Censorship and freedom on China's Internet

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ABSTRACT

We propose that the Internet is an arena for the renegotiation of human rights values in Chinese society, and that the social consequences of such renegotiation are changing the power relations between citizens and state. We address this hypothesis by exploring three factors: the choice of technology systems and censorship methods, the contested nature of information on the Internet, and the merger of on and offline worlds for young Internet users in China. We base our work on the existing literature and the research we have conducted with several focus groups of Chinese netizens. In an effort to move the debate on the divide between democratic and authoritarian forms of governance forward, we suggest that the creation of an online human rights culture, when combined with the cross-over between virtual and physical worlds and high due process expectations for most users, leads to an increasingly proactive relationship between citizens and State that challenges political categorization.

INTRODUCTION

Internet censorship in China impacts mostly those with a political or social agenda. Scholarly evidence for Party-State responsiveness to online campaigns around socio-economic issues, particularly the environment and corruption, is robust [Florini *et al*. 2012, Xiao 2011, Yang 2009]. Despite the political threat posed by the Internet in China, the Party-State is unable, or perhaps unwilling to control life on the Web. The vast majority of what people do on the Internet - from choosing a shade of lipstick to consulting the stock market - is ignored by censors and unfettered by government regulation [Xiao 2011].

Tai Zixue argues that there are several ways the Internet has transformed the arena of public opinion in Chinese society: first, it creates a previously unavailable platform for Chinese citizens to express their opinions; second, it produces a steady, core cohort of opinion leaders that constantly sway public opinion in China's cyberspace; and finally, the Internet has become a barometer for politicians, government officials, and lawmakers to gauge public opinion and readjust national or local policy [Tai 2006, 205]. Internet scholar Xiao Qiang points to "an emerging pattern of public opinion and

citizen participation that represents a power-shift in Chinese society" [Xiao 2011, 222], while Yang Guobin views the Internet as China's pathway to democracy [Yang 2009, 223].

This article proposes that the Internet is an arena for the reinforcement of human rights values in Chinese society, and that while the social consequences of such renegotiation do not guarantee a paradigm shift away from authoritarian government, they are changing the power relations between citizens and state. The article contributes to current scholarship by emphasizing the interface between Internet hardware and software violations, and the interlocking relationship between the online and offline human rights perceptions of Chinese users. The first part examines the contradictory human rights paradigm shaped by hardware and software policies promulgated by the Chinese government in response to the global IT industry and Internet users. While scholarship thus far has focused primarily on the issue of censorship, other challenges - such as the individual right to access the Internet versus collective rights to health and an environment with reduced levels of technology-generated pollution – have been largely ignored. The second part discusses netizen reactions to censorship and their expectations for due process online. We present our methodology and the preliminary results of a research project we are conducting based on a survey and focus group discussions with Chinese netizens living abroad. Our initial results join current scholarship in affirming that users value the virtual manifestation of their rights and consider the contested arena of Internet debate an integral part of their everyday lives. Moreover, like their counterparts in other societies, they carry certain paradigms with them when they live abroad, demonstrating a high level of sensitivity to censorship, even away from home. Our respondants are particularly hostile towards their government's refusal to respect due process on the Internet, a position that reflects the fairly homogeneous level of expectation for due process amongst users across the globe. We conclude with some thoughts on why these factors suggest a reinforcement of human rights values in Chinese society and what this virtual space for public debate means for China. Rather than focus on the divide between democratic and authoritarian forms of governance, we posit that the creation of an online human rights culture, combined with the user cross-over between virtual and physical worlds and high user expectations for due process, will lead to an increasingly proactive relationship between citizens and State, one that defies political categorization.

PART 1: SOFTWARE AND HARDWARE SYSTEMS: EMBEDDED CENSORSHIP AND INVISIBLE POLLUTION

The national government has been a vigorous proponent of Internet development in China. The number of Chinese citizens on the Web has soared from a few thousand in 1994 to over 564 million in 2012, with a penetration that has risen from 0,001% to 40% of the population in the same period [World Bank 2012; CNNIC 2013]. China has the world's largest telecommunications market and, according to a 2007 World Bank study, its information technology industry grew two to three times faster than gross domestic product in the period 1997-2007 [Qiang 2007]. The China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) reports that, in 2012, "the mobile phone has become the Internet access terminal with the greatest number of Internet users in the country", surpassing desktop access for the first time, and that a steady growth has been registered in the number of online video users, microblog users, mobile microbloggers, online shoppers, and e-bank and online payment users [CNNIC 2012]. Although the 2013 Global Information Technology Report of the World Economic forum suggests that China has slipped slightly because the "right investments" in ICT, skills and innovation are not forthcoming, China remains well ahead of Brazil, India and South Africa in the network readiness rankings [World Economic Forum 2013].

1.1 Censorship technologies

Ever since the Internet has been accessible in China, the Chinese government has controlled access to any content crossing its digital borders through a set of filtering technologies that have evolved in time and are now commonly known as the Great Firewall. By 1996 Internet access was widely censored and violations of Internet access restrictions could be fined with amounts equivalent to a year's salary of an average worker [Ang 1997]. State control was facilitated by a set of regulations that established that all connections to Internet's international circuits should go through one of four Interconnecting Networks (IN),[1] and all INs had to go through the ChinaNet gateway [Tan *et al.* 1997]. This centralized configuration, which persists today, has allowed the liberalization of the Internet Service Provider (ISP) market; the Chinese government maintains control by requiring that all ISPs subscribe via the IN operators and are licensed from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT).

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[1] Each one controlled and administered by one of four organizations: the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication (ChinaNet), the Ministry of Electronics Industries (ChinaGBN, China Golden Bridge Net), the State Education Commission (CERNET), and the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CSTNET, CSTNet).

As Internet usage grew, impacting every aspect of economic and social life, it became increasingly difficult for the government to strike a balance between maintaining control over Internet access and satisfying the informational and connectivity needs of its industry and citizens. For these reasons, and in response to similar efforts in other countries, China developed a national IT infrastructure project called the "Golden Projects". Among these was the Golden Shield Project that was showcased during the Beijing Trade Show at Security China 2000. The project supported "the adoption of advanced information and communication technology to strengthen central police control, responsiveness, and crime combating capacity, so as to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of police work" [Walton 2001, 6]. Li Runsen, one of the scientists involved in the development of the Golden Shield project, indicated that the project addressed six objectives, one of which was a "public network information surveillance system that monitors real time traffic and keeps undesirable content out of China cyberspace" [Tai 2010, 239]. In order to implement the project, China relied heavily on technological expertise and investments from Western countries where surveillance practices already made widespread use of data collected from networked devices, raising public concern and many ethical questions [Lyon 2001].

This integrated IT infrastructure was based on two main components: a monitoring and surveillance system comparable to that of the most technologically advanced countries, and a China-specific access control system relying on the centralized network configuration described above. This IT infrastructure, together with a set of evolving laws and regulations, as well as Party-guided manual censors, facilitates State monitoring, tracking, and control of Internet traffic, and international traffic in particular. According to a recent report by Freedom House assessing freedom of the Internet across 47 countries, the Chinese Communist Party's "content-control strategy consists of three primary techniques: automated technical filtering, forced self-censorship by service providers, and proactive manipulation" [Kelly *et al.* 2012,131]. Harvard scholar Gary King and his colleagues report that in order to implement such control, hundreds of thousands of people are employed to monitor, censor, and manipulate online content, with up to one thousand censors employed by each private site and approximately "20,000–50,000 Internet police and an estimated 250,000–300,000 '50 cent party members' (*wumao dang*) at all levels of government" [King *et al.* 2013, 1]. A group of scholars led by Dan Wallach at Rice University were able to track manual deletion of Weibo posts, estimating that one third of deletions occur within the first five minutes to half hour; their research posits that Weibo employs "a distributed, heterogeneous strategy for censorship" [Wallach *et al.* forthcoming, 1 and 11].

Scholars concede a range of opinions on what exactly the Party chooses to censor. The majority agrees that online censorship functions in a post-facto manner: only when a critical mass of users have intensively discussed one "sensitive" issue does the site regulator crack down and begin to inhibit further diffusion of information. Some recent large-scale studies explore which terms incur censorship measures. A 2011 study of 56 million messages from the Sina Weibo, and 11 million Chinese–language messages from Twitter suggests that censorship is driven by politically sensitive terms, so that "users may be prohibited from searching for specific terms at a given time (e.g., 'Egypt' during the Arab Spring)" and politically sensitive messages are occasionally deleted retroactively with a policy that appears not to be uniform across the country [Bamman *et al.* 2012, 2]. King and his team propose that, "the purpose of the censorship program is to reduce the probability of collective action by clipping social ties whenever any collective movements are in evidence or expected" [King et al. 2013, 1-2]. They find that posts that are critical of the party are not necessarily targeted by censors, while posts connected to possible collective action in the street are censored regardless of whether they are critical of the state or not.

1.2 Environmental impacts

While most attention is focused on the censorship violations that are part and parcel of the Chinese government's attempt to control Internet content, little attention has been paid to the burgeoning health and environmental violations that wireless technology and data storage will pose for Chinese citizens – on and offline. The installation of base transceiver stations (BTS) - elevated structures that relay electromagnetic signals from mobile devices to a network – is widespread; China had 714,000 3-G mobile phone towers in 2011, owned by China's three leading mobile service providers [Xinhua 2011]. With one billion mobile subscriptions as of May 2012, mobile penetration stands at approximately 74% [Wireless Intelligence 2012], with surging levels of data transmission as purchase of smartphones increases [Wireless Intelligence 2013]. In June of 2006, the Chinese government issued comparatively strict standards under regulations called "Limits for Human Local Exposure to Electromagnetic Fields Emitted by Wireless Communication Terminals".[2] As in most countries, however, virtually no regulation exists to protect Chinese citizens from the effects of *cumulative* prolonged electromagnetic wave exposure, nor do local governments require public hearings concerning the placement and number of mobile phone towers, hearings that are increasingly

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[2] Based on studies led by professor Cao Zhaojin, Director of the National Institute for environmental health and Related Product Safety, the "General Public Exposure Limits to RF Radiation on China" for the 0.3-300 GHz range (including the WiFi range of 2.4 GHz) was set at 10 $\mu W/cm2$ in June 2006, similar to the limits set by the City of Paris, for example, but far lower than those set by the US or Canadian governments [Cao 2006].

common for other potential sources of public dissent [Horsley 2009]. In May 2011, the World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classified radiofrequency electromagnetic fields as *possibly carcinogenic to humans* (Group 2B), based on an increased risk for glioma, a malignant type of brain cancer associated with wireless phone use [IARC-WHO 2011]. While it is too early to tell to what extent prolonged exposure to electromagnetic wave frequencies from multiple sources will result in an increased risk of cancer, the rush towards 4-G bandwidth will substantively ramp up emissions from these towers [Mozur and Osawa 2013].

A second environmental impact of Internet use in China is the electricity required for data storage. It is estimated that China is currently the global leader in coal-fired plants to generate electricity, with an additional 363 in the planning and construction stages [Yang and Cui 2012]. The Chinese government acknowledges high levels of air and water pollution due to coal consumption, but has no choice but to pursue its strategy of increased energy production to bolster economic growth, relying on a mix of renewable energy, nuclear energy and shale gas exploration to mitigate reliance on coal. Although the first low-polluting coal-fired plant opened in Tianjin in December 2012 to great acclaim, the level of water needed to operate certain cooling facilities associated with coal-fired electricity production has created an additional environmental problem, that of water stress in the industrialized area of north-eastern China [Bloomberg 2013]. There is no publically available data specific to China on the amount of electricity required to store data generated by Internet and wireless technology users, but this can only increase alongside advances in digital technology and consumption. In September 2012 the *New York Times* reported that an estimated 30 billion watts of electricity are required to store 1.8 trillion gigabytes of data in digital warehouses worldwide, the equivalent of the output of 30 nuclear powerplants [Glanz 2012]. If data storage is as wasteful in China as it is in the United States, then China would require the equivalent output of six nuclear power plants to meet demand for data storage.[3]

Because environmental activism came late to China and developed under circumstances of dire pollution, the Chinese Communist Party and the State have been fairly benign in their treatment of environmental NGOs [Florini *et al.* 2012, 119] therefore Chinese citizens are attuned to health and environmental violations of their rights and many have demonstrated a willingness to engage in street protests against environmental pollution. Sinologist Elizabeth Perry cautions against using the Anglo-American notion of human rights when examining the use of rights discourses within a Chinese context,

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[3] We can calculate that Chinese Internet users make up approximately one fifth of the world's total of 2,405,518,376 Internet users in 2013 [Internet World Stats], thus China would require roughly one fifth of the estimated 30 nuclear plants necessary to power annual data storage.

suggesting that, in the absence of regular elections, protest grounded in the language of socio-economic rights may serve as a check on the behaviour of State officials, but ends up reinforcing the political system [E. Perry 2008]. We suggest that, while Elizabeth Perry may be right about the function of social protest, the language used in Internet contestation is as much political as socio-economic, and has recalibrated citizen-government relations. This creates an interesting cocktail of opportunities for Chinese netizens. The Internet offers an ideal platform to broaden the human rights discourse and to render it far more sophisticated.

PART II: NEGOTIATING HUMAN RIGHTS ONLINE – BLENDED LIVES

This section explores some of the socio-political consequences of State-imposed censorship on the use of digital technology. State censorship has prompted the 564 million Internet users and 309 million micro-bloggers [CNNIC 2013] who participate in online fora within the Great Firewall to adopt a remarkably resilient online culture that avoids and manipulates State control, while celebrating a form of freedom of expression that is globally unique. Faced with the government filtering strategy, Internet users soon realized that only a rapid, bottom-up, many-to-many format, such as the ingenious use of quick-fire bulletin board postings[4] in response to news, would allow them to engage one another and the State in a multi-faceted dialogue under State-Party control [Jin 2008]. Bulletin Board System (BBS) has played a seminal role in Chinese Internet life. According to Kevin Day, builder of Discuz!, one of the first BBS platforms used in China via Hong Kong in 2002, it is their topic-centric character that makes BBS such popular choice with Chinese users [Lu 2008]. In 2008, China counted over 3 billion registered BBS users (one might register at multiple BBS sites), 80% of Chinese sites ran their own BBS and the total number of daily page views across bulletin board systems had reached over 1.6 billion, with 10 million posts published everyday [*ibid.*]. BBS began ceding ground to Weibo, a Chinese Twitter hybrid, in 2009. Today, the Chinese government estimates that 54% of China's half a billion Internet users are on Weibo, and of that number two-thirds are accessing Weibo on their mobile phones [CNNIC 2013]. The reasons for the success of Weibo in China are very much the same as those that underlie Twitter's triumph in the West.[5]

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[4] The online bulletin board is literally referred to as an "unnamed space" in Chinese (名空间, wèimíng kōngjiàn).

[5] Weibo has characteristics likely to make its popularity even more sustainable than Twitter. Although the 140 character limit helps both Weibo and Twitter maintaining messages within a size that can be very quickly read, much more can be expressed in 140 Chinese characters than in 140 letters or signs. [Liao 2013]. Weibo also includes options such as comments on posts in a classic BBS style and its users can transfer images, video, and

2.1 Research Methodology

Our on-going research aims at studying perceptions of young Chinese students with respect to Internet access and regulation. In particular we are interested in five questions: (1) What are the expectations of Chinese netizens regarding the potential of the Internet as a tool for free expression and information access? (2) What is their attitude with respect to online rights? (3) What involvement do they think national governments should have in order to protect fundamental liberty, fairness, and justice online? (4) How do their online and offline activities interact? And (5) to what extent do online attitudes learned at home apply when living outside China?

These questions could apply to citizens of any nation. Our methodology takes into account that the attitudes described are difficult to observe and, in certain cases, cannot be assessed through direct questions, as individuals may be uncomfortable in expressing their opinions on the subject. For these reasons, we have chosen a combined questionnaire and focus group methodology. The questionnaires enable us to poll a larger number of users, while providing them with complete anonymity. Focus groups with Chinese students facilitate in-depth exploration of specific issues. A control group of non-Chinese students is also being polled. By the time we have completed our study, we expect to have a respondant population of 50 Chinese students (25 living abroad and 25 living in China) and a control group of 50 non-Chinese students (25 Europeans, 25 non-Europeans, both living in Europe). We have currently administered the questionnaire to 40 control-group members and 10 Chinese living abroad, and we have conducted three focus group discussions with 9 Chinese students living in Paris. Each focus group includes three Chinese students (from several higher education institutions in Paris) who already know each other and are comfortable speaking to us as a group. Focus group participants fill in the questionnaire before the focus group discussions, which then cover those questions requiring causal analysis (e.g. "Do you express your ideas more effectively online or offline? Why?" or "Do you think that online activism very frequently results in offline activism? Why or why not?"). We also ask participants to comment on selected results of the Internet Society's *Global Internet Users' Survey 2012* [ISOC 2012] (e.g. "How would you explain the fact that 94% Internet users in China agree or strongly agree that 'my government has an obligation to ensure that I have the opportunity to access the Internet', while only 63% of US users and 73% of Indian users do?").

Focus groups discussions normally last about two hours. For reasons of privacy, we avoid both video and audio recording, taking notes as participants speak. One of the two researchers speaks

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sound directly into their Weibo feeds; users who retweet messages can add more characters and Weibo has more metrics encouraging input from Twitter followers, such as retweets and @mentions [Pihl 2011] .

Chinese, thus references to Chinese words and neologisms are frequent. Focus group discussion, however, takes place in either French or English, depending on the choice of the participants.

The preliminary results reported in this section only refer to a very small sample of focus group participants. The nine participants in our first three focus groups have asked to remain anonymous. They all fit the current profile of regular Chinese Weibo users: well-educated, urban students and professionals between the ages of 20 and 30, who are online 3-6 hours per day. Overall, we have noted that most participants are keenly interested in the contradictions inherent in a technology that offers the promise of free expression and virtual association, countered by State control and rising levels of environmental pollution.

2.2 *Online human rights culture*

Our respondants consider the contested arena of Internet debate an integral part of their everyday lives, and are often hostile towards the government's refusal to respect due process on the Internet.

One of the more interesting features of netizen response to government censorship in China is the creation of a "grass-mud horse lexicon", the use of online codes to evade censorship.[6] When scholar Xiao Qiang launched this initiative online in 2010, his staff trawled the net, but also solicited entries from Chinese netizens, leading to a rich and playful example of language use that is not immediately comprehensible to the average Chinese speaker. Although King's study, discussed above, goes a long way towards establishing that censorship targets the dismantlement of collective action that could spill over into the street, we note in our focus groups that our respondents assume the purpose of government censorship is to shut down all criticism of the Party online. Consequently, when discussing political matters, those posting commentary have been prompt to participate in this highly imaginative method for skirting perceived or real censorship, one that bonds users and creates what scholar Xiao Qiang calls a "resistance lexicon" [Xiao 2013].

A shared lexicon is part of the broader push towards online campaigns. The array of campaigns has been addressed in full by a series of scholarly publications [Tai 2006, Zhou 2006, Weber and Lu 2007, Zheng 2008, Zhang and Zheng 2009, Yang 2009, Jiang 2010, Lei 2011, Shirk 2011, Esarey and Xiao 2011] that demonstrate the often virulent online response to government corruption, lying or incompetence, particularly in the face of man-made or natural disasters. The most

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[6] The online China Digital Times, edited by scholar Xiao Qiang, provides a detailed list of political codes devised by online dissidents and used by many netizens [Xiao 2013].

significant online campaigns that prompted a change in government response took place immediately after the 2008 Szechuan earthquake (a BBS event) and the 2011 Wenzhou train crash (a Weibo event). The Chinese Party-State has learned to pay careful attention to online public opinion, and to use Weibo to improve its image. The 2012 Beijing floods caused a flurry of activity on Weibo; Sina recorded 8.8 million tweets about the floods during the 24 hours after the disaster started [Li 2012]. Firemen were able to rescue 100 children from a school thanks to Weibo SOS messages, the authorities used Weibo to publish real-time information, and the government's central Weibo account served as a hub for rescue messages [*ibid*.]. Most of our focus group participants demonstrated some confusion concerning the distinction between humanitarian assistance and human rights. Nonetheless, all of our respondents indicate a willingness to either send a donation or participate in person in response to a humanitarian crisis, but none had had the opportunity to do so.

According to a recent study, the Chinese government is experimenting with various local online initiatives in an effort to find means to streamline state bureaucracy, battle corruption and make the state more responsive to citizen demands [Florini *et al.* 2012]. The government's response to public opinion has expanded to e-voting, up-to-date information websites and portals designed to assist with registration for licenses, permits and other documentation. Whether this is "user-friendly authoritarianism" [Krastev 2011] or "unofficial democracy" [Yang 2009] is perhaps less relevant than the shift in discourse that has taken place over the past ten years. All of our focus group participants signalled that it is the government's responsibility to use the Internet to provide better delivery of social services; one of our focus groups engaged in an animated discussion on the relationship between socialism and their expectations for online delivery of social services. In our analysis, Internet technology and the evolving relationship between its users (both citizens and members of the government) have played an important role in reinforcing a collective awareness of, and expectation for, a full range of human rights.[7]

We have noted in our own research that the terms rights (*quanli*) and human rights (*renquan*) are not only ubiquitous and uncensored on the Chinese Internet, but they are frequently used in a purely political context. Ren Zhiqiang, a businessman and blogger with nearly 13 million followers, tweeted at the beginning of 2013 on Weibo:

"Freedom of the press and freedom of speech are rights given to the society and the people by the constitution; they are also symbols of human rights and freedom. Yet they have become pipe

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[7] China has signed and ratified three of the international human rights treaties: Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (ratified 4 November 1980); Convention Against Torture (ratified 4 October 1988); International Convenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ratified 27 March 2001).

dreams without the rule of law, being seriously distorted and restricted. If truth is not allowed to be spoken, will truth disappear?" [Lu 2013]

He was tweeting in response to a censorship incident at Southern Weekend, an event that brought out hundreds of demonstrators who, according to those present, seemed relatively unconcerned by police videotaping of the event.

Although the government is attempting to crackdown on techniques for censorship avoidance, and has promulgated regulations requiring Internet users to give their real names to service providers, the protests of early 2013 cited above indicate a shift in tone. Not only do Chinese bloggers and micro-bloggers make informed use of terms such as "human rights", but they are, on occasion, willing to cross the virtual line and engage in street protests. It is difficult to determine empirically whether a tipping point has been reached with the accelerated use of Weibo on mobile phones in China. All of our focus group participants consider any attempt to organize a political protest in the street sheer folly. Their reasoning on the latter was divided: while half of our respondants consider the maintenance of social stability by the government as a right in and of itself, the other half deemed government repression of political assembly a violation of their rights, but acknowledged that any attempt to organize a street protest would land them in trouble. Some of those who consider social stability a right have also engaged in "cybernationalism", while several of those who favour the right to assembly pointed out the government's manipulation of Internet fora to cultivate nationalism.

In their work on the comparative development of civil society in Taiwan and China, Ashley Esarey and Merle Goldman note that "democratization (in China) will be difficult without an expansion of opportunities for intellectuals to participate in political debate, the establishment of legally autonomous social organizations, greater media openness, and legitimation of other political parties." [Esarey and Goldman 2008]. The use of Weibo on mobile phones may have created such an *expansion of opportunities to participate in political debate* on an unprecedented scale. This, combined with greater media openness online than in the written press, plus the new online registration possibilities for civil society organizations in areas like Shenzhen, all point to a critical opening of Chinese society that would have been unthinkable without the Internet. Nonetheless, the missing factors towards what in the West is understood as a democratization process include the lack of official political plurality, stymied attempts to impose rule of law, and the continued use of policing mechanism to keep any attempt to challenge the one-Party State in check.

Other dangers loom equally large in Chinese society, as in all societies where the Internet has reached critical levels of penetration. These include societal fragmentation and consumerism [Damm 2007], an increasing preference for shallow information, attention to unreliable sources, and

radicalization of views and communities [Liebold 2011]. The fact that the Chinese blogosphere may be "producing the same sort of shallow infotainment, pernicious misinformation, and interest-based ghettos that it creates elsewhere in the world" must not be overlooked [*ibid.*]. Further, the Internet provides an ideal arena for cybercrime and for cybernationalism, as has been demonstrated in the recent Senkaku/Diaoyu Island dispute. All of these topics offer possibilities for further in-depth research.

2.3 *Blended Lives*

The vast majority of micro-blog users in China are young, urban, have at least a high school education, and access the Internet either from home or from a mobile phone. All of our focus group participants access Weibo via their mobile phones. We find that a merger of online and offline worlds is occurring in China, where the average user spends twice as much time online as in the United States – 19.9 hours per week online in 2012 [CNNIC 2012], compared to about 9 hours per week in the US in early 2013 [ComScore 2013]. If, as we argue, Chinese netizens give equal importance to both the virtual and physical manifestation of their rights, and consider the contested arena of Internet debate an integral part of their everyday lives, then the practice of online democracy is no longer "unofficial", to use Yang Guobin's term. It is part and parcel of the way in which Chinese citizens interact with their government, even if the structure and functioning of the Party-State remain authoritarian.

Liu Fengshu's study on *Urban Youth in China* examines the socio-cultural context of Internet use with a special emphasis on the interconnectedness of young people's online and offline lives. Her narratives reveal her respondants' expressive relationship with digital technology, and their consideration of the Internet "as a place and a way of being rather than a tool" [Liu 2010, 99]. Liu's work aligns closely with our own research, although we emphasize human rights discourses and seek examples of the cross-over between online debate and offline activism. Our survey respondents are very aware of a rights discourse and indicate that they use this discourse in their online postings. Several indicated that they would be willing to demonstrate on their university campuses (but not in the street) for an environmental or women's rights issue. Some are familiar with the rights guaranteed by the Chinese Constitution and understand the concept of non-derogable rights, such as the right to life, freedom from torture and freedom from discrimination.

Liu Fengshu's research points to the expressive, rather than instrumental interaction of young, urban users with Internet technology. Unlike Liu's respondents, most of our survey respondents and focus group participants are far from passive. They purposefully seek out news and their friends' opinion of the news, actively combining the search for accurate information and gossip in their first hour

online. Several striking indicators of human rights awareness have emerged in our focus group discussions with Chinese students. Our respondents denounce the lack of due process on the Chinese Internet. Privileging this user perspective, we define "due process" as the establishment and appropriate implementation of regulation ensuring online freedom of speech, press and assembly according to the rights guaranteed by articles 19, 21 and 22 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, a treaty that applies to citizens of all signatory States Parties.[8] We include in our definition of due process the right to privacy, as guaranteed by article 17 of the same covenant, and regulatory transparency, as established by customary law and the 2003 World Summit on the Information Society's Declaration of Principles.[9] Our focus group participants indicate that they consider China the worst offender globally in terms of violations of due process on the Internet, confirming the trend apparent in the Internet Society's Global Internet Users' Survey 2012 results (ISOC 2012).

A second indicator of human rights awareness is the alacrity with which our participants have taken up hardware pollution issues. Our participants clearly understood the concept of balancing human rights and one group suggested that Weibo would be an ideal medium for discussing the trade-offs inherent in individual user rights versus collective rights to a clean environment.

Due to the fact that our focus groups are made up of Chinese graduate students and young professionals studying and working in France, their understanding of human rights is both advanced and quite detailed, however they all consider themselves to be highly representative of educated urban youth in China today. If that is the case, then their sensitivity to censorship even while abroad is striking. All participants trawl the Web for news sources in more than one language, demonstrating an ability to take advantage of their study abroad to increase the scope of their news sources and to "create their own synthesis". Nonetheless, each participant indicated real caution with respect to Weibo use. No one yet uses his or her real name, nor discusses politics directly when tweeting friends in China. According to one participant, "the Party's agents are everywhere". We find an interesting comparison with our American and European survey respondents, who signalled a strong level of distrust concerning the issue of online privacy. It would appear that users are bound by the Internet paradigm of their country of origin. Chinese users continue to focus on censorship while abroad,

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[8] The United States and all European states have signed and ratified the ICCPR. China has signed, but not ratified the treaty, although the Beijing government has indicated that it intends to abide by the treaty clauses. China announced that it was amending domestic laws to prepare ratification in July 2011. "China amends laws for ratification of ICCPR", *China Daily*, 14 July 2011.

[9] World Summit on the Information Society, *Declaration of Principles*, WSIS-03/Geneva/doc/4-E, Geneva, 12 December 2003.

whereas our control group of American users seems preoccupied with potential privacy violations when living in Europe.

CONCLUSION

We are only halfway through our year-long study. More research needs to be done with a larger number of respondants to determine to what extent Chinese students overseas are more aware of human rights discourses than their stay-at-home counterparts, and how this compares with a control group of American and European users. Nevertheless, the copious body of research on citizen interaction with the Internet in China all points in the direction of a change in the power relation between citizens and State. The larger question is whether this form of virtual democracy matters.

If the practice of freedom of expression, assembly and the press online matters in the case of China, the fact that government censorship appears to target the possibility of collective action that may spill onto the streets is a pragmatic recognition of the importance of public opinion in maintaining Party-State legitimacy, while ensuring what some of our participants termed "social stability". Online and offline worlds merge, as citizens anticipate that the government will respond to virtual protest as it cascades through the system, skirting technical and manual censorship as it fans out across millions of Weibo posts. Political predictability is a cornerstone of the rule of law. Citizens worldwide have come to expect due process from their governments when they are online. Government legitimacy in China is now tied not only to economic performance, but also to online responsiveness to each and every impending crisis of public confidence. While many have termed the Party-State's reaction to the Internet as adaptive authoritarianism, or even "user-friendly authoritarianism", we would argue that China is a hybrid state, one where the increasingly proactive online relationship between citizens and State constitutes a new political space, one that counterbalances the physical sphere of governance.

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