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What is This?
Political contestation in Chinese digital spaces: Deepening the critical inquiry

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Abstract
Although research on the Chinese Internet is thriving, our understanding of its multidimensional character, its diverse forms, actors, and dynamics remains limited. This is due to a tendency to focus on technology at the expense of meaning and people, as well as a bias towards sweeping and dichotomous analytical categories, such as state vs. netizens, politics vs. entertainment, and authoritarianism vs. democracy. One of the perniciously appealing ways of sensationalizing the Chinese Internet falls under this either/or dichotomy. The seven contributions in this special issue of China Information challenge such binaries, thus deepening the critical inquiry into the multiple dimensions of the Chinese Internet. The authors show a more complex and nuanced picture of actors and contestation in Chinese digital spaces, as well as the symbolic forms and consequences of these contestations, illuminating new meanings of the political and new dimensions of digital contestation, including race, class and their interactions with the nation. Together, these articles exemplify an analytical orientation that I refer to as ‘deep Internet studies’. They explore the Internet as a facet of a deep China by linking it to people’s practical, perceptual, and moral experiences as well as to the contexts of institutions, politics, and policies.

Keywords
Chinese Internet, political contestation, microblogs (weibo), historicity, deep Internet studies

The year 2014 marks the 20th anniversary of China’s connection to the Internet. In 1995, barely a year after China was wired, 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 meters 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, China has wired close to 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.

Recognizing that the Internet has taken on distinctly Chinese characteristics, however, is the beginning, not the end, of analysis. To say, for example, that control is a feature of the Chinese Internet begs the question of how control is practised over time and the changes that have taken place in the strategies and ideologies of policing the Internet and why. Similarly, to argue that the Chinese Internet is apolitical, as some commentators do, 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. This is a process of contestation involving multiple actors, from Party and government agencies to Internet firms, citizens, and international governmental and non-governmental organizations. Although research on the Chinese Internet is thriving, our understanding of its multidimensional character, its diverse forms and actors, and the complex and fluid dynamics of contestation surrounding it, remains limited. This is due partly to a tendency to focus on technology at the expense of meaning and people, and partly to a bias towards sweeping and dichotomous analytical categories, such as state vs. netizens, politics vs. entertainment, and authoritarianism vs. democracy. One of the perilously appealing ways of sensationalizing the Chinese Internet falls under this either/or dichotomy. For example, commentators often ask whether the Internet promotes democracy or prolongs authoritarianism in China, whether it is about digital escapism or political engagement, or whether it serves as the mouthpiece of the Party, or constitutes a fourth estate. Behind these rhetorical questions is the assumption of a black-or-white world with no grey zones, an assumption that is only possible for moral purists and absolutists. Yet as some of the authors in this special issue show, the age of moral purity is long gone and contestations in Chinese digital spaces are full of ironies, ambivalence, and impurities. Together, the seven contributions in this special issue advance our understanding of the Chinese Internet by challenging binaries and crossing boundaries. They show a more complex and nuanced picture of the actors involved in contestation in Chinese digital spaces, as well as the symbolic forms and consequences of such contestations. They illuminate new meanings of the political, and they direct attention to neglected but important dimensions of digital contestation, including race, class and their interactions with the nation. Indeed, to my knowledge, many of the phenomena studied by our contributors, such as diaosi (屌丝), online consultation, and Chinese maker culture, have not been reported before in English-language academic research. This alone represents...
an important contribution of this special issue. The following discussion will highlight how the contributors have both broadened and deepened the critical inquiry of the Chinese Internet by bringing a new degree of nuance and sophistication to the analysis of a broad range of empirical phenomena.

**From either/or to both/and**

In her study of Chinese maker culture, Silvia Lindtner starts by noting 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’. She argues that the unquestioned category of Chinese netizens 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 what Lindtner calls ‘parasitic alignments between seemingly opposing actors’. Yet it also leads to change from within the system, a story not unfamiliar to scholars of Chinese politics. 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.

Ning Zhang’s study of web-based backpacking communities transcends another kind of binary – the online and offline divide. She begins her analysis with a critique of the dichotomous view of civil society as either completely independent of the state or dependent on it. She argues instead 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 adeptly negotiate between online and offline spaces. The result is a new form of associational life and citizen activism, one that aims to achieve social change through peer sharing, volunteer work and online and offline charity.

**Governance of and through the Internet**

Several contributors to this special issue explore the forms and actors involved in governing the Internet and governance through the Internet. In a timely discussion of SinaWeibo, China’s most influential social media platform in recent years, 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 was 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 SinaWeibo, 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 SinaWeibo’s management strategies. Stressing the multiple actors and different types of power relations in the shaping of SinaWeibo, 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’.7 Thus by making SinaWeibo 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, such platforms. A major initiative in recent years concerns encouraging government agencies and officials to set up microblog accounts and start tweeting their own messages. To understand how this ‘government on microblogs’ initiative works, Jesper Schlæger and Min Jiang examine a local government microblogging project.8 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,9 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 introduces a new relationship between local governments and commercial ISPs. When government agencies register their accounts on SinaWeibo, they must be authenticated and approved by the Internet firm, not vice versa. Their postings are archived on SinaWeibo’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 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 multiple 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 article 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 health system reform proposal 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 substantive 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.

**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 SinaWeibo. Marina Svensson argues, however, that personal expression on SinaWeibo 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.\textsuperscript{14}

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 grassroots 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.\textsuperscript{15} These popular forms mark a shift from the haughty propaganda media of a uniform official voice to a multivoiced, 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 ‘style’, this is not a Chinese, but global phenomenon.\textsuperscript{16} 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’ – the 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.\textsuperscript{17} Despite their proliferation, we know little about the social context of their appearance. Marcella Szablewicz’s study of the diaosi meme fills a gap.\textsuperscript{18} 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.

Linking this playful word to China’s broader social 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 study of 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.

**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 symposium explore 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. Their articles 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 ‘depth’ in this respect, the contributors to this special issue show that the contestations over the Chinese Internet are manifestations of the multiple ways of doing politics and being political. These include citizen participation in online consultation and government officials interacting with netizens on microblogging platforms, as well as online backpacking communities undertaking charity projects, *diaosi* engaging in self-mockery and social critique, hacker communities seeking to achieve creativity in their work through simultaneously challenging and aligning with government agencies, and netizens debating race and national identity. They encompass the politics of recognition, of 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 this symposium has uncovered enough new ground to invite a broader debate about the complex meanings of politics and the political in 21st century China in the study of the Chinese Internet and Chinese society more broadly.

**Notes**

5. 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.


20. 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.


**References**


