
A thesis presented to

the faculty of

the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

Qiongyou Pu

August 2010

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This thesis titled

by

QIONGYOU PU

has been approved for
the Department of Sociology and Anthropology
and the College of Arts and Sciences by

______________________________

Stephen J. Scanlan
Assistant Professor of Sociology

______________________________

Benjamin M. Ogles
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
ABSTRACT

PU QIONGYOU, M.A., August 2010, Sociology


(71 pp.)

Director of Thesis: Stephen J. Scanlan

This study examines dynamics and patterns of online collective action in China regarding large-scale grievances of landless farmers whose land was illegally expropriated by the local government for industrial development and construction. Such illegal land expropriation resulted in various conflicts between local officials and farmers due to the farmers’ common fear of losing their sole survival source and the local government’s inadequate compensation for their land loss. The two representative cases of such grievances and conflicts—which I call the Wang Shuai Incident in Henan Province and the Wu Baoquan Incident in Nei Monggu Autonomous Region—were initiated and mobilized by organizers, netizens, and news media through the Internet.

Qualitative content analysis is used for this study to examine available media outlets and public forum discussions from the seven selected Chinese websites that were extensively involved in the two cases. By applying framing theory to online collective action, this research compares different framing tactics of the two initiators and the media, resulting in contrasting outcomes. This study demonstrates that concise framing and continuous media attention in conjunction with the unprecedented accessibility of the Internet are central to mobilizing public support for online collective action. These techniques and technologies are part of a new trend signifying a critical evolution in the realm of grassroots activism in China.
Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Stephen J. Scanlan

Assistant Professor of Sociology
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am very grateful to a number of people for their help in my thesis research. Without them, this research would not have been accomplished successfully. I greatly appreciate my thesis advisor, Stephen J. Scanlan, for his tremendous and insightful guidance and suggestions during the whole writing process. I would also like to thank the other two committee members, Larry Burmeister, and Jieli Li, for their support and advice. I particularly want to extend my gratitude to my former advisor, Ann R. Tickamyer, who played an invaluable role in helping me get started and helping me choose this thesis topic. Finally, I would like to thank my other professors, my family, and my friends who showed their interest and encouragement throughout my research.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

With important urbanization and industrialization programs implemented as Chinese policy over decades, an increasing amount of land has been legally and illegally expropriated by the local government to accelerate social and economic development (Lin, 2003; Lin, 2005; Yu, 2006). Due to inadequate compensation from the local government and farmers’ common fear of losing their sole survival resource, however, such land expropriation is often accompanied with conflicts between local officials and peasants, resulting in participants being arrested and injured (Wang, 2006; Zhai & Xiang, 2007). This phenomenon has already caught widespread attention from policy-makers, scholars, and the media in China. These different agents commonly agree that if the issues are not effectively resolved, the conflicts will be intensified, affecting sustainable development in China and the country’s economic, political, and social stability (Gao, 2004; Liao, 2005). This will continue to be the case in the long run in that land is the only resource for survival for 744.7 million Chinese farmers (The National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2006), comprising over 60 percent of the total population.

Rapid development and expansion of the Internet allows these conflicts in China to take a new form – the emergence of online collective action. Chinese farmers who lose their land attempt to mobilize public grievances targeting the local government by publicizing their issues and concerns on the Internet. In this research I select two cases – which I call the “Wang Shuai (王帅) Incident” and the “Wu Baoquan (吴保全) Incident” - to analyze online collective action and framing dynamics. The “Wang Shuai Incident” occurred on February 12, 2009, in Dawang Town (大王镇), Lingbao city of He Nan
Province (see Figure 1). It ended in early May of 2009. The “Wu Baoquan Incident” took place in September 2007 and was over in October 2009. This case happened in Habagexi village (哈巴格希村) and Zhaizida village (寨子塔村) in the suburb of E’er Duosi city, Nei Menggu Autonomous Region (see Figure 1). To be specific, the land in both cases was expropriated by the Chinese local government for constructing industrial and economic zones. Through the Internet, Wang Shuai and Wu Baoquan initiated protests against the local government that imprisoned them for their actions (people.com.cn, 2009; Zuo, 2009). This raised widespread grievances and public contentiousness toward the local officials (Shi, 2009; Wang & Wang, 2009).
Figure 1. A map of the two cases in China.

I compare the characteristics and outcomes of the two cases using perspectives on framing as developed in the social movement literature. Focusing on qualitative content analysis, I collect data from online sources including blogs and public forums, media
outlets, and television transcripts. The time period of the data collected spans the entirety of the two cases. This research will contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of increasing collective action in China and how framing theory can be further developed and explored in the Internet age. A variety of collective action is booming on the Internet as there were 384 million Internet users in China at the end of 2009 (China Internet Network Information Center, 2009). Despite its growing significance, systematic and empirical analysis of online collective action in China has largely remained unexplored. My research will give a new direction to who are interested in such a topic and understanding dynamics of online collective action, particularly in China.

In addition, studies of increasing landlessness among the Chinese farmers, although flourishing, typically struggle with addressing landless farmers’ subsistence issues and how to provide them a better life through simply adjusting economic compensation policy (Chu, 2005; Gao, 2004). For example, scholars and experts constantly urge the state to reform and change ambiguous and out-dated components of polices regarding land ownership rights, land use rights, land expropriation, and compensation standards in accordance with economic markets (Cheng & Zhang, 2007; Gao, 2004; Wang, 2006; Zhai & Xiang, 2007). Sociological research and theory, however, unfortunately has not been sufficiently applied to examine collective action to address these problems among landless farmers in China. My research will begin to fill a gap between academic research and an important real-world issue.

Comparing the divergent outcomes between the two cases pertaining to expropriation of agricultural land in China, my central research question will examine and explain why and how the two online collective actions frame similar land
expropriation issues but achieve contrasting outcomes. Three important sub-questions in this analysis are: 1) How do the two collective action episodes identify, evaluate, and frame the illegal land expropriation by the local government on the Internet to mobilize mass support? 2) How do the mass media frame messages and public concerns to facilitate the cases? 3) How does the local government culpable for the action respond to the public protest voice? Data will sufficiently answer these questions in great details.
CHAPTER 2: CHINESE LAND POLICY AND LANDLESS FARMERS’ GRIEVANCES

China has been predominately considered an agricultural country, indicating the vital role that land plays in its economic growth. Throughout the Chinese history, peasants have heavily relied on farmland for survival from generation to generation. To accelerate economic growth and social progress, the Chinese government implements industrialization and urbanization programs that require massive land for building factories, commercial markets, infrastructure, and the like. In doing so, land therefore has been increasingly expropriated by government over decades.

In the early 1950s, the Chinese government launched a land expropriation policy, giving a higher priority to the development of industry over agriculture, though the latter was responsible for accumulating capital and raw materials including land for industrial development to occur (Cheng & Zhang, 2007). The main purpose of this plan is to use industrial development to sufficiently drive agricultural advancement. According to the Land Administration Law of People’s Republic of China (1999), China “practices socialist public ownership of land, namely, ownership by the whole people and collective ownership by the working people. Ownership by the whole people means that the State Council exercises the right of ownership of state-owned land on behalf of the State” (the Ministry of Land and Resources of China, 1999). The state has the right to requisition land owned by the collective in accordance with the law and constitution if it is for the “public interest”. As Zhai and Xiang (2007) point out, however, the law does not define and clarify what “public interest” is. They argue such conceptual ambiguity provides the local government with a convenient regulatory loophole to interpret “public interest”
however they like for overusing and abusing land expropriation (Cai, 2006; Zhai & Xiang, 2007). A survey from 16 provincial departments of land administration reveals that only 10 percent of expropriated land was truly used for “public interest” while a considerable proportion of expropriated land was for business and commercial purposes (Cai, 2006).

Scholars and analysts agree that the land requisition policy of China generally guarantees that the state can expropriate land with fewer obstacles at a relatively cheap price for local and regional economic development (Cai, 2006; Zhai & Xiang, 2007). According to the law, Chinese farmers theoretically are guaranteed at least 30-year land use right contracts. However, officials may easily seize it for the “public interest” (Walker, 2008). This situation means that Chinese peasants face a risk losing their land use right at any point where government views expropriation as being in the “public interest”, imposing uncertainty and insecurity about their access to land and ultimately their livelihood (Rupelle, Deng, Li, & Vendryes, 2008).

This insecurity becomes more fragile with the emergence of the large-scale “‘land enclosure movement’ (quan di yun dong) of the 1990s (that) was prompted in 1987 after the government issued new land management regulations” (Walker, 2008, p.471). Furthermore, the National People’s Congress “amended the constitution so as to allow for the transference of land ownership, thereby endorsing the existence of a land market” (Walker, 2008, p. 471). This implies that land, like most commodities, can be bought and sold in a market, thus accelerating farmland loss and flourishing a land market. Cai (2006) reports that total arable land of China only decreased by 3.915 million mu in 1998, while the number sharply rose to 34 million mu in 2003. Another news report
states that each year around 3 million mu of land is seized by the government for
industrial use and urban expansion (Wang, 2006). As a result, this increasing land loss
not only makes the farmers struggle to satisfy their daily needs but also risks the
country’s ability to its guarantee food supply as more and more farmers have no land to
grow crops. The official statistics reveal that China has approximately 40 million landless
farmers and this number increases by at least two million each year (Gao, 2004; Lin,
2005).

Despite an increasing land loss, such programs of urbanization and
industrialization have contributed to great progress over the last two decades. China has
experienced rapid economic growth, moving the country “from being the most egalitarian
society in the world to one in which the gap between the rich and poor is among the
highest worldwide” (Walker, 2008, p. 465). Meanwhile, emerging social conflicts
underlie this economic prosperity with increasing collective action taken by citizens
against legal and illegal land expropriation by the local government in the name of
“acceleration of process of industrialization and urbanization” (Gao, 2004; Zhai & Xiang,
2007). Moreover, because of coercive occupation of land, inadequate compensation,
insecure resettlement, and a lack of job placement, a large number of Chinese landless
farmers fall into a new and particularly vulnerable class characterized as ‘three nothings’
– no land, no work, no social security (Gao, 2004; Liao, 2004; Walker, 2008), thus
intensifying the conflicts.

According to the Jiu San Society (jiu san xue she) (2003), governments and land
developers respectively gain 30% and 50% economic benefits from commercial
development of expropriated land while farmers only receive around 5-10% of those
benefits. This significant disparity in expropriated land development oftentimes creates a growing dissatisfaction and contentiousness among landless farmers. According to the Ministry of Land and Resources of China, at least 10 billion Yuan in land revenue each year is lost to illegal land expropriation, and eight out of ten corrupted officials are involved in land expropriation and its commercial development application (Cai, 2006). Cai (2006) states that land expropriation policy of China actually sacrifices farmers’ interests, thus weakening their trust and confidence in society and government authority. He further states that such development of industrialization and urbanization at the expense of farmers is unfair and unjust, creating various conflicts between local officials and farmers as well as destroying a balance in rural and urban development (Cai, 2006).

Driven by a survival instinct, those who lose their farmland frequently appeal to higher authorities including the central government in Beijing (Cheng & Zhang, 2007; Gao, 2004; Walker, 2008; Zhai & Xiang, 2007). However, as representatives of the central government, local officials are expected to administer and maintain social order and affairs, deal with conflicts, and plan development. Local residents’ grievances are generally viewed as “local affairs and issues” that belong to those officials’ duties and responsibilities. As a result, higher officials usually return petitioners’ grievances to the local government that expropriated farmers’ land. This approach means that the farmers’ concerns and claims most likely remain unsolved, ignored, or suspended (Cai, 2008; Li & O’Brien, 2008; Walker, 2008), in part because dominant officials can use their power to control and suppress the powerless farmers whom they think create trouble. The ability of these officials to meet local residents’ needs is thus ineffective and dissatisfying to claimants and the need for “collective action” rapidly escalates among increasing
numbers of participants. For example, official reports reveal the number of collective action incidents dramatically increased from 10,000 to 20,000 between 1993 and 2003, with the participants jumping from 730,000 to 3,070,000 in those ten years (Wang, 2010).

Among the growing incidents, land expropriation by the local government is the central grievance. Reinforcing this, one survey shows that approximately 65 percent of collective action incidents are in response to the local government’s farmland expropriation (Wang, 2006). As part of this discontent, peasants sometimes have been known to burn government offices; local officials may ask policemen to arrest the participants in order to quell the protests (Cai, 2008; Li & O’Brien, 2008; Walker, 2008; Wang, 2010). In fact, such repression neither wipes out the protests as the officials think nor solves any problems the farmers claim. Conversely, it intensifies the conflicts in a way that aggrieved farmers, driven by the desire for survival, never stop searching for new ways to express their grievances.

Under these circumstances, the landless farmers of China discovered that their complaints and grievances may simply be blocked by the local officials when using only traditional protest tactics and petitions. They therefore turned to the Internet – an open and free expressing space – to frame grievances and vulnerabilities, generate public opinion, and mobilize mass support, expecting eventually to achieve a fairer settlement of their claims. In this sense, the two cases examined in this analysis - the Wang Shuai Incident and the Wu Baoquan Incident - reflect a new and influential trend of online collective action on behalf of grassroots people in China that demands attention.
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Social movement theory has increasingly addressed the significance of framing for understanding collective action, in addition to using traditional political opportunity, resource mobilization, and social-psychological perspectives. Framing refers to an ongoing, purposive, and selective process of constructing and amplifying shared meanings, messages, ideas, and beliefs to effectively mobilize support for an issue or cause (Benford & Snow, 2000; Dardis, 2007; Zald, 1996). In Dardis’ words, for example, social movement scholars “have investigated phenomena associated with the strategies and tactics employed by various sociopolitical actors who attempt to shape public perceptions regarding important issues” (2007, p.247). Snow and Benford (1988) note “framing signifies the production and maintenance of meaning by movement actors for supporters, adversaries, and observers” (cited in Dardis, 2007, p.248).

Although social movement scholars (e.g., Dardis, 2007; Entman, 1993; Snow & Benford, 2000) use different perspectives to define framing, they generally agree that activists need to frame salience in a strategic and tactical way to shape public opinion and facilitate action on the issues. This is the most important part of what framing means for collective action. Salience refers to “making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences” (Entman, 1993, p.53). To achieve salience, framing generally needs to comprise three essential components: 1) defining a problem, 2) diagnosing a causal agent, and 3) suggesting a remedy (Benford & Snow, 2000; Dardis, 2007; Entman, 1993). Through three consecutive steps, the most important message regarding identified problems, blamed agents, and suggested solutions is
transmitted and distributed to targeting receivers who are central to develop public voice and opinion.

Framing theory can be applied to examine a new type of social movement in the Internet era: online collective action. The development of Internet technology transforms the traditional face-to-face interaction to a new virtual form of communication primarily dealing with written language, text, pictures, video, and the like. Such a transformation provides framing theory already emphasizing language and message-building with an unprecedented platform to guide public perception in social movements. The Internet is a new communication medium through which I explain framing dimensions of protests on behalf of Chinese landless farmers.

3.1 Framing and Collective Action

Framing is rooted in the work of Goffman (1974). Goffman states that frames are “‘schemata of interpretation’ that enable individuals to ‘locate, perceive, identify, and label’ occurrences within their life space and the world at large” (cited in Benford & Snow, 2000, p.614). This statement indicates that how people perceive social reality is largely determined by how framing constructs that reality. A person may not believe what he/she sees, hears, or reads in the first place; after actors, activists, the media, or dominant groups tactically create a repetitive process of framing, however, the message becomes strengthened and embedded in his/her mind, eventually directing him/her towards believing it.

During the interactive and ongoing framing process, a cultural element of shared values and beliefs called “collective identity” is developed and shaped. Fostering
collective identity relies on “how organizers ‘frame’ their issues in a way that resonates with potential recruits by linking participants’ grievances to mainstream beliefs and values in the hopes of influencing public opinion and events” (Snow & Benford; & Benford cited in Carty and Onyett, 2006, p.234). Polletta (2001) suggests that such collective identity “may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and is distinct from personal identities’ (quoted in Carty and Onyett, 2006, p.234). The online collective action regarding the issues of Chinese landless farmers examined here demonstrates this. Even though not every participant and supporter experiences difficulties in land expropriation by the local government in their life, the issue commonly reflects ordinary people’s dissatisfaction and frustration with governmental authorities. In this regard, the discontent is ripe for influence from the framing processes of collective action episodes.

Building on the above, Entman (1993) claims that “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p.52). Entman (1993) details the purposes of effective issue-framing:

Frames, . . . , define problems—determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; diagnose causes—identify the forces creating the problem; make moral judgments—evaluate causal agents and their effects; and suggest remedies—offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects [all italics original]. (pp.52)
Therefore, framing, as a message-building strategy, to be effective, influential, and salient, should comprise three consecutive and interlinked steps: identifying a problem; evaluating and blaming culpable agents; and suggesting remedies and solutions (Benford & Snow, 2000; Dardis, 2007; Entman, 1993), steps I now discuss.

3.1.1 Identify Problems

Problem identification is regarded as “diagnostic framing” (Benford & Snow, 2000) that “focuses attention on an issue, helps shape how the issue is perceived, and identifies who or what is culpable, thereby identifying the targets or sources of the outcomes sought” (Cress & Snow, 2000, p. 1071). It is commonly known how a doctor diagnoses a patient. The doctor first needs to find out what problem the patient is currently experiencing and how serious that problem is. In a similar fashion social movement organizers “diagnose” a social issue. They must precisely tell “targeting receivers” what that issue is and why it needs to be an “issue” in the identification stage.

To make as many “receivers” as possible believe that something is a significant issue worthy of collective action, some scholars emphasize the significance of “injustice frames” (in particular Gamson, Fireman, & Rytina, 1982) by identifying an authority’s action as unjust and the victims and then amplifying that victimization (Benford & Snow, 2000). McCarthy, Smith, and Zald (1996) point out that an essential task in social movements is to “frame social problems and injustices in a way that convinces a wide and diverse audience of the necessity for and utility of collective attempts to redress
them” (p.291). Carty and Onyett (2006) further elaborate Taylor and Van Dyke’s (2003) notion on injustice frames:

Acting collectively requires the development of solidarity and an oppositional consciousness that allows a challenging group to identify common injustices, to oppose those injustices, and to define a shared interest in opposing the dominant group or resisting the system of authority responsible for those injustices.

(pp.234)

Social movement activists select a certain issue (e.g., illegal land expropriation in this analysis) and frame the collective beliefs so that the public perceives the issue as unjust and contentious. Furthermore, activists target their messages against the authority believed responsible for that injustice and contention. Applying this to the Internet era, Aelst and Walgrave (2002) report that “websites could possibly sustain the formation of such a shared frame by giving information, stressing the same elements of the issue, and organizing discussion and interaction on the subject” (p.476). Such an idea is especially important in this analysis in that injustice frames and collective action are important for challenging illegal land expropriation by the local government in China.

3.1.2 Evaluate Culpability

Once a salient and unjust issue is identified, the organizers move to the second step: assessing the identified problem, finding out who is responsible for that problem, and collectively targeting the culpable agents. Anderson (1991) emphasizes that,
“blaming is a pervasive social behavior. *Who’s to blame?* [italics original] is an almost reflex response when things go wrong” (as quoted in Dardis, 2007, p.251). Accordingly, organizers must adopt the most effective strategies to persuade constituents and potential supporters to attribute blame for a problem on the targets being challenged by activists. Depending on the reaction of the targets and the response of supporters, the organizers may need to modify or strengthen their strategies to sustain collective action.

More importantly, Dardis (2007) argues that “harmful events especially tend to elicit a strong desire to identify a blameworthy culprit, and greater responsibility usually is assigned to a culprit when an event is more severe or when greater harm is done” (p.251). It is clear that the issue the organizers choose to identify in the “diagnosis framing” stage largely determines the subsequent effects of blaming. From a social-psychological viewpoint, messages that can produce large-scale echo among people are more likely to stimulate massive voice in terms of shared values, ideas, and beliefs that hold them together. Being a country with 60% rural population, farmland loss in China resulting from the local government’s illegal expropriation action is a salient, noticeable, harmful, and unjust issue for both farmers affected and the country as a whole.

### 3.1.3 Suggest Remedies and Solutions

Collective action frames propose a solution to an identified problem that specifies what needs to be done as their primary goal. Snow and Benford (1988) call this stage “prognostic framing”. They clarify that the purpose is “not only to suggest solutions to the problem but also to identify strategies, tactics, and targets” (1988, p.201). Activists
should take strategic and tactical framing into consideration when proposing solutions so that potential goals of collective action can become achievable.

Dardis (2007) asserts that “the offering of solutions in relation to a specified problem may enhance individuals’ acceptance or evaluations of a message, and thereby may lead individuals to agree more with the notions promoted by the message’s source” (p.252). In other words, a credible and reasonable solution can help clearly guide participants and focus public concern to the blamed target. Participants wish to make some social changes through collective action. Providing solutions for the identified problem therefore make this goal possible. Otherwise, participants would be lost and confused about what their action needs to be taken to deal with the identified problem and the culpable agent.

3.1.4 Framing Persuasion

Researchers distinguish strong and weak framing which produce different effects on collective action. Strong framing indicates extensive persuasion while weak framing is typically unconvincing (Chong & Druckman, 2007). To create powerful effects, scholars commonly believe that the framing must maintain consistency in the three stages noted above, which taken together has been referred to as “consensus mobilization” (Klandermans, 1988), or “frame alignment” (Snow & Benford, 1988). More specifically, frame alignment refers to “the linkage of individual and SMO (social movement organization) interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values, and beliefs and SMO activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary” (Snow et al as cited in Snow & Benford, 1988, p.198). In this sense, activists should pay
particular attention to connect individual values with collective beliefs, mobilizing massive numbers of people to participate in collective action. The cases in my study seem only to matter to farmers’ individual interests at first glance, but widespread public participation profoundly implies that others have more or less the same shared grievances with the governmental authorities and society as the landless farmers.

In addition to maintaining consistency, scholars from social movement, communication, and public persuasion literatures address the credibility of both activists and framed issues that contributes to persuasion. Benford and Snow (2000) focus more on the “credibility of the proffered frame and its relative salience” (p.619) while Klandermans suggests “the higher the discrepancy and the lower the credibility, the lesser the impact” (1988, p.191). Benford and Snow (2000) further emphasize a widely accepted belief “that speakers who are regarded as more credible are generally more persuasive” (p.620). In this respect, public reputation, social status, and education, etc. are important elements for measuring the credibility.

With regard to the issues of Chinese landless farmers in this research, the fact that the most authoritative and influential national media engage in the Wang Shuai Incident but pay limited attention to the Wu Baoquan Incident can explain the dynamics of framing persuasion that effectively and sufficiently mobilize public support in a very short time period.

3.2 Importance of the Internet and New Media Accounts in Social Movements

Apart from being a traditional communication tool, the Internet is regarded as a news medium that has become important to social movements. It not only uploads and
exchanges information among netizens but also plays a growing role in initiating public opinion and mobilizing public support for collective action. Here, netizen, a new concept emerging in this virtual world, refers to a net citizen with no geographical and time boundaries, which is different from the term citizen, a geographic or national definition (Hauben, 1997).

Moreover, new media outlets in the digital age signify a collection of online information from both independent websites and electronic versions of traditional media including televisions, radio programs, and newspapers. These new media are typically able to expand and reinforce the powerfulness and influence of framing messages that are usually led by the traditional media, which easily foster public voice and concern in a relatively short time to facilitate online collective action.

3.2.1 Importance of the Internet in Social Movements

With the rapid development of computer and Internet technology, there has been a booming growth in scholars examining new forms of online activism, particularly with regard to transnational and global social movements. Adams and Roscigno (2005) believe the Internet proves “to be a valuable resource to social movement organizations striving to disseminate information and attract new members” (p.775). The Internet has important characteristics such as being an inexpensive, efficient, and interactive tool for “disseminating organizational information/propaganda to a mass audience” (Adams & Roscigno, 2005, p.763), “communicating grievances, sharing and expanding communication” (Carty & Onyett, 2006, p.230), and integrating and uniting mass support across the country as well as the world in a short time (Carty, 2002). The Internet
reduces “the cost of conventional forms of participation” and creates “new low-cost forms of participation, ultimately contributing to an upsurge in participation” (Leizerov cited in Garrett, 2006, p.5). With such few social and personal costs, Adams and Roscigno (2005) further point out that chat rooms, bulletin boards, public forums, blogs, and e-mail lists can form a sense of community and collective identity for those who share similar and common beliefs and values but were previously disconnected.

It is particularly worth noting that the Internet provide grassroots, disadvantaged and powerless people with an unprecedented channel to receive extensive information, and more importantly, to “raise issues, publish ideas, and present arguments” (Witschge, 2008, p.80). The nature and structure of the Internet with opportunities such as blogging and web forums foster interactive posting. As Engel (2001) claims, every single web page is “a collection of meanings which together pose an argument, which together tell a story” (p.307). In short, the Internet allows any netizen to upload, comment, and expand messages on websites with no need for traditional face-to-face interaction. With regard to Chinese landless farmers, as a new disadvantaged group, they use the Internet to mobilize public support and concentrate media attention, demonstrating advantages and significances of the Internet development in online collective action.

### 3.2.2 New Media Outlets and Functions

In addition to functioning as a cheap and central means of information dissemination, the Internet becomes “one of the newest and most accessible media outlets” (Adams & Roscigno, 2005, p.763). Furthermore, the Internet transforms traditional print and broadcast media such as newspapers, magazines, televisions and
radios. Because of growing awareness of both challenges and advantages generated by the Internet, print and broadcast media establish their own websites – an electronic version of their conventional format. The official websites of traditional media forms usually duplicate their daily published news reports and add new elements such as open forums and blogs.

The news media plays an important role and has a key function in framing, and researchers address the media significance in channeling, mobilizing, and hindering collective action. Boykoff (2006) agrees noting that “the mass media constitute a crucial site for the construction of reality, an ever-unfolding discursive locale that influences public opinion on social issues and delimits societal assumptions and public moods” (p.202). Kloby (2004) and Garrett (2006) add further to this discussion claiming that media tactics not only lead to the public understanding and interpretation of a variety of events but also generate pressure directed at the culpable agents through public framing process. Orum and Dale (2009) concur, arguing that “the way people attribute responsibility about things . . . depends largely on the way the media construct and tell the story . . . They not only furnish images, but they provide a very powerful representation of the way we actually think about the world” (p.276). The media therefore not just objectively or neutrally reports the news to their audiences, but more profoundly shape public opinion and construct the social world by selecting some aspects of events while omitting other parts on behalf of their controllers’ wishes and demands.

The mass media plays another vital role in reaching “a much larger audience than social movement actors can reach directly” (McCarthy, Smith, & Zald, 1996, p.291). They explain that activists generally lack “routine access to political decision-makers and
therefore must rely primarily on ‘outsider’ strategies to draw the attention of publics and policy makers to the problems they wish to have resolved” (p.291). Under such circumstances, the media becomes the indispensable “outsider”.

Regarding how to catch this “outsider’s” attention, from the newsworthy viewpoint, events with famous, important, new, unusual, and powerful characteristics are “more likely to become news” (McCarthy, Smith, & Zald, 1996, p.297). Reporting the “interesting” news, the media thus can “convey information, evoke emotional response, dramatize events, and focus attention” (Zald, 1996, p.270). Different degrees of news media coverage involved in the two cases suggest that activists should be aware of the newsworthy viewpoint to trigger journalists’ interest in reporting collective action, widely spreading framing messages to target audiences including ordinary people, authorities, and policy-makers.

3.3 Summary

Framing is an important perspective for social movement scholars to examine collective action, particularly online collective action in the information age. It focuses on message-building strategies in a way that activists wish audiences and receivers to perceive social realities and social issues. The purpose of the whole framing processes from problem diagnosis to suggestions for remedies is to use the most influential, powerful, effective, and persuasive language to construct that certain reality that can evokes large-scale echoes in terms of shared beliefs and values among the public. The media plays such a vital role in this constructing meaning and beliefs.
Development of the Internet allows a rapid growth in the influence and significance of media framing, in particular its inexpensive and fast characteristics make messages instantly spread and distributed to large-scale netizens with no time and space boundaries. As a result, compared to traditional media relatively constrained by certain time and space, new media outlets reveal an increasing significance in channeling and sustaining online collective action through framing processes. This research regarding Chinese farmers’ grievances demonstrates these dynamics in the Internet era.
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODS

To systematically compare and investigate the research questions, I perform qualitative content analysis of online materials. By “qualitative” I mean that the collected data is not converted to a statistical format. Content analysis is “a research method for systematically analyzing and making inferences from text” (Schutt, 2001, p.329). Further articulating this definition, Babbie (2001) summarizes that “content analysis is the study of recorded human communications” (p.304). This definition explicitly points out that content analysis largely deals with analyzing messages, texts, and language. Therefore, newspapers, television and radio programs, web pages, books, letters, historical documents, and speeches, etc. are particularly suitable data for this type of study.

My research analyzes written language posted online and examines its dynamics and the underlying meaning that is important for mobilizing online collective action. In this regard, qualitative content analysis is appropriate for my study. According to Schutt (2004), this method was “first applied to the study of newspaper content and then to the analysis of Nazi propaganda broadcasts in World War II” (2004, p.440). With the advancement of computer technology, the study of content analysis on web pages and newspapers has increased significantly. In 2007, Rauch, Chitrapu, Eastman, Evans, Paine, and Nwesige, for example, utilized New York Times coverage between 1999 and 2004 on the World Trade Organization protests to examine how the media framed globalization movements across countries. Such analysis was also used by Boykoff (2006) to examine the global justice movement. Boykoff used six influential America newspapers (e.g., the Washington Post, USA Today) and the five dominant television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and FOX) to collect news reports regarding the 1999
anti-World Trade Organization protests in Seattle and the 2000 World Bank/IMF protests in Washington, DC. Using the same approach, my analysis examines online content from the seven influential Chinese websites, focusing on two cases regarding Chinese landless farmers and their land expropriated by the local government.

4.1 Data Collection

Using Alexa Traffic Rank, a global professional web database, I selected six sites in October 2009 from the top 100 websites in China as the source of my data: cctv.com, people.com.cn, sina.com.cn, sohu.com, tianya.cn, and xinhuanet.com. Alexa, a web information company based in the United States, provides the top million global websites available by country, language or category (alexa.com, n.d.). In addition, I also include cyol.net in my sample. This website is the electronic version of China Youth Daily, the official newspaper of Communist Youth League of China (cyol.net, 2009), which I incorporate because it was the first newspaper in China to report the Wang Shuai Incident. This website also extensively spreads the messages to other media and the Internet and concentrates abundant news coverage and comments for understanding the emergence and progress of this case.

Alexa Traffic Rank is measured by pageviews (PV) combining the number of users that visit a website and the number of pages viewed by each user during a given period of time (directtrafficmedia.co.uk, n.d.). To be specific, PV means the total number of pages that all users visit a website during a given period of time, regardless of how many hits are generated (alexa.com; net.cn, n.d.; opentracker.net, n.d.). For example, one hundred users visit a website in a day, and each user visits five pages, so the pageviews =
100×5, or = 500. However, a pageview can generate multiple hits. In another good example, a page contains five pictures and five graphics; a user hit all these images when he/she visits this page. In this case, only one page view is counted while 11 hits (5 for the pictures, 5 for the graphics, and 1 for the html file) are generated in this page because every image in a page can be separated as an individual file. PV therefore can better show how popular a website is (alexa.com, n.d.; opentracker.net, n.d.) as the larger the number of pageviews is, the more visitors a website attracts, the more large-scale audience a website attracts.

As presented in Table 1, yesterday and 3 months ago are chosen as the two time points to show the general trend of credibility and stability of each selected site. From the two pairs of numbers in this table, it is clear that the yesterdays’ pageviews in the seven sites only slightly fluctuate around the average pageviews in the last three months. This trend significantly reflects the credibility and reliability of these websites among the audience and the public in China. The seven websites, therefore, provide plausible and reliable sources to examine the two cases regarding Chinese landless farmers’ issues and to analyze patterns and dynamics of online collective action.
Table 1

Pageviews on the Selected Websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sites name</th>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>Daily pageviews per user</th>
<th>Global pageviews (%)</th>
<th>Rank in China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cyol.net*</td>
<td>yesterday</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.00024</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 months ago</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>0.00033</td>
<td>1100*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cctv.com</td>
<td>yesterday</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.0065</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 months ago</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>0.01057</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People.com.cn</td>
<td>yesterday</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>0.0143</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 months ago</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>0.01494</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xinhuanet.com</td>
<td>yesterday</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>0.0162</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 months ago</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>0.02071</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tianya.cn</td>
<td>yesterday</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>0.0537</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 months ago</td>
<td>5.68</td>
<td>0.07084</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sohu.com</td>
<td>yesterday</td>
<td>7.51</td>
<td>0.1202</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 months ago</td>
<td>7.96</td>
<td>0.15172</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sina.com.cn</td>
<td>yesterday</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>0.3045</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 months ago</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.3706</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baidu.com**</td>
<td>yesterday</td>
<td>16.95</td>
<td>1.535</td>
<td>1**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 months ago</td>
<td>17.27</td>
<td>1.4957</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google.com ***</td>
<td>yesterday</td>
<td>12.74</td>
<td>5.336</td>
<td>1***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 months ago</td>
<td>12.03</td>
<td>5.0106</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Although cyol.net – the electronic version of China Youth Daily - does not rank in the top 100 sites, it plays an important role in analyzing dynamics of the Wang Shuai Incident.

** Baidu.com, the popular search engine in China, ranks the first among the top 100 sites in China. The statistics of pageviews and percent of global pageviews listed in table 1 make general sense to the meaning of numbers of selected seven sites.

*** Google.com, the global search engine, ranks the first among the top 500 sites on the web. The purpose to include its pageviews and the percent in table 1 is also to help better understand how popular and competitive the seven selected sites are.

Source: Alexa (Alexa.com) retrieved on April 10, 2010
In general, there are three dominant national media in China: the state TV station (CCTV), the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China’s (CCP) newspaper (People’s Daily), and the national news agency (Xinhua News Agency) (cctv.com, 2007; people.com.cn, 2003; xinhuanet.com, 2000). They generally represent the central government’s voice. cctv.com, people.com.cn, and xinhuanet.com are respectively their online versions, building an interactive bridge between the government and the public. Important social issues and public opinion can reach to the central policy-makers by means of these bottom-up communication channels. During the Wang Shuai Incident, these three media along with cyol.net extensively engaged in reporting and organizing online discussions. For this reason, they are important sources for my research.

The four websites, cctv.com, cyol.net, people.com.cn, and xinhuanet.com, not only update their own daily news articles published in their traditional paper format but also contain extensive coverage reported by other media (e.g., Nan Fang Du Shi Bao, Fazhi Daily, Xinjing Daily) as well as provide discussion forums and blogs for the public to engage in dialogue on important issues. For consistency reasons, each traditional form and its online version are only counted as one source for duplicate reports of the incidents of interest that were posted online.

In addition to focusing on four websites, sina.com.cn and sohu.com are the two most influential commercial websites in China independently run by private companies. Tianya.cn specializes in public open forums and blogs regarding popular social issues and concerns. This website is viewed as the most important virtual community in China and is the primary grassroots voice with currently over 20 million registered members.
(tianya.cn, 2009). The first and many follow-up posts in the Wang Shuai Incident are initiated on tianya.cn.

Wang Shuai and Wu Baoquan are the real names of the two initiators who contributed to their original online posts challenging the local government’s illegal land expropriation. I choose Wang Shuai Incident and Wu Baoquan Incident for a comparative analysis based on at least three central reasons. First, they are comparable in light of their framing illegal land expropriation by the local government on the Internet. This resulted in both men being imprisoned. However, these two similar cases have contrasting results (Jiang, 2009; xinhuanet.com, 2009; Zuo, 2009), thus being important for comparisons of social movement dynamics. Second, both cases became a focal point among the public and the media within a similar time period, providing considerable and sufficient data for my analysis. Third, the two cases present a new and growing trend of online collective action in China arising from the public grievances among disadvantaged groups. This analysis seeks to understand this trend’s patterns and relationships between different agents in online collective action, thus contributing to further exploration and development of social movement theory in the information era.

4.2 Data Analysis

According to Babbie (2001), “the aim of data analysis is the discovery of patterns among the data, patterns that point to theoretical understanding of social life. The coding and relating to concepts is a key to this process” (p.365). Such is the central goal of my analysis. Coding is a procedure of classifying raw textual materials into the consistent and interlinked forms such as words, sentences, and themes necessary to analyze the
patterns and relationships of social life. To create a complete picture of the two cases in this analysis, I collect all available discussions of these from the seven websites noted above by using the search names “Wang Shuai” (王帅) and “Wu Baoquan” (吴保全) in Chinese characters. The time period for the data spans the entirety of the two cases, that is, the data in the Wang Shuai Incident is from February to May 2009; the Wu Baoquan Incident is from September 2007 to October 2010. Multiple data sources converging on the two cases came in the form of online news articles and of netizens’ comments and discussions on public forums and blogs on the Internet.

I examine available news coverage and netizens’ comments in relation to the two cases and then translate them into English by focusing on five major themes that emerge in the data. That is, 1) the initiators’ framing tactics, 2) media framing strategies, 3) mobilizing sympathy for Chinese farmers, 4) the government response to the public grievances, and 5) media importance in facilitating online collective action. The first two themes address message-building and meaning-construction by using framing strategies and tactics. The rest three explain degrees of effectiveness of framing messages that are measured by response among netizens, policy-makers, and governmental authorities. Such similar approach was used by Boykoff (2006) who coded news coverage regarding the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle in 1999 and the World Bank/IMF protests in Washington, DC in 2000 into the violence Frame, the disruption Frame, the freak frame, the ignorance frame, and the amalgam of grievances frame to analyze global justice movement. With respect to the five themes in my research, I discuss each of these in more detail as follows:
*The initiators’ framing tactics* analyze different strategies used by Wang Shuai and Wu Baoquan to identify problems, assess consequences, and suggest solutions. Framing language choices and supporting evidence primarily represent their different tactics to catch media attention and public attention.

*Media attention and framing strategies* discuss that the media purposively selects framed language and invites various interviewees including the initiators, the farmers who lose their land, professors in law and scholars in the agricultural field, and the central officials to identify and assess the local government’s illegal land expropriation. Such evocative messages make injustice framing noticeable, salient, and memorable, thus mobilizing mass support for collective action and evoking strong emotional response to the government’s wrongdoing. As a result, the local government, under great public pressure, is forced to apologize to the public.

*Mobilizing sympathy for farmers* partly explains the underlying reason for why so many netizens in a short time engage in collective action, even though some are not familiar with the issues as are the landless farmers. This implies the phenomenon that the public are more likely to be sympathetic to the disadvantaged people and challenging the local government, thus reflecting widespread public support for the collective action and dissatisfaction with the local government that is widely viewed responsible for their landless farmers’ vulnerability.

*The government response to the public grievances* discusses contrasting ways that the two involved governments act in response to the public concern and media framing. This also will further demonstrate the importance of framing strategies and media framing in sustaining collective action and correcting the government’s wrongdoing.
Finally, *media importance in online collective action* is successfully reflected and presented through netizens’ comments and the media’s widespread reports on the contrasting outcomes between the two cases. In this sense, the media not only facilitates collective action but also strengthens public perception of the media’s power.

In sum, the methods’ discussions provide rationales for the cases’ selection and qualitative content analysis that I perform in this analysis. All five themes noted above address the importance of both consistent framing tactics and media involvement from different perspectives, central to understand framing theory in the Internet era and my research questions.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

My findings focus on the five major interlinked themes discussed above. Each theme illustrates a different component of the two cases that come together to answer the central research question – how and why two similar issues are framed to contrasting outcomes - proposed in the introduction. Findings systematically reveal that Wang Shuai and Wu Baoquan greatly differ in framing tactics regarding the landless farmers’ grievances in light of illegal land expropriation by the local government. Furthermore, differences between media framing and attention in the two cases demonstrate the media’s vital role in facilitating collective action and determine its outcomes.

In both the media and the initiators’ framing strategies, word and language selection and supporting evidence become basic units for analyzing framing dynamics in this analysis. Through a comparative analysis, it becomes clear how actors consistently function together to make one collective action successful while fragmented framing makes the other one a failure. An unjust and harmful issue can evoke a very strong emotional response from the public and mobilize wider support. Findings reveal applicability and effectiveness of framing theory for examining online collective action.

5.1 Wang Shuai Incident: Consistent and Concise Framing

In the successful case referred to as the “Wang Shuai Incident”, both Wang Shuai and the media address the Lingbao government’s illegal land expropriation and its inadequate compensation to the farmers. Their most important framing tactics throughout the incident is to use the legal arguments based and the central government’s policy regarding land expropriation as supporting evidence for identifying the problems.
According to the Land Administration Law of China, any local government must get approval from the State Council if seized land is more than 1,050 mu. With strong support from the law, Wang Shuai and the media point out that the Lingbao government, with no permission and approval from the State Council, expropriated 42,000 mu of land (28 square kilometers) for industrial development and construction. On February 24, 2009, for example, Wang Shuai on tianya.cn identified this illegal land expropriation:

Lingbao city government of Henan Province expropriated 42,000 mu of farmland of Dawang Town. Below is the official announcement file (a copy of the document provided online) . . . But why is there not approved file from the State Council written in your official announcement of land expropriation? It would be extremely ridiculous if it’s not illegal land expropriation! Let we all netizens come together and use every means and tool to spread this post to your QQ chatting group, blogs, and public forums; use mailing lists to email all Chinese people whom you know and don’t know!

In the media framing, “42,000 mu“, “28 square kilometers”, and “illegal” become the most widely used words, emphasizing the framing of the complaint and making the issue noticeable and memorable to the public. These numbers signify that a very large amount of farmland was illegally expropriated by the Lingbao government. In this context, using the fact itself to state the local government’s illegal action is the central framing tactic of Wang Shuai. In a parallel fashion of media framing, China Youth Daily, for example, highlights that the local government “occupies 28 square kilometers of land, but only 0.33 square kilometers are officially approved.” The first part of the sentence
points out how much land is actually “occupied” by the local government; the second part indicates how much land is approved for expropriation. This framing tactic not only catches the public’s eye, but more importantly, implies a very clear message that such land expropriation action is illegal.

While China Youth Daily’s framing tactic subtly implies the illegal land expropriation of the local government, CCTV’s special guest, a law expert from China University of Political Science and Law, professor He Bing, explicitly states that the Lingbao government’s land expropriation is illegal because it violates the law. He comments on this issue in the News 1+1 program in CCTV:

(The Lingbao government’s) expropriated land is absolutely illegal. I don’t need to spend too much time investigating it and I know this for sure… 28 square kilometers! How can (the government) have that right? Those 28 square kilometers must be approved by the State Council . . . (The Lingbao government) illegally expropriated land. Its action resulted in farmers losing their land. This is illegal action.

As the vice president of the law school at the university, He Bing’s identity and the university’s reputation in China make his comments more persuasive and authoritative to the receivers. Regarding the framing tactics, He Bing directly and precisely identifies the government’s action as illegal (e.g., “absolutely illegal”, “illegally expropriate land”, and “illegal behavior”) to reveal a strong emotional dissatisfaction with the government. In the six-page-long transcript, the word illegal is used nine times, embedding the government’s illegal behavior in those who hear it with He Bing’s
framing. The media’s framing tactics and attitude toward the government’s action are clearly and fully expressed through He Bing’s tone of comments. They stand on He Bing’s side criticizing the government’s illegality, indicating their support for the landless farmers. These framing words effectively mobilize great contentiousness from the public targeting the Lingbao government.

In addition to precisely identifying the illegal land expropriation, Wang Shuai and the media also make clear with their framing strategies that the local government did not sufficiently compensate those farmers for their expropriated land and their settlement expenses according to the law. They both state that the economic compensation of the expropriated land should include land compensation, settlement compensation, other physical objects built on the land (e.g., houses), and crops growing on land (e.g., potatoes, rice). The Lingbao government, however, does not pay the first two types of compensation money to the farmers whose land is seized. China Youth Daily, for example, reported, “the villagers of Dawang town only received compensation for the tangible objects built on the land and crops growing on the land, the other types of compensation are not mentioned at all.” Further articulating this, China Youth Daily used Wang Shuai’s family as a representative example noting that they “should have attained (compensation) of 600,000 Yuan, but in fact they only received 40,000 Yuan (from the government).” This framing points out a huge gap between what should have been done and what is actually done. The local government generated the injustice and unfairness, and the gap in compensation and subordination of its people need to be corrected.

Meanwhile, people.com.cn in conjunction with tianya.cn organizes an interactive discussion online between Wang Shuai, an agricultural expert, and netizens on April 10
2009. The national television station CCTV reports the “Wang Shuai Incident” in the three most well-known programs in China: News Focus, News 1+1, and People in the News between April 14 and 27 2009. News Focus (焦点访谈) is shown during what is considered the Chinese equivalent of “prime time” and is the most influential and powerful show on television. All media outlets commonly emphasize the two problems – land expropriation with no approval from the State Council and inadequate compensation to the landless farmers- and view the Lingbao government’s behavior as illegal.

After identifying the two important problems, Wang Shuai and the media assess the repercussions of the government’s wrongdoing for the landless farmers. China Youth Daily reports that the land expropriation will cause “approximately 30,000 farmers to lose their land.” Moreover, inadequate compensation from the local government results in sharp decrease in the landless farmers’ quality of life. In China Youth Daily on April 16 2009, Wang Hongru described the landless farmers’ vulnerability by using Wang Shuai’s father as an example:

The villager Wang Sheping points out his four fingers in front of the journalist. “40, 000 Yuan! Last year my apple trees helped my family earn exactly 40,000 Yuan income! Now after the land for the fruit trees is expropriated, my family’s annual income is less than 5,000 Yuan. Each family member only has 3 Yuan per day for survival … No land to grow crops, relying on such little money can’t satisfy the hunger at all!”
The farmers’ misery resulting from illegal land expropriation and inadequate compensation is expressed in this example that the media purposively selected to frame the discussion on the issues. Wang Sheping’s appeal and survival instinct tell how harmful the government’s behavior is and transmit a strong message to the public that “the local government is wrong” and causes this misery, thus successfully mobilizing public support for online collection action. This demonstrates that the more harmfully the issue is presented, the more emotional public dissatisfaction with the government. Furthermore, the more effective support for collective action, the greater likelihood it will be that constituents mobilize.

Depending on the problems identified, suggestions for remedying the government wrongdoing become the activists’ common goal. For example, He Bing, in the News 1+1 on CCTV gives specific solutions:

The right way of solving this problem is to return the illegal expropriated land to the farmers … the Constitution clearly notes that every citizen has the right to supervise and criticize the government … the government needs to compensate (Wang Shuai for the illegal arrest).

These brief but powerful framing messages not only identify the problems and target the government as being responsible but also suggest the solutions. This helps guide and mobilize mass support. Thanks to Wang Shuai and the media’s focus on the government wrongdoing, in a very short time, a wide variety of extensive messages spread among the netizens and the public, successfully mobilized massive amounts of
online collective action, and generated unprecedented and overwhelming pressure on the Lingbao government. Online posts such as “strongly support the poster”; “we want the truth”; “let justice and righteousness protect journalists and people who are fight for injustice”; “let social justice and fairness come back”; “we support your fight for justice forever”; and “Wang Shuai is a true hero” are examples of the most common sentiments expressed in the netizen discussions.

The media’s framing also evokes public sympathy for the farmers on the Internet in the form of many responses: “please save and help farmers”; “farmers live in the bottom of society”; “cry for the farmers”; “farmers are the most kind and most vulnerable group”; “care about landless farmers”; and “strongly support farmers to defend their legal interests”. Such ideas become the dominant slogans among netizens on tianya.cn, people.com.cn, and xinhuanet.com websites. Further elaborating the importance of land to farmers and the injustice of it being illegally expropriated, one netizen notes on tianya.cn: “land is peasants’ ‘livelihood root’; land is the ‘rice bowl’ of the lower social classes. For peasants, losing their land is equal to taking their life away.”

The case represents the importance of public sympathy for the disadvantaged people and their likelihood to challenge the governmental authorities, thus reflecting the massive support for the farmers’ cause and dissatisfaction with the government. Such shared identity and beliefs flourish on tianya.cn, people.com.cn, and xinhuanet.com. The representative examples for this are “You are the son of farmers, me too. I know your helplessness. I support you”; “Such thing (land expropriation issue) is very normal, happens everywhere”; “Wang Shuai represents justice and righteousness”; “We Chinese farmers are very proud of you”; and “My hometown also has a similar land expropriation
issue . . . We all are disadvantaged people. So I support the poster!!!!!!!!!!!” On April 16 2009, one user further commented on tianya.cn: “We support Wang Shuai because he belongs to the disadvantaged. A powerless person challenges and confronts the authority and power.” Taken together, these comments signify shared identity and values among the participants and the representative characteristics of the case for this analysis.

Challenged by such intense public concern, the Lingbao government reveals two completely different public faces. At the beginning, the local government not only claims that Wang Shuai’s post “ruins the image of the government” but also strongly disagree with the media reports. The best example for this is from China Youth Daily where one local official representative expressed his obvious anger with the Wang Shuai’s post:

This person (Wang Shuai) totally makes no sense . . . his post is absolutely made-up slanderous, and ruins the government’s reputation . . . The procedure of land expropriation is completely legal, only some villagers have some opinions about compensation . . . Doing such a (non-sense and slanderous) thing needs to get punished and learn some lessons from it in order not to make mistakes next time.

The local government’s response to the media representation of the incident illustrates that the government simply wants to use its power to repress and punish a powerless person representing and fighting for landless farmers’ interests. This emotional expression signifies the government’s extreme anger with the fact that its power and authority has been challenged by an otherwise powerless individual. He Bing’s analysis in the News 1+1 on CCTV is a good example to reinforce this perception: “(The Lingbao
government) still uses a very traditional way of thinking, that is, it thinks its power can control or repress public opinion.” The government’s irrational and irresponsible response was quickly smothered by overwhelming public opinion and criticism. Strong emotions and discontent are revealed on the discussion forums targeting the local government and its actions, with posts such as “irrational”; “unacceptable”; “shameful”; “mad”; “corrupted officials”; “overuse power and authority”; “strongly require the government to apologize”; “is it that difficult to admit the mistake?” and so forth, revealing common sentiments. Other posts further challenge the government: “Arresting the person has nothing to do with solving the problem at all but only intensify the conflicts.” While yet another adds, “Arrest! Obviously, this is not the attitude that a rational government should take towards the poster.”

With the public pressure intensely growing, eight days later, on April 16 2009, the Lingbao government had a complete turnaround in attitude. The vice governor of Henan Province, Qin Yu Hai came to the office of people.com.cn and interacted online with netizens in a public forum, making official apologies on behalf of the government. “The police made mistakes in arresting Wang Shuai. We have stopped investigating the case and made rational compensation to Wang Shuai . . . I apologize to Wang Shuai, his family, and the public.” Meanwhile, they also sent the official file regarding how to resolve the “Wang Shuai Incident” to China Youth Daily which then published it:

1. Since April 8, China Youth Daily, People’s Daily, CCTV, people.com.cn, and other websites report the Wang Shuai Incident, many law experts and netizens have paid particular attention to it . . . We truly thank media, netizens, and the
public for supervising and supporting the work of Lingbao, we are open to criticism . . . Regarding the negative effects that the response on the Information Center made, we hope friends from the media forgive (our mistakes).

2. The city government increased the compensation standards of expropriated land and settlement costs for the landless farmers. 28,000 Yuan per mu was finally decided.

These statements are obviously different from the response presented when the incident was first reported. There is no indication of the local government’s anger and arrogant attitude towards the poster or the media as was the case in the beginning when the public voice was not strong enough to create pressure. On the contrary, the local government, rather than a previously “powerful lion”, changed into a “tamed lamb” - admitting and correcting their mistakes, apologizing to Wang Shuai, the media, and netizens, while increasing compensation standards for the expropriated land. It was the public pressure created throughout Wang Shuai and the media framing process that successfully forced the government to correct its illegal behavior, demonstrating the importance of effective framing for social movements.

This official statement from He Nan Province also signifies that this online collective action regarding the Wang Shuai Incident was effective. Netizens celebrated this victory on the Internet labeling it as “ordinary people’s success”; a “netizens’ victory”; “a perfect outcome”; and “the victory of justice”. Such sentiment immediately dominated the Internet, thus exhibiting how persuasive framing messages on behalf of the
activists and the media in conjunction with accessibility of the Internet can be for this collective action and its success.

A couple of comments also stood out in particular with regard to the role of the Internet contributing to the success in the case. “We netizens are very powerful” proclaimed one activist while another added, “Wang Shuai is saved by the media and millions of netizens.” Further reinforcing the importance of the Internet, one person summarized: “Extensive follow-up posts and millions of netizens’ continuous mobilization during only a one-week time period. The Lingbao online post incident has been miraculous in the information exposure era.” Some netizens highly compliment the advantages of the Internet for grassroots efforts. “The Internet is very good” On April 10 2009, one person wrote on the tianya.cn: “the revolution of information technology brings the Internet to massive people. Here the disadvantaged people can express their opinion and make interests appealing become possible.”

5.2 Wu Baoquan Incident: Inconsistent and Ineffective Framing

Both Wang Shuai and Wu Baoquan wished to draw attention to their concerns using the Internet. Compared to Wang Shuai’s framing, however, Wu Baoquan is less consistent and strategic in his framing, using individual judgments and emotion more extensively. First, Wu Baoquan does not specify the central issues he wants to identify in a consistent way nor does he provide sufficient evidence such as the law and central government’s policy to justify his statements. Instead, his framing highly centers on abstractly summarizing and directly criticizing the government’s wrongdoing and expressing his sympathy for the landless farmers.
According to Wu Baoquan, the government expropriated land in Habagexi village and Zhaizida village in the suburb of E’er Duosi city for constructing the Kangbashi New District. On September 7, 2007, Wu Baoquan began his framing campaign on sina.com.cn: “E’er Duosi government forcefully expropriated over 50,000 mu of farmland for its interests.” In using “forcefully” he does not specify how and in what way nor does he clarify what kind of interests. Such judgmental language used to frame a problem needs supporting evidence and documentation to be convincing and justifiable.

Moreover, in the follow-up posts, Wu Baoquan showed his uncertainty and confusion about how to apply the central policy to identify the local government’s behavior. In one of his postings on tianya.cn, Wu Baoquan framed the issue as follows:

There is no official approved file from the State Council, the legality (of land expropriation) is still in dispute . . . The local officials admit, . . . , the total expropriated land of 32 square kilometers (48 000 mu) is not approved by the State Council.

Another good example that depicts similar contradicting and confusing messages to receivers from Wu Baoquan was posted on sina.com.cn: “Regarding thousands of mu of expropriated land, the local officials from the land administration department do not know whether this needs to be approved by the State Council or not.” Taken all these together, it is not very hard to say that Wu Baoquan failed to frame effective and persuasive messages from the start: clearly identifying the problems that he wanted to
resolve, thus significantly weakening subsequent effectiveness and persuasiveness of framing in later steps.

In fact, Wu Baoquan’s grievance is the same as what Wang Shuai identified: the local government expropriated large-scale land without the permission and approval from the State Council. The differences are that Wang Shuai and the media precisely identify the government’s behavior as illegal by using the central policy and law as supporting evidence. Unfortunately, although Wu Baoquan touched upon the central policy, instead of framing expropriation as “illegal” to justify action against the local government, he chose very ambiguous and confusing language such as “in dispute” and “do not know” and did not provide supporting evidence from the central government policy. Such framing language is too unclear to draw public attention and only creates confusion for the mobilization public with regard to actions to take. It is therefore hard to mobilize massive amounts of people to action. According to Wu Baoquan himself, his posts received less than 2,000 visits and around 20 comments, incomparable to 294,655 visits and 3,942 responses and comments for Wang Shuai’s posts on tianya.cn.

In addition to inconsistently and unclearly identifying the problems, Wu Baoquan is more inclined than Wang Shuai to express his personal emotion and feeling in terms of framing tactics, rather than focus on precisely diagnosing the central issues. In Wu Baoquan’s posts, a wide variety of emotional words such as “blackheart leader”; “shameful deal”; “deceptive way”; and “my heart is shocked, my eyes are blurring, (and it) makes me mad and outraged” are widely used to express how angry he is about the local government. Although emotion is important and can be a central element for social
movement success, his use, however, is not backed with sufficient evidence such as
official documents to justify his outrages and claims.

Compared to Wu Baoquan, Wang Shuai’s tactics focus objectively on describing
what the Lingbao government did, while his anger and emotion are fully and tactically
expressed through telling these facts. Frame alignment and persuasion means that an
effective framing remains consistent from problem identification to suggestions for
solutions. From this viewpoint, Wu Baoquan’s framing did not succeed in drawing both
the public and the media attention. In this sense, Wu Baoquan’s inconsistent and
judgmental framing of the issue weakens the message’s persuasiveness, failing to create
public pressure essential for the local officials holding power to correct their wrongdoing.

Furthermore, instead of directly contacting the official media partly representing
the central government’s voice, Wu Baoquan, pretending to be a “journalist”, went to the
Kangbashi New District in person and “interviewed” the villagers. As a “journalist”, he
should have listened to what the local official say regarding land expropriation, besides
hearing the villagers’ voice, a basic technique for a journalist investigating any social
issue that might create debate and dispute. However, Wu Baoquan published his
investigative results on some law and literature websites in China after only interviewing
the villagers, making his “report” subjective and unconvincing.

Wu Baoquan was noticed by the public and the media only after the Wang Shuai
Incident came to a quick end in the middle of April 2009. However, because “news”
means the latest events and stories, from a newsworthiness perspective, the fact that the
Wu Baoquan Incident that took place two years ago makes it too old to become news. In
this sense, unlike with the Wang Shuai Incident, no journalists particularly from CCTV,
People’s Daily, and China Youth Daily investigated and interviewed the principals about the land expropriation issue that Wu Baoquan claimed in the suburb of E’er Duosi city.

Under these circumstances, although Internet users also foster some support for Wu Baoquan, such as “we require the government to make explanations; please don’t avoid it”; “we care about this issue”; and “we support Wu Baoquan innocence”; the public opinion supporting Wu Baoquan is not as intense as in the Wang Shuai Incident due to a lack of media involvement and the effective framing messages. The E’er Duosi city government therefore could ignore such a feeble wave of public concern and insisted putting Wu Baoquan into jail for a year and half. No further information regarding how to solve landless farmers’ claims in the Wu Baoquan Incident is released. In this sense, whether the media - especially the prestigious and influential media - participate in framing issues and guiding public opinion or not will significantly affect the outcome of collective action when the authorities hold prevailing power over disadvantaged people.

5.3 Importance of Media Attention in Collective Action

With the successful outcome of the Wang Shuai Incident and unsuccessful end to the Wu Baoquan Incident, the media power and significance for mobilizing collective action was acknowledged by netizens and critics alike. For example, one person noted on xinhuanet.com: “if Wang Shuai’s incident didn’t become a public outrage, if the influential central media including CCTV and China Youth Daily didn’t report it, what Wang Shuai received now probably would not be a present victory but probably a much longer prison sentence.” This notion simplifies the powerfulness of the media and its framing in mobilizing public voice and concern for collective action.
The media’s importance in facilitating collective action is also demonstrated through comparing the contrasting results between the two cases. One Internet user states that “this is the difference between being focused and not being focused so we need to continue to care about Wu Baoquan” while yet another adds, “I hope CCTV concerns Wu Baoquan as much as it does Wang Shuai”. These comments imply that Wu Baoquan would be out of prison sooner if the central media paid much more attention to him.

In addition, news critics immediately appear in the media. They generally agree that “continuous public concern” and “media involvement and widespread public critical voice” effectively force the Lingbao government to correct their mistakes and save Wang Shuai. For example, “Wang Shuai is saved by the media and millions of netizens.” proclaimed one activist. China Youth Daily published an article insightfully analyzing how powerful the media mobilized Wang Shuai’s victory and outlining why Wu Baoquan suffered an opposite fate - sentenced to a year and a half in prison:

The media, once again, demonstrate the power of supervising and vanquishing the “county authority and power” . . . Wang Shuai becomes a typical successful example that relies on the media to gain justice; here media plays a leading role . . . Wu Baoquan’s experience is surprisingly similar to the Wang Shuai, but the differences are: Wang Shuai was protected and saved because of the public opinion and supervision; the arrogant authority was eventually surrendered to the public voice. However, because of not drawing media attention, Wu Baoquan’s fate is completely opposite.
This summary articulates that media framing can become a very powerful weapon to challenge the authority in collective action. The media constructs and shapes public perception in a way that it wants the public to view a social reality: who suffers? Who is culpable? What needs to be corrected? How to correct? and the like. To a series of such puzzling questions can be found answers matching both the media’s and the public’s will and effectively channeling them to mobilize collective action until a satisfactory outcome is achieved. The importance of media and concise framing discussed above reveal why and how the two similar cases resulted in the different outcomes.

5.4 Summary

In conclusion, examining the Wang Shuai Incident and the Wu Baoquan Incident suggests that for framing to be persuasive it has to be consistent throughout the whole protest process to sustain collective action. It therefore becomes essential for activists to think carefully about how to choose the most appropriate and most tactical vocabulary and language to frame their concerns. In Wang Shuai’s success, both the media and Wang Shuai focus their frames on the local government’s “illegal behavior” over and over again and its harmful repercussion for the landless farmers’ survival. Wang Shuai and the media’s mutually reinforced framing effectively create a very powerful wave of public contentiousness about the Lingbao government, eventually reaching the activists’ goal. Wu Baoquan’s failure also demonstrates these findings from a different perspective.

Findings also illustrate that the media plays an important role in channeling collective action through comparing the contrasting outcomes of the two cases by the media itself, netizens, and critics. Accordingly, social movement activists need to take the
media’s attention and involvement into significant consideration when attempting to mobilize massive support for collective action. It is true that, as a powerful “outsider”, the media does not just provide a public voice, but more importantly, it is able to reach policy-makers who can either actively respond to collective action or simply ignore it depending on how powerful and intense the media framing is. This reveals why the Wang Shuai Incident became successful while the Wu Baoquan Incident did not.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Framing theory and the data in this analysis mutually demonstrate that to mobilize and sustain collective action consistent and precise framing is needed. Applied to online collective action, it becomes essential for activists to think carefully about how to choose the most appropriate and tactical language to frame their concerns. Selecting a morally complex issue that has had harmful consequences is a powerful way to attract strong public opinion. There is a clear parallel between harmfulness of the framed issue and dissatisfaction of the public, demonstrating that the more damaging an issue is, the more likely activists will be able to mobilize support based on strength of the public sentiment.

In this study, the Lingbao government’s “illegal behavior” concisely framed by both Wang Shuai and the media is so harmful for landless farmers’ survival that it instantly evokes widespread sympathy for the disadvantaged while fostering contentiousness toward the governmental authorities. Such strong public voice creates powerful pressure to make the local government to present two completely different faces in front of the public from the beginning to the end.

Unlike Wang Shuai, however, Wu Baoquan failed to precisely identify the E’er Duosi government’s action in the first place. On the one hand, Wu Baoquan has already become aware of the Internet’s importance in drawing and mobilizing public attention, so he chose to publicize the issues online. On the other hand, what he actually did was to antagonize and fight against the local government on his own, making it an “individual fight” rather than “collective fight”. More specifically, he first publicized the land expropriation issue by the local government on his personal blog rather than more large-scale audience reaching public forums as Wang Shuai did. Without contacting any news
media, he then pretended to be a “journalist” and went to the villages by himself to “interview” the villagers. In addition to using less logical but more confusing language, all his ineffective framing tactics and messages fundamentally destined to the Wu Baoquan Incident’s failure.

Both Wang Shuai’s success and Wu Baoquan’s failure demonstrate that the media is a very powerful weapon in leading public concern for channeling collective action. Especially when the traditional media collaborate with each other online through their official websites and work together with the other new media, the Internet, this weapon’s significance and power comes forth in an unprecedented fashion as geographical and time barriers constrained in the traditional media format are broken down. In this sense, new media outlets including the Internet itself and electronic versions of the traditional media play a growing role in facilitating online collective action. As a result, activists need to take the new media’s attention and involvement into primary consideration when organizing collective action, in particular, advocating for disadvantaged people, such as Chinese landless farmers, and a large number of participants belong to the relatively powerless social classes.

The two cases also exhibit that accessibility of the Internet greatly contributed and will continue to contribute to online collective action on behalf of the grassroots efforts in China in the future. Through the two cases, the initiators, netizens, the government, and the media become more aware of the Internet’s strengths and reveal its usefulness for collective action. Different agents begin to think how best to utilize the Internet and the media to achieve their interests and goals. In this sense, online collective action in China will probably transition from the current loose and scattered form to a relatively
organized form in the long run as social movements adapt to the advantages that information and communication technologies in multiple forms have to offer.

This research has some limitations that can be further explored and examined in the future. For example, one can address the political opportunity perspective to examine how the government uses its power to suppress the activists, especially the failed case, Wu Baoquan Incident, when its authority is challenged by the powerless. The government holding prevailing power does not always play a passive role when confronted by the public voice. Even though the government’s public image is damaged after a wrongdoing is exposed, the power holders still can effectively utilize the Internet and the media to rebuild their image. This is the situation in the successful case, Wang Shuai Incident. The political opportunity perspective may thus offer additional insights on these cases but detailed analysis using this approach is beyond the scope of this research which has focused on framing theory.

Finally, this research is not just applicable to Chinese landless farmers’ grievances, but also can be generalized to analyze different social issues because activists, the media, netizens, and the governmental authorities are major stakeholders in most online collective actions throughout the world. With an increasing recognition of the Internet’s strengths, cyberspace activism or online collective action especially on behalf of relatively powerless social classes will grow and continue to grow flourish in the future as the Internet becomes more widely regarded as an important tool of social movements.
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