

The book provides a good example of nuanced fieldwork observations and ethnographic details based on a longitudinal field investigation that lasted from 2011 to 2018. This case study could be part of the big picture of migrant workers regarding their evolving workplace dynamics by cohorts, social groups, migrant destinations and so on. Readers will appreciate the rich details of daily interactions and benefit from the grassroots knowledge about migrant workers in China's metropolitan service sector. With its in-depth analysis of migrant workers' life and subjectivity, this is an excellent book for people who are interested in gender, migration, work and China studies more generally.

JING SONG
jingsong@cuhk.edu.hk

The Web of Meaning: The Internet in a Changing Chinese Society

ELAINE J. YUAN

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021

200 pp. \$50.00

ISBN 978-1-487-50813-5 doi:10.1017/S0305741022000212

Elaine Yuan's book *The Web of Meaning* is a timely publication that brings together a series of studies on China's internet and proposes alternative approaches such research across different socio-political and cultural contexts. Instead of regarding the internet as a kind of technological infrastructure or set of commercial practices, Yuan's book proposes a more creative approach to see it as "discursive fields" in which identities, relations, meaning and power negotiations unfold. As Yuan notes, "[t]he symbolic Internet operates less as a received egalitarian public sphere structuring the deliberative activities of all eligible participants than as an array of discursive fields composed of differentially positioned social actors with widely varying access to social and symbolic resources" (p. 7). As internet studies in China become more deeply embedded into China's social and economic domains, it becomes harder for scholars to find new approaches that can tackle and analyse the internet as a whole. Yuan's book makes a great contribution by presenting China's internet as discursive fields that are embedded in the very fibre of Chinese society.

The book has five chapters in total. In chapter one, Yuan contextualizes social changes in China in the realm of cultural (re)production of subjects, institutions and knowledge. As she argues, the internet forms symbolic spaces where social actors struggle to define new concepts and categories for understanding contemporary Chinese society. Cases of *shamate* and *diaosi* (youth subcultures) and the Sun Zhigang incident (the death of a migrant worker in custody) are used to demonstrate how various understandings of Chinese society are mediated by contingent network communications. The concept of "Internet sociality" that Yuan proposes is a powerful explanation for the digital articulations that have emerged in China during the last two decades.

Chapter two employs a theoretical approach to examine how the internet in China becomes a field structure for cultural economy and symbolic interactions, where different kinds of participants perform symbolic struggles, conflicts and goals. Instead of following a liberation-control framework, this chapter argues that the

internet is a symbolic space that has brought forth complex dynamics of consonance, conflict and compromise. This chapter traces the internet using a historical approach, pointing out that the development logic of China's internet has changed from being economically driven to cultural participation. This observation is by no means insightful, but when Yuan talks about cultural process, or cultural production and consumption, the issue of how culture here compares with economy, politics or society is not clear. Perhaps a predefined conceptualization of culture or cultural process is needed here.

From chapter three to five, Yuan uses three empirical cases to substantiate the book's key argument for "the internet as discursive fields": online privacy, cyber-nationalism and the network market. In chapter three, she analyses Chinese people's social discourses on privacy and finds 11 distinct semantic clusters where privacy is practised and understood in China. The chapter argues that China is forming a rapidly evolving private realm and an emerging new public realm. Chapter four uses the Diaoyu Islands event as a case to see how discourses on nationalism generate a kind of relational identity that differentiates representations and experiences of groups with particular socio-economic positions. Chapter five tells the story of Alibaba, one of the leading e-commerce platforms in China, and shows how economic actors mobilize symbolic resources to promote their goals in a network market.

The author takes an open, plural and relational understanding of China's internet by employing the approach of discursive reproduction. With solid empirical data and condensed arguments, this book bridges grand theories with contextual and empirical data. In presenting the internet as a symbolic space, Yuan provides deep and insightful thinking on civil society, field theory, public sphere and discourse in a Chinese context. In terms of research method, she employs innovative quantitative methods such as semantic network analysis and top modelling in data analysis.

The social practices of China's internet are constantly renewed. Yuan's book not only documents this development historically, but also provides a comparative lens on digital articulations between the world and China, the past and the future. During the post-Covid-19 period, some researchers argue that China is re-entering a time that addresses articulations on collective identity and belonging. This book provides possibilities for further dialogue regarding the following key issues: discursive articulations on internet transformation after Covid-19 in China; how the internet is related to state recentralization, social class and geopolitics; and how to draw an updated landscape of China's digital discourse about privacy, cyber-nationalism and marketization?

I agree with the author that the internet plays important mediating roles for an expanding array of social actors in contemporary China. Privacy, nationalism and the marketplace are important examples of social institutions that are undergoing changes in China. Yet, the book would have been even better if it had provided more explanations on how the three cases are related and intersected with one another under the umbrella concept of discursive articulation.

PING SUN
sophiesunping@gmail.com