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# **The evolution and power of online consumer activism: illustrating the hybrid dynamics of “consumer video activism” in China through two case studies**

## **Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media**

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**Abstract:** Short videos and short-video-based social media (SVB) platforms have provided Chinese consumers with a new way to protest against businesses. However, they have received scant attention from scholars. This study aims to fill this gap in two ways. Firstly, it will contextualize this phenomenon within the literature on consumer activism, foregrounding three key phases in the evolution of online consumer activism in China. Secondly, it will analyze two case studies to provide a vivid picture of consumer video activism (CVA), disentangling its hybrid dynamics in the complex interaction between consumers, businesses, We-media<sup>1</sup>, mainstream media and the public.

## **Keywords**

Consumer Activism, Online Activism, Short Video, SVB Platform, Hybridity

## **Introduction**

To safeguard their rights and interests, Chinese consumers are developing new online consumer activism tactics. Using their mobile phones, they are recording short videos of their unsatisfactory consumption experiences, uploading them to SVB platforms where they are amplified through the interaction of multiple audiences. To date, while some studies have started to tackle online consumer activism (e.g., Handelman, 2013; Lekakis, 2013; Heldman, 2017; Kampf, 2018), there has been scant attention to the latest manifestations of Consumer Video Activism (CVA) in China. To fill this gap,

this article sheds light on how CVA unfolds in contemporary China. Inspired by the literature on three categories of online consumer activism, we firstly map and contextualize three phases in the evolution of Chinese online consumer activism. Next, we illustrate how CVA tactics can be better grasped through the application of two conceptual lenses developed by Chadwick, i.e., “political information cycle” and “hybrid media system”. These lenses are applied to analyze the hybrid dynamics of CVA tactics in two representative cases in China. This study contributes to research on online consumer activism, video activism and the history of Chinese consumer activism. It provides references, conceptual tools and empirical evidence for scholars studying the above-related fields.

### **From activism to consumer activism**

“Activism is at the heart of everything that social and political movements do.” (Saunders, 2013, p.2). In terms of the form of participation in activism, McAdam (1986) has distinguished between “high risk and cost” and “low risk and cost” activism. The former type implies that participants will be exposed to certain dangers, such as being arrested or personally injured, and they will need to invest a lot of time, energy, and resources in their contentious activities. In the latter type, participants will encounter less danger and require less time, energy, and resources to invest. Recently, manifestations of activism have become “less likely to mean radical and revolutionary action and more likely to mean moderate civic action” (Yang, 2016, p.2-3), especially with the adoption of the internet and new means of communication. As a low-risk and low-cost activism form, consumer activism has increasingly appeared in social and political movements in recent years, and it has also been assessed by scholars in various research fields, and defined in different ways (Heldman, 2017). As Hawkins (2010, p.123) has pointed out, consumer activism provides “an opportunity for relatively powerless individual consumer and workers to redress the imbalance in the marketplace.” Numerous scholars focusing on consumer activism prove that consumers worldwide adopt different forms of activism for different objectives. This kind of activism is also related to economic issues such as high prices, poor quality of products and exaggerated advertisements. Some of the key studies (e.g., Glickman, 2012; Gabriel and Lang, 2015) on consumer activism have been produced by Western scholars mainly addressing the social context of countries of the Global North.

These studies have explored this phenomenon through addressing how various *ad hoc* or organized groups of consumers employ various tactics, part of a broad repertoire of contention, to change the targets' policies. Targets can include interest groups, commercial companies, political parties, national or local governments. Other accounts address actions directed towards social injustices; environment and animal protection issues; rights of minority groups such as ethnic minorities, LGBT people, etc. These tactics include boycott, buycott, online and offline protest, responsible investing and divestment, etc. Yet, since these studies of consumer activism are mainly based on the historical and social contexts of the global North, they can only partially account for the situation of consumer activism in other parts of the world like China. To better understand online consumer activism in China and the hybrid dynamics of CVA tactics, in the next section, we reflect on three categories of online consumer activism from the perspective of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) used by consumers.

### **Understanding the online consumer activism**

It is necessary to bear in mind that activism represents an ambiguous and contested phenomenon, especially in its encounter with the Internet and various ICTs (Yang, 2016). As Yang (2009, p. 27) indicates, online activism refers to “contentious activities associated with the use of the Internet and other new communication technologies”. Furthermore, Yang stresses that online activism is not limited to the political space, and it “can take cultural and social forms without being any less contentious” (ibid, p. 28).

As one of the common issues covered in online activism (ibid), consumer activism is complex enough to warrant our attention. Online technologies have provided consumers with new tactics to achieve their goals in relation to various issues. In what follows, we have divided the literature on online consumer activism and ICTs adoption by consumers into three broad categories: traditional internet technologies (emails, online communities, websites, etc.), social media platforms and a mix of the above technologies with different offline actions. First, traditional online technologies such as emails, online communities and websites are still regarded as powerful tools for consumers around the world. For example, Minocher (2019) explores how the North American consumer activists use the online petition site “Change.org” to successfully resist and challenge corporate business moves.

In addition to traditional online websites used by consumers in their actions, social media platforms have been gradually integrated into the repertoires of consumers around the world. As one of the first researchers to empirically shed light on the consumer activism in the social media age, Heldman (2017) underlines that since the emergence of different social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, social media have “taken consumer activism to a new level in the past decade by making it easier for organized marketplace campaigns to reach more people.” (p. 9). Besides Heldman, researchers have demonstrated the positive relationship between consumer activism and different social media platforms (Handelman, 2013). For example, Lekakis (2013, p.141) demonstrates that the internet and other digital media strategies only operate as an “idealized information portal” among fair trade participants in the UK in her research about coffee activism in the global North; Eli et al (2016) examine a free social media app named “Buycott” and found out that this app was “providing a means of consumer activism, but also a tool to help consumers care for their health in their everyday shopping decisions.” (p. 68).

Although different ICTs are helping consumers to achieve their goals, it does not mean that consumers can succeed by simply adopting these technologies alone, nor that offline activities are now worthless. Recent consumer activism actions prove that consumers have adopted different online communication technologies (including traditional internet technologies and social media platforms) in conjunction with offline actions to carry out their protests (Kampf, 2018).

As shown in this section, along with the rapid and continuous evolution of ICTs, scholarly attention to how consumers use different categories of online tactics to achieve their goals has gradually become an increasing concern. Yet, the Chinese context remains understudied, especially when it comes to the analysis of recent forms of short video activism. To fill this gap, inspired by the above-mentioned three categories of online consumer activism, we next illustrate and contextualize the three key phases of online consumer activism in China. We frame them in terms of the dominant technology used by consumers to sketch the evolution path of online consumer activism and introduce the main subject of this study – the third phase of online consumer activism, i.e., CVA tactics based on SVB platforms and short videos. This review constitutes the backdrop on which we base our subsequent analysis that, drawing on Chadwick’s concepts of “political information cycle” and “hybrid media

system”, explores the hybridity of CVA tactics in two recent Chinese cases.

### **The evolution of online consumer activism in China**

In this section, we identify and illustrate three phases of online consumer activism in the Chinese context from the perspective of the online tactics used by consumers.

#### *First phase: online forums and online petitions*

Before the internet was accessible to the public in China, the possibilities for Chinese consumers to protect themselves were limited. They could file a complaint to the Chinese Consumers’ Association and other official administrations, directly taking legal actions, or protesting offline in front of the government or shopping malls. As the internet penetration rate continued to increase in China since the late 1990s, the Bulletin Board System (BBS) and online forums mushroomed (Guo, 2021), providing a new environment for Chinese consumers to enact their activism practices. One of the most paradigmatic cases that display these new possibilities is the “Toshiba Incident”. This incident proved that the consciousness of Chinese consumers and their willingness to defend their interests were raising (Overby, 2006).

In March 1999, two consumers who had bought Toshiba Laptops in the US denounced that floppy disk controllers in their laptops were defective, alleging that the faultiness of Toshiba violated the federal U.S. Computer Fraud and Abuse Act and breached national express warranties of the Uniform Commercial Code. As a result, Toshiba paid 2.1 billion US dollars in mostly non-cash compensation to these two and other consumers who also complained about the same problem. This unprecedented settlement of Toshiba had a huge impact on Chinese consumers. A Chinese consumer who bought the same Toshiba laptop also asked for compensation after hearing the settlement in the US, but did not succeed. After failing to negotiate with Toshiba’s Chinese agency at the time, she/he chose to provide all recordings of her/his conversation with Toshiba to the “Qianlong News” (Peng, 2005) exposing Toshiba’s unequal treatment. On May 22, 2000, the then vice president of Toshiba Japan came to China to hold an emergency press conference, explaining that products manufactured in China had no quality problems, so there was no need to compensate Chinese consumers (Luo, 2000). This result angered Toshiba consumers in China and their grievances began to spread rapidly on different online forums, causing a massive

boycott of the Japanese commodities movement in China. In this case, Chinese consumers achieved their goals (made Toshiba's sales plummet) by criticizing the brand and calling on the public to boycott it along with other Japanese products through online forums and cooperation with mainstream media.

In the following years, Chinese consumers gradually realized the power of the internet, becoming more familiar with using online technologies - such as the BBS mentioned above - to amplify their voices, while also developing petition websites to initiate further boycotts. For example, in the spring of 2005, they protested Japan's efforts to gain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council through online petitions and street demonstrations, calling on everyone to boycott Japanese goods. Thousands of Chinese consumers participated in these two online petitions, which attracted the attention of mainstream media at home and abroad (Reilly, 2014).

### *Second phase: social media platforms*

Since the 2010s, with the emergence of mobile social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo, the development of Chinese social media has entered a prosperous era (Lai, 2019). The development and popularity of these social media platforms have also responded to the needs of Chinese consumers. For example, in September 2011, the Chinese General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ) found that the aflatoxin M1 in Mengniu's milk products did not meet the requirements of national standards. Wang Xiaoshan, a well-known columnist in China, used Weibo to criticize Mengniu and called on consumers to boycott Mengniu after AQSIQ announced the above results. Following his appeal, many well-known Weibo users such as Luo Yonghao (a Weibo celebrity) and Ning Caishen (a renowned screenwriter) also started to call on the public to boycott Mengniu by reposting Wang's boycott declaration on Weibo, attracting the attention of several mainstream media which reported and commented on this boycott incident (Huang, 2015).

The case of Wang was only the beginning. After this, more and more Chinese consumers began to defend their interests through social media platforms such as Weibo. In February 2014, user "Caijinning" posted a message on Weibo to boycott Baihe Net (match-making website), saying that a promotion advertisement of Baihe Net seriously hurt the feelings of married and unmarried people in China, and restricted users with outdated ethical rules. In March 2017, because the government of South

Korea accepted assistance from the United States and deployed the Sade Anti-Missile System, Chinese people collectively boycotted the Korea Lotte Group and other Korean products on Weibo. In June 2020, people across the country started boycotting Fengchao's hub locker service on Weibo because they were not satisfied with the service fees charged by Fengchao. These examples show that Chinese social media have become privileged spaces for consumer activism in the last decade.

### *Third phase: SVB Platforms*

In April 2014, the "ice bucket challenge" was introduced into Weibo where celebrities posted short videos about their participation in the challenge. On August 21<sup>st</sup> 2014, Chinese actor Wu Qilong posted his challenge short video on his Weibo homepage. This 51-seconds video racked up 132,151 comments and 68,676 likes in a very short time. After Wu's video, thousands of celebrities and common Weibo users started to develop their own "ice bucket challenge" and upload their videos to Weibo. This activity marked the beginning of short videos' popularity surge in China. Since then, a growing number of Chinese people have started to register their accounts on Douyin, Kuaishou, Miaopai and other SVB platforms. With the emergence of short video technologies, Chinese consumers have acquired new ways to attract the attention of mainstream media and government departments to pressure businesses to compensate them.

Before the emergence of the CVA tactics based on SVB platforms, the social documentary film can be regarded as the earliest representative means of using video technologies to express dissatisfaction and resistance in a specific field in China (Han, 2008; Xinyu L, 2013). The social documentary was produced by social elites or professional media organisations and disseminated through video sharing websites and mainstream media. These films were able to expose social ills, drawing the public attention to these issues and urging the government to do more to cure these problems (Han, 2008). With their roots in this tradition, CVA tactics on SVB platforms make the most of the convergence between the popularization of broadband cellular networks (Li, 2019), and the rapid diffusion of SVB platforms in China. They constitute *witness videos* (Richardson, 2017) based on digital camera recordings of acts of abuse and injustice that are easily spread on digital platforms and amplified by various publics relying on the hybrid media flows of contemporary media environments



(Tedjasukmana and Eder, 2020). Their strength lies in their informative, convincing and eye-catching nature (Yu, 2021), along with the sense of credibility, immediacy and authenticity they emanate (Thorburn, 2017). CVA tactics on SVB platforms represent the third phase of online consumer activism in China. In the next section, we rely on two conceptual tools to make sense of these new forms of activism.

### **The hybridity of consumer video activism tactics**

As one of the most influential theorists who focus on media hybridity, Chadwick has developed the concept of “political information cycle” through the analysis of the hybrid news system in Britain and the bullygate affair of the then-British prime minister Gordon Brown. Political information cycles are “complex assemblages in which the personnel, practices, genres, technologies, and temporalities of supposedly ‘new’ online media are hybridized with those of supposedly ‘old’ broadcast and press media” (Chadwick, 2011, p. 3). Moreover, in the life span of a political information cycle, “the combination of news professional’ dominance and the integration of non-elite actions in the construction and contestation of news [...] are important characteristics of contemporary political communication.”

Besides the above concept, Chadwick has introduced the conceptual lens of the “hybrid media system” which is “built upon interactions among older and newer media logics” (2017, p. 4). According to him, the hybrid media system “reveals how older and newer media logics in the fields of media and politics blend, overlap, intermesh and coevolve” (ibid), developing a holistic approach to the role played by communication and information in politics. For Chadwick, contemporary media are best understood as in ‘transition’. The hybrid media system underscores the interconnection and interdependence of all relevant media avoiding dichotomous thinking about the media field. Radio, newspapers, television, websites, social media, user-generated platforms, blogs and search engines are all part of that media system. As the scholar points out, “actors create, tap, or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals and in ways that modify, enable, or disable the agency of others, across and between a range of older and newer media settings” (Chadwick, 2017: xi).

Dialoguing with Chadwick’s concept of ‘hybrid media system’, recent scholarship on digital activism (Treré, 2018) has foregrounded the hybrid nature of contemporary activism, demonstrating how activists and social movements incessantly

blend old and new media and online and offline spaces in their contentious practices. Thus, modern expressions of digital activism are defined by multiple interactions among different actors, logics, and technological formats. More specifically, hybridity is “one of the defining features of contemporary online video activism and political discourse in a digital age more generally” (Askanius, 2013: p. 1).

In this article, we disentangle the hybridity of the CVA tactics, applying Chadwick’s conceptual tools (“political information cycle” and “hybrid media system”). More specifically, we formulate the following RQ: What are the key actors, interactions and media logics that comprise the hybrid political information cycle in China in relation to CVA tactics? We investigate these tactics across two representative case studies in the Chinese context. In these tactics, “news professional” and “older” media refer to those Chinese mainstream media directly managed by the government, such as newspapers, television broadcasting stations, news sites, and their ‘tentacles’ in various SVB platforms. “Non-elite” and “newer” media refer instead to We-media based on various SVB platforms. The combination of these different media logics, we demonstrate, co-constructs a new hybrid information cycle, which has now become established as an essential part of the CVA tactics.

## **Methods and data**

This study conceives the case study as a research strategy that includes different types of data-gathering methods or procedures, and “seeks to generate richly detailed, thick, and holistic elaborations and understandings of instances or variants of bounded social phenomena [...]” (Snow and Trom, 2002: p.151). Inspired by Chadwick’s (2011) method of studying the “political information cycle” and Lei’s (2021) methods of researching Chinese food-delivery courier’s resistance, we have conducted online real-time, close observations to illustrate the dynamics of video consumer activism in contemporary China. We have compiled a dataset that contains short videos in different SVB platforms, which include news coverages in Chinese mainstream media, government departments’ responses and other relevant online content describing two selected cases: “Protest of Chengdu homebuyers” (case 1) and “Hygiene Scandal of Chinese Luxury Hotels” (case 2).

These cases were selected according to the following criteria: (1) **Short video lead:** Short video is the core medium that helps the event spread rapidly among the public.

(2) **Limited timeframe:** the case must happen no earlier than the year 2018. Because the newest the case is, the easier it is to review and collect the data. (3) **Cross-platform:** the core short-video of the case can be easily found on three representative SVB platforms in China, including Weibo, WeChat<sup>2</sup>, and Douyin. (4) **Media exposure:** the case has successfully attracted news coverage from Chinese mainstream media and We-media – at least one mainstream media has reported the case officially through their newspapers, websites, social media accounts or news apps after the case happened. (5) **Public concern:** the case should be of public concern: Weibo hot topic ranking list is the measurement of such concern. Selected cases must be positioned on the trending topic list during their period of occurrence. (6) **Government response:** the case has earned official responses from the relevant government departments. (7) **Enterprise response:** the case has earned official responses from responsible enterprises.

The data collected starts from the occurrence of each case and ends three months after that date. The advantage of doing this is to collect relevant documents to the greatest extent and then create an accurate timeline for each case. Case 1 happened on 26th June 2018, so the data collected for this case started on 26th of June 2018 and ended on 26th September 2018; the data collected for case 2 started on 14th November 2018 and ended on 14th February 2019. “Baidu”, one of the biggest search engines in China, was used for searching the news coverage in mainstream media and government responses. Other analysed SVB platforms include Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin. The data collection process was conducted in Cardiff and Beijing from January 2019 to November 2020. After the data collection process was over, we coded the data with all observational notes including: type of case, type of medium involved, time when core short videos appeared, platforms involved, specific time when media reported, content of media coverage, type of media, response time of government departments and enterprises, and responses and actions of government departments and enterprises. Based on a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2014), we generated insights about the CVA and its hybrid dynamics from the data. Moreover, the data pushed us to consider the subtle variations between the two cases.

## **The protest of Chengdu homebuyers**

### *Background*

In China, “Semi-finished” means the buyer needs to hire another interior decoration

company to decorate their apartment or house. On the contrary, “finished unit” means the buyer can directly move into the property without any extra decoration work. On October 17th, 2017, the Chengdu government released an announcement on their official website, indicating that by the end of 2020, all of the new commercial housing (except for low-rise residential buildings) and the public housing of Chengdu should gradually turn into finished residential housing. According to this announcement, real estate companies (RECs) in Chengdu must provide various decoration plans for homebuyers. The decoration plans offered by these companies are usually expensive, and homebuyers have to accept these costly plans if they want to buy a new apartment or house from these companies. However, after paying additional decoration costs, many Chengdu homebuyers found many decoration quality defects that were inconsistent with the companies’ promises, such as hollow sounding tiles, floor leakage, etc., in their new apartments or houses.

*“We want our money back!”*

“Poor quality of decoration, we want our money back!” On July 25, 2018, thousands of Chengdu homebuyers gathered in front of the main office building of Chengdu Municipal Housing and Urban-Rural Development Bureau (CMHADB), and protested against the government’s inadequate regulation on local RECs’ fraudulent behaviors. This protest had happened only a month ago. On June 26, hundreds of Chengdu homebuyers protested in the same place for the same reason. To settle the problems of these homebuyers, the deputy director of the CMHADB, Jiangming Zhao showed up and started a conversation with representatives of the protesters. According to a live audio recording posted by a WeChat public account named “杭州买房摇号管家” (Hangzhou housekeeper)<sup>3</sup> on the same day, Zhao promised on the spot that the problem would be resolved as soon as possible.

However, the CMHADB did not fulfill its promises (the joint announcement did not work yet), which led to a second protest that took place on 25 July, 2018. During the second protest, numerous short video clips about the Chengdu protest scene were emerging on various SVB platforms. To prevent this video content from being deleted by the publishers or the platforms, we saved the representative short videos in the form of screenshots and downloads. These videos were recorded and posted by the homebuyers on the scene. For example, in one of the influential videos (figure 1.1)

posted on Weibo<sup>4</sup>, thousands of homebuyers who just bought apartments or houses built by different developers gathered in front of the main office building of CMHADB. Each of them was holding a piece of white paper with the name of the apartment they bought and its developer printed on it, shouting: “Fangguanju [CMHADB], it is your negligence!”.

The contents of these videos are relatively similar. They all include scenes of the homebuyers protesting at the door of the CMHADB, but the shooting angles of some videos are different. These videos and their screenshots, together with the corresponding text descriptions can be regarded as vivid reports sent back from the scene by the homebuyers, describing what happened at the scene or outlining the incident. These contents were continuously reposted by the homebuyers and other people on Weibo (also on WeChat and Douyin) and became one of the hot topics – #成都房管局# (CMHADB) on that day (figure 1.2). By observing the text comments and reposts below the videos, we found that these contents fall into the following categories. *First*, they provide additional information about this case. *Second*, they criticize and condemn CMHADB and the developers involved. *Third*, they mention opinion leaders, citizen-media, local and national mainstream media, and relevant government departments intentionally asking them for help. *Fourth*, they ask for support from other homebuyers who have similar experiences in Chengdu or other Chinese cities. It should be noted that these four categories of contents are sometimes mixed in a comment or repost. These videos and the corresponding discussions illustrate that Chengdu homebuyers wanted to use these videos to arouse the attention of the media, relevant government departments and the general public to their demands. Next, we describe how media and government departments responded and intervened in this incident.



Figure 1.1 a screenshot of a short video posted by a homebuyer protesting at the scene



Figure 1.2 a screenshot of the hot topic

By protesting at the door of CMHUDB, and posting these short videos showing scenes of the protest on Weibo, WeChat, Douyin and other SVB platforms, Chengdu homebuyers successfully attracted the attention of the media (mainstream media and We-media) and the government. At the same time, these short videos were immediately viewed and reposted by the public directly. We-media were faster and more detailed in reporting this incident than the mainstream media, occupying the dominant position in reporting the entire incident.

Take WeChat as an example. After those Chengdu homebuyers posted short videos of protest on various SVB platforms on July 25, numerous We-media operators and accounts based on these platforms wrote or reposted articles about the protest of Chengdu homebuyers on the same day: for example, a We-media account based on WeChat named “建筑工程那些事儿” (construction news) (figure 1.3) reposted an article describing the causes and consequences of the protest of Chengdu homebuyers.

This article used eight screenshots of several short videos about Chengdu homebuyers protesting at the door of the CMHADB and some simple texts to describe the incident, which was read by 11,000 people. In this case, these short videos were constantly making waves on different SVB platforms and few mainstream media also intervened and reported on this incident. For instance, affected by these short videos and related reports posted by various We-media accounts, Sichuan InfoNews Channel sent journalists to the protest site that day (25 July, 2018) and published news reports on the case on its WeChat account.

## 突发：成都房管局大厦再次爆发大规模精装修维权！中海、融创、万科、绿地等知名开发商未能幸免！

建筑工程那些事儿 2018-07-25



来源：梦回蓉城

7月25日上午 10 时，成都市房管局大厦聚集了上千名群众，再次爆发大规模精装修维权。





Figure 1.3 a screenshot of the article posted by “construction news”

### *Outcomes and lessons*

The short videos posted by the Chengdu homebuyers on various SVB platforms and related articles reported by the media prompted the further dissemination of information associated with the offline protest of Chengdu homebuyers. This protest forced the local government to publicly intervene in this case to help those people to solve the problem. This clearly shows how short videos are particularly powerful in leveraging hybrid media flows to mobilize the public’s attention and attract media coverage, pressing relevant government departments to act to solve the issue at stake.

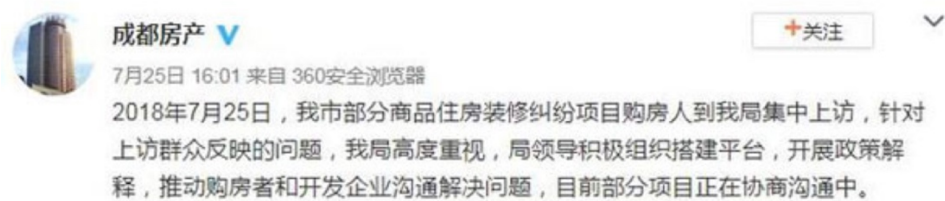


Figure 1.4 a screenshot of the official announcement

Later that day on July 25, 2018, the CMHADB posted an announcement (figure 1.4) on their official Weibo account, declaring that they would actively urge companies to resolve problems. On August 7, 2018, according to the Sichuan InfoNews Channel, eleven government departments in Chengdu (including CMHADB) jointly launched a special crackdown movement on the order of the Chengdu real estate market. To be specific, these departments would punish RECs that violated the law and used false or misleading advertisements for publicity. That was not the end of the story. On August 23, Xinhua News Agency reported that twenty-five Chengdu RECs faced inquiry by the CMHADB on August 22, because these companies had not resolved the previous complaints of homebuyers about the quality of house decoration: “The CMHADB verbally warned these companies to solve the problems raised by those homebuyers [who participated the previous protests] rapidly; for those companies that are unable to resolve disputes over decoration contracts, the CMHADB will request the relevant law enforcement departments to punish the company in accordance with relevant laws.” China News Agency, People’s Daily Online and other mainstream state-run media also reported the news.

In sum, the case of the Chengdu homebuyers protest (figure 1.5) underpinned the new feature of the short videos and SVB platforms. These eye-catching video clips posted by homebuyers succeeded in attracting the attention of the media (mainstream media and We-media) and the public. In a short amount of time, they were able to prompt the local government to intervene to help homebuyers to solve their concerns. During this process, mainstream media and We-media played an essential role in constructing a new hybrid information cycle that assisted those homebuyers to amplify their grievances and demands.

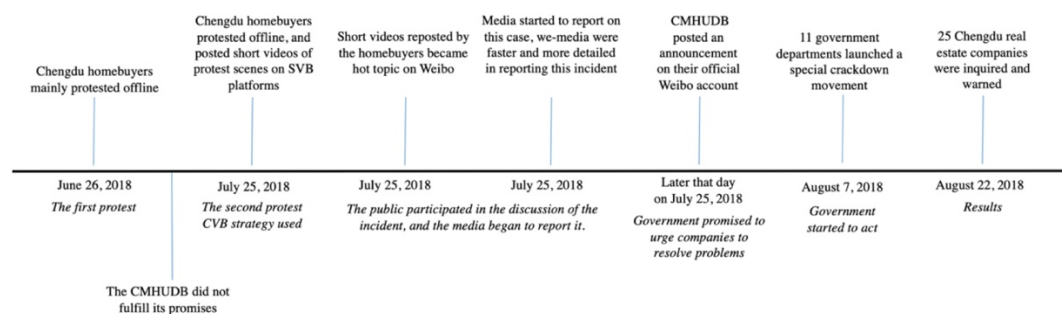


Figure 1.5 the timeline of case 1

## Hygiene scandal of Chinese luxury hotels

### *Background*

The leading role of this case – “Huazong” (Hua) is a We-media operator and an internet celebrity. As an experienced online text content creator, Hua is familiar with the power of social media<sup>5</sup>. On October 19, 2020, he was invited by Weibo to give a speech about his transformation from a text to a video content creator at the 2020 superstar on Weibo festival. In his speech, he emphasized that the strong influence of the documentary short video “The secret of the glass” (the core short video in case 2) made him discover that videos are more powerful than texts.

### *“The secret of the glass”*

On November 14, 2018, Hua released a short video about the unhygienic cleaning practices of cleaners at fourteen five-star luxury hotels in Beijing, Shanghai, Fujian, and Guizhou on Weibo and WeChat. This video clip “The secret of the glass” shows that cleaning staff in fourteen five-star luxury hotels in four cities used guests’ towels, but not specific cleaning cloths, to clean the guests’ cups, sinks, showers and toilets

(figure 2.1). Since this short video was released on Weibo, it has been watched and reposted by Weibo users nearly 40 million times and 90 thousand times respectively. On the same day, the video posted by Hua on his WeChat subscription account received at least 100 thousand views.

On November 15, 2018, “The Economic Observer”, a Chinese newspaper, interviewed Hua. He mentioned in the interview that he had made complaints to these hotels before setting up hidden cameras in the bathrooms. Unfortunately, he received no official replies from these hotels but only useless fudges. As a result, Hua decided to set up those cameras and record those cleaning staffs’ misconducts and expose them on Weibo and WeChat. As Hua stated in his short video: “All hotel management groups have their room cleaning procedures and hygiene standards, and the government management department has also issued the ‘Operational Procedures for Decontamination of Cups in Hotel Guest Rooms’, but most of the hotels I have stayed in these years have not implemented relevant standards and procedures”. As Hua clarified in the interview, He aimed to use this documentary to call on the hotel industry across the country to comply with relevant regulations in terms of room hygiene and cleanliness, and to correct previous improper practices.

After Hua released the film on his Weibo account, many internet celebrities on Weibo reposted and commented, which further promoted its spread on Weibo. For example, a We-media operator named “Lai Qu Zhi Jian” (Lai) reposted the video two minutes after the original release. Lai has 1.22 million followers on Weibo, and his repost was reposted 2453 times by his followers. Among the most popular reposts of the video, 6 of the top ten were reposted on November 14th, 2018, and 5 of these six were posted by Weibo gold verify users – We-media operators and internet celebrities with hundreds of thousands or even millions of followers on Weibo (figure 2.2). The online influence of Hua can be regarded as the catalysts for the instant, wide and viral spread of his video on the Internet.

The short video also immediately attracted the attention of mainstream media: the Beijing News was the first mainstream media to report it. At 8:58 pm on November 14, 2018, the “We Video” column of the Beijing News released a six-minute news short video (including an interview with Hua and clips from the video) about this case on its Weibo account “The Beijing News We Video”<sup>6</sup>. The Beijing News reposted this on its Weibo account “The Beijing News”<sup>7</sup> at 9:14 pm (figure 2.3). Like “The secret of the

glass”, this news video was also adopted by many mainstream media and We-media in their later reports and posts on various SVB platforms, their official websites and their news apps. For example, “The Paper” reposted this news short video on the early morning of November 15, 2018, on its Weibo account\*. Except for the Beijing News, most mainstream media reported on the incident promptly on the second day or even later.



Figure 2.1 a screenshot of the short video “The secret of the glass”



Figure 2.2 a screenshot of the top ten reposts of Hua’s short video documentary. The Chinese consumers association also reposted it (ranked first in the screenshot) and commented: “We think that our consumers are the noble God, but now we find that we are the most hurt.”



Figure 2.3 a screenshot of the news short video posted by “The Beijing News We Video” (top left); a screenshot of the same news short video posted by the Beijing News (top right)

### *Outcomes and lessons*

With the help of the short video “The secret of the glass” and the media (mainstream media and We-media) reports, Hua succeeded in getting the public and the government to pay attention to this hygiene scandal in Chinese luxury hotels, forcing them to respond by admitting their mistakes and making adjustments. The whole process took a very short amount of time (see figure 2.4). Only one day after the video documentary was released on November 15, 2018, several mainstream media reported in a timely manner the response of relevant government departments and the hotel involved. For example, on November 15, “The Paper” reported that the Beijing Tourism Administration stated on the same day that they would conduct inquiries, warnings, and interviews with the four hotels involved instantly, and require these 4 hotels to quickly verify the situation and correct mistakes within a short time limit”; according to the China National Radio, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China announced that it had instructed the cultural and tourism authorities of five provinces and cities including Shanghai, Beijing, Fujian, Jiangxi, and Guizhou to conduct further investigations into these hotels and related situations. As with the previous illustration, this example shows how the combination and interaction between media (We-media and mainstream media) and the public aroused the attention of the government and businesses to this matter, thereby prompting the resolution of the issue. Yet, some differences between the two cases will be discussed in the next section.

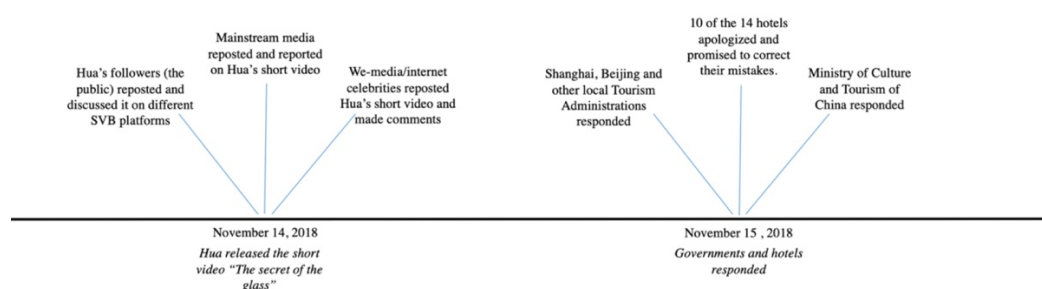


Figure 2.4 the timeline of case 2

### **Discussion and conclusions**

In this article, we have charted and contextualized the evolution path of the three phases (online forums and online petitions; social media platforms; SVB platforms) of online consumer activism in China for the first time. Subsequently, relying on Chadwick's concepts of "political information cycle" and "hybrid media system", we have

disentangled the hybrid dynamics of the CVA tactics through two representative case studies in the Chinese context. The findings of our close, real-time observations have revealed that for consumers' short videos to be properly "received" and acted upon by businesses and relevant government departments, We-media, mainstream media, and the public are all indispensable elements in the process of using the CVA tactics to contest businesses. More specifically, We-media, mainstream media, and the public co-construct a new hybrid information cycle that sustains the function of the CVA tactics. We have also illustrated the ways in which, within CVA tactics, short videos and SVB platforms bridge the consumer with the public, the media (We-media and mainstream media), the government department and the business. By comparing the above two cases, we have discovered that the dissemination paths of these short videos and the performance of short video activism tactics used by ordinary consumers and highly influential internet celebrities or We-media operators are different. For people like Hua, because of the influence they already have on the SVB platform, videos posted on these platforms can more easily and directly attract the attention of mainstream media, We-media and the mass public. For common consumers, although the emergence of short video and SVB platforms provide them with a new way to protest against businesses, and can help them amplify their voices online, the videos must first be "fermented" (reported and discussed) by the We-media and the public to attract the attention of mainstream media and achieve similar results. The dynamics of hybrid video consumer activism online follow similar paths, but their rapidity, intensity and spreadability vary depending on the social, cultural and economic capital that can be mobilized by the consumers.

Although CVA tactics have become a new way to protest against businesses for Chinese consumers, we should not neglect that they can be limited by several critical factors. Consumer's privacy can be exposed and violated along with the continuous dissemination of their short videos. Moreover, businesses often employ a so-called "Internet water army" to reduce the credibility of short videos. Finally, the profit-seeking nature of the media and several government controls will also limit the spread of short videos (Yu, 2021). Overall, this study contributes to research on online consumer activism and the history of Chinese consumer activism. The two empirical cases provide insights into the complex working mechanism of the CVA tactics in China. This article proves consumer activists are now leveraging the hybrid media

system of contemporary China to amplify their grievances and demands. SVB platforms are now firmly established as a new powerful tool of consumer activism for Chinese citizens. While most studies on hybrid media systems have so far focused on the social contexts of the Global North, our findings illuminate new forms of hybrid media activism in the context of China. In doing so, we expand the conceptual boundaries of both hybrid media systems and consumer activism. Further, we establish a fruitful connection and provide a conceptual toolbox that will allow future empirical investigation into the dynamics of emergent forms of online consumer activism in China and beyond.

Our study also raises key questions that will need further scrutiny: is online consumer activism based on more ephemeral, *ad hoc* alliances, or are more traditional forms of political organizing also possible? In other words, while our research displays rather individualized, intense, short-term forms of consumer activism, there is a need to understand if stronger, long-term alliances and collective identities can be formed and sustained to pursue more robust forms of social and political change in China. These stronger alliances could make the most not only of the hybridity between older and newer media logics but also of the interplay between online and offline protest, foregrounding a new kind of hybrid consumer activism.

## Notes

1. In China, the concept of “We-media” is usually adopted by Chinese scholars to refer to the Chinese term “zimeiti” or “self-media” (Yu, 2018). “Zimeiti” refers to the professional content generators (PGC) who use different internet platforms (such as blogs, social media platforms) to publish and broadcast their contents and news. To reduce ambiguity, in this study, we continue to use the concept of “We-media”. More specifically, “We-media” in this study refers to those people who use SVB platforms to publish and broadcast their contents and news.
2. Regarding WeChat, we focus on WeChat subscription accounts (WSA), not WeChat personal accounts. WSA is accessible for all WeChat users and the public, similar to Facebook pages.



3. See <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/8N0F0t5zPXPp75pxabK0Ag> (accessed October 11, 2020).
4. Except for mainstream media and We-media accounts, the names of all ordinary users in all screenshots are blurred to protect their privacy.
5. Hua's Weibo account has 300,000 followers, including ordinary users, We-media operators, internet celebrities, mainstream media organizations and journalists, see <https://weibo.com/hgszsj?from=profile&wvr=6> (accessed October 31, 2020); Hua also has a WeChat official account, on November 14, 2018, he posted the short video "The secret of the glass" on it, which received at least 100,000 views, see <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/oZYVxi13fNBZ8CowvPm4Bg> (accessed October 31, 2020).
6. See <https://m.weibo.cn/5044281310/4306523255425603> (accessed November 7, 2020).
7. As of November 6, 2020, this post received 88,941 reposts, 87,792 comments and 253072 likes, see <https://m.weibo.cn/6124642021/4306362487436671> (accessed November 6, 2020).
8. As of November 6, 2020, this post received 634 reposts, 467 comments and 671 likes, see <https://m.weibo.cn/1644114654/4306366716320836> (accessed November 6, 2020).
9. See [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_2637802](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2637802) (accessed November 8, 2020).

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