

**DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WEIBO DISCUSSION AND  
XINHUA COVERAGE OF THE CHINESE BOYCOTT OF  
THE JAPANESE GOODS**

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# **XINHUA COVERAGE OF THE CHINESE BOYCOTT OF THE JAPANESE GOODS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Through the textual analysis and a comparison study of 100 Weibo posts and ten Xinhua articles covering the Chinese boycott of Japanese goods, this research came to the conclusion that the two media platforms presented distinctively different discourses through the boycott.

Compared to Xinhua's coverage, Weibo developed the boycott into a long-term and multi-faceted issue. While Xinhua mainly depicted the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods as a political leverage, Weibo's discussion brought in extra information beyond the boycott and exhibited a plethora of opinions and views on the issue. The Weibo discourse of the boycott included the recall of the historical feud between China and Japan during the World War II, the questioning of the efficiency of the boycott as a resolution to the Diaoyu Islands dispute, the acknowledgment of China's disadvantages in the product quality competing with Japan as well as the assurance of the advanced societal development of Japan. All of them received little attention from the state news agency.

## Research Component

This professional analysis will attempt to answer this question: How does the discussion about the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods on Weibo, differ from the Chinese mainstream media's coverage of the same topic?

Weibo, a Twitter-like social media, has attracted hundreds of millions of users. Weibo is a tool for social change as it provides a more than ever dynamic platform for public discussion. Economic and business topics are widely talked about on Weibo and the content of the discussion to some extent represents the public views on the issues.

Chinese media has been long been characterized as the government's throat. However, in recent years, the media appears to have opened up to the public under the pressure of the thriving Weibo forum. It's critical at this point to gauge the distance between the mainstream media coverage and public discussion on Weibo.

Last September, the eruption of the Chinese boycott of Japanese goods over the Diaoyu Islands<sup>1</sup> dispute triggered a huge discussion both in the Chinese mainstream media and among the public. While the mainstream media tried to cool down the issue and call for rational thinking, the public had more radical rhetoric in their discussion on Weibo. As complicated as the issue is, it has met many different views and opinions from the two media platforms. Therefore, it is a great example to serve the purpose of this research.

Moreover, the Chinese boycott of Japanese goods is still an ongoing issue. It has a great significance not only in the media world but also in the real world. By studying

the issue, this research can also facilitate the understanding of the economic impact of the Diaoyu Islands dispute.

## Literature Review

### What is Weibo?

Dubbed the Chinese version of Twitter, the Chinese microblog Weibo has functions similar to Twitter, such as "tweet", "retweet", "forward", "reply", "mention", " forward", " hashtag" and so forth (Li, et al. 2012, p.1). Nonetheless, Weibo possesses some traits that Twitter doesn't. For instance, unlike Twitter where you can only post texts, Weibo users can upload multimedia materials such as photos, videos, links to articles, etc. Weibo also added a comments thread function with which users can check all the comments about a specific post with one single click (Li, et al. 2012, p.1).

Both Weibo and Twitter only allow users to enter 140 characters for each post. Nonetheless, the languages make a difference here. In English, one alphabet letter counts as a character and English words usually consist of several letters. In contrast, the longest Chinese words (Chinese Idioms) usually consist of four characters. So, within the 140 characters limit, Chinese Weibo posts can contain much more information than those posted on Twitter (You, 2013, p. 24).

According to the data from YaleGlobal last year, Chinese Weibo now has some 350 million registered users (Magistad, 2012). That's more than a quarter of the country's population. The two biggest Weibo providers are Sina and Tencent (Sullivan, 2012, p. 776).

### **Why not Twitter?**

Twitter was not completely blocked in mainland China until the summer in 2009 when riots happened in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang which is one of the five ethnic minority autonomous provinces in China. More than 200 people were killed. Against the global backdrop of Iran's Twitter revolution at that time, the Chinese government believed Twitter also contributed to what happened in Urumqi. In spite of the international criticism, the government decided to block Twitter out of its territory (Sullivan, 2012, p. 775).

Nonetheless, the microblog market seemed too attractive to be given up for the Sina company, which was a portal news website then. Its CEO Guowei Cao, a master's graduate from the University of Oklahoma (Bloomberg, 2013 April), utilized his long time well-maintained relationship with the government, and convinced the government he could keep the content "under control" and got the permission to launch Weibo (Sullivan, 2012, p. 775).

The Chinese government also was not entirely "discouraged" to adopt the new social media backed by the "Scientific mind-set" of Chinese political elites who believe technological development is essential to industrialize and modernize the country (Lei, 2011, p. 294-295).

### **Who is using Weibo?**

Similar with Twitter, the most popular people on Weibo are celebrities. But Sina is far more than a place for the public to follow the stars. "Academics, journalists and

prominent business people" also attract a great number of fans who have interests in particular areas where their idols are experts (Sullivan, 2012, p.776).

None-celebrities who also have a big follower base due to their constant posting of "well-structured" quality information are called "top grassroots". (Huang, et al., 2013, p. 18). Weibo top grassroots can often initiate and lead a discussion on certain topics. In other words, they are the "opinion leaders" on Weibo (Kats, 1957).

On average, Weibo users appear to be mostly "male, young, well-educated and from metro area". Males are 87 percent of Weibo users; 70 percent fall into age range between 20 to 29 and more than "one third have a university degree or higher" (Sullivan, 2012, p. 777).

Lei found Weibo users to be "worth examining". "They seem to be among the very few groups who are particularly critical in their views and constantly voice them" (Lei, 2011, p. 295). In the meantime, Lei also detected that the netizens on Weibo hold beliefs in democracy and tend to take "collective actions" (p. 309) to get their voices heard.

### **What do people talk about on Weibo?**

When it comes to the topics, the most popular ones are about entertainment, be they jokes, movies, fashion or celebrity gossip. Other popular topics are sports, cars and economics (Li et al. 2012, p.5).

As an overall trend, Hu et al. (2011) found that Weibo users pay attention to trivia in their daily life and develop them into topics. Most comments "are centered

around controversial issues" and the comments could be highly "emotion-charged" (Hu et al., 2011, p.75).

Li et al. also categorized the topics according to the pattern of how the discussions around these topics change along with time. They are divided into four categories: outbreak, mutation, fluctuation, life circle (Li et al, 2012, p. 6). Breaking news events will most likely trigger outcries on Weibo which usually involve several rounds of discussion. In the past, Weibo has seen many such cases. For instance, a Wenzhou train crash killed more than 40 people and triggered an outcry on Weibo (Wines & LaFraniere,2011). Other topics such as "Gaddafi died" may draw a short hot discussion and then will quickly fade into silence - "mutation"; stock market related topics are typical "fluctuation" topics and life circle topics are what you can almost always find on Weibo, such as living tips (Li et al. 2012, p.6).

### **Weibo Challenges Chinese Mainstream Media**

"The installation of the Internet in China has transformed China's media from a closed and centralized system to a relatively open and decentralized one." (Lei, 2011, p.291).

Weibo has diluted the news audience of Chinese mainstream media. Li, in his dissertation, conducted a research into how Weibo has become a primary news source for Chinese university students on the mainland.

Five factors led to the shift from mainstream media to Weibo as news source for Li's research participants: immediacy, richness in details, accuracy, interaction and self-recognition (Li, 2011).

Weibo challenges and changes mainstream media news reporting. The challenges are manifested mainly in two aspects: developing news by exposing hidden issues and diversifying news coverage.

### **Discovering news stories**

Since its birth, Weibo has brought lots of issues to the public's attention that used to be forbidden to be covered by China's mainstream media, especially issues related to environment, food safety (Magistad, 2012), corruption (You, 2013) and so forth. You believed the Chinese government's long time suppression of public speech and the increasing social problems made Chinese people "extraordinarily sensitive" to public issues. Now with the means of Weibo and its functions to upload pictures and videos, many issues can no longer be hidden and are showing up in the mainstream media's headlines (Li, et al. 2012, p.1).

For instance, the case of "watch brother" illustrated the news digging capability of Weibo. Last August, a picture of a Chinese government official named Yang Dacai went viral on Weibo. In the picture, Yang was standing with a smile on his face at a scene of a traffic accident which killed 36 people. Careful Weibo users soon noticed Yang's inappropriate smile and condemned him for showing no respect to the dead. What made it worse is that six pictures of Yang wearing different luxury watches later started circulating online. The most expensive watch claimed to cost more than \$30,000. Yang's smile was continually being criticized, moreover, Weibo users began questioning Yang's source of wealth. The issue was eventually picked up by Chinese

state media, Xinhua. As a response, Yang was expelled from the Communist Party and suspended from his job (You, 2013, pgs. 29-31).

Yang's example shows how Weibo acted as a watchdog and pushed an issue into the mainstream media's agenda. Weibo has helped to build up a "bottom-up surveillance" system upon the government officials and other social issues. It was able to not only affect mainstream media's "agenda", but to also force the government to respond (You, 2013, p.5-6).

Weibo is like an "information terminal" to which individuals send clues which together form the whole picture of a problem that later will emerge on Weibo. To some extent, Weibo extended mainstream media's story collection network (p. 38).

However, unlike traditional media which routinely provide news on daily basis, news publishing on Weibo is "random" (You, 2013, p. 40).

### **Diversifying news coverage**

Sullivan argued that the opinions expressed on Weibo are "Capricious" (2012, p. 779). Even on the same issue, Weibo users may have views very different from mainstream media. Weibo provides a platform for individuals not only to express their opinions, but also to encounter other views. As a result, the public is no longer the mere "compliant receivers" of official input (Lei, 2011, p.311). Weibo may introduce more diversity into the discussion of a news issue and lead attention to different aspects of the issue (p. 297).

For instance, in the case of the Wenzhou train crash, while state media at first unanimously attributed the crash to weather conditions, Weibo netizens questioned

why the local government buried the crashed car of the train so quickly, what were they trying to hide, why the weather condition could have caused such severe damage, etc. They also cited the corruption inside of the China Railway ministry and wondered if the officials did their jobs when the accident happened. Again, the flood of comments, questions and concerns on Weibo forced the central government to conduct a deep investigation and eventually found a major flaw in the design of the information control system of the express train. The accident also led to the reassignment of three high level officials of the Railway Ministry (Wines & LaFraniere, 2011).

When state media is constrained by the government in the breadth and depth of their coverage, Weibo with millions of users expressing different views and asking series of questions, competes with the mainstream in providing the public stories more comprehensive and closer to the truth (Wines & LaFraniere, 2011).

However, unlike mainstream media, Weibo has no rules regarding sourcing (You, 2013, p. 25). Hence, it could be used to spread rumors and cause reputation damages (Cheng, 2011) . University students who use Weibo as the first news source also expressed concerns about its "low credibility" (Li, 2011, p.15).

### **Chinese Government Censors Weibo**

China's Central Propaganda Department (CPD) makes sure domestic media are under control by holding media companies responsible for the content they publish online(Xiao, 2011, p.50). Sina, China's biggest Weibo provider, has a censorship department that hired a thousand people to monitor what their users say on Weibo (Fu

et al., 2013). Words such as "dictatorship, truth, riot police" are automatically filtered (Xiao, 2011, p. 50).

Recently, Weibo users were also required to register with "real identities". "There has been widespread concern that the true identity disclosure policy would have created a chilling effect." (Fu et al., 2013).

Nonetheless, Lei argued that the Internet has a "dispersed and unruly" nature (2011, p.299). Besides, information is always disseminated in an "explosive manner." (Xiao, 2011, p.52). Hence, it's hard to get online information circulation under control even for CPD.

It was found that 13 percent of social media content would be filtered, however, "curiously, many negative comments are allowed to stay". It may indicate that the Chinese government wants certain problems in the society to be exposed and is therefore loosening up its control of online information (Magistad, 2012).

Meanwhile, Weibo providers are deeply aware of their users' antipathy to online censorship. Most of the time, the providers comply with the state censorship laws, but try to push the government boundaries sometimes to keep their users from getting irritated (Magistad, 2012).

Drawing from the above, it is admitted censorship still prevails on Weibo. But as a user-oriented social media and crucial tool for democratization, the Chinese government does not want to completely stifle Weibo.

## **Weibo and Chinese Business and Economics Reporting**

Before China Joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), the domestic business and economics reporting only centered on the promotion of government's relevant policies and the business news was always blended with general news. Since 2002, foreign capital and personal capital started to flood into China's economy. Foreign investors as well as Chinese individual investors began to inquire about Chinese economic policies and every other aspect of the economy. This bolstered the demand for more business and economics news (Zhang, 2002, p.18).

Chinese state media and other metro media started to separate business and economics news as an independent section from general news (Pan, 2010, p.10). However even after WTO, Chinese business and economics coverage had been mostly a "government monologue". The content was still limited to government policies or news about a very narrow range of industries such as banking, manufacturing, etc. (Deng, 2009, p. 27-28).

Two things later brought big changes to Chinese business and economics reporting. First, the 2008 global financial crisis affected many industries in China ranging from traditional manufacturing companies to advertisement companies, and even dining service industries. All of a sudden, everybody started to care about the economy. The audience's appetite for business and economic news has increased to a large degree (Pan, 2010, p.10). Since then, lots of topics that used to be not considered as business and economics news have entered the front page or homepage of the business and economics media including topics like health care, education, technology,

etc.. Second, the emergence of social media, particularly Weibo, opened up the discourse about business and economics to the public. Business and economics coverage is no longer a "government monologue", but has become a public conversation (Deng, 2009, p.28).

Li et al. found that many economists on Weibo have more than one hundred thousand followers indicating the public's passion to engage in the discussion about business and economics topics. Even TV stars have hashtags such real estate (Li et al., 2012, p.7). The government scrutinizes online economic news less tightly compared to political news (Lei, 2011, p. 297).

### **Diaoyu Islands Dispute**

In the East China Sea, there's a group of eight tiny islands. The area of these islands in total is only 6.3 square kilometers. None of them is currently inhabited because of the lack of fresh water. They are called Diaoyu Islands in Chinese and Senkaku in Japanese (Pan, 2007, p. 71).

Neither China nor Japan paid attention to these almost barren islands until the United Nations Economics Commission suggested that a rich deposit of oil and gas was near these islands in 1968. Since then, China and Japan have had constant conflicts over the Diaoyu Islands (Koo, 2009, p. 208).

In the past, there were two major clashes between the two countries over Diaoyu. In 1978, the Japanese built a lighthouse on Diaoyu. As a response, more than one hundred fishing boats carrying the Chinese national flag entered the water area near the islands. This was considered to be the first "focal point" of the Diaoyu dispute. In

spite of the clash, the two countries were seeking partnership in the "anti-hegemony" Peace and Friendship Treaty against the Soviet Union by that time. So, the first clash was soon disregarded by the leaders from both countries (p. 217-18).

However, Diaoyu dispute was intensified sharply in 1996 after the death of David Chan. Chan was a "pro-China activist from Hong Kong". He jumped into the water and drowned when Japanese patrol boats prevented him from landing on the Diaoyu Islands. It triggered protests in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Mainland China and even in the Chinese community in North America (P. 223).

Nonetheless, China and Japan tried to "de-escalate" the clash again. Both countries were not willing to take military actions given their growing economic ties. Koo described the relationship between China and Japan over the disputed islands as "cold politics and hot economics" (2009).

Since 1972, the volume of China-Japan trade has increased from \$1 billion (Koo, 2009, p. 229) to \$300 billion (Bloomberg, 2013 Jan).

### **Recent flare-up**

The most recent flare-up happened in August, 2012 when the Japanese government decided to purchase Diaoyu Islands from the so-called private owners of the Islands, Kunioki Kurihara, for \$23 million (Bloomberg, 2013 Jan). This move ignited the rage of the Chinese people and an unprecedented boycott of Japanese goods in China. Many Japanese-related businesses like Sushi restaurants got attacked (Bradsher et.al, 2012). "Japan's industrial output fell 1.7 percent," which is "the lowest level since the 2011 earthquake". Both Toyota and Nissan registered their biggest

export declines in a decade. Japan's airline industry experienced 46,000 seats cancellations in the three months after the boycott started (Bloomberg, 2013 Jan).

The Diaoyu Islands dispute was soon converted from a political issue to an economic one. The boycott later went violent. Chinese started hurting their own people. Many who own Japanese cars got attacked (Mei, 2012). At first, the Chinese government didn't intervene in the public protests of Japan but later had to step in to ensure the safety of its citizens (Mei, 2012).

### **Media coverage**

Han (2011) conducted framing comparison of the Diaoyu Islands dispute between Mainstream media and social media in China. She found that compared to Chinese mainstream media, the discourse on social media over the Diaoyu Islands dispute was more negative (p. 40). Discussion on social media about the issue mentioned more "wrongdoings" of Japanese. Social media also focused on the historical feud between the two countries more than the coverage in mainstream media (P. 47). Moreover, more solutions to the dispute were suggested on social media than mainstream media (p. 46).

Han's research has many similarities with the research proposed in this paper and provides good guidance. Unlike Han's research, which examined the overall coverage of Diaoyu Islands dispute, this research will focus more on the economic aspects of the issue. Regardless of the nationalism and political strategy, this research will particularly probe into how Chinese mainstream media and Weibo interpret the economic impact of Diaoyu dispute.

## Theoretical Framework

The first theory that offers a backdrop for this research is agenda-setting theory. The fact that the chosen topic- the Chinese boycott of Japanese goods over Diaoyu Islands dispute- can be found both in the mainstream media and on Weibo indicates the interplay of agenda setting between the mainstream media and Weibo. In other words, this research is premised on the interplay of agenda setting between mainstream media and Weibo: only if the topic appeared in both media platforms, can this research take a further look at how perspectives from two platforms differ.

Tracing back to McCombs's (1972) study on how the media influence the public's image about political candidates by making certain issues about the candidates more salient, agenda-setting theory reveals the co-relation between the importance the public would attach to an issue and the amount of attention the media give to it ( McCombs E. & Shaw L, 1972. p. 2).

Traditional media used to have monopolistic agenda setting power. This is especially true with the pre-Internet Chinese mainstream media when the government strictly controlled the domestic media environment (Zhang et al., 2012, p. 663). However, in this Web 2.0 age, this power is transformed and challenged by the interplay between traditional media and online media (Bekkers, 2011, p. 210).

Li et al. (2012, p. 4) found that news from mainstream media can extend to the Weibo community and become popular topics, particularly news of national importance. It implies traditional media's ability to set the agenda for social media (Zhang et al., 2012, p. 664).

In addition, Zhang et.al (2012) found in a public survey research that what is most important to the country is not most important to the citizens of China. However, Zhang et al. (2012) also pointed out that because of the collectivism of Chinese society, its members actually have great interest in the dialogue about social agendas even if they may not overlap with their personal agendas. As a result, mainstream media news can constantly draw the attention of social media users.

Other research focused on the reversal process of how social media challenged the mainstream media's agenda setting capability. Meraz's (2009) detected that traditional media's agenda setting power was not anymore "universal or singular" within the "blog sphere". Traditional media heavily depend on "bureaucratic and routine" sources in order to ensure their generated news is credible. This code does not have to apply among bloggers which gives the bloggers more leeway to develop topics beyond mainstream media's agenda (Meraz, 2009, p. 20).

Not only can social media now sets its own agenda, some of the popular social media topics are also being picked up by mainstream media and therefore have become the public agendas. Bekkers described this phenomenon as "micro-to-mass media crossover effects" (2011, p. 209).

Bekkers studied the case of a student protest against "1040-hour norm" in the Netherlands to illustrate the crossover effects. In November 2007, students in the Netherland initiated a protest through MSN message and YouTube against the "1040-hour norm" which required students to study at least 1040 hours a year for the first two years of their secondary education. The online protest eventually caught the

attention of five national newspapers and forced the House of Representatives to investigate. Using this as an example, Bekkers concluded that "the usage of 'micromedia' in terms of Web 2.0 applications and the coverage by the traditional media of the actions reveals important crossovers from micromedia to mass media." (p. 216).

Although the focus of this research is not agenda setting for either Chinese mainstream media or Weibo, it is important to have an understanding of the interplay of agenda setting between mainstream media and social media. Such cross-over effects of agenda setting between the two media platforms provides theoretical support to the phenomenon where a certain issue or topic would appear and prevail in both mainstream media and social media, just like the issue this research will examine.

A second theory this study will draw upon is gatekeeping. Gatekeeping in communication is a conceptualized process where journalism practitioners choose what goes to the public and what does not (Shoemaker, 2001, p. 2). The development of Chinese social media provides an outlet for citizen to voice their opinions. In the meantime, it poses an unprecedented challenge to Chinese mainstream media which used to be the absolute gatekeeper of public information.

Previous studies suggested three levels of influence that social media can have on gatekeeping role of mainstream media: 1) minor, 2) moderate and 3) radical.

1). In some countries, in spite of the emergence of social media, the government holds absolute power to control the public information flow through censoring or

blocking online communication, especially social media communication (Wall, 2009, p. 42). This makes it impossible for social media to challenge the gatekeeping role of state controlled mainstream media.

For instance, Ali & Fahmy found that even in the case of Iran's "Twitter Revolution", the social media hardly changed the gatekeeper status of domestic mainstream media. The study discovered that people who actually went onto the streets to protest were hardly influenced by Twitter. Rather, they were the supporters of the opponent of Iran's president . Moreover, around 8,600 Twitter users who were involved in the revolution were from outside of the country which means social media still had little influence on people at home; in other words, mainstream media succeeded in keeping the public away from the agitating information and maintained its gatekeeping function in Iran's "Twitter Revolution"(2013, p. 61).

2). In other cases, social media and online communication may be moderately changing the gatekeeping role of mainstream media. Harrison (2010) found that BBC hub only adopts user generated content (UGC) on their website in the following circumstances: 1) if the UGC provides watchdog content; 2) if the UGC provides clues to breaking news stories; 3) if the UGC creates new angles to a story; 4) if the UGC adds more material such as pictures, videos to the story which BBC cannot obtain immediately by itself. But the BBC still constantly rejects UGC because of reasons such as the UGC may be too "down-market" (Harrison, 2010, p. 246) or "too much telling" meaning the story is too complex to tell given the present resources the newsroom has (p. 249).

Drawing from the example of how the BBC hub deals with user generated content, it can be seen that social media and online communication is slightly affecting mainstream media's gatekeeping function, but not to a significant level.

3) However, in certain cases, social media may cause a temporary collapse of the gatekeeping role of mainstream media. By studying the case of Bill Clinton's sex scandal, Williams pointed out that media's role as gatekeeper collapsed in the new media environment where the public has unlimited sources of information about political figures (Williams, 2004, p. 1208). He noticed during the coverage of the scandal, the media tried to pause to think about what the news worthiness really was. However, "reporters struggled to move the story forward, they did so in an environment where that story was being updated every 20 minutes." As a result of being pushed by social media, the mainstream media had less time to contemplate their coverage of the scandal, made mistakes and failed as a gatekeeper to some extent (p. 1225).

These three levels of social media's influences on mainstream media's gatekeeping role outlined by previous researches provide benchmarks for this research to gauge how Weibo affects Chinese mainstream media as an information gatekeeper.

## **Research Question**

How does the discussion about the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods on Weibo, differ from the Chinese mainstream media's coverage of the same topic?

## **Methodology**

This research will use textual analysis to analyze and code the opinions in the Chinese mainstream media coverage of the boycott of Japanese goods and the opinions in Weibo discussion about this issue.

### **Data Collection**

For mainstream media coverage of the Chinese boycott of Japanese goods over the Diaoyu Islands dispute, the research will use keyword searching to collect 10 articles from China's state-controlled news agency, Xinhua. For Weibo, this research will collect 100 Weibo posts also through keyword searching, as well as using the systematic sampling method to ensure the randomness of the posts, i.e. every 10<sup>th</sup> post will be picked till one hundred posts were collected.

Every post is usually accompanied by lots of comments. In order to control the size of the sample, this research will only recruit the original posts into the sample rather than posts with their comments.

### **Textual Analysis**

Textual analysis will be used to conceptualize the opinions. Once a concept is generated, it will be immediately taken into consideration for coding through constant comparison analysis.

Textual analysis aims to "read" the qualitative textual data. The word "read" here indicates the involvement of the researcher and the interpretive nature of textual analysis (Fursich, 2009, p.240).

By "decoding" and "encoding" (Fursich, 2009, p.238) the text and analyzing it within a given "context" (McKee, 2001, p. 145), a researcher using textual analysis tries to understand the "latent meaning" of the text (Fursich, p. 241), as well as the "narrative structure, symbolic arrangements or ideological potential" of the text content (p. 238).

There could be different kinds of textual analysis with different focuses, such as "thematic analysis, critical discourse analysis" or "rhetoric analysis" and so forth (p. 241).

However, the shortcoming or limitation of the textual analysis is that there could never be one single "accurate" presentation of the reality (McKee, 2001, p.143). When a researcher makes sense of the text, he or she may yield more than one interpretation. The "subjectivity of the researcher" leads to the "epistemological questioning" of textual analysis as a method. To increase the validity of the results of textual analysis, researchers usually combines textual analysis with other qualitative methods, such as interviews (Fursich, 2009, p. 241-242).

In this research, textual analysis will be used to read the theme, tones, language characteristics of the opinions reported in mainstream media and discussed on Weibo about Chinese boycott of Japanese goods over Diaoyu. Given the distinct nature of two media in this research, one focus of the textual analysis is how different characteristics of the media platforms are reflected in the text.

## **Constant Comparison Analysis**

Constant Comparison Analysis was first proposed by Barney Glaser in 1965. This method allows researchers to study quantifiable qualitative data in a way in which they can start in an initial direction without a fixed hypotheses, but later develop the theory through the "constant comparison" of the collected data (Glaser, 1965, p. 437).

Unlike content analysis, researchers do not need to stick to the "provisional testing" to find what "constitutes proof for a given proposition" (p. 437). Instead, researchers can derive theories by integrating the emerged concepts and categories during coding and then come up with theories closer to the data (p. 440).

Constant Comparison Analysis includes "data collection, coding and analyzing through memoing, theoretical sampling and sorting to writing." (Glaser, 1998, p. 12).

This method can be applied to a wide range of qualitative data including observations, interviews, texts, etc. (Glaser, 1965, p. 438).

In the process of coding, researchers first need to conceptualize the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 425). As mentioned above, in this research, conceptualization of the data will be done by textual analysis. Concepts are the basic units for analyzing and coding in constant comparative method.

In the later phase of study, researchers may transit from "open coding" to "selective coding" when some categories become more dense than others (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 13). Researchers may focus more on the core categories until it becomes "theoretically saturated" (Glaser, 1965, p. 441).

When the researcher finishes coding, he or she can start collecting the memos and conclude the coding results by analyzing the emerged concepts or categories.

For this research, constant comparison will accompany textual analysis. The ultimate goal for this research is to compare mainstream media's business and economics coverage with Weibo discussion. So, instead of mixing the data from mainstream media and Weibo together, the opinions from two media platforms will be considered as two sets of data and coded separately.

The conclusion will be formed by comparing the similarities and the differences between concepts or categories of the data from mainstream media and Weibo. The findings will then be followed by further discussion about what the differences or similarities between the mainstream media coverage and Weibo discussion mean.

Although the results of this research may have limited generality and applicability since only one topic will be analyzed, given the weight and symbolic value of this topic, the research will provide an incomplete and yet representative picture of how Chinese mainstream media differ from Weibo when it comes to covering an economic and business topic.

## **Results**

In order to answer the question: how does the Weibo discussion of the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods, differ from Xinhua's coverage of the same topic, this research carried out a three-step analysis.

First, this research analyzed the text of 100 Weibo posts and ten articles from the English website of China's national news agency, Xinhua. The posts were collected by searching the key term "the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods" on Weibo. One hundred posts were selected from the 9,508,652 posts that showed up as the searching results. As to the sample of the mainstream coverage, Xinhua had ten articles on its English-language website, reporting the boycott of the Japanese goods after last year's flare-up between China and Japan. This research collected and analyzed all the ten articles.

The textual analysis of the Weibo posts and Xinhua articles focused mainly on the themes of the texts, in other words, the core messages revealed from the content. There were various types of themes being found, including opinions, emotions, important factual details and so forth.

Second, this research then coded and organized the results of the textual analysis using the constant comparative method. This process generated many concepts as well as categories.

Third, a comparison analysis was conducted between the concepts and categories derived from the Weibo posts and from Xinhua articles.

In order to best illustrate the differences between the Weibo discussion of the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods and the mainstream coverage, this research will present the findings in the following way: it will first exhibit the concepts and categories generated from the Weibo posts and Xinhua articles respectively, then it will demonstrate the differences between the Weibo discussion and Xinhua coverage based on the findings of the comparison analysis.

### **Categories and concepts emerged from Weibo Posts**

Seven categories mainly emerged from the analysis of the 100 Weibo posts. They are: 1) advocacy for the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods; 2) moderate attitude toward the boycott; 3) pessimism over the boycott; 4) opposition against the boycott; 5) condemnation of the irrational behavior happened during the boycott; 6) watchdog behavior related to the boycott; 7) the expansion of the boycott into other areas.

#### **Advocacy for the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods.**

The posts under this category overall expressed the idea that China should continue the boycott. But the ways this idea is being delivered are different.

Many advocates expressed their persistence in the boycott by simply making assertions. For instance, post 2 labeled the boycott as the “most effective weapon” against the Japanese without further explaining why it is the most effective or why the other alternatives are less effective. Post 64 is also very succinct. It has only one sentence: never give up the boycott of the Japanese goods. Post 54 merely believed that Diaoyu Islands has always belonged to China.

Other than the above, other posts attempted to make arguments for the support of the boycott. Among the supporting reasons, the Japanese wrong deeds during the World War II were most cited. Often times, posts that mentioned the wrong deeds of the Japanese soldiers were accompanied by pictures. For instance, post 34 was attached with a picture of a Chinese woman being gang raped by the Japanese soldiers. It can be seen that the post is full of anger. It called the Japanese devil and it used 21 exclamation marks. Post 84 was also attached with many pictures of Chinese people being tortured and killed during the war with the Japanese. And the post frankly expressed that these pictures had reinforced the post maker's commitment to the boycott.

These posts demonstrated that this historical feud between China and Japan played a big role in motivating the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods even if the boycott originally started as a protest of Japanese purchasing the Diaoyu Islands.

Moreover, some posts also justified the Chinese boycott by citing the precedents of other countries' boycott of the Japanese goods. For instance, post 4 calls for Chinese citizens to learn from Korean to boycott the Japanese goods indicating that the post maker believed that the Korean indeed carried out such boycott. Post 10 introduced the idea of consumer activism and mentioned the US boycott of the Japanese goods in 1930s to justify the ongoing boycott in China.

As it can be seen that advocates expressed their support for the boycott in different fashions, but overall, it was obvious to detect the advocacy implied in the posts under this category.

### **Moderate attitude toward the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods.**

The posts with a moderate attitude toward the boycott didn't demonstrate the strong determination as the posts of advocacy did. Instead, these posts revealed the conflict in the mind of the post makers of this category between their approval of the boycott and their awareness of the inevitability of using the Japanese goods.

Post 8 best illustrated the point. The post basically supported the boycott of the Japanese goods, but it also added that if the refusal of using the Japanese goods would bring great inconvenience to someone's life, people should not stick to the boycott".

### **Pessimism over the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods**

The posts that indicated pessimism over the boycott basically held the view that the boycott wouldn't last long or the boycott couldn't resolve the dispute over Diaoyu Islands.

Concepts in this category include: "mistrust in the government", "the lack of unity among Chinese people", "the prevalence of the Japanese goods" and "the limited capability of the boycott for solving the territorial dispute. As it can be seen, these concepts were mainly the roots of the pessimism over the boycott.

For instance, post 36 first described the post owner's patriotic behaviors, but raised the question in the end, "how is the country treating me back?" One thing needs to be pointed out is that Chinese people sometimes equal the government to the country. In this context, it is believed that the post was actually asking, "how is the government treating me back?"

The questioning at the end of the post implied the declining incentive for the post maker to continue to boycott the Japanese goods and to be a patriot. Although it wasn't specified in the post what has the government done to the post maker, he or she might have come across some difficulties with the government, which caused his or her dissatisfaction. It's also possible that the post owner is just unhappy about the overall performance of the Chinese government and was less motivated to be a patriot.

In addition, post 30 suggested that the lack of unity among Chinese might contribute to the ineffectiveness of the boycott. Post 33 used an example to illustrate the prevalence of the Japanese goods in China and therefore the impossibility to boycott the Japanese goods: The central TV station would have to stop operation for the boycott of the Japanese goods, because some of the best high-end camera recorders are made in Japan. Post 94 pointed out that unless the two countries started a trade war, the boycott of the Japanese goods at an individual level wouldn't have any effect.

### **Opposition against the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods.**

Most posts that opposed the boycott cited the contrast between the quality of the Japanese goods and Chinese goods as the reason. Just like what post 3 said, "if we are going to spend the same amount of money, why shouldn't we choose the goods with better quality."

Some also mentioned the gap between China and Japan in the aspects such as the manners of the people, education, the technology innovation and so forth.

Contrary to the advocates who emphasized the historical feud between China and Japan during the war time, the opponents emphasized on the distance between modern China and Japan. Some of the opponents were very frank about their admiration of the good manners, rigorous working style as well as the innovation ability of the Japanese. This can be seen in post 100 where the post attached an article titled “what Japan teaches me” detailing the advantages Japan has over China. It said that Japan is a country thinking very hard everyday to solve the problems in their people’s life whereas in China, in spite of so many problems, not so many try hard enough to solve those. This kind of disparity in the development of two societies made the opponents less willing to boycott the Japanese goods.

#### **Condemnation of the irrational behavior during the boycott**

As mentioned previously, during the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods, many Japanese car owners got attacked (Mei, 2012). Among the one hundred Weibo posts this research collected, some condemned the vandalism as well as the irrationality of the so-called patriotic behavior.

For instance, post 6 called this kind of actions cheap. Post 18 actually linked the violent patriotism to the Cultural Revolution in Chair Mao’s era where people lost their judgment and fought among each other.

#### **Weibo watchdogs for the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods**

Posts such as 91 and 39 that exposed the Japanese brands which are not being recognized by the Chinese, acted as watchdogs for the boycott of the Japanese goods.

By identifying what products are Japanese branded, these posts want to facilitate the implementation of the boycott among the Chinese.

However, not every watchdog supports the boycott. Some of them, after finding out people who used to advocate the boycott orally, were not really doing what they told others to do, were dismayed by the hypocrisy of the boycott.

For instance, post 15 found that the editor of Huanqiu daily, who offers tips for the boycott of the Japanese goods, actually drives a Japanese car. Although the post didn't make a direct comment, the emoticon with a despising look accompanied the post revealed the post maker's attitude.

### **The expansion of the concept of boycott**

There are two kinds of expansion of the boycott on Weibo. On one hand, the boycott of Japan has been expanded from the economy to other areas such as culture. On the other hand, the boycott has been expanded from the boycott of Japan to the boycott of other countries, which China may have a diplomatic tension with.

Both kinds of expansion demonstrated the prevalence of the idea of the boycott among the Chinese. For instance, post 97 mentioned Japanese cartoons and asked the question if the cartoon should be included in the boycott list. This suggested that the boycott of the Japanese goods is not only confined within the economic aspect.

On the other hand, post 55 called for the Chinese to also boycott iPhone 5 and post 35 called for the boycott of a dog meat festival in a Chinese city. This indicates that after the boycott of the Japanese goods broke out in China, Chinese became

sensitive to the concept of boycott, and used it more frequently as a tool to express their opinions in other matters.

### **Concepts emerged from Xinhua Articles**

Three concepts mainly emerged from the textual analysis of the ten Xinhua articles covering the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods. 1) depicting the boycott as a diplomatic leverage; 2) reining in the irrational boycott behavior; 3) maintaining the responsible image of the Chinese government.

#### **Depicting the boycott as a diplomatic leverage**

Most of the Xinhua reports on the boycott focused on the facts, including the anti-Japanese march on the streets, the absence of the Japanese auto makers from a car show in China and how Chinese owned Japanese restaurants had to hang out the Chinese national flag to avoid vandalism from the protesters, etc..

There is one article titled “Good move on Diaoyu Islands” directly expressed Xinhua’s approval of the boycott. In this article, the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods was named as the first good countermeasure China had taken against Japan over the Diaoyu Islands dispute. The lead of the article claimed that countermeasure like the boycott had helped China “to wrest the initiative to resolve the islands dispute”.

Although other Xinhua reports didn’t directly label the boycott as a “good move” as the above article and the opinions toward the boycott were expressed in more subtle ways, it still can be seen that Xinhua reports tried to encourage the boycott as a diplomatic leverage against Japan.

For instance, the article “Web China: Chinese netizens riled by Japan’s ‘purchase’ of Diaoyu Islands” included two interviews in the end from two Weibo users who suggested not buying Japanese goods.

“I used to be a fan of Japanese goods. But now I think everything would be O.K without Japanese goods,” said Sina Weibo user “Mu Mu”.

“The Japanese economy relies more on China than China on it. So if an economic war breaks out between the two countries, China wouldn’t lose,” said another user under the screen name of Denghuclanshanchuherenzai.

The above two interviews were essentially saying that China would be fine to boycott the Japanese goods. The fact the this Xinhua article chose to include such two sound bites which expressed optimism toward the boycott, instead of sound bites that otherwise would seem discouraging to the protesters, indicates that the state-owned news agency is in favor of the boycott and tries to encourage the public to continue it.

In another article “Unwise foreign policy turns Japan into its own enemy”, one sentence wrote, “the pinch felt by Japanese companies results largely from an across-the-board boycott of Japanese goods spontaneously staged by Chinese consumers who felt betrayed by the bellicose Japanese government.”

It can also be seen that the Chinese government intended the boycott to keep going to exert diplomatic pressure on its neighbor, in other words, the government wants Japan to “feel the pinch”.

### **Reining in the irrational boycott behavior**

Despite that Xinhua's coverage was overall supportive of the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods, it sent out warnings to the irrational protesters after several cases of vandalism happened during the boycott. The warning was straightforward, "Patriotism is a noble act, but protesters should avoid any irrational or violent behavior."

The article "irrational, violent anti-Japanese protests should be avoided" said that although Chinese authorities had encouraged the citizens to "express patriotism", they strongly forbid any violence in the name of patriotism.

It can be seen that during the process of the boycott, the Xinhua agency tried to use its report to influence the tempo of the boycott. On one hand Xinhua has implied the government's approval of the boycott, on the other hand, it tried to rein in the violent behaviors during the boycott to get things back in control.

### **Maintaining the responsible image of the Chinese government.**

In Xinhua's coverage of the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods, one of its major focuses was to maintain the responsible image of the Chinese government in the international community by emphasizing the voluntariness of the boycott among the Chinese.

For instance, one sentence in the article "China exclusive: Japanese carmakers absent from China auto show" wrote, " although the Chinese government did not order the government agencies or citizens to boycott Japanese goods, the desire of Chinese consumers to buy Japanese goods has obviously lowered." The fact that

Xinhua thought it was necessary to point out the boycott wasn't an order from the government but rather a spontaneous activity initiated by the citizens themselves indicated that the state owned agency tried to prevent the formation of the perception that Chinese government agitated the boycott among its people.

In other words, the news agency felt responsible to maintain the image of the Chinese government as a levelheaded national leader as opposed to an agitator.

### **Findings from the Comparison Analysis**

#### **Similarities**

Overall, the Weibo discussion and Xinhua's coverage on the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods had fewer similarities and more differences.

When it comes to similarities, the facts reported in Xinhua's articles were mostly also discussed on Weibo. For instance, one of the Xinhua articles "China Exclusive: Japanese carmakers absent from China auto show" reported that the sales of Japanese cars slumped 40.8 percent in a month since the break-out of the boycott; in response, Weibo post 23 said, "it's a good sign that the sales of the Japanese cars are plummeting in China. We should unite together and continue to boycott the Japanese goods." The vandalism happened to some of the Japanese restaurants owned by the Chinese were also both reported by Xinhua and discussed on Weibo.

Moreover, the opinions delivered by Xinhua's coverage were also echoed by some of the Weibo posts. Xinhua reported that Chinese netizens were "riled" by Japan over the Diaoyu Islands dispute and the interviews chosen by Xinhua for its report expressed support for the boycott. And indeed, there was a good amount of posts on

Weibo are in favor of the boycott, especially the posts under the advocacy categories. In addition, both Xinhua reports and some of the Weibo posts expressed condemnation to the irrational behavior during the boycott when things got out the control in the later phase of the protest.

### **Differences**

Nonetheless, compared to Xinhua's coverage, the discussion on Weibo regarding the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods encompassed much more information and presented more various opinions about the boycott. In the following, this research will illustrate the differences between the Weibo discussion and Xinhua's coverage over the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods from seven aspects: 1) while the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods was reported by Xinhua as simply an episode of the whole Diaoyu Islands, it has evolved into an ongoing independent topic beyond the territorial dispute on Weibo; 2) while Xinhua's coverage focused more on the political influence of the boycott, the Weibo discussion focused more on the economic impact of the boycott; 3) the attitudes toward the boycott revealed from the Weibo posts were more complicated compared to Xinhua's coverage; 4) Weibo discussion is more emotion-charged than Xinhua's coverage; 5) Weibo discussion cited the historical feud between China and Japan much more times than Xinhua's articles did; 6) while some of the Weibo posts revealed inferior feeling when comparing China with Japan, Xinhua's report put China in a much better position than Japan; 7) the boycott is expanded into a much broader concept on Weibo than Xinhua.

### **An ongoing independent topic vs. an episode of the Diaoyu Islands dispute**

First of all, the time spread of the Weibo discussion much longer than the time spread of the Xinhua's coverage. What it means is that, the posting time of the one hundred randomly collected Weibo posts spread out in a time period of almost a year: there were posts posted right after the Japanese government claimed to purchase the Diaoyu Islands in August, 2012, and there were also posts posted up to date the data were collected which was June 8, 2013.

On the other hand, the Xinhua articles were mostly published in the two months following the breakout of the boycott. Especially given the ten Xinhua articles this research collected were all the articles that showed up as the results of searching for keyword "the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods" on Xinhua's website, it's likely that all the Xinhua coverage of the boycott happened in a limited time period after the breakout of the boycott.

With that being said, it can be seen that the boycott of the Japanese goods is still being discussed on Weibo even a year after the boycott started. It has developed into an ongoing issue on Weibo, whereas Xinhua mainly reported it as a news event and didn't follow up on the issue as long as the Weibo users did.

Second, while Xinhua only reported the boycott as an action that Chinese people have taken to protest the Japanese government's purchase of the Diaoyu Islands, Weibo users have taken this subject matter far beyond the Diaoyu dispute in their discussion.

Out of 100 Weibo posts being analyzed, only nine of them (Post 19, 21, 50, 54, 73, 75, 84, 85, 93) ‘mentioned the boycott and the Diaoyu Islands dispute directly in the post. Other posts talked about the boycott in relation with other issues such as the history, culture, etc., not necessarily in the context of the Diaoyu Islands dispute. The Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods has evolved into a multifaceted topic on Weibo.

### **Political leverage vs. Economic issue**

As mentioned before in the textual analysis of Xinhua’s coverage of the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods, Xinhua’s coverage mostly depicted the boycott as a political leverage in an effort to influence the Japanese government on how it handles the Diaoyu Islands dispute. This can be seen especially in two articles: “good move on Diaoyu Islands” and “unwise foreign policy turns Japan into its own enemy”. In the first article, the boycott of the Japanese goods was called as a good move to wrest the initiative to resolve the islands dispute by the state-owned news agency. In the second article, Xinhua said that “ the Japanese economy has suffered another blow due to a bitter row with China, a crucial trade and investment partner, ignited by Tokyo’s repeated provocations over the Diaoyu islands”, and in the following, it pointed out that “good economic relations are always based on sound political ties.” The article first brought the attention to the “suffering” Japanese economy had come across due to the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods, it later sent out a reminder that political tie is the base for economic relations implicating that if Japan wants to

prevent itself from being hit by the recent boycott happened in China, it should be more cooperative with the Chinese government over the Diaoyu dispute.

On the other hand, many Weibo posts mainly focused on how the boycott would substantially affect Chinese people's everyday life. For instance, post 28 expressed the post owner's struggle of not being able to go to the Sushi restaurants amid the boycott, post 31 expressed the frustration with the user experience of the Chinese products with bad quality and pointed out the impossibility of the boycott of the Japanese goods because of their good. "The prevalence of the Japanese goods in the Chinese people's life", "the lack of domestic alternative to the Japanese goods", "the inconvenience of not using the Japanese goods" are some of the frequently encountered concepts during the textual analysis of the Weibo posts and these are all details about how the boycott affected the economic life of normal people.

Based on the above, it can be seen that the boycott of the Japanese goods was mainly treated as a political issue in the Xinhua coverage; in contrast, the Weibo discussion touched more on the economic impact the boycott brought to people's life.

### **More complicated attitudes in Weibo discussion than Xinhua's coverage**

The attitudes toward the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods revealed from the Weibo discussion consisted of almost a spectrum: there are posts advocating and supporting the boycott, there are also posts with moderate attitudes toward the boycott, and there are opposing posts, and there are those condemning the violent behavior during the boycott.

In contrast, the attitudes revealed in Xinhua's coverage toward the boycott are less complicated: as mentioned in the textual analysis of ten Xinhua articles, the report on the boycott of the state-owned agency overall supported it as a political leverage against the Japanese government. Even if Xinhua also expressed its condemnation of the irrational behavior during the violent anti-Japanese protests, it still didn't withdraw its encouragement of the boycott. In the article "irrational violent anti-Japanese protests should be avoided", one sentence wrote, "although Chinese authorities have encouraged the country's citizens to express their patriotism peacefully, the government ultimately rejects the kind of blind patriotism that can result in violence". The above sentence indicated that in spite of the warning the Chinese government sent out to the "blind patriots" who have gone violent during the boycott, it does not discourage the boycott if it is expressed in a non-violent way.

One thing worth noting is that, although comparing to Xinhua, the attitudes toward the boycott embedded in the Weibo posts are much more complicated that they almost consist a spectrum, this spectrum is yet not complete.

What's missing here is Chinese saying that Diaoyu Islands belong to Japan. In spite of the existence of posts where Chinese spoke highly of the good traits the Japan possesses, none of the posts explicitly expressed, or indirectly indicated the support of the Japanese claim on the Diaoyu Islands.

The attitudes toward Japan, as a country, may be complicated and diverse on Weibo, but the attitudes toward the issue- which country owns Diaoyu Islands- still seems to be unanimous on Weibo. Despite that some of the Weibo posts are

Japan-friendly, at least no compromising ground has been found among Chinese on the territorial dispute.

As previously mentioned, the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods has already been taken as a multi-faceted topic on Weibo. Much more aspects of this issue have been paid attention in Weibo discussion than in Xinhua, such as the historical relations between the two country, the differences in the culture, people's manners, the quality of the goods, the innovation ability of the two country. As a result, much more diverse views and attitudes could be found from Weibo discussion than Xinhua.

### **Weibo discussion more emotion-charged than Xinhua's coverage**

Compared to Xinhua's coverage, Weibo discussion is highly emotion-charged. This is manifested mainly in three ways: the usage of profanity, the expression in the form of questioning, and the usage of exclamation marks. Some of the most distinctive emotions revealed from the Weibo discussion include the anger toward the Japanese, the dissatisfaction with the bad quality of the Chinese goods, the condemnation of the violent boycott behavior and the scorn of the hypocrisy of the boycott.

Most of the Weibo posts that used profanity are under the advocacy category. For instance, post 2 called the Japanese bastards and post 7 told Sony- the Japanese electronic production giant to fuck off. Strong anger toward the Japanese is indicated from the usage of profanity by the advocates of the boycott.

The usage of questioning are found many times in the posts which expressed dissatisfaction about the quality of the domestic products, for instance, post 17 said,

“People are boycotting the Japanese goods because they love their country. But look at the poisonous food all over the place, why should we choose you (Chinese goods)?” Instead of making a flat statement that “we should not choose the Chinese good”, the post chose to express its dissatisfaction in a question, which kind of makes the emotion stronger.

Moreover, the broad use of exclamation marks among the Weibo posts also demonstrated the strong emotions underlying in the posts.

### **Historical feud cited more in Weibo discussion than in Xinhua’s coverage**

As mentioned in the textual analysis of the Weibo posts, under the category of the advocacy for the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods, the historical feud between China and Japan during the World War II was cited more times than the Diaoyu Islands dispute as the reason for the advocates’ determination in the boycott. Posts such as 34 and 84 even attached the pictures of the bloody crimes the Japanese soldiers conducted in China.

In contrast, Xinhua only mentioned the historical feud once. In the article “yearender: Cooperation overriding theme in Asia-Pacific despite disputes”, the first sentence in the sixth paragraph wrote, “With memories of the Japanese invasion still vivid in China, the country felt increasingly irritated by Tokyo’s decision to ‘nationalize’ the islands”. It can be seen that his sole Xinhua mentioning of the history did not fully demonstrate the intensity of Weibo users’ rage from recalling the Japanese war.

### **Feeling inferior vs. overconfidence**

The opponents of the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods brought up many aspects where China lags behind Japan, including the bad quality of Chinese goods, such as post 3; the gap of the education between the two countries, such as post 78; China's lack of technology innovation compared to Japan, such as post 95. These posts more or less revealed the feeling of inferiority of the post makers. They acknowledged the weaknesses China has in the above-mentioned regards and pointed out that China is in a disadvantageous position to boycott the Japanese goods given its shortcomings compared to Japan.

However, this kind of inferior feeling received zero coverage in Xinhua's report. In contrast, Xinhua's coverage exhibited great confidence in China in the economic battle with its neighbor. This can be seen from the many times mentioning of the importance of China's economy to others in Xinhua's coverage. For instance, in the article "Japan's 'purchase' of Diaoyu Islands will damage trade ties with China", the first sentence of the ninth paragraph emphasized that China ranks as Japan's largest trading partner, with the latter being China's fourth largest. It seems Xinhua tried to imply that China is more important to Japan than Japan to China. Also, in the last third paragraph of 'yearender: Cooperation overriding theme in Asia-Pacific despite disputes', without attributing to any source, Xinhua said, "China now serves much like a backbone of the Asian economy". From this self-affirmation, it can be sensed that the state-owned news agency had great confidence, if not over confidence, in its country's competition with Japan.

**The boycott is expanded into a much broader concept on Weibo than Xinhua**

As presented in the analysis of the category “prevalence” derived from the Weibo posts, the concept of boycott has already been expanded from boycotting the Japanese goods to boycotting the Japanese culture and other Japan related things on Weibo; boycott has also been adopted as a tool to express political opinions for other domestic or international matters.

## **Discussion**

In addition to conducting textual analysis and comparison study to find out the differences between the Weibo discussion and Xinhua's coverage of the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods, this part of the research will further discuss the indications from the above findings. As mentioned in the introduction, this research not only seeks to answer the question how the Weibo discussion of the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods differ from the Xinhua's coverage on this topic, but also tries to provide a better understanding in: 1) Weibo as a dynamic platform for public discussion; 2) Weibo's interplay with Chinese mainstream media; 3) the lack of context in Chinese mainstream coverage; 4) the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods as an ongoing issue.

### **Weibo as a dynamic platform for public discussion**

First of all, Sullivan said that Weibo introduces more diversity into the discussion of a news issue and leads attention to different aspects of the issue (2012, p. 297). This is largely demonstrated in the findings of this research.

Compared to the Xinhua coverage where the boycott was only treated as an episode of the Diaoyu Islands dispute, Weibo discussion developed it into a multi-faceted long-term issue. Not only it brought in much more additional information related to the issue, such as the historical feud between China and Japan, the gap between the two countries in the quality of the goods, the education efficiency, the technology innovation capability and so forth; Weibo discussion also presented a nearly full spectrum of various opinions toward the boycott from advocacy to

disapproval. It can be seen that this news issue, and probably many other news issues too, are being carried further and discussed in a broader sense on Weibo.

In addition, Zhang et.al (2012) suggested that what is most important to the country is not necessarily important to the Chinese citizens. This was also echoed by the findings of this research. While the state-owned news agency mainly focused on the political influence of the boycott as to how it can be used as a leverage in protecting China's national interest in Diaoyu Islands dispute, people on Weibo seems to care more about the boycott's impact on the daily life of theirs, such as, what the domestic alternatives are if someone can't buy Japanese electronic products. Granted, some of the Weibo posts, especially those supporting the boycott cared about the national interest very much. But other posts took the discussion of the boycott to a more practical level as to how people should or should not change the way they live in responding to the boycott.

Moreover, Hu et.al suggested that Weibo comments can be highly emotion-charged and the findings of this research fully attested to it (Hu et. Al, 2011, p.75). First, given the boycott involves patriotism, it comes as no surprise that the discussion of it is charged with lots of emotions. But on the other hand, the strong emotions embedded in the Weibo posts could also be attributed to the lack of outlet for public discourse overall in China. Once Weibo shows up, the public takes full advantage of this channel to say what they used to be unable to say. With the eager to participate in the public discourse and the availability of such platform, the Weibo

users now can unleash their emotions and therefore the comments they make tend to be “highly emotion-charged”.

Overall, the findings of this research echoed the traits of Weibo discourses concluded by the previous research and cited in the literature review, in terms of Weibo develops and diversifies a news issue compared to mainstream media coverage, Weibo may focus more on individual aspects of a topic than the national aspect, as well as, Weibo comments tend to be more emotional.

### **Weibo’s interplay with Chinese media**

First of all, most of the facts Xinhua reported are also discussed in Weibo community, such as the decline of auto sales, the hit encountered by the Japanese restaurant and tourism, etc. However, it is unknown if people who were talking about those facts on Weibo initially obtained the information from Xinhua, it could be from other news sources, family, friends or from their own eyes. Hence, it’s only a possibility here that Xinhua did influence the agenda of the discussion on Weibo.

Weibo did enter Xinhua’s agenda, but in a very restrained way. One of the ten Xinhua articles “Web China: Chinese netizens riled by Japan’s ‘purchase’ of Diaoyu Islands”, specifically reported the rage of Chinese netizens on Weibo. The heated Weibo discussion is one of the angles of Xinhua’s serial report on the boycott. So it can be said that Weibo had a certain degree of influence on Xinhua’s agenda-setting. But this research did not detect an obvious interplay of the agenda setting between Xinhua and Weibo.

Nonetheless, not the whole Weibo discussion got the attention by the stated-owned news agency. This is where the gatekeeping weighs in. Xinhua only allowed part of the Weibo discussion that is in line with the Chinese government's diplomatic interest, to make to its agenda list. As mentioned in how Xinhua depicted the boycott as a political leverage, the only Weibo posts adopted by the Xinhua article were in favor of the boycott and expressed confidence in China in its battle with Japan.

Other views prevailing on Weibo regarding the boycott, such as the critics of the quality of Chinese domestic goods or the affirmation of the good manners and rigorous working attitude of the Japanese people, are nowhere to be seen in China's mainstream coverage.

Now, does this mean that Weibo's impact on Chinese mainstream media is at best, minor? Not really, according to previous research. In the previously mentioned cases of "watch brother" (You, 2013, pgs.29-31) and Wenzhou train crash (Wines & LaFraniere, 2011), Weibo has had revolutionary effect on the Chinese mainstream media in both cases. It successfully directed the mainstream media's coverage of "watch brother", having unprecedentedly exposed the corruption of a high-level official through human flesh search on Weibo. It also managed to lead the mainstream attention to the malfeasance of the government officials at the Chinese railway department when they simply blamed the accident on the weather. Such cases where Weibo brings social problems to the public, is still happening. Hence, Weibo's impact on Chinese mainstream media is more than minor.

However, in the case this research studied, Weibo's influence on the mainstream media is hindered to a great degree. And very possibly, this is due to the fact the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods is a foreign affair, it involves greater national interest, and it affects China's position in the international stage. Even though it was found that many negative comments are allowed to stay on Weibo, indicating that Chinese government wanted certain problems to be exposed in the seek of social change, the government still didn't lose its grip of the information control over some of the issues. There seem to be more room for social media to influence the discourse on domestic social issues, but when it comes to issues such as national security, foreign affairs, the government will hold firm to its control of public discourse.

As people wonder if Chinese mainstream media has really opened up under the influence of social media such as Weibo, the answer here is probably "it depends". Depending on the nature of an issue, the mainstream media is carefully calculating how much presence of social media discussion, such as Weibo, should be allowed in its coverage

### **Lack of context in Chinese mainstream media coverage**

Chinese mainstream media almost mainly acted as the public relations agent for the government in its coverage of the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods. Given the richness and complexity of the issue, Xinhua's coverage seems to be lack of context.

First of all, none of the articles explained how the dispute started. China, Japan and Taiwan all have different claims over Diaoyu Islands. In 1895, Diaoyu Islands, as

part of Taiwan, which was then a province of China, was ceded to Japan in the treaty of Shimonoseki. When Japan renounced the claims of this territory after World War II, it came under the U.S. trusteeship. And here's where the divergence begins: US later returned both Diaoyu Islands and Taiwan, Japan claimed that the Diaoyu Islands were returned to Japan; whereas China claimed that since Diaoyu Islands was originally part of Taiwan, and Taiwan was originally part of China, along with the liberation of Taiwan from Japan, Diaoyu was automatically returned to China (BBC, 2013, April).

None of the above information was provided by Xinhua to the public. As a result, most of the supportive comments about China's claim on Diaoyu Islands on Weibo, were lack of logical arguments.

Moreover, one the biggest reason that contributed to the recent flare-up between China and Japan- the rich deposit of oil near the area of Diaoyu Islands - wasn't mentioned by the Xinhua articles either (Koo, 2009, p. 2008).

The absence of above information can deter the formation of right perception of an issue and therefore the formation of a healthy public discussion of an issue. An example to echo the above point is how poorly Chinese people know about the Tiananmen square massacre. Due to Chinese government's block of the information, after 24 years, the new generation barely knew what really happened. And the problems reflected in the massacre- bureaucracy, the lack of freedom, the impossibility of criticizing the government- do still prevail in today's China and not being addressed effectively.

However, based on findings from how Xinhua handled the reporting of the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods, it still can be seen that the central government may still not be aware of, or not willing to admit, the importance of transparency to the public discussion, as well as the importance of public discussion to the development of a society.

### **Reflections from the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods**

There were not so many surprises in Xinhua's coverage of the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods. It tried to use the boycott to push the Japanese government and it called for cooperation between China and Japan. As the state-owned news agency, Xinhua's coverage is overall oriented by the government's diplomatic strategy.

In contrast, some of the Weibo's findings of the boycott are unexpected. Han (2011) found in her research that the discourse toward the Japanese over Diaoyu Islands dispute is more negative compared to mainstream media's coverage. There were indeed a decent amount of Weibo posts this research examined that made negative comments about the Japanese.

However, contrary to Han's research, there are also an overwhelming amount of posts made positive comments about Japan, speaking highly of some aspects where Japan has an advantage over China. Parallel with the positive comments of Japan are some of the critics about China's poisonous food, poor quality of the domestic goods and the lack of technology breakthroughs. The topic of the boycott didn't make these commentators hate Japan. Rather, it fortified their realization of the bad quality of

domestic goods along with some of the other economic problems China has today. And it seems the worst problem for the country came from itself.

Food safety appears to be one of the biggest concerns for Chinese consumers based on the Weibo posts that criticized the quality of Chinese goods. After the baby formula scandal in 2008, where tainted infant milk formula sickened 300,00 babies in China, food safety scandals continues to happen in China from time to time (Branigan, 2008, Dec). The most recent one is the selling of fake mutton made from fox, mink and rat meat in some of China's coastal cities (Kaiman, 2013, May).

Nonetheless, all these question arisen from the Weibo discussion about the boycott didn't make to the webpage of Xinhua. Considering that so many people complained about the quality of the Chinese product, it may be more important for the Chinese government to address this domestic issue than to battle with other countries.

But one thing worth noting is that the limited exposure of the problems discussed on Weibo in Xinhua's coverage, may have to do with the small size of sample of this research. This research only studied ten Xinhua articles and they were the only ten articles found on the Xinhua's English language website as the result of the keyword searching for the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods.

Another economic reflection from the Weibo discussion is the interconnectedness of the global economy. This is well demonstrated by post 33.

If we were to completely boycott the Japanese goods, the China Central TV will have to stop operation. Why? They wouldn't have any camera to use...If we were

to boycott American goods, we might just have to quit watching movies, and throw away our computers.

Every product now has components made in multiple countries. As a Chinese old saying puts, “if one country sneezes, the whole world will catch a cold.”

## **Conclusion**

Through the textual analysis and comparison study of 100 Weibo posts and ten Xinhua articles covering the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods, this research came to the conclusion that the two media platforms presented distinctively different discourses over the boycott.

Compared to Xinhua coverage, Weibo developed the boycott into a long-term and multi-faceted issue. While Xinhua mainly depicted the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods as a political leverage, Weibo discussion brought in extra information beyond the boycott and exhibited a plethora of opinions and views on the issue. The Weibo discourse of the boycott included the recall of the historical feud between China and Japan during the World War II, the questioning of the efficiency of the boycott as a resolution to the Diaoyu Islands dispute, the acknowledgment of China's disadvantages in the product quality competing with Japan as well as the assurance of the advanced societal development of Japan. All of them received little attention from the state news agency.

The attitudes toward Japan revealed from the Weibo posts also ranged from outrageous, moderate to friendly. But it seems that the attitudes toward Diaoyu Islands dispute are not as complicated as the attitudes toward Japan as a country. Despite that some of the posts are Japan-friendly, none of the Weibo posts has said things like Diaoyu Islands belong to Japan. The bottom line here is, nobody is fond enough of Japan to say China should give up its claim on Diaoyu Islands and let Japan have them.

It can be seen from this research how Weibo acted as a dynamic platform for advancing and diversifying the discussion of a topic. Nonetheless, Weibo wasn't really able to influence the mainstream coverage in the case of the boycott. The only part of the Weibo discussion that made appearance in Xinhua's coverage was in favor of the boycott. In other words, Xinhua only chose to quote the Weibo posts that served the government's interest. When it comes to the foreign affair, Xinhua still remained a gatekeeper for the government.

However, that is not to say that Weibo's influence on Chinese media environment is nothing significant. Previous researches documented many cases where Weibo propelled or diverted the coverage of mainstream media. But most of these cases were domestic social issues. When it comes to international issues, such as the one studied here, Chinese media has yet not ready to invite the public to participate the discussion. And therefore, it's still carefully filtering the information to make sure what shows up in the state-owned media does comply with the government's foreign policies.

But it's worth pointing out that, regardless of the nature of an issue, transparency is always important for a healthy discussion and more importantly, for the seek of the right solution. Thus, it is yet an ongoing project for Chinese government and its mainstream media to feel comfortable to disclose information on sensitive issues, and to manage public discussion in a more open media environment.

In addition to the study of the media, this research also provided the picture of how Chinese people really perceived the boycott. One of the biggest findings was that many Chinese people used the boycott as an outlet to vent their dissatisfaction of the

poor quality of Chinese products, saying that it's impossible to boycott the Japanese goods because there were no good domestic alternatives. Given the constant breakout of the scandals of food safety and product quality in China recently, this problem should be brought into attention to the relevant government departments.

Overall, this research tried to provide a prism through which people can get a glimpse of what Weibo is, how it is affecting the Chinese public discourse, how Chinese mainstream media is reacting to the social media change; as well as, how the boycott is interpreted by the public on Weibo and by the state-owned news agency, and what the connotations are of each kind of interpretation.

If given more time, this research can be carried further by interviewing Xinhua reporters or other media experts about the gatekeeping process when it comes to dealing with Weibo information on an issue like the Chinese boycott of the Japanese goods over the Diaoyu Islands dispute. Also, a more important question to ask is what lesson can be drawn from the differences between the mainstream media coverage and the social media discussion of an issue, to apply to the process of improving the media landscape in China.

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## **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Diaoyu Islands are named as Senkaku Islands in Japan. This research chose to use one name for the sake of the simplicity and not because the writer is taking sides in the dispute.