Policy agenda-setting of the public on local government in the new media era and Chinese context: A case study

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Abstract
The study uses content analysis on an anti-PX project event happened in a Chinese city of Xiamen last year to explore whether and how, if any, the local residents can set policy agenda at three different levels on the local government by virtue of new media. The study also distinguishes the different roles ecademic traditional media and local traditional media played in this process under contemporary Chinese media system. The study draws conclusions that a mobile phone short message, online forums and ecademic traditional media played central roles in setting policy agenda on the local government at the first level; ecademic traditional media and online forums contributed to the transfer of framing effects to the local government; However, ecademic traditional media and online media can not solely impose the priming effects on the local government; the changed national environment policy and the new mechanism to appraise government officials might be the underlying determinants of the framing effects.

Introduction
On December 16, 2007 the residents of Xiamen city, one of the five Special Economic Zones in east coast China, claimed victory after the municipal government announced it would not proceed with a controversial PX chemical project. Worried it might bring about an environmental disaster, a majority of residents resisted the project for more than six months. Residents in this case relied on mobile phones, electronic bulletin boards (hereafter EBB), blogs and Internet chat rooms as channels or forums to mobilise civic activities against the local government, which originally tried to silence the opposition. With the involvement of ecademic traditional media, the public agenda was grudgingly accepted as a policy agenda and eventually the local government conceded and abandoned the project. This case can typically illustrate
some aspects of the uniqueness surrounding policy agenda-setting of the public on local government in a Chinese context. The study attempts to explore: (a) how the public can reach the threshold of policy agenda-setting since the agenda issue was undesirable for the local government; (b) what role traditional media played during the process under Chinese media system; and (c) after the successful policy agenda-setting on the government at the first level, whether and how framing and priming effects were transferred from the public and traditional media to the local government.

As only a few ecademic traditional media reported the PX project before this agenda issue was successfully imposed on the local government as policy agenda, this study relies on content analysis mainly on news stories in three ecademic print media. The first section reviews some previous studies on agenda-setting, including how government controls the public through setting agenda on media, agenda interaction between online media and traditional media, and the agenda-setting of online media on the public. The second section depicts the agenda consonance, competitions, and conflicts between different parties involved in this case. The last section sets out the role ecademic traditional media and new media played at the first level and in transferring framing effects and priming effects of agenda-setting on the local government.

**Literature Review: Agenda-setting of government on the public**

Since 1972 when McCombs and Shaw hypothesised a causal relationship between the salience of media coverage and the salience of public concerns on political issues, more than 400 studies replicating their research methodology have ensued (McCombs, 2005), some of which were dedicated to disputing the myth of ‘who sets the agenda for the mass media’ (Gilberg, Eyal, McCombs & Nicholas, 1980; Weaver, Doris, McCombs & Chaim, 1981; Weaver & Elliott, 1985; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Dearing & Rogers, 1992). To answer this question is to address how the mass media is controlled, and by whom.

In a study on the influence of President Nixon’s second State of the Union address in 1970, Gilberg et al. concluded that the press set an agenda on the president “rather than the reverse presidential influence on the subsequent press agenda” (1980, p.587). However, two decades later the role of political leaders on setting media agenda was
strongly demonstrated as influential in another study on the ‘War on Iraq’ issue in three major American newspapers. The author concluded that heavy reliance on official sources more than on Iraqi sources resulted in both the first and second level of agenda-setting effect\(^3\) of White House on mainstream newspapers (Tajima et al., 2003). Namely, the Bush Administration not only controlled the American people in terms of “what to think about” (Cohen, 1963, p.13), but also manipulated them in terms of “how to think about some objects” (McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar & Rey, 1997, p.704) on this issue successfully.

Unlike studies on the influence of national leaders, Weaver & Elliott studied the influence of Bloomington City Council on the local newspaper coverage and found, in number, there was no high positive relation between the local newspaper and the local official agenda; while on topics, the local newspaper mirrored the prior concerns of the city council. Thus, the study suggested that the local newspaper played a role as “a transmitter” more than “a filter” of the city council agenda (Weaver & Elliott, 1985, p.91).

According to Shoemaker and Reese, media agendas are results of interactions between media organization, individual media workers, media routines, sources and ideology, among which government exerts frequent controls and official sources “dominate nearly all news content” (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991, p.269). Through a worldwide tendency towards budget-cutting on hard news coverage, especially the shrinkage of overseas dispatch of journalists, the news media have become more reliant on national government as a steady source, which facilitates government to manoeuvre the public through information control. It is believed that agenda-setting and framing effects of government on mass media and then the public are more salient in countries where the mass media are defined as the mouthpieces of the government or ruling party.

**Inter-media agenda-setting between new media and traditional media**

However, it might be too simple to imagine the public from such a negative perspective in the new media era. Recently studies have been done to address whether and how, if at all, personal or public agenda, by virtue of alternative media, can influence mainstream media agenda.
Regarding agenda-setting between the traditional media, Noelle-Neumann & Mathes reinterpreted a study of Halloran and his colleagues on multi-media coverage of an anti-Vietnam demonstration in London in 1968 and reconfirmed that there existed opinion leader media whose reporting perspective or article topic was taken up by other media as “a frame of reference” which “set off a chain reaction in the media system in each instance” (Noelle-Neumann & Mathes, 1987, p.401). Further, Noelle-Neumann & Mathes defined the similarity on topics, focuses and evaluation between those media as “consonance” effects (Noelle-Neumann & Mathes, 1987, p.404).

In 1991 Mathes & Pfetsch studied whether three ‘counter-issues’ in West German alternative media can contribute to the agenda-building of mainstream media. They found a ‘spill-over effect’, suggesting issues spilled over from the alternative media to liberal mainstream media not only at topic salience level but also at framing level (Mathes & Pfetsch, 1991).

In 2003 three South Korean students launched a study on reciprocal agenda-setting on the 2002 World Cup between two traditional media (The New York Times and The Washington Post) and Google newsgroups. They concluded that “there were agenda setting effects on online users in general, but reverse agenda-setting was not found” (Lee, Choi & Lee, 2003). However, this result might be completely different if the issue related to a far-reaching public interest. Another study, concerning agenda-setting of EBB on newspapers’ coverage of the 2000 South Korea presidential election, illustrated a salient influence of the former on the latter at the second level of agenda-setting. The author also concluded that “the Internet as a mass medium can influence the formation of public opinion for political campaigns, as well as other traditional mass media” (Lee, Lancendorfer & Lee, p.69). Another study on the influence of activists’ political blogs regarding the controversial Downing Street Memos showed that both television news and the news pages of major newspapers mainly cited official sources, namely statements of the Bush administration. However, this study did demonstrate the salience of agenda transferred from political blogs to the op-ed pages of major newspapers (Schiffer, 2006).
Agenda-setting of new media on the public

Regarding an Anti-US movement in South Korea in 2002, Song concluded that online media OhmyNews and PRESSian were more influential in escalating nationals’ anti-US sentiment compared with conservative newspapers (Song, 2007). While another study comparing the agenda-setting effect on the public between the paper and online version of The New York Times demonstrated that the former was stronger than the latter (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002).

Further studies went beyond the first level of agenda-setting, namely “the transmission of object salience” (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001, p.69), of online media on the public and engaged in the second level of agenda setting or “the transmission of attribute salience” (McCombs & Ghanem, 2001, p.69), which some scholars contended can be converged with the “framing theory” for the sake of theoretic parsimony. For example, Lee studied that the rank-order of five attributes of “global warming” issue can be transferred from online newspapers to readers (Lee, 2005, p.19). In addition, Lee studied the priming effects of online media on readers, namely whether the attributes of the “global warming” issue defined by the online newspapers can change the evaluative dimension of readers on this issue, and suggested that “the subjects who were exposed to the attributes of the global warming issue became more likely to judge that they should support the efforts to reduce global warming effects” (Lee, 2005, pp. 20-21).

Until now, there have been limited studies relating the reverse influence of personal and public agenda on government’s policy agenda by virtue of new media. The study on the Xiamen case will analyse the complicated agenda interactions between the public, professionals, new media, traditional media and the local government in the context of the Chinese media system. Therefore, it will not only address how they interacted, but also have an insight into why they interacted as such.

The Xiamen Case

Xiamen residents’ wide awareness of the PX project and its potential threat to health and safety originated from a short message simultaneously sent to their mobile phones around May 20, 2007. Subsequently, the content of the short message instigated wide online discussion. However, before the government announced it was going to re-
evaluate the project on May 30, news coverage by traditional media was by no means unrestricted. Between the dissemination of the short message and the announcement of re-evaluation, there were only two relevant feature stories in two ecademic print media – *Phoenix Weekly* (May 25), a Hong Kong magazine and *Southern Metropolitan News* (May 28), a newspaper of the neighbouring Guangdong province. *Southern Weekly*, a weekly newspaper also based in Guangdong province, published another story on May 31; however, its journalist had already undertaken his interviews in Xiamen before May 30. Therefore, this case study will mainly draw upon the relevant reports of these three print media to develop that analysis. It will also use another feature story of *China News Weekly* (December 28) published after the government had announced it was giving up the project on December 16, which reviewed the citizen involvement during the whole process. The paper is thus structured around the two key dates: May 30, when the government said it would re-evaluate the PX project, and December 16, when the government announced it would not proceed with the project.

**Public/new media agenda**

*Southern Metropolitan News* (Lan & Zhang, 2007) estimated that a majority of local residents were alerted by the short mobile phone message to the potential disastrous results of the PX project, such as leukaemia and malformed foetuses, due to the toxicity of the chemical and the location of the project, which encroached on the internationally recognised safety line between such chemical plants and residential areas. The message also encouraged recipients to transfer it to friends and relatives in Xiamen and even called for a demonstration (Lan & Zhang, 2007).

The message soon invited netizens’ radical debate on local online communities, mainly “*Small Fish Forum*”, the EBB of Xiamen University, and Internet chat rooms. Each sub-issue relating to the project attracted thousands of hits (Zhu, 2007). Blogs became another battlefield to launch personal opinions, to record peaceful demonstrations held on June 1 and June 2 – which were not reported by any traditional medium – and to transfer a news feature of *Phoenix Weekly* which had been confiscated from newsstands in Xiamen. It was because of the wide dissemination of the short message, persistent online debate and the magnitude of the public interest, that a personal agenda became a public agenda.
From the announcement of the re-evaluation of the project on May 30 to the announcement of the project being abandoned on December 16, online dispute never stopped. On December 8 the official website of the local government launched an online poll on the project. It was estimated that nine out of 10 voters vetoed the project before the poll was shut off the next day due to so-called ‘technical problems’. On December 13 and 14, 107 out of 646 volunteers were selected at random to argue their standpoint in two deliberation meetings held by the government, and a majority of them rejected the project (Liu & Zhou, 2007).

Therefore, before May 30 the residents were keen to set a policy agenda that the local government attempted to evade, while after May 30, the residents continued to attempt to impose framing and priming effects of agenda-setting on the government. In the understanding of the residents, the attributes of the project were: (a) extremely high toxicity; (b) incurring diseases; (c) encroaching on the safety line; (d) being as dangerous as an atomic bomb; and (e) threatening the survival of descendants.

**Public intellectual agenda**

In fact, the anonymous mobile message was not the first instance of individual agenda-setting regarding the PX project. In March 2007, a proposal written by six academics from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, including Professor Zhao Yu-feng of Xiamen University, was recommended by 105 members of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (hereafter CPPCC) to the annual congress of the CPPCC as the No. 1 proposal (Zhu, 2007). The proposal titled “A Suggestion on Removal of the PX Project from Haichang, Xiamen” drew upon an academic study which evaluated the possibility of ecological crisis on the basis of data review, calculations, and meteorological analysis. However, the No. 1 proposal was bypassed by the local government. For example, as a top official stated on March 18, “We should speed up [the project] regardless of the proposal of the CPPCC members” (Lan & Zhang, 2007).

The study conclusions were cited by the short message and almost every ecademic traditional media involved before May 30. According to the citations in those news stories, those intellectuals framed the project as: (a) dangerous chemical; (b) high rate
of malformed foetuses; (c) high rate of cancer; (d) air pollution; (e) encroaching on the safety line; (f) potential leakage and explosion threatening public security; and (g) removal is a must.

On May 30 Professor Zhao commented that the government’s decision on re-evaluation was a long way from the ultimate objective of removal of the project and called for “publicizing the re-evaluation institutions and accepting the participation and supervision of the public” (Zhu, 2007).

**Traditional media agenda**

*Phoenix TV* and its subsidiary magazine *Phoenix Weekly*, both headquartered in Hong Kong, are two of the traditional media which early on exposed the project. The No. 256 issue of the magazine (May 25) carrying a story titled “Xiamen: An Island City in the Shadow of Chemical Industry” was banned from selling in newsstands in Xiamen (Lan & Zhang, 2007). The story estimated that the PX project, together with a PTA project of the same chemical plant, would annually contribute 80 billion RMB to the local GDP (Liu, 2007). On May 28, *South Metropolitan News*, a newspaper registered in the neighbouring Guangdong province, published a feature story titled “*Was a Short Message Disseminated among Million Xiamen Residents*”, which was the first time the details of the short message had been described in a traditional medium (Lan & Zhang, 2007). Two days later, *Southern Weekly*, the most prestigious weekly newspaper in China, reported another feature story titled “*Xiamen Government Announced to Postpone the Billions RMB PX Project due to a Rumor on its Toxicity*”, which explained the cause of the rumour and implied the local government was confronting a dilemma between public interest and corporate interest (Zhu, 2007). The above news coverage soon made the debate known nationwide, which meant the local government was coming under pressures from nationwide public opinion and, probably, the central government.

The three print media presented prominent consonance when interpreting the attributes of the project, including air pollution, encroaching safety line, being legally approved, lack of transparency and public participation in policy making (Table 1).

**Table 1: Attribute salience of the three endemic media on the PX project**
However, there were still some differences in their attribute salience. Regarding the influence on health, *Phoenix Weekly* (Liu, 2007) and *South Metropolitan News* (Lan & Zhang, 2007) emphasised high rate of cancer and malformed foetuses because they either interviewed Professor Zhao or cited the short mobile phone message; whilst *Southern Weekly* (Zhu, 2007) denied the gravity of the threat on health because it interviewed both professor Zhao and an independent professional. Citation of multiple sources or a single source also resulted in different interpretations on the safety of the chemical and the project. The former two media worried about the possible leakage and explosion and defined the chemical with the term “extreme toxicity”; whilst the latter suggested the above dangers were controllable and characterised the chemical as possibly toxic. Regarding the influence on the local economy, the two mainland newspaper both doubted whether the chemical industry could be compatible with the
original guideline of city development – tourism and the real estate industry-oriented economy. Additionally, Phoenix Weekly argued that, while the project might be environment-friendly as a single case, in the context of the chemical industry, it might not be tolerated in the regional environment.

The announcement of re-evaluation on May 30 caught the attention of several other ecademic or nationwide traditional media but soon their enthusiasm cooled down. In early July, a local official leaked the information that the local government was drafting a regulation to force netizens to use real names on online forums, which soon incurred critique from South Metropolitan News (Qin, 2007) and the official was deposed (Liu & Zhou, 2007). When the official online poll was shut off in December, South Metropolitan News involved itself again and questioned whether it was due to a technical problem or a manmade problem. Southern Weekly reported the two deliberation meetings on December 13 and December 14. After the government announced it was giving up the project on December 16, the Xiamen residents were collectively enshrined by Southern Weekly as the ‘Man of the Year’.

Compared with ecademic traditional media, local traditional media, as mouthpieces of the local government, played a role as ‘fire extinguishers’. On May 28, responding to the provocative short message, online debate, and news coverage of Phoenix Weekly, Xiamen Evening Daily published an article titled “PX Project is in Construction after Legal Approval Procedure”. It was a two-page interview with a local environment official, who accentuated the safety and legitimacy of the project (Zhu, 2007). After May 30 Xiamen Daily kept itself in the foreground to persuade residents to trust the government, complain to the government through legal channels, and believe in the safety of the project.

**Local government agenda**

The confiscation of the No. 256 issue of Phoenix Weekly, the block of short messaging and the shut-off of the “Small Fish Forum” on May 28 demonstrate that originally the local government was unwilling to accept the concern of the ecademic media and the public as policy agenda until on May 29 South Metropolitan News published a feature story disclosing the aforementioned ‘efforts’ made by the local government.
Nevertheless, it was still too early after May 30 to claim that the framing and priming effects of the citizens’ agenda-setting were transferred to the local government. On June 1 and 2 thousands of residents “promenaded” in front of the municipal building, and several were detained (Liu & Zhou, 2007). In early July, the local government attempted to enact a ‘real name regulation’ to restrain online debate but eventually failed due to critique from ecademic media. In early December the official website invited residents to vote on the project but the online poll was shut off the next day. The reactions of the government demonstrate there was still a long way to go for the public before the framing and priming effects could be imposed on the government.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

Drawn upon the aforementioned recountal (Figure 1), some uniqueness in policy agenda-setting of the public on the local government in the context of the Chinese media system and media structure, e.g. the dynamic ecademic traditional media, compliant local traditional media, flourishing EBB, and marginalised public intellectuals, has emerged. The following will elaborate the determinants contributing to the public’s successful policy agenda-setting and framing and priming effects transmission which were originally undesirable for the local government.
Figure 1: Agenda interactions in the Xiamen case

**Ecdemic media surveillance**

Media surveillance can be briefly understood at two levels: (a) media are committed to scan significant environmental changes including government activities and inform the public of them on a regular basis so that the informed general public can make judicious decisions by themselves. It has been an indispensable channel to satisfy the “public right to know” since in modern society environmental changes usually go beyond the horizon of individuals; (b) media should be public forums where typical opinions from the general public can be reflected as an effective approach to be inclusive in democratic policy-making and satisfy the ‘public right to communicate’. Ideally, the rationality of mass media in any society should be on the basis of the above universal values.

Practically, Chinese local traditional media are legitimated as mouthpieces of local government so that some ‘sensitive’ issues, though relating a significant public
interest but incompatible with the intention of the government, will intimidate local traditional media into silence, thus giving room to ecademic traditional media.

In this case, traditional media that revealed threats against the health of the residents and the environment of the beautiful city are, unexceptionally, ecademic or/and nationwide media. Phoenix TV and its subsidiary magazine Phoenix Weekly are both headquartered in Hong Kong but are available in mainland China. The other two print media – South Metropolitan News and Southern Weekly, both belong to Nanfang Daily Press Group in Guangdong province, the earliest province carrying out reform and opening policy in the south of China. In Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong province, there are three daily newspapers, including South Metropolitan News, Daily Guangzhou, and Yangchen Evening respectively, belonging to three media groups and competing for local reader market desperately. Due to a relatively relaxed attitude towards editorial independence and, more importantly, market-oriented operation, provision of quality content, including carrying public opinions incompatible with local government, is critical to grab more market share. Among the three daily newspapers, South Metropolitan News is acknowledged as the boldest local newspaper in surveillance of local government and its reporting horizon and influence have already expanded to other provinces. Nevertheless, significant ‘bad news’ in any local newspaper was always limited to occurrences in other provinces. Even Southern Weekly, a sister weekly newspaper of South Metropolitan News, enjoying high prestige due to its bold investigatory stories, was often criticised for being less competent at revealing significant ‘bad news’ that happened in Guangdong province and hence suggested satirically it should change its name to “Northern Weekly” (Li, 2004).

Nevertheless, ecademic media surveillance is still valuable. Otherwise, who will take the responsibility of informing the public and disseminating public opinions when local government sifts out short messaging, stifles online forums, and actuates its propaganda machines? Further, ecademic media played an indispensable role in setting policy agenda at both the first and second levels, which will be discussed below.

Resonance effects between new media and traditional media

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In this case, before the government announced to re-evaluate the project on May 30, an “intertextuality” can be found not only between traditional media but also between new media and traditional media, which demonstrates not only “meaning-making” but also “meaning-revision” (Hartley, 2002, p.126) in relation to other types of media texts. For example, *South Metropolitan News* cited the short message as a typical standpoint of the local residents; *Phoenix Weekly*, though it did not mention the short message, presented similar attribute salience as the short message regarding the safety of the project and its influence on health, because they had the same source – Professor Zhao. The short message and the news coverage of *Phoenix Weekly* aroused keen debate on local EBBs. The instigation of the short message to “promenade” was particularly discussed on local EBBs. *South Metropolitan* also confirmed the confiscation of the *Phoenix Weekly* and the block of the “Small Fish Forum”, which implied a grave critique on the government regarding democratic policy-making and freedom of speech. Therefore, a conclusion can be drawn that it was the inter-media agenda-setting at both the first level and framing level, namely the resonance effects between new media and ecademic traditional media, which helped the public to reach the threshold of policy agenda-setting on the local government regardless of the latter’s intolerance of the issue.

However, they played different roles in policy agenda-setting. EBB and blogs are mainly considered the stage of youth and elites as 162 million Chinese netizens, 63.0 percent, are between 18 and 35 years old, 78.1 percent graduated at least from senior high school, and 76.9 percent are urban residents (CNNIC, 2007). Therefore, online media agenda can hardly be completely acknowledged as public agenda since it is less representative of those with little formal education, seniors and rural citizens. Moreover, netizens are segmented into numerous groups in cyberspace and the anonymity of cyberspace facilitates netizens to express freely and radically but maybe impedes the crystallisation of public opinion on the basis of reasoning, deliberation and compromise. Nevertheless, netizens are undoubtedly the most powerful and influential of citizens; advocates and opinion leaders with strong awareness of social democracy are more likely to be found among netizens; the interactivity of internet is conducive to exchanging common interests among netizens and mobilizing them to adopt further activities. In this case, the discussion on “promenade” on local EBBs
was believed to impose great pressures on the local government before May 30, due to their concerns about possible turmoil and future political risk.

Mobile phone short messages (hereafter SMS) can complement the shortcoming of the online forums in informing and mobilising citizens with diverse demographic characteristics owing to its wider popularity, cheapness and convenience. The power of SMS can be illustrated by “Coup d’text” case in which Philippine “Smart Mobs” were organised to overthrow the Estrada regime successfully (Rheihgold, 2002). In fact, before the dissemination of the short message around May 20, there was already ecademic media coverage on the No. 1 proposal of the CPPCC, e.g. China Youth Daily, Oriental Outlook, China Business Weekly, concentrated in March. Those reports drew the attention of several local elites who argued the issue on their own blogs. However, the synergy of sporadic news and blogs articles could hardly have reached the threshold of policy agenda-setting on the Xiamen government until the wide dissemination of concise but extremely demagogic short messages.

Nevertheless, new media have less credibility, and their lack of sources to authenticate information necessitate collaboration with well-resourced traditional media that comply with journalistic professionalism for the sake of the formation of public opinion based on rational judgment. Another significance of the involvement of traditional media relies on what Lazarsfeld & Merton called “status conferral” and “reaffirmation of social norms”. The former legitimises the status of persons, events or opinions “singed out from large anonymous masses” and “requires public notice” (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948, p.235); the latter suggests public exposure of a deviant event or opinion forces social members to “take a public stand for or against the norms… regardless of his private predilection” (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948, p.237 ). Those two functions can explain the power of media surveillance which usually imposes great pressures on the local government and thus helps to set agenda and even produce framing and priming effects on the government. Last but not least, traditional media are regarded by government as a formal channel of information input. In this case, both Phoenix Weekly and South Metropolitan News not only formed prominent resonance effects on attribute salience, especially with regard to lack of transparency and public participation, which was not available in the short message, but also exposed the local government to the nationwide critique. The story
of South Weekly, though published on May 31, can also contribute to the resonance effects and eventually the policy agenda-setting because the local government had already felt the pressure from the interview activities of the journalist.

Compared with the three types of media, it is difficult to distinguish which one played a central role in setting the first level of policy agenda on the government as they each complemented the drawbacks in the communication method of the other. However, regarding the framing and priming effects on the government, traditional media and online media played key roles, which will be discussed below.

**Framing and priming effects**

On May 30 a deputy mayor announced the postponement and re-evaluation of the project. To be precise, the re-evaluation would highlight the environmental tolerance of the region where the PX project was to be positioned (Zhu, 2007), which implied that, at that moment, the local government expected the result of the re-evaluation would be the way to stop protest from the public and criticism from ecademic media. In the short news conference, the deputy mayor also accentuated that the project was authorised by the National Development and Reform Commission according to legal and strict procedure (Lu & Li, 2007). Therefore, from the perspective of the local government, the attributes of the project were: (a) it is legitimate, and (b) the tolerability of the regional environment needs to be confirmed.

In contrast to attribute salience of the short message, online media and ecademic print media, the three print media agreed with the government on the legality of the project; regarding the possible tolerance/intolerance of the regional environment only Phoenix Weekly prominently overlapped with the cognition of government officials (Table 1). However, from an economic perspective, the tolerance of regional environment can be understood as whether the region could sustain both the chemical industry and environment-friendly industries such as tourism and real estate, which were discussed in both South Metropolitan News (Lan & Zhang, 2007) and Southern Weekly (Zhu, 2007). Therefore, at the end of May, it was not the short message and online media but the three ecademic print media that contributed to the second level of agenda-setting, namely framing effects, on the local government, though their attribute salience was only partially transferred.
Subsequently, thousands of local residents “promenaded” in front of the municipal building and cried out for giving up the project on June 1 and 2, probably because they interpreted the decision on postponement as a stalling tactic of the local government, as Professor Zhao commented in *Southern Weekly* (Zhu, 2007). On June 1 the government announced to “widely collect opinions and suggestions from the residents and news media” (‘Municipal government’, 2007) through formal channels including dedicated phone line, email, facsimile, letter, and two deliberation meetings. It is evident that only from then on another attribute of the agenda issue covered by the three endemic media – “lack of transparency and public participation in policy-making” – was accepted by the government and began to frame the policy agenda. Statistics shows that the government received about 6100 responses from the public during the period, within which 66.2 percent opposed the PX project explicitly (‘Public Opinion’, 2007).

On December 16, the government eventually announced it was giving up the project in spite of the result of the re-evaluation, which demonstrated that the resonance effects of the follow-up endemic media surveillance and the active involvement of the public successfully imposed both framing and priming effects on the local government. However, until now it is still unknown why ultimately the re-evaluation was downplayed and the public participation in policy-making dominated the solution to the agenda issue. The report of the regional environment evaluation publicised on December 5 was by no means clearly supportive of the residents of Xiamen. For example, the report concluded that, under effective risk management, the probability that the central city would be impacted by a severe leakage of the toxic chemical was only $10^{-7}$, which was acceptable (Wang, 2007). Therefore, the priming effect, namely the eventual attitudinal and behavioural change of the local government, should not be completely attributed to the endemic media and the residents. There should be other consonant variables that accelerated the priming effects. The answer might be found from an interview of *China News Weekly* with a Xiamen resident, who attended the deliberation meeting on December 13:

“We were encouraged by the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party [Oct.15, 2007-Oct.21, 2007]. Since then saving energy, reducing discharge and ecological civilization
became national industrial guideline.’ So she concluded that the project would miscarry. Anyway, the mechanism to appraise officials has changed: an official will fail the appraisal as long as poor record on environmental protection is confirmed (Liu & Zhou, 2007, para.52).

It implies that the changed national industrial guideline and the changed mechanism to appraise government officials, which are inclined to environmental protection and thus have made the discourses of the three ecademic media and the local residents more persuasive, might be the underlying determinants contributing to the priming effects of agenda-setting on the local government.

Notes
1. PX is the abbreviation for a chemical called paraxylene, which is mainly used in the polyester chain to produce fibre, film and polyethylene terephthalate. PX occurs as flammable liquid or crystal with a characteristic odour, which may explode and generate a dangerous fire hazard. For more details see http://www.icis.com/v2/chemicals/9076060/paraxylene.html.
2. Here the term “ecademic traditional media” signifies regional traditional media that were not registered in a specific district but can still be sold or reached in this district.
3. According to MaCombs and Ghanem (2001, p.69), the first level of agenda-setting effect is the transmission of agenda salience; the second level of agenda-setting effect is the transmission of attribute salience of an agenda issue. For some scholars, the latter can be converged with the framing effect theory for the sake of theoretic parsimony. This viewpoint is adopted in this article.

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