all the country's problems themselves, but are dependent on help from the people as well. Various week-long campaigns to promote issues such as cyber security have been launched to encourage social media

followers to take their lives into their own hands – within clearly defined limits, that is; **Beijing's intention here is to prevent citizens from setting up their own initiatives in areas frowned upon by the government.**

4.1 A selective memory to foster national unity

In addition to posting information on campaigns and commemorative days, the Chinese leadership also uses social media to focus attention on its own version of general knowledge and history, which is intended to serve as the basis for China's national identity and collective consciousness.

Using the hashtag of 'XYearsAgoToday' (那年今日), the government calls attention not only to prominent figures in Chinese history such as mathematician Chen Jingrun, but also to international personages such as French novelist Honoré de Balzac. In addition, Mao Zedong continues to be a key personifier of China's national identity. Despite the 'ten lost years' of the Cultural Revolution, many Chinese regard the founder of the People's Republic as the liberator of China and the epitome of national independence and strength. Detailed stories about the events in Mao's life are posted under the category of 'weekend history lessons' (周末读史) by

state, party and media accounts.

The state media uses other hashtags to note commemorative holidays and action days such as International Children's Day on 1 June and the Chinese equivalent of Valentine's Day on 20 May. The aim here is for both the state and its citizens to forget their problems and focus on the group in question on those days.

4.2 Virtual 'exercise machine' for the smartphone

For several years now, it has been popular among the Chinese to consult private websites for advice on health and well-being. **The Chinese government wants to take advantage of this trend to improve its citizens' health by providing information and encouraging people to take responsibility for their own health.**

The government's social media posts call for citizens to exercise more, for instance by setting daily targets for the number of steps they walk. The government and state media also offer free online advice on exercises that can be done outside the gym, such as sit-ups, press-ups and stretching using an exercise ball.

These efforts to promote better health are based on a serious concern: as the standard of living increases in China, health conditions that were previously almost unknown, including type 2 diabetes and obesity, have become much more widespread.¹³ **The government and state media seem to have hit a nerve with their focus on health; on average, the health-related reports are shared more often than reports on other topics.**

4.3 IT security tips for the people

The Chinese government monitors the internet very closely and has strict guidelines on the use of IT products. However, it has realised that IT security cannot simply be ordained by law. **The government is attempting to increase cyber security in China by warning against risky behaviour.**

The Chinese tend to use modern communications technology without a lot of reservations. Many are early adopters who try out the new technologies as soon as they are available. **When the pace of innovation is high, people are often not especially concerned about IT security.** This is an area where action needs to be taken as fraud becomes increasingly prevalent in Chinese social media, one example being bogus calls for donations.¹⁴

The state media also gives advice on specific everyday situations. In one post, for example, it warned of excessive roaming charges for mobile phone calls abroad and offered tips on how to avoid hidden costs.

5 Conclusion: the primacy of ideology is hindering a credible information policy

The Chinese government has recognised that it needs a comprehensive social media strategy if it is to win the 'battle for public opinion'. **Thus far, the leadership has made little headway in reaching its three main social media goals: spreading information more effectively, improving the credibility of information from official sources, and impacting public opinion.** One reason is the difficulty of communicating quickly and convincingly – especially in a crisis – when the correct ideological line to follow needs to be agreed upon first. Although not especially visible due to blanket censorship, the cynical comments about the government's information policy and its attempts to play up its concern for the people after the cruise ship sank on the Yangtze are an indication of the extent of the mistrust and the distance existing between the online community and the authorities. Another reason for the lack of progress is that neither the version of history that is officially

endorsed nor the state's paternalistic educational campaigns serve to foster the credibility of official sources of information. Instead, they reinforce the tendency (among netizens) to view political messages as 'infotainment' and to concentrate on non-political topics. Lastly, Beijing has yet to begin taking advantage of one of the greatest strengths of social media – its interactivity. **The Chinese leadership sees social media primarily as a platform for a one-sided dissemination of information and shies away from public exchanges with citizens.**

Opportunities to have a say are extremely limited, being restricted to reporting 'rumours' on Sina Weibo or to calls to rate or 'like' posts on WeChat, for example.¹⁵

At the local level, government agencies and individual cadres are frequently more flexible in their use of social media and they employ it for a wider variety of purposes. When natural disasters occur, for instance, they are able to present themselves as capable crisis managers by responding quickly and offering practical assistance.¹⁶ **This only goes to show that if the Chinese leadership wants its followers to credit its reports as being interesting and informative, it will need to relax its grip on maintaining ideological control.** At present, however, this does not appear likely at a national

level given the recent re-centralisation of power and the re-ideologisation occurring under President Xi's leadership.

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¹ Cf. Shi-Kupfer, Kristin (2015). 'Tianjin zeigt: Chinas Informationspolitik ist eine zentrale Schwachstelle des Systems'. <http://www.merics.org/presse/china-flash-pressemitteilungen/china-flash-tianjin-zeigt-chinas-informationspolitik-ist-eine-zentrale-schwachstelle-des-systems.html>. Accessed on 15 Oct. 2015.

² Cf. Shan, Chenyang (2013). 'The sources young people trust: The credibility ratings of sources of national political news in China'. <http://lib.dr.ias-tate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4091&context=etd>. Accessed on 15 Oct. 2015.

³ China Academy of Governance (国家行政学院电子政务研究中心) (2014). '2013 年中国政务微博客评估报告' (Evaluation Report on Chinese Government Microblog Accounts 2013). March 2014. http://www.egovernment.gov.cn/art/2014/4/5/art_477_722.html. Accessed on 31 July 2015.

⁴ Chinese netizens used Facebook and Twitter to post pictures of the social unrest that occurred in Urumqi (the capital of Xinjiang Autonomous Region) on 5 July 2009, sending them around the world. Beijing subsequently ordered access to these dominant social networks to be blocked.

⁵ The State Council's General Office (国务院办公厅) (2013). Accessed on 13 Oct. 2013, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/zdjs/Document/1347883/1347883.htm> ('General Office calls for the room for the press conference used by the State Council Information Office to be made the main venue for announcing information from the central government'). 国办要求把国新办新闻发布厅建成中央发布信息发布主要场所

⁶ The State Council's General Office (国务院办公厅) (2013). '国务院办公厅关于进一步较强政府信息公开，回应社会关切提升政府公

信力的意见' (Views of the General Office of the State

Council regarding the further strengthening of disclosures of government information and increasing credibility by providing answers to social concerns). http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-10/15/c_117723137.htm. Accessed on 15 Oct. 2015.

⁷ Some of these can be found online, e.g. the State Administration of Work Safety (国家安全生产监督管理总局).

⁸ There are already a number of studies on cadres' social media accounts (e.g. Esarey, Ashley (2015). 'Winning Hearts and Minds? Cadres as Microbloggers in China'. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 44 (2), 69–103) and on accounts belonging to regional governments (e.g. Schlaeger, Jesper/Jiang, Min (2014). 'Official microblogging and social management by local governments in China'. <http://cin.sagepub.com/content/28/2/189.full.pdf+html>. Accessed on 15 Oct. 2015). The MERICS study outlined here monitored six national accounts used by central government and party institutions over a period of one-and-a-half months, extracting data from them and analysing it.

⁹ Yan, Xiaoye (颜小叶). 'Don't be "unapproachable" any more. Cartoons show us the "human" side of top politicians' (不再"高冷"卡通漫画给你一个"有温度"的领导人)". <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/news/2015/07/14/370615.html>. Accessed on 15 Oct. 2015.

¹⁰ As in the autumn of 2013 (Xi Jinping appeared in a video on the subject of how to be president of the PRC) and in March 2014 (Li Keqiang as the man behind a government report); see the Global Times (2015). 'Drawn together: Xi Jinping cartoon puts people over politics'. 20 Feb. 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/843742.shtml>. Accessed on 15 Oct. 2015; China Forum (2014). "媒体解读李克强总理政府工作报告大盘点" (Collection of Media

Declarations on Li Keqiang's Government Report). <http://forum.china.com.cn/thread-3628388-1-1.html>. Accessed on 15 Oct. 2015.

¹¹ Lang, Simon (2015). 'Das Vorbild aller Vorbilder: Lei Feng'. <http://www.merics.org/merics-analysen/web-special/helden-und-vorbilder/historische-helden.html>. Accessed on 21 July 2015.

¹² Sun, Wanning (2015). 'From Poisonous Weeds to Endangered Species: Shenguo TV, Media Ecology and Stability Maintenance'. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 44 (2), 17–37.

¹³ Yu Xu, Limin Wang, Jiang He et al. (2013). 'Prevalence and Control of Diabetes in Chinese Adults'. *JAMA* 310 (9): 948–59.

¹⁴ A fake donation app was made available to users in August 2014 after an earthquake in Yunnan province; rather than helping the victims with the money, the people behind it pocketed it themselves. See "A Godsend for the Earthquake" has been exposed as a fraud. WeChat: Its distribution has already been stopped' (朋友圈"地震祈福"被指诈骗 微信: 涉诱导分享已屏蔽),

http://news.ifeng.com/a/20140806/41470408_0.shtml. Accessed on 15 Oct. 2015.

¹⁵ See Schlaeger/Jiang 2014, endnote 5.

¹⁶ Tai, Zixue/Liu, Xiaolong (2015). 'The Chinese Government Hops on the WeChat Bandwagon'. 6 May 2015, <https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/chinapolicyinstitute/2015/05/06/chinese-government-hops-on-the-wechat-bandwagon>. Accessed on 20 Oct. 2015.