An exploration of the Chinese Internet based on first-hand research and original data

Is there a pre-Weibo and post-Weibo era in Chinese Internet history? Are hackerspaces in China the same as in the West? How can the censorship of an Internet novel end up “producing” it? How is Lu Xun’s passive and ignorant spectator turned into an activist on the Internet? What are the multiple ways of being political online? Such intriguing questions are the subject of this captivating new book. Its ten chapters combine first-hand research with multi-disciplinary perspectives to offer original insights on the fast-changing landscape of the Chinese Internet. Other topics studied include online political consultation, ethnic identity and racial contestation in cyberspace, and the Southern Weekly protest in 2013. In addition, the editor’s introduction highlights the importance of understanding the depth of people’s experiences and institutional practices with a historical sensibility.

About the editor
Guobin Yang is Associate Professor of Communication and Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication and Department of Sociology. He is the author of *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*. 

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**China’s Contested Internet**

Edited by
Guobin Yang
CHINA’S CONTESTED INTERNET
Governance in Asia
Series Editor: Tak-Wing Ngo, Professor of Political Science, University of Macau (twngo@umac.mo)

Most Asian countries have experienced radical social transformation in the past decades. Some have undergone democratization yet are still plagued by problems of political instability, official malfeasance and weak administration. Others have embraced market liberalization but are threatened by rampant rent seeking and business capture. Without exception, they all face the challenge of effective governance. This book series explores how Asian societies and markets are governed in the rapidly changing world and explores the problem of governance from an Asian perspective. It also encourages studies sensitive to the autochthony and hybridity of Asian history and development, which locate the issue of governance within specific meanings of rule and order, structures of political authority and mobilization of institutional resources distinctive to the Asian context. The series aims to publish timely and well-researched books that will have the cumulative effect of developing theories of governance pertinent to Asian realities.

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CHINA’S CONTESTED INTERNET

Edited by
Guobin Yang

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In 1995, barely a year after China was connected to the global Internet, Jasmine Zhang founded the first private Internet service provider (ISP) and proclaimed its birth with a gigantic street poster: ‘How far are Chinese people from the information highway? 1,500 meters ahead!’ A short walk of 1,500 metres led to her office, but China’s journey to the ‘information highway’ has been much longer, to say the least. In the 20 years since 1995, China has wired half of its 1.3 billion population. In this process, it has also transformed the meaning of the Internet. The Internet in China has taken on such distinctly Chinese characteristics that it may now be called the Chinese Internet in the same way as we call China’s literature ‘Chinese literature’ or China’s politics ‘Chinese politics’. These characteristics include not only the contents and linguistic features on Chinese websites, but also the ways in which the Internet and social media are used by citizens and businesses and managed by the government.

Claiming that the Internet has taken on distinctly Chinese characteristics raises a number of important questions. If control is a feature of the Chinese Internet, then how is control practised over time and what changes have taken place in the strategies and institutions of policing the Internet and why? If people in China use the web for activism, how does their activism differ from or resemble online activism in other countries? Why does it seem that there is a distinct ‘Internet literature’ in China? Similarly, to argue that the political or apolitical nature of the Chinese Internet requires both an account of the meanings and practices of the political and the apolitical and the historical process of the formation of those meanings and practices.
What is needed, in other words, is an understanding of the historicity of the Chinese Internet, that is, its distinct features in a historical process marked by both constraints and contingency. It is important to study the many facets of the Chinese Internet, be they institutional norms or social practices, as ‘processes of becoming rather states of being’. Emphasizing ‘becoming’ is to recognize history and historical struggle. It is to affirm that the Internet as we know it today, as it is used by citizens and consumers or governed or surveilled by the state or Internet firms, has not always been like this and will continue to undergo change and transformation, for better or worse.

One way of underlining the historicity of the Chinese Internet is to stop viewing its history as a continuous flow of time eternally unfolding before our eyes. Although it is a relatively short history, it is possible to analyse it by breaking it down into smaller sections using the strategy of periodization. By identifying periods, analysts can identify common and distinct features and highlight continuity and change. As Bob Jessop puts it,

The main aim of any periodization is to interpret an otherwise undifferentiated ‘flow’ of historical time by classifying events and/or processes in terms of their internal affinities and external differences in order to identify successive periods of relative invariance and the transitions between them.

**PRE-WEIBO VS WEIBO: TWO HISTORICAL ERAS?**

The ten chapters in this volume are arranged in a rough chronological order to convey a sense of history and a sense of continuity and change. The five chapters in Part I focus roughly on issues or events in the pre-Weibo period, Weibo being China’s most popular microblogging platform until about 2014 when WeChat began to catch on. The topics include online consultation, Internet censorship, online communities, Chinese maker culture, and an incident of online contestation about racial identity. The main web platforms where these took place were blogs, web sites, and online bulletin-board forums. The exception is Silvia Lindtner’s chapter, which is a study of hackerspaces rather than about the Internet per se, although hackerspaces typically have virtual spaces as well as physical venues. As she notes in her chapter, China’s first
hackerspace was launched only in the fall of 2010, about one year after Sina launched its Weibo service. Yet if hackerspaces are not pre-Weibo, they are at least non-Weibo.

Sina Weibo was launched in August 2009. The next few years, from 2010 to about 2012, witnessed a strong wave of citizen activism on Weibo as well as growing government efforts to contain it. The five chapters in Part II all engage in issues or events associated with the popularization of Sina Weibo, with three chapters on cultural expression and online activism and two chapters on government control and the digital divide.

In what ways is it meaningful to talk about a pre-Weibo and a Weibo era in the history of Internet politics in China? Certainly not in the sense that the pre-Weibo era was more quiescent and the Weibo era was more contentious. Although it is true that many cases of online protest happened on Weibo between 2010 and 2012, the pre-Weibo era was just as much characterized by online protests, except that they happened on bulletin boards and blogs. In fact, most of the iconic cases of online protests in China happened in the pre-Weibo era – think about the Sun Zhigang case in 2003, the BMW incident in 2004, the ‘black kiln’ and the ‘South China tiger’ cases in 2007, or the Deng Yujiao incident in 2009.6

From the vantage point of 2015, when Sina Weibo’s influence on public discussion has clearly weakened and the Internet is governed more tightly then before in the name of national sovereignty and national security, it seems that the Weibo era, as opposed to the pre-Weibo period, is marked most distinctly by new and expansive forms of Internet control. These new forms of control started on Weibo and with Weibo, in part reflecting Weibo’s growing influence. In November 2010, Sina set up a special seven-person team charged with the mission of ‘stopping rumours’. These seven individuals work around the clock to monitor the content on Weibo. If they determine a user to be spreading a rumour, that person’s account may be temporarily suspended or permanently closed. Weibo also set up a new function on its first page to display and expose rumours. Around the same time, in September 2010, Sina formed an external monitoring mechanism called ‘commissioners of self-discipline’. These are individuals of some social stature or experience who are invited to help monitor Sina Weibo to weed out harmful content.
and build a ‘civilized Internet’. Sina frequently publishes notices when it claims to have found rumours being spread on Weibo. On 4 February 2012, for example, Weibo’s first page displayed a notice saying: ‘A Weibo message claims that a couple from Jiangxi was beaten up in Sanya; one was injured and the other killed. This is a rumor. The people who posted it have been penalized.’ Three individuals were said to be involved in this case. Sina announced that, as a penalty, their accounts were closed for six months.

The tightening and expansion of Internet control that started with Weibo in 2010 accelerated after Xi Jinping became China’s supreme leader in 2013. Already in 2010, the issuance of the white paper on The Internet in China by the Information Office of China’s State Council signalled the formation of a comprehensive Internet control model by proposing the idea of a ‘Chinese model of Internet administration’. This model fits well into the theory of ‘four comprehensives’ adumbrated by Xi Jinping in 2015, a theory that ties the deepening of the economic reform and the construction of a prosperous society to the improvement of governance and rule of law. One of the ‘our comprehensives’, that is, ‘comprehensively govern the nation according to law’, is evidently extended to the governance of Chinese cyberspace. Under Xi, new institutions are established to strengthen China’s Internet governance structure, the most important being the new ministerial-level Cyberspace Administration of China (www.cac.gov.cn). New campaigns were launched in the summer of 2013 to crack down on opinion leaders on Weibo. In November 2014, 29 major Chinese Internet firms pledged to strengthen their management of online comments made by Internet users. Meanwhile, Chinese government agencies and official media institutions have boosted their online presence and activity in a vigorous bid to ‘occupy the online frontier’. People’s Daily, for example, now maintains an active and often lively presence on Weibo, tweeting regularly and frequently, and in an informal tone that differs markedly from the official tone of its print editions.

All this suggests that along with the changing forms of Internet governance in China, especially the growing use of propagandistic and ideological (as opposed to coercive) methods, critical analysis of the Chinese Internet must also be increasingly attentive to these subtleties of state power and not be confined to the old dichotomies of resistance
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and control. This is precisely the approach taken by the authors in this volume, all of whom address the question of Internet governance and censorship in explicit or implicit ways. They paint a picture of where the Chinese Internet stands at the beginning of 2015 – battered, bruised, but surviving. More importantly, the chapters in this book will help readers understand how the Chinese Internet has come to thus and what some of the struggles and contestations are like in this historical process. They do so without reducing this history to a simple story of resistance vs. control, or state vs. society. On the contrary, most of the chapters directly challenge dichotomous and reductive ways of thinking, and in so doing, extend current research agendas and deepen the methods of critical inquiry. I will highlight some of their contributions in these respects in the remainder of this introduction.

**WORKSHOPS OF CENSORSHIP AND MAKER SPACES OF TECH DESIGNERS**

Censorship is a central issue when it comes to the study of the Chinese Internet. No one I know, however, has studied censorship the way Thomas Chen has. While the most ambitious current works attempt to find out exactly what is censored on the Chinese Internet and why and how censorship is prohibitive of Internet speech,¹⁰ Chen takes a very different approach. His chapter offers detailed and rare insights into the subtle processes of online literary censorship through a systematic and in-depth analysis of the censorship practices related to one piece of the literary work, namely, the Internet novel *Such Is This World@sars.com* (如嫣).¹¹ Refusing to set up authors and readers against censors, or resistance vs. oppression, he approaches the complicated problem of online censorship through a new conceptualization. First, Chen sees online literary censorship as a process of production, including alter-production. Chen uses alter-production instead of counter-production to avoid reducing censorship and resistance to a binary struggle and to emphasize the heterogeneity of responses to censorship. Second, he thinks of the processes of production and alter-production as work and the spaces where such work is done as workshops. For Chen, a workshop is a space ‘characterized by mutual instruction and the formation of alternative publics.’ In this way, the practices of online literary censorship and the responses they provoke and prompt become practices of producing and
reproducing the literary work. Thus, in the case of *Such Is This World* @sars.com, roadblocks of censorship ‘resulted neither in dead-ends nor so much in detours as in diffusion. Not only did the novel stay alive but multiple lives were engendered.’

In her chapter on Chinese maker culture, Silvia Lindtner argues that the unquestioned category of Chinese netizens (or wangmin) focuses only on the netizen as a user of technology and not as a producer. Opening up this category, Lindtner studies Chinese netizens both as users and producers in the context of the emerging do-it-yourself (DIY) maker-culture movement. In her ethnographic work, she finds that the maker culture is both a process of individual empowerment and of reimagining and redefining the meaning of creativity, innovation and social change. Contrary to the conventional wisdom about the lack of creativity in China’s IT sector, Lindtner’s subjects are proud of the creative thinking of Chinese technology designers. What they find lacking is the infrastructures and resources to help them execute their ideas. For this reason, they opt to work with rather than against the government. This leads to alignments between seemingly opposing actors. Yet it also leads to change from within the system, a story not unfamiliar to scholars of Chinese politics.12 Ultimately, Lindtner finds that China’s DIY maker culture is ‘neither entirely countercultural nor pro-system’. Instead, it seeks to implement creative ideas by exploiting both international venture capital and domestic official ideologies about creative economies. In this process, DIY makers craft their own multiple subject positions.

**GOVERNANCE OF AND THROUGH THE INTERNET**

Several chapters explore the forms and actors involved in governing the Internet and governance through the Internet. In a timely discussion of Sina Weibo, Marina Svensson argues that it has become an ideological and political battleground. Specifically, the Chinese government has launched campaigns to crack down on expression on the Internet in the name of fighting Internet rumours, the most recent of which were the harsh attacks against Internet public-opinion leaders in the summer of 2013. In one particularly notorious case, Xue Manzi, a popular microblogger with over 12 million followers on Sina Weibo, was accused of soliciting prostitutes. He was then subject to Cultural Revolution-style public shaming on China’s central television where he stated on
camera that the microblogs he posted did not always contain accurate information. By making an example of Xue Manzi, the Party-state sent a chilling message to other influential bloggers. It is ironic that the target of this crackdown had been essentially the creation of Weibo's management strategies. Stressing the multiple actors and different types of power relations in the shaping of Sina Weibo, Svensson notes that Internet companies push their own products for commercial reasons while the state ‘both encourages and tries to steer and use microblogs to shape public opinion’. Thus by making Sina Weibo a popular platform through its strategy of cultivating celebrity users and opinion leaders, Sina’s management has turned it into a space of contestation. In China’s information industry, commercial success often comes with political anxieties for both business and political leaders.

Increasingly, however, the Party-state responds to the challenges of popular social-media platforms by populating, instead of shunning, them. A major initiative in recent years concerns encouraging government agencies and officials to use microblogs to broadcast their own messages. To understand how this ‘government on microblogs’ initiative works, Jesper Schlæger and Min Jiang examine a local government microblogging project. They start by cautioning that the category of ‘government’ is too crude to capture the varied responses to social media in government bureaucracies. A municipal government consists of multiple agencies, where the department in charge of public security, for example, has different missions than the department responsible for commerce or urban planning. Thus, when an issue comes up on social media, it is not always clear which particular agency should address it. Schlæger and Jiang argue that although many local governments seem to have enthusiastically incorporated microblogging, these government microblogs function largely as ‘beta-institutions’. They define beta-institutions as ‘a collection of general rules and organized practices intended for temporary use or experimentation’. This idea captures an aspect of the Chinese political system that has long been recognized by scholars of Chinese politics, that is, its adaptability and flexibility, but one that has received little attention in the literature on e-government and Internet politics.

The beta-institution of government microblogs allows government agencies to experiment with ways of interacting with citizens online as well as improving social service and social management. It also introduc-
es a new relationship between local governments and commercial ISPs. When government agencies register their accounts on Sina Weibo, they must be authenticated and approved by the Internet firm, not vice versa. Their postings are archived on Sina Weibo’s servers, not in a government archival office. Thus, as far as online postings are concerned, the key function of storing archives in a government bureaucracy has moved from local governments to the commercial service providers. Furthermore, the municipal government that Schlæger and Jiang studied has no special access privileges to user data on the commercial microblog platform. Nor is there any formal means yet for municipal government agencies to demand such access to user data through the legal system. This finding goes against the common image of an omnipotent and omniscient Chinese government. Indeed, Schlæger and Jiang’s study shows the limits and pitfalls of talking bluntly about the government without differentiating its multiple agencies at different levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy.

Governance of the Internet goes together with efforts to govern through the Internet. Using online consultation to solicit citizen feedback on draft laws and regulations is one such effort to govern through the Internet. Steven J. Balla’s chapter offers an in-depth analysis of online consultation in one policy domain – the health-system reform.

Recognizing ‘the complex, multifaceted nature of digital spaces’, Balla refrains from making any general assessment of the role of the Internet – whether it stabilizes or changes the Chinese political system. Instead, he focuses on one specific institutional mechanism and its application in one concrete policy area. The online consultation period lasted for a month after the proposal for the health-system reform was posted. In this period, 30,000 comments were submitted, and more than 6,000 of the respondents provided their email addresses as well. Balla’s survey of the participants in the online consultation finds that those who were internally efficacious and democratically oriented were, relative to respondents not possessing such traits, positive in tone and highly substantitive in the comments they submitted. He interprets this finding to mean that the online consultation mechanism used in the health system reform exposed citizens to democratic principles and to the process of articulating interests. This is political change in a concrete form, but Balla cautions that such change takes place within a very specific institutional context and not across the board at the national level.
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VOICE, RACE, AND THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

Much of the work on the Internet and social media, in China and elsewhere, supports the argument that marginalized populations with no visibility in the mainstream media gain new voices online. Research shows, for example, that Chinese citizens have endeavoured to make their voices heard through online civic engagement, activism and protest. Some of this scholarship is specifically about online activism on Sina Weibo. Marina Svensson argues, however, that personal expression on Sina Weibo is unequal and that only some people have a voice while many others continue to be marginalized. Celebrities and online opinion leaders use their social and cultural capital to build large followings and gain influential voices. Migrant workers and labour NGOs are much less likely to be actively engaged in microblogging. The former are more likely to use QQ than microblogs.

Voice is about recognition; to repress it is to refuse recognition. There are many different scenarios in the contemporary world where the voices of particular social groups or where specific issues are denied or unjustly rejected by more extreme voices. Voice or the lack thereof can give rise to contestation. In their study of the online controversy surrounding the identity of Lou Jing (娄婧), Robeson Taj Frazier and Lin Zhang confront this issue head on. Lou Jing is a biracial woman of Chinese and African American descent. In late 2009, when she appeared as a contestant on a popular Shanghai television show and music competition, her claim to Chinese nationality triggered heated debates online.

Frazier and Zhang find in these debates both pervasive anti-black racism and more reflexive discourses embracing the values of multiculturalism and difference. More than about the colour of Lou Jing’s skin or her mother’s relationship with an African American man, the contestations extended to issues about the meaning of being Chinese, women’s interracial relationships with foreigners, and the identities of mixed-race Chinese children. Ultimately, the Lou Jing controversy turned into a national debate surrounding Chinese national identity and Chinese perspectives on blackness and difference.

From the disparaging remarks about Lou Jing and her mother, their own self-defence, as well as the show of support from netizens, Frazier and Zhang trace out a complex and sometimes disturbing story of racial and national identity. The controversy, especially the racist remarks
about Lou Jing, reflects the persistence of racial ideologies and practices that have long existed in China but rarely been openly debated. In addition, Frazier and Zhang find that some of the criticisms of Lou Jing resulted from particular ideologies of globalization, because on the global stage, attitudes about what it means to be modern rely on a set of racial discourses, ‘where non-whites, particularly groups of African descent, are frequently classified not just as economically and politically backward, but correspondingly as also racially and culturally backward as a result of their economic and political woes’. 

Finally, Frazier and Zhang attribute the Lou Jing controversy to the popular and Internet culture. By putting on a strong performance on Chinese television to defend herself and her Chinese identity and becoming the object of national attention, Lou Jing rose to the status of a national celebrity. Her story is thus part of a recent vogue of grass-roots celebrity-making. This trend parallels the rise of online participatory culture while riding the wave of American Idol-style television shows such as the Super Girl contest. These popular forms mark a shift from the haughty propaganda media of a uniform official voice to a multi-voiced, more pluralistic, albeit commercialized and profit-oriented, media and entertainment scene.

THE CLASS POLITICS OF LEISURE AND DESIRE

A fascinating aspect of contemporary Internet culture is the proliferation of popular Internet items called memes. Known in China as ‘Internet hot phrases’ (网络热词) or as ‘form’ (体), this is not a Chinese, but global phenomenon. Yet the contents and meanings of Internet memes, as well as their means of production and circulation, vary according to their cultural and social contexts. For example, the word ‘jasmine’ – jasmine being the symbol of the Tunisian revolution – was blocked when activists attempted to inject it into Chinese cyberspace. The numerous memes that are frequently created on Chinese websites are often borne out of playful online interaction. Despite their proliferation, we know little about the social context of their appearance. Marcella Szablewicz’s study of the diaosi meme fills a gap. Diaosi, which Szablewicz translates as ‘losers’, became a popular meme in 2012. A derisive term coined to denigrate young people of lower social status, it is ironically embraced by these people themselves as a form of self-mockery and self-affirmation.
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Linking this playful word to China’s broader context of social inequality and limited horizons of upward mobility, Szablewicz argues that *diaosi* is ‘an emergent form of affective identification through which alternative desires and forms of mobility may be imagined and enacted’. To understand what their alternative desires are, it is helpful to look at the antonym of *diaosi*. Captured by another meme – *gaofushuai* (高富帅), meaning tall, rich and handsome – the term in many ways signifies the social norm of wealth, status, and high style in contemporary China. The *diaosi* meme mocks this norm. According to Szablewicz, ‘the *diaosi* meme takes aim at these conventional and socially sanctioned models of success, questioning, in particular, the extent to which such models are achievable in the context of contemporary China.’ While affirming the political possibilities contained in the *diaosi* meme, however, Szablewicz discerns its contradictory nature, that it may ‘simultaneously reinforce and challenge conventional norms’, because ‘the meme’s emphasis on material wealth, physical appearance and sexual stereotypes may ultimately reinforce many of the norms and values that it seemingly intends to mock’.

Szablewicz’s analysis of the politics of desire forms an interesting pair with Ning Zhang’s chapter on the online activism of backpacking communities. Although Zhang does not frame her analysis in terms of class and wealth, she notes that the background for the appearance of web-based backpacking communities is not the Internet, but growing urban affluence and new lifestyles of leisure and pleasure. The ‘donkey friends’ (驴友) in these backpacking communities would have to have both the cultural taste and a minimum level of material wealth to pursue these leisure activities. Yet in the middle of these activities, Zhang argues, they develop a critical awareness of social inequality and a moral sensibility to help and support the needy. It is true that they aim at only modest change rather than radical critique or transformation, and there will be critics who dismiss this type of activism as ineffectual. Yet as Zhang contends, despite the leisure character of backpacking travel, ‘increasing numbers of young people join online communities and are changed by the relationships and practices they are engaged in on the Internet.’ Thus, like the self-mocking loser population in Szablewicz’s study, Zhang’s ethnographic account of the backpackers is about political engagement. It is just not the kind of politics that conventional observers of Chinese politics look for.
Blurring the Boundaries of Online and Offline Activism

Ning Zhang’s study of web-based backpacking communities transcends another kind of binary – the online and offline divide. Challenging the dichotomous view of civil society as either completely independent of the state or dependent on it, Zhang argues that state and society are constantly competing and negotiating in a dynamic social field. Within this social field, she finds that newly emerging online communities of backpackers engage in both online and offline activities to form a new social force that ‘constantly challenges, violates, and calls into question the system of authority’. In Zhang’s analysis, what is distinct about online communities is not what separates them from a supposedly more ‘real’ offline world, but how people in these communities negotiate between online and offline spaces. The result is a new form of associational life and citizen activism that aims to achieve social change through peer sharing, volunteer work and online and offline charity.

Jian Xu’s chapter studies the popular phenomenon of online weiguan, literally meaning online spectating. This new form of online activism became popular with Sina Weibo and generated a great deal of interest among scholars and activists in China, but has not been much studied in the English language. Xu defines weiguan ‘as a form of Internet-facilitated political participation, which contributes to the visibility of controversial social issues and the concentration of public opinion about these issues’. He argues that online weiguan has created an alternative form of political participation for ordinary Chinese to address social injustice and supervise political power while prompting the state to adapt its strategies of controlling the Internet.

A fascinating part of Xu’s chapter is its careful tracing of the historical origins of the practice of online weiguan. He starts with Lu Xun’s famous depiction in his 1919 novelette Medicine of the indifferent crowd watching the beheading of a revolutionary agitator. For Lu Xun, this culture of public spectating represented the ignorance and passivity of ordinary Chinese in traditional society. Xu then goes on to argue that the success of the Chinese communist movement was due in no small part to communists’ ability to transform this culture of passive spectating into one of active participation by promoting such practices as ‘speaking bitterness’, ‘denunciation’, and ‘show and shame’. The appearance of online weiguan as a form of online activism, Xu contends, is the result of
both the development of Internet technologies and the reinvention of a long-existing cultural and political practice. By recovering its historical origins, Jian Xu shows the meaningfulness and significance of online weiguan as a form of active spectatorship and ‘talk-centric’ politics.

Sally Xiaojin Chen’s chapter studies the Southern Weekly protest in January 2013 to shed light on both online and offline protests and their interactions. While Jian Xu grounds online weiguan in a history of civilizational decline and revolution, Chen conceptualizes online action as a form of embodied action, no less authentic or ‘real’ than bodily action in the streets. She draws on a critical literature about technologies and the body to argue that the online body is an inseparable part of the meaningful body and therefore ‘taking online action even by simply clicking the mouse and typing on the keyboard entails physical bodily movements.’

Based on extensive interviews and online ethnography, Chen argues that the Southern Weekly protest was a case of connective action of the kind adumbrated in the works of Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg. The protest happened both online and offline, but it was the intensities of the online protest that compelled people to take offline action. Chen’s data yield a surprising and important finding about the relationship between the online and offline protest activities. She finds that whereas the editors and journalists of Southern Weekly actively engaged in online action, they did not make the move from online to street action either out of fear of losing their job or because of their lack of confidence about the efficacy of offline action. The majority of the small crowd of street protesters were young people who had been loyal readers of Southern Weekly and who did not have prior experience in participating street protest. Paradoxically, this lack of experience, combined with passion, reduced their sense of fear and prompted them to join the street protest.

THE MANY WAYS OF BEING POLITICAL

In a recent edited volume, a group of distinguished anthropologists and psychiatrists delve deeper past the surface of ‘government policies, social institutions, and market activities’ to examine Chinese people’s ‘perceptual, emotional, and moral experiences.’ Their focus is on one facet of these experiences, that is, the remaking of the person in a dramatically changing China since the 1980s. They call their approach ‘deep China.’ It
could be argued, however, that a deep-China approach may also entail in-depth analyses of the very *surface* of China. At least in the area of Chinese Internet studies, many aspects of this surface – the institutions, policies, and market activities of the Chinese Internet – call for deeper analysis.

In one way or another, the authors in this volume examine the Internet as a facet of a deep China. They study the Internet in relation to people's practical, perceptual, and moral experiences as well as in the contexts of institutions and policies. There is a shared endeavour among the contributors to dissect the multilayered and complex dimensions of the Chinese Internet. These chapters exemplify an analytical orientation that I call, to borrow the insights from *Deep China*, 'deep Internet studies'. Such an orientation reveals the multiple realities of the Chinese Internet. By paying attention to the 'depth' of people's experiences and practices with the Internet, the contributors of this volume show that the contestations over the Chinese Internet are manifestations of the multiple ways of doing politics and being political. These contestations encompass the politics of governance, censorship, and resistance, the politics of recognition, desire, and leisure, as well as the politics of representation, class, and the nation. Undoubtedly many more forms are left unexplored, but it is hoped that these chapters have uncovered enough new ground to invite a broader debate about the complex and changing meanings of politics and the political in 21st-century China in the study of the Chinese Internet and Chinese society more broadly.

**REFERENCES**


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China’s Contested Internet


ENDNOTES


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6. Many of these cases are studied in the chapters in Jack Qiu and Joseph Chan (eds), Xin meiti shijian yanjiu (Studies of New Media Events). Beijing: Renmin University Press, 2011.


12. For example, Keyser shows there were significant efforts among Chinese liberal thinkers to change the system from within in the 1980s. See Catherine H. Keyser, Professionalizing Research in Post-Mao China: The System Reform Institute and Policy Making, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002.


China’s Contested Internet


21. I first explored the idea of a ‘deep Chinese media’ approach in my graduate seminar on Chinese media and communication in fall 2013. I would like to thank the following students and scholars in the seminar for their contributions to this discussion: Boyang Fan, Dan Ji, Liu Jiang, Leslie Jones, Tim Libert, Bo Mai, Jingjing Qian, Steven Schrag, Laura Silver, Wei Wang and Lin Zhang.

When Hu Fayun 胡发云 finished writing *Such Is This World* @sars.come 如焉@sars.come in 2004, China had been connected to the Internet for exactly 10 years. By then there were some 94 million users, a large number, to be sure, but only seven per cent of the total population. The Chinese Internet’s youth at the time explains the trajectory of Hu’s novel, which traces a coming of age. Except the heroine is a middle-aged widow and the age is digital.

At first Ru Yan 茹嫣 uses the Internet only to stay in touch with her son, who introduced it to her before he left for graduate school in France. With the handle ‘Such Is This World’ (ru yan 如焉), she then joins an online community of parents with kids studying abroad. Soon, however, she is exploring the vast world of the Chinese Web, which for her is a land of revelation and daring:

Her biggest shock was reading a great many works that had never made it into print. These writings had a point of view, with respect to their theoretical foundations, political doctrine, and conceptual framework, which at first was somewhat troubling to her. Ru Yan was the kind of person who had never concerned herself with politics and theory, and her indifference implied a certain skepticism and disapproval. But these articles, novel and incisive, with their recklessly bold judgments, mesmerized her even as they frightened her. They also gave her access to raw facts – the true facts of historical events that had been neglected or buried or repackaged, so that this history now began to reveal a disconcerting face.
The world of print and the World Wide Web appear in juxtaposition. If the former is equated with restriction and distortion, then the latter equals freedom and truth. The Internet is portrayed as an altogether new media, in fact an *in*media, providing its public with direct access to ‘raw facts’ (真相) that bypass any ‘repackaging’ (改装), not just by censorship but even, it is implied, by the narrative and the commodity form. If Ru Yan is unaccustomed to this rawness, then it is relished by Damo (达摩), the novel’s other main character, a lay intellectual who works as an electrician. With a website of his own and highly active online, he is the master craftsman to her apprentice. He later tells Ru Yan why he no longer publishes in print journals: ‘But they don’t offer the freedom you get online, where you can write whatever you think. After that, writing for the standard periodicals is like putting a halter on a wild horse’ (但是没有网上自在，怎么想，就怎么写了。给正规报刊写，总像一匹野马要套笼头一样). The Internet is where one can both read more widely and publish with more ease. Ru Yan, only a browser at first, begins to post personal pieces – about her son, about the rain – that draw praise from members of the online forum to which she belongs.

But her honeymoon is brief. It turns out that there are online halters after all. Not long after Damo’s paean is the novel’s first depiction of Internet censorship, regarding a ‘strange disease’ (怪病) that will later be diagnosed as SARS. Ru Yan has in the meantime become the moderator of the forum, and when posts mentioning this strange disease disappear, members think that she is the one deleting them. When Ru Yan herself tries to spread the word, she receives this seemingly automatic response: ‘SERVER ERROR: Your message is temporarily unable to be posted’ (服务器故障，暂时不能发帖). Thus is censorship masked behind technical difficulties.

What is to be gathered from above is not that the Chinese Internet is actually unfree, that it is just like the rest of the Chinese media. Needless to say, writings both academic and journalistic abound on Chinese Internet censorship and its verso, resistance: their forms and contents,
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their challenges, and their prospects. What is lacking, however, is their conceptualization as a distinctive kind of production, including alter-production. I choose ‘alter-’ in lieu of ‘counter-’ because the latter reduces resistance to censorship to a binary struggle. ‘Alter-production’ captures better the heterogeneity of responses, which include direct opposition, to be sure, but do not comprise it solely.

‘Counter-production’ also suggests that censorship is intrinsically ‘counterproductive’, automatically self-defeating. One scholar has astutely analogized the effects of censorship to that of autoimmunity: ‘State censorship, moreover, is autoimmune, in the sense that even as it attempts to prohibit disseminations of proscribed ideas by controlling channels of communication, it simultaneously produces unexpected, self-debilitating results.’ That censorship often draws attention to what it tries to suppress is certainly true, as was the case with Such Is This World@sars.com. And it would indeed be convenient to apply the analogy to a narrative of the state’s failed attempt to quash reports of an epidemic outbreak. Yet autoimmunity’s emphasis is on reflexive destruction, while what I wish to highlight is production and alter-production – which, again, is not a reflex but a response – that are labour-intensive. To return to the novel, the passage below presents an abundance of alternative names for SARS that netizens invent to elude filtering:

The odd thing was that both ‘feidian’ and ‘SARS,’ as soon as they came into use, became proscribed vocabulary on the forum. Any post containing them would be detected and automatically blocked by a software monitoring system. Users found ways to camouflage their messages. The disease came to be denoted as ‘FD,’ ‘flying point,’ ‘boiling point,’ ‘using a lot of electricity,’ ‘worn-out mattress;’ or as ‘murder,’ ‘scatter to death,’ ‘incredibly stupid’… all that mattered was that people could figure it out. The surveillance of the Internet has honed people’s ability, untaught, to decipher the intended meaning of muddled Chinese compounds. This trick doesn’t work, however, against censorship operated by hand.

蹊跷的是，“非典”也好，“萨斯”也好，这词儿刚刚出来，在坛子上就成了非法字眼，凡帖子里有了它，便会被一套系统自动检测出来并禁止帖子发出。于是网民们用起变脸戏法，将非典换成FD，换成飞点，换成沸点费电废垫或杀死、撒死、傻死……总之只要人看得懂就行。网络管制，让许多人无师自通地学会了从乱七
My focus here is not on the techniques of resistance – the Roman alphabet, puns, etc. – but on the kind of production. The netizens persist in publicizing SARS, coming up with ever creative ways to do so. Their coding may not work against individual censors, yet it precisely forces censorship’s production to become, at least in part, manual. We begin to realize how much human input, in this age of algorithmic generation, is demanded from both sides. The scanner cannot supersede the eye. What is more, neither the eye of the netizen nor the eye of the censor is ‘untaught’ (无师自通), unschooled in the ways of decryption. Coding and decoding are experienced communally: they may not be taught directly but they presuppose a public intelligibility of writing and reading practices handed down through the ages. The collaboration is therefore synchronic and diachronic in nature, relying on both the sharing of the present and the sharing of the past. The ends differ but the means are the same, everyone – censors included – teaching and learning from one another throughout the production process.

This process can be conceived in terms of a ‘workshop.’ There are at least four attributes of the workshop, as extrapolated from above: creative labour, collaboration, experience, and public-making. They derive from both censorship and the Internet. Thanks to the latter, ‘barriers to entry’ into public discourse have never been lower in China: with increasing online access, more and more people are ‘publishing’ (texts, images, videos) and participating publicly (commenting, forwarding, ‘liking’) and, in consequence, potentially forming publics. This unprecedented popularization of public-making gives rise to the unprecedented popularization of the experience of censorship. This is not to claim that censorship has become more totalizing than ever. Precisely because it is much less so than during the socialist period, it is all the more open to experience. In the postsocialist period before the digital age, not getting published could be ascribed to the ‘natural’ barriers of merit and market. Now, however, when one’s online publication is taken down, censorship (and not economics or aesthetics) is pointed as the culprit. A public grows: the censored public.

Such is the case with Ru Yan. As mentioned earlier, she goes from a reader to a writer, in the beginning only sharing personal and poetic
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musings within a small community. But after undergoing the censorship of posts about the strange disease, not only is she undeterred from subsequently making public her brother-in-law, a doctor in southern China, getting infected, she also enlists Damo’s help in dissemination. She herself is more practised this time around, hiding the public concern of her article, which her partner in crime immediately reposts elsewhere, under the innocuously private title ‘My brother-in-law…” (姐夫……).13 We could say that this is her first workshop product.

We know that Ru Yan was not previously interested in ‘politics’ (政治).14 She becomes politicized, however, not in the sense of protesting in the streets, but in the sense of engaging in another kind of manifestation: making public discourse and making discourse public. Her forum’s former moderator, Lonely Goose (孤鸿), warns her that they are renting webspace from a commercial site, ‘with clear regulations that we can’t publish news articles of a political nature’ (有明文规定不能发布时政新闻类文稿). One can infer that Chinese commercial websites that sublet space to fora like theirs are themselves subject to another landlord’s terms of lease, the only landlord in town. Ru Yan asks to see the regulations, to which Lonely Goose replies: ‘This kind of regulation is itself top-secret: no way are you going to read about it’ (此类规定本身也是机密，怎么会让你看到?).15 Not only is SARS kept under wraps but the wraps themselves are shrouded in obscurity.

It should be evident by now that Such Is This World dramatizes censorship: of the Internet, of news of SARS, and of June Fourth, as we will later see. If it is the antagonist, then Ru Yan and Damo are certainly the protagonists. The two of them, of course, are joined in the agon by unnamed netizens who propagate Ru Yan’s piece (with an addendum by Damo):

This post began to spread at once from one website to another, like that staple of horror films, the self-replicating monster. And in its wake, on each website, there followed a swirl of intense commentary. Hard on its heels followed a tidal wave of deletions. But as the post was deleted in each place, it was speedily re-posted. The wave crashed on the shore, obliterating the footsteps which the monster had left in the sand; but as soon as the wave receded, the invisible monster left another line of footprints.16

于是，这个帖子就在一个个网站上蔓延开来，像恐怖片中那些能够自我复制的怪物。每一个帖子后面，都汹涌着一片跟帖。
Footprints on the sand stand for a portion of the online populace. These prints indicate neither identity nor replication. What they have in common are not the same ridges on a toe-tip but the direction in which they tread. They may be washed by wind and wave, but posting, reposting, and commenting are the steps they take together towards the public realm. However, in addition to Hu Fayun’s narration of censorship, non-diegetic performances of censorship appear in *Such Is This World* as well, and not just by the author and not just in one edition. It is to the novel’s publishing history that we now turn.

**THE WORKSHOP OF THE WORLD**

Hu Fayun completed *Such Is This World@sars.come* in March 2004. He originally wanted to publish it in print, but plans to do so fell through because of the banning of two other 2004 works, Zhang Yihe’s (*The past is not like smoke*) and Chen Guidi’s (*Will the Boat Sink the Water? The Life of China’s Peasants*) and Wu Chuntao’s (*The past is not like smoke*). This is how Hu relates what happened next with the novel:

In the summer of 2005 an old classmate Xiao Yuan forwarded it to a friend’s website. Not long afterwards, the website was shuttered. Thereafter *Such Is This World@sars.come* circulated as an electronic text among friends acquainted and unacquainted. Between fall and winter it reached the hands of the incoming editor-in-chief of *Jiangnan*, Yuan Min. She immediately asked a friend Ding Dong to tell me that she really liked it and hoped to publish it in the first issue of her literary journal’s revised edition. And so at the start of spring 2006, *Such Is This World* entered the world as intactly as possible.

2005年夏天，老同学肖远将它发到一位友人的网站，不久之后，网站关张。从此，《如焉@sars.come》便在相识或不相识的友人间以电子文本流传。秋冬之际，《如焉@sars.come》到了正要赴任《江南》杂志主编的袁敏手里，她当即让朋友丁东转告我，她很喜欢，希望能在改版后的《江南》第一期上用。于是，2006年初春，《如焉@sars.come》以尽可能完整的面目出世。
Half a year later it came out as a book as well. The above bibliographical sketch actually appears in the afterword of the edition published by the China Radio International Publishing House (中国国际广播出版社) in October 2006. The following January, however, in a closed-door meeting with publishers, a senior official of the General Administration of Press and Publications (GAPP) identified a ‘list of illegal publications’ (非法违规出版书单); *Such Is This World* was one of the eight works named. Though there was never an official ban, Hu’s novel could no longer be advertised.

But the story of its publication does not end there. In March 2009, in the comments section of Hu’s first Sina blog entry, which is verbatim the 2006 afterword quoted from above, a blogger named Shi Yan Wu Tian (食砚无田) shared his project of comparing the book version with the version that had first appeared online: ‘I spent two days collating the two versions of *Such Is This World* and “caught” all the deleted text, which I offer blog buddies to read. The abridged version of *Such Is This World* cut approximately 8,000 characters (including punctuation)’ (化了两天多时间，对《如焉》两个版本对照浏览，把《如焉》中被删部分的文字全部“捉”了出来，供博友一读。《如焉》删节本共删除约八千字（含标点符号数）。). He then proceeded to post the differences right in the comments section. In April, he directed readers to another website: ‘Oftentimes I would post and get deleted, post and get deleted, so I’m no longer going to post here. Interested blog buddies can go to “Hu Fayun Bar” to see the complete text’ (且经常发了被删，删后再发，故不再这里发了。有兴趣博友可到“胡发云吧”看全文。). ‘Hu Fayun Bar’ is an online fan forum, where under the topic ‘*Such Is This World@sars.come* cut parts’ (《如焉@sars.come》删节部分), Shi Yan Wu Tian has indicated not only the deletions within parentheses but also where each deletion occurs in the book edition and how many characters are deleted each time (Shi Yan Wu Tian).

Before we examine Shi Yan Wu Tian’s alter-production, we can perhaps posit that it took its initial cue from Hu himself. For in the 2006 book’s afterword the author makes two references to censorship, first the shutting of the website on which the novel initially appeared, then its appearing in the journal *Jiangnan* ‘as intactly as possible’ (以尽可能完整的面目). Elsewhere Hu is much more graphic. In an online post he speaks of his original version being altered in different ways by the jour-
nal and the book, describing the latter thus: ‘Though its core is not hurt, it is nevertheless an injured edition, like a girl walking out of a growth of thorns whose face, legs, and arms are streaked with blood’ (尽管尚未伤筋动骨，但也可算是伤残本了。宛如一位少女，走出丛丛荆草，脸上，腿伤，胳膊上，留下了条条血痕。). Traces of injury are hinted around the text, tracks that may indeed have sent Shi Yan Wu Tian on his hunt: the figure of bodily wholeness lost beseeches recovery and restitution. It matters little that even the original is constituted through censorship, as will be shown below. For what we have here is not merely an exhibition of censorship but its enactment: the novel both narrates it and lives it.

Shi Yan Wu Tian can also infer from Hu’s afterword that an ‘intact’ (完整) version exists online. This version is of course an alter-production: denied printing and distribution at first, Such Is This World circulated alternatively. We will remember that an old classmate of Hu’s submitted it to another friend’s website. ‘Friend’ (友人/朋友), in fact, appears three times in that short excerpt cited above, a testament to the collaborative, manual effort that sustained the novel while it was in limbo. Its transmission was never automatic, passing through hands both named – Xiao Yuan, Yuan Min, Ding Dong – and unnamed, all those who ushered its publication. That the Internet kept it alive is not an argument for technological determinism. It is the human being who breathes life.

It took Shi Yan Wu Tian two days to catch the differences between the online version and the 2006 book. When he publicized them, he went from a reader to a writer, similar to Ru Yan, for which he himself was repeatedly censored. Thus is the reenactment of censorship propagated and proliferated from the author to his public. As in every workshop, learning is hands-on and handed down. Hu Fayun’s sharing of his experience enables Shi Yan Wu Tian’s own experience, which the latter in turn shares with other netizens.

And he gains an audience as well. Many bloggers thank him for the collation, including one Lao Jiao (老礁) who raves about the work’s potential: ‘What can be gleaned from the deleted parts and what can be derived by comparing them to the authorized edition extend far beyond the words themselves. Years later, there may be the birth of a new field called “comparative editions”, and at that time people will remember brother Wu Tian’s pioneering work’ (从删掉的部分能读出的，和与允许...
Lao Jiao follows Shi Yan Wu Tian to ‘Such Is This World@sars.come deleted parts’ at Hu Fayun Bar, where he continues: ‘I’ve always thought that finding the differences between a book’s “abridged edition” and “intact edition” and then comparatively analyzing every section and sentence is a unique and even highly effective method to understand the current “climate” (我一直认为，找出一本书的“删节版”和“完整版”的区别，并逐段逐句对照分析，是了解时下的“风情”的一个独特甚至极有效的手段。).29 The restoration of the repressed facilitates this task of political meteorology. To test what he has suspected all along, he launches a topic in the forum called ‘Recreational analysis of Such Is This World@sars.come cuts (1)’ (《如焉@sars.come》删节趣析（1）) (Lao Jiao).

We will not delve into Lao Jiao’s hermeneutics. What his ‘publication’ reveals – as do Shi Yan Wu Tian’s and Hu Fayun’s – is the (alter-) productiveness of censorship, especially in the Internet age. On the path from the plural Such Is This World@sars.come to ‘Such Is This World@sars.come deleted parts’ to ‘Recreational analysis of Such Is This World@sars.come cuts (1)’; roadblocks resulted neither in dead-ends nor so much in detours as in diffusion. Not only did the novel stay alive but multiple lives were engendered. Again, it bears emphasizing that this productiveness is not of the mass or recursive kind but of the workshop variety: it is characterized by mutual instruction and the forming of alternative publics.

Nowhere is this dynamic more on display than on Hu Fayun’s Sina blog. In a comment to his own first entry, which, as noted before, is Such Is This World the book’s afterword, Hu complains of the opacity of censorship: ‘I originally wanted to post some pieces, but there are always sensitive terms or other problems, but they don’t give a “list of bad terms” either, so it often takes a lot of effort’ (本想贴几篇东西，老是说有敏感词或其它问题，他们又不给一个“坏词表”，常常很费功夫。).30 The ‘effort’ (功夫) is the manual trial and error required to avoid automatic filtering. A week after Liu Xiaobo’s winning of the Nobel Prize for Peace on 8 October 2010, Hu derides its cover-up: ‘An event known the world over, an event on which the leaders and governments of all countries voice their views, an event destined to go down in the annals of history – to conceal it in the Internet age betrays an ignorance and
madness that belong to an end-time fairytale’ (一个世人共知的事件，一个各国政府及政要纷纷表态的事件，一个注定要载入史册的事件，在互联网世纪，竟然想遮蔽它，这样的愚昧和疯狂，是一个末世的童话。)31 These words are followed by an image of various titles of entries deleted, so we see why Hu cannot be more explicit about the Nobel: his current text is already the product of much ‘effort’.32 In case readers are unaware of the context, an unsigned poster offers an explanation that can only be encrypted: ‘Talking about no bell peas price one buy L I U X I A O B O’ (言若贝尔禾口平丬夕大为文丬日尧皮所得。). These hieroglyphics, decipherable or not, nevertheless render one thing transparent: instead of initiating talk about Liu and the prize, they direct it to censorship itself. Other bloggers, such as Ge Shi (隔世) begin to share their own stories: ‘I once wrote a commentary that contained Mr. Hu and Zhang Yihe’s names as well as the titles of their two banned books, which got deleted’ (我曾写过一段评论，有胡老师和章诒和的名字以及被禁的两本书名，也被删了。). Proscription of one form – a book, for instance – entails proscription of others by association, including the name of the same book. The experience of proscription widens from the writer of the book to writers of the name of the book. A public grows: the censored public.

By the middle of the following year Hu is castigating the imposed silence on another world event: ‘Yeemen, Yeegypt, Twonisia, Libbya, Cyria … these nations not often within our purview – within a single night, they made this big country of ours appear this wretched, made a certain power this terrified, to the point that it cannot say their names’ (yemen, ai及，tu尼斯，里比亚，xu利亚……这些常常不在我们视野之内的民族，一夜之间，让我们这个泱泱大国显得如此的猥琐，也让某些势力如此的恐惧，以至不敢叫出他们的名字。)33 He is of course referring to the Arab Spring, the series of revolutionary protests and civil wars that erupted in the Arab world beginning in December 2010. The word-play Hu resorts to presents the visual testimony to what he is attesting. A month earlier he was already commenting in code in the entry ‘lby’.34 When one visitor asks what ‘lby’ means, someone gives a more decodable answer: ‘Li%by%A%’ (利%比%亚%). Another blogger, on the other hand, offers a reflection on this back-and-forth: ‘One can tell between the lines of Mr. Hu that this text (only so many words) underwent numerous rounds of “protection” – incessant changes and combinations
– in order to remain here, and so it is secretive and abstruse, like a riddle for people to guess at’ (从发云先生这段文字的字缝里看出，这些文字（寥寥数字）也经历了数次的“保护”后、在不断变换词语的搭配才得以留存在此，所以变得隐讳艰涩，像一段谜面，任人去猜想。). The blogger recognizes that the writing on display is only the result of a laborious experiment. Yet the result risks becoming ‘secretive and abstruse’ (隐讳艰涩) to the point of incomprehension and incommunicability. This danger, ever present, asks for a communal response that unites elucidation with ingenuity.

The other side is a collective too, composed of Party-state censors as well as ‘in-house’ web administrators (网管) who monitor their own sites. Hu prefaces his comments on the Libyan revolution in the entry above with a challenge to the latter: ‘Sina’s web admins, you’ve worked hard; I’ve already made you work for a long time. Here’s another one; keep on working. History will remember you’ (新浪的网管，辛苦了，已经让你们劳碌了好长时间。再来一个，继续劳碌。历史会记住你们。). They must have put in overtime the previous Christmas: the entry ‘The beautiful Christmas present given to me by Sina web admins’ (新浪网管给我的美丽的圣诞礼物) contains an image of the deletion of an essay posted two years earlier. An anonymous blogger rejoins: ‘Happy new year, web admins! Wish you earn more and work less in the new year. Be smart: when someone is checking, block some stuff; when that person leaves, restore everything. In the future we will certainly recognize you heroes on the “invisible front”’ (网管新年好！愿你们在新的一年里，多拿钱，少干活。多动脑筋，有人检查时就屏蔽一下，人一走就还原。将来我们一定会知道你这个在“看不见的战线”里的英雄。). The remark may be in jest, but unlike Hu Fayun’s, this direct address does make an appeal. In the comments section of another entry, another anonymous poster even shows empathy: ‘The web admins’ conduct is understandable, because it is their job. Their apology means that they too know what they do is wrong, but they can only obey the command from above’ (可以理解网管的行为，因为这是他们的饭碗。道歉说明他们也明白做的不对。但只有听从上面的意指。). It is a point Hu well appreciates. Back in an August 2008 entry he did not fault any individual after his interview was distorted in a newspaper. Three years later, in ‘No anger, only pity’ (不生气，只有悲悯), he reiterates that his anger is not aimed at the web administrators themselves: ‘I am not referring to some specific person,
but to the institution that they serve and live off parasitically’ (不是说哪一个具体的人，而是他们所服务并寄生的制度。). It is clear he feels more than pity for these brokers of censorship.

Under the same entry someone named teddybear shares with the blog community his experience both of censorship and in maneuvering around it: ‘I also always get “Deared” by Sina’s admins, so I set up a blog at Blog China, where there’s censorship too, but every piece goes through. I link what Sina deletes to there’ (俺也是总被新浪网管“亲爱”呀，后来俺就在博客中国建立一个专栏博客，那边也审查，但是篇篇都能通过，新浪删的俺就链接到过去。). Instead of outflanking, a Mo Lei 2008 (默雷2008) advocates a more confrontational tactic, with the help of Sina’s microblogging service, Sina Weibo: ‘Mr. Hu, make your essay into a long Weibo and post it, open multiple Weibo accounts and post it simultaneously. There are many avenues in the information age – work those SOBs to death’ (胡老师把文章做成长微博发吧，多开几个微博同时发。信息时代渠道多，累死那帮SB吧。). Hu asks how it can be done, to which the same blogger replies: ‘The search tools of those SOBs work only on text; they are powerless against images’ (SB们的搜索工具只能用于文字，对图片内容是无能为力的。). In true workshop spirit he goes on to explain how to combine small images (of text) into a long one.

Hu learns about long Weibos, but he must have already known, whether through his own experience or from somebody else, that images elude automated detection. For a day earlier, an hour after the removal of the text of ‘That night of affliction’ (那一夜，焚心煮骨) – an account of his wife resolving, despite seeing on television the bloodshed of the night before, to go to a long planned meeting in Beijing on June 4th, 1989 – Hu posted the essay as an image. In fact, visual plus textual production is a common feature of June Fourth-related entries. In ‘June 4, 2010’ (2010年06月04日), named after the date of the post, Hu is pictured standing beside a replica of the Goddess of Democracy statue on the University of British Columbia campus. He writes: ‘On a little square I saw that beautiful goddess. I know some things have not disappeared’ (在一个小广场，我见到那个美丽的女神。我知道，有些东西，并没有消失。). Someone under the name of Tian E Zhi Lü (天鹅之旅) echoes the sentiment: ‘Yesterday I and a few net friends went to the square. As we were about to leave, we agreed to come back next year, come back every year, making it an inextinguishable agreement’ (昨天
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我和几个网友去了广场，分别时大家相约明年再来，每年都来，让它成为一个不灭的约定。Hu responds: ‘As long as the square is there, the memory will be’ (只要广场在，记忆便依然。). The entry on the same day the following year, ‘Untitled’ (无题), is simply a picture of a gardenia with drops of water on it. Communion in this community is nearly telepathic. A reader comments: ‘Thinking alike’ (同念); another: ‘Do not forget this day!’ (勿忘这一天!).

These elliptic messages and images act out both the remembrance of June Fourth as well as its enforced forgetting. We will find a corresponding performance in Such Is This World. Just as no impenetrable wall seals off the virtual world from the real world and vice versa – Hu Fayun sharing his visit to the UBC campus and the Goddess of Democracy with the online community, a group of ‘net friends’ gathering offline to observe an anniversary – so the fictional world of the novel is interconnected with these two worlds. It is to this world that we now return, while at the same time weaving through the other two.

IN PARENTHESIS

Lu Xun, in collecting his miscellaneous essays (杂文) into independently published volumes, used to add a black dot beneath every character – the Chinese equivalent of underline – that had been taken out by editors or Nationalist censors upon initial publication in the Republican-era press. In our digital era Shi Yan Wu Tian has done something similar to Hu Fayun’s text, reinserting as well as marking out (with parentheses) what was cut (from the 2006 book). Both gestures exhibit censorship, yet Lu Xun’s punctuates the writer’s defiance of it, while Shi Yan Wu Tian’s is a figure for it. The parentheses can be viewed as gashes, the unhealed and unhealable wounds of an ‘injured edition’ (伤残本). They also perform the grammar of censorship. For to parenthesize is to judge extraneous and expendable. The removal of the parenthesized, as my own sentences above in this paragraph demonstrate, would not cause any structural damage. Nothing essential, you could say, would be lost: my paragraph would still read smoothly.

Shi Yan Wu Tian puts the parentheses back in place, revealing just how much of Such Is This World was deemed dispensable. Of course, not all excisions were censorial in nature. But mere editing cannot account for the repeated elision of references to inglorious events in P.R.C. history,
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including the campaign against the so-called Hu Feng clique of 1955, the Anti-Rightist Movement of 1957, the Great Leap Forward of 1958–61, and the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76. These events have all, in the post-Mao period, been officially reevaluated, so their censorship targets further re-evaluations that venture beyond the verdicts pronounced once and for all. The Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, on the other hand, have received a different treatment: a near total blanketing. Thus their mentions are rigorously prevented from the 2006 book.

Tiananmen Square nevertheless occupies a central position in Such Is This World. In this 70–chapter novel an extended sequence spanning chapters 36–38 recounts the transformation of the character Maozi (毛子), Damo’s longtime friend, from a free-thinking intellectual who supported the 1989 protests to a defender of the regime whose writings adulate its leaders. One can tell from Shi Yan Wu Tian’s restorations that even the online version is constituted through censorship. The 1989 protests are alluded to as ‘that public disturbance’ (那一次风波) at the ‘start of spring’ (入春), and in June Fourth’s aftermath – ‘early June of that year’ (那年六月上旬) – Maozi sobs in his room: ‘It’s too frightening, it’s just too fucking frightening’ (太可怕了, 狗日的太可怕了). These oblique references are in the original and not the result of editorial alteration.

But Shi Yan Wu Tian’s parentheses disclose what was, including Maozi’s involvement in the movement: ‘… Maozi had been active, even making two trips to Beijing, (signing petitions, marching, writing essays, speaking at colleges). He had been in the limelight (毛子一直很活跃。到北京都去了两次。(签名, 游行, 写文章, 到高校讲座。) 风云一时。). Following Shi Yan Wu Tian, I have inserted parentheses into A. E. Clark’s translation. They enclose Maozi’s past participation, retroactively struck out so that it could never have been part of the past. In a way they also perform Maozi’s own stifling of the memory. His colleagues thought that ‘Mao N.N. had gone mad (at the sound of gunfire in Beijing)’ (北京枪声一响，毛××就疯了), and indeed he was diagnosed with ‘temporary insanity with amnesia’ (一过性精神失常并发失忆症). The diagnosis is spot-on, for his insanity is temporary and his amnesia is not. Maozi soon recovers and ascends the academic ladder, now penning, instead of essays for the movement, encomia of government policies. He is both thanked and thankful:
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A fine position, a good income, a nice car and a beautiful home, a lovely wife and a promising son . . . he had it all. (In candid moments he often said that Deng was The Man, and Maozi gave him unqualified support. Without old Mr. Deng, Maozi would never have had this good life. A man must show gratitude to his benefactor. Not long after that public disturbance, when Maozi changed direction, this was a major reason why.)

It is enough to know that Maozi is living the life in post-Tiananmen China. That this life is the reward of a conscious volte-face, his reverencing of the man who ordered the crackdown on the demonstrations in which he took part, is unimportant: it can be forgotten without harm. So the writing between the curved lines is negated without a trace, until Shi Yan Wu Tian retraces both the writing and the lines. But by interpolating them, he not only qualifies our understanding of Maozi’s course of development – which the original online version would provide – but also reenacts the role that censorship has played in China’s course of development since June Fourth. Violence and the fear of that violence – and not houses and cars – set in motion Maozi’s change in course. The parentheses not only resuscitate ‘the sound of gunfire’ but also make public how another form of violence has shaped the Chinese public.

There are hazards involved in exhibiting prohibition. But Hu Fayun was not deterred. Neither was Shi Yan Wu Tian. And neither were all the bloggers who partook in the alter-production, nor Ru Yan and Damo. In the face of a sensitive administration, they all refuse to desensitize themselves. All three worlds – fictional, real, virtual – are interlinked and not ranked. That Shi Yan Wu Tian is only an online identity, that Ru Yan and Damo are characters in a novel, do not diminish their productiveness. Near the end of Such Is This World@sars.com, a conference is organized for Wei Liwen (卫立文), an old intellectual – in fact, an alleged member of the Hu Feng clique – who was Damo and Maozi’s mentor and who died of SARS. When the conference is forced to be cancelled at the last minute, Damo does not desist:
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(Damo wrote a piece: ‘A conference devoted to one man’s life and work, convened in the mind.’ At the conclusion of the essay he quoted from the song which Teacher Wei had sung as he lay dying:

In unity there is strength. In unity there is strength, A strength like that of iron and steel. Open fire on the fascists, let the whole undemocratic system be wiped out! Facing the sun, moving toward freedom and a New China, Glory to the ends of the earth!56

Damo had this piece serve as a preface to the dozens of essays he’d received as tributes to be shared at the conference, and he posted them all to his website, Word and Thought. Two days later, the site was shut down and deleted. Damo was prepared: he had already made a zipfile suitable for download, for he knew that these voices would be propagated, even as the light from a star continues to spread out through the universe for thousands of years. Other websites were quick to pick this up, for they saw it as an act of love and memorialization for the old man as well as a kind of intellectual torch relay.)57

As we can see, the entire citation is parenthesized, meaning that a fictional passage removed from a real book is restored in a virtual copy. This censored fictional passage also narrates censorship in the real and virtual worlds, precisely of a commemorative, congregative act. It is about an aborted real-world event that, nevertheless, in its virtual incarnations achieves an even greater public, thanks to expertise and the contribution and collaboration of many. It shows that the trying
and testing of censorship is always a work in progress, not only carried 
on hand in hand among interconnected worlds but handed on, as light 
continues to shine after the star itself is gone.

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ENDNOTES


3. Hu Fayun, 2006: Such Is This World@sars.com, Beijing: Zhongguo guoji guangbo chubanshe, p. 78.


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10. In the comments section to Hu's first blog entry, a blogger (Meng Ge Ma Li 蒙哥马丽) talks about the novel’s ‘ban’ piquing his interest: ‘Hearing that your work was banned, I hurriedly searched online and downloaded it. I came across your blog and took the liberty of entering. What glory to have your work among the eight banned books!’ (看到楼主的大作被禁, 赶忙从网上找寻并下载。/偶尔看到楼主的博址, 冒昧来访。作品能列为八大禁书之例, 光荣啊!) (Hu Fayun, *Hu Fayun’s blog*, November 21, 2006, Such is this world, what am I to do?). Another blogger (hqwxyz) is similarly motivated: ‘The Selection Department of the CPC is truly a good guide to modern must-read books. I heard your work was banned and immediately bought a copy online. After reading the first few pages, I thought, “Is this a publishing ploy? Even this book is banned?” Only half way through it did I realize how perceptive this department truly is’ (中*选*部真是现代必读书的好指导老师。听说大作被禁, 立马到网上买到一本。看了前几页后心想: “是不是书商搞的鬼, 这书也要禁?”看到一半时才知道该部门真是很有眼光。) (Hu Fayun, *Hu Fayun’s blog*, November 21, 2006). The ‘Selection Department of the CPC’ (*zhongxuanbu* 中选部) is a pun on the Publicity Department of the CPC (*zhongxuanbu* 中宣部).


18. Hu Fayun, 2011: 3. The former is a memoir of the Anti-Rightist Movement of 1957 by the daughter of the prominent ‘rightist’ Zhang Bojun (章伯钧), while the latter is a work of investigative reportage by a husband-and-wife team.
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20. Among the other works on the list is another by Zhang Yihe, Performers Past (伶人往事) (BBC Chinese, 2007, ‘China prohibits distribution of eight literary works,’ January 19).


23. Ibid.


25. A Hong Kong edition came out in 2007, advertised bilingually on the front cover as ‘一字不删足版全本UNCENSORED EDITION’.

26. In an interview on Phoenix Satellite TV-US (凤凰卫视美洲台), Hu remarked that the novel had first made a splash overseas. The video of the interview did not pass Sina’s censorship, but its transcript was provided by another ‘net friend’ (网友) (Hu Fayun, *Hu Fayun’s blog*, February 12, 2010, Phoenix Satellite TV-US’s Daily Topic interviews Hu Fayun).

27. Hu Fayun gave a series of lectures on the Cultural Revolution at Wuhan University, the transcripts of which he posted on his blog. The text of the eleventh and last lecture, however, was repeatedly deleted despite Hu’s various efforts. Other bloggers suggested posting it elsewhere, but Shi Yan Wu Tian’s attempt was likewise censored: ‘I just reposted on my own blog your deleted essay (the 11th) and incurred the same deletion. Evidently this is not a place for speaking’ (刚才我在自己的博客上转载先生被删文章（之十一），同样遭遇被删，看来这里不是说话的地方。) (Hu Fayun, *Hu Fayun’s blog*, November 19, 2009, A lecture without an ending). Hu was able to post the 11th lecture only more than two years later in ‘A secret blog entry’ (一篇“私密博文”) (Hu Fayun, *Hu Fayun’s blog*, February 26, 2012).


29. Shi Yan Wu Tian, “*Such Is This World@sars.com* cut parts.”

30. Hu Fayun, *Hu Fayun’s blog*, November 21, 2006. An interview that he conducted with the Hunan-based Morning Weekly (晨报周刊), which is posted on his blog, is titled ‘Hu Fayun: Many topics in the unnamed forbidden zone can be gradually “desensitized”’ (胡发云：许多莫名禁区中的话题，是可以慢慢“脱敏”的) (Hu Fayun, *Hu Fayun’s blog*, February 11, 2009).

31. Hu Fayun, *Hu Fayun’s blog*, October 16, 2010, ‘An end-time fairytale’). Liu had been taken into custody in December 2008 for co-authoring Charter 08 (零八宪章), a manifesto circulated electronically that called for demo-
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cratic reforms in China. In December 2009 he was sentenced to 11 years in prison.

32. The blog entry ‘Today is the first day of heavy snow here’ (今天是这儿的第一场大雪) is simply an image of 15 deleted titles (Hu Fayun, Hu Fayun’s blog, December 15, 2010).

33. Hu Fayun, Hu Fayun’s blog, June 5, 2011, Tomorrow is the Double Fifth.


35. Ibid.

36. Hu Fayun, Hu Fayun’s blog, December 26, 2010, ‘The beautiful Christmas present given to me by Sina web admins.’ The essay is ‘Lin Zhao, how we love you’ (林昭，我们如何爱你). First labelled a rightist in 1957, Lin Zhao spent long bouts in prison where she maintained her steadfast belief in human rights and freedom. She was secretly executed in 1968 at the age of 35. She has since become a symbol for unrelenting opposition to political oppression and tyranny. An acclaimed documentary on her life is Hu Jie’s (胡杰) In Search of Lin Zhao’s Soul (寻找林昭的灵魂) (2005).

37. Hu Fayun, Hu Fayun’s blog, October 16, 2010. The message generated automatically after every deletion is ‘Dear Sina blog buddy: Your piece “—” has been deleted by the administrator. We deeply regret the inconvenience caused you’ (亲爱的新浪博友：您的文章《—》已被管理员删除。给您带来的不便，深表歉意).

38. Fundamentally speaking, this is not the problem of a particular journalist, or even that of the decision-making editor or chief editor, but the problem of our institution of the press. For many years now, our news does not report on newsworthy reality but rather carries out the propagandistic aims handed down by certain ministries or certain persons. Under this institution of the press our many journalists who loved and respected journalism are ultimately ‘forced into prostitution’.从根本上说，这不是某一个记者的问题，甚至也不是最后操刀的编辑、总编的问题，而是我们的新闻制度的问题。多年来，我们的新闻并不是真的需要反应那些有价值的新闻事实，而是要完成某些部门某些人物下达的宣传意图。我说，这样一种新闻制度下，我们许许多多满怀对新闻事业崇敬热爱的从业人员，最后都被“逼良为娼”。(Hu Fayun, Hu Fayun’s blog, August 30, 2008, For this apology, I want to say…).

39. Hu Fayun, Hu Fayun’s blog, October 9, 2011, No anger, only pity.’

40. Hu Fayun, Hu Fayun’s blog, October 8, 2011, ‘Deleted some Libyas, Libya’s victory is already in sight. Deleted “That night”, what’ll come of it?’


43. When Hu’s Sina Weibo account was frozen on June 4, 2013, one blogger wrote, ‘The web admin is reminding you that today is a special day, reminding you not to forget this day’ (网管在提醒你，今天是个特殊的日子，提醒你不要忘记这个日子。), while a second quipped, ‘Six four is too sensitive. I don’t even plan on celebrating my six four birthday’ (六四太敏感了。我不打算过六四岁生日了) (Hu Fayun, *Hu Fayun’s blog*, June 4, 2013, ‘June 4, 2013’).

44. In a chapter on Mo Yan’s *The Garlic Ballads* (天堂蒜薹之歌), I argue that the distinction between editing and censoring – and between revising and self-censoring – is not always easy to pinpoint. But the fact that editing and censoring sometimes blur does not mean the two are indistinguishable, a point I do not make sufficiently clear there. See Thomas Chen, 2014, *The Censorship of Mo Yan’s The Garlic Ballads*, in Angelica Duran and Yuhan Huang (eds), *Mo Yan in Context: Nobel Laureate and Global Storyteller*, pp. 37–49, West Lafayette: Purdue University Press.


51. Hu Fayun, 2006: 119; Shi Yan Wu Tian, ‘Such Is This World@sars.com’ cut parts.’

52. Hu Fayun, 2011: 226; Hu Fayun, 2006: 120; Shi Yan Wu Tian, *Such Is This World@sars.com* cut parts.


56. ‘In unity there is strength’ (团结就是力量) is a People’s Liberation Army song from the early 1940s, i.e. before the establishment of the P.R.C.


58. Hu Fayun, 2006: 265; Shi Yan Wu Tian, ‘*Such Is This World*sars.come cut parts.’
Hackerspaces and the Internet of Things in China
How Makers Reinvent Industrial Production, Innovation, and the Self

Silvia Lindtner

The contemporary landscape of information technology is one that has been profoundly influenced by the emergence of the ‘hacker culture’ in the 1960s and 1970s. From the computer you might be using in this very moment to online services you use frequently to communicate, the technology landscape is full of products that depend on alternative models of technology production that were driven by this early hacker culture. These alternatives are variously known as open source, open innovation, peer production, free software, and the like. The vision that drove these open forms of technology production depicted the emerging digital world in revolutionary terms and as antithetical to the technologies and social structures powering the Cold War-state and its defence industry. Members of this hacker culture were committed to designing technologies, which are open and modifiable by their users. Their approach towards technological ‘makings’ evolved out of an orientation toward the computer as a tool of empowerment and discovery.

Today, we find ourselves in the middle of a new hacker culture (or ‘maker culture’) that both harkens back to this model of technology production as individual empowerment and departs from it in significant ways. This contemporary maker culture is concerned not only with open Internet technology and digital things, but also with physical things such as hardware designs, sensors, and networking devices.
that bridge between the digital and physical world. While the earlier movement was concerned with the workings of software code and the workings of the Internet, this contemporary maker movement is also concerned with hardware designs and the workings of the Internet of things.³ Chris Anderson, the former editor-in-chief of Wired magazine, suggests that this contemporary maker movement is driving forward the ‘third industrial revolution’⁴ – a generation of technology producers that expands from the earlier Internet and Web 2.0 techniques to make innovative products and remake industrial production.

In this article, I explore the unique manifestations of this maker movement in China. The two main questions I set out to explore are: how do maker ideals of individual empowerment and open knowledge production unfold in relation to China’s politico-economic project of building a creative society? And what can a study of a culture of technology producers tell us about the relationship between identity, collectivity and digital technology in China?

I approach these questions by focusing on creativity discourse in China such as its supposed lack and/or the opportunities that lie in its nurturing. For instance, Chinese politicians have long argued that Chinese citizenry lacks creativity, holding the nation back in its modernization path. In contrast, scholars in the field of Chinese Internet research found that individual and creative expression flourish online.⁵ Their work has contributed important insights to our understanding of the Chinese Internet as multifaceted and as a site through which social norms are simultaneously reworked and existing control is further extended. However, much of this prior work has focused on political issues, including, for instance, censorship and political control,⁶ online activism, the public sphere and tactics to circumvent censorship,⁷ as well as on disadvantaged populations, such as migrant workers, who have limited access to Internet technology or technological work-arounds.⁸ With the notable exceptions of Andrew Ross’s detailed account of white-collar workers in the high-tech industries in China and Taiwan and Lorraine Justice’s work on contemporary Chinese product design, the experiences and practices of those who work in the high-tech and creative industries in China today have received less attention.⁹

Especially rare in the growing field of Chinese Internet research is work that involves long-term, on-the-ground ethnographic engagement
with people involved in the creation and design of technologies. Drawing from long-term research with a collective of technology producers – or ‘makers’ – provides exactly such an in-depth account of a culture of production and design in China. It is important to note here that my goal is not to predict whether ‘DIY making is really going to make a big difference’ for China’s project of creativity, as one of the reviewers of an earlier version of this chapter challenged me to articulate. Rather, I provide a situated account of a particular moment in China, when new alliances between China’s makers, established industries and governments were forged. Rather than asking if China’s makers and their hardware creations are ultimately going to push forward China’s larger modernization and innovation project, my inquiry is focused on the ways in which the story of China’s makers challenges any simple and linear story of technological progress and of Chinese modernization as eventually caught up with the West. China’s makers, as I will demonstrate in this article, are driven to craft their own vision of Chinese creativity, one that does not a-priori measure its success against Western models of progress and innovation. Rather than promoting a future of modern China, makers locate creativity and innovation in contemporary China, and more specifically in the history of industrial production, piracy and copycat culture that have evolved over the last 30 years in the South of China. In this chapter, I explore what lead up to this promotion of China’s own history and culture of maker innovation and creativity.

FROM ‘NETIZEN’ TO ‘MAKING SUBJECTIVITIES’

An important analytical category deployed in the broader field of Chinese Internet research to account for the relationship between individual expressions, collective identity and digital technology in China has been the notion of the “netizen.” The netizen is predominantly understood as a unique form of citizen engagement in China, enabled by the increase of Internet technologies.10 The analytical lens of the netizen has been employed, for instance, to account for new forms of individual and collective expression online, in particular with regards to political debates and societal controversies. Accounting for the many diverse forms of online expression, research on the Chinese netizen has led to important insights about playful approaches towards censorship and creative workarounds;11 and has uncovered the many shapes of contentious
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activities and activism associated with the use of the Internet. This idea that Internet technologies in China, despite censorship, contribute to the empowerment of citizens has been taken up widely beyond the field of Chinese Internet research, for instance in communication studies and popular tech discourse. Much of this prior research has concentrated on how people appropriate and make the Internet their own as they go about using it. Relatively little prior work, however, has explored how practices and cultures of technology use evolve in relationship to histories and cultures of production – which is perhaps particularly ironic, given China’s role in electronic manufacturing.

As China’s technological landscape is changing, so too is participation in technological production. People do not only access and use the Internet; they also make – to various degrees – their own devices, tools and software applications. Even social networking applications such as Weibo and Weixin (or WeChat) are shaped and remade by both their developers and users. Similar to social-media applications elsewhere, these platforms gain value based on the content their users produce. Fundamentally, then, technology use is inherently about production – technologies take shape based on what designers and users together ‘make’ with it. Concepts like the netizen do not suffice in accounting for this multiplicity of production that figures in practices of use. My goal, then, is to open up the concept of the netizen to include cultures and histories of technology production. In doing so, I bring together Chinese Internet research with work on ‘dividual’ subjectivity in anthropology, which recognizes the multiplicity of selfhood.

The concept of the netizen is based on the idea that the use of the Internet enables people to express themselves in new ways. While I consider it crucial to identify such emergent forms of expression and citizen engagement, the netizen as an analytical tool has in many ways turned into what anthropologist Marilyn Strathern terms a stable ontological category. Strathern illustrates how a new mode of governance emerged in Europe between the 16th and 18th centuries, which made sense of diverse people and populations by classifying citizens into discrete entities based on statistical analysis. People began to think in disparate entities that made up the natural and social world, that is, ‘persons became like data entities thought of as individuals, and society defined as the connections between them.’ Strathern argues that ever since, we have under-
stood identity as an ontological given that remains stable across time and space. Strathern’s insights allow us to see how netizen identity runs the risk of functioning as an ontological given, classifying people into online users (netizens) versus the rest (the state, the non-user, the citizen, the producer, etc.). For instance, the term netizen as it is used today generalizes across diverse values and practices in order to articulate the potential impact of Internet technology on social and political change. How can we account for diverse cultures of technology use and production in China? What other ways of theorizing the sociality of the Chinese Internet are there beyond the binary of the netizen versus the state?

Strathern proposes the analytical lens of the dividual to account for the multiplicity of selfhood through which a person acts and makes meaning of others’ actions. The concept has been taken up widely in both anthropology and digital media studies. For instance, building on Strathern, Boellstorff describes how the notion of the ‘flexible worker’ in contemporary tech business and political rhetoric is exactly such a closed identity, predicated on a single selfhood, that Strathern describes. Boellstorff urges not to re-inscribe dominant subject positions such as the flexible citizen, but to focus on how people make meaning out of tenuous, glancing, fragmentary and half-understood engagements.

Building on this prior work, I propose the analytical sensitivity of ‘making subjectivities’ to open up the notion of the netizen. Making subjectivities draws attention to the ways in which one’s position in society is continuously in the making. It means paying attention to the work performed when we position ourselves in relation to others. It also acknowledges that our position is never singular and predicated on a single goal or purpose (e.g. to make money or to resist state control), but multiple, fractal and heterogeneous. With making subjectivities, I wish to shift our focus from single identities such as the activist, nationalist, Internet user, and so on, to the multitude of a subject position. With making subjectivities, then, I point to prior research that has highlighted the diversity of technology use and apply it to the study of technology production. As such, I do not propose a move away from what we have gained through our explorations of netizen practice, but to open up the concept of the netizen itself to include the many positions people craft for themselves and others, when they use and produce technology.
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In what follows, I shall illustrate how China’s makers understood technology production and starting-up tech businesses as intervening in the status-quo from within. By designing open technologies and developing new businesses, they repositioned themselves in relation to others. Their efforts were not directed at escaping the system, but at making use of it, making fun of it, altering it, and provoking it. In that sense, the subject positions that they crafted were ‘parasitic’. With parasitic, I draw from Geremie Barmé’s use of the term to resist common analytical binaries such as ‘the dominant social order’ versus ‘subculture’ or ‘counterculture’.18 Providing a detailed historical account of China’s 1980s and 1990s’ avant-garde and pop art scene, Barmé suggests recognizing the mutual dependencies and alliances between artists and the state. Illustrating how the state leveraged dissident artists for claims over national cultural production and how artists in turn exploited state support, Barmé argues:

Nonofficial culture can also be spoken of as a parallel or even parasitic culture. As such, it is neither nonofficial nor necessarily anti official. Much of it was and still is produced with state funding and certain (often low-level) official or state involvement. It may not be directly sanctioned or beholden to the overculture, and it cannot simply be classified as oppositional.19

China’s maker culture is neither straightforward countercultural nor pro-system. Makers align with start-up culture and promotions of making in the United States, do not hesitate to take advantage of foreign venture capital,20 and exploit political promotions of China’s remake into a creative economy. They bring together and align often contradictory ideas such as copycat and open source, manufacturing and DIY, individual empowerment and collective change; and in doing so they craft a particular kind of subject position for themselves and others in China.

**DIY MAKING AND CREATIVITY IN CHINA**

China’s maker culture emerges from a growing network of hackerspaces, that is, physical spaces that expand ideas and practices of the Web generation into hardware and manufacturing. Hackerspaces are community spaces created by people committed to new approaches towards
technology use and design, based on the open sharing of software code and hardware designs. A typical space is equipped with computing tools that allow for experimenting with the physical/digital boundary – computer-controlled laser cutters, 3D printers, and microcontroller kits. Hackerspaces also often host educational workshops, where these tools are used to teach others about manipulating the physical environment through software, or vice versa.

China’s first hackerspace opened in Shanghai in the fall of 2010 under the name XinCheJian\(^{21}\) (新车间). I was able to witness this moment while I conducted research with a collective of entrepreneurs, designers, bloggers, and artists active in and around the co-working space XinDanWei\(^{22}\) (新单位). About three months into my ethnographic research with Xin Danwei, a small sub-community formed led by David Li, Min-Lin Hsieh and Ricky Ng-Adam, interested in DIY and open hardware. They equipped a room with a 3D printer, sensor toolkits, soldering irons – and China’s first hackerspace was born. Only six months later, XinCheJian had grown to such an extent that it moved into its own building. Today, there are hackerspaces across several cities in China such as Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, Ningbo, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou.

Hackerspaces are not unique to China. With an estimated 700–1,100 active spaces in existence worldwide, hackerspaces are a significant global phenomenon.\(^{23}\) The proliferation of hackerspaces around the world has helped promulgate a DIY maker culture that revolves around both technological and social practices of peer production, creative tinkering, a commitment to open source principles, and a curiosity about the inner workings of technology.\(^{24}\) The significance of hackerspaces goes well beyond the leisure-time activities of a bunch of geeks (however interesting they might be). Large corporations currently make money from open source, while inventing new business, organizational models, notions of property, ownership and innovation along the way.\(^{25}\) According to Stephen Weber, ‘by experimenting with fundamental notions of what constituted property, this [open source] community has reframed and recast some of the most basic problems of governance.’\(^{26}\) Powell, similarly, argues that open source communities and market structures are dialectical, demonstrating how ‘major software companies are now core contributors to open source projects, recuperating the processes that hackers originally linked with radical politics.’\(^{27}\) It is this confluence of
a countercultural ethos with corporate culture, and how it plays out in China, that this article sets out to explore.

Just one year after the founding of XinCheJian, the Chinese government made a call for proposals to build 100 ‘innovation houses’ (创新屋) to be supported by government funding. Although the official document described this initiative as part of a larger effort to build a citywide platform for supporting popular science work and innovation, national and international media interpreted this move as an endorsement of China’s fledgling hackerspace community. What is going on here? How do DIY makers and communist politicians come together in their belief that hackerspaces are the way of the future for creativity and innovation in China?

In popular discourse, when it comes to elaborating on the meaning of creativity, the quintessential example commonly used is Silicon-Valley tech entrepreneurialism and start-up culture. Silicon Valley has not only produced technologies we all use today – think of Web browsers and word-processing programs which readers may be using to read this article – but also a particular way of thinking about what counts as innovation, good design and creativity. China on the other hand is often invoked as Silicon Valley’s unimaginative counterpart. Silicon Valley comes up with the ideas and China manufactures them. Apple products, for instance, are labelled ‘designed in California’ and ‘assembled in China’ (see Figure 2.1).

It is exactly this image – that ‘assembled in’ or ‘made in’ inherently refers to China, while ‘designed in’ or ‘created in’ inherently refers to California – which Chinese politicians are driven to remake, when they promote the cultivation of creativity. For example, in 2004, Liu Shifa from the Chinese Ministry of Culture, stressed:

The new century should be a century of creativity. From flourishing creative industries to a rising creative economy, until the emergence of a creative society, this will bring about a new cultural perspective to our world. Contemporary China should be a creative China. From ‘manufactured in China’ to ‘produced in China’, from ‘made in China’ to ‘created in China’, this will bring about a new face and spirit to contemporary China.30

According to Liu Shifa, China should make the shift from its reliance on manufacturing (made in China) by re-directing economic and social
China’s Contested Internet

With the emphasis on creativity, politicians such as Liu Shifa invoke an older discourse based on the principle that China’s development rests on the development of a high-quality workforce. In the book *How Creativity Is Changing China*, Li Wuwei, one of China’s leading policy-
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makers, reiterates this larger discourse, promoting creativity as a new economic development strategy accomplished by the cultivation of a new society. For China to become creative, Li asserts, a remake of both its economy and its people is required. This call for creative development is exemplary of several official documents, by and large produced since China’s entry into the WTO in 2001, drawing upon the idea that the world economy has reoriented from the production of materials to the production of immaterial goods, ideas, knowledge and services. The underlying tenor of these documents is that it is still the ‘low quality’ of China’s citizenry and the failure of its people to modernize that holds the nation back from cultural leadership in international comparison.

Such allusions to the international competition mostly from the United States and the Asian economies have been central to the modernization discourse since the 1920s and 1930s, in which China’s progress was measured against technological and civil standards elsewhere, in particular the West. China’s culture was rendered as lagging behind in international comparison, because of China’s state of wenming (文明, civility). Prior work suggests that wenming has been invoked at different historical moments and for different reasons to depict China’s state of civility and cultural development in comparison to the West, rendering China’s modernization as a project of catching up with the West. Contemporary discourse mirrors this by presenting China as inherently lacking and lagging behind.

In contemporary creativity discourse, wenming, is invoked to attribute China’s lack of creativity yet again to the failure of its people to modernize. However, the very meaning of modernization has shifted. To be modern now refers to a disciplined citizenry in China that simultaneously embodies nationality and globality, including things like entrepreneurial thinking, technological ingenuity and stature in international relations. Taken together, the cultivation of creativity is envisioned to lead to the necessary technological innovation and scientific advancements in China in order to turn the nation into both an economic and cultural leader on a global stage. Wenming is at the heart of this process, casting the futures of China’s development in the hands of its people.

In their call for societal change in order to cultivate creativity, Chinese politicians are not alone. They share this vision with politicians, policymakers and business leaders in other regions across Europe, North
America and Asia, who have embraced theories of the post-industrial society, knowledge economy, and creative class. These theories, developed since the 1970s, have called forth a new class of workers such as the self-made entrepreneur, the flexible worker, the creator and innovator of technology. Prior research has traced how political discourse and managerial literature across North America, Asia and Europe have taken up this idea in order to promote the cultivation of tech-savvy, self-reliant and inventive citizens. These articulations call upon individuals to become creators of culture, technologies and profitable subjectivity.

The remainder of this article shows how China’s makers simultaneously critique and relate to these calls for social change. They find common ground with government officials, when they propose that innovation and creativity are crucial for China’s development. However China’s makers differ in how they envision that this change would unfold. While politicians argue that creative industry development will make China into a cultural leader of the 21st century, China’s makers believe that individual empowerment and a bottom-up approach will lead to social and economic transformation. I will show that we can neither fully understand DIY maker culture nor IT development in China more broadly, if we neglect such parasitic alignments between seemingly opposing actors such as makers and politicians.

FIELDWORK WITH MAKERS

The work presented here is based on in-depth ethnographic research that I have conducted with China’s DIY makers since 2010. Similar to makers elsewhere, makers in China see technology production as creative expression and a form of individual empowerment, achieved in particular by engaging with the inner workings of technology. They identify themselves as members of a global ‘maker movement’ with roots in the early Internet and technology counterculture, and they are committed to open source principles. My ethnographic research includes participant observations at Chinese hackerspaces, at maker-related events, and at a China-based hardware incubator programme. While mostly representing the middle and upper-middle classes, China’s DIY maker scene is diverse, including Chinese who have never left China, transnational Chinese who frequently travel to present their work or collaborate with others abroad, and expatriotes who live and work in
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China. Their world, which I came to know through my ethnographic fieldwork, is a fascinating one and one whose contours confound any simple generalization about China being a place where there is little or no creativity. Through my ethnographic research, I have become engaged as a close collaborator and co-producer in their cultural analysis, maker and business projects.

As part of my research, I also accompanied them to events that they helped organize or attended, such as TEDx conferences, BarCamps, Dorkbots, Hackathons, Startup Weekends, creative industry conferences, Arduino workshops and Maker Faires. I participated in the organization of some of these, as well as in the production of digital materials that unfolded at the hackerspaces on a daily basis.44 In addition to participant observations and interviews with people affiliated with the DIY maker scene, I conducted archival research on policy documents on creative industry development, technological and urban development in China, and also conducted interviews with other relevant stakeholders such as urban planners, policymakers, founders of Chinese start-ups and international design firms.

MAKING AS SITE OF INDIVIDUAL EMPOWERMENT

From the perspective of the makers with whom I worked, DIY making meant, among other things, utilizing computational tools for creative expression and individual empowerment. Many shared a commitment to the open and free sharing of software code, hardware designs, ideas and resources, with the goal of reflecting on and reworking dominant social and economic frames. As in open-source communities elsewhere, there is no single ideology or narrative that dominates the maker scene in China. Considerably numerous and at times conflicting ideas and values animate them. Some people, for instance, are committed to starting up firms or grass-roots communities, others are eager to rethink contemporary meanings of technology production through re-use and open sharing while working for larger corporations, and yet others are driven to invent new organizational models or alternative approaches to the legal system. Based on their research on free and open-source software, the anthropologists E. Gabriella Coleman and Alexander Golub describe this multitude of goals and motivations in open source communities as ‘a mosaic of ethical positions.’45
China’s maker scene became internationally visible when its members hosted Maker Carnival (创客嘉年华), a local version of the trademarked Maker Faire in Beijing in spring 2012. Maker Faire is a large-scale festival that is usually organized by the Make Magazine Group at O’Reilly Media and features hundreds of exhibitors who celebrate the arts, crafts, engineering, technology and science projects with a DIY mindset. Maker Faire is typically an event held in the United States (although more recently there have been smaller Maker Faire events in Canada, Europe, South America and Asia). It serves as a cultural meeting point and catalyst for a maker community that presents itself as acting globally and broadly providing the opportunity for people to exploit their creative capacities. The mission statement on the Maker Faire website reads: ‘Maker Faire offers the opportunity for us to see ourselves as more than consumers; we are productive; we are creative. Everyone is a maker and our world is what we make it.’ Although the Maker Carnival in Beijing was not officially supported by O’Reilly Media and as such could not be hosted under the licensed name Maker Faire, the event nevertheless was crucial for China’s makers in demonstrating their belonging to the global maker movement.

Many of those who attended the Maker Carnival, whether local Chinese or from abroad, told me that they believed that a maker approach towards creativity would place China at the centre of global development one day. In the words of a maker from San Francisco, ‘All of the world economy today is based on a creative economy. And if China is going to be part of this economy, people have to be able to take risks and be encouraged to be creative.’ In this call for social change, makers aligned with official rhetoric, arguing for the cultivation of a new creative society. They differed, however, in the reasons for China’s lagging behind. Many stressed that China lacked the necessary infrastructure such as educational programmes for children and youths, funding programmes and independent organizations that support artists, entrepreneurs or generally anyone who works outside traditional frames and large institutions. They repeatedly emphasized that China’s weaker position as compared to the rest of the world was not due to the low quality of its people and lack of wenming as government officials argue, but was caused by the lack of important infrastructures and support networks. To quote one of the co-founders of the co-working space XinDanWei at a TEDx Shanghai event:
People say that Chinese have no creativity. That’s bullshit! There are lots of very great ideas, some of them are almost too incredible to believe. We are not short of people with good ideas. What we lack are the ability to execute, to extend and the power of influence and resources. Where can you get those things? ... if there is a place where people can meet each other and come into contact with all those resources, what will happen then?

Establishing a hackerspace in China, then, was in part motivated by the intention to address this lack and to create a space that helps others in China think of new career paths (for instance, to become a freelance developer or designer, to start up your own business, or simply to work with physical materials). During the first months of the Shanghai hackerspace XinCheJian, the co-founders organized a series of workshops to introduce others in China to maker culture and its commitments to creative play, DIY and open sharing. During one of the first workshops, the organizers assembled participants around a big table that they had placed at the centre of the hackerspace, introducing the tools that they thought to be quintessential for any hackerspace: a 3D printer, Arduino boards, a laser cutter, some wires and electronic components, and soldering irons (see Figure 2.2). Coming together around a table that displayed ‘lots of cool stuff’, as one of the co-founders put it, made visible what working in a hackerspace meant in practice and what it symbolized. A co-founder further explained:

There is a new maker movement that’s emerging right now. It builds on the DIY culture, to get people excited again to build stuff. It’s anti-consumerism ... it’s affordable today to do it for fun and that’s of course driven by the power of open source. The iPhone is fun, but it’s more fun to make it yourself. This is part of the maker movement.

Such introductory workshops were a means for the co-founders to identify what maker culture could mean in and for China. Many makers were particularly sensitive to the issue that a hackerspace would be associated with the image of a heike (黑客, black hacker) engaged in illegal activity. As stories of Chinese hackers breaking into Google servers circulated widely in mass media outlets in 2010, the term heike became the widely-used term to describe this practice of hacking into a system. And so many makers were anxious to come up with a term that did not have any immediate associations with heike. It was during the planning
stages of the first international Maker Carnival in Beijing, when China’s makers settled on an alternative term: *chuangke* (创客, creative professional). The term *chuangke* has the advantage of connoting creativity (创意) and innovation (创新), which are employed in positive terms within the wider creativity discourse, as elaborated earlier in this article.

Through these early efforts, makers negotiated how to best position themselves and their work in China. XinCheJian and the other hackerspaces and maker events that spun from it, produced not only a wider imaginary of DIY making in China, but also with makers elsewhere. International attention brought with it legitimacy as well as access to a transnational network of like-minded tinkerers. More importantly though, the maker imaginary nourished a new subjectivity that existed simultaneously in relation to China’s creativity discourse and in its opposition. While government officials argued that creativity would flourish through top–down creative cluster development, Chinese makers argued that creativity is stimulated when people adopt a DIY mentality, guided by their own passions and working beyond rigid
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Institutions and large corporations. DIY makers questioned one central pillar of creativity discourse in China – the contention that the quality of China’s citizenry is low – by reformulating ideals about self-governance. Their businesses and daily work processes were centred around the idea that technology production can lead to individual empowerment and freedom of expression, ideas common to the free and open-source-software movement. Their businesses were targeted towards helping others in China to become creators not only of technologies, but also of a new position in society beyond rigid institutional frames and against a political rhetoric underlining the low quality of Chinese citizens. This orientation towards technology production as a form of individual empowerment goes back to the early days of personal computing and the Internet. Drawing upon Steven Levy’s writings on the ‘hacker ethic’, Mimi Ito, for instance, describes how a group of computer enthusiasts at MIT in the early 1960s began to think about technology as open and modifiable by its users. Rather than the contemporary perceptions of the hacker as somebody engaged in unlawful activity breaching security, this earlier approach towards technological ‘makings’ evolved out of an ‘orientation toward the computer as a tool of empowerment and discovery’.

In what follows, I shall elaborate how China’s makers on the one hand identified with this idea of open technology production as individual empowerment, and on the other hand challenged what they believed to be a Western-centric interpretation of openness.

China’s Maker Culture

Many makers that I worked with shared the belief that their work in China was uniquely positioned: at the heart of a pre-existing maker culture emergent from the hardware-repair workshops on the streets and from factories that produce for the world. David Li, one of the co-founders of XinCheJian, often described this to me as an authentic maker culture, driven by necessity rather than countercultural ideals, which he associated with maker practice in the West. The last two years have seen a rise in hardware start-ups working with manufacturers in China in order to turn their DIY maker ideas into consumer-end products. One of the regions central to this development is the Pearl River Delta in the south of China, and Shenzhen in particular, home
to factories like Foxconn that produce for companies such as Apple and HP. Shenzhen has long been a particularly unique region in China. Declared a special economic zone upon its inception, it was designed and built with the goal of encouraging foreign investment and economic growth. Foreign corporations, for instance, received tax reductions and other benefits when they opened a production site in the region. Today, Shenzhen also attracts a new generation of entrepreneurs – DIY makers who described Shenzhen’s electronic markets downtown as ‘a life-size Digikey’ and Shenzhen as a whole as ‘China’s most open city’. Many of the makers who started up businesses and moved to Shenzhen in order to manufacture their products were of the opinion that the region’s openness in manufacturing was central to its uniqueness.

What does open manufacturing as employed by makers mean? To answer this question, I first turn to the region’s history of shanzhai (山寨) production. Shanzhai traditionally stands for counterfeit products and low-quality copycat productions of well-known brands ranging from retail such as Gucci bags to electronic products such as the iPhone. The literal translation into English is ‘mountain fortress’ and carries connotations of self-reliance and resourcefulness. In this formulation, copying, re-use, and innovation are not mutually exclusive. For example, shanzhai factories in Shenzhen do not only produce copies of the latest tablet or mobile phone. They also remix functional albeit discarded components with new parts in order to produce novel products, often tailored towards niche markets in China, India and Africa. Often-cited examples include mobile devices for Chinese migrant communities that allow users to send remittances easily or phones with built-in compasses that point users in the direction of Mecca.

Makers referred to a second meaning of shanzhai when they described an efficient open-manufacturing system that has formed around these small-scale factories in Shenzhen over the last 20 years. Open manufacturing means that many small factories, and in particular shanzhai factories, have informally organized a peer-to-peer database for sharing hardware design schematics and their bill of materials, a list of materials used in manufacturing a particular product. Sharing these resources allowed the factories to lower production costs and to stay competitive in a global market. Bunnie Huang, an acclaimed member of the international maker movement and regular visitor to Shenzhen,
describe *shanzhai* in a blog post as China’s open source. Suggesting that the phenomenon has grown beyond the original *shanzhai* practice, he proposes the term *gongkai* (公开) to account for a ‘self-sustaining innovation ecosystem … just as the Galapagos Islands is a unique biological ecosystem evolved in the absence of continental species, gongkai is a unique innovation ecosystem with little western influence, thanks to political, language, and cultural isolation’.

Many other makers have similarly highlighted *shanzhai’s* workings through open sharing and remix-as-innovation. Many also believed that by focusing on this unique open source culture the image of Chinese manufacturing can be revamped from a site of cheap, copycat production to one that highlights the more creative connotation that *shanzhai* shares with the international maker movement. Let us look at a specific example of a business model built on this idea of bringing together an international DIY maker culture with China’s open manufacturing system.

In 2008, Eric Pan founded Seeed Studio, a small-scale manufacturing and design house located in Shenzhen. Seeed Studio designs and manufactures products for an emerging niche market: DIY makers. Its products include open hardware platforms, hardware-developer kits, hardware-hacking tools, and custom-made printed circuit boards. Today, Seeed Studio is internationally renowned in maker circles and amongst design professionals, with 98 per cent of its revenue stemming from product sales and contracts with clients in the United States and Europe. According to Pan, Seeed Studio might not have survived if it was not for Shenzhen’s *shanzhai* production. Before Seeed was established, he discovered a copycat Arduino board during a stroll through Shenzhen’s Huaqiangbei electronic markets. The Arduino board is essentially an easy-to-use microcontroller, a single-chip computer that supports the design of hardware-software-material interaction, and accompanying programming environment. Invented in 2005 in Italy at the Ivrea Design School, it has popularized the design of interactive systems and DIY making, by simplifying the process and greatly reducing costs. After Eric Pan had bought the *shanzhai* Arduino board, he turned to the Internet and discovered an international network of makers connecting hackerspaces across the world. It was then that the idea arose to partner with members of Shenzhen’s manufacturing ecosystem in order to invent new open-hardware products and to cater to this growing interna-
national market of makers. One of the first products that Eric Pan designed was a board that builds on the Arduino board – in the spirit of open source – by making it significantly better, and offering it at a lower price, which was made possible by the partnerships that he had established in Shenzhen (see Figure 2.3).

Seeed Studio is based on a business model that effectively merges maker ideals with China’s manufacturing expertise. It works because new ideas for products emerge from strong partnerships with both Shenzhen’s manufacturing world and DIY makers. For Pan, this notion of partnership is more than a business model; it is about ‘shaking up and remaking our very idea of manufacturing, innovation, and copy’. This is best exemplified by the label of Seeed Studio products. For instance, rather than the common ‘made in China’ tag that adorns most of the products we use on a daily basis, Seeed Studio’s products are labelled ‘innovate with China’ (see Figure 4). ‘Innovate with China’ illustrates the potential that lies in approaching China as a partner in the creation process rather than just a cheap producer. For Pan, as for many other

Figure 2.3: Seeeduino v 3.0 Atmega
makers, *shanzhai* and the process of copying is better seen as a productive force, rather than as something inherently negative, or in his words:

[S]hanzhai is ... you learn from something and you are redoing it in your own way and it could be shabby at times, but also interesting at other times ... it’s the same when you learn a new language. You have to write the sentence again and again, copying from your teacher. *Shanzhai* makers learn from their teachers such as Apple and Samsung to create a mimic first. So they have the basic skills and develop the basic infrastructure to create. After you have learned how to write a word, a sentence, you remember it. From words you can create sentences and grammar, then you can write a whole article. You can develop your own style. It’s a very natural process. It’s the same with *shanzhai* production, it’s nothing to be ashamed of or to be blamed for. It’s a very important learning process.

Similarly, many other makers considered *shanzhai*, with its roots in histories of piracy and counterfeit, not as something negative or to be avoided. On the contrary, many described it as a form of creativity and resourcefulness. *Shanzhai* stood for a form of ingenuity that many considered intrinsically Chinese: a DIY mentality, inventive ways of
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working with materials, and adaptability to local shortages and rapid changes to the physical and social environment. By aligning shanzhai with DIY making, Seeed Studio repositions Chinese manufacturing, challenging dominant associations of ‘made in’ such as cheap and low quality. It promotes a version of creativity that differs drastically from what the Chinese government has been promoting over the last years, as outlined at the beginning of this article; a move away from ‘made in’ and from China’s reliance on manufacturing. China’s manufacturing expertise, here, is promoted as the crux both for China’s broader ‘remake’ as a post-industrial knowledge economy and to deliver on the promises of the maker movement: the democratization of technology production.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have shown how China’s makers envision remake industrial production, common understandings of innovation and creativity. In doing so, they craft a subject position that both subverts and aligns with official creativity and innovation discourse. I have also shown that physical spaces such as hackerspaces function as interfaces between a wider public, potential investors, like-minded makers, Chinese manufacturing and officials. Across hobbyist maker practice and entrepreneurial activity, open source and the sharing economy are promoted both as site for collective gain and broader economic growth and as site of individual empowerment amidst rapid geopolitical, urban, social and technological transformation.

Throughout this article, the analytical lens of ‘making subjectivities’ was employed to illustrate the ways in which meaning of work, technology, and social life in and around China’s maker scene unfolds through both technology use and production. Makers are promoting the importance of a maker approach for China’s future development. However, making was not considered distinct from other aspects of people’s lives. Making constituted not only a particular mode of technology production, but also a way of being and acting in the world. For instance, describing oneself as maker was not understood in opposition to also being a citizen, parent, teacher, programmer, artist, blogger, designer, entrepreneur, employee, and so on. Rather, on the contrary, it meant being a parent (or teacher, artist, entrepreneur, etc.) differently – i.e. committed to act
in the world and bring about change through a hands-on and engaged manner. Identifying as maker meant constructing a multifaceted position in society that exists in relation to many other spheres of life.

Collaborating with diverse stakeholders, the makers whom I worked with positioned themselves in a world that they perceived as being in flux. They refused to be caught up in urban, economic, technological and social transformation in China and beyond. As the site of individual empowerment within unstable and shifting worlds, making provided the material and discursive means to intervene in the very societal norms and material infrastructures that undergird their work and livelihood. Maker productions and businesses, as such, are neither straightforward countercultural nor pro-system. In order to account for these at times symbiotic, at other times parasitic practices, analytical categories such as tactics versus strategies, state (or corporation) versus netizen, or official versus counterculture are clearly insufficient. For instance, I have shown in this article how the hardware facilitator Seeed Studio simultaneously exploits and intervenes in Chinese manufacturing, promoting a version of creativity and innovation that harnesses histories of *shanzhai* and piracy production.

By emphasizing how makers continuously craft their subject positions in relation to seemingly altering terrains, I wish to emphasize how simple binaries of resistance versus system, citizen versus netizen, user and producer do not hold. It is important for the study of Chinese information technology to take into account the politics of participation in technology production, as practices of making and the vision of its future impact are proliferating. This includes reflection on the participation of researchers into the production of visions and stories of both technology use and design. For instance, speaking of netizens or makers as the other, ontological category separates the researcher from the practices she studies. Taking a position removed from the practices one studies is complicated by our position within the same technological and social infrastructures or, as Annelies Riles put it so poignantly, “we lack an outside today. We are all in the network.” As politicians across regions are calling upon all of us (designers, educators, researchers, parents, students, etc.) to become makers of technologies and hence better futures, it is ever more important to understand how people craft positions in relation to such technologically deterministic stories.
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REFERENCES


Hackerspaces and the Internet of Things in China


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ENDNOTES


3. Internet of things refers to the embedding of sensing technology into physical artifacts. An early example is radio-frequency-identification technology.


Hackerspaces and the Internet of Things in China


11. Ibid. (Herold and Marolt, Qiu, Yang)


15. Ibid.: p. 38.


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19. Ibid., xiv.


27. Powell, Democratizing production through open source knowledge.


Hackerspaces and the Internet of Things in China


36. Scholars have stressed the historical significance and complexity of the term *wenming*. According to Anagnost, *wenming* stands for multiple things, including modernity, westernization as well as civilization as an advanced stage of historical development, see Anagnost, *National Past-Times*; Ralph Litzinger differentiates between acting *wenming* and *wenming* as a marker of progress and national belonging, see Ralph Litzinger, Tradition and the gender of civility, in Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (eds) *Chinese Feminities Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002: pp. 412–34; Andrew Jones traces *wenning* back to late Qing, where it came to serve as an emblem of all that was advanced, see Jones, *Developmental Fairy Tales*.

37. Ibid. (Anagnost, Litzinger, Brownell and Wasserstrom, Jones)

38. O’Connor, Shanghai modern: Replaying futures past.
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46. O’Reilly is a technical publishing house with a strong connection to the DIY maker community. O’Reilly publishes the technical documentation for major and emblematic open source tools and platforms.


48. Keane, *Creative Industries in China*; Keane, Reclaiming China’s former soft power; and Keane, *Created in China*.


CHAPTER 3

Government Consultation and Political Participation on the Chinese Internet

Steven J. Balla

Contemporary authoritarian regimes, such as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), routinely establish institutions designed to facilitate communications between citizens and government officials. Such communications are essential for non-democratic states seeking to bolster legitimacy in environments characterized by restrictions in political expression and, by extension, in the circulation of reliable information about public opinion. Increasingly, the search for legitimacy has led authoritarians to the Internet, to digital spaces where many of the central political contestations of the twenty-first century are articulated and adjudicated.

The Chinese Internet is not a monolithic entity, but rather a collection of disparate digital spaces, each with its own design features and user characteristics. As a result, the association between government-citizen interactions, on the one hand, and stability and change in the Chinese political system, on the other hand, likely varies significantly across institutional contexts. Irrespective of context, the tone and substance of sentiments expressed by citizens are likely to be central in determining the extent to which online interactions with government officials ultimately enhance or threaten the regime’s legitimacy.

This chapter contributes to the process of building a context-specific body of empirical knowledge about political expression and contestation in Chinese digital spaces. The chapter examines the operation of online consultation, a process through which government officials provide citizens with opportunities to offer feedback on draft laws and regulations.
Online consultation is an important institutional feature of the Chinese Internet, as it constitutes one of the central mechanisms through which government organizations solicit and receive public input on proposed courses of action.

The chapter focuses specifically on citizen feedback that is submitted during the course of online consultation, addressing the following research questions. What are the determinants of the sentiments that citizens express in online consultation? What is the respective importance of demographic characteristics and subjective motivations in determining the tone and substance of citizen feedback?

Although little is known about citizen feedback in online consultation, research on other forms of institutionalized political expression has devoted significant attention to the association between demographic characteristics and substantive motivations on the one hand, and the nature of public participation on the other hand. Demographic characteristics, like income and education, provide insight into the segments of society that engage government officials through instruments such as petitioning and voting in local elections. Subjective motivations, which include support for democratic principles and political reform initiatives, indicate the extent to which participatory instruments are associated with dispositions that potentially enhance or threaten the legitimacy of the CCP. By grounding the analysis in existing understandings and uncertainties regarding demographic characteristics and subjective motivations, the chapter situates the study of citizen feedback in online consultation within the framework of political participation and stability and change in the Chinese political system more broadly.

The chapter examines the determinants of citizen sentiments in the context of a particular application of online consultation, a revision to China’s health system proposed in 2008 by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC). Health-system reform is one of the most important policy initiatives that the Chinese government has pursued in recent years, as it seeks to improve its governance in an area where citizen dissatisfaction has skyrocketed in the post-reform period. In addition, health-system reform was one of the NDRC’s initial applications of online consultation as a means of soliciting citizen feedback. The chapter therefore establishes a benchmark against which future experiences with and
analyses of online consultation can be juxtaposed. Finally, health-system reform is perhaps unique in that systematic information exists regarding both the content of the feedback that was submitted and the characteristics of the citizens who offered comments on the NDRC proposal. Together these data sources make it possible to address such issues as the respective importance of demographic characteristics and subjective motivations in determining the tone and substance of citizen feedback in health-system reform.

In analysing the expression of citizen sentiment in online consultation, the chapter advances understanding of political contestation in Chinese digital spaces, particularly in the context of institutions established by government officials to bolster the legitimacy and sustainability of the CCP. Such understanding complements ongoing research on citizen expression in digital spaces, such as blogs, microblogs, and discussion forums, that are not directly created and operated by government organizations. Ultimately, the chapter, by generating insight into political expression in a specific institutional context, contributes to the study of the ongoing evolution of communications between Chinese citizens and government officials and, more broadly, the resilience of CCP authoritarianism.

RESEARCH ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN CHINA

Rather than stifling political participation in its totality, the Chinese government, as with contemporary authoritarian regimes throughout the world, establishes opportunities for and imposes constraints upon the expression of citizen sentiments. Participatory opportunities include instruments such as petitioning and voting in local elections. Research on such forms of political expression has focused extensively on the respective importance of demographic characteristics and subjective motivations as determinants of citizen participation. This research has generated insights and provoked uncertainties that are of great utility in informing expectations, analysis, and interpretations of the tone and substance of citizen feedback in online consultation.

One of the most publicized political reforms of the post-reform period has been the expansion of local elections. Research on the operation of elections is grounded in the underlying notion that patterns in citizen voting have profound implications for stability and change in the Chinese
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political system. From one vantage point, elections offer citizens opportunities to articulate interests and impose a measure of accountability upon government officials. Viewed differently, elections are exercises in which citizens demonstrate compliance with actions that have already been ratified through internal CCP decision-making channels.

The case for elections as meaningful democratic moments is derived from research demonstrating the centrality of particular demographic characteristics and subjective motivations as determinants of citizen voting. In competitive elections throughout the world, characteristics such as gender and education, and motivations such as interest in politics, affect the propensity of citizens to cast ballots. Research on Chinese elections demonstrates that, at least under certain choice conditions, substantially similar arrays of factors differentiate voters from citizens who abstain from participation. For example, in semicompetitive elections, well-educated male citizens who discuss politics and national affairs with others are more likely to vote than citizens not possessing such demographic characteristics and subjective motivations.

The contrary case for elections as instruments for inducing compliant citizen behavior is derived from research that highlights the importance of an alternative suite of demographic characteristics and subjective motivations. In this research, age is positively associated with voting, while education is negatively associated with participation in elections. To the extent that older, less educated citizens are relatively likely to be supportive of the political establishment, such patterns are consistent with the notion that elections are exercises in ratifying authoritarian courses of action. When it comes to subjective motivations, citizens with weak internal efficacy and democratic orientations are more likely to cast ballots than citizens who are confident in their capacity to influence public affairs and who support the expansion of local elections. These results suggest that efficacious, democratically-oriented citizens are dissuaded from participation, at least in certain choice environments, by constraints placed by government officials on the scope and conduct of elections.

Similar variation in findings characterizes research on other forms of political participation than voting in elections. Much of this research examines citizen-initiated contacts with government officials, through such instruments as petitioning, letter writing, and the attending of meetings. Many, though certainly not all, analyses demonstrate that
Government Consultation and Political Participation on the Chinese Internet

well-educated, wealthy male citizens are more likely than citizens not possessing such demographic characteristics to contact government officials. Research also suggests that civic competence is a crucial determinant of non-electoral participation, much in the same manner as in democratic countries throughout the world.

Such associations between demographic characteristics and subjective motivations on the one hand, and political participation on the other, have thus far not generated much attention in the specific context of citizen feedback on the Chinese Internet. The little evidence that has been generated indicates that citizens with awareness of the political possibilities of digital spaces have typically been online for relatively long periods of time and are well established in Chinese society. Such citizens are often highly-educated males who are employed in well-regarded professions.

Taken together, existing studies demonstrate the utility of demographic characteristics and subjective motivations as conceptual frameworks for analysing political behaviour. Given, however, that the results of previous analyses vary substantially across institutional contexts, little guidance is provided regarding the development of specific expectations for the operation of online consultation. Nevertheless, particular patterns of demographic characteristics and subjective motivations have been interpreted with respect to the distinction between participation as instrumental articulation on the one hand, or complaint behaviour on the other. These interpretations offer a pathway for linking the tone and substance of citizen feedback in online consultation with broader concerns regarding stability and change in the Chinese political system.

THE OPERATION OF ONLINE CONSULTATION

Online consultation is a relatively new development in Chinese policy-making that has been made possible in part by the extraordinarily rapid growth over the past decade in the proportion of the population with access to the Internet. Despite its recent vintage, online consultation is a highly salient instrument of political participation. In 2008, the State Council announced that it will ‘make use of the Internet as a standard method of inviting public opinion on draft laws and regulations’. In the years ahead, the State Council plans to establish a nationwide system for facilitating online consultation on the part of all central agencies and at all levels of government.
Due in part to the opacity of the Chinese policymaking process, little is known about the operation of online consultation. In 2011, for example, the National Peoples’ Congress (NPC) utilized the Internet to solicit citizen feedback on proposed revisions to the nation’s criminal procedure law. The NPC did not make public the tens of thousands of submissions that were received, thereby making it difficult to assess systematically the identity of participants, the content of citizen feedback, and the influence of comments on the law that was adopted the following year.

During the health-system-reform consultation, in contrast, the NDRC made available via the Internet comments that were submitted in response to the proposed policy. The proposal, which was circulated in October 2008, established the broad outlines of a reformed health system. The proposal laid out the objectives that the system would be expected to meet, such as providing both urban and rural residents with universal access to basic services, ensuring the safety and availability of pharmaceutical products, providing physicians with adequate compensation, and combatting waste, fraud and abuse in the system.

Concurrent with the announcement of the reform proposal, the NDRC opened a one-month feedback period, during which nearly thirty thousand comments were submitted. The NDRC also offered participants the opportunity to submit an email address along with substantive feedback. This request resulted in the provision of more than six thousand email addresses. The public, online disclosure of these email addresses makes possible the gathering of information not only regarding the content of specific comments, but also the demographic characteristics and subjective motivations of the participants who submitted these comments. By bringing together analysis of the content of comments with an email survey of participant attributes, attitudes and behaviours, the chapter utilizes a combination of original data sources to examine the determinants of the tone and substance of citizen feedback in health-system reform.

ANALYSING HEALTH-SYSTEM REFORM

An effort was made to collect information about the demographic characteristics and subjective motivations of all 6,402 participants who publicly provided their email addresses. The author, in collaboration
with the Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University, developed a survey instrument consisting of 23 questions regarding various attributes, attitudes and behaviours of health-system-reform participants. The Center implemented the survey by sending the questionnaire as an attachment to all available email addresses, accompanied by a message explaining the purposes of the research and ensuring the anonymity of respondents. Valid responses to this survey instrument were provided by 541 participants, who constitute the sample that is analysed regarding the determinants of the tone and substance of citizen feedback in health-system reform. Given that the sample was constructed in a non-probabilistic manner, the results of the analysis may not be readily applicable to health-system-reform participants and comments in general.

**Dependent Variables**

The dependent variables in the analysis consist of measures of the tone and substance of health-system-reform comments. These measures were operationalized through an analysis of the content of the 541 comments that were submitted by participants who subsequently responded to the survey instrument. Table 3.1 provides descriptions and summary statistics for the five indicators of comment content that serve as dependent variables.

With respect to tone, comments were differentiated according to the extent to which they express positive or negative attitudes toward both the current health system and the health-system reform proposal. These two dependent variables are coded as ordinal scales, ranging from highly positive to highly negative sentiments. For both variables, expressions of negative sentiments were more common than expressions of positive sentiments. In fact, not a single comment was coded as expressing even a moderately positive attitude toward the current health system.

Comments were differentiated in three ways regarding their substantive content. One such dependent variable is the length of the comment, measured as the number of characters contained in the submission. Comments varied in length from 16 to 5,254 characters, with the typical comment consisting of several hundred characters. Comment length is an imprecise measure of substance, given that brief comments may communicate substantively salient information and, conversely, comments comprised of hundreds or thousands of characters...
Table 3.1: Dependent variable descriptions and summary statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Number of observations</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>* Tone of comment</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward current health system</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td></td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward health-system-reform proposal</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td></td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Substance of comment</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of characters</td>
<td>541</td>
<td></td>
<td>339</td>
<td>609.75</td>
<td>723.94</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5,254</td>
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<td>Contain data, analyses, and arguments</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of recommendations</td>
<td>541</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** For each variable, only summary statistics that are appropriate for the level of measurement in question are calculated and reported. The attitude toward current health system variable and attitude toward health-system-reform proposal variable are both coded as follows: -2 = highly negative, -1 = moderately negative, 0 = mix of positive and negative, 1 = moderately positive, 2 = highly positive. These two variables are coded as missing for comments that stated neither positive nor negative attitudes toward the current health system and the reform proposal, respectively. There are multiple modes for the number of characters variable. The contain data, analyses, and arguments variable is coded as 1 if the comment articulated systematic arguments and referenced scientific data and statistical analyses and 0 if the comment did not engage with such types of knowledge and information.
may contain arguments and evidence of little relevance to government officials. Nevertheless, the number of characters serves as an indicator of the extent to which comments do more than quickly register facts and opinions.43

A second measure of substantive content considers the nature of the arguments and evidence presented in comments. Were comments grounded in knowledge derived from such sources as research and professional experiences? This dependent variable is dichotomous, distinguishing comments that articulated systematic arguments and referenced scientific data and statistical analyses, on the one hand, from comments that did not engage with such types of knowledge and information, on the other hand. Three hundred and two comments satisfied this criterion, including the following comment, of which the text below is an excerpt.

I work at a hospital in a rural area. The New Rural Cooperative Medical System was implemented in 2008, but it does not work to the benefit of peasants. Originally, 1,300 RMB was enough to cover the cost of an appendectomy. Now, however, the operation costs 3,000–4,000 RMB and patients must pay 1,300–1,500 RMB out of pocket.

Finally, substantive content is measured via the number of recommendations communicated in the comment. Recommendations are specific changes to the health system and reform proposal suggested by participants. Recommendations, in other words, are more than statements that convey information to government officials. The number of recommendations contained in comments ranged from zero to five, with more than three-fourths of comments including at least one such suggestion. The following comment excerpt is an example of a recommendation.

Restrictions on private hospitals should be eliminated, thereby allowing private hospitals to compete on equal footing with public hospitals.
Explanatory Variables
The explanatory variables, for which descriptions and summary statistics are provided in Table 3.2, are derived from responses to the survey instrument. Respondents were asked to provide information about demographic characteristics and subjective motivations that have framed debates and structured analyses regarding the causes and consequences of Chinese political participation.46

One such demographic characteristic is gender. Much previous research has generated nil results regarding gender differences in the propensity of Chinese citizens to vote in local elections and initiate contacts with government officials.47 Research that has uncovered gender differences has demonstrated that males are more likely than females to engage in political participation.48 Consistent with such results, more than 80 per cent of the health-system-reform comments under examination were submitted by males.

Previous research has demonstrated that age is associated with participation in the Chinese political system.49 This association is typically conceived of as curvilinear, with petitioning and voting in local elections rising in propensity through middle age and then declining afterward. As a means of assessing such curvilinearity in the context of the tone and substance of health-system-reform comments, the analysis includes as explanatory variables both the age of the respondent and the square of this quantity. The typical participant was more than 38 years of age, older than the majority of Chinese Internet users.50

The nature of the association between education and political participation is, on the basis of previous research, highly uncertain. Some research has uncovered a positive association, with participation more prevalent at higher levels of education.51 Other research, in contrast, has revealed a negative association,52 while still other research supports the conclusion of no association at all.53 The analysis includes as an explanatory variable an indicator of the respondent’s highest level of educational attainment. This variable is measured as an ordinal scale, ranging from less than a high-school education to education beyond the completion of undergraduate studies. Collectively, participants were well educated, with nearly 90 per cent consisting of university graduates.

Given that previous research suggests that political participation varies across geographic locations,54 the analysis includes a pair of explana-
**Table 3.2:** Explanatory variable descriptions and summary statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Number of observations</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Demographic characteristics</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>36</td>
<td>38.22</td>
<td>12.06</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>77</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age²</td>
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<td>1,296</td>
<td>1,605.75</td>
<td>1,055.37</td>
<td>256</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Residential location</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Subjective motivations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental motivation for participation</td>
<td>541</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government responsiveness</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other health system reform participation</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation in other online consultation</td>
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<td>–</td>
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<td>–</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** See endnote 77.
tory variables denoting the respondent’s current place of residence. One variable classifies respondents as living in either cities, small towns, or rural villages. The other variable differentiates Beijing residents from respondents who live in other locations. Nearly three-fourths of participants live in cities, with 77 respondents specifically residing in Beijing.

The survey provides a number of instruments for assessing the subjective motivations of participants in health-system reform. Respondents were asked to indicate their motivations for submitting comments on the reform proposal. They were given an array of options and were instructed to select as many reasons as applied to their participation. Several of these options offer insight into the internal efficacy of respondents, that is, the confidence of respondents in their ability to understand and influence politics. The analysis includes a dichotomous explanatory variable indicating whether respondents selected any of three options regarding their motivations for participation – to express concern with the overall reform effort, to express specific concerns with the proposal itself, to influence the direction of health-system reform. Nearly 80 percent of participants indicated that one or more of these instrumental motivations described their submission of health-system-reform comments.

As another means of measuring internal efficacy, respondents were asked about their expectations regarding the government’s responsiveness to health-system-reform comments. This variable is operationalized as an ordinal scale, ranging from very responsive to not responsive at all. Nearly three-fourths of participants expressed the expectation that the government would be either slightly responsive or not responsive at all to the comments that were submitted.

One indication of the internal efficacy and democratic orientation of respondents is political participation beyond the submission of comments on health-system reform. Was comment submission a one-time, perhaps idiosyncratic event or do respondents manifest internal efficacy and democratic orientation through participation in politics and policymaking on a regular, ongoing basis? The analysis includes a pair of dichotomous indicators that measure other forms and venues of participation. One variable differentiates respondents who have participated in health-system reform in ways other than submitting comments on the NDRC proposal from respondents who indicate no such
additional participation. The other variable asks respondents whether they have submitted comments on draft laws and regulations in online consultations other than health-system reform. 142 respondents and 316 respondents, respectively, indicate engaging government officials via these alternative forms and venues of participation.

The survey instrument assesses respondent attitudes toward the democratic possibilities of online consultation. Respondents were asked about the extent to which they view online consultation as a means of increasing fairness in the policymaking process. This variable is operationalized as an ordinal scale, in which the efficacy of online consultation is rated from very effective to not effective at all. Respondents were nearly equally divided in their assessments of online consultation as slightly effective, somewhat effective, or very effective in promoting fairness in government decision making.

**MULTIVARIATE REGRESSION RESULTS**

The analysis is oriented toward determining the extent to which the measures of demographic characteristics and subjective motivations are associated with the tone and substance of health-system-reform comments. As illustrated by the descriptive statistics, participants collectively occupy well-established places in Chinese society and aspire through regular, ongoing public involvement to exert influence over policymaking processes.58 Among such participants, did differences in circumstances and orientations affect the nature of submitted comments?

The associations between the dependent variables and explanatory variables are assessed through a series of five multivariate regression equations, the results of which are reported in Table 3.3.59 For each equation, the estimator is chosen on the basis of the nature of the dependent variable. Ordinary least squares is used for the number of characters variable, which is a continuous measure. Logistic regression is utilized for the dichotomous indicator of comments that articulated systematic arguments and referenced scientific data and statistical analyses. Ordered probit is employed for the attitude toward current health system and attitude toward health-system-reform proposal variables, both of which are ordinal scales. Finally, Poisson regression is used for the variable counting the number of recommendations.60
Table 3.3: Determinants of the tone and substance of health system reform comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanatory variables</th>
<th>Attitude toward current health system</th>
<th>Attitude toward health system reform proposal</th>
<th>Number of characters</th>
<th>Contain data, analyses, and arguments</th>
<th>Number of recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tone of comment</td>
<td>Substance of comment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.18 (.27)</td>
<td>-.61 (.29)*</td>
<td>-188.37 (101.02)*</td>
<td>.40 (.28)</td>
<td>-.02 (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.003 (.05)</td>
<td>.02 (.05)</td>
<td>5.14 (18.67)</td>
<td>.07 (.05)</td>
<td>.04 (.02)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age²</td>
<td>-.0001 (.0006)</td>
<td>-.0003 (.0006)</td>
<td>-.003 (.22)</td>
<td>-.0008 (.0006)</td>
<td>-.0005 (.0002)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.33 (.14)*</td>
<td>.004 (.14)</td>
<td>27.38 (49.73)</td>
<td>.11 (.14)</td>
<td>-.004 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential location</td>
<td>.40 (.16)*</td>
<td>-.13 (.20)</td>
<td>58.30 (64.49)</td>
<td>.03 (.18)</td>
<td>.05 (.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>.22 (.32)</td>
<td>.07 (.32)</td>
<td>-61.56 (117.48)</td>
<td>.06 (.33)</td>
<td>.13 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Subjective motivations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental motivation for particip’n</td>
<td>.44 (.27)*</td>
<td>.19 (.24)</td>
<td>204.23 (96.72)*</td>
<td>.66 (.27)*</td>
<td>.13 (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government responsiveness</td>
<td>-.02 (.11)</td>
<td>-.08 (.11)</td>
<td>-2.22 (41.43)</td>
<td>-.07 (.12)</td>
<td>.10 (.04)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other health system reform particip’n</td>
<td>.27 (.22)</td>
<td>.41 (.22)*</td>
<td>215.40 (84.23)</td>
<td>.78 (.24)*</td>
<td>.16 (.08)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particip’n in other online consultation</td>
<td>-.05 (.20)</td>
<td>-.10 (.20)</td>
<td>-14.25 (76.49)</td>
<td>-.23 (.21)</td>
<td>.06 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>-.12 (.11)</td>
<td>.19 (.11)*</td>
<td>-20.43 (42.47)</td>
<td>.09 (.12)</td>
<td>.02 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>223.35 (410.34)</td>
<td>-2.59 (1.15)*</td>
<td>-.77 (.44)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>-104.61</td>
<td>-142.82</td>
<td>-277.10*</td>
<td>-745.50*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-statistic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.90*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of observations</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Each column in the table reports the results of a regression equation. The numbers in the cells are parameter estimates, with standard errors in parentheses. * = statistically significant at p<.01. † = statistically significant at p<.05. * = statistically significant at p<.10. All hypothesis tests are two tailed. The number of observations varies across equations as a result of differences in the prevalence of missing data among the variables.
In general, the multivariate regression results demonstrate that subjective motivations were more salient than demographic characteristics as determinants of the tone and substance of health-system-reform comments. Among this well-established, publicly involved set of respondents, it was not specific differences in personal circumstances that were most important in explaining the nature of submitted comments. Rather it was internal efficacy and democratic orientation that separated respondents from one another in the content of their participation.

**Results for Subjective Motivations**
The comments of respondents who have participated in health-system reform in ways other than offering feedback on the proposal were more positive in tone and more substantive in content than comments submitted by respondents who have not participated in health-system reform through such alternative channels. This finding is derived from the fact that the *other health-system-reform participation* variable is positive in sign and statistically significant in four of the five regression equations.

To assess the substantive significance of the association between other health-system-reform participation and the tone of comments submitted on the proposal, Monte Carlo simulations were conducted. The predicted probability of submitting a comment of a particular tone was estimated both for respondents who have and have not participated in health-system reform through alternative channels. In these simulations, as in all simulations reported in the chapter, the remaining explanatory variables were held constant at either their mean, for continuous variables, or mode, for categorical variables. According to the simulation for the second column of Table 3.3, the probability of submitting a highly negative comment on the proposal was 28 per cent for respondents who had not utilized other venues to participate in health-system reform. This probability diminishes to 17 per cent for respondents who had participated in health-system reform through alternative channels. In addition, the probability of submitting a highly positive comment was more than twice as large for respondents who had participated in health-system reform via multiple venues than for respondents for whom submitting a comment on the proposal was their only form of involvement.

The magnitude of the association between other health-system-reform participation and the substance of comments was substantial
as well. As demonstrated by the parameter estimate for the *other health-system-reform participation* variable in the third column of Table 3.3, respondents who utilized other venues of participation submitted comments that were on average 215 characters longer than respondents who did not participate outside of the commenting process. According to the simulation for the fourth column, the probability of submitting a comment that articulated systematic arguments and referenced scientific data and statistical analyses was 52 per cent for respondents who had not utilized other venues to participate in health-system reform. This probability rose to 69 per cent for respondents who had participated in health-system reform through alternative channels.

The *instrumental motivation for participation* variable is positive in sign and statistically significant in three of the regression equations. Respondents who indicated that they participated in order to express concern with the overall reform effort, expressed specific concerns with the proposal itself, or influence the direction of health-system reform were more positive and more substantive in their comments than respondents who did not indicate one of these instrumental motivations. As demonstrated by the parameter estimate for the *instrumental motivation for participation* variable in the third column of Table 3.3, respondents with instrumental motivations submitted comments that were on average 204 characters longer than respondents without such motivations.

The association between instrumental motivations for participation and the substance of health-system-reform comments is also exhibited in the extent to which submissions articulated systematic arguments and referenced scientific data and statistical analyses. According to the simulation for the fourth column of Table 3.3, the predicted probability of submitting such a comment was 55 per cent for respondents who did not express an instrumental motivation for participation. This probability rose to 70 per cent among respondents who indicated one or more instrumental motivation for offering feedback on the health-system-reform proposal.

The magnitude of the association between instrumental motivations for participation and the tone of health-system-reform comments was substantial as well. According to the simulation for the first column of Table 3.3, the predicted probability of submitting a comment that was highly negative toward the current health system was three times small-
er for respondents who expressed an instrumental motivation than for respondents who did not participate for one of these reasons.

Other indicators of the association between subjective motivations and the tone and substance of health-system-reform comments come from the *fairness* and *government responsiveness* variables. As demonstrated by the parameter estimate in the second column of Table 3.3, the *fairness* variable is associated with the submission of comments that express positive attitudes toward the health-system-reform proposal. According to the parameter estimate in the fifth column, the *government responsiveness* variable is associated with the submission of comments that make numerous substantive recommendations. Each of the variables, it is important to note, is statistically significant in only one of the regression equations.

**Results for Demographic Characteristics**

The evidence for the importance of demographic characteristics in determining the tone and substance of health-system-reform comments is neither strong nor consistent. None of the explanatory variables measuring demographic characteristics is statistically significant in more than two of the regression equations.

To the extent that there are significant associations, the most clear-cut ones concern gender and the nature of comments. As demonstrated by the parameter estimates in the second and third columns of Table 3.3, comments from female respondents were more substantive and more positive in tone than those submitted by males.

There is limited evidence that the association between age and the substance of comments is curvilinear, with the number of recommendations contained in submissions at first rising with age and then declining afterward. Such curvilinearity is demonstrated in the fifth column of Table 3.3, as the statistically significant parameter estimate for the *age* variable is positive in sign and the statistically significant parameter estimate for the *age*² variable is negative in sign.

As demonstrated by the parameter estimate for the *residential location* variable in the first column of Table 3.3, respondents living in cities submitted comments that expressed more positive attitudes toward the current health system than respondents from rural villages. By contrast, the parameter estimate for the *education* variable indicates that respondents with high levels of education were less positively predisposed
toward the current health system than respondents with low levels of educational attainment.

**Summary and Implications**

Taken together, the results regarding the association between subjective motivations and the tone and substance of health-system-reform comments are broadly consistent with the notion of online consultation as a form of instrumental articulation. The determinants of the content of health-system-reform comments, in other words, did not indicate that online consultation operated as an instrument for inducing compliant citizen behavior within the overarching presence of authoritarian constraints. This interpretation derives from the fact that respondents who were internally efficacious and democratically oriented were, relative to respondents not possessing such traits, positive in tone and highly substantive in the submission of health-system-reform comments.

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**DIGITAL SPACES AND THE CHINESE POLITICAL SYSTEM**

The nature and implications of communications between citizens and government officials in authoritarian regimes constitute a significant concern in contemporary comparative politics. Of particular interest is the capacity of information and communication technologies to facilitate democratization, on the one hand, or bolster authoritarian resilience, on the other hand. This chapter has addressed such issues of political expression and contestation in the globally salient context of the Chinese Internet.

Given the complex, multi-faceted nature of digital spaces, the chapter has not endeavoured to offer an overarching appraisal of the possibilities of the Internet with respect to stability and change in the Chinese political system. Rather, the analysis has focused on online consultation, an instrument through which government officials regularly provide citizens with opportunities to offer feedback on draft laws and regulations. Specifically, the analysis has examined the tone and substance of comments submitted in response to a proposal, circulated in 2008 by the NDRC, to reform the nation’s health system. Health-system reform is one of the most pressing domestic issues in contemporary China, and the NDRC proposal constituted one of the initial applications of online consultation as a means of soliciting citizen feedback.
The primary finding of the chapter, derived from a survey of participants and analysis of the content of comments, is that participants' internal efficacy and democratic orientation are associated with the submission of health system reform comments that are positive in tone and highly substantive. Following the convention of previous research on demographic characteristics, subjective motivations, and Chinese political participation, this finding has been interpreted as evidence that health-system reform offered citizens the opportunity to gain exposure to democratic principles and the process of articulating interests, as opposed to inducing compliant behaviour defined by the overarching presence of authoritarian constraints.

This interpretation does not necessarily signal the potential of the Internet as an instrument for enhancing consultation and participation in Chinese politics as a general matter. Rather, the analysis has specifically identified the determinants of variations in the tone and substance of online feedback in government policymaking among a well-established, publicly involved set of Chinese Internet users. Although the proportion of the population with access to the Internet has grown at an extraordinarily rapid rate over the past decade, nearly 60 per cent of Chinese citizens cannot be counted as Internet users. Furthermore, even among citizens with access to the Internet, awareness and utilization of e-government remains rather limited. As a result, online consultation is likely to remain, at least in the immediate future, an instrument for communications between government decision makers and a limited set of socially advantaged, politically sophisticated Chinese citizens.

Despite such limitations, online consultation is emblematic of a significant evolution in communication practices among government officials and Chinese citizens who have fared well under the economic reforms of the past several decades. Such citizens are well-educated, work in professional and technical occupations, and reside in world-class urban environments. Political reforms, even modest innovations such as online consultation, carry the potential of facilitating partnerships between government and select citizens on issues of great importance to their everyday lives. Such partnerships, in turn, represent pathways for promoting citizen satisfaction with public policies, the legitimacy of the CCP, and, ultimately, stability in the Chinese political system.
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The analysis from which such interpretations and implications are derived consists of a case study of a single manifestation of online consultation. A logical next step is to scrutinize experiences with online consultation beyond health-system reform. It is through such investigation that general knowledge will be generated about citizen feedback and other elements of the operation of online consultation. As this research is implemented, the analysis presented in the chapter is well-positioned to serve as a demonstration for the collection of data and the drawing of inferences about expression and contestation in Chinese digital spaces.

An additional concern for future research is the comparison of participants in online consultation with citizens who have not submitted comments in response to draft laws and regulations. The analysis presented in this chapter focuses specifically on the importance of differences in demographic characteristics and subjective motivations among citizens who participated in the health-system reform commenting process. Expanding the comparative focus to include non-participants will broaden the inferences that can naturally be drawn regarding online consultation and stability and change in the Chinese political system.

Although the Internet is not a monolithic entity, overarching narratives of censorship and revolution are often ascribed to Chinese digital spaces. Neither of these narratives holds much explanatory power in the context of online consultation, which operates as an incremental innovation in facilitating communications between citizens and government officials. Institutional context, in other words, is a crucial dimension in conceptualizing and analysing expression and contestation in Chinese digital spaces. Ultimately, the continual building of a context-specific body of knowledge about the Chinese Internet holds exceptional promise for adjudicating the possibilities of CCP authoritarianism in the years ahead.

Author’s Note

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Science Association, Chicago, 29 August–1 September; and the 2014 World Conference for Public Administration, Daegu, 25–27 June. Comments offered by Yoonho Kim, Yuhua Wang, and anonymous reviewers were of great assistance in enhancing the research and its presentation. The Department of Political Science at George Washington University, Fulbright Scholar Program, and Sigur Center for Asian Studies at George Washington University made the research possible through the provision of generous grants. The Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University expertly implemented the health-system-reform survey, and Zhou Liao diligently carried out the analysis of the contents of citizen feedback.

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ENDNOTES


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11. Ding, Informing the masses and heeding public opinion.


16. Chen, Subjective motivations for mass political participation in urban China; Chen and Zhong, Why do people vote in semicompetitive
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elections in China?; Kent Jennings, Political participation in the Chinese Countryside; Shi, Political Participation in Beijing.


19. Chen and Zhong, Why do people vote in semicompetitive elections in China?; Zhong and Chen, To vote or not to vote.


22. Ibid.

23. Chen, Subjective motivations for mass political participation in urban China; Chen and Zhong, Why do people vote in semicompetitive elections in China?; Zhong and Chen, To vote or not to vote.

24. Chen and Zhong, Why do people vote in semicompetitive elections in China?; Zhong and Chen, To vote or not to vote.

25. Ibid.

26. Chen, Who participates in collective petitions in rural China?; Jennings, Political participation in the Chinese Countryside; M. Kent Jennings,
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27. Chen, Who participates in collective petitions in rural China?; Jennings, Political participation in the Chinese countryside; Jennings, Gender and political participation in the Chinese countryside; Li, Political trust and petitioning in the Chinese countryside.

28. Jennings, Political participation in the Chinese countryside.


33. China’s State Council to use Internet for public opinion.


36. Ibid.

37. Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo guojia fazhan he gaige weiyuanhui [The national development and reform commission], Guanyu shenhua yiyao weisheng tizhi de gaige yijian (zhenqiu yijian gao) [Suggestions regarding deepening the reform of the medical and health care system (draft)], http://shs.ndrc.gov.cn/yg/, accessed 12/12/2013. Given that the Chinese government censors Internet content (see Rebecca MacKinnon, *Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle for Internet Freedom*.
China’s Contested Internet

New York: Basic Books, 2012), it is possible that not all health-system-reform comments were publicly disclosed.

38. Thompson, China’s health care reform redux.


41. To facilitate an initial assessment of generalizability, probability samples were drawn of comments submitted by both survey respondents and other commenters. Sampled comments submitted by survey respondents were, on average, longer than those submitted by other commenters, although this difference is not statistically significant. Comments submitted by survey respondents also made more extensive use of a set of a dozen critical and demanding words than those submitted by other commenters. Thus, it appears that survey respondents were more negatively predisposed toward the government, health system, and reform plan than commenters who did not take part in the survey, although more systematic analysis is needed before such a conclusion can be reached with certainty.

42. Balla and Liao, Online consultation and citizen feedback in Chinese policymaking.


44. This comment is on file with the author.

45. Ibid.

46. Information about respondent income, a potentially salient demographic characteristic, was not collected in the survey instrument and therefore cannot be included in the analysis.
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47. Chen, Who participates in collective petitions in rural China?; Chen and Zhong, Why do people vote in semicompetitive elections in China?; Shi, Voting and nonvoting in China; Zhong and Chen, To vote or not to vote.

48. Chen, Subjective motivations for mass political participation in urban China; Jennings, Political participation in the Chinese countryside; Jennings, Gender and political participation in the Chinese countryside; Li, Political trust and petitioning in the Chinese countryside.

49. Chen and Zhong, Why do people vote in semicompetitive elections in China?; Jennings, Political participation in the Chinese countryside; Jennings, Gender and political participation in the Chinese countryside; Shi, Voting and nonvoting in China; Zhong and Chen, To vote or not to vote.


51. Jennings, Political participation in the Chinese countryside; Jennings, Gender and political participation in the Chinese countryside; Shi, Voting and nonvoting in China.

52. Zhong and Chen, To vote or not to vote.

53. Chen and Zhong, Why do people vote in semicompetitive elections in China?; Li, Political trust and petitioning in the Chinese countryside.


55. The correlation between these two variables, .17, is rather modest. In general, the correlations between the explanatory variables are all less than .25, with one exception. The correlation between education and residential location is .35, with more educated respondents more likely than less educated respondents to live in cities.


57. Chen and Zhong, Why do people vote in semicompetitive elections in China?

58. As further evidence of the societal standing of respondents, more than half of the participants described themselves as professional and technical workers (zhuanye jishu renyuan). This classification encompasses a wide range of specialized occupations, such as scientists, engineers, professors, teachers, accountants, journalists and lawyers. When asked about the specific sector within which they worked, participants most commonly cited the medical and health industry.
Diagnostic tests, such as the calculation of variance inflation factors, indicate that multicollinearity is not of concern in the analysis. In addition, the results hold when robust standard errors are utilized.

The determinants of the number of recommendations contained in health-system-reform comments were also estimated via ordinary least squares and negative binomial regression. These findings do not differ from the Poisson regression results.

Stata was utilized to implement these post-estimation simulations, as well as all of the statistical analyses reported in the chapter.

The results of the post-estimation simulations, and all statistical analyses reported in the chapter, are available upon request.

Chan, Research notes on villagers’ committee election; Li and O’Brien, The struggle over village elections; Manion, The electoral connection in the Chinese countryside; Shi, Political Participation in Beijing; Shi, Voting and nonvoting in China.

Chen, Subjective motivations for mass political participation in urban China; Chen and Zhong, Why do people vote in semicompetitive elections in China?; Zhong and Chen, To vote or not to vote.


Huang, Governing Health in Contemporary China.

Ding, Informing the masses and heeding public opinion.

Chan, Research notes on villagers’ committee election; Li and O’Brien, The struggle over village elections; Manion, The electoral connection in the Chinese countryside; Shi, Political Participation in Beijing; Shi, Voting and nonvoting in China.

Chen, Subjective motivations for mass political participation in urban China; Chen and Zhong, Why do people vote in semicompetitive elections in China?; Zhong and Chen, To vote or not to vote.
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72. Horn, Number of Chinese Internet users climbs to 513 million.
73. CINIC, Statistical report on Internet development in China.
74. Ibid.; Guo, Under the ‘golden shine’: China’s efforts to bridge government and citizens.
75. Lindtner and Szablewicz, China’s many Internets.
76. Ding, Informing the masses and heeding public opinion.
77. Note to Table 3.2: For each variable, only summary statistics that are appropriate for the level of measurement in question are calculated and reported. The number of observations does not equal 541 for variables for which not all participants provided responses. The gender variable is coded as 1 for males and 0 for females. The education variable is coded as follows: 0 = less than high school graduation, 1 = high school graduation, 2 = some college education, 3 = college graduation, 4 = education beyond college graduation. The residential location variable is coded as follows: 2 = city, 1 = small town, 0 = rural village. The Beijing variable is coded as 1 for individuals residing in Beijing and 0 for all other individuals. The instrumental motivation for participation variable is coded as follows. Respondents who indicated that they submitted a comment to express concern with the overall reform effort, to express specific concerns with the proposal itself, or to influence the direction of health-system reform were coded as 1, with respondents who indicated none of these motivations coded as 0. The government responsiveness variable is coded as follows: 0 = not responsive, 1 = slightly responsive, 2 = somewhat responsive, 3 = very responsive. The other health-system-reform participation variable is coded as 1 if the respondent participated in health-system reform through means other than submitting a comment on the NDRC proposal and 0 otherwise. The participation in other online consultation variable is coded as 1 if the respondent has submitted a comment on a policy proposal other than health-system reform and 0 otherwise. The fairness variable is coded as follows: 0 = online consultation is not effective at all in promoting fairness, 1 = online consultation is slightly effective in promoting fairness, 2 = online consultation is somewhat effective in promoting fairness, 3 = online consultation is very effective in promoting fairness.
The popularity of backpacking has co-evolved with the development of the Internet in urban China since the beginning of the 21st century. The Internet has not only helped to spread the popularity of backpacking in China but, more significantly, it has fostered the formation of voluntary associations among like-minded people and helped them carve out a new social space for community building and collective action outside the purview of the state. Web-based communities represent a new type of social organization that is different from the traditional type of association based on face-to-face interaction. While the latter requires centralized leadership, obligatory membership, and rather strict implementation of various rules and procedures, web-based communities are often anonymous, decentralized, and do not need formal means for enforcing agreement and conformity. These communities constitute a fluid and open-ended social body that primarily relies on voluntary participation, collaboration, mobility and flexibility. Through both online and offline exchanges, members avail themselves of the opportunities provided by the Internet to initiate and participate in public discussions and collective actions, most of which do not call for street demonstrations but instead focus on specific social problems. This article argues that these practices represent a new trend of online activism that does not aim to cause cyberwar or social unrest, but rather to raise public awareness and bring about social change through peer sharing, volunteer work and online and offline charity.
Web-based Backpacking Communities and Online Activism in China

This new form of online activism should be distinguished from the conventional form of online activism. In his discussion of different forms of online activism, Vegh defines online activism as a ‘politically motivated movement relying on the Internet’. In other words, activists now take advantage of the Internet revolution to pursue their traditional goals, which mainly focus on confronting and resisting the authorities whose political interest is counter to that of the activists. Some activists use offensive online actions to attack government computers, others use the Internet, especially social networking websites such as Twitter and Facebook, to mobilize people to take to the street and protest in public arenas; marchers and demonstrators often seek drastic confrontation with the government and immediate political change, as is seen in the Arab Spring movement. By contrast, the new online activism discussed in this article shows that citizens and activists use the Internet mainly for forming communities, sharing information, instilling democratic values and solving immediate social problems. They do not call for cyberwar, acts of hacktivism or other sorts of offensive online and offline actions, but seek to bring social justice and improve well-being within their sphere of influence, sometimes even soliciting support from the government to achieve these goals.

Precisely because of the ambiguous nature of these practices, Guobin Yang has introduced a broader definition which describes online activism as ‘any form of Internet-based collective action that promotes, contests, or resists change’. Following Yang’s approach, I argue that cultural and social activities associated with the use of the Internet, no matter whether or not they have outright political agendas, are capable of being contentious and subversive. Take celebrity gossiping, for example. Even this seemingly casual action can have the power of initiating and promoting social change if used properly. Recently a famous Chinese film director violated the birth control regulation and had several children. Netizens reacted strongly to this news. They made up and distributed all sorts of stories and gossips online, and eventually pressured the film director into paying the fines. In this case gossiping in itself does not have any political agenda, but it has become an effective means through which ordinary people are able to express their anger and speak against privileges enjoyed by celebrities.
Drawing upon my ethnographic research in two web-based backpacking communities from May 2005 to the present, I seek to understand the dynamics of this new online activism and its significance for the development of associational life and civil society in China. Scholars have long been interested in intermediate voluntary social organizations in China and take their presence as a sign of an emerging civil society. The rapid development of the Internet and computer-mediated communication has made many scholars raise important and inevitable questions regarding the relationship between web-based communities and civil society on the one hand, and computer-mediated interactions and civic activism on the other. Yang has forcibly made the case for the favourable effects of an incipient civil society on Internet diffusion and vice versa. Drawing on Yang’s insights, this article argues that computer-mediated associations and practices serve as both sites of civil society as well as agents of social change in contemporary urban China. Moreover, I will emphasize the changing strategies and tactics of forming alliances, mobilizing and participating in ‘non-transgressive’ collective actions mediated by the Internet.

To begin with, let me briefly review the scholarly works on social organization and civil society in China, and discuss their strengths and limitations in understanding the logic and tactics presented in this new form of online activism. I will treat the emerging online communities as a new form of ‘imagined community’ which calls into question the conventional online/offline dichotomy. Next, I will present an ethnographic study of two online backpacking communities, Travel and Photography Club (TP Club hereafter) and Lvye Outdoor Club (Lvye hereafter). Both communities are voluntary associations spontaneously founded and maintained by backpacking enthusiasts on the Internet.

CONTESTING CIVIL SOCIETY

Scholarly interest in locating possible sites of Chinese civil society has grown dramatically in the last two decades – from a special issue of Modern China (1993) dedicated to studies on the emerging public sphere and civil society in China to hundreds of new publications each year a decade later. Historically, the development of a market economy gave rise to the emergence of capitalism as a distinct economic system as well as to the separation between state and society in the West. The
notion of civil society was developed in 18th-century Western Europe at the inception of capitalism for the new bourgeoisie to come together against the absolutist state. Civil society in this sense should exist above and against the state, autonomous from it, including those dimensions of social life that cannot be confounded with or swallowed up by the state.8

Because the notion of civil society posits a social space independent of the state, and because it is inextricably connected to the rise of the bourgeoisie and tied to a particular historical setting in the West, many scholars have struggled with the legitimacy and sufficiency of applying the term to an understanding of China.9 Wakeman contests the extent to which the intermediate associations found in China were autonomous and separate from the state.10 White et al. also admit that the development of many social organizations studied in their research in fact reflected a process of incorporation, that is, the state’s penetration into and control of social organizations in various ways. For example, each social organization had to be affiliated with a supervisory body which ‘acted as a sponsor and was responsible for supervising the day-to-day affairs of its dependent associations ... thus the relationship between the affiliated social organization and its supervisory department is one of both control and co-operation’.11 In her field research in China in the late 1980s, Mayfair Yang also pointed out that, although the Chinese constitution guaranteed citizens ‘the right to form associations’, in reality the Party did not allow truly independent organizations, and any social group formation had to be supervised by a responsible branch of the state organization.12

In order to solve this dilemma, some scholars tend to treat civil society as a term of social practice so that it can be universally applied to give a better understanding of China.13 Others argue that the term signifies not so much a descriptive empirical task, but a performative act ‘in which to search for its traces is at the same time to invoke the non-state sphere and make it a conscious project’.14 While these studies are useful in qualifying and contextualizing the application of the notion of civil society in China, they have nevertheless reinforced the dichotomous understanding of an autonomous civil society: it must be either the Habermasian model of a public sphere completely independent of the state or the state-corporatism model.15 The most recent studies of state-
society relationships in China contend that using the level of autonomy to assess associational life in China is often misleading and inconclusive when state and society are constantly competing and negotiating in a dynamic social field. In line with this critical reflection, Huang argues that the binary oppositions between state and civil society, and public and private, upon which notions of civil society and the public sphere are predicated, are not appropriate for China. He proposes a ternary conception, the third realm *between* state and society within which both parties participate. In a similar manner, Teets suggests re-envisaging civil society as action-based category, as she explains:

First, the state–society relationship is theorized to be dynamic and contested, and thus not dependent on autonomy as the primary determinant of the relationship but rather allowing for a relational view that includes varying degrees of partnership and collaboration. Second, an action-based definition focuses on the ability of civil society organizations to create social trust, collective action and civic participation.

Teets’s reconceptualization of civil society has provided a useful conceptual tool for the study of online activism in China. Despite the fact that China still lacks a legal system to protect free association, the last decade has seen the relationship between the state and society change as a consequence of the retreat of state control from many realms of public life since the early 1990s. Scholars have called the radical socio-economic transformation that took place in post-socialist China a ‘revolution of consumption’. A thriving market accompanied by the development of technology has not only affected material realms of everyday life, but also transformed social relationships and nurtured new metropolitan subjectivities.

These transformations have significantly changed the ways society engages the state, and the ways citizens engage the systems of authority, which have been borne out by the proliferation of new contentious forms in the new era, one of which is online activism. Yang points out that popular contention since the 1990s tends to be more frequent, more diversified in its causes and forms, less disruptive, and more modest in its goals. China’s new civic activism no longer seeks to oppose the state but rather deals with more urgent and down-to-earth issues such as environmental injustice, consumer rights, wealth disparity and rural education. The flourishing of online interest groups and clubs has reflected
these features. Unlike traditional types of association, which were more vertically imbedded in relations of incorporation, online communities have fostered the formation of horizontal ties and voluntary associations of like-minded people outside the state. Through online exchanges and offline gatherings, members of web-based communities can engage in various public expressions and discussions of topics ranging from celebrity gossip to social justice, focusing on their genuine experience of self and others. The Internet, though subject to state surveillance in a number of ways, provides a useful channel to inspire thoughts and endorse organizational initiatives. Online communities thus constitute a fluid social space conducive to the development of civil society that Teets has foreseen, a form of civil society that generates social trust, mutual understanding and civic participation of like-minded people in both online and offline contexts.

**CONTESTING ONLINE/OFFLINE DICHOTOMY**

Given the primary reliance of the Chinese backpacking community on the Internet, this study takes a close look at the role of the Internet for the backpacking community in urban China. The numerous travel websites and Internet forums have not only provided grass-roots channels to obtain travel information, but also fostered coalitions among like-minded people beyond their immediate social sphere. Moreover, the presence of neologism, etiquette and behavioural codes seems to further distinguish this online community as a cultural group distinct from traditional offline interests groups such as the Mountaineering Association of Peking University, which is supervised by the responsible institution. Having said that, a nuanced understanding of web-based backpacking communities cannot be achieved if offline contexts are not taken into consideration. In fact, online activities and offline practices are closely connected, reinforcing and feeding each other to create a new social force that constantly challenges, violates and calls into question the system of authority. Online communities not only constitute a variegated and fluid imagined space; they also sustain the dynamics of associational life and transform relations between social organizations and the state in offline settings.

Therefore, the proliferation of web-based communities must be understood in a socio-political context in which the state has increasingly
withdrawn from society, thus allowing new metropolitan subjects to seek resources and networks beyond such traditional spheres as family, school and work unit. Decades after the Tiananmen demonstrations in 1989 there has been a rapid growth of urban associations. Many of them often choose to bypass the complicated and time-consuming registration process with the Ministry of Civil Affairs by operating as an informal group or a business. The latter only needs to register with the corresponding industrial and commercial bureau, which requires a minimal management structure and allows a high degree of autonomy. These informal social organizations or business organizations are extra-legal entities under such names as ‘clubs’ (俱乐部), ‘social circles’ (圈子), ‘forums’ (论坛) and ‘salons’ (沙龙). Set against this background, an inevitable consequence of the development of the Internet in China in the mid-1990s was the quick emergence of web-based Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and discussion forums (论坛). Many former informal organizations and business-organizations quickly adopted this new technology and transformed themselves into online communities. Online associations operate through loosely established networks of like-minded people, informed by and informing a widespread cyberculture encompassing new vocabularies, codes of behaviour, etiquettes and ethics.

In his insightful work, Anderson argues that the middle years of the 18th century in Western Europe saw the decline of religious communities and the emergence of a new mode of imagined community – the nation. The old sacred religious communities were imagined through the medium of the sacred language, ruled by persons deemed to have divine connections, and characterized by the conception of temporality in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable. By contrast, the new form of imagined community – the modern nation – was made possible by the convergence of capitalism and print technology – ‘print-capitalism’ – which laid bases for national consciousness and allowed people to relate with others in radically new ways.

The advent of the Information Age has also enabled new sorts of imagined communities and communicative practices based on the Internet, fostered new types of social relations, and cultivated new values and ethics. Much of the early literature applauded the new technology as revolutionary in its social and political implications.
McLuhan tends to see this new world as a ‘global village’. In his seminal work, Appadurai suggests that Anderson’s imagined communities were only ‘modest precursors to the world we live in now’. He has replaced Anderson’s concept of imagined community with that of ‘imagined world’, arguing that today’s world is more deterritorialized, that national boundaries are shaken, and that the relationship between states and nations is strained more than ever.

These scholars view the emergence of cyberspace as a watershed phenomenon that has created new imagined subjectivities and imagined communities, often assuming a radical distinction and disruption between the offline and online, real and virtual worlds, with the former representing the bounded, constraining and disciplining, and the latter the deterritorialized, egalitarian and emancipatory. Departing from this dichotomous approach, Constable has studied virtual communities of men and women involved in international correspondence marriages, and she discovered that some online communities sprang from localized groups and others served as a ‘space of contestation’ which reinforced offline power relations and social boundaries. By the same token, Wilson and Peterson argue that ‘the Internet is not growing apart from the world, but to the contrary is increasingly embedded in it’, and therefore it is necessary to ‘bring research back from cyberspace and virtual reality into geographical, social spaces’. They suggest that we should further examine ‘how offline social roles and existing cultural ideologies are played out … in online communication’, and ‘how online interactions are influenced by offline power relations and construction of identity’.

More in keeping with this line of thinking, I argue that online and offline interactions are both crucial in the development of online activism, and in creating solidarity, commitment and mutual trust in online communities. The Internet facilitates new imaginings of translocal identities and communities. The development of a new set of vocabulary, behavioural codes, and ethics on the Internet has constantly called into question those everyday boundaries shaping and controlling local groups and local identities. Virtual communities allow their members to cross many boundaries in terms of gender, class, geography and sociocultural background. Having said that, we should not overlook the significance of offline interactions, which help to strengthen the bond between members and their loyalty to the community. This is particu-
larly true for members of online backpacking communities as they not only chat online but also spend time together on the road. Ethnographic research in both online and offline contexts is thus necessary in order to understand the complexity and dynamics of computer-mediated communication, which does not take place in two separate and isolated spaces – online and offline – but in the fusion of the two. This new social space created by both online and offline experiences constitutes a field of contestation of ideas, values, and practices, allowing its participants to create new expressions and imaginings of subjectivity, social responsibility and collective initiatives.

**ETHNOGRAPHY OF TWO ONLINE BACKPACKING COMMUNITIES**

This ethnographic research has employed both traditional participant observation in face-to-face context as well as virtual ethnography on the Internet in order to reveal the complexity of associational life online which often leads to offline alliances and practices. Different online communities are created for different reasons, but their tactics and strategies for organization and practices are often similar. The two online communities studied here are backpacking communities, but the dynamics of their associational life can also be found in other online communities, be they pet owners’ clubs or Internet forums of movie aficianados. No matter what form an online community may take, similarities in alliances and practices feed on an incipient civil society and simultaneously open up new social spaces for public expression and collective action.

According to the most recent statistics released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), by the end of June 2013 there were 591 million people using the Internet, accounting for 22.7 per cent of the total population of China. The Internet penetration was 44.1 per cent, an increase of 2 per cent compared to that at the end of 2012. Of the new netizens, up to 70 per cent of them used mobile phones to surf the Internet, outnumbering those netizens who used other means to surf the Internet. For 82 per cent of Chinese Internet users, the Internet rather than television and newspapers was the main channel for acquiring information. Major online activities included browsing news, searching for information, sending and receiving emails, posting on discussion forums or BBS, and chatting online.
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Just as exchanging letters and poems in cafes and salons was commonplace in 18th-century Europe, participating in public discussions by posting on the Internet has also provided the ‘training ground for critical reflection’ and facilitated ‘a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel privateness’. The Internet has become an indispensable part of the new urban lifestyle, and it has fostered a plurality of interests and multiplicity of links through and across social, economic, and political realms. Since the late 1990s, increasing numbers of voluntary groups based on the Internet have emerged and developed at an accelerating speed in urban China. Among the participants of online communities, backpackers were the first to use online communities for both information sharing and collective action.

THE RISE OF ONLINE BACKPACKING COMMUNITIES

At the end of the 1990s, the newly coined term ‘donkey friend’ (驴友) became a widely used self-identifier among China’s backpackers, particularly those who organized themselves into virtual communities on the Internet – who had become acquainted with opportunities for recreation and leisure which were previously unheard of, examples of which include mountain climbing, hiking, and mountain skiing for wilderness adventures, and touring the Old Town section of Lijiang in northern Yunnan’s Naxi areas for more urban and ethnic experiences. The term ‘donkey friend’ may be somewhat opaque in meaning, as it is a pun on a pair of near homonyms, with donkey (驴), sounding similar to and even identical in some dialects to travel (旅). Unlike the animal’s less-than-flattering image in the West, in the eyes of Chinese backpackers the donkey possesses a desirable set of qualities and associations, such as perseverance, endurance and amiability; hence the quick adoption of the donkey as an icon for Chinese backpackers. Styling themselves as not only donkeys but also friends, Chinese backpackers stress the elements of companionship and fellowship by building communities and forming long-term relationships.

The majority of donkey friends were born in the 1970s and 1980s and came of age in the reform era. The emergence of backpacking tourism reflected the radical social and economic changes that took place in all areas of people’s lives in urban China. A market economy took off...
in regions with more favourable natural endowment and state subsidy, resulting in an increasing number of Chinese becoming affluent enough to travel for pleasure, a status marker indicating a style of life which was their own and an alternative to the undifferentiated humdrum of everyday life. The new economy grew symbiotically with new cultural values, which became an important ground for identification and competition among young Chinese who were born after the reforms and raised in affluent urban nuclear households. With the loosening of the hitherto all-important social and economic ties with work units and familial obligations to the older generation, China’s urban youth are eager to abandon conventional parameters of life in search of new styles, spaces and values, with which they can distinguish themselves as members of the new middle class. It is against this socio-economic background that online backpacking communities have emerged and flourished.

From the very beginning, these young backpackers represented an important social force in constituting China’s new cosmopolitan subjectivities with their newfound mobility, individualistic sensitivity and capacity for critical thinking. In Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, Bourdieu described how the new petite bourgeoisie rose along with new occupations and job positions in Europe.32 Likewise, avid backpackers are mainly associated with many newly-established occupations ‘involving presentation and representation (students, sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services’33 For them, travelling with a backpack is a rallying point for both distinguishing themselves from the mainstream and associating with like-minded people. Their intentional pursuit of maximum cultural profit (rich experience) at minimum economic costs (low budget) represents a subversive tendency that implies ‘renunciation of all ostentatious expense and all gratifications other than those given by symbolic appropriation’ of their endeavours.34 In addition to their constant quest for distinct tastes with regard to a new lifestyle and culture, they also manifest a keen tendency of association. In other words, the backpacking culture in urban China is not so much fuelled by some individuals’ desire for conquest and adventure but rather by their evolving relationships with each other, their commitment to communities of like-minded people, and the common experiences and memories they have collectively created and shared as companions and friends.
Therefore it is not difficult to see that the development of the Internet has significantly impacted the popularity of backpacking among urban Chinese. The Internet has provided Chinese backpackers with both the knowledge of outdoor activities and the opportunity for companionship in their newfound mobile opportunities. Members of backpacking communities are more attracted to the social function of the travel websites. BBS and forums provide a public space for backpackers to exchange information, organize trips, seek out travel companions, and post travel stories. Therefore these websites have become the primary bases for communication and collective practices among backpackers. Before the Internet came into existence, those who took part in backpacking tourism and outdoor activities had very few opportunities to meet, not to mention form communities. They were professional or semi-professional athletes, members of official sports clubs, and staff of outdoor-gear stores. Sanfo, a Chinese outdoor-gear chain store, started to organize travel and outdoor activities among its members as early as 1996. At that time their scope and size remained small, and information was circulated by word of mouth within private circles. The groups or individuals who loved backpacking and outdoor activities were mostly isolated and unaware of the existence of one another. The crucial change took place in the late 1990s. In 1999 and 2000, the Travel Forum (旅游论坛) hosted by China’s biggest web portal, Sina.com, and Lvye Outdoor Club (绿野) hosted at the independent domain Lvye.org were established around the same time. Since then, travel websites and communities have flourished. The size of these online communities varies. Lvye’s website had more than 100,000 registered users by the end of 2004, and their posts received more than 10,000 hits per day. Smaller sites such as TP Club had around 1,000 registered members in 2005, and their posts received far fewer hits per day.

The emergence of these outdoor websites and communities indicates a new trend of in the formation of associations in China. The Travel Forum at Sina.com, for example, was the first web-based community to allow members to post travelogues and share photos. Through these exchanges, an individual was able to enter a whole new world in which he/she was no longer alone but among a legion of enthusiasts who shared similar ideas, values, and goals. Community members were eager to seek out friends in the same camp with whom they could socialize and
share life experiences. Backpacking tourism could not have emerged if not for the state’s ardent promotion of the tourist industry. However, it would never have gone beyond private circles and become a nationwide trend without the prevalence of the Internet. The proliferation of travel websites and forums has not only fostered the spread of this newfound leisure activity – backpacking – outside professional or semi-professional circles, but also drawn travel enthusiasts out of their private and isolated circles to form larger communities of like-minded people who might otherwise have been total strangers outside their immediate social spheres.

I will draw upon my ethnographic study of two backpacking communities – TP Club and Lvye – to further demonstrate the social function of the Internet and its potential for organization and mobilization. Both these online communities can be seen as virtual and physically real. Their daily operations mainly take place on the Internet, and their discussion forums are the primary places where members actively participate and exchange ideas. At the same time, members meet and get to know one another in face-to-face contexts when they travel together, have group dinners, host exhibitions, and organize reunion gatherings. In the case of TP Club, its founders had opened a cafe that was used to accommodate offline activities and events.

During my research, I first signed up and became a member of both clubs. Then I made known my intention – of conducting research on the culture of online communities – in their discussion forums. Expecting people to express doubt and to question my motives, I was surprised and relieved by a lot of members’ greetings and welcoming messages. Many of them were eager to help. Immediately after I posted my research objectives on the discussion forum of Lvye, I received a number of responses such as ‘welcome aboard’, ‘interesting’, ‘willing to help’, and so on. All comments were supportive and encouraging. Some also added me to their Microsoft Network Messenger contact list so as to offer me personal help.

On reflection, the easy entry I gained testifies to the social function of these online communities. In fact, my fellow members were pleased by my research because it demonstrated that, even though their communities occupy a grey area in China’s associational life, they were recognized as legitimate social groups in the academic world. The warm welcome I received is typical of the open and free atmosphere in online
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communities. During the course of my fieldwork, I observed that netizens were indeed more open and outspoken on the Internet than those I met in face-to-face contexts. The dynamics of the Internet has less to do with the sudden change of people’s temperament than with the change of the milieu of social interaction. Borrowing from Victor Turner’s idea of liminality, the Internet seems to serve as a liminal space where everyday laws and obligations are temporarily suspended and individuals feel greater freedom to speak with less caution and suspicion, which are common in face-to-face interactions such as work units, schools, and neighbourhoods. These particular features of China’s Internet culture are crucial for the emergence of the new form of online activism that I will discuss in the following sections.

CONTESTING COLLECTIVE ACTION

Both Lvye and TP Club promote a strong sense of community and belonging among their members. Despite their heavy reliance on the Internet, both clubs have adopted very different strategies for promoting solidarity, facilitating online discussion, and implementing offline practices. They also differ in their agenda and vision. While both were founded by backpacking enthusiasts and have attracted large numbers of like-minded people, Lvye uses the Internet mainly for information sharing and backpacking-related discussions, whereas TP Club uses the Internet as a means to facilitate reasoned debates and implement collective actions. Where Lvye tries to promote a lifestyle, TP Club aims to promote social change. Their differences seem to represent two ends of the spectrum of the ways in which online communities use the Internet: on the one end, the Internet serves as an information reservoir where members exchange knowledge – in this case, knowledge about backpacking – and organize outdoor activities, on the other end, the Internet functions as a repository of public opinion and collective action. In this article I shall focus on the latter. But this does not mean that peer sharing of travel stories is insignificant. In fact, a lot of information shared by backpackers at Lvye is loaded with criticism of the government’s environmental policies and a lot of travel stories disclose writers’ concerns about social-justice issues that they see and hear on the road.

River Fish and Dan (both web IDs) are the two founders of TP Club. They opened a backpackers’ cafe in 2001 when backpacking travel
was only known to a small number of people in Beijing. As this style of travel became more popular, the club’s membership grew from 100 to 2,000 in 2006. The club’s web portal serves two primary purposes: facilitating online communication, and posting announcements of activities and events such as seminars, exhibitions and volunteer projects.

Since it was difficult to register the club as an official social group (社会团体) without a supervisory work unit in China, River Fish and Dan decided to open a cafe instead. Under the cover of this cafe, they registered the club as a business with the local industrial and commercial administration bureau. In China, it is not uncommon to register a social organization as a business and then run it as a social club. TP Club uses an independent domain name for an online community and it has a cafe as an offline business. The dual status of TP Club provides an online space for public discussion and a physical place for gatherings, seminars and other events.

I attended the club’s seminars several times, and each time I had to call to reserve a seat in advance. The speakers ranged from experienced backpackers to journalists, environmentalists, photographers and writers. The topics covered a wide variety of themes, from survival skills in the wilderness to environmental issues. Besides the diversity of the speakers and topics, these seminars also had a transnational dimension as a result of personal connections and media channels. River Fish graduated from Peking University – the most prestigious university in Beijing, which also sends out large numbers of graduate students overseas each year. Many of his previous teachers, classmates and colleagues were working and studying in the United States, and from time to time they sent River Fish books, magazines and other media items that were not sold in China. He once proudly showed me a complete collection of National Geographic magazines sent to him by his friends abroad. These overseas connections made it easy for River Fish to invite foreign personalities to speak at the cafe seminars. He once invited a British speaker who was on the production team of the Hollywood movie Vertical Limit to give a talk about rock climbing. On another occasion, two American authors gave a talk about their new book. The cafe came to life on these seminar nights. People filled the place quickly, the cook would be busy serving food and drinks (yes, the cook and the waitress were the same person), and the speakers were occupied with setting up laptops and projectors.
Most of the time the seminars were dialogues rather than monologues. Speakers and audience sometimes shared light-hearted jokes and at other times engaged in more serious discussions. Politics was not an uncommon topic here, albeit subtly dealt with. For example, the two American authors just mentioned showed many photos they had taken on the road. William, one of the speakers, showed a photo in which some villagers had written the slogan ‘people need freedom’ (人民需要自由) on the outside wall of their house. He said that the Hong Kong version of the book included this photo, but the mainland publisher warned him that the book would be banned if the picture was included. The audience laughed and got the message immediately. There were heated debates when members engaged in discussions on issues close to home such as pollution, inflation and the level of unemployment. Seminar participants always engaged in the discussions and were eager to share their opinions. To them this cafe was a safe haven where they could freely express themselves without worrying about state surveillance or judgement by family members and colleagues. People were excited about attending these seminars, as one member wrote on the Internet: ‘Last night on my way back from attending a seminar at the Travel and Photograph cafe, I got caught in a thunderstorm ... A few members and I sought refuge at the same shelter, and we were just eager to carry on the discussion we had earlier in the evening. We were all drenched, but we were all very excited.’

When River Fish talked about the history of TP Club, he referred to the club as a ‘grass-roots NGO’. He told me that he gained inspiration from Wikipedia. Volunteers around the world write Wikipedia’s articles collaboratively, and anyone who has access to the Internet can edit most articles. To River Fish, Wikipedia was a perfect model that he wished to follow as it ‘promotes no-threshold (无门槛) collaboration and interaction of free individuals who can act on their own initiatives and working goals’. He believed that his club should become such an organization that incorporated free communication and collaboration in their travel and non-travel practices. The cafe seminars bear out his vision for the club. Even though he and Dan needed to keep the size of gatherings small to avoid interference by the local police, they believed that the seminars could have a snowball effect and affect a larger audience through the people who attended the seminars. ‘We are sowing seeds,’ Dan once told
me confidently. ‘Even if we can’t see the immediate results we believe that the seeds will grow and bear fruits sooner or later.’

During my field research, besides seeing the public discussions/seminars initiated and carried out in both online and offline settings, I also witnessed several endeavours that materialized in civic participation and collective action, such as raising funds for the sick, recruiting volunteers to teach the children of migrant workers, donating goods to rural schools, and so on. In this article, I draw upon the case study of a charity sale for petitioners (访民) to demonstrate how an online backpacking community could use new tactics to initiate and participate in online activism, hence constituting a significant force facilitating the development of civil society in urban China.

In December 2005, a notice posted by a club member Ant (web ID) about a charity sale for the peasant petitioners caught my attention. Most of these petitioners were homeless; they slept on the street even in the winter months because they had no money for lodging. Sometimes hundreds of petitioners assembled on the southern outskirt of the city, built temporary shelters close to the State Bureau for Letters and Calls (国家信访局), and waited for their cases to be heard and petition letters to be read by the officials. Their very presence constituted a threat and brought shame in the eyes of the local authority. They were constantly subject to harassment from law enforcement and they had to endure severe weather in the winter months.

Petitioners and their cases were never reported in official media, so many backpackers admitted that they first heard about these people when they read Ant’s post. Ant wrote:

The winter has come, they need coats. They are petitioners, and they are not welcome in Beijing, but they are our sisters and brothers. While you are sitting comfortably in your heated office, enjoying your warm coffee, dreaming about skiing in the snowy mountains, think about these people, who are dying in the freezing winter wind. They need your help. You can donate clothes, quilts, and sleeping bags. We will soon organize a charity sale, and the profits from the sale will be used to buy coats and quilts for the petitioners. If you want to know more about our country’s shangfang (上访) policy, you can Google it, but make sure to set up your proxy first because these words are normally blocked in Mainland China.

Following Ant’s initial post, a number of backpackers responded: ‘Strongly support! They might be the poorest people in the world. I will donate my
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Sleeping bag. ‘I once caught sight of these people on my way home. Most of them were in rags. I saw them dragged away by the police. What can I do for them? Just let me know!’ ‘I can call upon my students to donate, too. It’s such a good educational opportunity.’ ‘I live in another city. Can I send clothes by mail?’ This post received 1,176 hits and 23 responses within 24 hours.

In the following days, Ant kept posting itemized summaries of the donated goods on a daily basis. A few days later, Ant rounded up a few members to visit the petitioners in order to understand the real needs of the petitioners as well as to give the members the opportunity to see for themselves the condition under which the petitioners lived and to report about their plight. Eleven people showed up for the visit, including Ant, River Fish, Dan, and myself. It was a warm and sunny winter day, and the wind was mild. I met the group at a parking lot a few blocks from where the petitioners congregated. Other members had already parked their cars and brought out two bundles of donated coats. Besides the people I already knew, I saw a couple of new faces: two women and three men in their early 30s, appropriately dressed in their warmest winter coats. And then we went off to have lunch at a nearby restaurant where we exchanged web IDs and became acquainted with one another. I got to know that the guy who wore the black leather coat was a photographer, who was there with his wife, a freelance writer; the other woman was a high school teacher, and the other two men both worked in the IT industry. At the lunch table we tried to figure out the best way to give away the items. After some brainstorming, we decided that in order not to draw unnecessary attention, we had to locate the petitioners most in need, and then give them each an identification card so that they could come to the parking lot and receive the coat individually.

It proved to be an effective method. After lunch, two members stayed with the donated coats in the parking lot; others went out to look for deserving petitioners, gave them the identification cards and asked them to pick up the coat at the parking lot. Within a few hours, all coats were given away. In addition, the members took 50 or so photos for online posting. The petitioners were all eager to have their pictures taken and asked us to publish their photos on the Internet in the hope that exposure could pressure the officials to process their cases. Not only did
participants of this event help the petitioners to gain non-conventional exposure on the Internet to which they had no immediate access; they also, wittingly or unwittingly, criss-crossed and challenged the traditional vertical relationship between the state and people, the privileged and underprivileged, and the powerful and powerless.

On their return, the members posted photos on the Internet. Perhaps in response to these photos, more than 100 people showed up at the charity sale. In collaboration with an outdoor-equipment store, TP Club had purchased a large quantity of outdoor equipment, clothing, and boots at very low prices. That night, members and non-members made their way to the cafe from different places in the city; some lived close by while others had driven for two hours, some came alone and others brought friends and family. The cafe was packed. Hiking boots were scattered on the shelves, fast-drying pants were hanging on the walls, and sleeping bags were still unpacked and in boxes. The place was so crowded that I had to reach over someone’s shoulder to grab a pair of shoes and pay the cashier. Everyone was shouting; I could hardly distinguish the shouts inquiring about the price and the shouts of friends chatting. At the end of the night, the sale had raised RMB 13,480 (circa US$ 2,000), and another RMB 5,000 (US$ 620) were collected from direct donations, making a total of RMB 18,480, which far exceeded Ant’s expectation. The following day, Ant posted:

It was already half past 10 when I left the cafe, and it was 1 a.m. when I arrived home. Almost all members had showed up tonight. It was crowded and loud. I used to be shy and quiet in public, but this time I had to shout so much at the top of my lungs that I almost lost my voice. The result of the charity sale was beyond my expectations. Except for a few pairs of shoes and pants, everything was sold out. With the money we received, we can buy more than 100 sets of winter coats and hats, and even some quilts. We will give them away this Saturday, and hope to help to relieve the petitioners’ misery this winter.

By the time the winter had passed, Ant and his team had given away numerous coats and quilts to the petitioners. Ant was satisfied with the result, as he told me: ‘Of course, our purpose was not to ask the government to abolish the petition policy. We were not that naive. Our goal was simple: to help petitioners survive the winter. It is in this sense that what we did was meaningful and successful.’
During the course of my fieldwork, I frequently heard people employ such words as help (帮助), support (支援) and change (改变) to describe their goals and agenda. They have replaced the traditional catchwords such as protest (抗议), confront (对抗) and overthrow (推翻), and they have created a new vocabulary in social movement and online activism. Helping the homeless, tutoring the children of migrant workers who had dropped out, and donating goods to those in need are the most common causes that I have seen in this new online activism. All of these practices are informed by the common motivation to resolve immediate social problems and implement real social changes. The goal of these activities is not to directly oppose or challenge state authority, or to promote radical political change, but to address social justice at the grass-roots level and bring about slow but steady social change.

**DISCUSSION**

As many scholars of governmentality have pointed out, China’s neoliberal market reforms have dramatically changed state–society relations since 1989, testifying to the Chinese state’s retreat from a number of social spheres.\(^3\) One of the changes where we see this trend has been the widespread development and expansion of social organizations in a variety of social spheres.\(^4\) The rise of web-based voluntary associations is part of the new trend and has to be understood in this socio-political context. Like most post-Tiananmen offline social organizations, online communities aim to perform certain social functions and provide certain services to society, rather than directly opposing the state. It is in this sense that this new online activism is consistent with the general pattern of how social organizations relate to and engage the state in the neoliberal era. Having said that, online activism has also displayed some important features that are not typical of ‘face-to-face organizations’.

As demonstrated in the charity sale discussed earlier, the first feature of online activism is that there is no central leadership in collective actions. There is no vertical hierarchy often found in face-to-face organizations. Collective action initiated online relies heavily on horizontal ties between members rather than vertical ties between a leader and his/her followers. Because Internet forums and BBS are the major platforms for communication and interaction, any registered member can initiate an activity simply by posting on the forum. In most online backpacking
communities, any member can use the forum to organize a trip, seek travel companions and share trip details. Because the first poster has the means to edit and remove his/her own posts, as well as other members’ responses in the same thread, the first poster is often referred to as the ‘master of the thread’ (楼主). Power in the Internet forum is diffused since each master of his/her thread is responsible for the world that he/she has created in the thread, no matter how tiny it is. The size of this world depends on how many clicks and replies his or her post receives. The master of the thread oversees the exchanges of information, interactions of members, and implementation of collective actions he/she has called for in this thread. It is true that there are moderators in each Internet forum managing and controlling the flow of information, but they rarely interfere with discussions and interactions taking place in each thread. The said charity sale is a case in point. Ant was an ordinary member of the club. One day he posted an ordinary message on the club’s forum, and this was the beginning of one big collective action that drew large numbers of participants and materialized in the form of a charity sale. There was no top–down decision-making process, no central leadership from the club, and no job assignment among the participant members. If there was a leader, the leader was Ant because he was the master of the thread, not because he was the leader of the club. In other words, this leader can be Ant today, River Fish tomorrow, and member X the day after tomorrow and so on. This mechanism of creating posts through one’s free will and of autonomy on the Internet has effectively decentralized power relations and leadership in the new online activism.

The second unique feature of online activism is spatial flexibility inherent in collective action initiated by online communities. Unlike TP Club, most online communities do not have a fixed meeting place. But to many people’s surprise, this has created more benefits than inconvenience. First of all, members of online communities do not need to worry about financial issues that often cause anxiety to face-to-face organizations. Second, members can choose their meeting places more freely and flexibly. Online backpacking communities are unique in this respect as travel produces spatial mobility and flexibility. Therefore their meeting places are often at the bus or train station, on the mountaintop, in the wilderness or on off-the-beaten tracks, far removed from power centres such as family, school and work unit. For most interest-based
online communities, restaurants are the most popular place for offline gatherings; members’ houses and apartments are secondary but not uncommon among close members. I described earlier how the restaurant provided us an ideal place for meeting and planning before distributing donated coats to the petitioners. A typical Chinese restaurant is always packed and loud, no one would pay attention to what you are discussing. Even mentioning such sensitive terms as democracy, government, corruption and so on will not arouse any attention. Spatial flexibility and mobility found in online communities is an important feature of this public space for dialogue, participation and information dissemination.

The third and fourth features of online activism deal with the de-territorialization of online and offline spheres. The third feature is anonymity in the online world and the fourth feature is collaboration with traditional media in the offline world. In online communities, members address one another by web IDs, and nearly all identification information is intentionally or unintentionally withheld from fellow members. Most members do not enquire about the details of other members’ age, education, marital status and employment status. Going by nickname and web ID, members of online communities are no longer subject to the immediate surveillance of authority and can easily keep separate their newfound social world and their everyday life. At the same time, online communities also actively seek collaboration with traditional media for support and social recognition. In order to provide concrete service to the people who need special care – for example, the poor, the sick, school dropouts, and laid-off workers – web-mediated social groups often have to comply with government policies, and sometimes even seek support from local authority and official media channels, to achieve their goals. More than once, reports in newspapers, on radio talk shows, and on television news programmes have brought public attention to the volunteer projects of the members of backpacking communities, including environmental protection campaigns, photo exhibits, and charity programmes in rural schools. Although they are not recognized as official social organizations, the term ‘grass-roots NGO’ has nevertheless been employed in these news reports.

To conclude, all these features demonstrate that online communities are dynamic in their associational life, rich in tactics and resources for galvanizing and participating in collective action, and hence constitute
a significant force facilitating the development of civil society in urban China. Travel and the Internet, and travel clubs and charity sale are seemingly incongruous, but in today’s China increasing numbers of young people join online communities and are changed by the relationships and practices that they are engaged in on the Internet. It is not uncommon for an urban citizen to donate money or to volunteer to teach in a rural school through voluntarily formed online communities.

This new social channel demonstrates several notable features. The first is their unofficial status and voluntary nature. Because online communities are not registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, they are less subject to state regulation and supervision. They are economically independent, as their financial needs are often met by voluntary donations of their members. Second, a new consumer culture has sparked the need to assert a newfound individualism and to form associations with like-minded people outside traditional communities. The emergence of a more mobile, heterogeneous, and economically independent urban population has increasingly given shape to new types of interpersonal relationships and associational styles. These people have demonstrated an urgent desire to articulate their newfound identity and to share their private experiences. The emergence of new horizontal ties between urban citizens, accompanied by the rise of new types of interactions and communications on the Internet, has become part of a repertoire of collective actions described in the above. Lastly, the web-mediated collective practices have demonstrated new tactics and goals of online activism. Members of online communities aim to raise public awareness, disseminate knowledge, and mobilize collective action to solve immediate social problems. This new form of online activism no longer relies on centralized leadership, no longer mobilizes large-scale mass demonstrations nor calls for radical political change; instead, it emphasizes collaboration, civic participation, and social and cultural change, as demonstrated by the charity sale discussed in this article.

REFERENCES
Web-based Backpacking Communities and Online Activism in China


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ENDNOTES


2. Ibid.

4. The traditional fieldwork in face-to-face context was carried out from May 2005 through April 2006, and the virtual ethnographic research has been carried out on the Internet since then. The two online communities studied have followed different trajectories since 2005. Lvye remains the biggest web-based backpacking community in China and it now includes two independent online communities: lvye.org and lvye.cn. TP Club has gradually transformed from an online community into an offline book club, and it has also changed owners. But because of the influence of the old TP Club among backpackers, many more online communities and personal blogs have been named after the Travel and Photography Club since then.


10. Wakeman, Jr., The civil society and public sphere debate.
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13. Wakeman, Jr., *The civil society and public sphere debate*.
16. Huang, ‘Public sphere’/‘civil society’ in China?
17. Teets, Post-earthquake relief and reconstruction efforts, 338.
21. Saich, Negotiating the state.
22. An Internet user can set up a website under an independent domain by registering online at the website of the Ministry of Information Industry (http://www.miibeian.gov.cn/), which involves fewer obstacles than registering with the Ministry of Civil Affairs.
24. Ibid., 37–46.
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33. Ibid., p. 359.

34. Ibid., p. 270.


36. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

37. Petitioners (fangmin) refer to those people who feel that they are wronged or mistreated by their local government and go to Beijing to appeal to the higher authorities.


39. Saich, Negotiating the state, p. 124.
During the fall of 2009, Lou Jing (娄婧), a contestant on a popular Shanghai television show and music competition, moved to the centre of online Chinese discussions. For numerous users, Lou Jing’s claims to Chinese nationality were overridden by her caramel complexion and identity as a biracial woman of Chinese and African American descent. Within the debates over her racial and national identity, however, were anxieties over other issues, particularly questions about who can be Chinese, who can produce Chinese children, what kinds of interracial relationships are acceptable for Chinese women, and the impact of foreign immigration by people of African descent into China.

This article argues that the online commentary about Lou Jing offers an entry point into contemporary Chinese cultural struggles over race. Specifically, it provides a valuable, though bounded, porthole to how the Internet and other digital communication technologies are being mobilized as discursive sites of contestation, knowledge production, and cultural exchange regarding Chinese constructions of race and nationality. We maintain that unpacking the ideologies and discourses – of the naysayers who rejected Lou Jing’s claims to Chineseness and those who supported her – supplies a productive site to consider the different ways that perceptions and attitudes regarding race take shape in Chinese digital media and moreover to study the inevitable clashes between Chinese society’s growing racial and cultural diversity and conservative constructions of Chinese racial identity. In short, while the online...
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post commentary about her showcases the pervasiveness of Chinese anti-black racism and the discursive logics through which Chinese and black bodies are unevenly categorized in China, it also conveys how racial ideologies and racial formations are both shaped and contested within digital media. Amid a population where to a large degree racial difference and multiracial understanding are still evolving discourses, it was primarily online where the most constructive conversations about Lou Jing and Chinese attitudes about race took place.

This chapter begins by briefly contextualizing Chinese perspectives on race and blackness and the 20th-century experiences of people of African descent in China as means to properly situate the cultural context in which the Lou Jing affair came to life. We then move to the central line of analysis and explore the different, though intersecting, articulations and racial formations that people mobilized within Internet online commentary to make sense of Lou Jing’s significance. While some people conveyed an aversion to her complexion, a dominant proportion of the racist backlash she received was organized around themes that extended beyond skin colour. Moreover, in the face of these attacks, Lou Jing received a great deal of online support from people who argued that mixed-race status did not prevent a person from being Chinese. Lou Jing correspondingly employed digital media as means to respond to her critics; via the Internet and her television performances she enunciated an alternative, albeit nonetheless problematic, racial construction of being Chinese. This chapter consequently argues that comprehending the different and contending articulations about race and nationality that were made across these digital media requires multifaceted consideration.

ORIENTAL ANGELS AND CHINESE IDEOLOGIES OF BLACKNESS

During the 2009 summer season of Dragon TV’s Let’s Go! Oriental Angel (加油！东方天使), Shanghai’s equivalent to the Western television show American Idol, Lou Jing became one of the show’s stars. A college student and aspiring singer, Lou Jing would go on to receive much prized non-performance camera time, and be written about in the international press, on Internet sites, blog posts, and Twitter feeds. Her popularity however did not stem from the quality of her singing. Tagged by the show’s hosts as ‘Our chocolate girl, Lou Jing’ (我们的巧克力女孩),
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China’s ‘black pearl’ (黑珍珠) and ‘Halle Berry of the East’ (东区哈莉贝瑞), it was Lou Jing’s skin colour that distinguished her from the other contestants of the show.

As the daughter of a Chinese mother and an African American father, Lou Jing’s mixed-race background received top billing. The show’s producers, believing that the incredibility of her story would capture greater viewership, thus devoted substantial airtime to publically examining the backstory of her conception and birth, bringing Lou Jing’s mother onto the show to interview her about her relationship with Lou Jing’s biological father. It was revealed that the two met while attending college and that after the relationship dissolved, Lou Jing’s father left China unaware of Lou Jing’s mother’s pregnancy. The latter ended up raising Lou Jing singlehandedly; Lou Jing and her father have never met.

In the months that followed, the Chinese public – primarily on the Internet – were transfixed with Lou Jing. What emerged online was a national, and later international, debate surrounding Chinese national identity and Chinese perspectives on blackness. For numerous people, Lou Jing’s skin colour marked her as ‘black’ (黑), a racial classification that they believed overrode her claims to Chinese nationality. In a nation where over 90 per cent of the population self-identify as being of Han ethnic lineage, it was argued that her skin colour and black parentage prevented her from being a ‘real’ or ‘true’ Chinese national (中国人). Some of her worst critics dubbed her a ‘black chimpanzee’ (黑色黑猩猩), ‘black devil’ (黑鬼), and as polluting the larger Chinese national body. Her mother was also accused of engaging in an extramarital affair and denigrated for this act, as well as for engaging in an interracial relationship with a black man and participating in publicizing her and Lou Jing’s story.

Ultimately, the heightened nature of this online commentary brought to light the challenges that China, and numerous other countries, face concerning racial difference. Furthermore, it forces China experts and critical investigators of race to consider how ideologies of racial difference are shaped and disputed within Chinese user-generated online content and exchanges. The issue of how China treats racial difference in social life, particularly within online chat rooms, blogs and posts, is an important question. It brings to the fore the issue of how China is engaging the world through digital media. How will a nation, which at times
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has premised its definition of citizenship, ethnicity and race through a somewhat, though not exclusively, culturally homogenous frame, further open itself and prepare its citizens for a planet that is becoming more ethnically and racially diverse and where global multicultural and intercultural exchange is far more unbounded? And what role is Chinese use of the Internet playing in either facilitating or obstructing such development, most centrally an evolution in Chinese understandings of race and nationality?

The racist denunciations of Lou Jing build on a complex history of Chinese attitudes about blackness and engagement with groups of African descent. From late antiquity onward, within Chinese politics, education, science and popular culture, Africans and blacks were frequently depicted and described as the ‘black slave race’ (黑奴种族). This was congealed through depictions of Africans and Africa as ahistorical. Moreover, fundamental to these Chinese understandings of blackness were biological and teleological arguments of China as a nation of the ‘powerful yellow race’ (强大的黄种人). Yet with the establishment of the Chinese communist regime in 1949, the government rhetorically distanced Chinese culture from such overt articulations of anti-black racism. Nonetheless, over the past 60 years African residents and foreign exchange students, as well as African-American visitors and expatriates in China have both remarked experiencing racial discrimination. African immigrants for instance have received the harshest treatment. And while this population has been targeted as drug dealers and criminals, and syphilis and AIDS have been racialized as African illnesses that ‘pollute’ the ‘pure’ blood of Chinese people, African American, Afro-Canadian, and Afro-European expatriates have also remarked about encountering negative attitudes about blackness, particularly within the employment and educational sectors.

With the exception of a few scholars though, rigorous analysis of Chinese racial nationalism and anti-black racism remains sparse. While various works have examined Chinese constructions of ethnicity, there is relatively little interrogation of the racial components of these negative attitudes – that is to say, how these attitudes also reflect ideas and arguments about race and how they represent contending ideas over the ongoing evolution of China as a potentially multiracial society. This lack of deep scholarly investment in unpacking the presence and impact
of racial ideologies and practices in China has consequently meant very little exploration of how such ideas about race also circulate online among Chinese Internet users.

Many researchers have argued that the Chinese Internet has become a safety valve for political venting by everyday persons.\textsuperscript{10} Whereas anti-government voices are often censored, nationalist and anti-Western and anti-Japanese expressions are allowed or even promoted online. For instance, Yuezhi Zhao explains that the Internet has played a leading role in ‘the re-emergence of nationalistic consciousness’ in China, the Internet becoming one of several ‘channels by which the most globalized segment of the Chinese population, namely educated urban youths, express the multifaceted discourse of Chinese nationalism’.\textsuperscript{11} This attention toward the role that the Internet plays in facilitating and amplifying nationalist sensibilities and anti-Western outlooks however does not immediately illuminate the racial contours of such ideologies online.

Interested in the latter dynamics, Yinghong Cheng has recently examined racial nationalism within Chinese Internet use, exploring explicit anti-African commentary on Chinese blogs and cyberspace posts. Specifically focusing on online essays and blogs produced by Chinese citizens who have travelled, worked and lived in Africa, he highlights how these netizens use anti-African stereotypes to depict China as racially pure and modern and Africa as backward, deviant, and pathological. Recalling the attacks on Africans on Chinese campuses during the 1980s, Cheng concludes that “Cyber racism” has [now] replaced “campus racism”.\textsuperscript{12}

Scholars examining racial practices in other regions agree that the participatory culture enabled by the Internet must be taken into consideration when examining how ideas about racial difference become widely accepted and are challenged.\textsuperscript{13} The Internet is often celebrated as a non-discriminatory, deracialized space of inclusion and participation where racial difference and racial ideologies neither prevent a person’s access nor hinder his/her user experience. But such illusory myths of the Internet as a race-less utopia and colour-blind, virtual and disembodied world belie several realities: (1) that the terms and terrain through which people of different stripes access and are active on the Internet are never even or equal, but rather impacted by structural conditions and material privileges and constraints; and (2) that the Internet is not disconnected
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from the categories, classifications, and cultural understandings and distinctions that organize social life, but rather fuelled by them, which thus makes the Internet a site for both the articulation and negation of diverse forms of embodiment and consciousness.

Racial formation – the processes by which racial categories and racial dynamics are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed, and through which resources are reorganized and redistributed along particular racial lines – is therefore a central facet of the Internet and new media. In sum, race is frequently mobilized online to distinguish and separate bodies and create social meanings. Lisa Nakamura explains: ‘Race, as vexed a term as that has come to be, is an indispensable part of the “root” that warrants, anchors and conditions the lives of actual users in cyberspace to the world offline.’ According to her, ‘digital racial formation’ best describes the different processes, projects, and spaces of online communication and identity formation through which racialized constructions and understandings are made and unmade.

COMPETING RACIAL FORMATIONS

Within the various websites that covered the debates about Lou Jing were competing racial formations and projects, people employing Lou Jing as means to make different arguments about race, nationality and nation. Both users and creators of these sites in effect shaped the post/blog sections, commentary forums, and bulletin board discussions into racial representational spaces – points from which to affirm or contest dominant constructions of Chinese national and racial identity. Within their articulations, Lou Jing’s raciality came to be imagined and signified through different formations, some of which affirmed nationalist-racist narratives of Chinese nationality and others that confronted such perspectives by suggesting that she instantiated a more flexible, multicultural Chinese identity. In the end, computer-mediated communication provided these people with an interactive platform to make competing claims about Lou Jing’s significance.

For instance, among some netizens, it was predominantly Lou Jing’s claims to being ‘Chinese’ that were at the centre of their online discussions. On NetEase, several netizens asserted that she and other mixed-race Chinese people risked ‘contaminating’ and ‘diluting’ the blood of the nation. ‘She is not Chinese. It’s not about discrimination
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of ethnicity … . No matter what, she has the blood of a foreigner’, one person commented. ‘Although her nationality is Chinese and she grew up in China, she has a foreign parent! … I think the child deserves a real identity.’ Another posted: ‘We can never accept mixed-blood people. Generation after generation, in the future, all Chinese will turn into black- or blue-eyed [people], how could this happen? I suggest that a law be enacted not to give Chinese nationality to mixed-bloods, in order to keep our ethnic purity.’ These posts reveal some of the ways that Lou Jing’s critics understand and construct Chinese identity. For these people it is not shared membership in a political community (citizenship in the state and civil society) that determines a person’s Chineseness. Instead, Chinese identity is framed as being based on shared racial/ethnic heritage. Moreover, these constructions are grounded in idealist assumptions of racial purity and arguments about the racial aesthetics of being and looking Chinese. For Lou Jing’s critics then, her having grown up in Shanghai and her familiarity and ease with Chinese culture were contradicted and overridden by her race and being born of a foreign parent. In short, her skin and the foreignness of her lineage were identified as symptoms of an alien force that was invading China, attempting to adulterate a supposed pure Chinese identity. Ultimately, these responses to Lou Jing are similar to Chinese nationalist and culturalist frameworks that shape Chinese engagement with the world under the banner of, either, ‘Chinese culture and society under siege by the West’, or as displaying the resilience of a pure, unified Chinese nation against foreign encroachment. In both discourses, Chineseness and Chinese society are flattened out, evacuated of their global, hybrid and multifaceted, contradictory and contested features. As Yuezhi Zhao explains, such ‘discourses assume a unified “Chinese national interest” and a (self-)orientalizing “dehistoricized and desocialized” understanding of “Chinese culture”. What is lost here is any discussion about … exactly what it means, and who can be its legitimate representatives.’

Another important feature of some of these condemnations was that netizens denigrated Lou Jing’s mother for having a relationship with a black man and for allegedly engaging in an extramarital affair. On the website Youku, one person distanced himself/herself from attacking Lou Jing, but placed the blame on Lou Jing’s mother. ‘Actually, her skin colour is not a problem, what’s problematic is morality’, the person
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explained. ‘Extra-marital affairs are always spurned … . After all, we hate the infidelity of Lou Jing’s mother as much as the black guy.’ Similar commentary was made on the website ChinaSmack. ‘Having this kind of woman as a mother is truly lamentable,’ one user wrote. ‘Chinese girls, please have a little more self-respect.’ Two others affirmed this view. ‘I am not racist, but if her mother really was married first and got involved with a black person, then that is indeed low … truly both low and deplorable,’ the first stated; whereas the latter commented, ‘Society’s norms and values haven’t become so non-mainstream have they? … If I were that girl, I would be so restrained … how could I possibly come out and show my face, seeking attention and sympathy?’

From these negative comments, what becomes clear is that the disparaging remarks about Lou Jing and her mother were about more than the colour of Lou Jing’s skin. They encompassed a variety of important issues: struggles over what it means to be identified as Chinese, as well as debates over women’s interracial relationships with foreigners and the increase of mixed-race Chinese children. To properly conceptualize the racist criticisms of Lou Jing and her mother, it is therefore vital to gender blackness—or better stated—to understand how Lou Jing’s critics framed her racial identity in relation to ideas about gender and anxieties about globalization and the impact of immigration on conventional markers of Chinese identity.

For one, critiques of Lou Jing’s mother rest on opposition to married females’ participation in extramarital affairs and resistance against romantic and sexual relationships between Chinese women and black men. Like other societies, outlooks on extramarital affairs and relationships in China are leaned heavily in favour of men. In imperial China, concubines and mistresses were status symbols for Chinese men, part of what Don Lee explains as a ‘2-millennium-old tradition of “golden canaries” … because, like the showcase birds, mistresses here are often pampered, housed in love nests and taken out at the pleasure of their “masters”’. Despite the PRC outlawing concubines in the Maoist era and the 2003 modification of China’s 1980 Marriage Law to now forbid married persons from cohabitating with a third party (the original 1980 law liberalized divorce, introduced China’s notorious one-child policy, instructed courts to favour the interests of women and children in property distribution in divorce proceedings, and legalized marriage
with foreigners and interracial marriage), it is nonetheless common knowledge that some Chinese men have taken to having a second wife. In a paper on Chinese extramarital affairs, Zhenmei Zhang and Yuanting Zhang conducted a content analysis of Chinese newspapers and found that in Chinese popular media, ‘[m]en’s extramarital behaviours were portrayed as natural or sometimes necessary … On the other hand, female initiators are usually described as “loose” women.’24 High economic growth and social and cultural transformations in Chinese society have made way for progressive changes and opportunities for Chinese women, especially in protecting married women’s rights. Nonetheless, among some Chinese, it is socially and culturally unacceptable for married women to have lifestyles similar to that of a philandering husband.

In addition, there has been a history of hostility to romantic relationships between Chinese females and black males.25 Barry Sautman opined years ago that Chinese women involved with foreign men are ‘often considered traitors or prostitutes … especially where the foreigner was black.’26 Professor Yu Hai of Fudan University agrees, adding that intimate relationships with black men are also viewed through the lens of class and status. ‘If a Chinese woman dates a white man it is social climbing. If she is with a black man, it is “stepping down”’, Hai relays.27 One user on NetEase brought this issue up, remarking how such criticisms of interracial relationships between Chinese women and black men were gendered and reflected a double standard not applied to Chinese men involved with black women. The latter relationships, the person maintained, hardly ever received the same kind of criticism and rejection among Chinese. ‘If it were an affair between a Chinese man and a black woman, then there would be applause instead of criticism.’28

In any case, for several of Lou Jing’s online critics, it was not just having a romantic relationship with a foreigner that was considered essentially wrong, but having one with a foreigner whose race was deemed to be below that of China on the global racial hierarchy. Their anger was representative of a deep-rooted cultural angst over the potential decrease in China’s international prestige, a contemporary version of what many Chinese refer to as ‘losing face’.29 For these netizens, media coverage of Lou Jing’s story and Chinese interracial relations with people of African descent signified a blemish to China’s international image. ‘The virtues of our nation are destroyed’, one ClubChina user posted. ‘From now on,
many people will take the daughter and mother as role models.’ Others agreed that Lou Jing and other black people in China defiled the country’s honour. While one person stated that this reality represented ‘black people begin[ning] to “blacken” China’, other netizens concluded that ‘[o]ur nation shall never accept the existence of this kind of shame’ and that ‘[s]he [Lou Jing] has made all Chinese lose face’.30

These sentiments were also framed around arguments about beauty. For example, the aforementioned netizen’s use of the idiom ‘blacken’ – a term that is anything but race-neutral – to describe how Lou Jing was tainting China’s international image must be read in relation with Chinese societal codes that have historically privileged pale white skin over darker complexions. One online user bluntly relayed this outlook: ‘In China, the brighter the skin colour the more beautiful a girl is. White represents jade and white embraces the meaning of health, beauty and cleanness.’ ‘So if a girl is a mixed-blood of a Chinese and a European who is white, then [this] issue would never exist. People would consider a girl a gorgeous beauty.’ Another user added: ‘Is this a new aesthetics standard for the Eastern people?’31 Such statements testify to both the localization of Eurocentric notions of beauty among some Chinese and the continued prevalence of problematic, historical Chinese associations of skin colour with beauty (or lack thereof), class position, and ethnicity.32

Ultimately, as these denunciations of Lou Jing’s Chineseness and criticisms of her and her mother mushroomed, a number of Chinese journalists and scholars jumped to their defence.33 However it was from online users that Lou Jing and her mother received the most support, many of these people just as assertive in supporting Lou Jing as her disparagers were in condemning her. For one thing, various people protested against the multitude of racial discrimination that Lou Jing received online. One person commented: ‘Strongly despise people who are racial discriminators!!! China is a tolerant nation’, and ‘We are all Chinese. Don’t bother about what others think of you or how they categorize you. Be yourself!’34 Others seconded this call. ‘She is a Chinese, she should have the rights of a Chinese citizen, as well as the dignity’, another person commented. Two others maintained: ‘It’s not her fault, let’s accept a Chinese with a different skin colour’, and ‘She is a lovely Chinese girl! … The only difference is the skin colour.’35
As the aforementioned posts convey, many of Lou Jing’s supporters affirmed her identity as Chinese. Also intriguing is that several of these commenters explicitly championed her for publically calling into question the naturalization of uniracial and monocultural representations of being Chinese. ‘Don’t be so narrow-minded! Our nation will never become truly strong unless we learn how to tolerate difference’, a netizen proclaimed. Other users similarly maintained that Lou Jing and other mixed-race Chinese were evidence of the need to expand the narrowly defined notion of being Chinese. Citing historical evidence of intercultural and interracial contact between China and the world, many users argued that it was necessary for China to open itself to the global politics of difference, that is, to the costs of global cultural flow and engagement with the world. ‘The sea admits hundreds of streams for its tolerance’, one user asserted. ‘Communication propels the world forward. Have you seen any ethnic group that can make progress without communication with the outside? Multiculturalism is already an unstoppable trend.’ It was this kind of openness to difference that led another netizen to maintain that Lou Jing was testament to the reality that ‘the world is converging gradually’. A ClubChina user similarly alleged that Lou Jing’s mixed-race status was representative of a larger, unspoken reality. ‘There are millions of mixed-blood kids in China’, the person claimed. ‘Are you going to criticize them one by one?’

Other netizens spoke favourably about Lou Jing’s mother, lauding her for courageously raising a mixed-race child in a culture not known for celebrating people of interracial heritage. ‘I think this mother is still very great/admirable’, one netizen posted. ‘A single mother able to bring up a daughter is already very difficult/impressive, much less one with a different skin colour.’ Another person commented: ‘Her mother should be considered brave to overcome all the great pressure to bring her up.’ In line with this support, other online users highlighted the fact that much of criticism Lou Jing’s mother received was the result of gender bias against women. In comparison to male adulterers, women were unfairly judged as immoral. Consequently, the allegations of the mother’s infidelity worked to heightened many netizens’ denunciations of her; she was perceived as being representative of an out-of-control Chinese female body and sexuality. One of her supporters explained: ‘It’s important to remember that there’s racism as reaction and racism as
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a mode of thought. Chinese aren’t necessarily against mixed-blood couples; it was the adultery that led to racist comments.41 Another stated: ‘Women have affairs … what’s the difference if the one with whom they have the affair is Chinese or a foreigner? Isn’t this narrow nationalism and patriotism? What about men? Are they allowed the exceptions?’42

Yet ironically, while quite a number of Lou Jing’s supporters gave merit to the observation that Lou Jing and her mother were victims of Chinese patriarchy, others explicitly emphasized the importance of not downplaying race when examining the gender politics of these criticisms. Commenting on the previously cited post, one netizen asserted: ‘I don’t buy that distinction at all ... Obviously, the adultery is a factor in the outrage of the commenters, but so is the racial aspect, obviously. If this girl’s mother had had an affair with another Chinese guy, would we even know about it? Would it ever have ended up on this site? Would people be saying she shouldn’t show herself in public?’43 Other people seconded this argument. ‘I think Lou Jing should not be condemned’, they maintained, ‘and if her father was an American white person, she probably would not be discriminated against. In the end, it is still racism.’44 In short, by bringing attention to the different ways Lou Jing’s mother’s alleged adulterous affair would have been perceived had she been romantically involved with a fellow Chinese national or with a white person, these online users underscored how the critiques of her parents’ relationships were embedded in particular racialized understandings. They maintained that had Lou Jing’s father been non-black, the criticisms of her and her mother might have been potentially less harsh and widespread.

People also pointed out that some of the criticisms of Lou Jing were the consequence of particular ideologies about globalization. Wealth and resource disparities on the global stage and discourses about modernization and development functioned to racialize Lou Jing and other mixed-race Chinese in very particular ways. In short, attitudes about what it means to be ‘modern’ and ‘developed’ rely on racial discourses, where non-whites, particularly groups of African descent, are frequently classified not just as economically and politically backward, but correspondingly as also racially and culturally backward as a result of their economic and political woes. It was thus through such developmentalist logic that one user framed her criticisms of Lou Jing’s mother. ‘Europe is
a developed community, a mixed-blood Chinese with European ances-
try would be viewed with pride’, the user wrote. ‘Lou Jing’s mother made
a mistake of choosing the black guy’.45

Overall, the above online commentary relays that Lou Jing’s racial
identity was articulated through multiple formations – as rigidly
non-Chinese, as a marker of illegitimate and looked-down-upon inter-
racial relations, as negatively impacting Chinese aesthetics of beauty
and China’s status within world relations, as primarily demonstrating
gender oppression against Chinese women, and as a symbol of Chinese
multiculturalism and racial inclusion. Invested with different social
meanings, Lou Jing’s racial identity and representation within popular
culture therefore became a serious site of contention and contestation,
a forum for numerous claims about what she and other mixed-race
black-Chinese nationals mean within larger Chinese debates over na-
tonality, race, gender and globalization.

Amid this battleground of articulations and criticisms, Lou Jing took
to the Internet to defend both herself and her mother. In a video inter-
view with NetEase, one of the biggest news-portal sites in China, she
briefly reflected on how being of mixed-race impacted her life.46 Despite
fantasizing about her father as a child, Lou Jing was taught from a young
age to self-identify as native Chinese. However a key reminder that she
did not fit easily into this social formation was the nickname childhood
friends and classmates had for her: Xiaohei (Little black). Although
meant to be a pet name of endearment, the nickname was one of several
public methods of differentiating her from other Chinese youth and
disjointing her from the imagined, homogenous Chinese collective
body. In addition, people’s awareness of her difference was further
heightened when she spoke Chinese. Lou Jing’s distinct Shanghainese
accent and comprehension of her national language served as a central
mark of her alienation. She explained: ‘People would say, “how come
her skin colour is different?” … It was okay if I didn’t speak. When I
talked, people would start to discuss it.”47 As Lou Jing relayed, for some
of her compatriots, to hear a voice that they identified as Shanghainese
spoken from the mouth of a person they identified as black was alien to
their understanding of what it meant to be Chinese.

Interestingly, it was these same traits – skin colour and fluency in
her national language – that Lou Jing mobilized in a unique way when
introduced on *Let’s Go! Oriental Angel*. Standing out from the pack of other contestants, she performed a poetic rap:

*My name is Lou Jing,*
*I usually like singing,*
*I occasionally also enjoy dancing.*
*When I am bored I can’t stop eating,*
*So I have to go on a diet.*
*Happiness is my goal*
*And nothing else matters.*

While the lyrical content of the rap was straightforward, the cultural politics surrounding it were multifaceted; ultimately it was not the lyrics that mattered most, but the language, dialect, and ideas about race associated with the genre. Employing a genuine and unquestionably Shanghainese accent, Lou Jing situated herself as definitively Shanghainese and moreover as a Chinese national. But by performing a rap, a musical genre based in black American and Afro-diasporic hip-hop artistic and cultural practices and whose impact has been felt and reshaped globally, Lou Jing employed a particularly racialized and Western transnational mode of expression. In sum, a performance style identified dominantly as ‘Western black’ was ironically her means of introducing herself to her Chinese audience. This though was made more complex by the fact that over the following weeks she went on to sing tunes ranging from classical Chinese opera compositions to contemporary Chinese pop hits. Performing Chinese music consequently proved fruitful in situating her identity within common understandings of what it means to be Chinese.

Thus in some respect, Lou Jing’s performances subtly engaged people’s uneasiness with her claims to being Chinese and worked to make intelligible what some people viewed as the inconsistencies between her skin colour, her voice, and her performance of Chinese identity. Through her performances, China was not constituted by notions of ethnic homogeneity, but rather through language and diversity of cultural experience and influence. Her convincing performance of her native tongue, the music native to her homeland, and a foreign musical form worked in tandem to confront her alienation and dislodge the reification of essentialist constructions of Chineseness. Her acts consequently enunciated the range of influences, cross-cultural contact, and understandings of race that exist in being and living as Chinese.
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CONCLUSION

It is important to note that the considerable media attention, blog and post commentary devoted to Lou Jing’s story tie into a growing trend in China where both government and private interests have attempted to frame China as becoming more sensitive to the cultures of groups of African descent. Perhaps prompted by Chinese government and private industries’ investments and trade relations with Africa, African immigrants’ allegations of mistreatment in China, and China’s attempts to refashion a new cosmopolitan international image of itself, the PRC has taken several steps within the cultural arena. Most recently, the first African hair salon was opened in Beijing. And as African American, Afro-European, and African professional basketball players obtain contracts to play for different teams within the Chinese Basketball Association, a few African American and African musicians and producers have found success within Chinese popular culture. But probably, the most glaring example is the government’s selection of Ding Hui, a 22-year-old biracial Chinese citizen of Chinese and South African ancestry, to China’s national volleyball team. This decision by the government to allow a mixed-race national to represent the country on the international stage has been articulated in other cultural venues, for instance in representations of the nation at the annual CCTV Spring Festival Gala. Alongside the aforementioned increasing visibility and popularity of this small but growing number of black celebrities in China, Lou Jing’s unusual life story therefore made her useful in promoting an image of a more culturally inclusive China.

But even more, she represented a niche commodity within a competitive market of mediated entertainment. How her story was transmitted – a mediated spectacle that fed on multiple publics’ curiosity for extra-marital affairs, mixed-race romantic relationships, the experience of a mixed-race Chinese woman – consequently played a foundational role in setting the context for how the message was received, circulated and debated in cyberspace. By privileging race in the portrayal of Lou Jing and sensationalizing her story, Let’s Go! Oriental Angel and other media entities capitalized on some netizens’ racist outlooks about black people. They therefore, to some degree, provoked the online fiasco that ensued regarding Lou Jing’s claims to being Chinese. Furthermore, in many ways, Lou Jing is part of a recent fad of grass-roots celebrities (草根明星)
根名人)，a trend that parallels the rise of network-based participatory culture and facilitated by popular American Idol-like competition shows such as *Supergirl* and *Dream China*. These popular forms mark a turn from the haughty propaganda media of one official voice to a multivoiced, more pluralistic, commercialized and profit-oriented media and entertainment scene that often focuses on sensational and personal stories of ordinary people. It was this broader cultural shift that made the discussion about Lou Jing and moreover about race possible in Chinese entertainment media.

What is also significant to note is that in their focus on racializing Lou Jing as mixed-race Chinese, both the television show and Lou Jing relied on global commoditized images of blackness, representations primarily controlled and circulated by multinational corporations and identified primarily with black American culture. While the racial signifiers that the television show employed framed Lou Jing as ‘Halle Berry of the East’, in interviews Lou Jing positioned her race and musicality as primarily influenced by international entertainment moguls Beyoncé and Jay-Z. These were representations that Chinese audiences could view as foreign and cosmopolitan, yet most importantly, non-threatening – an image that juxtaposed with the dominant Chinese view of other black populations, in particular African expatriates. In so doing, both the television show and Lou Jing heeded no attention to the extreme, quotidian repression experienced by numbers of Africans and mixed-race Chinese persons in China. Several netizens brought this issue to light online. ‘She is a showpiece for Chinese “diversity” but how is she treated in day-to-day life?’, one person remarked. Such blatant silences were also furthered by Lou Jing’s reticence about racial discrimination and its impact on her life. Throughout the airing of the television show and later in her interview with *NetEase*, she continuously stressed that she was an ‘ordinary Chinese girl’ who just happened to be of mixed-race, which relayed, to some degree, her reluctance and discomfort in acknowledging the prevalence of Chinese racism and anti-black attitudes.

Thus, from one perspective the debates surrounding Lou Jing displayed the tendency of entertainment media to employ commoditized images of race as means to obtain viewership while simultaneously scandalizing and exploiting neo-nationalist attitudes. Moreover, as the various people who commented about Lou Jing online demonstrated,
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cyberspace, with its anonymity and accessibility, is definitely not an ideal Habermasian public sphere where cultural power is openly negotiated, struggled over and contested. The nature of the entertainment media and of the digital space in which the discussion about Lou Jing unfolded, to a certain extent, magnified and worsened the racial discrimination experienced by Lou Jing. She subsequently became a site for some people to rearticulate anti-black racist outlooks and neo-nationalist conceptions of being Chinese.

However, this was not the only result of the online consumption and circulation of her story. Both Lou Jing’s critics and supporters online, as well as Lou Jing herself, showcased the understandable difficulty and omissions involved in participating in a critical and constructive discussion of race, a conversation that has been historically marginalized within Chinese culture, politics, and media. Furthermore, the debates surrounding Lou Jing displayed the unique characteristics of debates concerning race and blackness in China, that is the specific set of questions race and blackness engender in the Chinese context, and subsequently, their implications for contemporary Chinese struggles over national identity and culture. While the anti-black racism of many of Lou Jing’s critics ties into and reflects the global treatment of black bodies where discrimination, structural inequality, and articulations of black inferiority reign supreme, Lou Jing’s supporters convey the complexity and multifaceted aspects of Chinese constructions of identity. Interestingly, it was a modern version of Chinese identity as citizenship in a nation-state (as opposed to the traditional cultural conception of Chineseness as shared skin colour, language, heritage and racial purity) which provided the resource for this population in endorsing Lou Jing’s Chineseness and calling for greater expansion of what it means to be Chinese. That these different responses and standpoints took grandest shape in cyberspace therefore demonstrates the Internet as a significant contemporary space for power struggles over Chinese racial and national identity by everyday people.

Ultimately, for China to persist as an emerging international space for cross-cultural exchange, diversity, and global cultural flow and moreover to engender greater racial equality in the country, Chinese netizens will have to continue to enlarge their cultural scope, understanding of racial difference, and acceptance of the increasing heterogeneity of Chinese
civil society. ‘She is a beautiful human being ... she sounds well adjusted ... smarter than many of the people who are making racist remarks about her. Let us have a kinder and gentler world ... just as she [Lou Jing] inferred,’ one netizen remarked, referencing the lyrics of Lou Jing’s rap and encouraging Chinese citizens to broaden their perceptions about race. ‘Good luck Lou Jing,’ the netizen consequently concluded. ‘Given the re-emergence of China on the global stage, your unique quality will make you a great image to project to the world of a new 21st-century China ... a confident, inclusive, and kind global power.’ As this person points out, efforts to make the Chinese public more racially sensitive can only serve to boost the nation’s aptitude for intercultural communication and contact. The Internet is an important site for such discussions and cultural sharing. However, the participatory culture enabled by the Internet must simultaneously be seriously engaged. Critical reflection over how individuals and groups perform their national, racial, gender and class identities online can produce more meaningful opportunities to unpack how nationalism, racism and hegemony are articulated and legitimized through specific discourses about difference. If, as several scholars note, ‘the digital is altering our understanding of what race is as well as nurturing new types of inequality along racial lines,’ then it is also important to analyse how race functions in digital contexts, that is to interrogate how people cultivate and use this space to construct and promote both dominant and resistant ideas. The reality of Chinese popular nationalism and moreover of China’s slow but growing racial publics requires greater investigation and the digital is one of several central public forms to begin both this critical work and the more important project of celebrating, rather than demonizing, China’s evolving multiracial future.

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ENDNOTES

1. What is especially unique is that Lou Jing was able to accomplish all of this despite not even becoming one of the show’s 12 finalists.


3. In a classic 1920s Chinese work such as Du Yaquan’s Dongwuxue da cidian [Great dictionary of zoology] for instance, the author stated, ‘the “black race” … have a shameful and inferior way of thinking, and have no capacity to shine in history’. See Du Yaquan et al. (eds) Dongwuxue da cidian [Great dictionary of zoology], Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1927, p. 15.

4. The importance of yellow (huang) to China’s evolving racial consciousness can be discerned for instance simply within the names of China’s Yellow River (Huang he), descriptions of China as the ‘Yellow centre’ (huang zhong), and the ‘Yellow Emperor’ (Huangdi), the Chinese cultural hero mythologized as the paramount racial and ethnic antecedent of all Han Chinese. See Frank Dikötter, Racial identities in China: Context and meaning, The China Quarterly, no. 138, 1994: 404–12; Barry Sautman, Myths of descent, racial nationalism and ethnic minorities in the People’s Republic of China, in Frank Dikötter (ed.) The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997, pp. 75–95.

5. Racism, the CCP maintained, was a Western disease that China was combatting through support for the African American civil rights movement and internationalist solidarity and trade with African liberation movements. In the process, the Chinese government subsidized African students’ study at Chinese educational institutions and trained African armies and revolutionary groups in military operations and guerilla warfare.


9. Scholars have examined interethnic perceptions and how Chinese nationalism and the construction of majority identity in China rely upon representations and discourses surrounding minorities. However terms such as ‘minority’, when used in the context of China, are often not used in relation to race. When some researchers use the word ‘minority’, they are often referring primarily to China’s 56 ethnic minority groups. Minority in such articulations does not include foreign populations residing in China, or biracial Chinese citizens, both of whom are groups generally marked as racially ‘other’ from what is conventionally identified as racially Chinese. This heightened focus on ethnicity risks silencing the fundamental role that race and racism play in constructing what it means to be Chinese. For example, Rowena Fong and Paul R. Spickard have examined Chinese attitudes about foreigners by surveying students at Nankai University. The scholars found that while their subjects had high regard for Americans, British and Germans and viewed them in positive terms, they perceived and described Russians, Mexicans, Japanese, Tibetans and Africans in negative terms. Africans were specifically characterized as ‘primitive, uncivilized, threatening, warlike, poor, simple, uneducated, ignorant, and ugly’. Ultimately, Fong and Spickard’s study categorizes these Chinese attitudes as ‘ethnic questions’ and as representing debates over ‘the ongoing evolution of China as a multi-ethnic
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13. As a form of media and communication, the Internet is now part of mainstream everyday life, used and creatively cultivated by people of different economic, regional and cultural backgrounds far and wide. Yet it is also a commoditized form dominated by corporations, governments and economic elites. For example, Kent Ono and Vincent Pham point out: ‘The Internet and new media are constantly changing technologies that are often in tension with the concept of freedom…. New media do not guarantee a “cyberspace democracy”…. Freedom on the Internet is not assured, but is, rather, something that is a constant and continuing struggle.’ See Kent A. Ono and Vincent Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009, pp. 140.


16. We translated andanalysed post comments from several Chinese and non-Chinese websites and search engines, the majority of posts posted in September–December 2009. The post comments come primarily from four Internet sites. A good portion of the comments come from Chinese search engine Baidu, and websites *NetEase* and *ClubChina*, all of which are portals created specifically for Mandarin speakers. While Baidu is the Number One search engine in China, controlling what some approximated in 2010 as 63–70 per cent of China’s Internet market share, *NetEase*
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operates 163.com, a web portal that in 2009 was ranked as China's sixth most popular free email-service provider. ClubChina on the other hand is a website administered by Chinadotcom, a Chinese portal network that offers a broad range of online products and services. We also consider commentary from ChinaSmack and Shanghaiist, two websites devoted to translating news and popular contents from Chinese-language websites into English. These two sites were selected because besides their translation of Chinese-language Internet articles, the websites’ translators also select and translate the comments posted by Chinese netizens in response to the articles and topics discussed. For non-Mandarin speakers and readers, particularly Western netizens, ChinaSmack and Shanghaiist provide online access points to Chinese views and opinions. Nonetheless, it must be noted that numerous Chinese bloggers perceive such sites as particularly sensationalist, devoting attention mainly to translating online forums with highly sensational topics and commentary. It must also be noted that in our analysis of these websites, we assume a default Chinese user; this of course limits our analysis, because we clearly are not sure that all of these users identify themselves as Chinese. In any case, in our understanding of Chinese identity, we acknowledge the differences in Chinese identity and experience. This means that we recognize that many of the users, even if Chinese, represent different regions/provinces of China although not all of them may be residents of China, but rather overseas Chinese. Some users may also be non-Chinese people who happen to read and speak Mandarin and who took an interest in the debates surrounding Lou Jing’s national and racial identity.


22. Critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw describes this as engaging in an intersectional approach, that is to say, a theoretical lens invested in situating the criticisms of Lou Jing and her mother, as well as the anger over the increasing publicity and exposure of their story, within an analysis of racism, sexism and globalization. Crenshaw points to the centrality of analysing ‘the intersecting patterns of racism and sexism’ and shifting away from singular frameworks that are ‘shaped to respond to one or the other’, that is race or gender, rather than both simultaneously. But she adds: ‘Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.’ See Kimberle Crenshaw, Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color, *Stanford Law Review* 43(6), 1991: 1241–99; Kimberle Crenshaw, Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics, *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* (Volume 1989: Feminism in the law: Theory, practice and criticism), 1989: pp. 131–68.


29. A historical Chinese notion regarding respect and shame usually applied to individuals, ‘losing face’ is also prevalent within Chinese political and cultural circles. David Yau-fai Ho explains that fear of losing face therefore creates a propensity among government and cultural leaders to constantly focus on avoiding shame on the world stage. See David Yau-fai Ho, Wai Fu and S. M. Ng, Guilt, shame and embarrassment: Revelations of face and self, *Culture & Psychology* 10(1), 2004: 64–84.

30. Post comments on Jiechuan Shanghai ‘hei meiren’ Lou Jing de manzui huanghua! [Debunking Shanghai ‘black beauty’ Lou

31. Post comments on Wangyi zhuanfang Lou Jing.

32. In China dark skin tone frequently denotes ethnicity and class; it is often assumed that dark-skinned Chinese persons are non-Han and come from rural poor means. Regarding the rise of Western beauty aesthetics in China, one good example is the Chinese fashion and advertising industries. Both have recently begun to open their doors more and more to foreign models. However it is predominantly white American and European models that are being hired. In a Washington Post article, Ou Haibin, head of the Yuanjin Modeling Agency in Shenzhen, explained that he never hires black models because ‘foreign models’ faces are much more three-dimensional, look nicer in pictures’, and because his ‘clients don’t ask for black models’. He rationalized this bias as merely ‘an issue of Chinese people’s aesthetic view’. This has also had an impact on everyday Chinese life, with more and more Chinese men and women using skin-bleaching creams and ointments. See Keith B. Richburg, Foreign models flock to China, which embraces a Western vision of beauty, Washington Post, 26 December 2009, C01.

33. Media mogul and blogger Hong Huang weighed in stating: ‘In the same year that Americans welcome Obama to the White House, we can’t even accept this girl with a different skin color.’ Among many others, Raymond Zhou also defended Lou Jing. Moreover, he has provided a succinct analysis of why some Chinese people responded so negatively to her. Zhou referenced factors such as cultural bias against dark skin, Chinese aesthetics of beauty, and class discrimination. See Shi Yingying, Coloring the debate, 18 September 2009, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2009-09/18/content_8706527.htm, accessed 12 January 2010; and Raymond Zhou, Seeing red over black angel, China Daily, 18 September 2009, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2009-09/18/content_8711576.htm, accessed 12 January 2010.

34. Post comments on Shipin: Lou Jing.

35. Post comments on Wangyi zhuanfang Lou Jing.

36. Post comments on Shipin: Lou Jing.

37. Post comments on Wangyi zhuanfang Lou Jing.

38. Post comments on Jiechuan Shanghai ‘hei meiren’ Lou Jing de manzui huanghua!

39. Post comments on Shanghai ‘black girl’ Lou Jing abused by racist netizens.

40. Post comments on Wangyi zhuanfang Lou Jing.
41. Post comments on Shanghai ‘black girl’ Lou Jing abused by racist netizens.

42. Post comments on Jiechuan Shanghai ‘hei meiren’ Lou Jing de manzui huanghua!

43. Ibid.

44. Post comments on Shanghai ‘black girl’ Lou Jing abused by racist netizens.

45. Post comments on Wangyi zhuanfang Lou Jing.

46. See Shipin: Lou Jing. Although the video was posted in 2009 when the show was still ongoing, it still receives viewers; users might notice that some of the latest comments were posted in 2014, which means that Lou Jing’s story still attracts attention and generates debate in cyberspace after five years.

47. Translation of Wangyi zhuanfang Lou Jing: Wo shi tushengtuzhang de Zhongguo ren on ChinaHush.


50. At the 2013 CCTV Spring Festival Gala, one of the most important Chinese propaganda-entertainment shows aired annually on the Lunar New Year’s Eve, there was an unusually large number of foreign faces. The show included a Canadian singing a classic Peking Opera tune with a Chinese opera performer and dance performance by a Turkish dance troupe. Moreover, the show closed with a group performance by singers of different races: white, black and yellow. Given that there had been very little representation of non-Chinese culture on the show in the past, this change signals a crucial shift in the ‘mainstream’ cultural industries and state ideologies towards greater globalization and aspiration for a multi-racial and multi-cultural society.
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51. See Louise Edwards and Elaine Jeffreys (eds) _Celebrity in China_, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010; I. D. Roberts has a chapter (titled ‘China’s Internet celebrity: Furong Jiejie’) in this book in which he discusses Furong Jiejie, one of the first and best known grass-roots Internet celebrities in China who shot to fame in the Chinese cyberspace in 2005 by posting narcissistic self-description and photos that challenged mainstream morality and female sexuality; also see Lin Zhang and Anthony Fung, The myth of ‘shanzhai’ culture and the paradox of digital democracy in China, _Inter-Asia Cultural Studies_ 14(3), 2013: 401–16.

52. This is a point also made by Malcolm Moore, China’s black pop idol does NOT expose her nation’s racism, _The Telegraph_, 5 November 2009. Regarding the differences in terms of the treatment and representation of African Americans versus that of Africans, it must be noted that American citizenship provides black Americans abroad with particular class and geopolitical privileges denied to African expatriates. For example, in China, like most places outside the United States, a black tourist, labourer, student, or professional with a US passport will often be treated in ways superior to that of a Nigerian of similar status. This is not to suggest that African Americans in China do not face racial discrimination, but that the colour of their passport allows them a different range of mobility and a more limited type of surveillance than that enacted on Africans. In China and elsewhere, Africans sadly are often associated with pathologies of crime and poverty. Africans have been largely represented and perceived as impoverished immigrant populations who unfairly gain from Chinese investment and aid.

53. For instance, in Guangzhou, a city where the population of African residents has been growing at annual rates of 30–40 per cent since 2003, many Africans residing in a 13-mile section of the city known as ‘Chocolate City’ daily face police harassment, deportation shadow, lack of quality housing, food and healthcare, and intense restriction of their mobility. Mixed-race Chinese persons on the other hand have to contend with a different set of obstacles. One reporter maintains that a report from the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau conveyed that while mixed-race marriages have slowly increased in Chinese cities, in Shanghai in particular, effective governance has not matched these numbers. The reporter points out that China’s censuses and registers for new births have yet to produce a category for mixed-race Chinese citizens, which consequently in some instances can adversely impact a mixed-race Chinese person’s claims to the rights and privileges of Chinese citizenship. See Zoher Abdoolcarim, Race to judgment, _Time_, 8 October 2009, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1848514,00.html, accessed 12 January 2010.

55. Mixed-race volleyball player Ding Hui expressed a similar outlook. When asked about the impact his appearance and skin colour has on his everyday life, he responded, ‘What I want to say is that I’m a Chinese, I was born and raised in China, it is no big deal that I played for our national team … I don’t want people to look at me in a different way, please don’t pay too much attention to my looks.’ Ultimately Ding Hui hopes to use sport and his talents as tools to convey that his skin colour does not offset his national allegiance. And he is not alone in this endeavour. Xu Genbao, a former player on the Chinese national soccer team and manager of several Chinese soccer clubs, has utilized his youth soccer school, the Xu Genbao Football Base, as a site to cultivate the talent of mixed-race Chinese nationals. Over the last eight years, Xu has trained mixed-race players such as Aili (Chinese-African), Eddy Francois (Chinese-Tanzanian), Nasri Nagi (Chinese-Moroccan), Wolf Schenzirolzi (Chinese-German), Maximiliano Roderige (Chinese-Argentinian), Hugo Veramassan (Chinese-Argentinian), Vladimir Peterovski (Chinese-Russian), Walter Marincosca (Chinese-Serbian), Cardezo Dimo Dargoberlli (Chinese-Panamanian), Qin Yanjiong (Chinese-Brazilian), and Bojan Zievetanovski (Chinese-Bosnian). According to Xu, the goal is to fashion these young men into China’s most elite players and prepare them to represent the nation at the international level. Xu boasted: ‘Ten years from now, there’ll be at least four players from my team selected by our national team.’ See Wei Bin, Zhongguo titan ba da hunxue’er: Ding Hui bingfei kaichuang xianhe zhi ren [Chinese sports-world’s eight great persons of mixed blood: Ding Hui is not the first], *NetEase Sports*, 15 April 2009, http://sports.163.com/09/0415/11/56UH6721000534N9_8.html, accessed 3 March 2010.

56. Post comments on Shipin: Lou Jing.

In November 2012 I found myself in Kunshan, China, just an hour outside of Shanghai. I was sitting amidst a veritable sea of young men awaiting the start of the championship match for the World Cyber Games’ Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne tournament. According to statistics released by the organizers of the event, over 110,000 people had come out to see this professional gaming tournament. The vast majority of the audience were young men. Sitting beside me was Yuanqi, a young man whom I had met two years earlier, in Shanghai, while completing fieldwork on digital gaming culture. Yuanqi was himself an avid Warcraft III fan, though he and his friends had much less time to play now that they had finished their undergraduate degrees and were spending long hours each week working at competitive internships. We were talking about popular and zany Chinese Internet memes, among them the recent ‘aircraft carrier style’ (航母) trend. But I was particularly interested in a phenomenon of young people who were calling themselves a term that is roughly approximate to ‘loser’, and I questioned Yuanqi further about that. ‘So, who is diaosi?’ I asked? ‘Well, probably everyone here is diaosi’, he replied.

Since early 2012, self-proclaimed diaosi have flooded the Chinese-language Internet. In a global economic environment in which increasing numbers of youth face precarious futures, what might we make of these young people who eagerly identify themselves as losers? While many confess to being diaosi, few can actually account for the specific origins of the term or what precisely it represents, aside from being...
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the opposite of ‘tall, rich and handsome’ (高富帅). It is easy to dismiss this phenomenon as mere online play, but as Guobin Yang has noted, contentious online activity often takes a playful form and ‘the view of entertainment as mere play devoid of politics is simplistic’.

This chapter analyses the origins and nature of the diaosi meme and the young men (and women) who self-mockingly describe themselves as ‘poor, short and ugly’ (穷矮丑). The meme has led to ample speculation in the media and among Chinese academics, and while some see the meme as a relevant form of political critique, others dismiss it as indicative of a psychological malaise affecting contemporary youth. The phenomenon has been the subject of so much attention that even the Renmin ribao warned of the problem of the diaosi mentality (屌丝心态).

As such, this paper also reviews the state of debate about the meanings of the diaosi phenomenon, while offering a new interpretation that frames the meme in terms of Raymond Williams’s notion of ‘structures of feeling.’ Though diaosi is a seemingly humorous and playful Internet meme, it is also one that signals young netizens’ increasing disillusionment with regard to the possibilities for upward socio-economic mobility in contemporary China. The author contends that the diaosi phenomenon, though amorphous and at times contradictory, may also be considered an emergent form of affective identification through which alternative desires and forms of mobility may be imagined and enacted.

China’s Playful Internet Politics

In a volume devoted to examining political contestation in Chinese digital spaces it seems worthwhile to begin with the basic question: ‘What constitutes the political?’ When speaking of China and ‘the political’ in a Western context, the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests are a common point of departure. This global media event still holds sway in the Western collective imagination, but, as Ralph Litzinger has pointed out, one of the unfortunate legacies of this romanticized Western memory of Tiananmen Square is the notion that, in comparison to youth of the 1980s, Chinese youth today are apolitical.

This is not only an opinion common among college students, but also one held by scholars. Stanley Rosen, for example, has argued that contemporary Chinese youth exhibit ‘a waning interest in politics’ but an increasing interest in joining the Communist Party for personal gain.

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In the wake of the tumultuous events of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ and the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement, it is quite possible that we harbour an even more romantic image of what constitutes political action than we did following the events of Tiananmen Square. Certainly, we have now seen first-hand the potential of new media to spark and support on-the-ground political protest. This is all the more reason, however, that we should be careful not to overlook the possibilities of new online lifestyles and activities that are less transparently or overtly political in nature.

Rather than characterizing contemporary Chinese youth as uninterested in politics, Litzinger called on scholars to consider other manifestations of the political. It is no small coincidence he goes on to address the issue of the Internet and Internet cafés:

Based upon my own preliminary research, these cyber cafés do not seem to be providing spaces for subversion or radicalism, and most users do not look for sites such as Amnesty International or HumanRights.com. Many of the young students we talked to mostly used these cafés to download various kinds of video games. The rave among male college students in the fall of 1998, for instance, was a World Cup soccer game, narrated in English by one of England’s most famous soccer announcers, where users buy and sell the world’s best players. It is a great game for those who love soccer; it is also a wonderful fantasy of corporate power and global wealth.

Internet cafés are arguably providing spaces for the construction and pursuit of new desires, and these desires seem to be closely linked to China’s burgeoning consumer economy and to the fascination with certain kinds of commodities. We need to think more about the political possibilities offered in these seemingly rampant desires for the commodity form.  

A great deal has changed about the new media landscape in the nearly 15 years since Litzinger made these observations. In particular, young people coming of age in the post-2008 economic environment are discovering that they face a vastly different economic future than was imagined back in 1999. The Internet has indeed enabled the ‘construction and pursuit of new desires’, but in the current economic climate many young Chinese find that these desires for wealth and commodities seem more and more fantastical and impossible to fulfil. Even among highly educated Chinese, the competition for white-collar jobs is at an all-time high.
One young woman with a master’s degree from an American university told me that for every 10 positions offered, a Shanghai company would likely have over 10,000 applications. She seemed unfazed by these odds and estimated that she may have to apply to as many as 200 positions before getting a single offer, if one comes at all. The pressure to find a high-paying job is even greater for men, many of whom find that dating and marriage is largely out of the question until they can prove to potential partners that they have a stable income, house and car. As someone who has recently borne the emotional burden of seeking a job in an overly competitive and depressed job market, I am left pondering the odds that Chinese youth face today. In light of such intense competition, are these visions of white-collar financial success and heteronormative lifestyles achievable, or even desirable?

This chapter addresses the issue of political contestation through a consideration of the ‘politics of desire’. I locate this discussion of youth desires not in the commodity form per se, but rather in a more general desire for socio-economic mobility. Importantly, the Internet continues to serve as a space for the production of new desires, and the *diaosi* meme is an excellent example of the ways in which such desires are given voice online. I argue that, in the present moment of economic uncertainty, youth are using digital media to imagine and articulate alternative identities that pose a challenge to mainstream visions of what success entails.

This argument is positioned within a growing body of scholarship that focuses on the political possibilities inherent in everyday uses of the Internet. While early scholarship on the Chinese Internet tended to take a ‘Tiananmen Square’ approach to politics in focusing on issues of censorship and speculation about the Internet’s democratizing potential, recent work has demonstrated the manner in which political issues infuse everyday activities, even when not overtly framed as politics. Within this body of scholarship, many academics have begun to take seriously the political potentials embedded in forms of Internet entertainment and playful activities. Leading this wave of scholarship, Guobin Yang has stated that Chinese Internet is a place where contentious activity through play flourishes. Yang argues:

> It is against this culture of official-centricity that the Internet culture of humor and play assumes special significance. Play has a spirit of
irreverence. It always sits uncomfortably with power . . . . Much online activism, and much Chinese Internet culture in general, is enlivened with this spirit [the spirit of play].

Bingchun Meng has argued that new discursive modes and communicative practices on the Internet are transforming the nature of political discussions in China. In particular, she has examined the political implications of online parodies (恶搞), noting that, in the context of the authoritarian Chinese state, entertainment and politics fuse in important ways and that ‘political engagement goes beyond information acquisition and rational deliberation’. Although such modes of humorous satire may not lead to political consensus or visible policy changes, Meng argues that the critiques of social political issues implicit in the encoding and decoding of such parodies are an important kind of political participatory practice. Haomin Gong and Xin Yang have similarly argued that online parodies provide ‘an alternative locus of power, permitting the transgression of existing social and cultural hierarchies’. Finally, Hongmei Li analysed parodies in terms of Bakhtin’s concept of carnival, noting the manner in which the online space helps to suspend power relationships in a manner that permits critique.

Memes often rely on a combination of visual and textual materials and references in order to construct humorous parodies of existing issues. The role of China’s memes in political critique has also been well documented by An Xiao Mina in her ‘China Meme Report on 88 Bar’. Mina reports that one of the tactics by which politically sensitive memes successfully evade censors is by relying on pictures and other visual representations that are harder to censor as they evade key-word search functions. Fan Yang has also discussed Internet memes in terms of visual culture, as a means of making visible what has been rendered invisible by the censorious state. She analyses cases such as the ‘empty chair’ meme in honour of Chinese Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, who could not attend the Nobel award ceremony because of his imprisonment in China. By focusing on the empty chair as a sign of Liu’s imprisonment, Chinese netizens successfully created a meme that took aim at the authoritarian state.

Within China, memes such as the empty chair, Ai Weiwei’s ‘grass mud horse style’ and ‘clothed nudes’ are overt and specific expressions of political critique and as such provide convenient examples of the manner in
which humour can be used in politics. However, scholars have generally shied away from the analysis of memes and humorous parodies that are less overtly political in nature. The *diaosi* meme has eclipsed many other contemporary memes in popularity, and yet its chameleon-like nature makes it difficult to interpret. Yet like the memes interpreted by Mina and Yang, the *diaosi* meme may also be read as bringing visibility to a group of young people rendered otherwise invisible by a society in which success is often defined by educational achievements and material wealth. The following analysis reviews the many ways in which this ambiguous meme has been interpreted by scholars and media both in China and abroad.

**THE GENEALOGY OF DIAOSI**

*Diaosi* ranked as the most popular Chinese Internet term of 2012. Although the term has been loosely translated as ‘loser’ in English, the literal meaning of the phrase in Chinese is quite different. Broken into its component parts, the Chinese word *diao* (屌) is a particularly crude term used to describe the male genitalia. *Si* (丝) is literally translated as ‘threads’ or ‘hairs’, although in this context it may also linked to the Chinese transliteration of the English word ‘fans’ (粉丝). As such, although the word *diaosi* is commonly translated as loser, a more appropriate translation might be the English slang term ‘tool’, which retains the derogatory reference to the male genitalia that is contained in the Chinese term.

Like many popular internet memes, *diaosi* has a complicated genealogy, though the origin story has been well debated on the Chinese Internet. The popular online video series *Feidie shuo* (飞碟说) released a video about *diaosi* and the online encyclopedia *Baidu baike* has a growing description of the meme and its evolution. The meme has also been discussed extensively in the Chinese press. As can be parsed from these sources, the term itself is the result of multiple iterations of name-calling on an online forum. *Diaosi* reportedly came into being as a result of ‘trash talking’ between members of the Baidu Li Yi bulletin board system (BBS) and the members of the Leiting Sanjutou (雷霆三巨头) BBS. Fans of Chinese footballer Li Yi (李毅) became the target of ridicule, and they mockingly called themselves *Yi si bu gua* (一丝不挂), a phrase meaning ‘without a stitch of clothing’. This eventually morphed into *Yi si* (毅丝), meaning fans of Yi, and, finally into the nickname *diaosi*.
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The evolution of this derogatory nickname is not as surprising as what happened next. Rather than taking offence to the name-calling, the young diaosi seized hold of the nickname and self-mockingly adopted the label. Suddenly, young people declared their status as diaosi on webpages and SinaWeibo accounts, while news stories about diaosi flourished. At the time of writing this text, a search for the term yields over 100 million results on Baidu.

Since becoming popular on the Internet bulletin boards, the term diaosi has popped up in numerous contexts, both domestic and international. The phrase has been used for a web series called Diorsman (屌丝男士), the Chinese translation of a German television comedy, Knallerfrauen (屌丝女士), and, as will be discussed later, has become the subject of an advertising campaign for an online game. Internationally, the diaosi made headlines for ‘occupying’ President Obama’s Google+ page in February 2012.19 Having discovered that Google+ was not blocked in mainland China, Chinese netizens swarmed President Obama’s Google+ page. In the comments left on his page, some suggested that Obama ‘free’ China the way that America had ‘freed’ Iraq and Libya. Some claimed that Obama would process a green card for anyone leaving a message on his page; others simply made their presence known by typing a few characters. Though the statements varied and could be interpreted in many different ways, taken as a whole the tone of the comments was overwhelmingly ironic and humorous. The China popular culture watcher Jeremy Goldkorn described the event as a form of ‘bystanding’ (围观), whereby people engage in a crowd mentality and simply visit a page in order to see what is going on.20

Despite, or more likely because of, the numerous places the term appears, the definition of diaosi culture continues to evolve. Depending on the source, diaosi may embody some or all of the following traits: they may be short, poor, ugly; are of rural origin; and have a low education level, a low income, blue-collar job, no house, no car, and no girlfriend. Their leisure activities include playing video games, spending a lot of time online, and excessive masturbation. They are also sometimes described as nerds who rarely leave the house (宅男).21 As described on the talk show, Qiangqiang san ren xing (锵锵三人行), the diaosi male:

1. Doesn’t carry more than RMB 1,000 on his person.
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2. Wears knock-off brand (冒牌) shoes or shoes that cost less than RMB 800.
3. Has not had more than three girlfriends before marrying.
4. Smokes cigarettes that cost less than RMB 20.
5. Only drinks beer or cheap liquor.
6. Has benefits (福利) amounting to less than RMB 10,000.
7. Does not have a car or, if he does, it costs less than RMB 100,000.
8. Rarely takes long-distance trips.
9. Has no one of wealth and influence in his social circle.
10. Spends less than RMB 2,000 on his cell phone and spends a lot of time on microblogs. Tries to act ‘cool’ with his phone.

There is also a female version of the diaosi, a woman described almost entirely in terms of superficial appearances and fashion. The list for the female diaosi is as follows:

1. Has never bought a bikini.
2. Does not wear brightly colored nail polish.
3. Has never worn heels higher than 5cm.
4. Does not have matching sets of lingerie.
5. Spends five or more months dieting in one year.
6. Does not dare to show her teeth when she laughs or smiles in public.
7. Likes to walk behind men.
8. Does not like to look in the mirror or looks in the mirror too much.
9. Has not changed her hairstyle in more than six months.

Another popular representation of the diaosi describes them in the following manner:

They have no money, no background, no future. They love DOTA,\textsuperscript{22} they love the Li Yi BBS, they love their menial jobs (搬砖). They are fated to kneel before the tall rich and handsome. When the diaosi must the courage to strike up a conversation with a ‘goddess’ (女神), the only response they receive is a chuckle. They worship their god, Li Yi; they are diaosi.\textsuperscript{23}

While the list of possible descriptors varies from source to source, one thing that remains consistent, and – by that logic the most important
aspect of the meme, – is the ability to define the *diaosi* in relation to what he is not: he is not ‘rich, tall, and handsome’; he is not the ‘second generation of wealthy families’ (富二代); he does not enjoy the privileges of the ‘second generation of officials’ families’ (管二代). He cannot date, or even successfully converse with, goddesses. Simply put, the *diaosi* are at odds with popular representations of the successful, heteronormative male.

**ARE THE DIAOSI CHINA’S 99 PERCENT?**

The refrain of the *diaosi* may be indicative of a growing awareness of income inequality within urban China. Scholars and journalists within China have echoed these sentiments, and many have cast the implications of this online meme in a serious light. As scholars Li Bin and Tang Qiufen argue:

> *Diaosi* has moved from the Internet’s virtual world to the real world. Not merely a form of self mocking, the term is more likely to be an expression of the growing rigidity of social class, the widening gap between the rungs of society, or an indicator of increasing class friction. At the same time it may also be a reflection of the hardening of social structure, power imbalance between individuals and the social whole, and a reflection of individuals’ increasing feelings of helplessness.24

Jin Ge has similarly explained the issue as one related to the increasing income gap between entitled upper-class youth and the struggling middle class. According to Jin:

> An increasing number of the middle class are using the term *diaosi* as a form of self-parody. This is not necessarily due to a decline in living standards, but is more likely due to a perceived disparity. The disparity comes about through comparisons with the second generation of officials’ families, the second generation of wealthy families and the tall, rich and handsome.25

To a foreign ear, the *diaosi* phenomenon may call to mind some of the complaints offered by members of Occupy Wall Street’s ‘99 Percent’. While Occupy Wall Street took aim at the big banks and other members of the privileged one per cent that continued to enjoy both bailouts and large bonuses during times of economic crisis, the *diaosi* use humour to point to the disparities between the lives of average Chinese youth
and those privileged youth who simply inherit wealth through family connections and corrupt government back channels.

Though vastly different in scale and despite the fact that the diaosi have not engaged in large-scale on-the-ground protests, I offer this comparison in order to call attention to the ways in which both groups mobilized the Internet as a means through which to give voice to a disenfranchised majority. One of the most emotionally persuasive elements of the Occupy Wall Street movement was its 99-per-cent tumblr, in which thousands of individuals shared their stories of economic hardship by posting photos of hand-written placards. By comparison, a notable strength of the diaosi meme has been the extent to which large numbers of youth are willing to embrace the ‘loser’ label in online forums. In both cases, the Internet has provided the platform on which a sense of group solidarity is established; it is a visual medium that gives individuals a visceral sense of the vast number of people who identify with their situation. This group affect, in turn, becomes a rallying point for the movement.

What also becomes clear in the comparison of the 99-per-cent meme and the diaosi meme, different though they may be, is the manner in which the target of the meme is not wealth itself but rather the sense that the dream of upward socio-economic mobility is increasingly out of reach for the majority of people, while the wealthy few maintain their wealth at the expense of the average citizen. This can be evidenced by the fact that in both the case of the 99 per cent and the case of the diaosi, celebrities and otherwise wealthy individuals have pledged their support and allegiance for the cause. Within China, post-1980s poster boy and race-car driver-turned-author Han Han made headlines for declaring that he too was diaosi. Despite being what some might consider tall, rich and handsome, Han Han’s declaration was acceptable because of his rural origins and the manner in which he was a self-made man.

In comparing diaosi to the Occupy Wall Street 99 Percent, I do not mean to suggest that the two movements are by any means equivalent or that different cultural factors are not at work. Certainly, diaosi has not led to on-the-ground protest, let alone one of the scale of a movement such as Occupy Wall Street. However, the 99 percent tumblr and the diaosi meme do share a similar spirit, a structure of feeling that seems to emanate from similar concerns and modes of experience.
DIAOSI, THIS GENERATION’S AH Q?

In a July 2012 cover article written for the Chinese Xin zhoukan (新周刊), author Tan Shanshan compared Lu Xun’s legendary ‘loser’, Ah Q, to the figure of the diaosi. Tan argues: ‘Ah Q had “psychological victories’, diaosi seem to instead use a method of “self-belittling’ in order to come to terms with reality. Instead of sinking into despair, they use this new method in order to reconcile social reality and their own place within it.’27 This comparison was also echoed by Chinese television personality Xu Zidong. Like Tan, Xu also argued that the diaosi have some of the ‘Ah Q spirit.’28

As it was with Ah Q, the diaosi seem happy to claim the title of the ‘foremost self-belittler’, using their self-mocking attitude as a means of declaring ‘psychological victory’ over their wealthy and privileged counterparts, the tall, rich and handsome. For, as Ah Q would reason, after removing the word ‘self-belittler’ what remains is ‘foremost’. To quote an example from the story:

But presently he changed defeat into victory. Raising his right hand he slapped his own face hard twice, so that it tingled with pain. After this slapping his heart felt lighter, for it seemed as if the one who had given the slap was himself, the one slapped some other self, and soon it was just as if he had beaten someone else – in spite of the fact that his face was still tingling. He lay down satisfied that he had gained the victory.29

The similarities between Ah Q and the diaosi go on. Like Ah Q, the diaosi are often described as itinerant laborers who work menial jobs for the likes of the tall, rich and handsome. They lust after women or, as is the case with the diaosi, goddesses, but they have little luck in finding actual romantic partners.

Finally, both Ah Q and diaosi are products of their historical circumstances. The story of Ah Q is set amid the tumultuous years of the downfall of the Qing Dynasty and China’s Republican revolution. Ah Q has little knowledge of government or the radical changes affecting China at the turn of the 20th century, but he idly believes that by changing his hairstyle he will join the ranks of the revolutionaries and prosper. If Ah Q represented a China coming to terms with the effects of the Republican revolution, diaosi represent a China coming to terms with the challenges and limitations of its rapid economic growth in the 21st century. While growing up amid economic reforms that touted China’s
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ascendancy to the status of global superpower, members of the post-1980s generation have discovered that national economic growth is not necessarily indicative of personal opportunity. Both Ah Q and the diaosi are, to some extent, victims of their own unrealistic expectations about the nature of revolutionary change.

Despite these similarities, it must be pointed out that Ah Q and the diaosi respond to disappointment in sharply different ways. Lu Xun’s Ah Q thrives on his wilful ignorance. He denies reality and deceives himself into thinking that all of his humiliations and defeats are actually victories. As such, Ah Q becomes Lu Xun’s national allegory for the decline of the Manchu government, which, until the very end, refused to embrace the reality of its imminent demise. An editorial in Shang zhoukan (商周刊) noted that ‘while Ah Q was always fixated on wealth and enjoyed dominating those weaker than him, the diaosi accept their lowly fate, and kneel before the gaofushuai. While others brag and boast about their successes, the diaosi grin and admit defeat.’ Furthermore, the townspeople for whom Ah Q works, such as the rich Mr Chao, may be the equivalent of the ‘tall, rich, and handsome’, but they are also pitiable in the eyes of Lu Xun. As Fredric Jameson notes, these townspeople who laugh at Ah Q represent yet another faction of Chinese society, people whose ‘response to powerlessness is the senseless persecution of the weaker and more inferior members of the hierarchy’. For Lu Xun, both Ah Q and the townspeople were indicative of a spiritual malaise affecting the Chinese people.

But by far the most crucial difference between Ah Q and the diaosi has to do with the power of Internet connectivity. Indeed, where Ah Q was blind to his low status, the diaosi emerge out of a vibrant Internet culture that is sharply attuned to and critical of the goings-on of the Chinese state. Diaosi harbour no illusions about their place in the hierarchy of Chinese society, rather, they empower themselves by embracing their lowly status. And while Ah Q was a loner, isolated from his peers, the young people who are using social media to embrace the diaosi label are doing so in such a way as to create a sense of community, a point of affective identification that crystallizes through the power of online address.

**Ambiguities of the Diaosi Meme**

Despite such seemingly admirable elements of the meme, it must be acknowledged that diaosi culture often shocks as much as it impresses.
An essay on a Fudan University anthropology blog calls attention to the many problematic gender attitudes that pervade diaosi culture. Huang He focuses on the diaosi ‘food chain’ and the distressing ways in which women are objectified in popular Chinese culture. Far from recreating the inclusivity of Occupy Wall Street’s ‘We are the 99 percent’ mantra, it is suggested that the diaosi meme has encouraged sexism, cynicism and exclusivity. As is evident from the above descriptions, the meme focuses mainly on money as a source of a man’s power and attractiveness (ranking him in terms of the kinds of goods he can afford and how much money he has on his person), while women are ranked in terms of sexual experience and physical attractiveness. Aside from referring to women as either goddesses or female diaosi, a number of other more offensive terms have also been used in conjunction with the meme. In particular, the terms ‘pink wood ear’ (粉木耳) and ‘black wood ear’ (黑木耳) have been used to describe a woman’s sexual experience, with a pink wood ear referring to a virgin’s genitalia and black wood ear being used to refer to the genitalia of a woman who has had numerous sexual partners. With regard to the male diaosi, it is said that the women whom they often marry have been previously used and discarded by the tall, rich and handsome.

Bloggers have also critiqued the diaosi for lacking respect, both for themselves and for their culture. A popular motto often expressed in conjunction with the diaosi, ‘sincerity equals defeat’ (认真就输了), seems to encourage young people to keep a cynical distance from more ‘serious’ matters and to treat everything as a joke. In March 2013, the popular film director Feng Xiaogang posted on Sina Weibo that those who call themselves diaosi were brain damaged (脑残). Indeed, while the self-mocking loser label seems on one hand to pose a challenge to a system in which only a select few can attain such materialistic success, its twisted humor may in fact reproduce the consumerist and object-oriented culture that it targets.

Finally, it is important to note that the popularity of the diaosi meme, though originally a kind of ‘grassroots’ movement, has since been co-opted by corporate interests. In early 2013 a Chinese company promoting a new massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) unfurled a new advertisement in Times Square with the characters for diaosi featured prominently in the centre of the billboard.
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Giant Interactive (巨人游戏), the maker of the game, has proclaimed that theirs is the game of diaosi. The same company that advertised in Times Square also funded a study of diaosi culture, finding that 526 million people, or over one-third of the Chinese population, identified themselves as diaosi. This report, which can be read in full online, seems to be an elaborate April Fool’s joke.33

In his classic explanation of subcultures, Dick Hebdige noted the manner in which many subcultural signs become appropriated by mass culture and turned into mass produced objects. He cites the example of punk fashion, where the subversive use of ripped clothing held together by safety pins ultimately became adopted by high-end fashion houses. Hebdige notes that ‘youth cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions’.34 It is not surprising, then, that the once alternative diaosi, in their popularity, have become representative of the new normal. An article entitled ‘Are China’s “Losers” Really Winning?’ suggests that the popularity of luxury goods such as high-end watches and designer clothing may be waning in contemporary China. While luxury watches have made headlines for being a signal of government deceit and corruption, the diaosi seem to thrive on their candid appeal.35 By extension, some have suggested that the popularity of the diaosi meme may be attributed to a more traditional cultural emphasis on modesty. Many consider it important to maintain a self-effacing attitude toward personal success, and as such few Chinese wish to admit to being tall, rich and handsome. Xu Zidong noted that China’s recent communist past has left a legacy of hating wealth. ‘Even though everyone wants wealth in real life, in public they all pretend to be poor.’36 In keeping with Hebdige’s description of mass cultural appropriation of subcultures, the popularity of the diaosi meme has thus made it an attractive device through which to market more modestly priced products and brands.

DISCUSSION

The proliferation of new identities online and the critique levelled at privilege and corruption through humour are cornerstones of China’s burgeoning civil society. The case of diaosi is relevant to an investigation of political contestation in Chinese online spaces in that it offers a complicated picture of how online identities might simultaneously reinforce
and challenge conventional norms. On the one hand, the *diaosi* meme takes aim at the lack of avenues for upward socio-economic mobility and the privileged upper echelon of Chinese youth who inherit wealth and power from their parents. On the other hand, the meme’s emphasis on material wealth, physical appearance and sexual stereotypes may ultimately reinforce many of the norms and values that it seemingly intends to mock. As such, the public is left to wonder, who are the *diaosi*, really? Are they China’s 99 Percent, are they the new Ah Q, are they representatives of a new Chinese consumer that rejects high priced luxury items in favour of video games, or are they yet one more manifestation of materialism run rampant? Like many popular Internet phenomena, the *diaosi* meme often acts as a floating signifier, taking on new meanings in different contexts.

It should come as no surprise that the chameleon-like nature of memes such as *diaosi* thus pose a particular challenge for scholarship. And here I would caution against the temptation to read the content of the *diaosi* meme too literally. Rather, what is important is a larger understanding of the mechanisms involved in this meme’s perpetuation and evolution. Henry Jenkins, for example, has articulated the ways in which youth are engaged in new forms of ‘participatory politics’, a kind of politics that takes place through online activity, including the making and sharing of memes. Jenkins has argued that such participatory politics are ‘politics that often stretch beyond our institutional understanding of what constitutes the political, that involve kinds of cultural activities that invoke the production and sharing of media’.37 Participatory politics may play a role in the rise of counter-publics, which, as defined by Nancy Fraser, are ‘parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs’.38 Importantly, Michael Warner has suggested that such counter-publics engage with discourses that ‘in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness’.39

Certainly, the spread and sharing of the *diaosi* meme constitutes a kind of online youth participation. What is more, it is a kind of participation that at times seems pregnant with political possibility – one that thrives off of ‘indecorousness’ in the face of a government and society relentlessly concerned with image and ideal citizenship. But the ambigua-
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ities of the diaosi meme – the way in which it seems to alternately reject normative definitions of success while also reifying existing sexist and consumerist ideologies – must serve to limit the claims that can be made with regard to the meme’s radical potential.

As such, rather than labeling the diaosi culture a fully developed ‘counter-public’, it seems more fruitful to focus on what cultural critic Raymond Williams has termed ‘structures of feeling’. Structures of feeling are not fully developed ideologies or worldviews, but are instead ‘concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt’. Williams notes that ‘emergent or pre-emergent, they do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action.’

Similarly, cultural theorist Sara Ahmed has written of the ‘politics of emotions’, arguing that emotions serve as forms of social power, even though they are not always recognized as power. Emotions, she writes, align certain bodies with others, and may be the basis for collective action. This kind of affective identification is, without a doubt, present in the case of young people who so readily identify themselves as diaosi. Indeed, it is the conclusion of this author that the term diaosi reflects just such a structure of feeling, one that is gaining currency with young Chinese, and one that, consciously or not, is subtly helping young people to rearticulate the kinds of lifestyles that are desirable and achievable in the face of economic uncertainty.

It is of particular importance to note here that ‘desire’ is never a simple thing. Though it is tempting to think of desire as a ‘pure’ affect that we engage in freely, it is quite the opposite. Instead, what we desire is often to a great extent what mainstream society dictates desirable. Sara Ahmed made this provocative point when she noted the manner in which ‘happiness’ functions as a disciplinary technique, working to redescribe social norms as ‘social goods’. Seen in this light, desire is also implicated in projects of locating ‘happiness’ in places that society deems to be ‘proper.’ To what extent does the diaosi meme enable constructions of happiness and success that challenge social norms, and to what extent does it ‘redescribe’ them? Within the field of Chinese Internet research, Fengshu Liu has argued that young Chinese find themselves pressured to adhere to a norm of the ‘good netizen’. Similarly, I have shown the manner in which the Internet may serve as a location in which notions

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of ‘ideal citizenship’ and ‘patriotic leisure’ are cultivated and reinforced. By contrast, the *diaosi* meme takes aim at these conventional and socially sanctioned models of success, questioning, in particular, the extent to which such models are achievable in the context of contemporary China.

For young people coming of age as China’s first generation of only children, desire is closely associated with pressures to achieve narrowly defined visions of success. Anthropologists such as Vanessa Fong, Lisa Hoffman and Andrew Kipnis have documented the nature of these pressures, both with regard to education and to career and lifestyle aspirations. In particular, Fong has described an environment in which young people are trained by parents to think of themselves as an up-and-coming generation of CEOs and CFOs. These parental expectations, combined with structural limitations created by the size of China’s population and factors such as the extremely selective college entrance exam have created a stifling environment for many urban youths. Fong notes that the young people whom she worked with ‘found incongruities between the status they expected and the status they attained as a major source of stress’. She goes on to state:

> As their parents’ only hope, singletons were socialized to become part of the elite. Work in construction, sanitation, housekeeping, and the bottom rungs of factories and the military could not offer enough income, security, and promotion opportunities to enable youth to attain respectable living standards, be competitive on the marriage market, save money to purchase marital housing, provide their own children with expensive education, or support their retired, unemployed parents and grandparents. Therefore, most singletons refused to work at such jobs, even if the alternative was unemployment.

Disillusioned by these offerings and faced with housing costs that exceed their incomes, many young urbanites are increasingly aware of the inequalities of the market system. The situation is made worse by the fact that young people still face pressure to secure a respectable job, car and apartment in order to fulfil the basic expectations for marriage.

By embracing their status as *diaosi*, young people are explicitly acknowledging the unfair and sometimes impossible standards of success by which they are being judged. While working within the confines of a dominant ideology that would frame them as losers, young people
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who adopt the *diaosi* label do so cynically, thus effectively challenging the notion that their lifestyle is something of which to be ashamed. Though the extent to which this may be the case is not as yet clear, implicit in the trending *diaosi* culture is a rejection of the heteronormative notion of upward mobility outlined by neoliberal models of ‘patriotic professionalism’, educational desire and Chinese ideal citizenship.  

These ‘millions’ of *diaosi* are calling attention to the number of young people whose lifestyles are characterized by mediocre incomes, lack of marital status and digital leisure culture. Whether or not these kinds of lifestyles are truly ‘desired’ is a murkier question, but the very existence of this meme suggests that it is, nonetheless, a question on the minds of Chinese youth as they come to terms with the fact that the lifestyle of the so-called tall, rich and handsome is neither fully desirable nor generally achievable in the contemporary urban landscape.

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http://vdisk.weibo.com/s/7CKwAg1KGg, accessed 21 February 2014.

ENDNOTES

1. Warcraft III is a kind of computer game that is played competitively and is considered to be a form of ‘e-sports’; Warcraft III fandom is also considered to be one of the calling cards of the diaosi.


7. Litzinger, Screening the political, 833.

8. See, for example, the work of Jack Linchuan Qiu, David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt, Fengshu Liu, and Cara Wallis.


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16. An even more literal translation, and one that has been suggested by other English speakers, is ‘pubic hair’.


21. The moniker zhainan is a Chinese translation of the Japanese term otaku. Both terms make literal reference to the fact that these young men rarely leave home, largely because they are known to be obsessed with ‘nerdy’ hobbies such as collecting and reading manga or playing video games.

22. The acronym DOTA refers to the popular computer game Defense of the Ancients. As mentioned previously, diaosi are known for their love of particular video games, including DOTA, Warcraft III, and League of Legends (LOL). League of Legends is now jokingly referred to as lu a lu, a slang phrase referring to the act of masturbation, and, by extension, to the male diaosi.
23. See image seven, Fenghuangwang zhuanti tupian [Special topic image from the Phoenix website], http://baike.baidu.com/albums/5642513/5686019/0/0.html#0$, accessed 1 July 2013.


26. See the archived tumblr posts online at http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com/, accessed 1 July 2013.


28. Xu Zidong: Diaosi shenshang you yigu zijue de Ah Q jingshen.


36. Xu Zidong, Diaosi shenshang you yigu zijue de Ah Q jingshen.

37. Henry Jenkins, Counterpublics: Self-fashioning and alternate communities (presented at Media in Transition 8: Public Media, Private Media,
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38. Nancy Fraser, Rethinking the public sphere: A Contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy, Social Text, no. 25/26, 1990: 67.


45. Ibid., 99.

46. For more on neoliberal educational desire and patriotic professionalism, see the work of Andrew Kipnis and Lisa M. Hoffman.
This chapter explores the changes in Chinese local governance induced by official adoption of microblogs. Microblogging refers to the practice of posting small pieces of digital content (e.g. text, pictures, videos, or web links) through a web service to subscribers of that content. Since 2009, microblogging has become an important channel of communication between citizens and local governments in China. After the exposure of numerous corruption scandals and local protests through weibo, the central government has grown increasingly nervous about the new medium and strengthened state regulation of it. Speaking through state media in 2011, Wang Cheng, deputy director of the Central Propaganda Department, encouraged local officials to ‘occupy microblogs’. Since top Chinese Internet firm Sina Corporation started to offer its microblogging service SinaWeibo in August 2009, Chinese local governments have enthusiastically incorporated microblogs into their administrative operation as a form of ‘social management’, creating both opportunities and challenges for local governance. In addition to SinaWeibo, similar microblog platforms have been developed by Tencent, NetEase, Sohu, and even state media company Renmin wang (People’s daily online). By August 2013, there were more than 176,000 official government microblog accounts across these platforms, actively trying to engage the public by providing local information, answering user questions, and interacting with local residents.
These government microblogs are part of a fast-growing Chinese microblogosphere comprising more than 300 million microblog users, making microblogging one of the most popular online activities in China.\(^4\) Even though government microblogging has become a widespread practice not only in China but also globally, research about Chinese officials’ use of microblogs, especially in English, is very limited. Most published studies on Chinese microblogs probe filtering patterns on Chinese social media. However, this study wishes to gain a deeper understanding of government use of microblogs from the perspective of local governance. Such an approach allows us to move beyond filtering and high-profile cases toward a better understanding of the fundamental functioning of social media and social management by Chinese local bureaucracy. From this perspective, government microblogs aim not only to gauge and control public opinion, but also to provide services to improve local governance and state legitimacy. Additionally, from a comparative perspective, our work can contribute to a richer understanding of how microblogging is diffused globally as part of local governments’ political toolkits as the need to have more inclusive and accountable institutions that can provide a space for interaction between citizens and governments is a universal concern.\(^5\)

We contend that research on Chinese state–netizen relations tends to emphasize confrontation while the more mundane and conciliatory use of social media by local governments in Chinese netizens’ everyday life is often downplayed or trivialized. Such an overarching ‘confrontational’ framework tends to overlook real, prolonged possibilities of ‘authoritarian resilience’ or dynamics of ‘authoritarian online deliberation’.\(^6\) While a confrontational framework foregrounds social conflicts, it does not pay particular attention to how such conflicts are neutralized by local governments or how changes are introduced into Chinese local governance itself. We argue that official microblogging is an extension of sophisticated e-government efforts for managing social tensions and conflicts, grounded in the much larger context of Chinese administrative and social management. By assessing the impact of microblogging on local governance, we expand the scope of the debate on digital contention to the inner workings of local bureaucracy. An in-depth look into government microblogs from the perspective of local governance can better
help explain the persistence of state power despite waves of contentious digital politics in contemporary China. Accordingly, this chapter poses the following two research questions: ‘How are microblogs adopted and managed by Chinese local governments?’ and ‘How does the adoption of official microblogs affect the local government’s role of social management?’

To answer the first question it is necessary to describe the multiple actors, interests and motivations in microblog adoption to uncover contentions within the fragmented local bureaucracy. The second question requires analysis of how the microblogs as ‘beta-institutions’ change the government’s role in local governance and how the local government navigates its relations with private microblog-service providers and microbloggers. Do official microblogs work as a battering ram to propel reform, a virus leading to unintended changes, or is it politics as usual?

This chapter first briefly reviews the literature on government microblogging and contention in China. It then introduces a political system theory framework highlighting three types of potential impact that microblogging could have on local governance: a battering ram to spearhead reforms; a virus introducing unexpected consequences; and a reinforcer of authorities’ existing power, that is, politics as usual. Following a description of research methodology, findings are reported. We discuss the implementation, dynamics and potential impact of government microblogging, with particular attention to how changes in Chinese local governance are shaped by the main actors in the official microblogosphere, their motivations for adoption, and institutional constraints. While microblogs do not in the short run lead to institutional change in local governance, such beta-institutions can in the long run result in changes through the delivery of individualized services on commercial platforms. However, the transition of local governments from service providers to ‘service predictors’ could also have profound state surveillance implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Government microblogs and contention
From fax machines to emails, websites, online forums, blogs, search engines, and most recently microblogs, the Chinese Communist Party
(CCP) seems to have weathered and withstood waves of information and technology transformations. Despite the speculations about regime change upon the arrival of the Internet, the political decision makers have so far managed to curb the rising number of popular protests through various means of censorship and control. More importantly, the central government has grown very adept at promoting its legitimacy through economy, nationalism, ideology, culture and governance to achieve a degree of responsive authoritarianism. Notably, the central government allocates considerable funds for social stability and management. China’s fiscal budget for ‘maintaining stability’ (spent mainly on police, public security, and various social-conflict-mediation units) in 2009 was RMB 514 billion (or US$ 77 billion), almost the size of its official military budget of RMB 532.1 billion (or US$ 80 billion).

It is against such a backdrop that the current study examines the latest ‘occupying’ of microblogs by Chinese local governments. Between 2009 and 2012, the number of Chinese government entities adopting microblogs has risen dramatically. The provincial government of Yunnan was the first to set up a government microblog in November 2009. Sanctioned by various levels of governments, the number of government microblogs on Sina’s platform grew from 552 (312 government agencies and departments, 240 government officials) in October 2010 to 18,132 (9,778 government agencies and departments, 8,354 government officials) in October 2011. In April 2011, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs jumped on the ‘microblogs bandwagon’ as the first central government agency to register an account on SinaWeibo. According to official China Internet Network Information Center data, the total number of government microblogs picked up further momentum and amounted to 80,000 in September 2012. The Chinese Academy of Governance E-government Research Centre estimates the total number of government microblogs to be 176,800.

The concerted effort on the part of the Chinese government has been noticed. In fact, a shared research interest in Chinese government microblogs has emerged among academics and government think tanks alike, both inside and outside China. Government-commissioned reports have carefully analysed the structure, content and services of SinaWeibo and encouraged both government agencies and individual cadres to ‘adopt microblogs practice scientifically’. The same report
believes that government microblogs fulfills multiple public-security and social-management functions: (a) more than one-third of government microblog accounts are maintained by public security agencies and officials; (b) the second largest group of government microblogs come from administrative entities such as municipal governments (e.g. Beijing municipal government account ‘Beijing Announcements’ (Beijing Fabu 北京发布) on SinaWeibo); and (c) a great emphasis has been placed on collecting information for decision-making, obtaining social news, interacting with users, promoting positive news, and maintaining social stability during crises.\textsuperscript{16}

Therefore, besides active censorship of China’s microblogosphere to curtail collective actions and social mobilization,\textsuperscript{17} authorities are also proactively engaging in information services and the shaping of public opinion on social media. Drawing on earlier literature,\textsuperscript{18} we view government microblogs as an extension of the Chinese e-government efforts and more broadly as an expansion of ‘central propaganda spaces’\textsuperscript{19} into the commercial and civic realms of the Chinese Internet. However, in order to move beyond a dichotomy seen in previous research on Chinese online contentions that stresses either citizen activism\textsuperscript{20} or political control,\textsuperscript{21} research needs to explain specifically how microblogs are perceived, adapted and used in China’s local governance to offer insight into how social tensions are neutralized or harmonized in China’s everyday social-media spaces and practices.

In this vein, Nele Noesselt’s call to ‘bring government back in’ to the discussion of microblogs is relevant.\textsuperscript{22} After surveying Chinese government uses of and attitudes toward social media, she concluded that the CCP has come to view social media, including microblogging, as a route to popular political legitimacy. By responding to public opinion publicly, government microblogs can help keep citizens content and regain public trust in government, at least temporarily. Liang Ma’s recent empirical research on Chinese local governments’ use of microblogs reveals that while municipal police bureaus’ adoption of microblogs tends to be driven by top-down pressures, horizontal competition between local governments and leaders driven by financial and career incentives largely fuelled the fast diffusion of government microblogs in China.\textsuperscript{23}

However, research has not empirically examined the implementation and dynamics of official microblogs at the local level through in-depth
case studies. We know relatively little about the actual day-to-day practice of the hundred thousands of government microblogs. Moreover, rather than treating ‘government’ as an undifferentiated unit, it is probably closer to reality to view the Chinese government as a complex array of different or even contentious administrative actors. As Guobin Yang shows, China’s Internet-content-control regime is highly fragmented between more than a dozen regulatory authorities and the power struggle between them is extremely contentious. So under ‘fragmented authoritarianism,’ the one party-state’s capacity to implement nationwide policies is often hamstrung by the turf wars between different bureaucratic fractions and levels of governments in a complex ‘matrix-muddle.’ State strategies cannot be assumed to translate straightforwardly into implementation. Instead, bureaucratic fragmentation and the complexity of social media in authoritarian China leave ample room for digital contention in the government microblogosphere.

Government microblogs as beta-institutions: adapting to technological changes

While the CCP embraced new information technologies to regain political legitimacy through economic modernization, the concomitant political consequences of such technologies for information sharing, public discourse, and collective action among users are profound. As the editor-in-chief of People’s Daily Online remarked in the mid-2000s, ‘What would it look like if everybody went into politics? ... China has more than 100 million Internet users. If they were all free to speak their minds, we would have a very serious situation.’ By the end of 2012, the situation only got ‘worse’: China had an Internet population of 564 million and a microblog populace of 300 million. For the Party, the only option is to change and adapt. Such adaptation requires, among other things, restructuring government functions and reinventing state–netizen interactions on a massive scale. The Chinese government took this task seriously. By 2003, it was estimated that the government had invested over RMB 1 trillion (or US$ 121 billion then) in government-IT projects since early 1990s to build an extensive state digital network.

The ‘occupy microblogs’ movement is the central government’s latest response to the new technological and sociopolitical challenges. Crucial to such government-IT investments and adaptations is the notion of constant and measured trial-and-error in political governance. Over the past three decades, while the Party retains its communist moniker, it has
morphed by integrating various elements of market capitalism, forging trade relations worldwide, and renegotiating its relationship with the public. From emails, websites, online forums, blogs to search engines and most recently microblogs, the Party’s approach towards social and political management, especially crises, has gradually evolved from being reactive and retarded to proactive and swift. New strategies have been taken up and new institutions have been created to cope with the challenges posed by the exponential growth in public communication via new media technologies. However, some Chinese scholars such as Sun Liping fear that current ‘social management’ is veering away from proactive engagement with the public and is instead teetering on the verge of comprehensive, preventive ‘social control’. The latter involves more pre-emptive and oppressive measures to stifle public debates.

To bridge the larger trends of social management and specific institutional practices at the municipal level, we advance the concept of beta-institutions to capture the semi-institutionalized practices that shape social management at the local governance level. Particular attention is paid to the character of institutions and a distinction between regular institutions and beta-institutions is made. We use institutions to refer to ‘a relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices’. For instance, municipal e-government portals in China have evolved into relatively stable institutions with enduring rules and organized practices. They come with personnel and budgets to maintain and develop the online presence of the local government. They are here to stay. Beta-institutions, however, denote a collection of general rules and organized practices intended for temporary use or experimentation. Government microblogs are an example of this. While established institutions have clear operational rules, beta-institutions only have broad guidelines, which leave much room for organizational-level interpretations and innovations. Additionally, institutions are undergirded by formal or informal rules to ensure their survival. In contrast, beta-institutions are defined by a ‘trial mode’, expected to desist or morph into something else. As such, beta-institutions are formulated deliberately to allow for flexibility during implementation. Tolbert and Zucker posit that institutionalization progresses in stages from innovation over habituation to objectification (completely rule-binding, regularized actions). Beta-institutions, viewed in such a perspective, are ‘semi-institutionalized’,
situated in a pre-objectified stage, oscillating between innovation and habituation. While many Chinese institutions are non-transparent, flexible and informal, beta-institutions are marked particularly by their temporality, bottom–up process of construction, and a deliberate decision by the government to allow for experimentation without providing extra management personnel or funding.

Government microblogs are seen as beta-institutions. While the central government encourages local municipalities and cadres to ‘occupy microblogs’ and interact with microbloggers online, the details of execution are left to individuals and local government organizations. Research from Chinese scholars shows that government microblogging practices vary considerably between government microblog accounts. Government microblogs can be funded by budgets intended for a variety of departments such as e-government portals, public affairs, environmental agencies and public security. Thus they can operate under different authorities, governed by different rules and responsibilities. Among the three model cases profiled in a report published by the Chinese Academy of Governance E-government Research Centre – official municipal microblog accounts from Chengdu, Nanjing and Shanghai – each has its own characteristics, reflecting unique local cultures, histories and issues.\[33\] Seeing government microblogs as beta-institutions rather than regular institutions allows one to explore the experimental nature of these unique state-media forms tasked to disseminate information and engage individual microbloggers in a commercial online setting.

Thus, beta-institutions can be seen as a pragmatic way to produce innovation within the government. They could mature and become institutionalized, developing formal rules and regulations, and creating the basis for long-term organizational reform.

**Government microblogs: battering rams, virus or politics as usual?**

We adopt a political system approach advanced by David Easton amended with Wanda Orlikowski’s structuration model of technology to examine the practice of Chinese government microblogs.\[34\] According to Easton, the system, identified here as municipal-level public administrative organizations in China, comprises different actors, roles, motivations, and a complex structure of constraining institutions.\[35\] When the system is stressed, as for instance when local government administration is expected to adopt new technologies or implement ‘service-oriented’
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strategies, dynamics within the system adjust to allow for structural changes. Following Orlikowski’s duality of technology theory, this chapter posits that the three key elements in the development of systems are ideas, institutions and technologies (such as microblogs), all of which can constrain and enable actors in a given system simultaneously. In our case, Chinese government microblogs both shape and are shaped by the ideas and institutions of national and local bureaucracies, which can create a number of outcomes for organizational change in the short and the long run.

While it is difficult to predict the exact changes in local governance induced by the adoption of government microblogs, it is possible to chart the potential technological impact and organizational outcomes. Drawing from the literature, we discuss three possibilities where new technologies are adopted by government institutions as (1) a battering ram to spearhead reforms, (2) a virus bringing unexpected consequences, and (3) a reinforcer of authorities’ existing power, that is, politics as usual.

First, new technology could hypothetically be used as a battering ram to enable institutional reforms. The battering-ram metaphor invokes the image of an army conquering a castle by breaking down its front gate, illustrating an instantaneous overthrow of existing interests. Such a depiction of radical institutional changes brought by new technologies, however, is poorly supported by empirical evidence. While new technologies can play an integral role in restructuring political relations, creating profound changes to organizational procedures over time, the impact of new technologies on fundamental political structure and power relations is much more moderate, more contingent and gradual than causal, instant and radical. Nevertheless, research on Chinese governance studies shows that the powerful battering-ram effect of technologies has often been invoked by political actors to enlist public support, increase infrastructural resource allocation, improve data gathering in order to boost bureaucratic efficiency, bring stability and order to social chaos, and enhance authorities’ political legitimacy. While the powerful effect of technologies is seldom realized, the battering ram serves as a powerful rhetorical instrument and orienting ‘idea’ that can influence the design, implementation and impact of government technology projects.
Second, the virus metaphor is an alternative conceptualization of the potential impact of government microblogs. Used originally in biology and virology to examine the outbreak and spread of diseases and more recently in organization and management studies to investigate the diffusion of new ideas, the metaphor – according to Kjell Arne Røvik – brings to mind notions of ‘infectiousness, immunity, replication, incubation, mutation and dormancy’. Similar to viral infection of an entire organism, information technologies, and in this case microblogs, are often viewed as gradually taking hold in organizations, producing unexpected consequences. Following the diffusion of innovation paradigm popularized by Everett M. Rogers, the dissemination of new technologies, Ronald Deibert argued, tends to start with a limited user group on the social ‘fringes’, and gradually permeates society to become mainstream. Similar to Rogers who hypothesized the adaptation of new technologies to the existing environment through ‘reinvention’, other authors have theorized the process as institutionalization, enactment, and translation. Literature on the adoption of technology in Chinese public administration also reveals that the process of implementing technology into the government is often long, complex and unpredictable.

Third, new technologies can be conceived as a reinforcer of the existing power structures to produce politics as usual. The literature on Chinese e-government shows that although initially challenged by computerization and the Internet revolution, existing government institutions tend to reinforce their power over time through adaption and adjustment. So far, the Chinese government has managed to keep the governing apparatus intact, but at the same time, has made room for greater civic freedoms and spaces for other social forces as long as the ultimate political legitimacy of the central government is not questioned or threatened. In particular, various Chinese e-government projects, Randolph Kluver, Min Jiang, Jeffrey Seifert and Jongpil Chung argue separately, have strengthened the centre, increased state surveillance, and restored to some degree, popular confidence in Chinese top leadership. This theory of reinforcement is further supported by studies of Chinese local governance by such scholars as Jens Damm and Jesper Schlæger.
METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions, we analysed a revelatory case of an official microblog in one particular municipality in China. This study does not claim to be a general account of government microblog development in China, as adoption at the local level differs from place to place. Instead, the case study identifies local-government microblogging practices that exemplify the challenges of navigating a new media environment. Guided by the three sets of outcomes of government technological adoption described earlier, the case study develops theoretical insight into how the frontrunners in China’s local-government social-media development perceive microblogging and use it to manage its interaction with the public. These insights can be compared with results from other studies for a fuller account of Chinese government social-media landscape.

Our data consists of both interviews and documents. We conducted seven extended interviews with multiple actors: (1) a two-hour semi-structured interview with two local government officials in charge of social-media affairs; (2) a one-hour interview with a university professor who also serves as a local government advisor on e-government; (3) four one-hour interviews with four different microblog users; and (4) an extended interview with an employee working for a large microblog-service-provider company. To protect our interviewees’ confidentiality, we will not disclose their names or the location of the municipality. In our interviews with the government employees, we discussed why the local government uses microblogging, what services are offered, how they engage with citizens, and how they manage their interactions with both users and microblogging-service providers. Other interviews sought opinions from diverse related actors. Interviews were transcribed and coded using Glaser and Strauss’s grounded theory approach.

In addition, an extensive collection of documents was used, including local rules and regulations concerning government use of microblogs, presentation slides of local government microblog development, training materials from microblog-service providers for government entities, and the particular municipal’s microblogs. We also selectively collected and reviewed public discourse on the role of government microblogs from government online forums and large Chinese commercial discussion forums such as Tianya.
Multiple actors, multiple interests, multiple motivations
We describe here the multiple actors, interests and motivations embedded in the particular municipal microblog under examination to illustrate the contentions within local governance. According to our interviewees in charge of municipal microblog, the organizational actors involved in local government microblogs can be divided into different types based on their interests.51 First, the local propaganda department and government information office are the mouthpiece of a municipality and as such are interested in using microblogs for information dissemination. Second, informing the public is also important for the local police department, which uses microblogs to manage public crises, in particular, to gauge public opinion before local incidents escalate into national news headlines. Third, line agencies, which carry out government policies and provide public services such as the local environmental protection agency or bureau of urban management, can use the microblogs as an extra channel of communication with the public. However, their interest in microblogs is limited because microblogging requires additional resources. Furthermore, real-time response to citizen inquiries via microblogs would demand changes in line agencies’ standard operating procedures. Fourth, political decision-makers in the municipal government standing committee are interested in improving service provision, reducing corruption among street-level bureaucrats, and providing government employees with direct citizen contact. Finally, local e-government portal, which is often linked organizationally to government affairs service centres, is interested in promoting one-stop-shopping via municipal microblogs.

Multiple and conflicting interests also exist behind government microblogging. Officials in charge of local e-government portals try to use their own microblogs to push for back-office integration across agencies. The propaganda bureau on the other hand focuses on information provision, while line agencies are keen on integrating microblogs as another channel of contact with local residents. Thus, our inquiry into government microblogs operations reveals that ‘government’ is too blunt a concept to capture the varied contentions engendered by technological diffusion within the government. Municipal microblogs managers revealed that an official microblog involves much more than
just a microblog. Similar to previous e-government efforts such as mayor’s mailbox, discussion forums and real-time messaging through QQ (a widely used Chinese commercial instant messaging service), municipal government microblogs must establish problem-solving mechanisms as one government employee remarked: ‘We must decide whether a particular matter should be addressed to the police, to municipal bureau of business administration and commerce, or city planning bureau. Government is a big concept, but ultimately, problems must be solved by individual government units.’

The motivations for adopting government microblogs are just as varied as the actors and interests involved in the latest government social-media project. Our respondents cited three major reasons for the adoption of a microblog by their municipality: perceived pressure from the public; perceived need to monitor public opinion for social management, especially during a crisis; and a belief in a service-oriented government.

According to the university professor interviewed for the study who has an extensive network among local public employees involved in local government informatization work, municipalities regard microblogs as an unavoidable and powerful medium, through which the public voice their opinions and watch how government conducts its work. A government microblog manager interviewed for the study said: ‘Microblogs have developed by leaps and bounds in the past two years with tremendous impact. Government has to face up to the challenges posed by rapid development of microblogs.’ However, the adoption of microblogging constrains government policymaking in important ways in that it is increasingly hard for political decision-makers to issue policies that oppose the interests of microbloggers. The speed and social networking nature of microblogs, in particular, contribute to the role microbloggers play in local governance. The municipal microblog supervisor remarked:

Most government organizations have already realized that the group of microblog users cannot be ignored. Even though not everybody uses it, the user group and the speed with which it spreads as well as the social consequences it creates have already convinced government organizations that they have to face it.

Such a perception prompts municipal governments and their microblogging team to implement mechanisms to address public concerns.
and avoid public dissatisfaction. In a highly contentious transitional society such as China, maintaining stability is a high priority for local governments. Through new communication channels like government microblogs, netizens have gained some limited leverage in local governance by being considered legitimate stakeholders.

As microblogging becomes embedded in China’s general social-management discourse in public administration, the perceived need to use microblogs for crisis management and government decision-making seems paramount. The government can use microblogs to assess the level of social conflict before contention erupts into public incidents, online or offline. As expressed in metaphorical language by a civil servant, the government can use microblogs to ‘gauge the water,’ to avoid crisis. During times of crisis, microblogs can furthermore function as a channel for government agencies to provide their own interpretation of high-profile public events. As a government employee explained: ‘The main strength [of an official microblog] is perhaps that it can broadcast the voice of the government... There is too much false information online – in particular on microblogs – and sometimes it is necessary for the government to clarify things.’ This corroborates previous research that crisis management and interaction with citizens are important motivations for local government microblogs.

In addition, adapting to the perceived inevitability of technological changes, the local municipal leaders in microblogging management describe microblogs as a local mechanism for service provision. Our interview data shows that the local government perceives a need to match the commercial retailing websites in terms of customer service efficiency and quality. As users are receiving increasingly efficient services through online commercial operators, there is a public expectation that local governments must deliver services with a familiar degree of efficiency. A user said: ‘[Government microblogs] must accomplish their tasks by answering the questions posed, and dispel doubts when they arise.’ One of our government-employee interviewees echoed such an expectation for real-time services from the municipal microblog: ‘I think answers should be provided to netizens on a selective basis. Let them feel that the microblog is alive, and that it is there to provide service to everyone.’ On the other hand, there is a palpable fear of inadequacy and inefficiency on the part of municipal microblog managers that
they cannot meet public expectation for real-time responses. Officials interviewed for this study regarded microblogs as a form of instant messaging system with a need for ‘quasi-instantaneous’ responses to microbloggers’ queries as the local government reforms and gradually establishes its response mechanisms.

_Governing through beta-institutions: from service provision to service prediction_

‘[My colleagues in other agencies] know that it [microblogging] is important, but they do not know exactly how to use it.’ It becomes clear through our interviews with municipal microblog managers that although there is plenty of uncertainty regarding the specific ways to apply the affordances of the microblogs within the local government to engage the public, the need for adapting is non-negotiable. In such contexts, government microblogs serve as beta-institutions for local governmental units to ‘gauge the water’ and gradually establish the mechanisms through which they can deliver public services. The municipal microblog managers whom we interviewed explained the experimental nature of local government microblogs:

So far, we at the government microblogging unit are not regulated by a formal mechanism of evaluation. There are no documents telling us what to do, what to include in our work, or what evaluative criteria there should be, at least none so far ... . We have not yet mastered the entire working mechanisms of microblogs. A comprehensive response system has yet to be established for every government department.

Given the absence of formulated rules, the internal government unit responsible for the official microblog account, composed of a dozen or so staff members, developed its own guidelines that are tweaked over time to regulate employees’ work. The internal guidelines, which they shared with the researchers, include the procedures of daily maintenance of the municipal microblog account, distribution of tasks and responsibilities among staff members, guidelines for publishing microblog posts as well as specific requirements and personnel responsible for the types of content published and monitored.

It is worth noting that this particular government microblog, managed by our interviewees, is an extension of an existing municipal e-government website whereas other government entities have developed their own microblogging presence under different accounts. As a result, this
e-government microblog includes such categories as government news, news conferences, mayor’s mailbox, local issues, online polls, and legislative consultation, roughly corresponding to established e-government service items in e-information, e-consultation, e-discussion and e-decision-making. The municipal government microblog managers also described their services in similar ways outlining three main functions of microblogs: ‘[O]ne is information openness, one is service, and one is interaction.’ The same respondent added that the municipal government microblog is ‘[a] relatively official channel to provide everyone with more authoritative, precise information ... and to offer everyone consultation services.’

New forms of interaction afforded to e-government microblogging include targeted publication and distribution of information and services to subscribers as well as such functions as web radio. Online interviews, as an example, take place twice every week when leaders from different government agencies debate with and provide advice to microbloggers through a multi-channel set-up consisting of phone hotline, microblogs, and web-chat. The interactions are posted in real-time on government web-portal and web-radio. Since 2011, more than 5,000 postings have been published on this e-government microblog. However, its nearly 30,000 followers seldom respond to or forward posts. Fewer than ten readers forwarded each post. One post attracting a rare ten comments was a notice about new rules of the correct placement of vehicle licence plates. A user asked sarcastically: ‘Why don’t you offer this information earlier?... My license plate’s completely bent. I almost ruined it!’ Overall, this e-government microblog repeats the one-way, top-down information-relay strategy with little citizen involvement.

Meanwhile, the municipal propaganda office runs a highly successful government microblog attracting several million followers and averages roughly 20 posts per day. It adopts a highly friendly tone and an efficient approach, promising to provide replies to user complaints within one hour during regular workdays. Its pages contain many useful everyday tips (e.g. weather, transportation, health, food, and safety) and heart-warming human-interest stories. Following the routine of a ‘morning post’ and an ‘evening post’ every day, one ‘evening post’ says: ‘There is nothing in the world more loyal to you [than this government microblog]. That is your experience. Good night!’ Prior to the Spring
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Festival, the busiest time of the year for travelling, it explains to users the classification system of China's high-speed trains: ‘G train labels starting with ‘G’ or ‘C’ can travel at a speed of 300 km per hour; those with ‘D’ can reach a speed of 142; and those with ‘K’ can travel at 120. How fast is the train you usually take?’ Embedded into users’ everyday life, these posts are actively shared amongst local microbloggers.

Such examples show that multiple government entities are engaged in using microblogs to communicate with their audiences, and some do a much better job than others. As part of the beta-institutional practices, these government entities are allowed to experiment with (re)building relations with local residents. The level of government investment in microblogs appears to be constrained mainly by personnel allocations. Hardware, such as mobile phones and networked computers, is already present as part of the e-government inventory of government organizations. Software is provided free of charge (as far as the basic service is concerned) by large commercial microblog-service providers such as TencentWeibo and SinaWeibo. As underlined by a government employee, government microblogs are only one among many different interfaces with citizens:

Government organizations mostly direct their energy to such offline interaction channels as the government affairs hall, service counters, and the office of letters and visits... Some energy can also be expended on new media channels... Many departments also realized that they need to create mobile applications.66

In addition to service provision, a new trend in the development of government microblogs is a subtle move towards service prediction and government surveillance. As government functions navigate from offline encounters in government offices to online interactions including government hotlines, websites and microblogs, the bodies of both government employees and citizens disappear from their virtual interactions. This disappearance means that digital representations of governments and citizens now constitute ‘data doubles’ on behalf of their physical, offline bodies. Implications of this trend for state surveillance of the public are profound as traces of online interactions can be captured by the state actor that offers a given service, or a commercial agent that enters into a complex relationship with the government that regulates its commercial platform.
As aptly pointed out by surveillance theory through the works of such scholars as David Lyon, a ‘function creep’ – the gradual widening of the use of a technology or system beyond the purpose for which it was originally intended – can easily turn the function of ex-post-service provision into ex-ante-service prediction or surveillance. Analysis of huge amounts of data generated by users of government microblogs could allow for individualized services as well as government surveillance by predicting citizen needs. The municipal microblog managers clearly saw it on the horizon:

When a person conducts business or interacts with government, it produces related data. This will cumulate and can be stored in one archive. Let us say you got married, well then I might recommend to you that you apply for a birth permit, as you would be prepared to have a child, right?

Such potential uses of microblog data for service prediction, according to our interviews with government microblog managers, are winning popularity in Chinese academia and administration in the name ‘smart government’. Smart as it might have appeared to the government to employ technologies to deliver speedy and individualized services, the myriad kinds of unanticipated surveillance consequences set in motion by such liberal use of microbloggers’ information do not seem to be a major concern to the municipal government officials we interviewed. While government delivery of services could potentially become more efficient, a redistribution of power in favour of the public is not likely to happen if microbloggers’ personal information such as their IP addresses, microblog posts and sentiments are monitored continually and targeted precisely. It in fact brings government–citizen interactions one step closer to a ‘big brother’ scenario. The uncertain and contingent nature of government microblogs, caught between good-intentioned service provision and intrusive state surveillance of the public, reinforces government microblogs as beta-institutions.

Negotiating government relations with commercial service providers
The original intent of the municipal government was to create a government-run microblog platform besides the commercial ones. The idea was eventually abandoned in favour of operating on the two dominant commercial microblog service providers in China, namely SinaWeibo...
and TencentWeibo.\textsuperscript{70} The advantage of using a commercial platform is obvious: potential increase in efficiency as government obtains a new communication channel to interact with a large user population without expending resources on hardware and software.

Dependence on commercial service providers on the other hand limits government control over user data, archived now by microblog service providers. Hence, one of the key characteristics of a bureaucracy, namely archives, has moved from local governments to the commercial service providers. The municipal government examined in this study did not have any special access privileges to user data on the commercial microblog platform. In addition, there is currently no formal means for municipal government agencies to demand such access to user data through the legal system. As commercial entities, the microblog service provider in question here does not share valuable user information for free. To quote the same interviewee:

\textit{The statistics on the microblog are too hard to use... The sampling period is too short and the functions are incomplete. You simply cannot analyse your users or to be more specific about users’ behavioural patterns. For instance, although it can give you an approximate estimate of your fans and the degree of fan activities, it cannot tell you the ages of your fans or their gender [distribution].\textsuperscript{71}}

The local government has effectively – at least for the time being – given up control over user-data. This, however, is not the only concession to commercial actors. In addition, private microblog-service providers also have the power to authenticate government microblogs. The authentication is the provision of ‘tokens of trust’,\textsuperscript{72} issued by a private Internet service provider instead of a governmental entity. Such tokens of trust include different symbols attached to the name of the microblog such as a ‘V’ for a verified account and a crown or a diamond for registered members who have access to additional services. The commercialization of online activities that were located previously in the realm of e-government services creates a paradoxical situation whereby government entities must be verified by the private sector, in the same way people have to apply for business permits from the state. This marks a shift towards a larger role for commercial actors in local governance. However, there are constraints on the service providers as well, as they are obliged to follow the laws and regulations of government. So, in general the microblog
providers are under government control, a fact that employees of these private-held companies are readily aware of.\textsuperscript{73}

However, in important ways even this seemingly new direction can be argued to contain significant elements of politics as usual. In effect, the possibility of ‘shared’ governance could be shifted by government regulations, if, for instance, the microblog service providers were asked to supply the raw user-data to the government or provide government entities with other special privileges on their platforms. Historically the Chinese government has not refrained itself from reaching into the commercial quarters of the Chinese Internet and regulating commercial entities as it sees fit usually in the name of law;\textsuperscript{74} therefore strong resistance from commercial Internet service providers to protect the security of user data is unlikely to succeed.

Politics as usual?

Following the prior discussion of the actors, motivations, inner workings and new trends of government use of microblogs, this section considers the potential organizational outcomes of local government microblogs. Our data shows that the hypothesis of the battering ram, which holds that local government organizations will be affected by new media technologies in radical ways in the short run, is not supported. Instead, official microblogging could ‘infect’ specific operations of local governance like a virus and pave the way for organizational changes in the long run. Most likely, the impact of such new media technologies as microblogging on local governance will be mediated and moderated as a reinforcer of the existing power arrangement to produce politics as usual.

For a certain technology to become a battering ram to trigger organizational changes, it must function in such a way so as to re-arrange institutional structures and powers. This does not seem to happen in the municipal government microblog case that we researched. While the microblogging staff appeared eager to listen to and serve the local residents, their work was largely driven by a top–down vision for social management and political stability. Granted that government microblogs can extend and improve existing local e-government websites and deliver their information and interactions in a more humorous and personalized style, such activities largely replicate content and services already available on e-government sites. As long as mechanisms of responsibilities are not firmly established within the local government
back stage, one municipal microblog manager noted, no real changes are likely to happen: ‘No matter what kind of new intervention, if there is no change in the mind set or related mechanisms, [government microblogs] will remain quite an empty thing.’ Another remarked: ‘Microblogs are merely one form. ... In reality the issue is how government organizations position themselves in relation to service provision.’

The beta-institutional character of government microblogs also makes them vulnerable to stringent state regulations. Political decision-makers can change direction at short notice and a surge of interest today could fizzle out over time. In such a relatively unstable environment, the incentive for bureaucracies to invest in the development of microblogs is limited. The bottom–up development process accompanied by rapid technological changes makes microblogs a high-risk investment for local governments. Yet the (perceived) imperative to engage with citizen microbloggers compels municipalities to maintain their microblog presence. Consequently, given the stress and uncertainty surrounding government microblogs, they are adopted as provisional beta-institutions for the time being.

In sum, the battering-ram hypothesis fails in the test because as beta-institutions, official microblogs are unlikely to bring fundamental change in local governance. Instead, politics as usual could unfold where different bureaucracies adopt microblogging to suit their own ends.

When assessing the potential impact of Chinese government microblogs in the long run, a pertinent question prompted by the analysis above would be whether the beta-institutions can sediment in the long run to become tools for change. On this very issue, one of the microblog managers we interviewed said: ‘I believe that if microblogs can maintain popularity over a relatively long period of time, more organizations will build working mechanisms, working methods, and start thinking about working in a new way related to microblogs.’ The statement reflects a glimpse of optimism in the long-term influence of government microblogs at the local level, indicating that future inquiries could focus on this aspect of development.

In effect, it seems that the government’s role in managing social and political relations at the local level is slowly changing. Although local governments are instructed to maintain social stability and manage social contentions more effectively, they are not issued a clear set of spe-
cific strategies from the above. Instead, local experiments, based on our case, are characterized by pragmatic solutions to adapt to the new media and political ecology of diverse localities. This adaptation appears to be based on specific government-internal processes and contestations between conflicting local government objectives that are further confounded by commercial interests. Whether the beta-institutions could solidify in the near future and become the basis for organizational reform is, however, still an open question that deserves further exploration.

CONCLUSION

The use of social media and particularly microblogging by local governments is becoming increasingly popular globally. This chapter has explored the changes to Chinese local governance induced by official adoption of microblogs. Specifically, we have asked: (1) ‘How are microblogs adopted and managed in local government in China?’ and (2) ‘How does the adoption of official microblogs affect government’s role in social management?’

We contend that research on state–netizen relations tends to emphasize confrontation while largely neglecting the more mundane and conciliatory use of social media by local governments. While a confrontational framework foregrounds social conflicts, it does not pay particular attention to how such conflicts are ‘harmonized’ by local governments or how changes are introduced into Chinese local governance itself. We argue that official microblogging is an extension of sophisticated e-government efforts for social management, grounded in the much larger context of Chinese administrative and social management. By assessing the impact of microblogging on local governance, we expand the scope of the debate on digital contention to the inner workings of local bureaucracy. An in-depth look into government microblogs from the perspective of local governance can better help explain the persistence of state power despite waves of contentious digital politics in contemporary China.

Through a case study of a municipal government microblog, including its implementation, dynamics and potential impact, we uncovered the main actors in the official microblogosphere, their motivations for adoption, and institutional constraints. We conclude that government microblogs do not in the short run lead to local governance overhaul,
but this particular form of beta-institutions could in the long run lead
to organizational change through the delivery of individualized services
through commercial platforms. However, the transition of local gov-
ernments from service providers to service predictors have profound
implications for state surveillance of microbloggers and its conflicting
relationship with commercial service providers. Such conflicts are not
restricted to Chinese local governance alone and are likely to remain a
point of tension for governments elsewhere as they increase the delivery
of online services.

Given the multiple actors, interests and motivations involved in gov-
ernment microblogs, it becomes necessary to disaggregate local govern-
ment as a single unit of analysis to reveal the complexity and contention
within it. As a government employee remarked,'Government is a large
concept.'79 Y et to date, available analyses of microblogs have focused on
the tension between microbloggers and the state, and thus have largely
ignored divergent preferences within local governments. However, when
we start to disaggregate government analytically, it becomes clear that
the local government is composed of distinct units with their own par-
ticular preferences and standard operating procedures, creating tensions
for the development and implementation of government microblogs.

The motivations for adopting government microblogs are complex.
Besides competition between local governments and leaders driven by
financial and career incentives,80 this case study also identified a few
other motivations: perceived pressure from the public; perceived need
to monitor public opinion for social management, especially during a
危机; and a belief in a service-oriented government. Situated in a larger
discourse of social management, government microblogging is charac-
terized by a perception of unavoidable technological change as well as
public pressure for timely provision of information and services. On
the one hand, local government entities perceive citizens’ expectation
of efficient and timely delivery of information and service as a pressure.
On the other hand, a techno-optimism is visible in the belief that infor-
mation technology can lead to better service provision by integrating
the work processes and requiring collaboration between different agen-
cies. In both cases, the idea guiding local government microblogging
is to enhance its capacity for social management. Local government’s
social-governance strategy in this case points towards a new role for the
state in its service-providing functions, not a fundamental change to local decision-making or power arrangements.

The study has limitations in several respects. As a single case study, it does not easily lend itself to nation-wide generalization but instead serves to provide theoretical insights based on an exemplary use of government microblog. While we interviewed a few users of government microblogs, they may not represent the wide spectrum of microblog users in both experience and attitudes. Moreover, the main focus of the study was directed at changes in local governance based largely on interviews with a diverse, yet small group of respondents representing the municipal government, users and commercial operators. Given the time and resource limitations, we were not able to observe and interact with more governmental agents over a long period of time. While our conclusions are tentative, they serve as a good starting point for learning more about state-citizen interactions online from the perspective of local governance. Future research could expand the scale, scope and length of investigation to yield more sophisticated results. Moreover, the experimental nature and the role of beta-institutions in Chinese bureaucracy as well as the specific consequences they produce are worthy of further explorations. Future research can also consider incorporating both contestation and conciliation into studying and theorizing state–citizen interactions in specific Chinese contexts. Given the centrality of core functions of government online interactions with citizens such as information, service and surveillance, a comparative framework could yield productive insights.

In sum, in our case study of Chinese local government microblogging, we identified a fragmented structure of multiple actors, interests and motivations of local government actors. As beta-institutions, official microblogs are given flexibility to experiment with ways to engage with their microblog publics and manage social conflicts, which in turn shape local governance. Overall, official microblogs work to reinforce existing power structures; they are not meant to stimulate radical reforms. In addition, the role of government tends to morph from service provider to service predictor with enhanced capabilities to deliver individualized services and institute government surveillance. In the end, official microblogs reinforce, rather than change, the power relations in Chinese local governance, that is, politics as usual.
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22. Noesselt, Microblogs in China.


24. Yang, Social dynamics in the evolution of China’s Internet content control regime.


30. Sun, Zou xiang jiji shehui guanli.


42. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*.

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46. Yong, Enter the dragon.


51. The following section is based on Interview 1, interview notes, and an interview with a university professor who is also an advisor to the local government in e-government issues.

52. Interview 1.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid., 20.

55. Ibid., 3.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid., 14.

58. Interview 2, 26.

59. Interview 1, 14.

60. Ibid.
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61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. For a breakdown of specific categories of e-government information, consultation, discussion and decision-making, see Jiang and Xu, Exploring online structures on Chinese government portals.

64. Interview 1, 15.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., 21.


68. Interview 1, 23.

69. Interview notes.

70. Interview 1.

71. Ibid, 23.

72. Lyon, Surveillance Society.

73. Interview with an employee of a large microblog service provider.

74. See Yang, Social dynamics in the evolution of China’s Internet content control regime; Jiang, Authoritarian deliberation on Chinese Internet; and Jiang, Internet companies in China.

75. Interview 1, 18.

76. Ibid, 17.

77. Interview notes.

78. Interview 1, 17.

79. Ibid, 6.

In recent years microblogs (weibo 微博) have emerged as an important social media platform for Chinese citizens to share information, debate and network. Whereas the use of Twitter in the West is quite low in most countries – for example, only 18 per cent of the American population used Twitter in 2013 – a bigger percentage of the Chinese Internet population is actively using microblogs. The latest statistics show that some 44.1 per cent of all Chinese citizens have access to the Internet, and that 56 per cent of them also use microblogs.\(^1\) A recent study reported a total of 1.2 billion microblog accounts spread over 103 different platforms in the country, with SinaWeibo and TencentWeibo having a comparably similar number of users: 536 and 540 million accounts, respectively.\(^2\) This means that many people and organizations have opened microblog accounts on several platforms, and that microblogs are the most popular social media in China today. SinaWeibo is the preferred platform for many users, and it is also the focus of this chapter.\(^3\) The popularity of microblogs reveals a strong need among a large segment of the Chinese population for a public space where they can express themselves, share information, obtain news, and discuss and network with each other.

In many ways the framing and focus of current research, and the narratives surrounding microblogs, reflect a continuing tendency among scholars to oscillate between seeing information and communications technologies (ICTs) as ‘liberation technologies’ and emphasizing the Chinese state’s authoritarian resilience and adaptive use of ICTs. There
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has thus been a particularly strong interest among scholars and institutions in the West to document and analyse censorship practices on microblogs. Many researchers have also addressed microblogs’ potential for protests and social and legal mobilization, including studying their role in specific events such as the high-speed train crash in Wenzhou and the protests in Wukan. Another line of research focuses more on the state’s attempt to adopt and adapt microblogs as a new tool of governance. So far only a few studies have paid attention to specific users, and often they address elite and middle-class users such as journalists and lawyers, and interest groups such as homeowners. In terms of topics, scarce attention has been given thus far to the more mundane aspects of the use of micro-blogs and their role in identity formation among youth.

This chapter addresses the issue of who has a voice on Chinese microblogs, and what having a voice in the age of social media actually means. It is inspired in part by Nick Couldry’s works on voice as well as by José van Dijck’s and Dhiraj Murthy’s critical examinations of connectivity on social media in the Western context. The questions we need to ask ourselves in the Chinese context are whether microblogs enable previously silent voices to be heard, or whether we are seeing the emergence of a class of ‘Weiborati’, and, if so, who they are. Are microblogs a platform for more equal debates and deliberations, and what are the issues addressed? What are the role and impact of opinion leaders (意见领袖) and traditional media/journalists on microblogs, and what is their relationship to other groups in society? Although microblogging practices have spread from the technology-savvy early adopters to broader groups in society, one should not assume that microblogs have helped bridge the information gap among China’s ICT users, or empowered everybody in equal measure. In theory, microblogs have a low threshold and are easy to use, thus enabling more citizens to articulate their concerns as well as making way for interactivity among different groups of people. In reality, however, not all citizens are as likely to use or be heard on microblogs. Two groups of people are more visible than others: celebrities and opinion leaders. A majority of those with the most followers are in the entertainment business, which testifies to the rise of celebrity culture in China and to the fact that some celebrities today are also engaged in social issues and charity work. The category of
opinion leaders includes a diverse group of people: traditional and new elites such as public intellectuals, businesspeople and media professionals. The fact that elites and the middle class may benefit the most from social media should not come as a surprise. We find similar tendencies in Western societies, where the Internet and social media have enhanced the role and visibility of traditional public intellectuals, as well as given rise to a new generation of ‘web intellectuals’ or ‘micro-celebrities’.\textsuperscript{11}

This chapter discusses the demographics of microblog users, addressing diffusion patterns, number and range of followers, as well as topics discussed and how these are shaped by microbloggers of different socio-economic status. It makes use of and synthesizes existing surveys and previous studies in the field, while also building on the author’s qualitative and ethnographic research. The ethnographic part is based on the author’s active use of microblogs since August 2010, and interviews with Chinese scholars, journalists, migrant workers and representatives of labour NGOs, all of whom together with their peers have been closely followed on microblogs.\textsuperscript{12} Journalists and migrant workers are of particular interest since they come from two opposite ends of the spectrum of Chinese digital society, and thus illustrate both continuing digital divides and new possibilities for limited forms of connectivity. A study published in December 2013 by the People’s Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Center (人民网舆情监测室) showed, for example, that journalists and media professionals constitute the largest group among opinion leaders, whereas migrant workers’ voices continue to be marginalized although they are increasingly making use of new ICTs such as smartphones.\textsuperscript{13} Given the hype of microblogging in many debates and in the media, it is important to acknowledge its unequal nature, limited connectivity and reciprocity, and how weak and marginalized individuals and groups still depend on influential actors like journalists and opinion leaders in order to be heard. Furthermore, it needs to be acknowledged that struggles for voice and recognition, although increasingly mediated, take place through many other avenues, and that in order to be effective they also have to be institutionalized and be able to affect decision-making. To speak without anybody listening, or without being able to affect change, is a weak form of empowerment. A critical analysis of microblogging practices will thus enable us to better understand the limits of ICTs when it comes to bringing about
more fundamental political changes and a more equal and democratic Chinese society.

THE IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL BATTLEFIELD OVER MICROBLOGS: FIGHTING ‘RUMOURS’ AND ATTACKING BIG VS

The Chinese government under President Xi Jinping has expressed increasing concern over public opinion and has tried to strengthen its control of the Internet through ideological work, administrative regulations and directives targeting Internet companies, as well as legal measures. Microblogs were from the beginning subject to censorship and control through the blocking of sensitive topics and keywords, deletion of posts, and monitoring of well-known critical and influential users, whose accounts were frequently closed, although many of them were ‘re-incarnated’ after a while, sometimes under a different name. In addition, users have been requested to register with their real names, although this method has not been completely implemented, and Internet companies have also adopted self-regulatory guidelines. Since 2009 the government has on several occasions stepped up its ideological critique of microblogs as a site of ‘rumours’, arguing that irresponsible language threatens social harmony and the development of a ‘safe and healthy’ Internet. During the summer of 2013 a renewed attack on rumours was launched, which for the first time identified and targeted opinion leaders and verified microbloggers with huge followings, popularly known as Big Vs. Internet celebrities and companies were summoned to discuss their social responsibility, and Xi Jinping and representatives of the State Internet Information Office made statements and speeches on the necessity of fighting rumours and controlling the Internet, news of which was then spread and elaborated upon in editorials and articles in Party newspapers. At the same time several people, including both opinion leaders and ordinary citizens, were arrested for spreading rumours, or charged with other criminal offences. In the most notorious case a well-known Big V, Xue Manzi with over 12 million followers, was accused of soliciting prostitutes and forced to appear on CCTV where he described his involvement in various events and admitted that some of the information he posted on his microblogs was inaccurate and irresponsible. Xue also voiced his support of the government’s measures to address and punish those who spread rumours. The government
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showed its resolve to use legal measures to control microblogs and the Internet, and in September 2013 adopted a new judicial interpretation that expanded criminal liability for defamation and rumours under the Criminal Law.²⁰

To speak out in public is thus an act that continues to carry risks in China, including personal attacks and possible imprisonment. Individuals who have a big impact on public opinion, regardless of whether their speech implies or calls for mobilization, are especially vulnerable. The attack on Big Vs and subsequent reports revealed the government’s recognition of the influence of opinion leaders, as well as its determination to steer public opinion through encouraging official microblog accounts and cultivating ‘trustworthy’ opinion leaders. These latest developments prompts us to probe further and ask which voices and topics are privileged in the digital public sphere, and why, and also to reflect on the implications for the future. In an opinion piece deploring the crackdown on opinion leaders, Chang Ping, formerly with the Southern Media Group, argued somewhat optimistically perhaps that the waning influence of some opinion leaders and Big Vs might pave the way for more diversity on microblogs.²¹ Coming from the other side and defending the crackdown, Zhu Huaxin, the director of the People’s Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Center, stated that the crackdown on rumours and ‘irresponsible’ Big Vs would lead to more diversity and provide more opportunities for ordinary people to make themselves heard.²² Zhu also expressed the belief that people would be more likely to value and follow opinion leaders who were recognized experts within their respective fields. He also praised those opinion leaders who were more constructive in their speech and actions, giving as an example the journalist Deng Fei, who was described as having developed from a critical investigative journalist to a more constructive actor engaged in charity projects such as Free Lunches (免费午餐). While it is difficult to see how ordinary people’s voices could be strengthened by the crackdown, some studies have noted diminished activity on microblogs in general and among some opinion leaders in particular.²³ The legal scholar He Weifang, who in December 2013 announced that he would cease microblogging, citing disappointment over the silencing of many other bloggers, was however soon back on the platform. Yu Jianrong, a sociologist with 1.5 million followers, for
his part continued to use microblogs and subsequently opened a public WeChat (微信) account. The crackdown on microblogs and many users’ migration to WeChat led many observers to pronounce the death of public debates on SinaWeibo, while the official Chinese media for their part claimed that efforts at cleaning up microblogs had been successful, and that postings by traditional media within the system (体制内) and government bodies now surpassed the role of opinion leaders.

**THE RISE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF MICROBLOGS**

The year 2010 has widely been hailed as the year that microblogging made its big breakthrough in China. Several important news stories and public events were first spread in the microblogosphere, which made more people turn to microblogs to obtain timely and more accurate information. The rise in registered users has been spectacular. In the fall of 2010, SinaWeibo reported 50 million registered users, whereas in January 2011 the company claimed 100 million users. In late 2012 that figure had climbed to 400 million registered users, and by the end of 2013, 536 million registered users were reported. Although the number is at first glance very impressive, few users are actually very active and some accounts are ‘zombie’ accounts. Sina itself has claimed 46.3 million users active on a daily basis, whereas one study found that many registered users had an empty timeline, and of those active 86.9 per cent had not made any original post during a seven-day period. Furthermore, it seems that 5 per cent of the users are responsible for more than 80 per cent of the postings. These findings raise questions regarding the reach of microblogs and how participatory the platform is. Nonetheless, many of the registered users, who do not post anything themselves, read posts by others, and this by itself affects the way such ‘lurkers’ understand society.

Since SinaWeibo was established in 2009 it has undergone several changes and updates with regard to applications and features. Since one can comment on anybody’s posts on SinaWeibo and follow the chain of comments under the original posting, as well as make a comment while forwarding the post, one gets an impression of who is discussing a certain topic and how people interact with each other. A popular practice is to address or mention other users with the @username in the post. Marginalized individuals fighting for justice often do this in the hope
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that influential opinion leaders and journalists will take notice, respond and react. It is possible to group the people one follows into specific groups such as fellow students, colleagues, friends, family, celebrities and others. This shows that on the one hand, Sina focuses on and encourages ties based on family, friendship and work, rather than those based on shared interests or communal/organizational membership, and on the other hand, that it singles out a very specific group of strangers, namely celebrities. Despite this pre-configured category setting, however, one can also group the people one follows into specific groups and thus create one’s own communities. A crucial and dividing, indeed hierarchical, aspect of SinaWeibo is the distinction between verified user, marked with a V after the user name, and non-verified users. From the start Sina has encouraged influential individuals such as celebrities, journalists, scholars, public intellectuals and media organizations to set up a SinaWeibo account, and also offered them the prospect of verification as a status marker and endorsement of their official credit and trustworthiness.28 In a report from December 2013, Sina and Tencent were said to have a total of 19,000 Big Vs with more than 1 million followers, 3,300 Big Vs with more than 10 million followers, and 200 with more than 100 million followers.29

Even though there are striking differences between Twitter, which is blocked in China, and SinaWeibo when it comes to history, development, regulations and business models, it is worth noting that both services inscribe and privilege certain users and connectivities. Van Dijck’s analysis of Twitter’s hierarchical structure, engineered sociality and limited connectivity thus illustrates how power structures and hierarchies can be embedded in social media technologies which at the same time are also shaped by the specific sociocultural contexts in which they operate and by the users themselves.30 In the context of China, it is important to remember that state control and censorship are not the only forces that guide speech and connectivity on microblogs. Many actors and different types of (power) relations also play a role. Whereas the Chinese state (in its fragmented form) both encourages and tries to steer and use microblogs to shape public opinion, Internet companies are pushing their own products and privileging certain users for commercial reasons and in competition with each other.31 At the same time, influential early adopters and creative users strategically appropriate and take advantage
of the channel to discuss public events and raise social issues. Sina’s strategy to encourage, create and privilege certain celebrities and opinion leaders has thus both helped boost the popularity of the platform and created official concern and pressure that have forced the company to control and censor the more outspoken among its users.

UNDERSTANDING MICROBLOG USERS: DEMOGRAPHY, DIFFUSION PATTERNS AND DIGITAL DIVIDES

Research on social media users and communication patterns in the West has revealed lingering socio-economic divisions and gaps in terms of adoption, use, interactivity and impact. Far from being an equal playing field for all users, studies show that a small number of elites, such as celebrities, politicians and journalists, dominate Twitter in the West. What, then, is the situation in China? Microblog users share many of the same features of the Internet population in general. Although microblogging does not require much technical skills and can be used on a smartphone, microblog users are mainly young, urban, and middle class, and geographically concentrated in the coastal regions. While men initially dominated the Internet and microblogs, women have begun to catch up in recent years. Women made up 44.2 per cent of Internet users, and 44 per cent of micro-blog users in 2012, although women were reported to spend more time on microblogs than men. The majority of microbloggers (51 per cent) were between 26 and 35 years old, and lived in the coastal regions. While 27.9 per cent of all Internet users lived in the countryside, only 5 per cent of microblog users were rural dwellers. Looking at types of profession, in 2012 out of 309 million, 8.43 million microblog users were said to be migrant workers. Since estimates put the number of migrant workers at 260 million, it means that less than 4 per cent of all migrant workers use microblogs. This shows the continuing existence of digital divides in terms of access, digital skills and types of ICTs used. However, the figures are not entirely reliable, as people’s socio-economic status is difficult to confirm, and habits are also rapidly changing with more and more people today owning a smartphone. A survey of 120 village cadres thus found that 23.33 per cent used microblogs, mostly to obtain news and information, while 18.33 per cent had not even heard of microblogs. A recent survey of 215 migrant women found that 59.4 per cent of them went online every
day, and 67.9 per cent used their mobile phone to do so. QQ, a commercial instant-messaging service provided by Tencent, was the most popular service, and used by 81.86 per cent. Many of these women also used TencentWeibo (51.16 per cent), which is related to their QQ use, whereas fewer used SinaWeibo (32 per cent), and a growing number had begun to use WeChat (49.77 per cent).35

Studies from a number of countries show that previous online experience affects the adoption and use of social media, and that early adopters often are young, technology-savvy and well educated. This also seems to hold true for microblogging in China (see Table 8.1). In the beginning microblog users were a rather small and exclusive group, with journalists and activists being among the earliest adopters. A survey of 2,503 journalists in 2010 showed that 47 per cent were already frequent microblog users, at a time when the average among Internet users was only 25 per cent.36 In my in-depth study involving 31 investigative journalists I found that all except four used microblogs in 2011, that is, some 87 per cent. Among the 27 journalists, 11 had set up accounts already in 2009, 11 in the first half of 2010, four in the second half of 2010, and one in 2011. This group thus realized early on the potential of this new communication tool in their professional lives, and they also rapidly became engaged in social and political debates that went beyond their professional role as journalists.37 Migrant workers and other marginalized groups, on the other hand, started to use microblogs later when their popularity grew. There are no reliable figures on how many migrant workers use micro-blogs, but based on my own interviews with migrant workers, labour NGOs, and Chinese scholars and activists, my conclusion is that few migrant workers use microblogs, and those who do tend to be younger, more active in NGOs, often working in slightly better-regarded jobs, and in the southern part of China. My sample of 15 migrant workers who used microblogs (including both workers whom I have interviewed and those whose microblogs I follow) is thus biased towards quite active and technology-savvy persons, but when it comes to diffusion and followers, an interesting and probably representative pattern is revealed. Only two of the workers had started using microblogs in 2009, and one of them (the only in my sample) had had a blog before he began using microblogs. Four workers began using microblogs in 2010, six in 2011, two in 2012 and one in 2013. Four of
those who started in 2011 were inspired and involved in the Love Save Pneumoconiosis Foundation initiated on microblogs that year by the journalist Wang Keqin. There are different reasons why few migrant workers use microblogs, for instance personal circumstances, time, convenience and lack of previous experience with blogging. For migrant workers who are more interested in communicating with family, friends and colleagues, QQ (and potentially WeChat) is a better communication platform. For example, at the time of the Honda strikes in 2010, workers mostly used SMS and QQ groups, the more closed community-based social networking platforms rather than public social media platforms.

Although all major media institutions set up microblog accounts early on in order to take advantage of the platform as a publicity tool, labour NGOs have been much slower and also more cautious, given their own precarious legal status and position in society. Among the 18 labour organizations that I identified and whose microblogs I continue to follow, only four had opened an account in 2010, while six did so in 2011, and the rest in 2012. More labour NGOs then begun using microblogs to spread news and mobilize people about certain issues. For example, several labour organizations in Shenzhen turned to microblogs for publicity and help when they experienced increasing restrictions and harassments in 2012. For labour NGOs, microblogs have thus become more of a news medium to reach out to other organizations, scholars and the mainstream media, but not migrant workers – the majority of whom are not microblog users. Nonetheless, being influenced by the growth and hype of microblogs, and believing that it might be a tool for empowerment, in the past couple of years several organizations have be-

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gun offering migrant workers special training in how to use microblogs’ others include it in their general computer classes.

**OPINION LEADERS AND VERIFIED USERS ON MICROBLOGS: THE RISE OF BIG VS**

Throughout Chinese history, cultural and political elites have played a central role in public debates, and they have taken upon themselves the task to speak out and ‘worry’ about China. In 2004 the magazine *Southern People Weekly* (南方人物周刊) published a list of 50 ‘public intellectuals’ (公共知识分子), which elicited quite a lot of interest and debate. This list included not only intellectuals in academia, but also media professionals, lawyers, writers and artists. Although the concept was quickly attacked for ideological reasons and became taboo in official discourse, it is still commonly used, and many commercial media outlets also annually select the most outstanding individuals in different fields. Since 2004, many of these public intellectuals have turned to the Internet to publish their ideas, which has helped make them more visible to the general public. At the same time the group of individuals seen as public intellectuals has expanded, and many are interested in interacting with and joining other social groups when addressing hot topics and campaigning on different social issues. Although the concept of public intellectuals is avoided in official discourse, other somewhat overlapping concepts, such as opinion leaders and Internet/microblog opinion leaders, have come to be used in recent years to describe the role and impact of particularly vocal and influential individuals in online public debates and events. Since 2009 microblogs have become an important platform for these public intellectuals, and for new actors such as journalists, businessmen and lawyers. This has further increased their visibility, enabled them to quickly react to different events and engage in public debates, as well as to network among themselves and with other groups in society. The authorities have expressed concern about the rise of this group of online opinion leaders, and since 2010 several studies and institutions such as the Internet Public Opinion Research Laboratory at Shanghai Jiaotong University and the People’s Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Center have published many surveys and studies on the impact of this group on online events and debates.
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From the start Sina actively recruited celebrities, opinion leaders and bloggers, and also singled them out through the practice of verification. Although opinion leaders are not the same as Big Vs, as the latter also include celebrities who do not necessarily discuss social issues, and not all ordinary verified users can be described as opinion leaders, most opinion leaders are, however, verified users. In general, those considered opinion leaders would have at least one million followers. It should be acknowledged that there is a wide range of opinion leaders whose number of followers, background and profession vary, and who speak up and discuss different issues and thus have quite different types of followers. Celebrities, for instance the actress Yao Chen, one of the biggest microblog celebrities with almost 60 million followers, mainly focus on entertainment and their own work. But Yao also often addresses social issues and engages in charity work. In some ways, microblogs and other developments in society have given rise to the type of ‘celebrity humanitarianism’ that has developed in the West in the past ten years. Other opinion leaders come from the business community, which shows the increasing relevance and admiration for this group of people in Chinese society. Lee Kai-Fu, ex-CEO of Google China, who has more than 50 million followers, has been listed among the top 10 microbloggers, posting on a range of social and economic issues. Another category of opinion leaders comprises well-known journalists-turned-social activists like Deng Fei and Wang Keqin, both of whom have set up microblog-based charities. Some opinion leaders address many different issues, but others prefer to stay within their field of expertise and gain a special type of following. Yu Jianrong, a sociologist and an expert on rural issues, who does not consider himself an opinion leader, has a big impact with 1.5 million followers, and his blogs are read by cadres, scholars, journalists, ordinary citizens and petitioners alike. His posts on social and legal issues, including land confiscations and the plight of petitioners – topics that he also does research on – result in many reposts, and many people with grievances also send him private messages on his microblog hoping to get his help. Yu has also used microblogs to engage in social activist work. For example, in 2011 he started a campaign with the aim of creating awareness about and helping trafficked children.

There are a number of features that stand out with respect to opinion leaders’ demography, gender, place of work and residence, number of
followers, speech patterns and impact on public events. An in-depth study of 300 Big Vs in 2013 revealed a strong gender bias, as only 29 of the 300 opinion leaders were women. The Big Vs were concentrated in big cities, with as many as 64 per cent of them based in Beijing. The study also found that the majority had a university degree, only 22 had not attended university, and that as many as 95 of them had also studied abroad, which reveals their high socio-economic status. The biggest group among them worked in the media sector (28 per cent) and institutions of higher education (20 per cent), while others came from the business sector (14 per cent). Only 10 per cent worked in government bodies, Party institutions, and the military, although 120 had some experience from working within the system. It is noteworthy that 88 per cent of these opinion leaders have published essays or appeared in traditional media, and that almost 54 per cent were identified as liberals (自由派). Their elite status, liberal leanings, and close connection to traditional media help explain why the government is highly concerned about their influence, and why it wants to tighten control over both the Internet and traditional media.

CONNECTIVITY AND IMPACT ON MICROBLOGS: JOURNALISTS AND OPINION LEADERS AS AMPLIFIERS AND TRANSMITTERS

A user’s social and cultural capital, level of activity on microblogs, number of followers, reposts and comments, all help determine his/her impact in the microblogosphere. Not surprisingly, there are striking differences in this respect between opinion leaders and journalists on the one hand, and migrant workers, labour NGOs and other NGOs on the other hand. Many studies have noted and analysed both the number of followers and the importance of opinion leaders in public events. Although verified users in 2011 made up only 0.1 per cent of the total microblog users, their contribution accounted for 46.5 per cent of the ‘hot’ microblogs. Of the 30 hot topics on microblogs during 2011–2012, only 2,158 users had more than 500 reposts. According to a report released in 2012, microblog opinion leaders were found to have an average of 980,000 followers, and their posts were reposted 478.8 times on average. Verified users and Big Vs are thus more likely to have their posts reposted and commented upon than ordinary users and marginalized groups such as migrant workers and labour NGOs. In my
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sample, 10 of the 18 labour organizations had fewer than 1,000 followers, and only two had more than 10,000. However, famous activists such as Wang Keqin (503,000 followers), and Sun Heng, head of the New Workers Art Group (154,083 followers), had large followings. Nine out of the 15 migrants in my sample had fewer than 1,000 followers. It is also interesting to note that the followers of labour NGOs and migrant workers were mostly other NGOs, migrant workers, and some media/journalists, scholars and lawyers interested in labour issues. Reposts and comments on their posts were considerably fewer, which means that their reach beyond their own circle is limited.\(^{50}\)

Public debates on microblogs are not only restricted by censorship but also by socio-economic forces in society. Furthermore, SinaWeibo is more of an actor in its own right than Twitter is, since it does not just offer a space for citizens to communicate but also aims to encourage and guide activities and debates. SinaWeibo thus launches special topics (by setting up hashtags), organizes public events and takes up specific causes, including organizing online debates with famous people on hot topics. SinaWeibo is also engaged in charity work, and it teams up with and provides platforms for organizations and individuals engaged in such activities. When the journalist Deng Fei in 2011 started a campaign on SinaWeibo to help parents find their trafficked children, SinaWeibo invited him to discuss the issue with SinaWeibo users on its platform called ‘micro-interviews’ (微访谈).\(^{51}\)

A survey of topics which attract the most attention among microbloggers reveals that they are quite similar to those identified earlier by Guobin Yang for the Internet, namely topics such as nationalism, rights defence, corruption and power abuse, environmental issues, cultural contention, muckraking, and online charity.\(^{52}\) Some topics, such as corruption and environmental issues, have received increasing attention in recent years and have also led to different campaigns on microblogs. However, few of the hot or topical issues deal with marginalized individuals, and when they do they are spearheaded by opinion leaders and journalists. If we look at the 20 hot topics identified by the China Internet Public Opinion Analysis Report in 2011, we find that only a couple of them dealt with marginalized groups.\(^{53}\) This included the death of Qian Yunhui under suspicious circumstances in connection to problems related to land confiscations.\(^{54}\) The Qian Yunhui case is
interesting because it initially united a broad group of opinion leaders, including scholars, lawyers and journalists, who carried out a citizen investigation into his death. The other top issues related to marginalized groups were two charity activities and campaigns launched on microblogs: Free Lunches and two anti-trafficking campaigns. The emergence of microblog-based charities since 2011 is an important new development that shows that many Chinese citizens are interested in expressing concern, making donations and engaging in specific issues at a more personal level. However, it should be noted that these charities and campaigns have been initiated and led by opinion leaders, in this case Deng Fei, a journalist, and Yu Jianrong, a scholar. Although social and political issues on microblogs receive a lot of attention in the media and in academic works, the majority of hot topics on microblogs are actually related to entertainment and leisure.

It is obvious that when journalists and opinion leaders speak out on social issues on behalf of weak and marginalized groups in society, this leads to greater exposure and may evoke sympathy among broader groups in society. However well intentioned such efforts may be, they nonetheless deny marginalized groups their own voice and agency. It is obvious that ordinary citizens with grievances have difficulties making their voices heard because they have fewer followers and thus few reposts. Nonetheless, given the low threshold entailed in setting up a microblog account, a growing number of citizens involved in struggles for justice have created their own accounts in an attempt to make their voices heard. The Yihuang demolition and self-immolation case in September 2010 is one of the first and more widely published cases where ordinary citizens used micro-blogs to publish information about their plight. But it was actually two journalists working on the case, Liu Chang from Caixin (财新) and Deng Fei from Phoenix Weekly (凤凰杂志), who first reported on the case and also helped and taught family members to set up their own microblog accounts. Several of the family members have continued to use microblogs to write about their and other’s cases of demolitions. The daughter in the family, Zhong Ruijiao, has 33,676 followers today and has written 4,610 posts since September 2010. But having a microblog account and publishing information is no guarantee for Chinese citizens that their calls for justice will be heard. This was clearly revealed in the case of Qian Mingqi from Fuzhou, who
was protesting against unfair treatment and insufficient compensation in a demolition case that dragged on for years. Qian’s petitioning did not lead anywhere so he turned to the Internet in the hope of getting more attention. He set up microblog accounts on Sina and Phoenix New Media and posted information about his case but failed to draw many followers or attract attention from influential opinion leaders. Despairing about ever getting justice, Qian finally set off three bombs outside government buildings in Fuzhou that killed him and two officials. Before Sina removed his microblog account his number of followers had risen from 2,000 to 32,000. Qian’s case shows that merely having a microblog account does not guarantee that one’s voice is heard: the attention may come too late.

To be able to speak on microblogs and to communicate with just a few people can nonetheless be empowering at the individual level and help individuals feel less isolated. Even though labour organizations and migrant workers have few followers, or followers who are already concerned about these issues, microblogs serve as a tool to reach out to more people, strengthen communication among these organizations and the media, and create new support networks that can be activated in case of need. The struggle to save a migrant school in Beijing in 2012 shows how support networks were activated in a difficult situation. When the Beijing government decided to withdraw the permission for several migrant schools, including one in Pi village run by the New Workers Art Group, the leader Sun Heng used his microblog to draw attention to their plight. He made several posts and although reposts were limited, a number of scholars and other NGOs forwarded them. It was the involvement of celebrities and scholars that eventually helped save the school. The famous TV personality Cui Yongyuan, who had been involved in the workers’ own spring gala, and five scholars long active on labour issues wrote an open letter to the Ministry of Education, and the media also picked up this story. Labour organizations and individual migrant workers thus need influential followers and supporters, and the publicity generated by traditional media still remains crucial.

**VOICE AND EMPOWERMENT ON MICROBLOGS: LIMITATIONS AND PROSPECTS**

It is fair to say that microblogs have changed the way many Chinese citizens receive and disseminate information, and how they interact
and communicate among themselves and with strangers. The rise of microblogs has in many ways served to break the spiral of silence and made more people realize that they have some shared interests and concerns, for example in fighting corruption and pollution. Maybe the greatest impact of microblogs so far has been at the cognitive level as it has enabled people to share sentiments and concerns which used to be hidden from the public view, or only shared among trusted friends. One could thus argue that microblogs enable more people to express themselves, connect and bear witness to problems in society. Such acts of ‘grievance sharing’ and raising awareness on microblogs could also be a crucial pre-condition for future mobilization efforts. Visibility and witnessing rather than mobilization and activism thus seem to hold longer-lasting value and importance for microblogs. However, Teng Biao’s belief that ‘networking technology is … the power of the powerless’ and Yu Jianrong’s view that ‘everybody has a microphone’ are a bit too optimistic in a society of digital divides and where democracy is lacking. Microblogs have helped raise the visibility and profile of old and new opinion leaders, including critical investigative journalists, lawyers, public intellectuals, bloggers and businessmen, many of whom have become Big Vs. This group has become more engaged in social issues, interacting more with ordinary citizens than they did in the past. But it is clear that ordinary citizens and marginalized groups do not have the same kind of voice and impact on microblogs, or in society, and require these opinion leaders to speak for them, a testimony to continuing socio-economic inequalities in Chinese society and differences in communicative power. Many of the limitations that have been identified with respect to connectivity on Twitter, such as the dominance of elite users, limited reciprocity, brief attention span and disconnect between online speech and offline mobilization, are also found in the Chinese blogosphere, where consequences are even more serious as the gaps and divides are not mitigated by democratic institutions and a free media. The recent crackdown silenced, at least temporarily, some voices on microblogs, and the discussions became more cautious, revealing the limits and fragility of public debates and civic engagement online in an authoritarian state. Predictions in the Western media on the death of microblogs, however, seem a little premature as microblogs continue to offer a space where many valuable discussions on social issues take place.
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and new contacts are made. The Chinese social media environment is dynamic and rapidly changing, with the emergence of WeChat as one of the latest new technologies, and Chinese citizens are quick to adopt new technologies for both personal communication, professional use and public debates.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

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Zhongguo jizhe shejiao meiti shiyong baogao: 78% shouxuan Xinlang weibo


Zhu, Huaxin (2013) Daji yaoyan beijing xia de wangluo yulun xin geju


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86–104. For a discussion on the middle class, see Wu, Micro-blog and the speech act of China’s middle class.


11. On online public intellectuals, see Peter Dahlgren, The Political Web: Media Participation and Alternative Democracy, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 88–108. And for the emergence of micro-celebrities and their background in the case of the Middle East, see Zeynep Tufekci, ‘Not this one’: Social movements, the attention economy, and micro-celebrity networked activism, American Behavioral Scientist 57(7), 2013: 848–70.

12. In a project on investigative journalists, 2008–2011, I interviewed 31 journalists, mainly legal reporters, and many of them several times during the duration of the project and thereafter. In August 2010 I also started to follow this group on SinaWeibo. The interviews focused on the forms, possibilities and difficulties of carrying out investigative journalism rather than microblogs per se. I have also followed other journalists and early microblog users such as scholars, lawyers, and opinion leaders on SinaWeibo. A project on migrant workers, running from 2010 to 2013, stimulated my interest about their use of the Internet, including microblogs, as well as the NGOs working with this group of people. I have interviewed some ten migrant workers as well as representatives of NGOs, and I also follow them on SinaWeibo. My own use of microblogs and interaction with different groups has thus evolved over time, throwing light on issues such as when and how different groups use microblogs, their different patterns of use and impact, the complex relationship between individuals with high social status and cultural capital and those without, as well as cross-talk on microblogs/SinaWeibo. I believe that the practice of not only ‘lurking’ on microblogs but also — although modestly — posting and interacting, including meeting new informants, yields a
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deeper and more profound understanding of how different people use and experience microblogs.


17. For an official view of the arrests, see Renminwang Yuqing Jianceshi, 2013 nian Zhongguo hulianwang yuqing fenxi baogao.


20. Zuigao Renmin Fayuan [Supreme People’s Court] and Zuigao Renmin Jianchayuan [Supreme People’s Procurate], Guanyu banli liyong xinxi wangluo shishi feibang deng xingshi anjian shiyong faliu ruogan wenti de jieshi [An interpretation on issues of how to use the law to deal with
those using information of the Internet to carry out defamation and other criminal cases], Zhongguo fayuan wang [China Court online], 6 September 2013, http://www.chinacourt.org/law/detail/2013/09/id/146710.shtml, accessed 20 May 2014.


22. Zhu, Daji yaoyan beijing xia de wangluo yulun xin geju.

23. This was reported as early as September, see Patrick Boehler, Is anti-rumour crackdown silencing voices of online dissent at Weibo?, South China Morning Post, 13 September 2013, http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1308860/anti-rumour-crackdown-silencing-voices-online-dissent-weibo, accessed 2 January 2014.

24. WeChat, or weixin as it is known in Chinese, owned by Tencent, is a popular app in China with some 396 million users. The app allows users to send private and group messages and photos and videos, as well as carry out group chats and so on. While it is mainly used for private communication, media organizations, NGOs, and individuals such as Yu Jianrong have also set up public accounts. On the features of the app, see http://www.wechat.com/en/, accessed 20 May 2014.

25. For a first evaluation of the crackdown, see Renminwang Yuqing Jianceshi, 2013 nian Zhongguo hulianwang yuqing fenxi baogao.


27. The number of active Twitter users is also quite small – 10 per cent of Twitter users accounting for over 90 per cent of all tweets, quoted in van Dijck, The Culture of Connectivity, 74.

28. Many of the journalists in my sample confirmed that they have been courted and encouraged by Sina and other companies.


30. van Dijck, Tracing Twitter; van Dijck, The Culture of Connectivity.

31. So far, few works have focused on the visions and commercial strategies of Chinese Internet companies, and none provides an overview of the history and development of SinaWeibo. See however Johan Lagerkvist,

32. See, among others, van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*; and Murthy, *Twitter*.


37. See Svensson, Media and civil society in China, for a discussion of how journalists engage in microblogging.


40. On networking among journalists and lawyers, see Svensson, Media and Civil Society in China.

41. For the official view on the rise of Internet opinion leaders, see Shanghai Jiaotong Daxue Yuqing yanjiu shiyanshi [Internet Public Opinion Research Laboratory of Shanghai Jiaotong University], Gonggong shijin zhong de wangluo yijian lingxiu yanjiu [Research on Internet opinion leaders during public events], in Xie Tengfeng (ed.) *Zhongguo shehui yuqing yang huiji guanli baogao 2011* [Report on public opinion and crisis


43. I base this discussion on the more official studies, although these are not always very detailed and informative when it comes to sampling methods or definitions.

44. Renminwang Yuqing Jianceshi, 2013 nian Zhongguo hulianwang yuqing fenxi baogao.


46. Li et al., What are Chinese talking about in hot weibos?

47. Liu, Zhongguo weibo fazhan taishi yu redian jiexi, 41.


49. In a study on microblog users interested in a homeowners’ association, it was also found that identified users were more likely to be followed and that most re-tweets came from a few users, see Huang and Sun, Weibo network, information diffusion and implications for collective action in China.


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56. Wang Jiangsong, Laogong weiquan yu dangqian weibo shengtai.

57. Rennick has argued that in the North African case, one can distinguish between a pre-mobilization phase of ‘grievance sharing’ where social media helped spread information, and a collective action phase where mobilization took place. See Sarah Anne Rennick, Personal grievance sharing, frame alignment, and hybrid organisational structures: The role of social media in North Africa’s 2011 uprisings, Journal of Contemporary African Studies 31(2), 2013: 156–74.

Online Weiguan in Web 2.0 China
Historical Origins, Characteristics, Platforms and Consequences

Jian Xu

The Chinese term ‘weiguan (围观), literally translated as ‘surrounding gaze’ in English, refers to a crowd activity that occurs in public venues. It describes mass gatherings around public spectacles, such as ritual celebrations, traffic accidents and public executions. In this sense, weiguan is a common human behavior that exists in different cultures and societies. However, with the penetration of the Internet in Chinese people's everyday life, the term has been used as a cultural metaphor to vividly illustrate the phenomenon of virtual crowd gathering in China’s cyberspace to discuss public outcry and public opinion around offline controversial social issues. This has been termed by Chinese netizens and media as ‘online weiguan’ (网络围观).

Online weiguan is a popular form of Internet-facilitated political participation, which contributes to the visibility of controversial social issues and the concentration of public opinion about these issues. It usually results in high volumes of online traffic by attracting millions of netizens’ reading, sharing, reposting, commenting and discussing. In the process of online weiguan, public emotion and opinion are highly mobilized, which tends to form networked power and group pressure to promote the transparency and resolution of controversial events. Since the year 2003, which is popularly dubbed as ‘the year of online public opinion’ (网络舆论年),1 a year seldom passes without national online weiguan events in China. Online weiguan has become a popular way for ordinary Chinese to discuss hot events, participate in public affairs, express public opinion and supervise governmental power. It is a unique cultural and political phenomenon in China’s new media age.
This chapter discusses the cultural-political origins, characteristics, major platforms and political implications of online weiguan. It argues that online weiguan has not only created an alternative and activist form of political participation for ordinary Chinese to address social injustice, defend human rights and supervise political power, but has also promoted the state’s proactive and strategic adaptation of the Internet in crisis management and everyday governance. The ‘mediation of politics’ from the bottom-up and top-down compete, negotiate, interact and mutually constitute with each other, fostering a deliberative turn of China’s political development in the Web 2.0 era.

**ONLINE WEIGUAN: HISTORICAL ORIGINS AND CHARACTERISTICS**

China’s literary giant Lu Xun probably first wrote about the weiguan phenomenon in his short novel *Medicine* (药) in 1919. The story is about Old Chuan buying the steamed bun dipped in the revolutionist Xia Yu’s blood at the execution site in order to save his son’s life. Old Chuan had the superstitious belief that steamed buns dipped in human blood could be used as medicine to cure his son’s tuberculosis. In this story, Lu Xun vividly described a crowd of indifferent and numb Chinese who dumbly watched the beheading of the revolutionist Xia Yu, who had fought for their liberation and freedom:

> Craning their necks as far as they would go, they looked like so many ducks held and lifted by some invisible hand. For a moment all was still; then a sound was heard, and a stir swept through the on-lookers. There was a rumble as they pushed back, sweeping past Old Chuan and nearly knocking him down.\(^2\)

Lu Xun used Xia Yu as a hidden reference to Qiu Jin (秋瑾), a pioneer of the 1911 Revolution, who advocated the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty and the establishment of a republican China. By telling this story, Lu Xun criticized the ‘culture of gaze’ (看客文化) in Chinese society. To Lu Xun, the culture of gaze, as exemplified in the weiguan crowd of Xia Yu’s beheading, was one of deep-rooted weaknesses of the Chinese nation. It reflected the ignorance, numbness, conservativeness, and backwardness of ordinary Chinese in feudal societies. They did not care about the fate of the nation and were ignorant about revolution. They were obedient subjects of the feudal ruler, though they suffered a lot under imperial
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governance. They did not want to take part in the revolution, because they were afraid that resistance against the authority would be risky and disrupt their routine family-centred lives. However, they were curious to see the result of the revolution as spectators and gossiped about the revolution in private. In the meantime, Lu Xun also criticized the bourgeois democratic revolution in the late Qing Dynasty, which lacked a mass base and was doomed to failure. He thought that if only the revolution could enlighten and unite ordinary Chinese and turn them from passive onlookers into active participants, then the revolution would succeed.

Lu Xun’s prediction about China’s revolution was not realized in the bourgeois democratic revolution, but instead came true in the Chinese Communist revolution that followed, led by Mao Zedong. Mao made use of the Chinese people’s weiguan habit in everyday life and incorporated weiguan in a series of Communist political campaigns from the 1930s to the 1970s. The passive weiguan spectators were strategically organized and mobilized by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and transformed into masses with revolutionary fervour. A series of techniques were consciously used by the CCP to harness the emotional energy of the weiguan masses in order to realize its political purposes, such as ‘speaking bitterness’ (诉苦), ‘denunciation’ (控诉) and ‘criticism–self criticism’ (批评与自我批评).3 These techniques were usually intentionally applied in ‘show-and-shame’ weiguan contexts to agitate ordinary people’s outrage against the CCP-selected political targets and heighten the emotional commitment of the masses to CCP-led revolutions.

The mass criticism meetings in the Cultural Revolution were representative cases of the fervour of the mass. In these meetings, the Red Guards, Rebels and the people were organized together and became weiguan crowds. They stood around ‘counter-revolutionists’ to hold an open trial on CCP-selected targets. In stark contrast to the numb and indifferent on-lookers around Xia Yu’s execution in Lu Xun’s novel, they became frenzied participants with revolutionary fervour. They shouted slogans, denounced crimes or even threw stones to attack their targets. The emotions of the weiguan crowds were intensified by the strategic emotion work of the CCP. The ‘show-and-shame’ ritual, as exemplified in the mass criticism meetings in the Cultural Revolution, proved to be an effective strategy for the CCP to propagate, mobilize mass emotion and punish political enemies at different revolutionary stages in the Mao
After the Cultural Revolution, the CCP shifted its focus from the Communist revolution and class struggle to the maintenance of social and political stability and economic development. The 'show-and-shame' ritual was used again to punish destructive forces that harmed social and political stability. In a series of ‘campaigns on criminal activities’ (严打) since the 1980s, the 'show-and-shame' ceremonies could be widely seen in public trials and shame parades of criminals. In these weiguan contexts, the masses were not encouraged to participate as mobs in the Communist revolution. They became organized as voluntary spectators of public executions. By openly showing the punishment of criminals, the CCP aimed to manifest its sovereign and disciplinary power over society as China’s only legitimate ruling Party, while warning the people to behave within the range of law and disciplines. For example, on 29 November 2006, the public security bureau in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, handcuffed about 100 prostitutes and forced them to march in front of a jeering crowd on the street. The march was broadcast via television to show the government’s efforts to combat the illegal sex trade. The visibility of the punishment of the few was used as a means to show disciplinary power of the authority over many.

The 'show-and-shame' ritual and the weiguan context it requires, as discussed above, were consciously and strategically used by the CCP to achieve its political purposes in different historical periods. In the Mao era, they were used to mobilize emotional power and revolutionary fervour of the masses. In the post-Mao era, they were used to maintain the CCP’s social control and manifest its governing capability. However, this ritual has been reinvented and reversed by ordinary Chinese to articulate social critiques and supervise governmental power in the new media era, forming a popular online weiguan phenomenon. The term of weiguan has also been redefined in cyberspace and has become a synonym of active participation.

As communication scholar Hu Yong argues, online weiguan is a kind of ‘minimal form of public participation’ in Chinese society, where free expression and political participation of the people are restricted. It has become an alternative way for ordinary Chinese to exercise ‘unofficial’ and ‘unconventional’ public opinion supervision, when the official leg-
islative mechanisms, such as the Letters and Visits System (信访制度)\textsuperscript{7} and the mass media, play a limited role in monitoring and containing the increasing social injustice issues and official abuses of power. Online weiguan is affordable and practically achievable for most Chinese people equipped with digital devices and the Internet. It consists of various Internet-based micro actions, such as posting, reposting, commenting and sharing. These micro actions can generate large-scale communication networks in the online space around specific hot topics in a short time, putting pressure on the government to resolve controversial issues in the offline world. Compared with its offline precedents, online weiguan has the following features.

First, online weiguan is a transformative crowd activity. In the history of the crowd in the West, crowd activity is usually taken as a synonym with social protest, and has the potential to make social and political change.\textsuperscript{8} As Rudé succinctly put it, crowd activities should be viewed as an integral part of the social process within which the nature of popular politics could be explored directly.\textsuperscript{9} He suggests that the main study of crowds should be activities such as strikes, riots, rebellions and revolutions, which involve ‘aggressive mob’, ‘hostile outburst’ and ‘political demonstration’.\textsuperscript{10} Accordingly, most of the offline weiguan phenomena in China should be excluded from transformative crowd activity, because they seldom involve popular politics or advocate social and political change. They are either motivated by people’s psychological curiosity and crowd mentality, or strategically manipulated by political power to realize certain political ends. Only in cyberspace could weiguan become a form of popular politics and achieve political change on behalf of the people.

Online weiguan also makes use of the ‘show and shame’ ritual, a technique used in the Chinese communist revolution, to mobilize public emotion against selected targets. However, the targets of offline weiguan are no longer selected by the CCP; instead, they are chosen by ordinary people. Interestingly, online weiguan targets are usually CCP government officials, who are suspected of being involved in immoral and/or corrupt scandalous affairs. The ritual wielded by the CCP to punish its political opponents and manifest its disciplinary power has been reinvented and reversed by disgruntled citizens to fight official corruption and human rights violations under the governance of the CCP. The mass power of crowds has become a double-edged sword, which could not only facilitate
the CCP to fulfill its political purposes offline, but also could facilitate citizens to exercise supervisory power over the CCP’s governance online.

Second, similar to offline weiguan, online weiguan also needs a group of gathering crowd. However, the connectivity, interactivity and networking of the Internet have made virtual crowd gathering possible without the physical co-presence of participants. Therefore, online weiguan theoretically could enable more heterogeneous participants to take part. Anyone who has a digital device and can access the Internet could be a potential participant without being restricted by temporal and spatial factors. As Naughton writes, by making use of digital networking devices, the ‘transaction costs’ to organize, mobilize and participate in collection actions have been significantly reduced.11 In online weiguan, participants are not organized and manipulated by the CCP as in the previous ‘shame-and-show’ ceremonies.12 They get together instead through the Internet-enabled networking, mobilization and collaboration, based on their own interests and voluntary participation. This virtual, leaderless and networked weiguan action has become one of the most important collective actions in present-day China to express disagreement, grievance and dissent, and form public opinion, as open critiques and public gatherings against the government are still tightly controlled and highly risky.

Third, online weiguan is mostly based on discursive communication with few corresponding offline actions. As a popular mode of online activism in China, it is also a ‘radical communicative action conducted in words and images’.13 The symbolic and textual representations, such as verbal or visual storytelling, commentaries, satires and discussion, are major discursive practices of online weiguan. The production, reproduction, circulation and consumption of these symbolic and textual representations generate great discursive power.

A complete online weiguan process could be normally divided into three communicative phases. The first phase is the storytelling of controversial issues with wrongdoers and victims involved. The stories are usually presented by victims, eyewitnesses or journalists, and posted online in the forms of words, images or videos. These stories usually have very eye-catching titles, which underline the conflicts between the rich and poor, powerful and powerless. The second phase is emotional mobilization and public opinion concentration. The attention-grabbing
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posts are likely to be widely circulated and cause strong emotional responses of the weiguan participants. These highly mobilized public emotions – usually sympathy toward victims and indignation against evils – can generate strong online public opinion that advocates justice for victims and punishment for wrongdoers. The third phase is the ‘online-offline’ and ‘bottom-up’ flow of weiguan agendas. The issues publicized through weiguan can attract the attention of mainstream media and government for further investigation. The online gathering crowd usually disperses after government authorities make responses to the online outcries and promise further investigations.

The characteristics of online weiguan are clearly demonstrated in a series of ‘Internet incidents’ (网络事件) or ‘new media events’ (新媒体事件) in China.14 Online weiguan is the precondition of the occurrence of these Internet events. However, not all online weiguan practices can cause Internet events. Many factors could determine if online weiguan can lead to successful and influential Internet events, such as the issue involved, timing, the quantity of weiguan participants, and the government’s attitude to the issue.

In addition, online weiguan also needs specific ‘venue’ or ‘platform.’ Online weiguan is usually conducted on three major platforms in China’s cyberspace. They are the Bulletin Board System (BBS), Human Flesh Search (HFS) engine and microblogs. Each platform has its own technological characteristics and plays an important role in supporting online weiguan practice. Particularly, the popularity of microblogging has elevated online weiguan to a new historic height.15

ONLINE WEIGUAN PLATFORMS: FROM BBS TO MICROBLOG

BBS was invented in the United States in the early 1970s.16 It was first introduced to Chinese universities in the mid-1990s and soon obtained huge success among China’s young people.17 One of the earliest and most famous BBS sites in this period was ‘Shuimu Tsinghua’ (水木清华) established in 1995 at Tsinghua University. After 1998, BBS developed rapidly in China. Many popular BBS sites were set up, such as ‘Xi Ci Hu Tong’ (西祠胡同), ‘Strong Nation Forum’ (强国论坛), ‘Tianya Community’ (天涯社区), ‘Kdnet’ (凯迪社区), Baidu Tieba (百度贴吧) and so on. These BBS forums, consisting of hundreds of discussion boards and millions of threads and individual posts, continue to

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attract a large number of registered users. According to China Internet Network Information Centre, by June 2014, the number of China’s BBS users was 124 million. BBS sites open up virtual communities for the Internet users to share and affirm information and opinion on a broad spectrum of topics, particularly on some ‘critical’, ‘negative’ or ‘sensitive’ hot-button issues. They have created an alternative space for the political engagement and social bonding of the ordinary people in China’s tightly controlled and heavily censored media environment.

Many influential Internet incidents in the pre-blogging era were caused by online weiguan on BBS sites. Prominent cases include the case of Sun Zhigang, the BMW incident, the South China tiger photos incident, as well as the Shanxi Black Kiln incident. The cultural metaphor, ‘construct a tall building’, which is widely used on BBS to refer to the prolonging of a conversation thread, is the major form of online weiguan on BBS sites. Though the population of BBS users is declining in recent years due to the popularity of blogs and microblogs, BBS is still playing an important role in the online entertainment, discussion and participation of China’s Internet users.

HFS engine is another important online weiguan platform. Human Flesh Search is a cyber-term invented by Chinese netizens. It refers to a strategic problem-solving model through online crowdsourcing, which aims to track down offline individuals by making an open call to the masses of the Internet users. HFS is not a unique Chinese phenomenon. Similar phenomena widely exist in other social and cultural contexts. In Clay Shirky’s book, Here Comes Everybody: the Power of Organizing without Organization, he begins by telling a HFS-like story, which happened in New York. A lady lost her phone in a taxi. After a few days, the lady was able to find an e-mail address of the person who had picked up her phone, because this person used her phone to post pictures she took a few days earlier online. When the owner asked this person to return the phone, the current holder responded with ‘no’. This set in motion a series of events where the netizens were able to use social networks to track down the culprit and finally bring the New York Police Department into investigation. Though similar examples of netizen-vigilante justice have taken place in many countries, only Chinese netizens have embraced this cyber vigilantism as a regular practice to punish a wide range of people labelled ‘evil’.

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In China, mop.com (猫扑网) has the largest and most popular HFS engine. In 2001, mop.com established China’s first HFS engine for users to submit information queries and respond to questions. The mop site described the feature of its HFS engine as, ‘using collective knowledge instead of technology to solve problems.” In the ensuring years, several major portal sites, such as Baidu, Sina and Yahoo, continuously set up their ‘question-and-answer’ (Q&A) search engines. Though not named as HFS engine, these search engines could have a similar function. Different from major web-search engines, which scan their database of sites to match the keywords to those same keywords in the database, such as google.com, HFS engine is based on the Internet users’ massive labour. It operates by enlisting as many people as possible to collaborate and contribute, in order to track down the individuals from the original posting. The collaborative and networked way to track down the evils is likely to attract high online traffic and cause online weiguan, generating many Internet incidents, such as the Luxury Cigarette case and the ‘My Dad Is Li Gang’ incident. ‘Human flesh’ (人肉) has become another popular cultural metaphor that vividly illustrates the practice of online weiguan on the HFS engines.

BBS and HFS engines both lie somewhere between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. They work on the same ‘forum and editor’ model. With the development of Web 2.0 technologies, SNSs become popular globally. They allow registers to ‘construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system,’ ‘articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection’ and ‘view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system’. Since their introduction in 1997, SNS has attracted millions of users, such as MySpace, Facebook and Twitter. However, popular SNSs in the West have a limited market in mainland China, due to the Chinese government’s massive blockage of the global SNS. The restriction on Western SNS has resulted in the rise in China’s home-grown and state-approved SNSs, such as Renren Network (人人网), a Chinese version of Facebook, and Weibo (微博), a Chinese version of Twitter. Particularly the dramatic increase of Weibo registers since 2009 has made it the latest and the most popular online weiguan platform in present-day China.

Weibo is the Chinese translation of the term ‘micro-blogging’. The number of registered users to China’s Top Two Weibo services, Sina and...
Tencent, has already skyrocketed past the 200-million mark just two years since their operation began in 2009 and 2010,\(^3\) while it took Twitter five years to reach 200 million subscribers in 2011.\(^3\) By June 2014, China’s total Weibo population reached 275 million.\(^3\) Both Twitter and Weibo allow their users to share messages up to 140 characters. However, 140 Chinese characters can convey much more meaning than the Roman alphabet. In addition, Weibo provides users more services than Twitter, such as message threading and the ability to comment directly on other users’ posts.\(^3\) Technologically, Weibo integrates the elements of BBSs, blogs, instant-messaging system and audio-visual sites, making it a real multifunctional media platform. As the Online Public Opinion Monitoring Centre based in the People’s Daily put in a report issued in March 2011, ‘micro-blogs have shown most vividly the speed and breadth of information transmission on the Internet, and they rapidly transmit information on the Internet with a means of high efficiency’.\(^3\) The technological advantages of Weibo and its fast popularization have helped netizens to ‘publicize and express their discontent’ and posed ‘a new challenge to the state regime of information control’.\(^3\) In the Weibo era, online weiguan has become more practically achievable and frequent. Weibo has now become the most important platform to ferment Internet incidents in China. The Guo Meimei scandal,\(^3\) the Wenzhou high-speed train crash,\(^3\) the Guangzhou Wukan protest are representative cases,\(^3\) which have caused large-scale online weiguan in the micro-blog-sphere.

Though the overall number of Weibo users has been dropping from 330 million (the highest since its emergence) in June 2013\(^4\) to 275 million in June 2014 due to the rapid popularity of WeChat (Weixin) service,\(^4\) the dominant status of Weibo as the most popular weiguan platform has not been challenged. That is because (1) Weixin only allows users to add maximally 5,000 people, but Weibo users can follow or to be followed by unlimited numbers of people; and (2) Weixin users’ posts are only visible to a defined circle of accepted friends, whereas Weibo users’ posts are seeable to all followers and can be reposted and commented with little limitation. Therefore, the semiprivate Weixin has much less potential of a ‘public forum’ than Weibo and is not suitable to hold online weiguan that requires large-scale networking. However, with many Weibo users migrating to Weixin and the government’s crack-
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down on Weibo,\textsuperscript{43} it should be admitted that current weiguan activities on Weibo have become less active and frequent than before. But as the stickiness and activeness of social media users are dynamic, and the government’s Internet policies are ever changing, weiguan on Weibo may regain its high activeness and frequency at any proper time. Particularly in public events, Weibo still has strong vitality and is un-replaceable.\textsuperscript{44}

As discussed above, online weiguan platform has expanded from BBS, HFS engine to the latest Weibo with the development of Web 2.0 technologies. However, the emergence and popularity of a new weiguan platform do not mean that the previous platforms have perished. An HFS posting may be reposted on BBS and cause crowd gathering on both platforms. A scandal clue originated from Weibo may soon become a buzz topic on BBS and evoke netizens’ HFS on the labelled ‘evil’. Therefore, the three online weiguan platforms are not balkanized, but interconnected and interplayed in holding online weiguan practices. They also work together with other networked communication forms, such as blogs, e-mail groups, instant chatting systems, increasing the visibility and of the weiguan events and the engagement of weiguan activities.

Based on the three major platforms, online weiguan has formed a supervisory mechanism from the bottom-up against social injustice and official wrongdoings. It has greatly challenged Foucault’s Panopticon model in a disciplinary society,\textsuperscript{45} which allows the powerful few to monitor the powerless many through the normalizing power of the gaze. In the online society, people have transformed from objects under scrutiny into proactive spectators. Through online weiguan, ‘the few’ are put under the gaze of the mass spectators, forming what Mathiesen calls ‘a synoptic system of power’,\textsuperscript{46} where the many watch the few. Cascio vividly called this power structure ‘Participatory Panopticon’.\textsuperscript{47} In a world of Participatory Panopticon, constant surveillance is carried out by citizens equipped with digital devices and through networked communication enabled by the Internet.\textsuperscript{48} Online weiguan has demonstrated a vivid example of this Participatory Panopticon in the Chinese context. However, the rise of Participatory Panopticon does not cause the decline of the Panopticon model of power. Instead, it has transformed the traditional model and made the relationship between the ‘watchers’ and ‘being watched’ more complicated. This requires reconsidering the ‘mediation of politics’ in China’s Web 2.0 era.
ONLINE WEIGUAN CONSEQUENCES: ‘MEDIATION OF POLITICS’ IN WEB 2.0 CHINA

Mediation, as Silverstone argues, is ‘a fundamentally dialectical notion which requires us to address the processes of communication as both institutionally and technologically driven and embedded’. Its dialectic nature ‘requires us to understand how processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them as well as the relationships that participants, both individual and institutional, have to that environment and to each other’. Silverstone’s mediation approach provides an insightful perspective from which to examine the ‘interdependence and mutual shaping of communication action and communication technology’. Following this approach, the mediation of politics could be understood as concrete political communicative actions, which assume media technologies and forms. On the one hand, the media have become a relatively independent institution with a logic of their own that political actors in other institutions have to adapt to. On the other hand, the media have been incorporated by different political actors into the working mechanisms of their own institutions and have worked for various political purposes.

Mediation of politics is not a new phenomenon in the Internet era. As Finnemann argues, ‘[n]ew media – whenever they arrive in history – imply extended mediatisation’. The Internet, which is usually taken as ‘new’ media, together with ‘old’ media, such as telegraph, telephone and television, have all extended existing communicative forms and have transformed patterns of social, cultural and political interaction as they are newly invented. However, the Internet, for the first time in history, allows information (texts, graphics, sound and audio) to be rapidly and effectively compressed and transmitted across multiple media platforms. This has caused not only the digitization of media and communication technologies, but also the convergence of new and old media. In this Internet-centric, digitized and converged media environment, the patterns of political communication have been innovated, reformed and transformed. The mediation of politics has thus increased in form, scale and degree in the Internet era.

The non-state players are increasingly depending on the Internet and take it as ‘microphone’ or ‘loudspeaker’, with which they can obtain information, articulate social critiques and organize collective actions.
In the meantime, the state player sees the Internet as ‘safety valve’ and is increasingly relying on it to capture the public opinion and resistance and enhance the governing capability. The Internet has become a public interventional tool that multiple social actors could make use of to pursue different political agendas. In this chapter, I focus on online weiguan, through which the non-state players mediatize politics from bottom-up. However, it is equally important to examine how the Internet has been strategically used to channel and contain online weiguan and cope with public-opinion pressure by the state power from top-down. Since 2003, the year that marks the rise of China’s online public opinion, the government officials and agencies on different levels have gradually realized the importance and power of the Internet, netizens and online opinions. ‘To solve online issues through online channels’ has already become a consensus after drawing lessons from thousands of online weiguan events. The Internet has been proactively incorporated in everyday governance of the state in order to draw the distance between the government and people closer, better solve the problems of the people, and promote positive state-society interaction.

On 20 June 2008, former President Hu Jintao had an online chat with netizens via People's Daily Online (www.people.com.cn),
 which was the first high-profile online discussion by a top Chinese leader. On 28 February 2009, former Premier Wen Jiabao had a two-hour online chat with netizens via two state-news portals: the official web portal of the Chinese government (www.gov.cn) and the Xinhua News Agency website (www.xinhuanet.com). The two online talks involving top Chinese leaders had not only shown the government’s care about the opinions of ordinary netizens, but had also helped to foster the political leaders’ man-of-the-people images. Moreover, the Internet has also been widely used in dealing with issues about official malfeasance and corruption, which are likely to cause online weiguan and Internet events. For example, Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the CCP opened up its public tip-off website (www.12388.gov.cn) on 28 October 2009. The website provides an official channel for the public to air discontent with government service and report civil servants who violate law and the CCP’s disciplines. Local government also tried to make use of the Internet to solve various online weiguan events. In the ‘Hide-and-Seek’ (躲猫猫) incident in 2009, which involved jail inmate violence and
police malfeasance, Publicity Department of Yunnan province recruited netizens online and organized a netizen investigation delegation to look into the incident. The netizen delegators were allowed to enter the jail, read police documents and raise questions to the police. They finally released an investigation report online to respond to the concerns of the national netizens. This strategic use of the Internet and netizens had facilitated the local government to successfully break out the online weiguan crowds and shake off the public opinion pressure.

In addition, the state is also adapting itself to China’s Internet trend. While Weibo has become a popular online weiguan platform, it has been swiftly incorporated into the crisis communication and everyday publicity work of the central and local government in order to dissolve public opinion risk in emergencies and promote interaction with citizens between crises. According to the ‘2013 China Government Microblog Evaluation Report’, by the end of December 2013, a total of 183,232 Weibo accounts had been opened by government agencies on China’s four major Weibo service providers (Sina, Tencent, People.cn and Xinhuanet). The number of Weibo accounts opened by the CCP and governmental cadres had reached 75,505. The adaptive use of the Internet in governance has been elevated to a new height since the accession of President Xi Jinping in late 2012. Xi launched the ‘mass line’ (群众路线) education campaign to forge closer Party-people ties. The CPC officials were called on to prioritize the interests of the people and persist in representing them and working on their behalf in the campaign. The Internet was taken as an important platform to practice ‘mass line’, through which, the Party could better hear the voices of people, understand their needs and solve their problems.

The Internet, as a medium, has been increasingly institutionalized in doing politics by both the state and non-state players in China. The interplays between the mediated activism and the mediated governance, both of which take the Internet as a buffer, to a certain degree, have relieved the direct contestation between the state and non-state, such as the contention between Weiwu (维稳 stability maintenance) and Weiquan (维权 rights defence), fostering a deliberative turn of China’s political development.

For the non-state actors, the deliberation has democratic potential. As exemplified in the discussion of online weiguan, the non-state players promote discursive participation, citizen engagement and surveillance...
through this collective, networked and leaderless action. It has generated an alternative and activist form of deliberation, when the authentic ‘deliberative democracy’ through rational debate and consensus decision-making could not be fulfilled in China. For the state, the deliberation is authoritarian in nature, though the voices and public opinions of the ordinary people seem to have unprecedented opportunities to be heard by government through the Internet, whether the expansion of ‘listen-to’ channels can ensure effective ‘listen-in’ results remains questionable. The government’s adaptive use of the Internet primarily aims to establish a more transparent, responsible and quasi-democratic image of the Chinese government, rather than actually democratizing China’s authoritarian political system. This phenomenon is particularly relevant to what He and Warren call ‘authoritarian deliberation’ through which, the authoritarian regime incorporates deliberative practices into its governance to better stabilize and strengthen authoritarian rule. These deliberative practices with contrasting political purposes, but all mediated through the Internet, demonstrate the double-sidedness of ‘mediation of politics’ in Web 2.0 China.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Online weiguan is an Internet-mobilized collective action with a long cultural and political history rooted in Chinese society. By using the digitally networked social media, such as BBS, HFS and Weibo, ordinary Chinese people have gained the opportunities to exercise the critical practices of ‘active spectatorship’ when controversial social issues happen. This active spectatorship is usually practiced in the form of mediated scrutiny through social media representations rather than physical spectatorship offline, which is widely taken as a synonym of ‘collective participation’ in China’s heavily controlled speech environment. It has shifted previous intensive and high-risk social movements into more decentralized, extensive and flexible online protests, based on the netizens’ ‘opt-in/opt-out’ coalitions and the ‘cultural logic of networking.’ It has constituted an important part of what Guobin Yang calls ‘China’s new citizen activism,’ which enables ordinary Chinese to exercise ‘rightful resistance’ through everyday social media uses. This mediated activism tends to cultivate Chinese people’s citizenship and consolidate the sense that making a better China is an ongoing com-
mitment that requires every individual’s participation, contribution and collaboration. As popular sayings in China’s cyberspace go, ‘attention is power’ (关注就是力量) and ‘weiguan changes China’ (围观改变中国).

The popularity of online weiguan, on the other hand, has generated pressure to force the government to adapt itself to China’s Internet trend in governance. As a result, political communication in China is increasingly relying on the Internet as an institution. The mediated deliberation through the Internet has become an effective strategy of doing political communication for both the state and non-state, demonstrating the ‘deliberative politics’ with Chinese characteristics in the Web 2.0 era. This politics underscores ‘talk-centric’ deliberation through the Internet-based communicative practices and takes Internet interventionism as a fundamental mechanism for social and political changes. It promotes peaceful, continuous and small-scale social adaptations and arrangements, rather than adopting violent revolutions and drastic political reforms.

The future study of online weiguan should follow the ‘media-as-practice’ approach to examine how this online activism practice contributes to ‘social practice more generally’. We need not only to look at how online weiguan anchors other types of social practices on the micro level, such as China’s rights defending movement and public-opinion supervision, but also address social and political changes caused by this mediated activism on the macro level, like China’s Internet policy and governance. Online weiguan and the multi-pronged forms of doing Internet management and control, in the long term, will contest, negotiate, interact and co-evolve, making China’s Internet one of the most dynamic, contentious and elusive spaces in the world. Moreover, the market force should also be taken into consideration in the study of online weiguan in the future. The ‘50 Cent Party’ and the ‘Internet Water Army’ (网络水军) have actively participated in online weiguan. The participation of these quasi grassroots players has made it difficult to verify the authenticity and credibility of voices and opinions from the real ‘masses’ (人民群众), making online weiguan more contested and complicated.
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ENDNOTES

1. In 2003, online public opinion for the first time in history demonstrated its great supervisory power in Chinese society. The grassroots netizens effectively set agendas for mainstream media’s subsequent reporting and the government’s further investigation to solve controversial social issues, such as the SARS epidemic, the case of Sun Zhigang (see note 20) and the BMW incident (see note 21). Therefore, 2003 is taken as a landmark year in which the Chinese netizens and online public opinion had moved out of the fringes and into the mainstream. See http://cmp.hku.hk/2010/10/25/8238/, accessed 21 October 2012.


7. ‘Letters and Visits System’ was established in the PRC from the 1950s. It serves as an official channel for Chinese citizens to seek assistance to

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resolve their grievances. In the absence of transparent and fair legal and judiciary systems in China, Letters and Visits System is one of the main methods for ordinary citizens to solicit institutional recourse to redress the violations of legal rights, property rights, and other human rights. See Carl F. Minzner, Xinfang: An alternative to formal Chinese legal institutions, Stanford Journal of International Law, no. 42 (2006): 103–79.


10. Ibid., 4.


12. The participants of online weiguan are mainly voluntary and unorganized ordinary citizens. However, members of ‘50 Cent Party’ (五毛党) who are organized and manipulated by the CCP often participate in the process as well. ‘50 Cent Party’ are the state-sponsored online commentators. They widely post comments favourable towards the CCP’s policies on BBS, chatrooms, blogs and weibo to shape and sway public opinion, particularly when the government and government officials are forced to defend their credibility in controversial social issues. It is said the commentators are paid 50 cent of RMB for a posting. See: http://www.freedomhouse.org/blog/china’s-growing-army-paid-internet-commentators, accessed 2 April 2013.


15. Biao Teng, ‘Rights defence (weiquan), microblogs (weibo), and popular surveillance (weiguan)’, China Perspectives, no. 3 (2012): 29–39.

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42. WeChat, also known as 'Weixin', literally translates as 'micro-message' in English. It is a popular mobile messaging app (similar to WhatsApp) released by Tencent in January 2011. It provides hold-to-talk voice messaging, text messaging, broadcast (one-to-many) messaging and sharing photos and videos. By the 3rd quarter 2014, WeChat has already had 468 millions active users in China and overseas (see: http://www.statista.com/statistics/255778/number-of-active-wechat-messenger-accounts/).


48. Ibid.


50. Ibid., 189.


55. The term ‘non-state’ refers to individuals, groups or organizations that are not strictly controlled by the state. It does not belong to or exist as a state-structure or established institution of a state, but has sufficient power to influence and cause changes in politics, such as the social
activists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and alternative media outlets. The relations between the state and the non-state actors could be confrontational or collaborator. See Haiqing Yu, *Media and Cultural Transformation in China*, London and New York: Routledge, 2009.


73. ‘Internet Water Army’ is a group of Internet ghostwriters hired by private public-relation companies and paid to post comments with particular content online. They play a similar role to the ‘50 Cent Party’ in balancing online public opinion. See: http://www.technologyreview.com/view/426174/undercover-researchers-expose-chinese-internet-water-army/ accessed 2 April 2013.
Collective Action in Digital China
A Case Study of the 2013 Southern Weekly Incident

Sally Xiaojin Chen

Since the 1989 student movement, collective action involving street assemblies has been increasingly risky for Chinese citizens. Although the contribution of the Internet to civic participation in China has been celebrated and a large body of literature has been generated in this area, the facilitation of radical forms of social movements through the use of the Internet in China has rarely been explored. This is not because of the shortage of large-scale political social movements in China – recent and ongoing movements include the New Citizens’ Movement (新公民运动) and the Southern Street Movement (南方街头运动). There are also increasing numbers of environmental protests in China. However, collective action focusing on political issues and involving both online and street action is hard to develop in ways similar to the ‘Arab Spring’ or the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movements, due to the sensitiveness of institutionalising movements in China. Therefore, radical political movements in China are seldom studied.

The past two decades have seen Chinese citizens pursuing online activism as the prominent form of political resistance. Guobin Yang understands online activism as ‘any form of Internet-based collective action that promotes, contests, or resists change’. His analysis positions the emergence of online activism within the development of a new citizen activism in the wake of the repression of the 1989 student movement. Focusing on online contention and attributing the mobilisation of political participation to the power of the Internet, collective action in China is studied in the same way as online activism.

The emergence of the Southern Weekly Incident in 2013 is remarkable in both the fields of journalistic practice and politics in China. On
the surface, the case was a censorship conflict between Southern Weekly, a prominent nationally circulated newspaper belonging to Southern Media Group (南方报业传媒集团), and the local provincial government’s official propaganda department. In fact, it was a confrontation of Chinese citizens against authority around the long-term issue of press freedom. It is a meaningful case for study because it generated both online and offline action that pushed the limit of collective action in China. The case demonstrates a form of online and offline action that is seemingly segmented by different groups. It is neither a form of e-tactics, where protest happens only online, nor is it exactly an e-mobilisation which aims to use the Internet to turn to the streets.3

I shall first briefly review the literature on collective action and discuss the logic of connective action as a framework for analysing online activism. To understand people’s commitment to taking action, I introduce embodiment as a key factor for mobilising individuals in action. Then I present the case study of the 2013 Southern Weekly Incident, which I argue demonstrates the logic of connective action and individuals’ embodied mobilisation. A format of online and offline action being seemingly segmented by different groups of people is also highlighted in this case study, suggesting multiple action frames being facilitated by the use of the Internet in collective democratic action in China.

**COLLECTIVE ACTION AND THE LOGIC OF CONNECTIVE ACTION**

To understand collective action, Melucci argues for the need to capture the ‘action systems in action’.4 He claims that movements are ‘the outcome of exchanges, negotiations, decisions, and conflicts among actors’ – thus the need to capture the forming systems of the unity of actors and the implementation of their collective action.5 Della Porta and Diani focus on the internal links between actors and emphasise ‘social relationships and feelings of solidarity and of collective belonging’ as factors that make the mobilisation of movements possible.6 Concerned with the effects of modern technology on movements, Gerbaudo emphasises the use of the Internet in movements as a tool to mobilise people’s emotion and collective identity.7

To understand the logic of large-scale networks of contentious action, Bennett and Segerberg develop the concept of ‘connective action’. They argue that a logic of ‘connective action based on person-
alized content sharing across media networks’ is becoming prominent in contemporary contentious politics. This logic is “distinct from the logic of collective action associated with high levels of organizational resources.” They assert that organizing action in contemporary societies has become more personalized. They identify two elements of this ‘personalized communication’: ‘Political content in the form of easily personalized ideas’ and ‘Various personal communication technologies that enable sharing these themes.’ The former ensures that the action frames are inclusive of different personal motivations for a particular contestation, while the latter element emphasises the pivotal role of communication technologies. Taking digital media as organizing agents, people co-produce and co-distribute personally expressive content. The network itself becomes the organisational structure and the action becomes a personal expression. This logic bypasses the organisational dilemma in collective action that requires people to adopt particular social identities.

The logic of connective action provides a framework for studying collective action that highlights the complex effects of the Internet. It makes it reasonable to treat people’s online expressive activities – people’s discussion, expression of emotions and opinions as a type of online collective action. Zheng and Wu regard ‘voice activities’ as a successful strategy used by Chinese citizens online to challenge the state in the sense that they do not pose a direct physical challenge to the state and with the online voice growing louder, a collective force may be formed to bring improvement of legitimacy. Due to a selective control strategy exercised by the state, there seems to be room for certain types of voice to develop. As King, Pan and Roberts’ study on Chinese online censorship shows, criticism of the state, leaders, and their policies can be routinely published, as long as it does not contain collective action potential (in physical offline locations).

The 2013 Southern Weekly Incident involves collective action in both online and offline domains. Although in the digital age it is increasingly difficult to differentiate people’s online action from offline action given that people are widely networked, the peculiar form of action in the 2013 Southern Weekly Incident makes it meaningful to analyse it by focusing on online and offline action as two stages of action without missing the interplay of these two types of action in each stage.
EMBODIMENT IN MOVEMENTS

As the logic of connective action emphasises individual commitment via personalised expression, I would like to explore how individuals’ commitment to taking action can be understood. Theories of embodiment conceptualise the relationship between physicality and subjectivity of human actions. Studying global movements, Kevin McDonald claims that people participating in collective action bring their personal experiences and feelings to the collective group. Through acting with other people, they encounter their vulnerable selves and recover interiority. In this process, people reconstruct their subjectivities and reconnect these with other people’s subjectivities. He terms this as the action grammar of embodiment. Concerned with people’s emotion in action, Juris claims that performative rituals in action can trigger and amplify people’s emotion. In this sense, people’s embodied experience is also enhanced during action. Therefore, embodiment is the key to facilitating and sustaining the mobilisation of collective action.

Since embodiment has been discussed as the reconnection of corporeal bodies and internal subjectivities through physical action, the role of the Internet in collective action makes such a conception of embodiment problematic. It has been argued that bodies online are not ‘real bodies’ and thus virtual activities such as characters playing their particular roles in a computer game, and communication through the presentation of texts may be considered disembodied. As Balsamo explains, however, the body in technology is the body ‘materially redesigned through the use of new technologies of corporeality’. In his conceptualisation of the ‘human body as a boundary figure’, Balsamo argues for an inseparable connection of the natural body and the cultural body in shaping the meaning of the body. Coté claims that we have always been bodies in technology in the sense that technology is always presented ‘not as a prosthetic supplement to the biological body but as comprising an originary condition, a defining characteristic of the human’. Studying online gaming, Jordan argues that it is impossible for the virtual body to be detached from the real body and the virtual body and the real body are mutually constructed and circumscribed. Drawing on insights of Balsamo, Coté, and Jordan, I see the online body as an inseparable part of the meaningful body. Thus the embodied effects generated in physical action that McDonald outlines can also be seen in online action. To
be more specific, taking online action even by simply clicking the mouse and typing on the keyboard entails physical bodily movements.

Embodiment on the individual level is facilitated by people’s experiential concerns. Specifically, people’s emotional mobilisation towards an issue does not work simply in the form of spectators’ sympathy, but is based on experiential concerns and anxiety. McDonald argues that in social movements people could see their subjectivity in the battered body of another. The unfairness and injustice existing in Chinese society make Chinese citizens concerned about the possible suffering of others. Taking this factor into account, it is reasonable to explore individuals’ past experiences and their embodied mobilisation in collective action both online and offline.

THE SOUTHERN WEEKLY INCIDENT
Qualitative methodologies are adopted to explore the mechanism and forms of the collective action in the 2013 Southern Weekly Incident. I observed the incident in online settings in January 2013 and collected relevant online data, including timeline information, social-media posts, open letters, petition documents, photographs of the protest, and media reports and comments on the incidents. I conducted in-depth interviews with 45 journalists and citizens involved in this case. I have also collected contextual data from domestic and overseas reports and research journals to analyse the political, economic, and social context in China. In the following section, names and identifying information have been altered to protect the identities of those concerned.

Information fermentation and online action
On the evening of 2 January 2013, Lin, a Southern Weekly staff member, received a WeChat (Weixin, a popular mobile text- and voice-messaging communication service in China) message which was posted in a WeChat contact group for Southern Weekly staff. The message informed the group that the New Year greetings message of Southern Weekly (which was due to be published on 3 January) had been modified and Tuo Zhen, head of the Propaganda Department in Guangdong province, might be responsible for this action. Photographs of the modified articles were uploaded to the WeChat social network. It was suggested that the modification took place after all edits of the New Year Edition were finalised by Southern Weekly Editorial Department at 3 am on 1 January.
When Lin received this message, he was having a New Year gathering with around 20 other colleagues from Southern Media Group in Lijiang, a city 1,264 miles away from Guangzhou where the newspaper is located. Most of this group work for *Southern Metropolis Daily* (which also belongs to the Southern Media Group) and *Southern Weekly*, two of the most liberal newspapers in China.

The news was shared and anger was immediately sparked among these 20 journalists. Their discussion quickly focused on finding ways of voicing their resistance. As a strategy for efficiently spreading information while minimising risks, it was finally agreed that *Southern Metropolis Daily* staff (rather than *Southern Weekly* staff) should post the first messages of the news on Sina Weibo (a popular microblogging network, thereafter referred to as ‘Weibo’) and other people may all help repost them. Huang and Jiang, who worked for *Southern Metropolis Daily* and who had the biggest number of Weibo followers, soon sent out their first messages. The messages rapidly triggered reposting and comments by some journalists and editors in Southern Media Group.

On the morning of 3 January, the newspaper was published. While online rumours about the unethical modification by the propaganda department were still awaiting verification, readers identified other issues on the front page, including mistyped characters and historical inaccuracies. These issues were posted online and people made fun of Director Tuo’s allegedly poor level of literacy.

However, Lin and his colleagues were repeatedly rebuked by senior staff at Southern Media Group who instructed them to delete the Weibo posts and not to repost related information. The first messages were finally deleted.

Large-scale online support did not come until *Southern Weekly* staff validated the rumours that had been circulating on Weibo for two days. At 18:50 pm on 3 January, *Southern Weekly* Editorial Department posted an open letter on Weibo in which *Southern Weekly* staff accused Guangdong’s Propaganda Department of aggressively interfering in the production and final editing of the New Year Edition, and modifying the final version after it was finalised. They demanded thorough investigation of the incident and the re-opening of the blocked Weibo accounts of journalists and citizens who participated in the discussion of the
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incident. With journalists and editors of *Southern Weekly* posting more relevant information on Weibo, large-scale information fermentation started online. So too did a race against post deletion.

Obviously, an incident with such an anti-censorship character is ‘unreportable’ for mass media including news websites in China. Being in its heyday, Sina Weibo became the main source of information for Chinese citizens. It was efficiently adopted by *Southern Weekly* staff and other Southern Media staff as a platform for publicising the progress of their investigation and organising online petitions. Reports on the *Southern Weekly* case from overseas media were also shared on Weibo.

As a relatively private social networking tool, WeChat became another popular information disclosure platform working behind the scenes. WeChat groups were formed among both *Southern Weekly*’s current and former staff members. WeChat messages shared among friendship circles provided them with trustworthy information sources.

In the four days after *Southern Weekly* staff confirmed the modification of the New Year Edition, a series of online actions unfolded on Weibo. Open letters were circulated online asking for signature support. The open letter addressed to citizens received 3,000 signatures within two days, and new signatures were constantly updated on Weibo. *Southern Weekly* staff posted another open letter, declaring the establishment of *Southern Weekly* Ethics Committee for investigating the incident.

On the night of 6 January, *Southern Weekly*’s official Weibo account was seized by the senior staff of the newspaper and this episode marked the climax of the online action in this case, leading some people to protest outside the office buildings of the Southern Media press. Weibo itself formed a stage for this show. At 9:18 pm, Wu Wei, the executive officer of *Southern Weekly*’s New Media business, posted the following statement on Weibo:

@Feng Duan: I have handed in the password of Sina Weibo account @SouthernWeekly to Mao Zhe, General Manager of *Southern Weekly*’s New Media business. I will not be responsible for the following statement and any future content posted by this account. (6 January, at 9:18 pm)

Wu’s statement was censored and removed shortly after. Two minutes after Wu posted the statement, *Southern Weekly*’s official Weibo account sent out a statement of clarification:
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@Southern Weekly: To our readers: The New Year Greeting we published in the January 3rd New Year Edition was written by our editors under the theme of Chasing Dreams; the preface on the front page was written by one of our directors. The related rumours on the Internet are untrue. We apologise to our readers for the mistakes we made due to our negligence in the haste. (6 January, at 9:20 pm)

This statement, denying the interference of the Guangdong Propaganda Department in the production and publication of the New Year Edition, was apparently intended to prevent further demands for accountability of the propaganda department. It provoked angry responses from onlookers, disappointment and anger diffusing on Weibo.

Following this, Southern Weekly staff successively posted messages calling for clarification. However, these Weibo posts were soon censored and removed by Sina Weibo. The intensity triggered a strike threat made by editorial staff of Southern Weekly’s Economy Edition at 9:49 pm.

At 11:04 pm, a statement signed by 97 Southern Weekly staff was posted on Weibo, declaring that the Southern Weekly’s official Weibo account was taken over forcibly and the post ‘To our readers’ was untrue.

Updated investigation reports of the Southern Weekly Incident signed by Southern Weekly Ethics Committee were posted on Weibo on 7 January. These reports revealed the two-day struggle within Southern Weekly in which the chief editor first asked his staff to post the untrue information on the official Weibo account and then forcibly seized the official account from the account’s manager. The reports were quickly removed.

The prompt and relentless deletion conducted by Sina Weibo triggered another type of action – racing against the deletion to defend the ‘truth’. Active Chinese Weibo users formed a large-scale reposting relay to keep information flowing. They attempted to utilise the few seconds or minutes before the deletion in order to spread the information to other accounts, thus lengthening the lifespan of the posts.

Creatively using homophones, punctuation marks, and images to cheat the filtering system is a skill practised by Chinese citizens in their daily Weibo usage and well used in the Southern Weekly case. The Chinese writing tradition chunqiu bifa (春秋笔法) which expresses critical opinions in subtle ways was adopted in order to avoid direct confrontation. Mocking as a technique created entertaining effects that attracted a large number of reposts. The creative and artful ways of expression were Chinese citizens’ strategies of protecting them from political repression.

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In general, the online action in the *Southern Weekly* case aggregated elements that are important in traditional street protests, which are strictly restricted in China. Staff of the Southern Media Group published statements and declarations about the facts of the *Southern Weekly* case and sent out open letters to ask for support from citizens in ways similar to organising conventional street protests. Citizens reposted declarations and statements and signed petitions of support to enhance the online voice, which resembled ways of creating momentum in traditional street protests. Through these online activities, public voices were collected and broadcast to the public and the authorities. On the one hand, Weibo was used like a loudspeaker for mobilisation and communication. On the other hand, Weibo formed an arena similar to offline locations for the action to unfold. The ‘battle’ over the seizing of the official Weibo account was an example.

Considering what I discussed earlier about the conception of voice activities as one type of online action, the totality of individuals posting messages online is itself a form of collective action in a general sense. While the declarations, statements and online petitions initiated collectively by journalists were loosely organised following internal discussion on WeChat, the understanding of each individual’s action as part of the entirety of online collective action implies the acknowledgement of the non-organised format of it. This is in line with the logic of connective action which emphasises the personalisation of political expression. Weibo posts sent by individual journalists and citizens from their personal Weibo accounts, though delivering personalised appeals that did not form a consensus appeal in general, contributed greatly to the collective voice online. This worked in the way that individuals’ expression mobilised each other and their voices together created and increased the momentum of the online collective action.

To the street?
The intensity of online protest incentivised some people to protest outside the office buildings of the press. However, for many people, distancing themselves from street politics is the bottom line, regardless of how active they are online. No journalists from Southern Media Group who initiated the online discussion and a series of online actions about the *Southern Weekly* Incident made the shift from online to offline. In my interviews, many journalists honestly expressed their willingness to work
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within the current censorship system rather than risk unemployment and even prison. A journalist of *Southern Weekly* said: ‘What we need to do is, to develop the case online to the maximum, whilst ensuring the development remains only online.’ The doubt about the effectiveness of collective action was also commonly expressed by the journalists. Moreover, as many interviewees added, they did not see an organiser or a key actor who could possibly mobilise the whole group. Therefore, they chose to remain online pursuing what they regard as mild defiance rather than radical protests on the street.

So who was protesting on the street? What sort of motivation and justification for action did they hold that surpassed their concerns of the potential risk they were facing in action?

The majority of the street protesters in the *Southern Weekly* Incident objected to the harm done to the newspaper, or in a broader sense, the freedom of press and speech. Let me briefly give two examples. Xiang’s photos of her wearing a mouth mask with three characters ‘Bi Yan Tao’ (‘speaking is prohibited’) on it were published widely on Weibo and overseas media, making her one of the best-known protesters in the *Southern Weekly* case. Xiang was in her 30s. She used to work as a web editor in an online current affairs forum, where she was required to read the citizens’ posts on the forum, and delete ‘sensitive and inappropriate’ content. Feeling frustrated by what she had to do as a web editor, Xiang resigned from her job after two years working on the forum. It was the first time that Xiang participated in a protest. Xiang had been a loyal reader of *Southern Weekly* for many years and gradually felt disappointed by the lack of significant reports being published in the newspaper in recent years. She laid the blame on the censorship system. As she puts it, ‘the newspaper had been dying, and this time it was sentenced to a complete death’. For her, presenting the yellow chrysanthemums was an action of mourning the death of both her beloved newspaper and press freedom in China. As she recalls, after *Southern Weekly*’s Weibo account was seized on the night of 6 January, her decision to go to South Press and present flowers was made ‘firmly’, ‘simply’ and ‘without a lot of consideration and concern’.

Hui, another protester, similarly recalls that he did not see himself as joining a dangerous political event, but simply protesting for ‘some basic rights’. Hui was hidden behind a V for Vendetta mask, holding a
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sign which read: ‘1.3 billion Chinese have the right to speak; we want democracy and constitutionalism.’ His mask stood out from the crowds, and for four days it attracted passers-by to stop and watch. For Hui, the V for Vendetta mask was a tool that both conveyed a message of confrontation and protected him from revealing his real identity. Hui later wrapped himself in newspaper from head to foot and sat on the floor to read a newspaper. Through this art performance, he intended to ‘let more people know that the media has been kidnapped’. It was also the first time that Hui participated in a street protest. Hui was in his 30s, a real-estate businessman and a father of three children. He did not care much about social issues until 2007 when he went to court to challenge a tenant renting one of his properties. He won his case but the court officials would not help with the execution of the penalty. He sought help from the media to expose the case and was then frustrated to find that the media could not help him either. After the case, he was bankrupt. The judicial injustice, the incompetence of public institutions, and the helplessness of the media made him realise that the social system as a whole was not working.

The Southern Weekly Incident finally prompted Hui to take street action. He felt personally connected with Southern Media for their enlightening and liberal reports that he had been reading for many years. The night the Southern Weekly’s Weibo account was seized, his emotion ran high. For the whole night he was refreshing Weibo pages looking at updated information about the case. He explains:

I saw so many media employees struggling. At the end they still had to give up their official Weibo account. Although they were not able to say much, we felt the despair between their simple words. I felt so moved by the effort they had made and such urgency that I should stand up for them. It is time for me to step forward.

Both Xiang and Hui became active protesters after the Southern Weekly Incident, joining other dissidents in democratic social events in the remainder of 2013. As Hui explains, the Southern Weekly incident was a tipping point when he realised the passion deep inside him for taking offline action, and from this point he was networking with other protesters that he met in the Southern Weekly case and stepped into an activist community whose members are always prepared for street protests.
In many aspects, Xiang and Hui may be representative of the majority of the street protesters in the Southern Weekly case. They were relatively young and brave, and did not have much experience of street protests before the case. They took action without seriously considering the potential dangers they faced. This does not mean that they were unaware of any risk. The self-conviction was not made with absolute certainty. However, they resisted being too worried by risks, because the lack of experience of protests means predicting possible danger of action for them was merely based on imagination. The passion of taking democratic action, inside these young and angry people, overtook their consideration of risks that for them could be seen as simply making them paranoid.

Their active Internet use underlined the influence by the global culture that brought them not only democratic ideas to demand and defend human rights, but also creative ideas of using artful forms to amplify action publicity. As many of them recall, they believed that strengthening the publicity of the case, informing people of the case, and mobilising more people should be their direct and somewhat realistic target of action at the current stage. Xiang’s mouth mask, her posture of presenting followers, Hui’s V for Vendetta mask and his performance of the ‘newspaper man’, citizens’ banners and signboards with inspiring words, the group singing, and so forth, all show the creativity of the people and their determined pursuit of publicity. The effects of the arts in protest on publicity were further amplified through the presentation on the Internet.

The second group are the activists who used the Southern Weekly case as merely a good opportunity for action. Their aim in the Southern Weekly case was to promote a civil action rather than specifically to protest against censorship or demand press freedom. Many of these activists admittedly did not perceive their action as a struggle for the newspaper, as one activist explains,

... It doesn’t matter how the Southern Weekly Incident developed. The Southern Weekly Incident was only the background, the stage of our action ... From the beginning I did not expect the action to be a cooperation of the Southern Media staff, citizens, and our democratic circle. The newspaper is after all operated within the Party-state system. I am familiar with many people inside the media circle and I know very clearly that those media people will not want to pay the price for challenging the system. We cannot expect their cooperation. So we
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can only develop the incident to be an occasion for civic participation and citizen expression ... we are separate from the newspaper... What we want in this case, as in many other cases, is to help citizens defeat the fear of joining street action. We want to let them know that civil expression is itself part of their rights. We hope that after citizens join in more action and develop the habit of taking action, there will be a date for a big scale revolution.

This opinion of using the Southern Weekly publication Incident for civil action is shared by most of the activists in the Southern Weekly case.

Although the activists did not make up a big proportion of the protest population (roughly 30 people out of the total number of 300 on 7 January and a smaller number on the next two days),\(^22\) the activists’ contribution to the Southern Weekly protest was significant – not only through their determined action at the site, but also through the effective mobilisation of citizens by broadcasting their protest on Weibo. The utilisation of social media allowed them to claim that their action involved no organisation, no leaders, and no action agenda. They explained that they initiated the action and then let the Internet do the work of implementing massive mobilisation by broadcasting their action. In other words, the activists mobilised people to join the action without directly ‘organising’ them. As one activist recalls,

I did not ask anybody to go with me. But I knew that as long as my friends knew I was there, they would also go. I sent photos of the protest scene. Once I sent more than just one or two, my friends knew I did not just repost other people’s photos but I was actually there. The GPS of the phone also showed my location. Then many of my friends came.

The use of social media is challenging the authorities’ control of street gathering. It becomes difficult for the authorities to accuse particular activists of organising and leading a particular event.

Pre-existing network plays a significant role in organising and mobilising action. The activists in Guangzhou regularly hold dinner gatherings during which they discuss social issues.\(^23\) However, the participants in the dinner gatherings in main cities have been under increasing pressure. They may be questioned, and sensitive persons are sometimes threatened or detained. Under such conditions, WeChat groups are gradually becoming the preferred venue of gathering. They
discuss possible collective action there and manage to organise different groups to act.

In the *Southern Weekly* Incident, the activist community as a whole first worked on the goal of action. This goal was simply to mobilise more people to speak out, to confront the authorities, and specifically, to protest. In other words, it was to expand and strengthen the coalition of the people for confrontation. The activist community also worked as the network which, together with the Internet, facilitated the action of its members. When the activists claimed that they did not organise the action in the *Southern Weekly* incident, they also admitted that they were confident that their followers, who got online and saw their photographs of protesting, would join the action. The network of these activists works for itself in organising and mobilising the activists through the facilitation of the Internet.

Citizens’ who were gathering and protesting were photographed and put on Weibo. Weibo became a medium for live reports of the ongoing event and citizens co-produced this report online. Information was updated on a minute-by-minute basis. The constant broadcasting on Weibo about the offline action echoed and strengthened the online voice.

The one-week incident ended without creating a new dawn for Chinese press freedoms. After a few internal negotiations within *Southern Weekly*, journalists went back to work. Despite the fundamental issue of censorship remaining ingrained in media system, this chapter argues that, in the Chinese context, voicing opinions about such a sensitive issue like censorship is itself a great achievement for democratisation of the society, and it would not be possible to see this without the facilitation of the Internet.

**EMBODIED MOBILISATION AND CONNECTIVE ACTION AS A MECHANISM**

I cannot remember how many of my reports were killed last year since Tuo [the surname of head of the Guangdong Propaganda Department] came. Some time last year I had six reports killed in a row. No matter how much this was directly associated with his censoring, my emotion was pushed up after the New Year Greeting news came out. I just felt excited that I wanted to keep reposting those posts, the declaration, the statement, the open letters that support *Southern Weekly* until Tuo was sent away, and I felt hopeful about this good opportunity. – A journalist of Southern Media Group
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The grammar of embodiment reveals the meaning of acting both online and offline in this case. Through posting, reposting, and commenting on information and opinions about the issue, and through acting on the street, a sense of being connected with other people was generated, and in this way citizens’ subjectivities which were formed in the past sufferings of censorship, social unfairness and injustice, power abuse by the authorities, and so forth were reconstructed. Through this process, their pain was being healed. In the sense of understanding this process of healing, reviewing the trauma caused by actors’ past experience is important.

Journalists’ emotion was accumulated in their daily work in which censorship on various levels determined what topics and which angles of the particular topic they were allowed to report. Suffering strict news regulation during the one year that the particular propaganda chief was in post was expressed by most of the Southern Media staff whom I interviewed. They accused him of an abnormal level of censoring compared to previous propaganda officers. The past suffering was felt strongly when the *Southern Weekly* Incident took place and was turned into a force that compelled them to take online action.

Frustration with the propaganda chief was felt even more deeply during the whole month of producing the New Year Edition since early December. The original author of the New Year Greeting revealed that 90 per cent of the contents of his original article had been changed after his first draft was adjusted a few times following the censoring requirements from the chief editor, and even so, the final version was still modified. Many articles were removed during the negotiation and by the end, the total number of subsections in the New Year Edition were reduced from 16 to 12. Five editors in charge worked three whole nights on a roll to make sure that the final version did not contain any ‘mistakes’. However, the final version was still modified.

It may appear that citizens online simply got angry and felt sympathetic about what censorship had done to *Southern Weekly*. Many citizens’ street protests in this case may also be described as being impulsive, both by themselves and other people. Admittedly, feeling impulsive was part of their emotion that drove them to take action both online and offline. However, impulsiveness in a collective action in the Chinese environment where risks obviously exist, should be understood
as the emotion rather than an impetus. To be specific, the impulse was not the motive that explains their action, but an abrupt inclination that was produced at the particular time, and this sudden internal force did not irrationally arrive out of nowhere, but was embedded in the totality of emotion being developed and adjusted for a period of time. As we saw from the examples of Xiang and Hui, this impulse was generated by their long-term personal connection with the reports in the newspaper or Southern Media Group, by the anger accumulated in their previous experience of power abuse by the authorities, and by the feeling of the freedom of speech or other human rights being suppressed in their daily lives. Only by understanding their past experience can we articulate the motive of their action.

The healing is a long-term process and the satisfaction from it will encourage their further action. This also explains many activists’ long-term commitment to street protests including the Southern Weekly Incident. Most of them had experienced confrontation with the authorities in the past. Embodiment worked through their previous confrontation to mobilise the later confrontation. Their past suffering of serious injustice or unfairness that is still powerfully influencing their current lives continues to trigger their pursuit of activism. For example, some of them had participated in the 1989 student movement which had a life-long impact.

Since the experience of embodiment is dependent on individuals’ past experience, it may also explain the different appeals made by journalists and citizens in the case. Compared to the journalists’ direct experience with censorship at work, other citizens’ broader and more abstract feelings about the issues involved motivated them to take on more idealistic approaches to the case.

Fighting against censorship was not a universal appeal. Interestingly, the journalists who were seen as the victims of censorship did not directly challenge news censorship: different kinds of appeals were made by different groups, depending on how far they were from the centre of the case. The further from the centre, the safer, and the more likely to express political appeals. Former Southern Weekly staff and journalists in Southern Media Group in the few days of promoting the Southern Weekly Incident clearly requested the resignation of the provincial propaganda minister, while Southern Weekly staff did not publicly express
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their willingness to challenge censorship or the propaganda chief, but emphasised their focus on the ‘publication accident’. In other words, they did not intend to challenge the long existing issue of press censorship in China, but simply demanded the adjustment of regulation implementation in censoring the newspaper. Some explanations for this relatively mild demand were provided by the journalists I interviewed. While some of them admitted that directly challenging censorship as a whole is ‘too political and risky’, many of them believed that ‘it is impossible to challenge the whole system’.

By contrast, participating citizens demanded press freedom and democracy. As one of the Southern Media staff elaborates:

What the Southern Weekly staff were trying to do was ... to negotiate a slightly looser way of censoring. But it was the Internet, it was the people online that somehow forced a more fundamental issue of press freedom to this case. Then when the online voice was pushed to that level, Southern Weekly staff had no way back.

These diverse expressions and approaches to the issues in the Southern Weekly Incident fit what Bennett and Segerberg discussed about the personalised expression in the logic of connective action. The central issue was framed flexibly by different groups of people. The expressions, although personalised by different people, were shared and shaped by each other. As one Southern Media journalist observes,

Some people don’t read Southern Weekly for long, but they support the journalists’ action. Between journalists and citizens, there was an echo of social value. This echo enhanced journalists’ emotion and strengthened their courage to speak out more bravely.

CONCLUSION

The study of the 2013 Southern Weekly Incident shows multiple frames of action pursued by Chinese citizens, including action online and offline, following physical and vocal forms, based on various appeals, and presented through flexible personal expressions. The co-existence of the multiple frames of action work collectively through the facilitation by the Internet. Specifically, a mechanism of embodied mobilisation based on the logic of connective action is promoted by the use of the Internet, and the format of action being segmented by different groups
without being disconnected is implemented through the linking of the Internet.

People’s action foregrounding the pursuit of embodied experience is triggered by their past suffering, and is accomplished through personalised expressions online and offline. The Internet accommodates and coordinates various personal expressions across networks to become a seemingly coherent, discursive and collective force demanding political change. In general, citizens’ action was not organised in the strict sense, but autonomous organising was enabled by the network.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

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REFERENCES


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ENDNOTES

1. The New Citizens’ Movement was initiated by a civil rights group led by the civil rights lawyer Xu Zhiyong in 2010. It is a collection of civil rights activities from 2010 to 2013 in mainland China intended to facilitate a
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peaceful transition of the current political system towards constitutionalism and to promote civil society in China.

The Southern Street Movement was initiated in August 2011. It involves ongoing actions of petitioners holding banners or signs to protest against injustice or forced demolitions in main southern cities such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen.


9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 744.


19. McDonald, Global Movements.

20. Later elaboration by the Southern Weekly Ethical Committee (a committee formed on 5 January by some Southern Weekly staff for the purpose of investigating the modification of the New Year Edition) suggested that the modification of the New Year Edition after finalisation of the newspaper was made in five places over six pages. These include the following points and other text changes: the New Year Edition title ‘Dreams of Home-Country’ was replaced by ‘Chasing Dreams’ which directly indicates more optimistic Party values; in the editorial of New Year Greeting, a number of characters were deleted and about one hundred characters were added; the artwork on the front page was scaled down and a restrictive description emphasising the evolution of the spirits of the Party was printed as a preface beside the artwork; on p. 3 the article ‘Guangzhou teens show their patriotic actions rationally (at anti-Japanese demonstrations)’ was removed. A Southern Weekly image advertising took its place.

21. According to China Digital Times (Chinese) which runs a project that crowd-sources filtered keywords on Sina Weibo search, terms including ‘Tuo Zhen’ (the name of Guangdong Propaganda Minister) and words that sound like ‘Tuo Zhen’ thus adopted by people to refer to the name, ‘Chidu’ which means ‘measure’ that represents the meaning of the Chinese character ‘Tuo’ (People online started calling Tuo Zhen ‘Chidu Minister’ during Southern Weekly case, meaning ‘Measure Minister’ to imply the scale of censorship), ‘China dream’, ‘dream of constitutionalism’ (the title of the original New Year Greeting was ‘China’s Dream, the Dream of Constitutionalism’), ‘Guangdong Propaganda Department’, ‘Southern Weekly New Year’s Greeting’, and ‘Nanzhou New Year’s Greeting’ (Nanzhou is an abbreviation for Southern Weekly) were unsearchable on Weibo on 3 January. On 4 January, words like ‘open letter’, ‘Yu the Great Controls the Waters’ (a story told in the published New Year Edition in which a historical mistake about this story was made) were added to the blocked list. On 6 January, each of the four individual characters in the name ‘Southern Weekly’ and ‘nfzm’ which stands for...
‘Nanfang Zhoumo’ (meaning southern weekend), the Chinese name of Southern Weekly, were blocked.


23. This ongoing event organised by citizens for discussing social issues over the meals is called ‘Tong Cheng Fan Zui’ (fan – food, zui – drunk), meaning ‘Same-city dinner gathering’ and is homonymous with ‘committing a crime in the same city’ in Chinese, also called ‘citizen banquets’. It has been a tradition for many years that some Chinese online citizens organise themselves to meet up for discussing social issues over a meal. At around the end of 2011, it was proposed by the New Citizens’ Movement (a collection of numerous civil rights activities in mainland China since 2010) to set the last Saturday of every month as a fixed date for the dining gatherings so as to strengthen the coalitions of citizens.
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