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Online citizenship learning of Chinese young adults

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Abstract

This paper explores the citizenship learning of Chinese young adults through examining their participation on Weibo (the biggest micro-blogging service in China). Interview data collected from 31 young mainland Chinese adults contained their reflections on their everyday online participation on Weibo. Using the theory of communities of practice, this paper describes the citizenship learning that occurred in the context of their online participation in two intersecting dimensions. One dimension is their learning of digital citizenship in the Weibo community, manifested in their understanding and grasp of language, values, attitudes and shared commitment in this virtual space. The other is their learning of Chinese citizenship which is embodied in their understanding of Chinese society arising from their reflections of their internet-mediated social participation. This paper brings new insights into the concept of citizenship exhibited in the everyday online participation of Chinese young people, and the mutually constitutive relationship between their learning of citizenship and the forging of new citizenship. The implications of this informal learning for the content and pedagogy of formal citizenship education is discussed.

Keywords

Chinese, citizenship, learning, online, Weibo, young adults

Introduction

The issue of education of citizenship has drawn significant attention in both political and educational spheres over the past few decades. Citizenship education was implemented in multiple forms in countries around the world (see section 2: Geographically Based Overviews in Arthur et al., 2008); however, the implementation of citizenship education in formal educational settings was often found to be ineffective either because of the pedagogies used being out of step with the preferred learning styles of learners, or because the content was irrelevant to the learners' everyday lives (Brooks and Holford, 2009; Petrovic and Kuntz, 2014). Tu's (2011) study of citizenship learning among Chinese university students also shows that the informal curriculum - which allows them to engage with relationships and interactions within and beyond the university setting - plays a bigger role than mandatory political and moral education courses (mainly focusing on Maoist and

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Marxist theories) in shaping students' civic values and attitudes, though the latter accounts for up to 10% of the their total university course time.

In addition to the ineffectiveness of citizenship education in the classroom, there are broader concerns about restricting citizenship learning processes to formal school settings. By emphasising the nature of citizenship as a learning process, Delanty (2003) problematised the notion of *disciplinary* citizenship which restricts citizenship learning to citizenship classes and to formal membership of the polity. He then argues for a model of *cultural* citizenship which approaches citizenship as a dynamic learning process unfolding in the everyday engagement of learning subjects with their society. In a similar vein, Biesta (2011) maintains that citizenship learning should be extended to young people's everyday lives rather than confined to schools and teachers. He argues that the idea of restricting citizenship education to formal educational settings raises three problems. First, it assumes that schools need to prepare young people as competent citizens, and that young people are themselves responsible for acquiring the necessary competences for practising citizenship. In this way young people's citizenship education is treated as the responsibility of schools and young people. Second, it sees young people's citizenship as an outcome of an educational process rather than a dynamic and constitutive practice with which people continuously engage. The third problem is that citizenship education within formal school setting is often underpinned by a specified trajectory and outcome. This is against the diversified nature of citizenship learning embedded in different practices with which students engage both inside and outside school.

In response to this understanding of citizenship education in schools, there was a call for research on young people's 'lived citizenship', described by Hall and Williamson (1999) as 'the meaning that citizenship actually has in people's lives and the ways in which people's social and cultural backgrounds and material circumstances affect their lives as citizens' (p. 2). Research along these lines has produced valuable insights into the forms of citizenship that emerge from young people's everyday social interactions and into the ways these are learned. Lister and colleague's (2003) study of young people's perceptions of citizenship in their everyday lives in the UK illustrates young people's fluid and more communitarian understanding of citizenship, one that emphasises civil rights, social responsibility and constructive social participation in the local community. Biesta et al. (2009) examined the citizenship learning of young people afforded by their engagement with practices and communities in their everyday lives, highlighting the invisible dimensions of citizenship learning, such as that acquired through leisure activities. These new citizenships and means of citizenship learning have deep implications for our understanding of the nature of citizenship and how it should be taught and learned. Knowledge of this *lived* citizenship and the learning processes associated with it remain limited however. Added to this, new venues for young people's social interaction and participation afforded by digital media constitute a new terrain in which new meanings of citizenship can emerge and citizenship learning can occur. The learning dimension of young people's citizenship practices in this new space also remains largely unexplored.

The dearth of studies of citizenship learning in Chinese young people's everyday online activities is an example of this. China has more than 400 million internet users aged between 20 and 30 who spent 27 hours per week on average on the internet by the end of 2018 (CNNIC, 2019). Young people's active engagement with the online space has generated a vibrant and engaging online culture (Yang, 2009). In addition to this, despite the increased venues and spaces of civic and political participation in China (He and Warren, 2011; Paik, 2012), the opportunities for Chinese young people to practice citizenship in conventional ways are relatively limited comparing to their counterparts in western societies. Their opportunities are restricted by the limited room allowed in their formal education for social participation due to the rigid school curriculum and schedule (Ye, 2011; Tu, 2011), and the limited institutional channels and highly sanctioned terrain of voluntary and non-governmental channels for civic and political participation (Zheng and Pan, 2016). The

lack of opportunities for Chinese young people to practice citizenship offline makes the internet a venue of special value for Chinese young people's social participation and citizenship learning. This was demonstrated by the proliferation of studies of the Chinese internet in recent years (Meng, 2018; Yang, 2015; Yang et al., 2014). However, these studies are mainly conducted from a political, economic, and cultural perspective, leaving the dimension of citizenship learning within Chinese young people's online activities rarely explored (Fu, 2019).

This paper aims to narrow this gap by examining Chinese young people's citizenship learning through their lived experience of online participation. Drawing on data collected from online observation and internet-mediated interviews, it investigates how Chinese young people learn about citizenship through online participation. Using the theory of communities of practice, it delineates participants' learning of digital citizenship by making sense of the language practices, values and attitudes, and shared enterprise of the Weibo community through their activities on Weibo. It also describes their learning of citizenship through their social and political engagement, mediated by social media. The findings of this paper shed light on how citizenship is understood, experienced, and learned by Chinese young people in their everyday online activities. There are deep implications for our thinking about the pedagogies of citizenship education in formal, non-formal and informal settings.

Citizenship learning and the theory of communities of practice

Citizenship is no longer merely a legal status conferred by a nation-state (Ramirez and Meyer, 2012); it is also a series of interrelated political, social and cultural practices embedded in people's lived experience in their everyday lives. Following this line of thought, citizenship learning is a process concurrent with young people's social engagement. Young people are citizens, not simply because of the rights and duties they are entitled to have; they become citizens through their daily engagement with the practices of family, peers, school, work and the media (Baker and Blaagaard, 2016), or 'the actual practices that make up their lives' (Lawy and Biesta, 2006: 45). Their experience of citizenship in their everyday lives demonstrates a broad, fluid, and inclusive avenue for learning about citizenship (Delanty, 2003; Smith et al., 2005). The engagement of citizens in social communities provides a learning environment for them to explore and make sense of the communities to which their citizenship relates (Hoskins et al., 2012). This conception of citizenship learning echoes the theory of community of practice which is based on the assumption that learning occurs in the process of our engagement with social practices (Wenger, 1998). My analysis of the citizenship practice of young Chinese internet users as citizenship learning will draw upon the theory of communities of practice.

The notion of communities of practice is predicated on the assumption that learning is not an individual process but a process of engagement with social practice (Wenger, 1998, 2010). Wenger (2009) defines communities of practice as 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (p. 1). It is the place where we develop, negotiate, and share our understanding of the world. Through our engagement in communities of practice we learn the shared enterprises and practices of these communities, negotiate the meaning of our experiences, and take part in the (re)production of these practices. In this process, 'the social and the individual constitute each other' (Wenger, 2010: 179). Wenger (1998) defines practice as 'doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do' (p. 47). It includes not only explicit artefacts such as language, symbols, regulations, and contracts, but also tacit elements such as conventions, untold rules, recognisable institutions, underlying assumptions and shared worldviews (p. 47). Since we participate in multiple communities of practice across time and space, Wenger uses the term 'landscape of practice' to

describe the 'complex system of communities of practice and the boundaries between them' (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015: 13). In this paper, I draw on this theory to analyse the meanings participants make of their participatory activities in online communities, and how these meanings contribute to their informal learning of citizenship in relation to these communities.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research which combines data collected from online observation and internet-mediated interviews. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Plain language statement and consent forms were sent to potential participants. Thirty-one frequent Weibo users aged from 19 to 33 were recruited from mainland China. The gender distribution of participants is almost even (16 female and 15 male). All participants are from urban areas (the majority located in south and eastern regions), with 24 from metropolitan cities, such as Guangzhou, Beijing and Shenzhen, four from regional cities, with the remaining three participants studying in Hong Kong, Korea and Canada respectively for their master or bachelor degrees. Twelve participants have a bachelor degree, 11 a master degree; five are college students; two have professional college degrees; and the 33-year-old participant holds a PhD. Apart from the five undergraduates and the two first year PhD students, all the rest of the participants have just started their careers in a wide range of private or government sectors. Sixteen of them live in rented accommodation, seven in a dormitory on campus, and eight live with their families.

In agreeing to participate in this research, participants allowed the researcher to follow them on Weibo. This enabled the researcher to observe the visible representations or digital footprints of their participation on Weibo, such as their profile settings and the posts on their homepages. Using the method of 'scrolling back' (Robards, 2014), twenty pages (20 entries on each page) of Weibo posts were collected in reverse chronological order from the day the researcher received the address of the Weibo homepage of each participant. This method allows the researcher to observe participants' past footprints on Weibo, and effectively avoid the quality of data being affected by participants' possible moderation of their online behaviour after joining the research. Since these activities are conducted online and represented mainly in the form of text (sometimes facilitated with emoticons, audio and video messages), they are detached from the social contexts in which participants physically reside. In order to interpret participants' digital citizenship practices from the perspective of their everyday life experiences, I conducted interviews to collect participants' basic demographic information and their accounts of their online activities. All the audio interviews were conducted in Chinese via WeChat because it is available and familiar enough to participants. The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, with the consent of participants.

Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews started with questions which sought basic contextual data such as demographic information, participants' work and current life situations, and their internet habits, then proceeding to questions about participants' perspectives on their motivations behind and meanings they ascribed to the posts they made on Weibo. Data collected from online observation was used as an entry point for acquiring these insights. Before every interview, I extensively reviewed the posts collected from participants' Weibo pages. With an inclusive notion of citizenship which examines people's daily engagement with social communities, I categorised these posts according to the communities with which they engaged. I chose posts from each category which typified participants' engagement in these communities, and asked interviewees for background information about these posts, including the reasons behind them. This way of conducting interviews ensures every interview question has a clear purpose. It has proved effective in generating rich, elaborate, and reflective qualitative data. Another benefit of designing

interview questions in this way is that my familiarity with their Weibo presence helped me to establish a good rapport with them, which also benefited the generation of high-quality interview data.

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim in Chinese, while thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was conducted using Nvivo. All the information that can possibly be used to identify participants was removed or substituted with pseudonyms. Data collected from observing participants' Weibo pages was used to triangulate the interview data and to complement my understanding of participants' accounts for these archives. By merging codes from open coding, two broad themes about citizenship learning were identified. I elaborate on these two interrelated dimensions of citizenship learning in the next section.

Findings

The citizenship learning arising from participants' engagement on Weibo occurs in two intertwined ways. The first is their learning of the norms and expected behaviours of the Weibo community which shapes their practices in the realm of digital citizenship. The outcome of this learning is demonstrated in their understanding of the shared repertoire, values, attitudes and joint enterprises for mutual engagement in this community. The second is their internet-mediated learning about Chinese society and their position in this society. Weibo, in this case, offers a new way of engaging with and learning about Chinese society. Through reconciling their learning about Chinese society through their direct engagement with the virtual and physical spaces and through internet-mediated engagement with the broader Chinese society, participants form landscapes of practice from which their notion of Chinese citizenship derives.

Learning digital citizenship

Engaging with online communities is a means by which young adults learn and shape the practices of these communities. These practices are composed of explicit embodiments such as 'language, symbols, regulations, and contracts', as well as tacit elements such as 'conventions, untold rules, recognisable institutions, underlying assumptions, and shared world views' (Wenger, 1998: 47). The process of understanding, following, and contributing to shape these practices through engagement is the process of them making sense of their relationship with these communities, and it is this that defines their digital citizenship (citizenship in these online communities). In this section, I explain how participants learn their digital citizenship through their participatory activities on Weibo.

Online language practice as shared repertoire. Learning how to communicate in the manner of a full participant is a way for newcomers to become legitimate participants in a community (Jordan, 1989). In a community of practice, language is an important property that is generated by its participants' pursuit of shared enterprises across time (Wenger, 1998). A good grasp of the language is therefore essential for people's engagement with this community. It gives legitimacy to people's participation in the community, enables them to make sense of the practices within each community of practice, and enables them to experience this engagement as meaningful. Like the continually updating English internet lexicon, lol (laughing out loud) and yolo (you only live once) being two examples, Chinese online language has an evolving lexicon with tacit meanings that are shared among internet users. This language is part of the 'shared repertoire' of the online community (Wenger, 1998) used extensively in participants' online posts on Weibo. Their use of this context-specific language is the outcome of their learning of the shared repertoire of the Weibo community through participation; it is also a performance of identity as a legitimate member of this community

(Fu, 2018). Similar practices were identified in Wernholm's (2018) study of Swedish children's participatory experiences in digital communities.

Apart from these embodied features, participants in this study also share similar perceptions about 'good' language practice in the online community. Shenying, a 25-year-old producer at a television station in Guangzhou, stated that a good and effective Weibo post should provide a distinctive view in refined and incisive language, or examine things from a different perspective. 'Be interesting' is another characteristic of good language practice on Weibo. Zhangguai is a 31-year-old entrepreneur who runs a media studio in Beijing. He emphasised humour as an essential ingredient of 'good' language practice on Weibo. He said that, for him and his friends, expressing things in a humorous way has become 'a subconscious habit' in their online expression, even when they talk about serious topics, such as social inequality or government wrongdoing. He said that 'You simply feel it is very tedious and boring if you say something as it is without a bit of teasing or bantering'. This language practice was also noted by another participant, Xiaoyu, a Chinese teacher at a primary school. She stated that she liked online content written in a witty and humorous manner, but that is also direct and rational.

Participants' perceptions of language practices on Weibo, discussed above, reflect plain language, flexible usage of online colloquial/internet slang, and humorous and sarcastic narratives. This informal, accessible, and entertaining character of online language casts the Chinese internet as an alternative space for information communication and public expression, different from mainstream mass media regulated by the authorities and dominated by rigid and formalised rhetoric (Yang et al., 2014). By learning and taking on this alternative language practice, internet users both gain legitimacy in their online community and contribute to maintaining and developing this language practice. This process enables them to make meaning of the practice of this community and claim their citizenship in this community. Their grasp of community language is only part of their learning of digital citizenship, however; it does not necessarily mean that they have learnt 'the actual practice the language is supposed to be about' (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 108). Learning about communities of practice also involves making sense of the meaning of their participation through the reciprocal process of learning and shaping the mutual engagement and shared enterprises of these communities of practice.

Community expectations for content generation. Mutual engagement between members of a community yields tractable norms and practices on which the coherence of a community is predicated (Wenger, 1998). In the Weibo community, all participants spend a considerable amount of time browsing, posting and commenting on others' posts. Through these activities, they learn the collective expectations of the Weibo community for the contributions of its members and use what they have learnt to regulate their participatory activities in that community. Participants' perceptions of the collective expectations of the Weibo community for user-generated content can be summarised as *Youqu* (interesting) and *Youyingyang* (literally meaning nutritious, and here can be understood as beneficial or practically useful), to highlight the two words repeatedly used by participants. Content which can enrich their knowledge and understanding of their society, or is of practical use for their daily life, is deemed *Youyingyang*. Examples of this kind of material given by participants include a short video teaching new traffic rules, news reports, comments based on sound evidence and rational analysis, and opinion pieces which offer fresh perspectives and can help them to gain a comprehensive picture or an informed understanding of an issue.

Participants also noted that online content needed to be interesting to attract people's attention. Xiaoyu commented that 'views and opinions which are expressed in a satirical or teasing manner are definitely more likely to be accepted online, the more serious your online expression gets, the less attention you will be likely to receive'. This perception was shared by another participant,

Huaxia, a fresh university graduate. He said that he appreciates well-written puns, parodies, sarcasm, and political jokes, all of which have strong resonance among Weibo users.

The user-generated content which reflects the two expectations of the Weibo community for the engagement of its users not only entertains but also provides a source of identification with a particular community. These communities arise when people who can see the point of particular content (such as to understand sarcasm) connect with each other and build shared knowledge (Biscontini, 2016). Participants learn the expectations, rights and responsibilities of the Weibo community in their content generation through engaging with this community as content consumer and generator. Their contributions, which enrich the Weibo community, also enrich themselves. The establishment of this mutually enriching relationship between them and the Weibo community supports the belief that they can and should be part of this enriching process (Pring, 2016); it lays the foundation of their citizenship in the Weibo community.

Mutual engagement – attitudes and values. The mutual engagement within a community is underpinned by a set of shared beliefs and values which makes communities of practice 'as much a matter of diversity as it is a matter of homogeneity' (Wenger, 1998: 75). All the participants had a positive attitude towards public discussion on Weibo, believing that it could at least make the different perspectives of a social issue visible (if not leading to a solution). These different perspectives are crucial for their informed understanding of Chinese society. Many participants in different ways showed how a belief in tolerance is essential to the Weibo community. This is illustrated by Shijie, a 19-year-old junior student at a university in Canada. In the interview, he said he normally did not criticise other people's views because

> . . . this is such a vast and diversified world. People have different opinions just because their ways of thinking and the perspectives they take are different. It does not necessarily mean their view is wrong.

Cimi, a sophomore majoring in landscape architecture, also argued that 'everybody is unique, so everybody can express their own opinion, you do not have to post your opinion under their post to refute'. This tolerance for different opinions on Weibo is also shared by Shihou, a 23-year-old undergraduate student in Guangzhou. He explained the importance of tolerance when engaging with the Weibo community, stating that

> Different opinions are valuable, even for those that are hard for me to take. Because when a social incident happens, we need different voices to help us to form an unbiased judgment. So, I will not follow or avoid certain people intentionally, I still mainly want to extend my horizon on Weibo, try my best to hear from different voices, and then to form my own judgement.

This attitude of tolerance was also endorsed by Xiaomeng, a 28-year-old product manager in Shenzhen. In the interview, he shared his experience of being attacked on Weibo by extreme nationalists for expressing his disagreement with their hostility towards Japan, saying, 'I have no doubt about the evil things Japan did to China in the past, but now we are at peace, Japan has developed really fast after the war, the country has a lot that we can learn from'. When asked how he felt about these attacks, he showed his tolerance by saying that these people are probably very young, or may have limited information, knowledge and life experiences, which to him was normal, because 'after all, we all have been young before'.

Aside from tolerance, participants also try to manifest rational and reasonable attitudes within the Weibo community. This intent is shown in participants' descriptions of a valid discussion on Weibo. Zeqin is a 26-year-old public relations manager at an advertising company in Shenzhen. He

values posts and discussions that are based on facts and evidence. In response to my question about his participation in online discussions, he commented:

> Sometimes discussion is necessary for finding the truth, but I wish we could base our discussions on evidence, facts, and proper reasoning, do not bring strong personal biases into it, or express personal opinions solely based on some personal political ideology, this is not right.

Apart from developing rational and tolerant attitudes, participants also learn about the values underpinning the practices of the Weibo community to which they have contributed. These values were described by participants as equal rights of expression in online communities and responsible contributions to these communities. Xiaomeng explained in the interview:

> Everybody has his/her right and freedom to express their opinion, . . ., I'll never attack others even if their opinion is entirely against mine because people come from different ages, family backgrounds, and have different learning and working experiences, it is just the points of their main concern are different.

While the value placed on equality in online expression suggests the rights that participants feel entitled to claim as online citizens, participants also share a view that this right should be used responsibly, shown in their efforts to be responsible content generators and distributors. Zeqin said he only *Likes* or re-posts information and opinions which are 'faithful, well-grounded, and make a clear point'. His premise for online expression is 'do not abuse others'. The value of making responsible use of the right to online expression was also stressed by Yanyu, a 27-year-old TV journalist at a county-level broadcasting and TV station in Guangdong Province. In the interview she said that a Weibo user 'should be able to identify right (information) from wrong, and to choose to distribute that right or true information'.

Xuexin and Zeqin also identify with the value of being responsible members of the Weibo community. Xuexin is 26 years old, a general secretary at a department store in Guangzhou. She said in the interview that a good Weibo user should not disseminate rumours and should be responsible for her activities online. Zeqin indicated that he tries to post content which is different from others and to minimise repetition of information on Weibo. A few of the participants also stated that they only expressed their opinion when their view was absent on Weibo. It is evident that the attitudes and values for mutual engagement on Weibo as learned by the participants are strictly applied in their engagement with the Weibo community. In this sense, their mutual engagement on Weibo is a reciprocal process of learning and shaping the practices of the that community.

Joint enterprise in an online community. The shared repertoire and the expectations, attitudes and values manifest in people's mutual engagement embody the history of their pursuit of shared enterprise, which is a definitive element of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). This enterprise is negotiated in the process of mutual engagement between the members of this community. The practices participants learn through their engagement on Weibo exhibit a joint enterprise of constructing an equal, engaging, accountable, and tolerant space for information-sharing and opinion expression. This joint enterprise is illustrated by participants' statements about the significance of Weibo as a source of reliable information and diversified opinion. Lingzi is 27, a news reporter in a city in South China. In commenting on the significance of the Weibo community for her, she stated that 'Weibo could expand the information you can see'. Her view is widely shared by other participants. Shihou commented that

> . . . on Weibo, because you can follow people of a different kind, from all walks of life, . . ., the more you follow, the more you see. . . ., in this process, you can broaden your horizons, and things related to your

> values will gradually mature. I feel Weibo is beneficial for this process because if you know how to screen and reflect on the content generated by others, it is actually a process in which you can acquire different life experiences.

Similarly, Shijie said that 'Weibo can help me understand the ins and outs of a social phenomenon or event, know more opinions, possibilities, and get a deeper understanding'. Zhangguai said the reason he shares his views online is that he wants to make his followers aware of the existence of an opinion or a voice about a particular issue, to find out how they think about this issue, and to discuss it with them.

As mass media are still largely regulated by the government, despite the marketisation of the media sector in China (Zhao, 2008), the joint enterprise of constructing Weibo as a source of high quality information and diversified opinions is essential for it to continue operating as an alternative space for news and public discussion. This joint enterprise can shape Weibo into a supportive community, enabling its members to learn the rules, practices, behaviours and identities of Chinese society. It produces relations of accountability and mutuality, enriching relationships between individuals and their online community (Pring, 2016). This enterprise structures participants' dynamic practice of their digital citizenship in the same way that rhythm structures music (Wenger, 1998), and helps them to learn the practices in the Weibo community by which their digital citizenship in relation to that community is defined (Gastil, 2004).

To sum up, participants' learning of digital citizenship is the process of them making sense of the practices in the Weibo community: its online language practices, attitudes, values, and shared enterprises. This learning process resonates with Wernholm's (2018) findings regarding children's participatory experiences in digital communities which involved learning context-specific language, understanding rules, reward systems and hierarchical structures of their communities, as well as contributing to participatory cultures in these communities. Young people make sense of and contribute to shape these practices through their online participation. In this sense, participants' online engagement is not only a process through which they learn about their digital citizenship, but also a formative process through which new modes of digital citizenship are forged. These practices in the Weibo community, as perceived by participants, illustrate their understanding of their rights, duties, and identities in relation to that community, an understanding which enables them to claim and practise their digital citizenship in their daily engagement with other users on Weibo.

Learning citizenship through Weibo-mediated social engagement

The Weibo community is the space in which participants practise their digital citizenship through interactive activities such as information-sharing and opinion expression. More importantly, it also works as a mediated space in which participants engage with other communities which they would otherwise not be able to access. This feature of the internet extends the realm of people's social learning and strengthens their social learning capabilities. It becomes an artefact beneficial for people in forming and engaging with different social communities, understanding practices in these communities, and managing their boundaries (Wenger, 1998).

Mediated social learning: the internet as boundary object. As stated above, the mutual engagement of Weibo users makes Weibo a space of varied opinions and information. These opinions and information are the result of people's reification of the meanings they make through their everyday participation in and across different social communities. In this sense, Weibo can be regarded as a boundary object, defined by Wenger (1998) as 'objects that serve to coordinate the perspectives of

various constituencies for some purpose' (p. 104). It provides rich and vibrant scenarios for its users to learn the practices of the communities with which they engage in everyday life. Weibo thus provides a mediated space in which participants can experience the practices in and across different communities of practice. Their mutual engagement in the Weibo community holds great potential for them in making meaning of Chinese society in their everyday lives.

This mediated form of social participation and learning is apparent in one of the most frequently-mentioned values of Weibo by participants, that is, its role in enabling them to hear other people's opinions on the issues about which they care, thus gaining access to new perspectives. Given the protective Chinese school system which has little space for social engagement, and the mass media which tends to offer homogeneous perspectives and opinions, this function is crucial for young Chinese in acquiring an informed understanding of social affairs and issues they come across in their everyday lives, and for developing their understanding of the general social context and ways to engage with it. Below are some typical statements in relation to the value of this function of the internet.

> It (Weibo) can let you hear multiple opinions; you can use it as a tool for your own research of an issue, you can also get help from other experts. At least it can help me to get a relatively comprehensive understanding of an event or a phenomenon, to form my own judgment/opinion, it also helps me realise what position I am at, what attitude and action I should choose to take. (Shenying)

> This understanding is fundamental because as you live, you should not be ignorant. You should live a sober life, . . ., know why you live, know how good is your life, and know what the world is like, this is essential. (Zeqing)

> Weibo is my main channel to know what is going on outside (of the university), like what is happening outside and some hot social issues. This information is important because I can form my attitudes, ideas and values towards this society by integrating the online information about social events with my own knowledge. It is helpful not exactly in a sense that it can help me adjust to the society, but it can help me understand the environment that I live in. It is an intellectual process and part of my life. I feel it is crucial for a person, because if we do not try to make sense of things in our life, what else can we do? (Shihou)

Weibo as a boundary object accommodates the reification of the participation of its users in various social communities, enabling people to learn about Chinese society through other people's experiences of social participation represented on Weibo. At the same time, participants also contribute to this body of experience by sharing information or expressing their opinions on Weibo. In this sense, participants' mediated citizenship learning represents a new kind of citizenship practice characterised by a mutually beneficial process of giving and taking of its citizens. Weibo is the educational space in which young people can act as subjects. In this way, young people form and transform new patterns of action, and share and (re)construct meanings of citizenships (Biesta, 2007).

The results of internet-mediated social learning, however, may not be consistent with those produced by people's direct engagement in the communities of practice in physical life. This discrepancy poses a challenge to people's coherent understanding of Chinese society; it entails coordinating the meanings they make through their engagement with the mixed realities of the virtual and the physical. In the next section, I draw upon the experience of a participant to show how representation on Weibo of a social event, and observation of that event in physical space, can be reconciled.

Landscape of practice: reconciliation of learning in communities of practice. Even though the internet has already become a vital avenue through which young people learn about their society, some are conscious of the mediated nature of the world they experience on Weibo. Zixun, for example, is a 28-year-old PhD candidate at a university in Guangzhou. When was asked if online participation could satisfy all his needs for social and political participation, he responded as follows:

> Definitely cannot, because lots of information is still unavailable online, and lots of information online is interpreted out of its context. It can lead or change your thoughts before you realise it. So the most important thing is to participate in reality. The internet is just a supplement. It can help you to get prepared for your engagement in real society.

Participants' consciousness of the mediated nature of the reality represented on Weibo was also illustrated by their dissatisfaction with the state censorship of the Internet. The existence of censorship (Cairns, 2017) reduces the richness and diversity of information and opinion available online, discouraging young people from active online participation and expression. Zhangguai stated in the interview that:

> . . .on Weibo, many things are not included in the range of topics that can be discussed, such as sex, politics, certain periods of history, etc.. If they are not discussable, how can we have quality discussions about these issues?

Zeqing also commented that:

> The information censorship limited the way I see the world. Because I know the world mainly through my grasp of information, but this behaviour of the government restricted my access to information, it will further affect my views of different issues.

The reconciling of citizenship learning through engagement with online and offline communities is well illustrated by the experience of one participant: Xiaoyu talked about how she recognised the mediated nature of the world represented online through seeing a discrepancy between online representation and her witness experience of a collective protest in her city. In the protest, local citizens expressed their opposition towards the proposed construction of a paraxylene (PX) factory believed to be harmful to the local environment by a *jiti sanbu* (collective stroll)[1] to the local government building. Since this form of collective action was mobilised using the internet and mobile phones, it was widely studied as a typical case of digital activism in China (Dong, 2013; Liu, 2015).

In the interview Xiaoyu said that she experienced the event on both Weibo and in physical space. It was her observation that the information about this event on Weibo was much more exaggerated in terms of the number of participants and the mood of the protesting masses. She said that only about 1000 people joined the walk at the beginning, the crowd becoming bigger as many curious spectators joined the walk along the way. The presence of local and foreign media also encouraged more spectators to join. The crowd at the end was five to six times bigger than its original size, but most of them were just curious spectators who did not necessarily care about the construction of the PX factory.

She saw records of this event on Weibo that reported people being beaten during the protest, students at Ningbo University being prohibited from going into the downtown area, and public transport being suspended - all of which, according to her on-site observation, were just rumours. When asked about the effect of her recognition of this difference between the online representation and her personal observation of the same event, she said that it made her a more responsible internet user; she will consume online content more critically in future, only posting or sharing content online after careful verification.

People experience encounters between different practices and understandings in the landscape of practice. Xiaoyu's experience together with other participants' consciousness of the constructed nature of the reality represented on Weibo (due to misrepresentation and censorship) show how their reconciliation of learning on Weibo and in physical space could foster their awareness of the limitations of mediated social engagement, and improve her literacy as an informed and responsible online citizen (Wineburg et al., 2015). It also shows the interactive relationship between the learning that occurs in different communities of practice. By reconciling these learning

experiences in one's unique landscape of practice, one can form a coherent understanding of Chinese society informed by experience of multiple memberships in and across various virtual and physical communities. In other words, Chinese citizenship is defined by the reconciled practices of the communities with which they engage in their everyday lives; their citizenship is learned through, and defined by, their participation in and across these communities.

This section presented Chinese young people's learning of citizenship through their internet-mediated participation with Chinese society. Weibo functions as a boundary object which mediates and extends participants' engagement with and learning about Chinese society. It facilitates participants' learning about Chinese society by providing an accessible space for people to share their experiences of social participation and to explore those contributed by others. In this sense, this form of mediated citizenship learning constitutes a new form of digital citizenship characterised by a give-and-take process of collective learning. It goes beyond the narrow understanding of digital citizen as a responsible user, and demonstrates the promises of digital citizenship in spawning creative culture and new forms of participation (McCosker et al., 2016). On top of this, young people's citizenship learning involves reconciling the outcomes of citizenship learning through internet-mediated social participation, engagement with the digital community, and engagement with communities in physical life. This reconciliation generates their coherent landscape of practice by which their everyday participation in different communities is mediated, and upon which their notions of citizenship are drawn.

Conclusion

This paper analysed two forms of citizenship learning embedded in Chinese young adults' everyday activities on Weibo: first, their learning of digital citizenship in relation to the Weibo community through direct engagement with this digital community; and second, their learning of Chinese citizenship via internet-mediated social participation. This learning contributes to 'an understanding of how they are positioned and what this means for their participation' in society (Wyn, 1995: 61), and informs their everyday engagement with the communities in both virtual and physical spaces. Weibo in this process is a learning object in its own right because the practices of this community define participants' digital citizenship within it. It is also a medium that enables participants to learn about the practices of other social communities through which their Chinese citizenship is defined.

The online activities of Chinese young adults demonstrate vibrant citizenship learning occurring outside the classroom, and how new citizenships which are relevant to and meaningful for young people are forged through young people's everyday participatory activities in the mixed reality of the virtual and physical worlds. This process of online participation has deep implications for the content and pedagogies of citizenship education in formal education. As shown in this paper, the meaning of citizenship varies across different social and cultural communities with which young people engage. In order to engage them in citizenship learning in the classroom, educators need to first understand which citizenships are valuable and meaningful for them, and what these citizenships comprise. The construction of the curriculum should draw on this understanding and highlight the relevance of citizenship education content in their everyday lives. The shared enterprise of Chinese young adults on Weibo provides an example of a supportive environment for action-centred citizenship learning (Biesta, 2007), an accessible and tolerant space in which a learner can act as a responsible subject and learn from their experience of being one.

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Note

1. A word used by participants in this event to replace the word demonstration in their online posts and mobile phone messages in order to bypass censorship, and to highlight the peaceful nature of this collective action to appease the repression of local government.

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