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“Do you remember Guo Meimei?”: On the Interaction between Online Collective Action Frames and the Cultural Context in China

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Abstract

This article, from the framing perspective, addresses the interaction between online collective actions and their cultural contexts by tracing the connection between two online collective actions regarding the Red Cross Society of China. One online collective action’s diagnostic frame could turn into a netizens’ collective cognitive frame about a particular object over a long period, forming the cultural change for later actions. This cognitive frame affects how participants attribute the diagnostic frame of later online collective actions about the same object. It also helps participants inherit anger from previous collective actions.

Keywords: online collective action in China; framing analysis; culturalist approach; COVID-19; cultural change

Introduction

An online collective action (OCA) could be described as internet users’ spontaneous and non-institutional action around one particular issue. Participating in OCAs could “inform the

government in pursuing a better governance, for better decision making and policies toward civic amenities, public safety, and political transparency” (Agarwal, Lim, & Wigand, 2012, p.120); therefore, it has “become one of the common routes individuals take in their attempt to contribute to the betterment of society” (Yuce, Agarwal, Wigand, Lim, & Robinson, 2013, p.2).

Structuralist and rationalist approaches have been the major approaches in studies of mobilization and participation in collective actions. The structuralist approaches, such as the political process theory, assume that a particular political power structure and political process provide political opportunities for activists to mobilize supporters to participate. However, in China, the political opportunities “have not been linearly linked to online politic disputes” (Xie, 2012, p.80), and structuralist approaches cannot fully explain the mobilization and participation of Chinese OCAs. The rationalist approaches, such as the resource mobilization theory, explain the participation in collective action as individual’s rational choice through “weighing” costs against benefits, and the internet is a new type of mobilization resource. Klandermans (1984) introduces new social-psychological theories to expand resource mobilization theory. However, understanding individuals’ factors as merely a resource that influences the process of weighing the benefits and costs simplifies and instrumentalizes individuals’ psychological processes. Furthermore, a series of terms that culturalists use must be interpreted in specific cultural context, which is defined as “the shared beliefs, understandings, symbols, and meanings commonly found at a place and time, matters insofar as it shapes people’s interests, motives, tactics, and strategies” (Jasper & Polletta, 2019, p.64). For example, the term ‘collective good’ (Klandermans 1984, p.585) is both a rhetoric construction and a political symbol that is based on the people’s assumptions about the society, which is diversified in different societies. Therefore, the occurrence and mobilization of an OCA are, to a large extent, decided by its cultural context. Besides, in China, “the way to narrate the event... the more the event touches the bottom line of citizen’s morality, the more shocking the event it is, and the more the event could arouse people’s emotion and form online events” (Yang, 2009, p.60). Accordingly, the occurrence, mobilization, and participation of Chinese OCAs are relying on the emotional shockness, rather than structural resources and political opportunities. Therefore, structuralist and rationalist approaches “could not fully reveal the motivations, dynamics, and meanings of online events in China” (Yang, 2009, p.41).

The study of social movements and collective action took a cultural turn in the 1980s. Culturalists see social movements as cultural phenomena, cultural activities, and discursive practices. Traditionally in sociology, culture was conceptualized as “a series of durable behavioural or cognitive dispositions that reflect one’s ‘realistic’ expectations and accumulated experience” (Snow, Tan, & Owens, 2013, p.226) or, more generally, ‘norms and values that were widely shared’ (Williams, 2004, p.98). For culturalists, culture is simultaneously enabling and constraining for social movements; it has the structuring power in “rendering belief and actions meaningful” (Snow et al., 2013, p.226). Culturalists underline the in-depth interpretive understanding of heterogeneous cases by using methods such as thick description and process tracing. Although culturalist studies are at the risk of being over-descriptive, fragmented, and lacking systematic theoretic generalization, they provide insightful views into the scopes of moral and values, and shared cognition and regulations that supply missing dimensions to structuralist and rationalist theories.

The framing perspective is one of the best-known culturalist approaches; it primarily focuses on the ways in which movements use “symbols, language, discourse, identity, and other dimensions of culture to recruit, retain, mobilize, and motivate members” (Williams, 2004, p.93). The sociological beginnings of the framing could be traced back to Goffman (1974), who borrowed the term “frame” to denote interpretive schemata that enable individuals to ‘to locate, perceive, identify and label’ (Snow & Benford, 1988, p.214) information that they encounter. Frames are also described as “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p.143), or “the principles of selection, emphasis and presentation ...about what exists, what happens, and what matters” (Gitlin, 1980, p.7). By rendering events meaningful, frames “function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective” (Snow & Benford, 1988, p.214). Scheufele argues that the theoretic premise of framing is attribution (1999, p.300), which implies the framing perspective’s identity of culturalist approach, since the attribution process is embedded within a particular cultural context.

Based on Klandermans’ notion of consensus and action mobilization (1984), Snow and Benford use the verb “framing” to refer to social movements’ efforts and approaches of “mobilizing potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists” (1988, p.198). For Benford and Snow, the collective action frames, as the resultant products of the framing activity, are “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement

organization” (2000, p.614). Therefore, how a social problem is framed significantly influences a social movement’s mobilization. According to Snow and Benford (1992), a collective action frame has the function of modes of attribution and articulation: the movement activists attribute blame for some problematic condition by identifying culpable agents (the diagnostics attribution) and suggesting addressing problem resolution (the prognostic attribution). In other words, a collective action frame “provides a coherent message: (1) what is going on? (2) who is to blame? and (3) what can we do?” (Xue, Stekelenburg, & Klandermans, 2016, p.8).

This article assumes that an interaction exists between OCA frames and people’s collective cognitive frames. The cognitive frame is similar to individual frames (“mentally stored clusters of ideas that guide individuals’ processing of information” see Entman, 1993, p.53), which does not exclusively depend on media coverage of an event or issue; it also depends on the audiences’ own opinions work in the meaning construction process (Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997). The collective cognitive frames belong to the scope of the cultural context of social movements.

Social movements are one of the major forces in the change of culture. Snow, Tan and Owens (2013) describe culture as a “reservoir” that contains various cultural resources that could be strategically used to mobilize movements. A social movement may produce and add new cultural resources into the reservoir, affecting later movements. For example, in a Hong Kong collective action, “Formerly marginal values... later became widely discussed in the local political discourse.... A new political group was formed, and continuous struggles began, which reshaped the local cultural context as well as the political ecology” (Xia, 2016, p.319). Therefore, an OCA may bring new values to the forefront, which potentially change the the cultural context.

This article aims to investigate the interaction between OCA and their cultural contexts in China from the framing perspective, based on two OCAs about the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC). The first one, called the Guo Meimei incident, occurred in 2011; the second, called the 2020 action in this article, occurred at the end of January 2020. The major question is: How has the Guo Meimei incident’s frame shaped the Chinese netizens’ collective cognitive frame about RCSC, which has changed the cultural context and affected the framing process of the 2020 action?

This article is concerned with the aspects below.

(1) Chinese internet world's influence on OCAs framing

As a cultural activity, social movement framing is “inherently embedded within a broader cultural context” (Xia, 2016, p.302). OCAs in China have distinctive modes and features from Western social movements. Meanwhile, the ‘Chinese internet world’ as the cultural context of OCAs in China, is not homogenous and static; it is dynamic and keeps changing. This article gives attention to how the specific cultural context in a particular time (the early stage of COVID pandemic) affects OCAs’ framing process.

(2) The interaction between OCAs and their cultural contexts

The primary critique of the culturalist approach has been “its static quality and inability to account clearly for cultural change” (Williams, 1995, p.99), which is concerned by this article. Individuals use two frames of reference to interpret and process information: the long-term, global political views, and the short-term, issue-related frames of reference (Scheufele, 1999, p.107). Current studies underline the latter’s dominant influence on perceiving and interpreting political problems (Pan & Kosicki, 1993), but the former is over-simply seen as ‘a result of certain personal characteristics of individuals’ (Scheufele, 1999, p.107). Similarly, Chinese researchers outweigh the “framing effects in short periods” (Xiao, 2015, p.131); they usually focus on singular cases to examine how cultural context affects the formation of OCA frames, yet the OCA frames’ influences on the culture, as well as the connection between OCAs, are less addressed. This article pays attention to OCAs’ long-term framing effects in the light of cultural change; it traces the connection between the frames of two OCAs about the same object, so that the OCAs’ effect in terms of cultural change can be investigated.

(3) Individuals’ influences on OCA framing process in China

Western framing studies underline SMOs’ role in social movements, and they tend to see individual-level framing effect as the outcome of SMO’s framing effort. Nevertheless, this paradigm does not fit Chinese OCAs, since OCAs in China are usually self-motivated and self-mobilized without formal SMOs. Chinese researchers, on the other hand, have not paid enough attention to netizens' individual factors' influences on the occurrence, mobilization and participation of OCAs . This article sees the OCA frames and the individuals’ frames in Chinese cyberspace as being in a dynamic and interactive relationship rather than the inputs-outcomes model. It pays attention to how OCA frames interact with individuals' cognitive frames and emotion, which changes Chinese OCAs’ cultural contexts on the individual level.

This article starts with an overview of Chinese OCAs. It then observes how the Guo Meimei incident has influenced Chinese netizens' collective cognitive frame about RCSC by analyzing the comments of RCSC's announcements on the eve of the 2020 action. In the next section, it traces the formation of the 2020 OCA's diagnostic frame to explore the interaction between Chinese netizens' collective cognitive frames and the OCA frames.

Methods

This article chronologically traces the context and the process of the 2020 OCA about RCSC on Sina Weibo (Weibo). It focuses on the head posts and comments of the 2020 OCA, examines the formation of the diagnostic frame, and highlights its connection to the Guo Meimei incident.

Hot Weibo posts published by national/central media accounts usually have huge numbers of reposts, comments, and likes; therefore they have greater influences than local media. Meanwhile, for each Weibo post, most likes are for the head comments, as the sum of likes of the top 20 hot comments usually reaches 25%–50% of the total likes of this Weibo post. In short, both the head posts and their head comments about a particular issue could reflect the overall public opinion on Weibo. Based on this observation, this article focuses on the head posts and comments, and the detailed inclusion criteria are explained in the corresponding sections.

This article observes a designated range of hot Weibo posts that are closely related to the 2020 action. It counts the numbers and percentages of comments that hold certain opinion, as well as the likes of these comments, to evaluate the strength of this opinion. The number of comments of a Weibo post reflects the degree to which netizens pay attention and respond to a post, and the texts of comments express opinions that could be categorized. The number of likes of a comment reflects the degree to which this comment is supported by netizens. Generally, a comment possesses a higher number of likes, which means that its opinion is endorsed by more netizens. The replies of comments are dialogues between netizens. They are highly interactive, and on many occasions, a large number of replies are published by a few users; therefore, all replies under comments are not included in this study.

Since Chinese netizens apply a range of tactics to evade censorship, in Chinese online communities, the connection between the text and the meaning of the comments is complicated (see below), unstable, dynamic, and individualized. This article applies detailed

reading to insightfully examine the meanings and framing process beneath the complicated texts in particular contexts.

Online collective actions in China

In recent years, Weibo has become the most dominant social media platform in China. Weibo was initially a Twitter clone, yet it has achieved great localization. One singular post could contain a maximum of 140 Chinese characters; which “allows users to write nuanced messages and include other contributors’ thoughts in their own messages, making it easier to follow and participate in online conversations” (Sullivan, 2014, p.28). A Weibo user could also click the like/thumb button to show their agreement with a particular post/repost/comment. Consequently, Weibo has become the major arena of OCAs in China.

Action forms and organizations

OCA participants in China could use hard, violent attacks (e.g., “burst-the-bar” and “human flesh search”) or soft actions (e.g., massive discussion, and large-scale petition and voting) (Qiu, Lin, Chiu & Liu, 2015, p.15). OCAs in China are generally not organized by institutionalized SMOs, but are triggered by a few hot posts on SNS platforms. Chinese OCAs seldom have formal leaders and websites/Weibo accounts as their headquarters. Meanwhile, Weibo’s mechanisms of operating, profiting, and censorship play a decisive role in OCAs. For example, whether a post is censored may be decisive for the occurrence and mobilization of an OCA, which enables the government to monitor and interfere with OCAs. As a strategy of evading censorship, Chinese netizens use tactics such as dark humor, parody, subversive messages, and posting images to express their dissatisfaction. For example, one may use terms such as “legal society [fazhi shehui]” and “public servant of people [renmin gongpu]” to imply social injustice and corruption. Numerous internet hot words have been coined, partly in order to evade the increasingly strengthened censorship, and the database of popular words keeps expanding and iterating. Chinese netizens also creatively use non-linguistic texts, such as emoticons and custom images (biaoqingbao), to express opinions and emotions (e.g., a [/doge] emoji at the end of a comment means “sarcasm”). Besides, netizens use linguistic and non-linguistic texts based on their personal habits; therefore, the diversified styles of commentators may generate considerable noise for interpreting the texts. Some comments may contain grammatical mistakes, and they might be either simply typos or puns

on the word. The literal meaning of comments are frequently detached from the speakers' intended meaning, which is hidden in the subtexts by linguistic games.

Driving forces

Most OCAs in China are justice-driven moral crusades, as they are aimed to solve specific injustice social issues. In China, "the emphasis is not on laws and regulations, but instead on self-regulation and self-discipline" (Herold, 2008, p.28). Chinese traditional value emphasizes the individual's social responsibility and belongingness to the nation; therefore, for Chinese, the "moral justice is naturally attractive... it is the core content of the internet public discourse and the core element of the construction of online hot issues" (Xie, 2012, p.81). Chinese netizens believe that their participation helps to fix social problems, such as the polarization between the rich and the poor, corruption, environmental damage, and moral deterioration.

Another core driving force of Chinese OCAs is individuals' emotion. For Yang, the core of online events is discourse, and the power of discourse "comes from the expression of emotion" (2009, p.45). Currently the major emotional expressions in Chinese OCAs are "sadness and parody" which "reflect the conflict between values in specific historical conditions" (Yang, 2009, p.60). As Yin and Zhang (2017) note, the resentment of Chinese OCAs reflects a binary narrative that tells the stories of the strong "Them" bully the weak "Us". This "Us-Them" conflict is seen as structural and could be traced in most Chinese OCAs, as Qian describes, "the operation of Chinese social structure and cultural relationship forms the major source of the resentment in online collective actions" (2017, p.47). Chinese researchers tend to see the negative emotions as being generated, cultivated, and shared in the process of OCAs.

Targets

Most OCAs in China are aimed at attracting the government's intervention in solving particular cases of injustice. Chinese OCAs work as a non-normative channel of communication between the rulers and the ruled, and they are expected to "influence the government's decision making" (Xue et al., 2016, p.6). For Chinese grassroots, it is commonly believed that the central government is concerned with people's livelihoods, but the corrupt mid-level bureaucracy prevents the central government from hearing the voices of the people. This conviction is rooted in Chinese traditional narrative that inferior individuals struggle against social injustice by making deviant actions (e.g., to intercept an officer's sedan chair while he is en route) to attract attention from higher officials, even the emperor in the

ancient age. Currently, Chinese people have “low political efficacy and feel each individual is powerless” (Qiu et al., 2015, p.5) through offline channels. Online channels, on the other hand, are usually over-burdened; as Herod describes, “The willingness of netizens in China to interact with officials often overwhelms the government and the resources it allocates to respond to citizens.... Whenever government departments decide to use the Internet to interact with ordinary people in China, they seem to underestimate the numbers of netizens willing to respond” (2008, p.34). Consequently, only salient issues could attract the government’s attention and intervention, and OCA is one of the most effective means to endow one issue with high salience.

Ideological or political subversion are not the target of Chinese OCAs, since “majority of [Chinese] people do not want radical changes in society” (Sullivan, 2014, p.26). Therefore, Chinese OCAs are commonly understood as having positive social influences, and the Chinese Government keeps “tolerance of protest as long as it is specific, localized and doesn’t contain a threat of collective action” (Sullivan, 2014, p.26). Additionally, King, Pan, and Roberts argue that in China, the government manages to “eliminate discussions associated with events that have collective action potential” by strategic censorship, and “Chinese people are individually free but collectively in chains” (2013, p.339). If this is true, the occurrence of OCAs in China is arguably acquiesced by the government, and only those OCAs that are judged by the authority as harmless and positive for the society are allowed to occur.

Frames

The mechanism of the framing process of Chinese OCAs is different from that of Western online movements. Western SMOs seek to “make their goals, beliefs, and practices accord with and be relevant to the experiences, beliefs, and practices of one or more target groups” (Snow et al., 2013, p.227), while OCA framing is seen as instrumental for mobilization. Consequently, the participation is seen as the individual-level effects of framing, and the central tendency of the framing literature and its conception of frame resonance is to examine the relationship between movement culture producers and target audiences (Williams, 2004, p.110). However, since Chinese OCAs are “spontaneous and unorganized” (Yang, 2009, p.43), the movement culture producers (the claims-makers) and consumers (the target audiences) are not clearly distinguished. Chinese OCA participants are typically prosumers (consumers who take on production, see Earl, 2015, p.4), as they simultaneously consume and produce online movement culture. As a result, Chinese OCAs’ frames could be seen as the outcomes of the negotiation and contestation between media frames and collective individual

frames. This process is similar to what early framing studies emphasized: “frames do not come about intentionally but are the result of interactions and conflicts between collective and individual social and media actors” (Vliegenthart & Zoonen, 2011, p.112).

The internalization of the frame of the Guo Meimei incident

In both the Guo Meimei incident and the 2020 action, Chinese netizens expressed their discontent about RCSC’s corruption through collectively commenting and reposting related Weibo posts to draw the attention of the government. This section traces Chinese netizens’ opinions about RCSC on the eve of the 2020 action in order to examine the cultural change caused by the Guo Meimei incident.

RCSC is an officially organized NGO that operates as a state-owned organization in China (Yang, 2016, p.3244). In June 2011, a young lady named Guo Meimei flaunted her wealth on Weibo, and she implied a close relationship with RCSC. A huge number of Chinese netizens participated in a self-motivated OCA about Guo Meimei and RCSC. The Guo Meimei incident showed a “proposing (frame)-proving (frame)” mode, as the participants firstly assumed the corruption of RCSC and “proposed the ‘corruption frame’ as its dominant problem definition frame” (Hao & Lu 2012, p.6) ¹, and then used human flesh searching to collect evidence. The corruption frame matches the current daily experience of Chinese netizens and therefore has strong potency of mobilization in Chinese OCAs. In the Guo Meimei incident, the social reality of RCSC corruption was constructed by rumors; however, it was an “ostensibly twisted but internally authentic expression of public opinion” (Ma, 2010, p.44).

The Guo Meimei incident has changed the cultural context of OCAs about RCSC. The narrative of RCSC’s corruption has formed a collective cognitive frame for Chinese netizens to understand RCSC-related information. It produced new cultural resources for Chinese netizens, namely, “Guo Meimei,” as a sign that refers to the public’s “query and suspicion of obscure terms such as social organizations, rich-second-generations and high officials” (Zhang, 2016, p.110). The influence of the Guo Meimei incident has existed over a long period. As Bai Yansong, an influential CCTV host and part-time vice-chairman of RCSC, said in 2020, “Guo Meimei has no relationship with RCSC. She has been released from jail several months before. However, RCSC is still in jail in many people’s mind.” ²

Chinese netizens' opinion about RCSC on the eve of the 2020 action reflected the Guo Meimei incident's long-term influence in term of the cultural change. In the specific context of the early COVID pandemic (late January 2020), Chinese people were in great anxiety and thirsted for information about the pandemic. Since most Chinese residents were grounded at home due to the pandemic control policy during this period, Weibo became one of their major channels of information gathering and emotional catharsis. There had been several hot issues around the pandemic, such as the Wuhan lockdown and material support, and the Chinese Government had been criticized for lacking information transparency. As the largest charity in China and the officially designated central public donation collection point during disasters, RCSC was closely related to the hot issues above; therefore, it was under the spotlight of public opinion.

This article analyzes Chinese netizens' responses to the 3rd and the 4th announcements of Wuhan COVID Pneumonia Control Headquarters (both were published on 23rd January 2020, closely before the 2020 OCA), published by RCSC Wuhan Branch's official Weibo account. These announcements called for cash donations³, which involves the financial issue and potentially connects the two announcements to the Guo Meimei incident and RCSC's financial corruption. The two announcements had low hot degrees (69 comments in total before 31 January, most of which were blessing Wuhan, and none of them questioned RSCS; later, with the breakout of the 2020 action, this account closed comments). However, they were reposted by national newspapers' Weibo accounts, and caused wide social concern. A few hot Weibo accounts (most of them are official accounts of national newspapers) gained the most attention from netizens, and they had far more reposts, comments and likes than most other reposts. The hot five reposts of the 3rd announcement were *People's Daily* (人民日报)⁴, *CCTV News* (央视新闻)⁵, *Global Times* (环球时报)⁶, *Life Week* (三联生活周刊)⁷, and *China News Online* (中新网)⁸. The hot five reposts of the 4th announcement were reposted by *People's Daily* (人民日报)⁹, *Beijing News* (新京报)¹⁰, *Headline News* (头条新闻)¹¹, *People.cn* (人民网)¹², and *Global Times* (环球时报)¹³. Furthermore, for each hot repost, netizens' opinions were centered on several head comments. For example, as Fig. 1 shows, the top five comments of *People's Daily's* repost of the 3rd RCSC announcement had far more likes than other comments. Other reposts also reflected this tendency. This article therefore believes that the top 20 comments could represent major netizens' opinions, which could reflect the Guo Meimei incident's influence on Chinese netizens' collective cognitive frames about RCSC before the 2020 action.

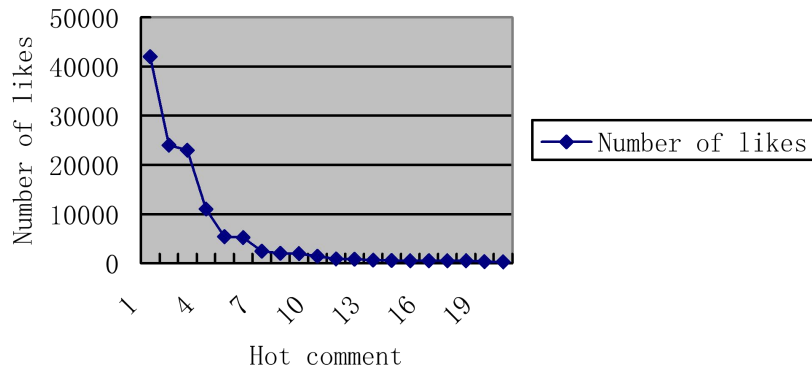


Figure 1. The numbers of likes of the top 20 comments of *People’s Daily’s* repost of the 3rd RCSC announcement

The two reposts’ top 20 hot comments (200 in total) had 224,084 likes.¹⁴ As Table 1 shows, before 30 January 2020 (the breakout of the 2020 action), the proportions of both comments and likes regarding the destination of donated materials and mention RCSC were low, partly because negative reports about RCSC and the distribution of donations were not espoused. In other words, RCSC had low salience during this time. However, all 24 RCSC-related comments (6185 likes) were emotionally negative, which reflects Chinese netizens’ distrust of RCSC. These comments showed that Chinese netizens tended to link RCSC-related information to corruption. In other words, Chinese netizens have hold the corruption cognitive frame about RCSC before the 2020 action.

Table 1. The related opinions in the comments of top five hot-reposts of RCSC’S two announcements

Opinions	The number of hot comments	The percentage of hot comments	The number of likes	the percentage of likes
Concerning the destination of donations	19	19%	26381	12.0%
Refer to RCSC	24	24%	6185	2.8%
Doubting RCSC	24	24%	6185	2.8%
Express anger about RCSC	18	18%	5627	2.5%

A number of hot comments and reposts mentioned Guo Meimei, such as “Do you remember Guo Meimei?”, “I had a bad impression of RCSC since [the] Guo Meimei [incident],” “RCSC Wuhan is the second Guo Meimei,” “Guo Meimei was in the sense of anti-corruption hero,” and “I am not going to donate anything, and I am afraid that Guo Meimei would purchase a new car this time.” These comments/reposts explained that netizens’ collective cognitive frame about RCSC comes from the Guo Meimei incident. The term ‘Guo Meimei’ signified RCSC’s corruption, and Chinese netizens used this symbol to boycott RCSC’s call for donations. Among the 24 RCSC-related comments, 18 comments (5627 likes) contained

various kinds of anger expressions, which indicated that before the breakout of the 2020 action, the angry about RCSC had been held by many netizens. The anger mainly came from long-term feelings of dissatisfaction and distrust, and RCSC was generally labeled corruption. Qian argues that the provocation of resentment in Chinese OCAs is based on the labelization of “resentment words” (2017, 48). In this case, “Guo Meimei” had become the “resentment words” that signify RCSC’s corruption, and the anger generated in the Guo Meimei incident was inherited.

Additionally, some comments referred to recent scandals of other Chinese charities (e.g., “400 million CNY was misappropriated by China Charities Aid Foundation for Children” and “I’m afraid it is another 9958”¹⁵), or public opinion events with injustice frames (e.g., Benz G-Class in the Imperial Palace¹⁶). These comments showed that in people’s minds, RCSC had been linked to labels such as corruption, privilege, and flaunting wealth, and other scandals could strengthen this linkage.

The formation of the frame of the 2020 OCA

This section chronologically traces the process that the OCA frame of 2020 action is shaped in the complicated dynamic context, and then examines how the Guo Meimei incident’s frame affects this process. By doing so, it examines the mechanism of the transition between OCA frames and collective cognitive frame.

The framing contest phrase

At the early stage of the pandemic, major Chinese media held a media frame that selects and organizes information to render the sufficiency of materials to enhance people’s confidence to the situation; this issue-specific frame could be called the “adequacy frame”. In a CCTV interview, Wang Xiaodong, then-governor of Hubei Province, indicated that Wuhan has adequate materials and market supplements. Central media such as *China Daily* frequently reported that the state had allocated massive material to Wuhan. Terms such as “sufficient material reserves,” “begin arriving,” and “smooth logistics” were frequently exposed. Meanwhile, the donation issue was with high salience, as both official media and we-medias have paid great attention to the donations of medical supplies to Wuhan. The official account of RCSC also published several posts such as “RCSC Wuhan: donated materials have been sent to the frontline of pandemic control [武汉市红十字会：捐赠物资陆续送达抗击疫情防控一线]” and “Our wills unite like a fortress, rush to help Wuhan [众志成城 驰援武汉].”

The report of donations matched Chinese traditional virtue and news frame of “when troubles occur at one spot, helps come from all sides [一方有难， 八方支援]”. Local newspapers such as *Changjiang Daily* actively published similar reports such as “50 volunteers and 15 telephones take turns, the channel for donated materials get into Wuhan is clear: RCSC Wuhan Branch answers residents’ seven major concerns”¹⁷, and claimed that RCSC has a series of measures and conditions to guarantee the rapid distribution of donated materials. Major media’s adequacy frame shaped Chinese netizens’ cognitive frame about the situation of material supply, and the medical material supply was rarely questioned.

At the end of January, many hospitals in Wuhan announced the shortage of medical materials and publicly called for help, which brought emotional shockness and caused framing contests between the adequacy frame and the newly formed “inadequacy frame.” According to Weibo Hot Degree Index (see Fig. 2), the Weibo topic of “Union Medical College Hospital” began to rise on 23 January, and it was followed by the topic of “Donations.” Notably, the topic of “Red Cross” and “Donations” synchronously arose after 23 January, which suggests that RCSC was embroiled in this event. Yet at this moment, events such as the lockdown of Wuhan (on 23 January) were the most concerning issues, and the RCSC issue is relatively less salient. Chinese netizens lacked intuitive feelings regarding the shortage of medical materials, and so there was no emotional shock to trigger the OCA.

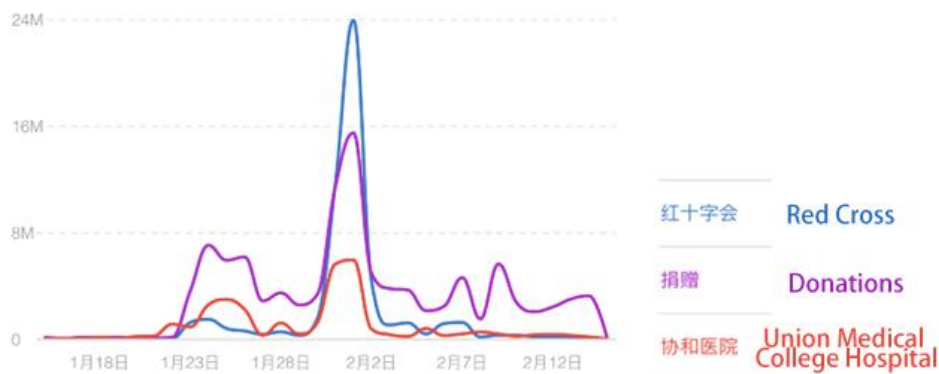


Figure 2. The Weibo Hot Degree Index of “Union Medical College Hospital,” “Donations,” and “Red Cross” (extracted from Sina Weibo Index)

The Accommodation-Attribution process

The 2020 OCA was triggered by a post published by a certified Weibo user, “Mr. Do, a doctor of Union Medical College Hospital” (“协和医生 Do 先生”; “Doc. Do,” as he is called in this article) on 30 January. Doc. Do had previously posted a few posts that integrated the Wuhan hospital announcements of raising medical materials from society from 23 January

2020 onwards. These posts were reposted 590 thousand times, and they had 940 thousand likes in total (on 12 February 2020). In his 30 January post, Doc. Do added an introduction: “[It is not emergency! It is none left !!] (【不是告急! 是没有了!!】)¹⁸.” On the linguistic level, “none left” was more severe than previously used terms such as “insufficient,” “in a hurry,” and “emergent”; the usage of multiple exclamatory marks further underlined the emergency and strengthened the emotional shockness. This short introduction was cited in many reposts in titles. *Qianjiang Evening News*, a local newspaper of Hangzhou, reported this post under the title of “Newest! Wuhan Union Medical College Hospital is requesting supports of medical materials: It is not emergency! It is none left!!” on 30 January. The depletion of medical materials was supported by other information sources. For example, on 1 February, another doctor of Wuhan Central Hospital claimed that her hospital “has no foot covers left, even normal plastic bugs run out... (we) request everybody helps”¹⁹.

On 30 January, the official account of *People’s Daily* reposted Doc.Do’s post as “[It is about to exhaust! # Wuhan Union Medical College Hospital is requesting supports of medical materials#]”²⁰. This was the first time that Chinese central media had confirmed the insufficiency of medical materials in Wuhan hospitals. Although *People’s Daily* employed milder words (“is about to exhaust”) than Doc. Do’s “It is not emergency! It is none left !!”, the central media of China reversed from the adequacy frame to the inadequacy frame. This report caused widespread questions and invoked strong anger. Weibo Hot Degree Index clearly shows that the online collective action about RCSC broke out on 30th January, as the topics of “Union Medical College Hospital,” “Donation,” and “Red Cross” drastically raised to their peaks (see Fig. 2), which marks the breakout of the 2020 OCA.

This article analyzes the hot comments of this *People’s Daily* report to examine how the OCA frame is formed. Like most Weibo posts, the several head comments gained most likes (see Fig. 3). This article set a moderate sample range that includes comments with more than 30 likes (61 comments, 76,065 likes in total) to investigate Chinese netizens’ opinions about this frame reverse. As Table 2 shows, 33 comments (33,800 likes in total) questioned where the donations are gone; among them, 29 comments (52,136 likes) had anger expressions.

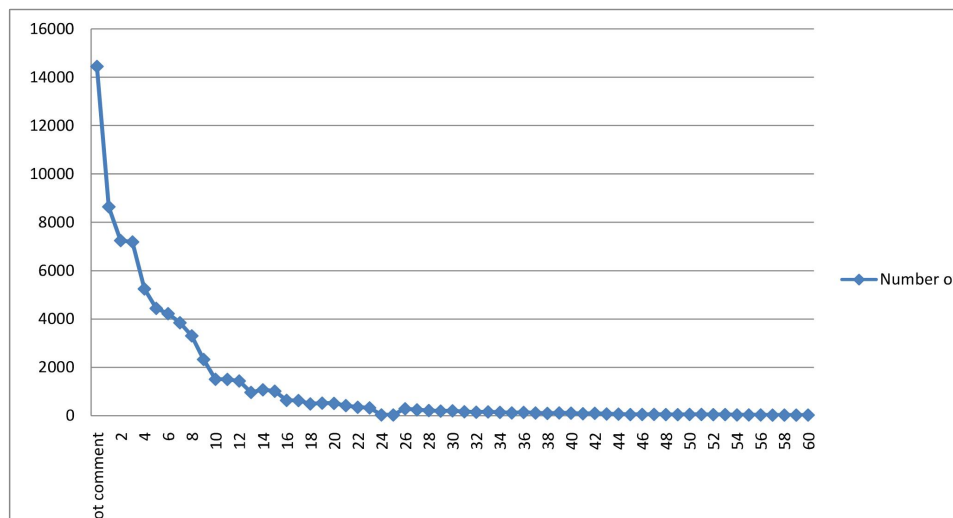


Figure 3. The numbers of likes of comments of *People's Daily's* report on 30 January (reviewed 3 January 2021)

People's Daily's framing reverse broke its consistency; it told two contradictory stories (adequacy and inadequacy) about the medical materials in Wuhan to the audiences in a short time. However, individuals prefer and seek consistency among multiple cognitions (Festinger, 1957), and “dissonance stimulates people to attain consistency and reduce inconsistency” (Gruber, 2003) by decreasing the number and/or importance of the relevant cognitive elements, or by adding new elements consonant with their existing or committed behavior (Goyer, 1964, p.92). In this process, people tend to maintain positive perceptions of the self and defend for themselves (Ding & Li, 2019). Since *People's Daily* as a central media remained a high authority in China, though it reverse its frame, both inadequacy frame and adequacy were seen as credible. Consequently, Chinese audiences tended to accommodate CCTV's reports, rather than trying to assimilate them. Yet netizens had to find a way to eliminate the dissonance caused by *People's Daily's* juxtaposition of two opposite media frames, without undermining the positive perception of the self. As self-defending, Chinese netizens attributed the insufficiency to an Other who should be blamed (which is closely connected to the collective action frame).

Consequently, the Accommodation-Attribution mode was formed, and the result of the attribution was that the medical materials were jammed in the process of distribution (“the last kilometer,” as many netizens said), and RCSC (which was in charge of distribution) became the one to be blamed. Evidence is strong that in the 61 hot comments above, 33 questioned the distribution of donations, and 16 out of 17 RCSC-related comments questioned RCSC²¹, while none of them admitted the overall shortage of materials. Furthermore, instead, comments such as “We have donated so much [and now where they are?]”²² appeared 20

times (39,727 likes). In this Accommodation-Attribution process, individuals' self-defending unwittingly defended the authority of the central media. Besides, anger expressions could be seen in comments, and 12 out of 17 RCSC-related comments are with anger expressions.

The formation of the diagnostic frame

The attribution process led to the formation of the “dereliction of RCSC” frame, which was what Snow and Benford called “the movement-specific diagnostic frame” (1992, 138) of the 2020 action. It derived from the master frame of injustice and was constructed in the Accommodation-Attribution process. This specific frame bridged the adequacy frame and inadequacy frame, and it supported Chinese netizens' psychological self-defense: their false cognition (the adequacy frame) was not caused by themselves but the Other (RCSC). As evidence, *People's Daily's* 30 January report did not involve RCSC; however, 16 comments (35,162 likes) out of the hot 30 comments questioned RCSC, including the top 1 comment (14,443 likes), and among them, 12 comments (20,559 likes) contained anger expressions.

Chinese central media contributed to the formation of this diagnostic frame. On 31 January, *People's Daily* posted another report, “Is it a shortage of materials, or a problematic distribution? It looks anguish [究竟是物资紧缺还是物资分配环节存在问题? 看着揪心]”²³, which further strengthens the RCSC dereliction frame. The quiz in the title of this report implied that the distribution is problematic, which guides audiences' attribution. “It looks anguish” showed the central media's sympathy. This post displayed photos showing Wuhan medical staff making protective clothing from disposable bags, which enhances the emotional shockness. Though this report did not mention RCSC, out of the 75 (323,308 likes) comments that have more than 30 likes, 73 (323,239 likes) questioned RCSC; this reflected the overwhelming consensus that RCSC should be blamed for the shortage of medical supplies. These comments supported the Accommodation-Attribution mode above: the commenters did not deny the cognition/frame of adequacy, but they attributed the inadequacy to RCSC's dereliction in distribution process. Arguably, Chinese netizens actively imaged the missing part of the whole story and constructed the RCSC dereliction frame.

The term “Guo Meimei” was frequently used by Chinese netizens to accuse the RCSC of dereliction. The topic of Guo Meimei's Weibo Hot Degree Index drastically rose up and peaked on 30 January (see Fig. 4), and it synchronized with other topics such as RCSC and donations (see Fig. 2). This indicated that the Guo Meimei incident was deeply involved in the formation of the 2020 OCA frame, as netizens frequently use this word to refer to RCSC's

corruption. In fact, at this moment, minimal factual evidence had been exposed to support the conclusion of RCSC dereliction; the attribution was merely based on the imaged reality of massive donated materials having been jammed in the process of distribution, which is supported by experiential evidence such as the Guo Meimei incident and other recent related scandals such as the 9958 incident.

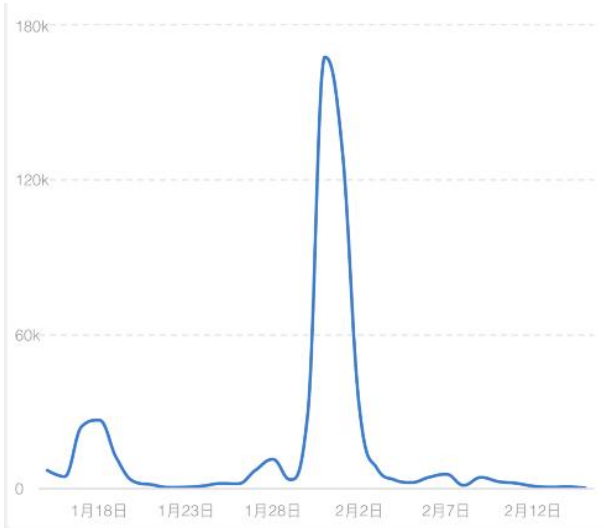


Figure 4. The Weibo Hot Degree Index of “Guo Meimei” (extracted from Sina Weibo Index)

According to comments of *People’s Daily’s* 31 January post (with more than 30 likes), the RCSC dereliction frame could be further divided into two specific sub-frames: the (RCSC) corruption frame and the (RCSC) incapacity frame. The former accuses the financial corruption in RCSC; it interprets the insufficiency of materials as a result of RCSC embezzling the donations in the process of distribution. The latter considers RCSC staff as being incapable and inaction, which leads to the poor efficiency of distribution work. Furthermore, this frame sees RCSC staff as nepotism of local officials, which finally directs to another form of corruption. Out of the 73 RCSC-related comments, 11 comments (139,680 likes) hold the RCSC corruption frame, and 13 comments (127,083 likes) hold the RCSC incapacity frame (see Table 2). In other comments, without explicitly using terms of corruption or incapacity, opinions such as “requesting thoroughly investigate RCSC” and “requesting PLA take over RCSC” also express extreme distrust of RCSC. These comments typically reflect that Chinese OCAs are aimed to restore justice by calling the intervention from the superior government, and also demonstrates participants' trust in the central government. For participants of the 2020 action, Chinese central government and PLA represent the power of justice, which echoes the traditional struggle paradigm as discussed above. All comments with corruption frame or incapacity frame have anger expressions,

which clearly shows that injustice frames easily provoke public anger. Two comments with 98 likes show the co-occurrence of corruption and incapacity frames, which suggests that participants prefer to adopt the first formed frame through a rapid attribution to organize the comment than fully analyze the shortage of medic materials in Wuhan and apply the two parallel frames.

Table 2. RCSC-related opinions in the comments of *People's Daily's* report on 31 January 2020 (reviewed 15 February 2020)

	corruption frame	incapacity frame	both frames	Neither
comments/likes	11 /139,680	13 /127,083	2 /98	20 /36,066

Conclusions

Action effects

The 2020 action was a moral crusade that fights against social injustice, and it severely injured RCSC's credibility. The OCA diagnostic frame decided people's collective perception of RCSC, which furthermore formed the cultural change for RCSC. According to RCSC (Wuhan)'s official statistics, the cash donations showed a cliff descent after the collective action (Fig. 5), which shows that the 2020 OCA's diagnostic frame influenced people's RCSC-related actions.

On the other hand, since people overwhelmingly attributed the shortage of materials to the dereliction of RCSC, other potential reasons were less noticed. Since RCSC is generally considered as a NGO, the 2020 action actually dispersed the pressure and criticism the Chinese Government bore during the early stages of the pandemic. To some extent, the Chinese Government allowed the occurrence of this OCA, and central media such as *People's Daily* even guided people to blame RCSC. By giving an acceptable response (launching the investigation to RCSC) to participants, Chinese netizens' negative emotion against the government during the early period of pandemic was relieved.

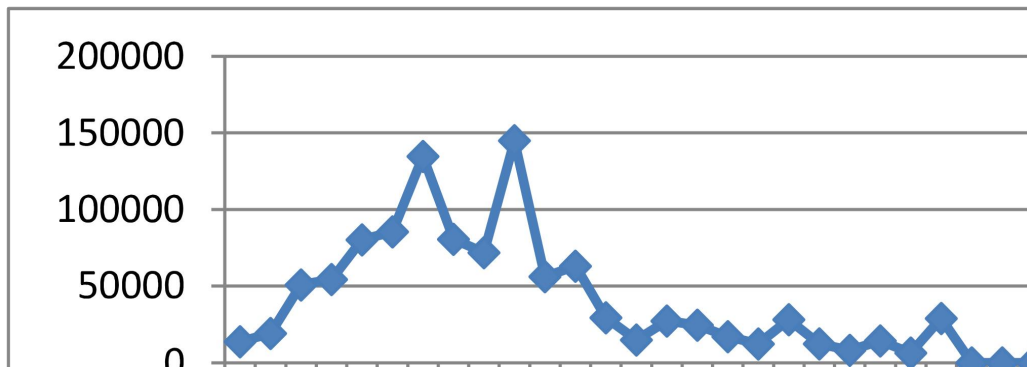


Figure 5. The cash donation that RCSC received before and after the action

Mechanism of frame transition and cultural change

In both the Guo Meimei incident and the 2020 action, the diagnostic frame was proposed without credible evidence, but it was based on the widely accepted narrative of the corruption of bureaucracy in China. The corruption frame had not been proven, as many pieces of evidence were fragmented rumors that were produced by participants. Nevertheless, this frame successfully mobilized Chinese netizens and ignited people’s anger. This process echoed what Williams notes: some frames “‘work’ better than others because they resonate with audiences who are prepared to hear the claim, or have experiences commensurate with the claims being made” (2004, p.105). Meanwhile, the participants of the two OCAs did not merely consume movement culture by interpreting the messages being offered; instead, they actively produced cultural resources (such as the sign of ‘Guo Meimei’), which are bought into the "reservoir" and could be used in later OCAs. Therefore, the symbol of ‘Guo Meimei’ is directed to an past OCA, yet it influences the occurrence and mobilization of later actions.

A loop of the transition between the cultural change and OCA framing process, also between collective cognitive frames and OCA frames, could be traced in the two OCAs about RCSC. The diagnostic frame of the Guo Meimei incident has turned into Chinese netizens’ collective cognitive frame about RCSC, which decides how individuals interpret RCSC related information and further shapes the diagnostic frame about RCSC in the 2020 action. Meanwhile, the word ‘Guo Meimei’ has been turned into a symbol and metaphoric rhetoric which is used in reference to RCSC’s corruption. This word has been bought into Chinese netizens’ cultural reservoir, and it contributes later OCAs forming injustice/corruption frames. Other events with corruption frames have also influenced the 2020 OCAs’ framing process.

In conclusion, the frames of OCAs could be internalized and turned into collective individuals’ cognitive frames, which causes the cultural change for future OCAs (see Fig. 6). In China, OCA frames are usually constructed through the interaction between collective

netizens; therefore, collective individuals' cognitive frames are decisive to later OCAs. Meanwhile, since the micro-mobilization of potential participants is largely dependent on the alignment between individuals' cognitive frame and the collective action frame, the internalized OCA frames also affect the mobilization of later actions. Therefore, in short, the frame of a past OCA potentially influence future OCAs.

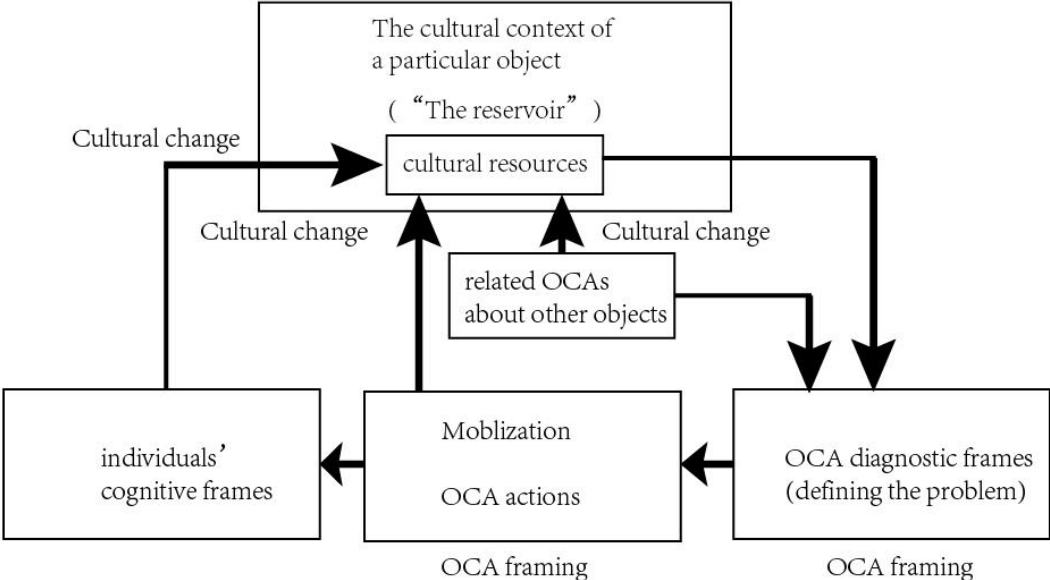


Figure 6. A mode of the interaction between the OCA framing and the cultural change

This study indicates that one of the major sources of anger in Chinese OCAs is being inherited from other OCAs. This could be described by a Chinese internet proverb: “The internet has its memory.” Since OCAs in China are emotionally mobilized, the anger generated in OCA could potentially enhance the mobilization in later OCAs. This is another aspect where an OCA changes its cultural contexts.

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¹ Hao and Lu's term "problem definition frame" is similar to the diagnostic frame, which "involves identification of a problem and the attribution of blame of causality" (Snow and Benford, 1998, p.200).

Based on Snow and Benford's notion of diagnostic framing, this article considers the diagnostic frame as one dimension of the online collective action frame.

² https://weibo.com/u/2205860842?is_all=1&stat_date=202001#1581108782882 reviewed 15 May 2020

³ The 3rd Announcements of Wuhan COVID Pneumonia Control Headquarters stated that RCSC has opened the telephone channel for social donations. See https://weibo.com/2747133954/IqOjEgSCI?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&type=comment (reviewed 12 February 2020).

The 4th announcement stated detailed information about the required donations, recipients and the ways of using the donations. See https://weibo.com/2747133954/IqQU36QkN?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&type=comment (reviewed 12 February 2020).

⁴ https://weibo.com/2803301701/IqOiubQsL?type=comment#_rnd1580991760309 (reviewed 12 February 2020).

⁵ https://weibo.com/2656274875/IqOojA0Ih?type=comment#_rnd1580994987863 (reviewed 12 February 2020).

⁶ https://weibo.com/1974576991/IqOylAPJY?type=comment#_rnd1580991945246 (reviewed 12 February 2020).

⁷ https://weibo.com/1191965271/IqOCOpUyQ?type=comment#_rnd1580994712016 (reviewed 12 February 2020).

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¹⁰ https://weibo.com/1644114654/IqQu8t3P4?type=comment#_rnd1580988410328 (reviewed 12 February 2020).

¹¹ https://weibo.com/1618051664/IqQshuM94?type=comment#_rnd1580988489441 (reviewed 12 February 2020).

¹² https://weibo.com/2286908003/IqRaJjuKh?type=comment#_rnd1580988895107 (reviewed 12 February 2020).

¹³ https://weibo.com/1974576991/IqQsqma5y?type=comment#_rnd1580989048633 (reviewed 12 February 2020).

¹⁴ The comments after 30 January 2020 (the breakout of the 2020 action) are excluded so that the influences of the Guo Meimei incident on people’s cognition about RCSC could be observed; however, likes after this date could not be identified.

¹⁵ On 13 January, 2020, Huayan Wu, a donation target of China Charities Aid Foundation for Children (CCAFC), passed away. Later reports indicated that CCAFC had appropriated only 20 thousand CNY to the treatment for Wu, while it had collected donations of about one million CNY through the 9958 fundraising platform. China Central Television (Finance Channel) revealed that according to financial reports of CCAFC 2018, the net book value of CCAFC’s bank financial products had reached 409 million CNY, and the annual financial income was 44 million CNY.

¹⁶ On 17 January 2020, a Weibo user, “Xiaobao Lu,” posted photos showing she had parked her Benz-G63 in the square of the Imperial Palace. Traditionally, automobiles are not allowed to drive into the Imperial Palace for the consideration of protecting the cultural heritage. Heads of states, including Chinese Premier Keqiang Li, and French President Francois Hollande, were required to enter the Imperial Palace on foot. This blog had been criticized by massive netizens. The People’s Daily comments that it is the privilege that provoked the public’s anger.

¹⁷ https://weibo.com/changjiangribaowuhan?is_all=1&stat_date=202001&page=17#1581109464154 (reviewed 14 February 2020).

¹⁸ The square brackets were originally added by “Doc.Do” in his blog.

¹⁹ https://weibo.com/2677629630/Isd41d2fu?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&type=comment (reviewed 12 February 2020).

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https://weibo.com/2803301701/IrTAewq1O?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&type=comment#_rnd1581086583671 (reviewed 12 February 2020).

²¹ All comments that questioning RCSC are seen as Questioning the distribution of donations.

²² Words in the square brackets are added by the author.

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https://weibo.com/2803301701/Is2uQuoGL?filter=hot&root_comment_id=0&type=comment#_rnd1581090206661. (reviewed 15 February 2020).