

China's Contested Internet

Edited by GUOBIN YANG

Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2015

xii + 310 pp. £18.99

ISBN 978-87-7694-176-5 doi:10.1017/S0305741016000059

The internet has brought fundamental changes to China. Yet, scholars, and observers in general, have yet to reach a consensus about the extent to which the technology has transformed politics in the world's largest authoritarian regime. Evidently, the internet has empowered social actors to initiate, organize and participate in social and political activities that were more constrained, if not impossible, in the pre-internet era. In effect, internet users in China are often referred to as “netizens” precisely because the term carries a strong sense of entitlement that is absent in the offline world. However, the expectation that the internet would bring about political liberalization and democratization has not been met. The Chinese party-state has once again proved its resilience with its ability to adapt and control. Then, in what ways has the internet transformed China and to what extent has the authoritarian rule been challenged? This volume edited by Guobin Yang, a true guru of Chinese internet studies, represents the latest scholarship in the field. With contributions from a group of brilliant scholars, the book not only adds to the knowledge on the specific topics under study, but also fleshes out a distinctive “deep Internet studies” approach to study the Chinese internet.

The book consists of eleven chapters, including the introduction, and covers a diverse selection of topics. Several chapters of the book have focused on the variety of online activism such as resistance to literacy censorship, civil activism of web-based backpacking communities, online spectating (*weiguan*) as a form of public participation, and internet-based collective mobilization such as the 2013 *Southern Weekly* protest. Marina Svensson's chapter on Sina Weibo acknowledges the empowering effects of the platform, but highlights digital divides between opinion leaders and ordinary citizens. The book also studies less “political” phenomena such as the maker movement and hackerspaces, online contestation of ethnic and racial identity, and the proliferation of *diaosi* (losers) culture. In terms of governmental responses, the book has one chapter on citizen participation in online political consultation and one on the government's social management efforts through official microblogging. Such diversity in topics mirrors vividly “the multilayered and complex dimensions of the Chinese Internet” (p. 14).

Through these empirical chapters, what Guobin Yang calls a “deep Internet studies” approach is fleshed out. Such an approach appreciates the complexity of the Chinese internet and more importantly broadens the conceptualization of politics and participation in China. As Yang puts it, there are “many ways of being political” (p. 13). To gauge the impact of the internet, it is necessary to go beyond high politics or outright state–society confrontation to incorporate everyday experiences and practices online. Such a perspective helps better evaluate the political significance of phenomena that may otherwise be deemed as non-political. For instance, the *diaosi* culture seems to be somewhat irrelevant when examined through the lens of state control vs. social resistance. However, as Marcella Szablewicz demonstrates, the meme is highly political as a form of youth participation, a structure of feeling, and a reflection of China's social stratification. The “deep Internet studies” approach also enables new insights into old topics, as witnessed in Thomas Chen's study on literacy censorship. Instead of viewing censorship as a binary struggle, Chen sees it as a

process of “alter-production” through which the censors and netizens together shape the production of online content.

Another major merit of the book is its historical sensibility. The historicity of the Chinese internet is evident in the co-evolution of institutions, practices and technological advancements in the past two decades. In particular, the introduction of Weibo, as emphasized in the book, marked the beginning of a new period of citizen activism and state control – both with distinctive features not found in the pre-Weibo era. By organizing the chapters into pre-Weibo and Weibo eras, the volume conveys a sense of both continuity and change in the historical process.

Much can be learned from the informative and inspiring analyses in the book. But readers are insatiable in that we always expect more, sometimes quite unreasonably. First, though “the Internet has taken on distinctly Chinese characteristics” (p. 1), making it a “Chinese Internet,” an alternative “Internet in China” perspective – studying China comparatively – can be fruitful. This is by no means to deny the value of the “Chinese Internet” perspective. Rather it echoes the call to bridge China studies and other academic disciplines, especially considering the lack of comparative studies in the field. Second, the interpretive nature of some chapters may also be a concern as readers may question its validity and reliability, particularly given the fluidity of online communication. Moreover, for some readers, much needs to be done to reveal the “politics” behind phenomena such as *diaosi* and the contestation of ethnic and racial identity. After all, events rise and fall and memes come and go, what are the more tangible political implications? In this sense, the book serves as a nice starting point for further research.

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Citizen Publications in China before the Internet

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Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015

xiii + 268 pp. £63.00

ISBN 978-1-137-49207-4 doi:10.1017/S0305741016000060

In contemporary China, the regime encourages people to take no interest in public affairs but to “cultivate such ‘private’ concerns as career and family life.” In this sense, the legacy of most unofficial magazines was twofold: opposition to totalitarianism, but also opposition to the kind of cynicism that many Chinese magazines cultivate today. From today’s vantage point, we can see *minkan* as a defender of virtues that are also endangered by the new face of totalitarianism as represented by the party’s propaganda that evokes a harmonious society. (p. 179)

The conclusion of Shao Jiang’s book is refreshing: the author does not shy away from defining the true nature of the regime as “a new face of totalitarianism” after having presented an almost comprehensive history of resistance during its first 40 years of existence.

The book’s title, *Citizen Publications in China before the Internet*, is a little awkward. As Shao tries to show in his introductory chapter, Chinese subjects of the Empire, of the Republic and of the PRC have seized all opportunities, whatever the risks, to express their voices when they have clashed with the authorized media. Traditionally, information has been regarded as an instrument in the hands of the state, and the Communist Party has attached great importance to its control.