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Transformations of the Chinese Public Sphere: Media in the Age of Weibo

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Asian Studies

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Introduction

Microblogs – personal Twitter-like blogs with character limits and rapid information dissemination capabilities – have taken the contemporary Chinese media world by storm. With one anonymous click, microblogs allow Chinese netizens to instantaneously re-post and propagate potentially sensitive information, posing a serious challenge to the former information hegemony of the Chinese Communist Party. In 2011, there were a series of cases in which the presence of microblogs upended the government’s control of information, reconstituting the dynamics of power between authority and the public and allowing individual citizens, or netizens, to have a constructive impact on government policy formation and execution. In the following project, I will situate the recent emergence of microblogs within the larger context of 20th and early 21st century Chinese media history, recognizing both the similarities and divergences between earlier 20th century media developments and the recent microblog-driven changes.

In the first chapter, I provide a historical framework for understanding China’s 20th century media landscape. Building on but departing from Habermas’ conceptualization of the public sphere, I focus on four key periods in China’s 20th century post-dynastic history in order to show the various ways in which the Chinese government and people have navigated the public and private spheres in the modern period. It is my belief that an understanding of the four periods that I address in the opening chapter is crucial to a meaningful analysis of the impact that microblogs are having on Chinese
media in the present. It also may help illuminate ways in which microblogs can play a role in forging of a more independent and lasting form of public expression.

The second chapter focuses on the historical and changing role of the Internet in Chinese society, using a combination of empirical findings and personal observation to show how the pre-microblog Internet failed to fundamentally alter the power dynamics between government authority and the public. The third chapter looks specifically at the introduction of microblogs in 2007, first analyzing the case of the ill-fated original microblog (Fanfou.com) that was shut down in 2008, and then successive microblogs that have proven more sustainable. In this section, I examine three case studies from the summer of 2011 that each illustrate different ways in which the medium is changing the relationship between government and the public. The final chapter will offer informed speculation, based on extensive, research, interviews, and interactions with Chinese media experts, on the potential ways in which the government is seeking to neutralize and/or utilize the microblog medium.
Chapter 1: The Role of the Public in 20th Century Chinese History

Habermas' Public Sphere and its Applicability to China

In his seminal work *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jurgen Habermas examines a new form of publicity that he claims emerged as a result of social and economic conditions in eighteenth century Europe. The text describes the development of a bourgeois public sphere and, more broadly, traces a history of the modern distinction between public and private. Habermas maintains that the public sphere is by definition inclusive, providing a means for private people to join together and form a "public" capable of effectively articulating the interests of a people.\(^1\) Since its publication in 1962, the work has transformed approaches across the humanities and social sciences, and many writers have attempted to apply Habermas’ model of the bourgeois public sphere to other countries and periods.

Using Habermas’ conception of the public sphere to interpret 20th century Chinese history presents two types of difficulties. First, one must grapple with the fact that despite its later widespread applications, Habermas’ public sphere was not actually intended to be applied to foreign contexts. The author is clear that the emergence of the public sphere described in his work was inextricably tied to the specific social and economic conditions of eighteenth and early nineteenth century Europe: “It cannot be abstracted from the unique developmental history of that ‘civil society’ ... originating in the European High Middle Ages; nor can it be transferred [or] generalized to any number of historical situations that represent formally similar constellations.” As a

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result, the adoption of the Habermasian public sphere as a platform for understanding foreign social-historical contexts must be done cautiously; it is necessary to modify certain aspects of the original concept to better accommodate new social dynamics.

Cautions aside, one cannot help but note the surprising social and institutional commonalities between late imperial China and the early modern European period that Habermas’ work addresses. As was the case in Western Europe, after the sixteenth century China also witnessed a drastic intensification in the volume of trade; the rise of large-scale commercial, financial and mercantile institutions; a continuing process of regional urbanization and the development of urban culture, with the teahouse functioning as a kind of parallel to Habermas’ pub or coffeehouse; and a major expansion of the printing industry, which helped popularize literature through increased accessibility and rising literacy rates. The social conditions present in late imperial China thus bear some meaningful likeness to Habermas’ 18th century European context.

In addition, there is a limited but real parallelism between the English word “public” and its closest Chinese equivalent, gong: the two terms are unified in their joint opposition to the concept of “private,” with one of the earliest definitions of gong, from the third century dictionary Erya, being “not private” (wusī). Perhaps the most famous classical usage of gong dates to the Classic of Rites, one of the Five Classics of the Confucian canon, with the sentence “all under Heaven is gong”; in this famous phrase, gong was actually interpreted as being the same as its homophone, “collective” (gong).

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2 Alan Lawrence, China Since 1919: Revolution and Reform (Psychology Press, 2004), 25.
3 Williams Rowe, “Public Sphere in Modern China,” Modern China, Vol. 16 (1990), 312.
which begins to adopt a slightly more politicized meaning. According to China scholar Mizoguchi Yuzo, the concept of gong developed an association with government in a process remarkably similar to the one that the English word “public” underwent in medieval Europe. By the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD), when the imperial examination became a key route to political and social power, gong appears to have been almost entirely appropriated by government to refer to the business, property and personnel of the imperial bureaucracy, a transformation akin to the one that was occurring in medieval Europe. By the Qing dynasty (1644-1911 AD), a number of competing conceptions of gong were simultaneously in play, with some usages referring to “properties and accounts that were supervised more-or-less loosely by local bureaucrats, but that were not legally government property.” These terms included gongchan, which was later adopted to refer to communism, and gongtian, which has come to mean communal or shared land. Finally, by the late Qing, records exist of the emperor emphasizing the importance of “public criticism” (gongping) and “public opinion” (gonglun), usages that bear striking similarity to Habermas’ notion of the public sphere.

The conceptual and historical similarities between the evolution of the Chinese gong and the Western “public” notwithstanding, there remains a more fundamental hurdle to be overcome in applying Habermas’ public sphere to China: the author’s emphasis on the widespread and inclusive nature of the social debate that must by

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4 Ibid., 316.
5 Ibid., 317.
7 William Rowe, “Public Sphere in Modern China,” 318.
definition characterize the public sphere. Habermas conceives of an almost unattainably inclusive public sphere that “stood or fell with the principle of universal access... A public sphere from which specific groups would be *eo ipso* excluded was less than merely incomplete; it was not a public sphere at all.” But if the public sphere must be characterized, as Habermas argues, by absolute inclusion, one might rightfully question whether such a public has ever been realized, whether in China, Habermas’ eighteenth century European context, or anywhere else. Beyond the fact that only the literate bourgeoisie could access and participate in Habermas’ eighteenth century idealized public sphere, women too were excluded, along with the rest of the non-educated, non-white population.

It is therefore necessary to tweak Habermas’ notion of the public sphere, seeing it not as an absolute condition defined by presence or absence, but instead as a nuanced and gradated spectrum. This spectrum must recognize not only the varying levels of participation among different social groups; it must also adapt to the reality that not all periods of 20th century Chinese history have allowed for the open debate and critical discussion so integral to Habermas’ original concept. Because of the volatile and sometimes authoritarian nature of government control in recent Chinese history, a key criterion for evaluating social expression should be the public accessibility of controversial information, particularly information that runs counter to the government’s grand narrative. While this may seem an unfairly low standard to set in an examination of a society’s openness, the reality is that no period in 20th century Chinese history, with the possible exception of the May 4th Period, allowed for the free-flowing exchange of

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opinions and ideas that Habermas describes in the 18th century European public sphere. Under such conditions, the mere ability to access and carefully disseminate opinions that are at odds with those of the government can serve as an important marker of free expression, regardless of whether open public dialogue ensues.

Noting the important alterations that must be made to Habermas's original concept, the idea of the public sphere is nonetheless a potentially helpful conceptual starting point for evaluating the different forms of social expression that have emerged throughout 20th century Chinese history. Four periods in 20th century Chinese history – the May 4th Period, the Nanking Decade, the Cultural Revolution, and Reform and Opening – provide invaluable insight into the changing limitations of public expression that have characterized China's recent past. Each period represents a key turning point in the volatile and evolving relationship between the mechanisms of social control and the expressive freedoms of the public. Each period also provides crucial contextual understanding of the power dynamics that are now changing in contemporary China due to the emergence of the Internet and microblogs, a subject around which the later chapters of this work will center.

Republican Era: Newspapers and a New Youth (1912-1926)

Beginning with the outbreak of revolution in Wuchang on October 10, 1911, China made a tentative entry into the Republican Era, ending the Manchu-ruled Qing Dynasty that had lasted almost three centuries. Spearheaded by the Tongmenghui, an underground resistance movement led by Sun Yat-sen and Song Jiaoren, the Wuchang Uprising, as the event is now known, quickly spread to other regions of the country,
hastening the downfall of Qing dynastic authority. Sparked by similar energies, students and intellectuals in the 1910s and 1920s began to challenge the tenets of Chinese tradition through the New Culture Movement, an iconoclastic campaign for social liberalization, enhancement of individual rights, and improvements in economic, educational, and gender equality.

No individual better represents the changing boundaries of public expression under the Republican Era than the reformist scholar, politician, and journalist Liang Qichao. Liang, along with many intellectuals of the period sought to encourage China’s mass politicization and provide the emerging national entity with a new and dynamic political vocabulary. A study of Liang by the Chinese scholar Hao Chang clearly articulates Liang’s efforts to expand the Chinese lexicon so as to encompass greater political and social possibilities. Hao describes Liang’s ideas on the familiar concept of gong as follows:

“It was in his treatment of the ideal of gong that Liang went beyond the traditional meaning of altruism to suggest subtly the connotations of popular sovereignty. Public-mindedness meant that everyone in the group had the right to govern himself; the right to self-government that everyone did what he should do, and was entitled to the profits he deserved.”

Historian Joseph Fewsmith adopts the self-determination described above and argues that at the turn of the 19th century, gong became less directly tied to the imperial bureaucratic administration and began to emerge, in a more Habermasian sense, as a distinct political actor counterposed to the state. This dialectic, between the traditional

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state and the emerging concept of gong as a separate political entity, is most evident in
the establishment of a powerful Chinese press in the opening decades of the 20th century.

Liang Qichao was integral to the formation of a vibrant newspaper culture in the
Republican Era. His New Citizen Journal (Xinmin Congbao), founded in Japan in 1902
to discuss issues of politics, religion, law, economics and international affairs, inspired
dozens of imitation publications, and within several years such journals were
commonplace across China. Liang’s belief, radical in China at the time, was that
newspapers and print journalism should be used to communicate political ideas to the
populace. In Liang’s opinion, newspapers were to function dually as mass education
tools that could better inform the Chinese citizenry of important intellectual and social
trends, and as revolutionary weapons that could service nationalist uprisings, a desire
encapsulated in Liang’s famous quote that newspapers are “revolutions of ink, not of
blood.”

While newspapers had been present in China since at least 1822, when a
Portuguese-language commercial paper was launched in Macao, in 1901 there were only
125 total newspapers with a combined circulation of just 100,000 across the country. In
the early Republican Era, however, the number of newspapers and the extent of public
dialogue expanded dramatically, and by 1921 the number of papers had grown to
1,124. In Shanghai during the 1920s, for example, demand for newspapers skyrocketed
and circulation of just two of Shanghai’s most popular papers – Xinwen Bao and

12 Barbara Mittler, A Newspaper for China?: Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai’s
13 Barbara Mittler, A Newspaper for China?: Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai’s
News Media, 1872-1912.
Shenbao – exceeded 100,000, the previous nationwide figure in 1901.\textsuperscript{15} The publishing and printing industry in Shanghai grew twenty-fold between 1912, the year of the proclamation of the Republic of China, and 1932, on the dawn of the Japanese invasion.

These publications, most of which were written in the newly popularized Chinese vernacular (baihua) that was displacing the classical written language that had dominated written discourse for millennia, were accessible to a wide range of urban dwellers. They fostered dialogues on an array of highly political issues and were effective in rallying popular sentiment in support of or against government actions and policies. For example, such publications were crucial in informing the educated public about the outcome of the Treaty of Versailles and the Shandong Problem, in which the Allies breached an agreement to return former German concessions in modern-day Shandong after World War I.\textsuperscript{16} The Allies instead transferred the concessions to Japan, thereby, in the view of many, violating Chinese sovereignty. With information about the controversial treaty being disseminated via the robust Beijing newspaper scene, students and intellectuals quickly rallied together in public opposition to the government’s apparent weakness in the post-war negotiations.

On May 4\textsuperscript{th} 1919, this anger coalesced into a fervent protest of over 3,000 students in front of Tiananmen Square in central Beijing.\textsuperscript{17} Informed by the diverse publications of the time, the protesters opposed more than the mere concession of Shandong to the Japanese; they sought to discuss and draw awareness to China’s precarious place in the outside world, pondering what concrete steps would have to be

\textsuperscript{15} Anonymous author, “A Short History of Chinese Newspapers.”
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 78.
taken in order for China to emerge from its imperiled state. Such energy in turn sparked discussions and movements that would play critical roles in shaping future cultural, linguistic and ideological trends in China.

The presence of a vibrant public sphere that fostered widespread social dialogue is perhaps best exemplified by *New Youth* magazine, first published on September 15, 1915 by Chen Duxiu, who went on to co-found the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. *New Youth* played a critical role in instigating the New Culture Movement by influencing the young nation with its provocative political fiction and essays on science, democracy, and, crucially, Marxism, all of which were written in vernacular Chinese. During the second half of the 1910s, *New Youth* emerged as a central arena to debate the root causes of and potential solutions to China’s weakness. The editors of *New Youth* were not merely free to express ideas without government constraints, they were also able to engage with opposing ideas from competing publications and political factions, fostering a robust social dialogue.

In an early edition of the magazine, Chen Duxiu laid the blame for China’s backwardness on Confucian culture, with one of his influential essays calling on readers to replace “Mr. Confucius” with “Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy.” Hu Shi, another influential intellectual, looked to the reformist ideals of the American thinker John Dewey, with whom he had studied at Columbia, championing Dewey’s pragmatic evolutionary change as a cure to China’s condition. Lu Xun, who went on to become

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18 Ibid., 78.
one of China’s most revered 20th century writers, used *New Youth* to publish his acclaimed story “A Madman’s Diary,” in which he uses cannibalism as an allegory to describe the effects of China’s outdated and inhibiting traditional values. These three different approaches to addressing China’s ills demonstrate the unrestrained critical spirit and exchange of ideas that typified the public sphere of the early Republican Era. Made possible by a relatively weak but surviving transitional government, the 1910s and 1920s marked a level of openness and debate that would go unmatched in much of subsequent 20th century Chinese history.

From the Nanking Decade to the Second Sino-Japanese War (1925-1945)

Following Yuan Shikai’s short-lived attempt to revive the imperial monarchy in 1915 and 1916, much of China descended into a chaotic state of factional warfare. The New Culture Movement, partially in reaction to this domestic instability, helped organize the populace into two primary political parties, both of which felt that their own ideological convictions were best suited to guide modern China. In the early and mid-1920s, these two political parties – the Communists (CCP) and the Nationalists (KMT) – cooperated with each other, forming a United Front to quell the domestic unrest that was sweeping the country. While Sun Yat-sen, known for his political moderation and pluralism, was alive, the Nationalist Party found it very useful to collaborate with the Communists in an effort to jointly challenge the twin threats of domestic warlordism and international imperialism.\(^{21}\) With the guidance and material aid of the Soviet Union – administered through Comintern advisers such as Mikhail Borodin and Adolf Joffe –

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the two political parties worked out a policy that enabled Communists to become
members of the Nationalist Party while retaining their CCP affiliation. This strategy, of
creating distinct blocs within the KMT, for a time delayed the necessity of identifying
with one side of the political debate.\textsuperscript{22}

Under this atmosphere of relative political stability, the newspapers of the New
Culture Movement remained in circulation and many people engaged in public
discussions over political and national issues. In her analysis of what she deems the
Chinese enlightenment of the 1910s and 1920s, Vera Schwarz writes that such
intellectual openness was “the product of a historical moment privileged by the absence
of brutality.”\textsuperscript{23}

Despite the illusion of peacefulness, however, trust ran thin in the first United
Front, and by 1927 the semblance of cooperation had deteriorated into bloody purges on
both sides of the political line. On April 12, 1927, Nationalist forces led by Chiang Kai-
shek violently suppressed Chinese Communist Party organizations in Shanghai, purging
many and literally decimating the Party's central structure.\textsuperscript{24} Outside of Shanghai,
similar movements took the lives of countless other Communist sympathizers, setting off
the White Terror era, a period that lasted until 1949 in the mainland but would
technically continue in Taiwan until martial law was lifted in 1987. For the first time in
the movement's history, the young New Culture adherents were faced with the threat of
overtly physical suppression, and the violence effectively smothered public debate under
its cloak of intimidation.

\textsuperscript{22} Vera Schwartz, \textit{The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 147.
\textsuperscript{24} John King Fairbank and Merele Goldman, \textit{China: A News History}, 301.
Political theorist Hannah Arendt's 1970 work *On Violence* provides useful insight into the impact of repressive social tactics on political organization: “Terror is not the same as violence; it is rather the form of government that comes into being when violence, having destroyed all power, does not abdicate, but on the contrary, remains in full control... The effectiveness of terror depends almost entirely on the degree of social atomization.”25 The result of the Nationalist crackdown in Shanghai, an event subsequently referred to as the Shanghai massacre, was just such social atomization. Union workers, who had suffered the brunt of the violence, felt deceived by the intellectuals, while intellectuals themselves were faced with steadily intensifying political repression; the press became heavily censored and universities systematically lost their previous reformist vigor.26 During this period, the focus of intellectual debate and dialogue shifted from Beijing and Shanghai southward to Guangzhou, where political factionalism ran less deep.

The repressive impact of this violence on individuals is exemplified in the political evolution of Zhu Ziqing, a renowned poet and professor at Tsinghua University in the 1920s. Zhu, who had espoused the liberal and nationalistic ideals of the New Culture Movement and played a role in the May 4th Movement, was shocked and intensely disillusioned by the use of violence in Shanghai in 1927. He writes passionately of the terror he felt as a survivor of one deadly clash with the Nationalist police: “The only thing I knew was that I did not want to die. I only wanted to live. I rolled down a hill of corpses. Later, when I realized that I had walked on corpses, I

shuddered with fear for a long time." The threat of violence, both from rival political powers and from an ambitiously imperialist Japan, ushered in a heightened questioning of survival that would have been foreign to the iconoclastic principles of the May 4th Movement less than a decade earlier. The disorganization of the late 1910s that had allowed for the free development of the New Culture Movement had been replaced by a politics of fear, one in which social groups were atomized and intimidated into inaction.

This is not to claim that Chinese intellectual production and debate simply died between 1927 and the end of the Japanese occupation. Mao Dun, an author who sought to depict the tension in the conflicting revolutionary ideologies of the 1920s, published some of his most distinguished works, including *Midnight* (*Ziye*), *The Shop of the Lin Family* (*Linjia Puzi*), and *Disillusion* (*Huanmie*), between the years of 1928 and 1933. However, it is fair to say that the mass participatory intellectual and ideological debates of the New Culture Movement had largely subsided by the end of the 1930s. As the Communists set off on the Long March from the Jiangxi Soviet northwestward to Yan'an, the Nationalists imposed strict martial law on the country, an act that was justified by Sun Yat-sen’s theory of the three stages of revolution and that seemed necessary in order to combat the increasingly bold incursions of the Japanese into northeastern China. The Communists and Nationalists formed a second United Front in 1936 in order to drive out the Japanese, but once their anti-imperialist goal had been accomplished, the two parties abandoned any pretence of cooperation and rapidly descended into a state of all-out civil war. The chaotic terror and brutality of civil war

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and occupation in the mid-1920s, 1930s, and 1940s prompted an environment of insecurity and repression. Expression was stifled or violently suppressed, and the vibrant public sphere of the May 4th Period was rendered a distant memory.

Cultural Revolution: big-character posters (1964-1976)

In the aftermath of the disastrous economic failure of the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s, Mao largely withdrew himself from political and economic decision-making, leaving space for Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, among others, to manage the country. Beginning in 1962, Mao focused increasing energy on his contemplation of Marxist-Leninist social theory, developing a particular fascination with the notion of "continuous revolution." It was the manifestation of this idea that would provide the theoretical backdrop for the Cultural Revolution.

Launched in 1966 in an attempt to root out bourgeois elements that Mao claimed were creeping back into society and government, the Cultural Revolution was a complex and multivalent chapter in modern Chinese history. First and foremost, it must be characterized as a period of immense suffering, destructiveness, and political chaos. Broadly speaking, the goal of the movement was to remove capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society and to enforce a socialist order throughout the country. People were encouraged to adopt any means necessary to achieve this goal. On August 8, 1966, the Communist Party's Central Committee, officially adopted the "Decision Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution," an act that took the existing fragmented movement and elevated it to a nationwide and government-condoned mass

campaign. The “Decision” consisted of sixteen specific points, but the main thrust is captured in a short introductory paragraph:

“The proletariat must ... meet head-on every challenge of the bourgeoisie in the ideological field and use the new ideas, culture, customs and habits of the proletariat to change the mental outlook of the whole of society. At present, our objective is to struggle against and overthrow those persons in authority who are taking the capitalist road, to criticize and repudiate the reactionary bourgeois academic ‘authorities’ and the ideology of the bourgeoisie and all other exploiting classes, and to transform education, literature and art and all other parts of the superstructure not in correspondence with the socialist economic base, so as to facilitate the consolidation and development of the socialist system.”

The issuance of the “Decision,” widely publicized in the media, swept the entire country into a revolutionary fervor, encouraging individuals of all walks of life to violently denounce their fellow citizens. Over the next decade, millions of people were persecuted and displaced, and tens of thousands were killed in purges and factional battles that began in Beijing but spread under Mao’s active encouragement. The victims ranged from Liu Shaoqi, the Chairman of the People’s Republic of China from 1959 until 1968, who was labeled a “capitalist roader” and died in prison 1968, to school teachers and traditional religious figures, all of whom were seen as embodying the vilified “Four Olds” – old culture, old customs, old habits, and old ideas.

Due to the agitated and dangerous politics that characterized the Cultural Revolution as a whole, one might intuitively suppose that any form of public expression would have been severely limited during the period. It is important, however, to recognize the atypical power dynamics that were in place during the movement and to

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understand the unique breakdown of authority that allowed the movement to occur. During the movement, the Chinese populace selectively waged battle against various individual and conceptual manifestations of the traditional Chinese power structure. The originators and targets of criticism were constantly shifting and alternating, but the one constant was that Mao, the true source of political authority at the time, remained firmly entrenched on the side of the populace, distancing himself from the traditional power structure that was under attack. Feeling threatened by forces within the Party, the “Great Helmsman” transferred his unparalleled power from the Party to the side of the people, weakening the Party and opening it to critique, all while channeling popular discontentment away from his own individual responsibility for the disastrous Great Leap Forward. With Mao safely protected by his popular alignment with the people, the people were for the first time empowered to criticize the Party, no longer taking direct orders from an established power hierarchy but rather voicing pent up dissatisfactions with a social system that was not producing its promised results. It is clear that people lived with a ubiquitous fear of being labeled rightists or imperialist roaders by their peers, but at the same time there was remarkable social energy and populism, with individuals and non-governmental groups all actively discussing, critiquing, and attacking the formal power structure. The Cultural Revolution was thus in some ways an era of paranoid anarchy and upheaval, but in other important ways, it granted the

32 The Chinese youth launched such battles against the traditional power structure even though they themselves, predominantly as the children of Beijing Party leaders, could ironically be seen as belonging to that very power structure.  
masses unprecedented channels to make themselves heard in the public arena, somewhere between the official state structure and the private sphere.

Such popular expression was not manifested in the formal press, which remained under Party authority, but through such media as big-character posters (*dazibao*): large, handwritten posters that were mounted onto walls in public spaces as a means of communicating ideas and revolutionary strategy among the masses. A major trigger of the Cultural Revolution was the posting of such a big-character poster in Beijing in 1966 by Nie Yuanzi, a party secretary at the capital’s prestigious Beijing University. The poster called on students to eradicate bourgeois tendencies that were persisting on the campus, intensifying the momentum for Mao’s brewing social movement. Mao noticed Nie’s call to arms and had it republished in the June 2, 1966 edition of the *People’s Daily*, the main party newspaper, with an expansive circulation of over 3 million.

Within weeks, big-character posters were appearing on billboards throughout Beijing and other major cities across China. On November 1st of the same year, Nie Yuanzi looked back on her then famous big-character poster:

“Five months ago today, our most dearly beloved great leader Chairman Mao ... by making [our] revolutionary big-character poster known to the entire country and the entire world, lit the blazing fire of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution!”

To demonstrate his solidarity with the people, Mao himself began denouncing officials, sometimes by name, in big-character posters that would then be reprinted in the national state-owned media. By 1975, a year before Mao passed away, the right to make big-character posters had even become entrenched in the constitution with the passing of the

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34 MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution*, 58.
“four great rights” amendment. Big-character posters, while often used towards malicious and self-advancing ends, were a form of public expression that had little precedent in earlier modern Chinese history.

In 1978, just two years after Mao’s death brought a fizzling end to the Cultural Revolution, activists in Beijing again began to use big-character posters in what would later become known as the Democracy Wall. They were initially encouraged to criticize the actions of the Gang of Four, the four politicians deemed most responsible for the disastrous later stages of the Cultural Revolution, but the posters quickly began to address deeper sources of conflict in Chinese society. In response to the government’s widely publicized Four Modernizations campaign – modernization in the agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology fields – Wei Jingsheng, a Beijing-based activist and author, wrote a big-character poster calling for a Fifth Modernization, namely an advancement of democratic individual liberties. Soon thereafter, the Party leadership decided to permanently close the wall. The rapid shutdown of Democracy Wall highlights just how historically unique the Cultural Revolution truly was – while individuals felt great pressure from their peers to conform to the norms of Maoist revolutionary behavior, the public also possessed an unprecedented ability to make their voices heard, discuss issues openly in public, and levy criticisms against the formal power structure.

Reform and Opening: the commercialist push (1978-)

In 1982 China drafted a new constitution that closely resembles the version that is in use today. The document emphasized economic development and tacitly renounced mass political movements; it made no reference to the ten years of chaos from 1966 to 1976, only stating that the “exploiter” class had been eradicated and that class struggle was thus no longer a necessity. The new party motto became “seek truth from facts,” and Deng Xiaoping, a rehabilitated party leader who had been persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, reduced the Party’s emphasis on ideology in economic decision-making and instead stressed that policies must be empirically effective.

On the macroeconomic level, Deng introduced large-scale planned and centralized economic management by specialized bureaucrats, with many of his ambitions modeled after the economic planning and control mechanisms present in Western nations. On the microeconomic level, individuals and locales quickly adopted a market economy structure, and the country saw rapid gains in light industry and agricultural output. In the early stages of the Reform era, China’s form of market socialism was likened to Lenin’s New Economic Policy and the more pragmatic socialism of Nikolai Bukharin; all three envisioned a system of market economics that was partially based on trade and pricing rather than governmental mandates of production.

37 The saying “seek truth from facts” dates back to the Book of Han, a Han dynasty historical text finished in AD 111.
China’s early economic reform occurred in two primary stages. In the first, limited numbers of entrepreneurs were granted permission to start businesses, the country became open to foreign investment for the first time since the 1940s, and agriculture was rapidly de-collectivized. Most industries were still state-run, but there was a marginal opening for market competition. In the second stage, occurring in the late 1980s and 1990s, many state-owned industries were privatized while price controls and many protectionist policies from the Mao period were discontinued.40

Less well known but arguably no less important was the contemporaneous commercialization process that was occurring within China’s media sector. CCP-ruled China had no true investigative journalism prior to the Reform era, with most publications devoted entirely to what could be termed state propaganda. In a commonly used phrase, the sole responsibility of the media was to be the “throat and tongue of the Party,”41 to disseminate homogenous information in order to mobilize popular support for public campaigns. In 1979, at the onset of Reforms, the country had only 69 newspapers, all of which were strictly controlled by the Party’s propaganda apparatus.42 Newspapers were required to adhere to the standard version of events that was depicted through dispatches from the government’s hegemonic Xinhua news agency. An unvarying diet of state-controlled news left the people hungry for alternative sources of information, and when industries began adopting commercialization measures under Deng in the early 1980s, the media sector was quick to jump on the bandwagon.

40 Joseph Fewsmith, China Today, China Tomorrow: domestic politics, economy and society (Rowman and Littlefield: 2010).
41 Transliteration of common Chinese expression.
From a logistical standpoint, newspapers gradually reduced their government support – they had previously been entirely government subsidized – and started to test the waters of the open marketplace. In 1979, they were permitted to sell advertising for the first time since the 1940s, and in 1983, the central government began allowing them to retain some of their advertising profits. By the beginning of 2005, the country was publishing more than 2,000 newspapers and 9,000 magazines, marking roughly a 2900 percent growth in newspapers since 1979.

The government has viewed the growth of newspapers, both in terms of quantity and circulation, with great ambivalence. On the one hand, those in power have been eager to obtain the advantages of increased economic efficiency. The Party has effectively transformed what was previously a government expense into a government-overseen source of immense revenue. The quality and amount of financial and macroeconomic coverage in commercialized newspapers have also increased the total supply of economic information available to the public, raising the overall efficiency of the young marketplace. Finally, commercialized media has also led to an improvement in the editorial and production quality of content, making Chinese journalism more competitive on the world stage.

At the same time, the government is predictably concerned that a diversified mediascape will pose greater censorship challenges, potentially threatening central governmental authority. As Susan Shirk writes:

"Surrendering control over information creates severe political risks. It puts news demands on the government that it may not be able to satisfy, and it could reveal to the public the divisions behind the façade of party unity... What most worries CCP leaders – and what motivates them to continue investing heavily in

\[43\] Ibid., 38.
mechanisms to control media content – is the potential that a free information environment provides for organizing a challenge to their rule.”

As Shirk indicates, the government still invests “in mechanisms to control media content,” but commercialization provides an incentive for publications to supply more information in the drive to obtain an ever-increasing readership. Publications, in order to remain financially viable, are now forced to differentiate themselves from other media sources, all the while steering clear of the indistinct central governmental line that could cause their journalistic licenses to be revoked. The boundary between competitive profit and central government regulation is a fine one, and it is in this sphere that one sees an extra-governmental popular voice emerging in the early Reform era.

What has arisen from this government-media power dynamic is a journalistic landscape in which different publications create subtle distinctions between each other in an effort to gain the readership of new and information thirsty demographics. Censorship still exerts a severely restrictive effect on expression, but there is nonetheless a political and ideological diversity among newspapers, even if this diversity is too minute for the untrained foreign eye to perceive.

The most evident diversity can be thought of as a spectrum of audacity – in other words, the varying degrees to which publications are willing to pursue and treat potentially sensitive topics. When Liu Zhihua, the former Beijing Vice-Mayor, was stripped of his party rank in 2006 on suspicion of corruption, propaganda officials issued a ban on independent reporting, ordering newspapers to stick strictly to the limited information that had been released by Xinhua. The People’s Daily, in an attempt to brush over the incident, consigned the story to a small space on page 4. The contentious

44 Ibid., 15.
news was also slipped into a larger article on the Standing Committee of Beijing’s 28th Conference, greatly deemphasizing its importance. In the Beijing Daily, a state-run paper based in the capital, Liu Zhihua’s fate was still downplayed, but it at least made the paper’s front page. With commercial newspapers, however, the treatment of the story differed drastically. The Jinghua Times, a Beijing-based commercial newspaper loosely affiliated with the People’s Daily, abided by the original propaganda order and only printed the Xinhua copy, but they differentiated themselves by highlighting the story with a conspicuous title on the top of the front page. The headline was direct and to the point: “Beijing Vice-Mayor Liu Zhihua Removed from Office.”

The greatest difference, however, can be seen in coverage of the scandal outside of the capital. In the Oriental Morning Post, a commercial paper based in Shanghai, readers were granted more than the limited Xinhua release. Without violating the ban on independent reporting, journalists went to government sites and published publicly accessible information about Liu’s job responsibilities. This in turn allowed readers to deduce, based on Liu’s formal employment responsibilities, where corruption might have occurred. Since the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997, southern China - specifically Guangdong province - has come forth as an increasingly bold journalistic center, exposing stories that may previously have remained uncovered in the mainland before commercialization.

The different ways in which these publications covered events, although seemingly subtle to an outsider, presented a choice of opinion, and the purchasing of one

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newspaper over another involved an implicitly political choice. While Chinese newspapers were not making blatantly political distinctions in their coverage, as is the case in the United States’ conservative or liberal media spectrum, they nonetheless provided readers with a choice, a type of gauge of how willing readers were to question the official party line. This remains a far cry from a free press in which the public could openly criticize the government, offer solutions to social ills, and present divergent ideological viewpoints. But it also marked the first time in decades of modern Chinese history that there was any real choice in media, and a dialogue began to arise, albeit subdued, between the different publications. It was not a vibrant public sphere, but it offers the first glimpse of a reawakening independent media, initial steps to recapture the vitality and diversity of the May 4th Movement. This movement towards commercialization ultimately sets the stage for the Internet’s introduction into the Chinese mediascape, the topic of the following chapter.

Conclusion

All of these periods present widely divergent manifestations of the idea of a public sphere. They are all united, however, by one characteristic: they did not last. Each period reveals a public sphere that was not firmly rooted in the consciousnesses of the people, that was more a result of direct political climate than enduring political ideals. The May 4th Movement was only made possible through a unique combination of dynastic overthrow, national humiliation from abroad, and an extremely weak central government. The succeeding Nanking Decade and Sino-Japanese War period created conditions that were extremely adverse to the formation of a vibrant public sphere, and
the civic communality of the May 4th Movement was effectively suppressed through violence and terror, as one sees with the transformation of the young scholar Zhu Ziqing. The Cultural Revolution, while severely limiting the range of ideological expression, was nonetheless a period of immense popular participation and critique of the formal government structure. None of these periods was able to outlive the unique political conditions under which they arose. It is the last period, that of post-Reform commercialization, which finally suggests a possibility for a more entrenched public sphere. With the introduction of the Internet, China’s media commercialization continued to proceed at a rapid rate, blazing the possibility for a more balanced distribution of expressive power between the government and the populace.
Chapter 2: Historic and recent role of Internet in Chinese society

The Question Concerning the Internet

In order to determine the historic and recent role of the Internet in Chinese society, as well as the relationship that the Internet has had to the formation of a potentially more stable and sustainable Chinese public sphere, one must first understand the origins and earliest applications of the technology itself. The Internet is a complex set of engineering protocols whose applications can be altered by anyone coming into contact with them. While the technical structures of the Internet do not fully predetermine its social and cultural uses, they do present both limits and opportunities that unquestionably shape those uses.

The development of the Internet was largely driven by the needs of the U.S. defense establishment and the Internet’s main precursor, ARPAnet (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network), which first made an appearance on November 21, 1969. The initial objective of the project was to create an efficient countrywide communications system that could be resistant to full-scale military attack from the Soviet Union.46 The system was capable of withstanding attacks largely because it avoided centralized communication hubs and increased the number of small connections between all parts of the network. Through a method called packet switching – the chopping up of information into smaller bits that were then sent to computers via separate and random routes47 – information could still be transmitted between network connection stations even if some

47 Abbate, Inventing the Internet, 7.
communication lines were damaged or destroyed.\textsuperscript{48} In short, the Internet presented the possibility of a decentralized communications system that was both resilient and efficient.

It soon became clear that the Internet had advantages that extended beyond the realm of national defense. Most notably, the Internet possessed four key advantageous communications qualities: it was highly efficient, scalable for large-scale information transfer, conducive to rapid and general-purpose communications, and capable of avoiding congestion.\textsuperscript{49} In particular, individuals within academe, whose day-to-day work involves the transferring of information and data pools between researchers, students and institutions, quickly found important applications for the technology. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Internet developed mainly on university campuses, connecting mainframe computers from different institutions to help facilitate inter-university research. Because of its roots in the academic world, collaboration emerged as the driving ethos of the Internet: Further developments in the technology overwhelmingly sought to remove barriers and friction rather than increase security and intellectual property protection.\textsuperscript{50} This motivation eventually led to the creation of the World Wide Web (WWW), which began as a collaborative platform between scientists at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) and then developed into a global network. Invented by Tim Berners Lee, the World Wide Web provided a non-linear and


\textsuperscript{49} Abbate, \textit{Inventing the Internet}, 9.

\textsuperscript{50} O'Hara, \textit{Web Engineering in the Chinese Context}, 124.
decentralized platform upon which scattered information on the Internet could be
organized and rendered accessible to both academic and non-academic circles.\textsuperscript{51}

Today, several decades after the creation of the WWW, a collaborative and even
libertarian culture still pervades the way that people in most countries think about and use
the Internet. Stewart Brand’s techno-utopian phrase – “Information wants to be free” –
has persisted in popular culture, and attempts to limit access to online information have
generally faced widespread opposition.\textsuperscript{52} In January 2012, the popular backlash against
two bills – the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Protect Intellectual Property Act
(PIPA) – was so intense in the United States that congressional officials, a majority of
whom had previously supported the bills, were impelled to postpone their vote
indefinitely.\textsuperscript{53} Through an online protest spearheaded by Wikipedia against the two bills,
Americans demonstrated their desire to preserve an open and free flowing Internet, one in
which information is abundant and barriers are rare.

Because of the prevailing associations that most people in the West have with the
Internet, it is commonly taken for granted that the technology, when widely adopted in
countries with repressive regimes, will naturally have an emancipating effect, freeing
information flows and bolstering popular expression.\textsuperscript{54} Such an outlook of technological
determinism assumes that the Internet has certain endogenous qualities that apply to all

\textsuperscript{51} Abbate, \textit{Inventing the Internet}, 215.
\textsuperscript{53} Jonathan Weisman, “In Piracy Bill Fight, New Economy Rises Against Old,” \textit{New York
\textsuperscript{54} Fengshu Liu, \textit{Urban Youth in China: Modernity, the Internet and the Self}, (Routledge
2011), 45.
national and cultural contexts – that the technology itself is inherently democratic and liberal. Rarely though is this assumption rigorously investigated or challenged.

Martin Heidegger, in his 1954 philosophical inquiry entitled *The Question Concerning Technology*, pushes back against such technological determinism, instead suggesting that a single technology can possess hugely divergent potentials, all depending on the user’s manner of utilization. Quoting the poet Friedrich Holderlin, Heidegger writes, “But where danger is, grows the saving power also.”

Whether a technology realizes its “supreme danger” or its “saving power,” Heidegger argues, depends on the practical ways in which humans choose to engage with *techne*, the ancient Greek term for technology whose meaning is intertwined with a type of artistic truth which Heidegger terms the “essence” of technology. To Heidegger, humans must ideally be witnessing and listening to but not blindly obeying technology, consciously utilizing it while not becoming passively subservient to its various functions.

One important implication of Heidegger’s argument is that technology, despite the rigid engineering protocols that may underlie it, is as much defined by the way people engage with it as it is by any of its endogenous qualities. If people use technology blindly, then it threatens to oppress them and render them subservient to its functionality; if, however, it is used consciously with an understanding of its potential misuses, then it has the capacity to enrich human experience and present solutions to pressing problems.

The debate over the impact of the Internet on contemporary society – whether it presents a “supreme danger” or a “saving power” – is brought to life in the contemporary

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debate between Evgeny Morozov and Clay Shirky. Shirky’s argument, similar to the one offered above, maintains that the Internet will necessarily reshape civic life, changing the ways that members of the public interact with each other in a manner that will enhance democratic expression. His optimistic outlook on the changes that the Internet is effecting have earned him important advisory roles within the U.S. government, and his scholarship corresponds to the techno-utopian approach that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton currently encourages in U.S. foreign relations. According to Shirky, information cascades and other new media phenomena are helping reshape the balance of power between people and their governments, and such changes are in the best interest of formerly disenfranchised populations.

In his much discussed book *The Net Delusion*, Belarussian researcher Evgeny Morozov offers a techno-dystopian counterargument to Shirky’s theory. In the work, Morozov expresses deep skepticism about the popular view that the Internet is a herald of democracy in authoritarian regimes, instead highlighting the Internet’s potential as a tool for government surveillance, the spreading of top-down and sometimes dangerous propaganda, and the harassments of dissidents. He draws from a variety of examples to support his perspective: While the radio is often viewed as having played a key role in the democratization of the former Soviet Union, Morozov shows how the same technology played an equally important role in facilitating the genocidal impulses in Rwanda in

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59 Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, 255.
1996; while the Internet (and Twitter) may have helped activists organize in the Iranian election protests of 2009 and 2010, the government has subsequently proven capable of not only censoring popular expression online but sometimes even preempting actual protests by using the Internet as a spying mechanism. Using his home country as an example, Morozov explains how the Belarussian government used online social media sites to identify and access protesters during and after the country’s 2010 popular protests:

“[T]he authorities began monitoring By_mob, the LiveJournal community where the activities were announced. The police started to show up at the events, often before the flashmobbers did. Not only did they detain participants, but they too took photos. These – along with the protesters’ own online images – were used to identify troublemakers, many of whom were then interrogated by the KGB, threatened with suspension from university, or worse.”[61]

Morozov does not attempt to deny that the Internet is reshaping civic life, changing the balance of power. Rather, he suggests that while the technology may reduce the power of authoritarian regimes, that power is not always subsequently transferred to pro-democracy groups. Instead, he argues, such power is liable to transfer to groups who are willing and capable of harnessing technology to curb free speech, monitor activists, and punish anti-establishment expression.

Both Shirky and Morozov buttress their arguments by selecting empirical cases that conform to their larger ideological inclinations. Morozov’s scholarship awakens one to the reality that the Internet is not always employed to meet popular ends, but Shirky is also correct in emphasizing the immense potential that the Internet possesses in supporting the aims of progressive social movements and positively reshaping society.

Combined, the two perspectives present a range of possible influences that the Internet can wield upon society. As Heidegger suggests, the impact of a given technology on society is largely dependent on the ways in which people within that society engage with technology and utilize it.\(^{62}\) How then have the Chinese used the Internet, and what have been the social impacts of this usage?

The Internet with Chinese Characteristics

China’s first network connection to the Internet was established in 1994 at Beijing University, Tsinghua University, and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.\(^{63}\) Similar to the Internet’s early narrative in the West, only researchers and those in academic circles could initially access the Internet, and such access was limited to university cities along the eastern seaboard. In January 1996, China opened its first commercial Internet service to the public, and during that year it is estimated that roughly 3,000 people had network access.\(^{64}\) Since 1996, the Chinese Internet has experienced staggering growth. According to surveys released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CINIC), China had 2.1 million users by late 1998, 22.5 million by 2000, and 111 million in 2005. Between 2005 and 2008, the figure almost tripled, growing to 298 million users.\(^{65}\) By the end of 2011, this figure had risen to 513 million.\(^{66}\)

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\(^{63}\) Liu, *Urban Youth in China*, 35.

\(^{64}\) Liu, *Urban Youth in China*, 36.

The sudden explosion in Internet usage over the past 15 years has presented immense regulatory challenges to the Chinese Communist Party, which has historically kept a close reign over all media within its borders. One of Deng Xiaoping’s favorite sayings from the late 1980s aptly characterizes the Party’s view on information control since Reform and Opening. Discussing the rationale for the market socialist economic system that he was implementing, Deng reportedly once said: “If you open the window for fresh air, you have to expect some flies to blow in.” In light of the commercialization and partial liberalization of the media sector that was taking place, Deng was expressing the Party’s need to still protect its values and political ideals by “swatting flies” or other unwanted ideologies.

Despite the government’s longstanding emphasis on media control, the Chinese Internet initially had a rather surprising relationship to protest. Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) became influential in the mid-1990s on college campuses, which have traditionally been hotbeds for protest, and the earliest documented online protests took place on Tsinghua University’s BBS: a nationalistic protest over the Diaoyu Islands in 1997 and one concerning the violence committed against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia in that same year. In the wake of the protests against the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia in 1999, the People’s Daily Online, the web version of the People’s Daily,

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actually established a BBS that was bluntly called the “Protest Forum.” Within days, tens of thousands of netizens had posted their grievances, most calling for the U.S. government to apologize (former President Clinton’s apology was initially censored by state-run news agencies). The creation of the “Protest Forum” had the unintended consequence of popularizing online protest just as the Internet was emerging as a popular medium in China. Today, it would be unthinkable for *People’s Daily Online* to endorse or host any form of dissent; as the loudspeaker of government policy, its job is to disseminate Party policy so as to prevent such protests from coalescing. The early emergence of university campus BBS’s and the online “Protest Forum” demonstrate the uncertainty with which the government initially dealt with the Internet.

As the Chinese Internet grew steadily throughout the 2000s, the Communist Party’s regulatory approach also became more technologically sophisticated. Nonetheless, the government is still conflicted by two contrary impulses when facing the ongoing rise of the Internet. On the one hand, post-Deng leaders all share a belief that technological supremacy lies at the core of the country’s successful modernization. The informatization of the economy was deemed a primary strategic priority in the tenth ‘five-year plan’ (2001-2005), and former President Jiang Zemin famously stated, “None of the four modernizations (agricultural, industrial, educational and military) would be possible without informatization.” Furthermore, access to information is a critical part of the country’s economic reform, helping establish freer markets and allowing

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73 Liu, *Urban Youth in China*, 41.
consumers and businesses to connect with each other in efficient ways. China’s ambitions to lead the world in scientific and social scientific research also ride on more open access to the Internet. The government has therefore attempted to pursue a strategy of exploiting the Internet for economic and commercial purposes.

On the other hand, open access to information presents a dangerous threat to the kind of enforced social harmony that the government deems imperative. With a more abundant and less centralized media sector, the government must work harder – and risk more – to preserve its façade of complete control. As a result, the government has attempted to clamp down on independent political and social commentary, as well as material it deems inappropriate, such as pornography, all while allowing and even promoting economic and financial journalism. The evolution of *Caijing*, an investigative financial magazine founded in 1998, illustrates the conflicting forces at play in the government’s treatment of new commercial media.

Founded by Hu Shuli, a former editor of the *Worker’s Daily* newspaper, *Caijing*’s stated mission was to present “an independent standpoint, exclusive coverage and a unique perspective.” Its dependable and insightful financial news coverage was hugely popular, and by the mid-2000s it had emerged as one of the most influential news sources in mainland China. As Hu Shuli notes in a recent academic article, “government control of economic news in terms of licensing and supervision has been relatively loose compared with control over other types of news,” and *Caijing* initially focused strictly on these areas. As its influence and readership grew, however, *Caijing* – literally meaning

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“finance (cai) and economics (jing)” – gradually broadened its coverage to address more general societal subjects, including sensitive issues such as illegal detentions and environmental degradation.

Many suspect that Hu at first managed to report on such issues largely because she portrayed them as isolated occurrences that the central government could remedy, as opposed to systemic issues resulting from one-party rule. Hu reportedly once told Ian Johnson, a former Wall Street Journal China correspondent, “We know where the line is, and we walk right up to it.” Caijing was also treated more leniently because much of its critique was cloaked in economic terms: They downplayed the overtly political nature of the topics they were addressing by framing them in terms of the economy. But with time, Caijing’s calculating evasion of censorship regulations was enough to incur the anger of the central propaganda bureau. In September 2009, a disagreement over editorial policy between Hu Shuli and the Stock Exchange Executive Council (SEEC), a regulatory agency overseeing Caijing, resulted in the resignation of Hu and ten senior editors and writers. While Mainland Chinese media report that the dispute was rooted in the company’s revenue sharing breakdown, many speculate that the resignations were prompted by coverage restrictions imposed by the SEEC. One prominent theory suggests that Hu resigned in principle after being told that she could not send reporters to cover ethnic riots in Xinjiang in July 2009. While Caijing has continued to be published, its popularity has declined in the wake of Hu’s departure. As prominent Chinese media

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76 Personal conversation with Ian Johnson in Beijing.
expert Yuan-ying Chan correctly predicted in 2009, “Caijing would not even be a shadow of its former self without Hu Shuli.”

The fate of Caijing illustrates the duality of the current government’s approach to media censorship. On the one hand, they are eager to embrace new technology, particularly when doing so will lead to an increase in economic efficiency or an augmentation of the country’s global competitiveness. Conversely, however, they are extremely apprehensive about any media coverage that threatens central government rule. Caijing was immensely successful as long as it maintained its financial focus and did not report on any national “hot button” issues (ethnic minority rights in Xinjiang, falungong, Taiwanese independence, etc.). But when the government sensed that Caijing was becoming too controversial, they stepped in and neutered it. The government did not outright shut Caijing down, for such an act would potentially have triggered excessive popular backlash. Instead, the government quietly strong-armed resignations while keeping the causes ambiguous, forcing the magazine to gently fade into insignificance.

The Dominant Optimism Underlying Chinese Internet Scholarship

Upon returning from his 1998 state visit to China, President Clinton famously remarked that trying to control the Internet in China was “sort of like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall.” The presiding Western perspective on the Chinese Internet holds that the

80 Jack Goldsmith and Tim Wu, Who Controls the Internet?: Illusions of a Borderless World (Oxford University Press 2006), 90.
technology is like a “trojan horse being let into the Chinese political system” – its influence will continue to grow until the government can no longer control it.\(^{81}\) Most China analysts have shared this rosy assessment of the Internet’s impact on the PRC, with New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof writing in 2006 that any “single blog can start a prairie fire,” and that the expanding blogosphere will eventually lead to the overthrow of the Communist Party.\(^{82}\) More serious scholars have generally agreed, with people speaking of the Internet as a “platform for bottom-up information and public debate”\(^{83}\) that either “democratizes communication of information in Chinese society,”\(^{84}\) “promotes political openness, transparency, and accountability,”\(^{85}\) or “erodes the CCP’s ideological and social control.”\(^{86}\)

Two examples are widely cited from the mid-2000s to bolster arguments that the Internet has had an emancipating effect on Chinese politics. The first case concerns the detention and death of Sun Zhigang, a migrant worker who died in the custody of the Guangdong police in 2003. Sun came to Guangdong in 2003 looking for work and had been in the city for only twenty days before he was discovered and detained by police.\(^{87}\) He was held under a detention and repatriation legal code that had been in place since

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\(^{81}\) Liu, *Urban Youth in China*, 45.


\(^{83}\) Zhou Xiang, “The Political Blogosphere in China: A Content Analysis of the Blogs Regarding the Dismissal of Shanghai Leader Chen Liangyu,” *New Media and Society*, 1006.

\(^{84}\) Tai Zixue, *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society* (Routledge 2006), 289.


May 1982 to control the growing number of migrant workers flocking to Eastern coastal cities in search of manufacturing jobs. Fearing the prospect of uncontrolled migrant populations in cities, the government required all migrants to register and purchase temporary residency cards. Police could ask for these cards at any time, and empty-handed migrants were promptly sent to local detention centers where they were then to be transported back to their native provinces and towns.

In the direct aftermath of Sun’s death, Southern Metropolis Daily, a commercial newspaper known for its investigative edge, published an article exploring the reasons behind Sun’s detention and death, raising questions concerning police conduct. The Southern Metropolis Daily article was subsequently reprinted in newspapers across the country, from China Youth Daily, a Beijing news daily, to Yangcheng Evening News, a southern paper based in Guangzhou. As the story spread across the country, the questions surrounding Sun’s death turned to demands for institutional reform so that the situation would not recur.

Though the story was already picking up steam within China’s print media, it was the Internet that truly allowed for the widespread support that ultimately swayed government policy. Having gotten wind of the movement’s momentum online, three daring Peking University law students – Xu Zhiyong, Yu Jiang, and Teng Biao – submitted an appeal directly to the National People’s Congress (NPC) for the repeal of the detention and repatriation law that was thought to have been responsible for Sun’s death.

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90 Qian Gang and David Bandurski, “China’s Emerging Public Sphere,” 64.
91 Unknown author, “Sun Zhigang’s Brutal Killers Sentenced.”
death. The three students strategized and communicated with each other online, and they soon gained the support of a board of distinguished law professors at Peking University. On June 20th, the ambitions of the legal students came true: Premier Wen Jiabao signed State Council Order 381 abolishing the detention and repatriation system.

The Sun case is commonly used to demonstrate that the Internet, along with commercial media, can stimulate public opinion and bring about significant policy responses from the government. It also demonstrates the ways in which netizens could use the Internet to facilitate the organization of protests.

The second case dates to 2007 and centers around the location of a Paraxylene (PX) facility in Xiamen. Concerned that the facility was located too close to residential neighborhoods, local professor Zhao Yufen wrote a letter to the city’s Party Secretary explaining the dangers of PX, a toxic chemical substance, and requesting that the facility be relocated. After being ignored by the Xiamen authorities, Zhao then wrote a letter to the two top leaders in Fujian province, again explaining his concerns. After once again being disregarded, Zhao drafted an online petition against the project on the grounds that it posed a health danger to Xiamen residents.

In March 2007, as local and then provincial media began covering the story, the Internet started to show its strength. Zhong Xiaoyong, a popular Xiamen blogger, was central in spreading the story outside of the province, and his commentaries were published across the web and printed in newspapers far beyond Fujian’s borders. Reports buzzed through cyberspace and protesters used the Internet to organize a demonstration.

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92 Qian Gang and David Bandurski, “China’s Emerging Public Sphere,” 64.
93 Qian Gang and David Bandurski, “China’s Emerging Public Sphere,” 65.
94 Liu, *Urban Youth in China*, 56.
on June 1. The Xiamen authorities attempted to slow down the movement’s momentum by announcing that they would “postpone” the project, but people continued to mobilize online and thousands of people took to the streets on June 1 for the planned protest. In December 2007, in the wake of the protests, the Xiamen provincial government finally set up a public consultation process that ultimately resulted in a decision to relocate the plant.

Many pundits firmly believe that the Sun Zhigang and PX Xiamen cases are harbingers of the future. President Hu Jintao has repeatedly affirmed the importance of monitoring online public opinion as a means for government to develop more effective and popular policy, indicating that the Party is eager to take preemptive steps to ameliorate situations before they develop into crises on the scale of Sun Zhigang or PX Xiamen. Benjamin Liebman, the director of the Center for Chinese Legal Studies at Columbia University, even warns that the government – and the judiciary in particular – may actually be paying too much attention to online expression, sacrificing the country’s fragile rule of law in order to mitigate protests. In sum, Western journalism and scholarship have tended to depict the Internet as a positive technology that is subverting Party control, seeping into the popular consciousness and opening new channels of dissent.

Challenging the ‘Trojan Horse’ Narrative

There are, however, a number of serious problems with such a favorable depiction of the pre-microblog Chinese Internet landscape. Underlying the narrative of the Internet as China’s ‘trojan horse’ is a patronizing assumption about the Chinese people that betrays a certain Cold War-era mentality.\textsuperscript{98} The narrative assumes a Chinese population that is deprived of information and thirsting for uncensored ‘truth,’ a view that in turn implies a bifurcated view of Chinese society. On the one side, you have the Chinese people, shackled and bitter in their government-imposed ignorance, and on the other side, you have a hostile government that survives purely through information hegemony and the intimidation of its people. Such a view holds that the Chinese people are like a river, gradually swelling with frustrations until they suddenly overflow and coalesce with potent anti-government anger.

In reality, most Chinese netizens either understandingly tolerate or even support the government’s efforts to control the Internet. While they may resent their inability to access certain websites, they simultaneously value the order and stability that some censorship provides. In today’s China, economic development is the thread that ties the vast majority of people together, from factory workers to high-ranking government cadres. If some censorship is necessary to maintain the order and stability that fosters development, then this is seen as being a sensible trade-off. In a 2007 survey conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 85% of respondents said that they thought that Internet content should be controlled, with 87% citing pornography, 86% citing violence, 64% malicious representation, and 30% online chatting as being in particular

\textsuperscript{98} Liu, \textit{Urban Youth in China}, 46.
need of control. This is not to claim that Chinese netizens are not annoyed by the government’s intrusive role in online affairs; they are. But they also value stability in a way that most Westerners would find surprising, and this valuation is critical to the effective functioning of the censorship regime.

In addition, the ‘trojan horse’ narrative also wrongly depicts the overall activities of Chinese netizens. The vast majority of Chinese netizens are not busy inventing ways to circumvent the Great Firewall or pursuing facts about the falungong or Tibet. Instead they are playing online games, communicating with friends about mundane life affairs, or blogging about celebrities and music stars. The Chinese netscape is not devoid of anti-Party political content, but such content is miniscule when compared to the other uses that dominate the medium. According to a 2010 report by the Chinese Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), an administrative agency under the Ministry of Information, the most popular uses of the Internet in 2010 were all entertainment oriented: 83.5% used it for online music, 68.9% for online games, and 62.6% for online video. To illustrate the entertainment-centered orientation of the Chinese Internet, consider that in the closing week of March 2011, the most popular search terms on Baidu’s search engine were the Korean drama Temptation of the Wife and the Chinese serialized fiction Smashing the Universe, the two of which together attracted more than 40 times more searches than the Japanese earthquake/tsunami and the Libyan conflict combined.

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100 Liu, Urban Youth in China, 48.
101 Figures from top.baidu.com
A number of recent social scientific studies also suggest that the Internet's horizontal structure, rather than exposing people to new ideas, may actually be encouraging people to remain in self-selecting communities of the like-minded. The form of 'selective exposure' facilitated by the Internet may thus promote homophily rather than heterogeneity and exchange of ideas, helping feed the like-minded truculence of ultra-nationalist or other extremist communities that are commonly overlooked in optimistic studies of the Chinese Internet. Blogs and other individualized online media options can thus at times be seen as running counter to the kind of opinion-changing dialogue that is requisite for a healthy public sphere, instead promoting a balkanization of opinions that can further fracture dialogue. In Evgeny Morozov's *Net Delusion*, the author even theorizes that the prevalence of infotainment on the Internet offers a kind of digital escapism that threatens to depoliticize populations. Without a free media and civic organizations capable of criticizing those in power, Morozov warns that aimlessly surfing the net can actually bolster the government's control over the public.

Furthermore, while the government has enthusiastically embraced the idea of monitoring public opinion online, it is now clear that they have equally become engaged in the *manufacturing* of public opinion. Through a variety of methods, the government is not simply sitting back and responding to the mass opinions being expressed online; rather, they are manipulating these opinions and attempting to create a façade of support for government policy stances. The most widely acknowledged method they have used involves the 50 Cent Party, a massive amalgam of volunteers and paid-netizens that the

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103 Morozov, *The Net Delusion*, 70.
Party employs to post pro-government comments on influential blogs. The name derives from the widespread belief that these commentators are paid the equivalent of fifty cents for every pro-government comment that they post online. When discussion boards or chat rooms are veering into dangerous territory, 50 Centers attempt to steer the discussion away from sensitive anti-Party topics. Some estimate that the number of 50 Centers is upwards of 280,000, a veritable army waiting to water down any online expression that challenges the Party.\(^\text{104}\) In June 2011, a government directive addressing 50 Centers was leaked to the Chinese public: among other commands, the order asked posters to “increase the exposure that positive developments inside China receive,” “make America the target of criticism,” and “play down the existence of Taiwan.”\(^\text{105}\)

On top of this, the government does not shy away from publicly punishing select netizens for voicing anti-government sentiment, in the process intimidating others who may have been harboring similar sentiments. The practice is encapsulated in the common Chinese phrase *shajigeihoukan* – “kill the chicken and make the monkey watch.” The phrase implies that the monkey will be intimidated from speaking out after witnessing his fellow animal’s punishment. The practice is common on the Chinese Internet, making netizens operate with the understanding that they too could suffer disproportionate consequences for anti-government expression.

The most troubling aspect of the Chinese Internet, however, is the manner in which content is censored. Unlike in Saudi Arabia, where censorship is openly documented by the country’s Internet regulatory committee, or Singapore, where the

country's severe legal code dissuades people from acting out online, in China censorship is opaque. One never knows with certainty whether a page has been censored. When someone tries to access Google's E-mail service, the browser simply hangs. Occasionally one will get through to the page, but more often than not, the page will load indefinitely, leaving the netizen frustrated and unsure of the origin of the problem. If one uses a search engine to search a banned word, the results will simply not appear. In Saudi Arabia, information is still blocked, but netizens are notified when access has been denied; in other words, they are aware that they have crossed a line and that the government has imposed a restriction. In China, the opposite is true. Opacity ensures that netizens are never sure when they are breaking rules, never sure when a comment risks getting them into the disproportionate kind of trouble described in the above paragraph. Because censorship in China is not transparent, netizens are even more likely to self-censor out of a kind of panoptic fear, shying away from expression that could potentially be deemed subversive.

We can thus see that while there may be some examples that substantiate the 'trojan horse' narrative, the overwhelming picture of the pre-microblog Chinese Internet is much more bleak. In the Internet's early stages in China, the government has proven all too capable of diluting dissent, punishing online protesters, and, in some cases, channeling Internet technology in directions that ultimately help bolster central government authority.

New Medium, Same Regulatory Game

Considering the various traits of the Chinese Internet outlined in the previous sections, it is difficult to view the pre-microblog Chinese Internet as wholly separate from the government’s preexisting propaganda apparatus. Information on the pre-microblog Internet could at times spin out of control, creating situations in which the government was forced to adapt to popular demands, like with the Sun Zhigang and PX Xiamen cases. But the government was always able to rein in these crises, and dissidents were swiftly punished the moment the public eye moved on to the next trending news story.

Most glaringly, successful cases of online dissent almost never revolved around issues that directly concerned central governmental authority. Online content relating to China’s territorial integrity (Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan) never spins out of control, unless, in the case of anti-Japanese protests concerning the Diaoyu island chain, the government thinks that it is in its strategic interest to allow or even promote popular sentiment around these causes. When dealing with core issues pertaining to the central Party apparatus, the government’s underlying control is unmistakable. With the 2009 protests in Xinjiang, for example, no online news sources dared publish more information than the central news agencies were providing, and local Internet access was completely suspended during and in the aftermath of the protests.\textsuperscript{108} The subject was too sensitive for print, television, or online media, and netizens were clearly wary of the heavy punishments that loomed over their actions.

In cases of more regionalized protest, local governments attempt to wield similar control. With the PX Xiamen protest, for example, netizens within Xiamen were wholly unable to blog or publish articles on the subject of the PX facility. Zhong Xiaoyong, the blogger most responsible for attracting mass attention to the issue, was only able to address the subject on his blog because it was hosted by a web server in a separate province. Had his blog been hosted in Xiamen, there is little doubt that it too would have been censored by local authorities. The articles and commentaries that Zhong wrote were also published by out-of-province newspapers and websites, otherwise they too would likely have been struck down. The protest was successful not because of the Internet’s inherent ability to evade local government control, but rather because outside sources proved sympathetic to the cause of the protesters.

All levels of Chinese government, from municipalities to the central government, are attempting to improve their ability to locate online dissenters and punish them in the non-digital sphere. Beginning with the province of Hunan, other provinces have proven willing to require real name identification cards in order to access the Internet in private domains. National policy already requires Internet café users to provide government-issued identification before using public computers, but the regulations appear to be expanding into the private computer realm. Such a tactic underscores the government’s aim of making online behavior even more directly traceable and punishable by the law.

There is no question that Internet technology has helped empower some popular movements both in China and abroad. But the Chinese government has clearly shown

that it will not complacently sit back and watch these developments unfold. Rather, it has employed every means at its disposal to control and stifle potential anti-government sentiment brewing on the Internet. But just as the government is changing to adapt to new technological challenges, one should not assume that the Internet itself is remaining static and unchanged. The next chapter will introduce and discuss a new form of digital social media that has emerged as the most threatening challenge yet to the government’s control of information: Weibo.
Chapter 3: Microblogs and Chinese society

The Microblog Considered Globally

From a strictly definitional standpoint, the term “microblog” is self-explanatory. It is a shorter, or “micro,” blog with an imposed limitation on the input field. Typically restricted to 140 characters, a standard established by Twitter, microblog posts are highly referential – the necessity of condensing communication often leads microblog posts to be incomprehensible to people outside of a given group. The compact and at times cryptic form of the message initially led to a backlash among more traditional social commentators. Writing in September 2008, New York Times journalist Clive Thompson opined that microblogs had “expanded narcissism into a new, supermetabolic extreme – the ultimate expression of a generation of celebrity-addled youths who believe their every utterance is fascinating and ought to be shared with the world.”

Science fiction writer Bruce Sterling wrote in 2008 that using Twitter for “literate communication [was] about as likely as firing up a CB radio and hearing some guy recite the Iliad.”

Over time, however, microblogs have steadily gained social acceptance, and it has become clear that the abridged communication space does not necessarily translate into a dilution in meaning or influence. For many users, part of the medium’s appeal lies in the very challenge of forming relevant and meaningful expression within the tight character

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constraints. Referring to the versatility of the medium, Harvard University Internet law professor Jonathan Zittrain has argued that “the qualities that make Twitter seem inane and half-baked are what make it so powerful.” Such a view holds that the accessibility and contagiousness of the medium allow for extremely wide dissemination of ideas that may appear basic, but have the potential to be complex and critical of society. Debates about quality notwithstanding, there is no denying that microblogs have emerged as a global communications force, exerting influence in a wide range of social and cultural contexts.

In the United States, the birthplace the microblog medium, Twitter remains somewhat of a more niche social network, with only 7% of Americans actively using the service, compared to the estimated 41% who maintain a Facebook profile page. Despite this quality, awareness of Twitter has exploded in recent years. In 2008, according to a survey conducted by Edison Research, only 5% of Americans had heard of the service, while a recent survey in 2010 showed that this figure had risen to 87%. The same survey revealed that 51% of U.S. Twitter users actively follow companies, brands and products via Twitter, demonstrating the growth of Twitter and other social networking platforms for marketing and public relations. Twitter is most influentially used in the United States as a top-down publicity mechanism for celebrities, politicians, and various social elite. Celebrities take advantage of the rapid snippet format of Twitter to foster a

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114 Edison Research, “Twitter Usage in America 2010.”
115 Edison Research, “Twitter Usage in America 2010.”
greater sense of identification among their fans or followers, while politicians use Twitter as a campaigning tool geared towards America’s youth and young adults.

In other countries and contexts, however, microblogs have developed entirely different applications. In Mexico, for example, Twitter disseminates life-saving information regarding gang actions and movements in various cities. Residents of cities affected by the recent escalation in drug-related violence, like Veracruz and Guadalajara, have turned to Twitter as part of their public security apparatus, with people “tweeting” when and where they witness violent acts. “Avoid Plaza las Americas,” several people wrote in September 2011, adding that “there are gunmen, they’re not soldiers or marines, their faces are masked.”116 According to a New York Times article published at the time, many Mexicans “now say they trust Twitter more than local news outlets, and in some areas, parents and grandparents are being taught by their children how to get online – specifically so they can be safe.”117 While druglords have threatened to get back at the “online snitches,” the user anonymity that Twitter provides has made it difficult (but unfortunately not impossible) for gangsters to engage in retribution.

In Iran, Twitter was instrumental in organizing and emboldening the 2009 election protests. Along with other social media websites such as Facebook, it allowed Iranians to upload pictures and video from the protests and subsequent government suppression, but Twitter also allowed locals to access and exchange information with networks of international activists. In fact, prominent news outlets such as CNN and BBC News obtained many of their reporting leads via Twitter, often using photos or videos

117 Damien Cave, “Mexico Turns to Twitter and Facebook for Information and Survival.”
that were uploaded onto the site by Iranian activists.\textsuperscript{118} The service was so integral to the protests, in fact, that the U.S. State Department reportedly urged the company to put off a scheduled network upgrade that would have temporarily rendered the service inaccessible.\textsuperscript{119} After conducting the delayed upgrade, Twitter posted an explanatory notice on their official company blog:

\begin{quote}
"When we worked with our network provider yesterday to reschedule this planned maintenance, we did so because events in Iran were tied directly to the growing significance of Twitter as an important communication and information network."\textsuperscript{120}
\end{quote}

In an interview with the Guardian concerning social media and the Iranian protests, then prime minister Gordon Brown stated that the Internet had changed foreign policy forever, even venturing to suggest that the Rwandan genocide may not have been possible if Twitter and other social media had been present.\textsuperscript{121}

Common Elements Across the Medium

The wide array of different social applications of microblogs emphasize the fact that it is not a static medium, and that it can have – just like the Internet at-large – complex and multifarious impacts on society. This being said, there are certain qualities of microblogs that distinguish it from other forms of online media, and these qualities are what facilitate the medium’s extensive social influence. First, despite attempts in China

\textsuperscript{120} Twitter official company blog: http://blog.twitter.com/2009_06_01_archive.html.
and elsewhere to better regulate microblogs, the medium typically provides users with a high degree of anonymity. Compared with Facebook, for example, where users are expected to create an entire profile page that displays photos, user-to-user interactions, and an array of personal information, Twitter is much less personal and revealing. In fact, the very commercial rational of Facebook is precisely to gather as much accurate information as possible concerning its users. If a user falsifies their Facebook account information, doing so naturally limits their ability to influence other users – the falsity of their information renders it difficult for them to obtain “friends” and expand their network. Twitter, on the other hand, does not have the same Facebook- or MySpace-style profile page, and users are thus free to keep their identities relatively concealed, protecting them from potential government or institutional reprisal.

A popular U.S.-based Twitter account called “GS Elevator Gossip,” for example, claims to tweet actual phrases overheard in a Goldman Sachs company elevator. While the tweets tend to be elitist, if not outright offensive, and are likely detrimental to Goldman Sachs’ public reputation, the firm has been unable to confirm whether the Twitter account is actually controlled by an employee, and they have no means of terminating or controlling the feed. For now, the firm must simply tolerate the fact that almost a quarter million followers regularly read tweets that negatively caricature the corporate culture of Goldman Sachs.

Second, microblogs are capable of disseminating information much faster than other forms of online media. When someone with many followers tweets something

particularly interesting on a microblog, followers can instantaneously repost (a kind of forwarding of the original tweet) this information onto their own microblog pages, thus disseminating it to all of their own followers. As the cycle repeats itself, the number of people who have access to a viral tweet increases exponentially, creating a pyramidal trajectory of information dissemination. (see diagram below) In contrast, information tends to be more sequestered on traditional blogs, and Facebook only recently began offering a “Share” function that allows users to repost information from other people’s pages, a clear attempt to emulate the microblog medium. The ease with which popular ideas are shared on microblogs, via a mere click of the mouse, allows the medium to disseminate information with unmatched speed.

![Diagram](image)

Original tweet (1)

Recipients of original tweet
(1 x 200)

Potential recipients of repost (1 x 200 x 200 = 40,000)

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This diagram represents an idealized situation in which there are no overlapping followers, a situation that is highly improbable. I would estimate that roughly 25%-50% of one’s followers overlap with friends’ followers.
Third, the popularity of the repost option also reduces the degree of authorship involved in online content production, an effect that encourages people to post more candidly and reduces user fears of government reprisal. Whereas ideas have to be individually formulated on traditional blogs – and to a lesser degree on Facebook as well – the microblogs’ popular repost option is a form of expression that masks origins. Because tweets are often reposted thousands of times in mere minutes, it is difficult to hold a single person accountable for actually conceiving of and expressing an idea contained in a tweet. On a traditional blog, such as that of popular Chinese cyber-commentator Han Han, authorship functions as it does in books or print media. Bloggers know that the ideas expressed on their blogs are unambiguously identifiable as their own, and they must be held accountable for their published words. On microblogs, however, reposting reduces the liability of individual posters while obscuring the true origin of popular tweets.

Lastly, the “trending” feature on microblogs allows ideas to rapidly circulate and gain network-wide recognition in a very short time span. Typically visible on individual microblog homepages in the form of a Top Ten list, the trending feature allows users to see the words, phrases or topics that are being discussed at the highest rate on the entire microblog platform. While trending topics tend to be rather benign, commonly featuring people like “Justin Bieber” on Twitter or the popular icon “Yao Chen” on the equivalent Chinese Weibo, trending topics can at times be more contentious. 125 Once a topic’s high rate of discussion earns it a place on the trending list, there is often a snow-balling effect and the topic becomes common knowledge among all users. From the perspective of

social analysts and non-users, trending also provides a method, albeit imperfect, of quantifying the movement and popularity of ideas.  

Emergence of Microblogging in China

The formal Chinese name for “microblog,” weixing boke, literally meaning “mini blog,” is most often abbreviated in Chinese as weibo. Because of the substantial number of competing microblogs in China, individual microblogging services are referred to as “(name of company) Weibo.” The earliest notable Weibo service on the Chinese market was Fanfou Weibo, which was launched in early 2007 and closely modeled itself after Twitter. Founded by prominent Beijing Internet tycoon Wang Xing, Fanfou experienced slow growth in its first several years before jumping from 0.3 million users to 1 million in the first half of 2009.  

Like the American Twitter, Fanfou was initially unsure of how it would derive its profits, and the service’s early potential appeared to be mostly political in nature. Highly politicized figures like artist Ai Weiwei and environmental activist Lian Yue were early adopters of the service, and the government reportedly took note of the threat that the service could possibly pose to their societal control.

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According to media analyst Clay Shirky, the popular mobilizing potential of Fanfou first became evident during the unrest that followed the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008. While it took the government over three months to even admit that the quake had happened, Shirky states, the ability of local residents to post pictures and video of the disaster meant that citizens learned of the incident from fellow citizens across the country, rather than from the Xinhua news agency, which has long maintained a monopoly on important national news. Largely because its role in mobilizing popular sentiment in the aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake, Fanfou was temporarily shutdown in 2009 from June 3 to June 6 to increase public security precautions during the 20th Anniversary of the Tiananmen Square crackdown.

On July 7, 2009, in the direct aftermath of the 2009 Urumqi riots that killed almost 200 people in the western region of Xinjiang, the government again shutdown Fanfou,

132 In the Fanfou announcement, the service is not referred to as a “weibo” but instead as a “mini boke,” or mini blog.
publicly citing “site maintenance” as the official reason. As described in chapter 2, when websites become inaccessible in China, one is never certain whether they have been intentionally blocked by Chinese censors or whether actual technical problems are to blame. In the case of the 2009 shutdown of Fanfou, various factors suggest that government intervention was to blame; in addition to the shutdown coinciding with a burst of tweets about the growing unrest in Xinjiang, on the day of the shutdown a high-level Fanfou employee reportedly posted a resentful MSN status that read: “Fanfou is under tech maintenance and will re-open soon. Don’t ask me why.” Never admitting that the site was being censored, Fanfou went on to endure long periods of “forced maintenance” over the next several years, periods that generally coincided with politically sensitive moments for the CCP. The site was reopened on November 11, 2010, but by then, users had already become frustrated with the site’s unpredictable accessibility, and the number of users has yet to rebound to 2009 levels.

The New Microblog Powerhouse: Sina Weibo

In June 2009, amidst the first controversial shutdown of Fanfou, China’s largest infotainment web portal, Sina, launched a microblog of its own. While the government’s apprehensiveness towards the microblog medium no doubt presented a huge business risk for Sina’s entrepreneurial CEO Charles Chao, the gamble was well calculated.

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Capitalizing on the government's distrust of the highly political Fanfou microblog, Chao framed his site as a haven for apolitical popular and commercial culture. Instead of attracting figures like Ai Weiwei and Lian Yue, Chao instead extended invitations to movie stars, singers and famous business figures, in essence manufacturing a microblog site whose culture the government would be more inclined to tolerate. Forbes magazine's longtime China correspondent Gady Epstein wrote at the time, "Filling the government-manufactured void [after Fanfou's shutdown] was Chao's government-trusted sandbox for cynics, celebrities, influential bloggers and media elites."

Further seeking to ensure government acceptance, Chao also emphasized the financial and commercial value of the microblog medium, demonstrating to the development-obsessed government in Beijing that microblogs could have immense benefits for overall economic efficiency. Unlike its predecessor Fanfou, Sina Weibo developed a clear business strategy, encouraging brands to use the emergent platform as a direct marketing channel to reach their customers. This strategy proved successful, and most competitive brands and popular artists now use Sina Weibo as a critical element of marketing and publicity strategies – even the U.K. band Radiohead opened a Sina Weibo account to better publicize their music in China, and multinational brands from Nike to BMW all rely on Sina Weibo as a key publicity medium. According to an iResearch report released on March 30, 2011, more than 5,000 companies and 2,700 media organizations in China use Sina Weibo for their business, figures that attest to the

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136 Gady Epstein, "Sina Weibo."
137 Gady Epstein, "Sina Weibo."
commercial importance of the platform. Additionally, the iResearch report states that the top 100 Sina Weibo users have a combined 485 million followers, suggesting that much of Sina Weibo’s content production emanates from the accounts of a select and controllable social elite.

The fact that Sina Weibo is only one component of the larger Sina media conglomerate, which includes online news, a traditional and well-regulated blogging service, games and entertainment, and other services, also helped establish trust between the government and Chao’s new venture. Whereas Fanfou was a standalone company modeled after the highly political and idealistically American Twitter, Sina Weibo fit better into the Chinese model of large, state-influenced media conglomerates. Also, because of Sina’s preeminence in the Chinese news market, the company is known to have extensive and cozy links to high-level government officials, relations that likely make it more difficult for the government to simply pull the plug on the company’s profitable microblogging endeavor.

Alongside Sina Weibo’s rapid commercial growth in recent years, however, the site has also experienced a wide diversification of users, and it is increasingly serving as more than a mere infotainment and marketing platform. With a reported 227 million users in September 2011, Sina Weibo has become a critical conduit for public indignation, and scholars, activists, and concerned netizens are increasingly using it as a vehicle for circulating ideas and mobilizing their followers into action. Sina Weibo’s political

140 Wang Shanshan, “Sina brings microblogging to China.”
141 Gady Epstein, “Sina Weibo.”
142 Gady Epstein, “Sina Weibo.”
implications became perceptible when indignant users came together to condemn the son of a Hebei police official who infamously cried “My father is Li Gang” after fatally hitting a college student in his Volkswagen Magotan on October 16, 2010 in Baoding, Hebei. The incident fueled populist anger against the transgressions of government elite, but it was not linked to the central government and could thus be considered relatively innocuous from the government’s point of view. A deadly apartment building fire the following month in Shanghai was seen as slightly more serious, causing 58 fatalities and purportedly being the result of government corruption during the construction process. Mainstream coverage of the blaze was strongly censored by the Propaganda Bureau, but information dissemination on microblogs helped provoke widespread condemnation of the government’s handling of the fire. Yet even in this case, the government managed to largely control of the official media’s response, and social disaffection on Weibo gradually petered out with time. It was not until the summer of 2011 that Sina Weibo truly emerged as a popular force that could both overwhelm and undermine government censors. Two cases from the summer of 2011 – the Guo Meimei scandal implicating the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC) and the Wenzhou 7/23 high-speed train crash – illustrate the socially transformative potential of Weibo.

Case Study #1: Guo Meimei Scandal

143 Xiao Gang, “My father is Li Gang,” *China Digital Times*, http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/My_father_is_Li_Gang.
Guo Meimei, a 20-year old girl from the southern metropolis of Shenzhen, was no different from many of China’s young nouveau riche: she engaged in conspicuous consumption, loved to flaunt her fancy bags and fast cars, and evinced a jarring insensitivity to the struggles of ordinary Chinese. The fact that Guo narcissistically posted numerous photos of herself carrying Hermès bags and driving Maseratis did not immediately trigger an online uproar; netizens may have been repulsed by her exorbitant vanity, but such behavior is quite common among young Chinese parvenus. What caused the month-long outrage that overturned Guo Meimei’s life and seriously tarnished trust in a branch of the central government was the fact that her personal Weibo account claimed that she was an executive at the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC), the country’s largest state-run charity. Questions abounded: How could this 20-year old have risen to such a high position in a state charity? How was she funding her extreme opulence? And more fundamentally, could state charities that lacked institutional oversight be trusted to use donations toward philanthropic causes?

The scandal admittedly landed on an already fertile ground of suspicions about charity organizations in China. Though China has an increasing number of super-wealthy—Forbes listed 115 billionaires in 2010—philanthropy is still relatively undeveloped, and there are few trusted domestic charities to which the wealthy can donate. Many social commentators believe that the lack of credible charities is rooted in the government’s insistence on regulating philanthropy and promoting its own vast organizations, such as the RCSC, while imposing restrictions on private players. As a result, many of China’s

richest citizens are hesitant to donate funds to organizations that they fear suffer from the same corruption that afflicts the government.

Given this background, netizens were quick to attack the RCSC on June 21 when pictures of Guo Meimei flaunting her wealth were circulated on the Internet. Making matters worse was the fact that Guo’s Weibo account had been marked with a “V” icon, leading netizens to believe that Sina had verified her account information and confirmed her position at RCSC. While Sina Weibo was quick to admit their error and claim that there had been a malfunction in the verification process, the “V” on the account helped fuel netizen suspicions that Guo might in fact be connected to the RCSC.

As public anger mounted, Guo began using Sina Weibo as a direct channel to communicate with the media and the public. But the more Guo pleaded for forgiveness, tweeting apologies for her “stupid and ignorant behavior,” the more netizens investigated her past and uncovered evidence of murky ties to the RCSC. Rather than being silenced by the government or forced to apologize in a more controlled environment, as would likely have been the case prior to microblogs, Guo effectively used her Sina Weibo account as a direct platform to speak to the media and attempt to clear her name. Doing so inadvertently drew attention to the actual shady practices of the RCSC, provoking even more distrust of the organization.

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Most significantly, Guo shed unprecedented light on the for-profit activities that many Chinese charities secretly engage in. On July 4, 2001, a senior board member of the Red Cross Society of China Bo’ai Asset Management Ltd. Corp., a for-profit affiliate of the RCSC with an unclear mandate, quit his job and claimed responsibility for the entire affair, stating that he had been dating Guo Meimei and that her luxury items had been his gifts to her.150 But when Guo publicly denied dating Wang Jun on her Weibo account, people grew even more distrustful of the RCSC, suspecting that the organization was using Wang Jun as a scapegoat to conceal the actual source of Guo’s wealth and provide closure to journalistic investigations.151

The importance of microblogs in the development of the Guo Meimei scandal can be illustrated by three interrelated characteristics of the case. First, the scandal was broken on Weibo, highlighting the ways which the medium empowers citizen journalists and investigative reporters to uncover stories without requiring state-sponsorship or approval from sluggish bureaucratic entities.152 By the time the government mobilized its censorship mechanisms, the story of Guo Meimei had already become so embedded in the public consciousness that many commercial news organizations felt forced to respond to the public’s demand for answers. Suppression quickly became near impossible.

Second, as the story gained momentum in the media, almost all new developments were exposed via Weibo. Staying out of the traditional media spotlight, Guo Meimei instead used Weibo as a means to try to vindicate herself and explain her

true identity. She first apologized to the public via Weibo, explicated her strange relation with the RCSC on her Weibo account, and then denied dating Wang Jun through a Weibo post.\textsuperscript{153} This meant that traditional news sources, from the \textit{People’s Daily} to more commercialized papers like \textit{Southern Metropolis Daily}, were relying on Weibo for new content to include in their articles. Unable to investigate large entities like the RCSC because of government-imposed restrictions, traditional media outlets were handed leads from Guo Meimei and other involved parties via their Weibo activities.

Third, and perhaps most particular to this case, the RCSC was ultimately compelled to open a Weibo account of their own in an attempt to halt the rumors concerning their organization. On July 6, 2011, the Red Cross Society of China opened an official microblog on Sina with the stated purpose of “better interacting with netizens amid a mounting public trust crisis.”\textsuperscript{154} Within a mere day, the site’s Weibo postings had been forwarded to more than 25,600 accounts and sparked an estimated 61,800 comments. Shortly after opening the account, RCSC secretary general Wang Rupeng explained: “By opening the microblog service, the RCSC aims to enhance transparency in our work, deliver timely information, and conduct real-time communication with netizens.”\textsuperscript{155} In short, the RCSC’s inability to quash the Guo Meimei scandal made them realize that their organization’s only means of survival was to combat rumors on Weibo. Unable to sustain its traditionally opaque practices, the RCSC now had to engage with the public, endure heightened social scrutiny, and be more accountable for abnormal institutional practices. On July 10, a sarcastic Weibo user named @GIN_ posted: “Guo

\textsuperscript{153} Haolan Hong and Jaime Florcruz, “Red Cross China in credibility crisis.”
\textsuperscript{155} Unknown author, “Red Cross trying to ease trust crisis on microblog.”
Meimei has made an indelible contribution to the development of the RCSC. Without her, we could not have changed the organization in 100 years!"156

The RCSC’s decision to use Weibo to make their organization more transparent was not an isolated shift. According to Chinese media reports, in 2011 the Chinese Academy of Governance, the exclusive cadre school where senior officials are trained, expanded their syllabus to include “Improving guidance of public opinions in the Internet era.”157 Indicators suggest that government officials and departments are taking this advice to heart, with Sina estimating that the number of official government or government-related Sina Weibo accounts quadrupled in 2011 to 20,000.158 If the government continues to use Weibo to register and respond to citizen concerns, as occurred in the Guo Meimei case, this could represent a new source of public influence over government policy. It has the potential to create unprecedented opportunities for constructive dialogue and inclusive government policymaking.

Case Study #2: Wenzhou high-speed rail crash

“With all the wind and storm, what’s going on with the high-speed train? It’s crawling at a snail’s pace. I hope nothing happens to it.”159 Such were the prophetic words posted on Weibo by user Smm_Miao on the evening of July 23, 2011. Shortly

156 Personal observation.
158 Unknown author, “Verified official microblog accounts hit 20,000 in China,” Xinhua, December 12, 2011.
thereafter, high-speed train number D3115, which had lost power over a viaduct, was rammed from behind by another high-speed train traveling at a speed of 99 kilometers per hour.\textsuperscript{160} The two trains carried a combined 1,630 people, and the collision derailed six coaches, with two precariously falling 20 to 30 meters off the viaduct and crashing into the valley floor. Forty people died in the collision and 192 were injured, making the Wenzhou collision the second most deadly high-speed rail crash in history, following the 1998 Eschede train disaster in Germany.\textsuperscript{161}

The crash posed an immense threat to the prized economic development narrative of the Chinese Communist Party. Since launching their first high-speed rail route from Tianjin to Beijing in 2007, the Chinese government has utilized high-speed rail as more than a mere efficient domestic travel alternative – for many, it has become emblematic of China’s technological prowess, and perceived superiority, in the twenty-first century. Building has proceeded as a furious pace, with roughly 35 new lines covering an estimated 13,000 kilometers being built in just over seven years. The BBC reported in 2010 that by the close of 2012 China was estimated to have more kilometers of high-speed rail than the rest of the world combined.\textsuperscript{162} On top of this, China boasts the fastest commercially operated train in the world – the Shanghai Maglev (magnetic levitation) Train – traveling at a peak speed of 431 kilometers per hour.\textsuperscript{163}

\textsuperscript{162} Michael Robinson, “China’s New Industrial Revolution,” BBC, August 1, 2010.
As such, it should not come as a surprise that high-speed rail emerged as one of the primary talking points for a government obsessed with portraying its country as a global technological leader. The aforementioned Tianjin-Beijing line, for example, was launched directly before the 2008 Summer Olympic Games amidst much media and government attention,\textsuperscript{164} while the Beijing-Shanghai high-speed rail line was scheduled to launch on July 1, 2011, purposefully coinciding with the momentous ninetieth anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party.\textsuperscript{165} In some ways, the speed of construction on the trains, as well as the trains’ actual record-breaking speeds, were seen as symbolic embodiments of China’s consistently remarkable rates of economic growth, which have hovered around 10% over the past 30 years. Furthermore, the trains were viewed as evidence that China was slowly transitioning away from being a cheap manufacturing economy and becoming a sophisticated economy capable of technological innovation and high value-added manufacturing.\textsuperscript{166} In short, the two trains that collided on July 23 were not mere isolated trains – they were enmeshed in a larger nationalistic narrative that originated from top government leaders and permeated many layers of society.

Despite these larger macro pressures, not all was positive and auspicious with the high-speed rail in the lead-up to the crash. In February 2011, the former Minister of Railways Liu Zhijun, who had occupied this position from 2003 to 2011 and had overseen the entire construction of the high-speed rail program, was found guilty of

\textsuperscript{166} Bradsher, “High Speed Rail Poised to Alter China.”
charges of corruption. Liu had been the international spokesperson for China’s high-speed rail program, showing off his creation to dozens of high profile visitors during their visits to China. Shortly before his dismissal, Liu was quoted in the media saying, China “has created a high-speed railway system with the greatest comprehensive technology, the best integrative ability, the highest operational distance, the fastest operational speed, and the largest scale of construction in the world.”

The abruptness of his dismissal called all of the program’s successes into question, sparking concerns over the safety and long-term sustainability of the rail system. On the Internet and in some commercial media outlets, people expressed worries that the atypical dismissal meant that Liu and the Ministry of Railways had cut corners in their all-out construction efforts, hinting at the possibility of future safety concerns down the line. In the aftermath of Liu’s firing, Yoshiyuki Kasai, the chairman of the Central Japan Railway Company, told the Financial Times that the Chinese were using trains that were based on Japanese designs, but that were operating at speeds 25 percent faster. He went on to speculate, “I don’t think they are paying the same attention to safety that we are. Pushing it that close to the limit is something we would absolutely never do.”

Thus, like the Guo Meimei scandal, the Wenzhou crash occurred in a popular climate that was already rife with suspicions, this time over the safety and integrity of the rail project.

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171 Jonathan Soble, “Japanese rail chief hits at Beijing.”
Most likely because of the sensitivity of the rail campaign, traditional media outlets were initially hesitant to cover the accident. On Saturday evening, the night of the crash, state television devoted the bulk of its programming to the mass shooting in Norway.\textsuperscript{172} Within minutes of the crash, however, Sina Weibo was alive with posts, including images, from the crash scene. One passenger posted that there had been a power blackout and two strong collisions, while another passenger’s cries for help were reposted over 100,000 times: “Children are crying all over the train car! Not a single attendant here!”\textsuperscript{173} Another post calling for blood donations at a local hospital was reposted hundreds of thousands of times, leading to an enormous surplus of donors within mere hours.\textsuperscript{174} By evening, the train was on everybody’s lips in the faraway capital, and people had switched off their televisions, which were still broadcasting from Norway, in disgust.

The following day, traditional media, including television, was permitted to follow the story. However, the State Council Information Office, in charge of media censorship regulations, issued a secret directive that was subsequently leaked to the China Digital Times, a U.S.-based news aggregating site that is blocked in China:

All articles related to the Wenzhou high-speed train crash are to be kept on back pages; no relevant articles are allowed on front pages. All news centers are to keep only one report of the most recent development. Do not release any commentaries. [...] All websites are to immediately carry out and implement this

\textsuperscript{172} This is based on personal recollection, along with the experiences of friends and colleagues in Beijing at the time.

\textsuperscript{173} Personal observation, later used in New York Times article.

\textsuperscript{174} Michael Wines and Sharon LaFraniere, “In Baring Facts of Train Crash, Blogs Erode China Censorship.”
order within the next half an hour. Review of implementation is required after another half an hour.\footnote{175}

With traditional media forced to air and print deceptively positive messages, people flocked to Weibo to seek the truth about the crash. Cai Qi, a senior official from Zhejiang, the province in which the crash occurred, posted: "Such a major accident, how can it be attributed to weather or technical reasons? Who should take the responsibility? The Ministry of Railways should think hard in this time of pain and learn a lesson from this."\footnote{176} Another blogger from Hubei province posted that despite watching the news on the train crash, he felt like he knew nothing about what actually happened: "Nothing is reliable anymore. I feel like we cannot even believe the weather forecast. Is there anything that we can still trust?"\footnote{177} One comment that was widely reposted criticized China for allowing the mass media to carry details of a massacre in Norway, committed by a political extremist, but not permitting the release of the death toll in a domestic train crash. He wrote: "Chinese journalists are in Oslo interviewing the mayor, but they aren’t even allowed to enter the village near the crash scene in Wenzhou. What is going on?"\footnote{178}

Despite calls from CPC general-secretary Hu Jintao and premier Wen Jiabao for an “all-out effort to rescue passengers,”\footnote{179} railway workers at the site of the crash conducted a hasty cleanup of the accident site and quickly declared that the rescue was

\footnote{176} Michael Wines and Sharon LaFraniere, “In Baring Facts of Train Crash, Blogs Erode China Censorship.”
\footnote{177} Personal observation, later used in New York Times article.
complete. Shortly thereafter, however, a video was circulated online of trains being broken apart by backhoes and buried in a nearby pit, fueling suspicions that the Ministry of Railways was attempting to conceal evidence that could potentially implicate the government or their bureau. More than 40,000 Weibo users reposted a statement by Yi Nengjing, a Taiwanese celebrity, saying that wreckage from the Air France crash in 2009 had been well preserved and treated, including tiny debris, to help figure out the cause of the tragic accident and prevent it from happening again. At a press conference on Sunday, Wang Yongping, the Ministry of Railways’ spokesperson, claimed that the burial of damaged carriages was necessary to make way for mechanical equipment that would assist in the rescue efforts, adding that it was also necessary to protect the intellectual property of the train technology. But netizens remained utterly unconvinced, appalled by how little effort had been put into rescuing the injured, and infuriated by the government’s apparent attempt to conceal evidence from the site. Wang’s statements sparked further indignation when the last survivor, a 2-year old named Xiang Weiyi, was discovered in a pile of rubble hours after the Ministry had officially declared the rescue “completed.”

In an attempt to quiet the growing discontent over the handling of the crash, the Ministry of Railways announced the firing of three senior railway officials: Long Jing, head of the Shanghai regional railway bureau; Li Jia, a party secretary; and He Shengli,

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180 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3PiHQDe0fQ
deputy chief of the Shanghai bureau. But the dismissals, seen as transparent attempts to provide scapegoats for the public’s anger, only raised further suspicions that the Ministry was concealing information. In the past, Chinese officials fired too soon after similar calamities had merely been scapegoats, resurfacing several years later in different roles but with no less authority.

Netizen suspicions were aggravated further when a statement was released by the Wenzhou Lawyer’s Association, a relatively independent body, showing that the Wenzhou Judicial Bureau, a government entity, had ordered the Lawyer’s Association not to take cases from the families of the crash victims. According to the statement, lawyers were told to reject cases because “the accident is a major sensitive issue concerning social stability.” But when word of the government injunction was circulated on Weibo, the Judicial Bureau was forced to withdraw the order and apologize.

Then on July 27, several days later, a group of over 100 families affected by the crash organized a protest outside of the Wenzhou South Railway Station. Their banners – which read things such as “Return dignity to the victims of 7/23! Seek the truth of what happened!” – reflected a widespread popular desire to discover the true cause of the crash in order to hold the guilty parties responsible. Images of the protest were widely disseminated first on Weibo and then in the traditional media, and the central government finally sent Wen Jiabao, the premier affectionately known as Grandfather Wen, to the

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185 Sebastien Blanc, “China lawyers ‘told not to take rail crash cases,’” Agence France-Presse, August 1, 2011.
186 Sebastien Blanc, “China lawyers ‘told not to take rail crash cases.’”
scene of the crash in an attempt to restore public trust. In a rare occurrence for such a high-level Chinese politician, Mr. Wen delivered an hour-long news conference that was streamed live on the state-run television. Vowing to “get to the bottom of what happened,” premier Wen assured viewers that if any corruption was discovered during the investigation, the government would “handle it according to law, and the consequences [would] be severe.”

Weibo users applauded the premier’s strong words, while commercial media interpreted his speech as providing implicit approval for more investigative reports.

Months after the premier’s hopeful address, however, there was still no finality regarding the cause of the collision, and the promised investigation was continually being delayed. Even the lawful monetary compensation had not yet reached the families of victims. For people like Chen Lihua – who lost his brother, broke eight ribs, punctured a lung, and shattered a kneecap – the most painful blow was suffered to his sense of self-dignity. He and others were unable to endure the fact that the cause of the crash was still inconclusive and that those guilty for his brother’s death were not being held accountable.

“I want to cry, but I have no tears left. Our family has already lost someone in this accident. How can they treat us like this? I am being tortured both physically and mentally.”

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Finally, on December 28, more than five months after the crash, the government released a “comprehensive” report that claimed that flawed equipment and procedures, as well as corruption, were the main causes underlying the crash. More specifically, the report cited sloppy development of signaling equipment, bidding irregularities in rail contracts, and lapses by safety inspectors as being responsible for the crash. The report singled out 54 individuals who would face disciplinary actions for their negligence regarding the crash, including some people who had been involved in the shoddy rescue effort. But much of the report seemed self-evident to those who took the time to read it, and many Weibo users expressed their dissatisfaction with the shallowness and lack of specificity in the report’s findings. Signaling equipment, for example, had already been identified as a main cause of the crash in late July, while bidding irregularities – or corruption – did not surprise a public already accustomed to the Ministry of Railways’ less than honest ways. Furthermore, the three officials that the report cited as being particularly responsible for the crash were either dead, already disgraced, or in jail on unrelated corruption charges. The main culprit according to the State Council investigatory team, for example, was Ma Cheng, the deceased former CEO of the Signals and Communications Group.

The public frustration with the government’s handling of the crash had an immediate negative effect on the viability of China’s high-speed rail system. Without a satisfying report, many feared that the same malfunctions that led to the Wenzhou crash could recur at any time. The result was, and continues to be, a lack of confidence in the high-speed rail project, with the government struggling to fill trains and continually being forced to reduce operation speeds in order to assuage passenger fears. Following the crash, for example, vacancy rates on the Shanghai-Beijing route were above 70 percent.196 Airplane tickets, on the other hand, responding to a surge in demand, saw an immense price hike. Netizens created clever memes and wordplays to satirize the Ministry of Railways, including the picture below, which isolates radicals from the three characters that comprise “Ministry of Railways,” and reconstitutes them to say, “neglecting one’s duty.” In addition, trains across China, many of which had prided themselves for their record-breaking velocities, were forced to reduce their transport speeds by more than 20%.197

197 Benjamin Haas, “China to slow its high-speed trains,” Los Angeles Times, August 11, 2011.
Many people took their frustrations to another level, publicly decrying the handling of the train crash as emblematic of a political culture that prioritizes fast results over public welfare and government accountability. One Weibo user wrote, “China, please slow your soaring steps forward. Wait for your people, wait for your conscience! We don’t want derailed trains, or collapsing bridges, or roads that slide into pits. We don’t want our homes to become death traps. Move more slowly. Let every life have freedom and dignity.”

David Bandurski, head of the China Media Project, articulated a widespread popular belief when he wrote, in the International Herald Tribune, that the Communist Party’s “culture of expediency and secrecy is the root cause of this and other tragedies.”

The importance of microblogs manifested itself in a wide array of ways in the aftermath of the Wenzhou train crash. First, as with Guo Meimei and the RCSC scandal, Weibo was critical in initially breaking news of the crash. As stated above, news and pictures of the crash were first circulated on Weibo by passengers on the train, and the attention that the crash garnered on microblogs helped put pressure on traditional media organizations to defy censorship directives and provide the public with at least a modicum of information. Subsequent developments related to the crash were also first circulated on microblogs, as opposed to other traditional media sources.

Images and video of the cover-up, for example, spread on Weibo before they reached established

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200 David Bandurski, “China’s High-Speed Politics.”
201 Michael Wines and Sharon LaFraniere, “In Baring Facts of Train Crash, Blogs Erode China Censorship.”
news outlets, while the protests of Wenzhou families were also first discovered and publicized by watchful citizen journalists on their Weibo accounts.\textsuperscript{202} Going further, microblogs provided a perfect platform for public opinions and concerns to amass and coalesce, with people discussing developments, criticizing the government’s actions, and even taking part in user-created polls that gauged public dissatisfaction with the government’s treatment of the crash.\textsuperscript{203}

Weibo allowed for people not only to access information concerning the crash but also to discuss and develop their own opinions on the incident. For something so closely tied to a major government agency, the nature of the critique facilitated by Weibo was remarkable.

Second, the case demonstrates that once information reaches a certain level of social ubiquity on Weibo, it becomes next to impossible to completely stamp out.

\textsuperscript{202} Michael Wines and Sharon LaFraniere, “In Baring Facts of Train Crash, Blogs Erode China Censorship.”

Because of the inherent speed and information-sharing structure of the medium, information spread before censors could even determine whether or not a given post transgressed a particular censorship line.\textsuperscript{204} The government was stuck between a rock and a hard place – if they barred all posts containing “high-speed rail” or “Wenzhou crash” they risked sparking a massive social backlash, because the public’s hearts and minds were already so invested in the issue; but if they did not act broadly or quickly enough, only deleting individual messages, they would not have a chance to stem the negative public sentiments that were building. In short, by the time the first media directive was issued on July 25 (quoted above), it was already too late to halt the momentum that the incident had gained on Weibo. Furthermore, many journalists, responding to the popular outpouring on Weibo, developed a sense of civic responsibility to offer the most hard-hitting, investigative coverage that they could muster. Even when faced with censorship and governmental restrictions, many journalists found ways to contribute to the media snowball effect. Journalists acted together, protecting each other when their colleagues, such as a CCTV news producer, were reprimanded for coverage that crossed censorship lines.\textsuperscript{205} Some journalists even had the courage to release the State Council Information Office’s actual censorship directives, such as the one featured above, giving outsiders rare access to the top-secret exchanges between state censors and media outlets.

\textsuperscript{204} Ben Blanchard and Sui-Lee Wee, “China’s effort to muzzle news of train crash sparks outcry,” \textit{Reuters}, July 25, 2011.

Lastly, the incident made it clear that officials can no longer maintain their former standards of behavior in the age of microblogs. The officials that bundled the rescue effort, likely in an effort to save face, may have gotten away with their actions a decade ago – but in the age of microblogs, such callous acts of self-preservation are bound to be noticed and criticized online. Wang Yongping, the Ministry of Railways spokesperson who had attempted to justify the hasty cleanup, was also a casualty of this changed standard for political behavior. When facing questions from journalists skeptical of his defense of the cleanup, Wang said, “Whether or not you believe this explanation, I believe it.” His insensitive response prompted an instant Internet meme of the phrase, and after the conference Wang was lambasted across the microblogosphere. On August 16, Wang was dismissed from the Ministry of Railways, purportedly because of his poor handling of the press conference. An article in the People’s Daily, the party’s main publicity mouthpiece, subsequently highlighted the new standard of behavior expected of government officials. Titled “How to speak in the age of Weibo,” the article offered a candid look at how Weibo was changing the way officials have to interact with the public.

In a mere several years, Chinese microblogs, and Sina Weibo in particular, have emerged as a force that has meaningfully upset the previous government-populace balance of power. In the Weibo era, it has become increasingly difficult for the government to control the media in times of crisis, and traditional media outlets are being

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207 Andrew Jacobs, “Spokesman Fired After Chinese Train Crash Has New Job.”
208 Tang Weihong, “How to Speak in the Age of Weibo” (微博时代如何说话) People’s Daily, August 2, 2011.
forced to liberalize their coverage if they hope to remain relevant. People’s expectations of government are also changing—gone are the days when officials could simply sweep scandals under the rug, offering uniformly cryptic media accounts in all newspapers and television broadcasts. But the societal shifts induced by Weibo mostly took place during the summer of 2011, and the government has not been watching idly as its power to control media erodes. The final chapter will speculate on the future of Weibo in China, analyzing recent policy proclamations and exploring their potential consequences for the medium.
Chapter 4: The future of Weibo

A permanent public sphere?

As evidenced in the opening chapter, the public sphere has endured a winding and precarious fate in post-dynastic China. Periods in which the public has been capable of criticizing central government policy have been short-lived and made possible only by atypical power balances between the government and the public. In the Cultural Revolution, for example, *dazibao* were public forms of expression that were critical of government officials; but they were only made possible by the fact that Mao, the true source of authority, was dissociated from the Party apparatus. Since Reform and Opening, the public has been granted access to an increasingly varied, though nowhere near unrestricted, spectrum of media perspectives. The introduction of the Internet in the pre-microblog era initially seemed to promise the decline of the government’s historic informational hegemony, providing users with a public platform that could circumvent censorship regulations and create a vibrant digital public sphere. But rapid adjustments on the part of the government have managed to force traditional blogs and online news sources to abide by the same censorship restrictions that have typically governed print and broadcast media.

Only with the introduction of the microblog medium has modern China seen a genuine space, whether concrete or digital, within which people can freely exchange thoughts and ideas with minimal fear of government retribution. On Sina Weibo, scandals have been exposed and ideas have spread in spite of official attempts at information
The rise of the microblog medium has forced the government to be more circumspect in its actions and more responsive to public demands. In cases like the Guo Meimei scandal and the Wenzhou high-speed rail crash, microblogs appear to have succeeded in forcing the Communist Party to govern more responsibly and transparently. Such developments may ultimately benefit individual and communal expression at the expense of overall governmental control. As a result, with each scandal that Weibo exposes, the respectability and prestige of the government erodes. And with each new and controversial idea that Weibo disseminates, the ideological hegemony of the Party weakens. How then does the government view Weibo, and what policies has it enacted to deal with the medium?

**Government rationale towards Weibo**

Considering the challenge that Weibo poses to Communist Party rule, one must naturally question why Sina Weibo and other microblogs have not yet been shuttered? What does the government stand to gain by allowing for their continued existence? Many Western China analysts depict the Chinese government as a passive recipient of the changes wrought by Weibo, as if the government possesses no power to pacify or weaken Weibo’s growing influence. While the government may still be unsure of the best way to deal with microblogs, it is far from passive in its treatment of the medium. Highly sophisticated Chinese think tanks, both state-run and private, employ thousands of people to analyze social conditions and develop correspondingly appropriate policies. Party actions or policies that seem counterintuitive are almost always grounded in some kind of
rationale. One can thus assume that Weibo’s continued existence is not a result of government negligence; rather, it represents a carefully formulated plan that the government selected to deal with the medium.

The first likely reason that the government has been hesitant to shutdown Weibo is due to the platform’s unrivaled capacity to gather important information. Because of its unmatched speed, Weibo allows the government to identify growing issues and trends as they emerge. In the realm of national health and security, Weibo has the potential to help locate epidemics and track them as they spread regionally. Google has already demonstrated this capacity on a number of fronts in the United States. According to a May 2010 article in the journal *Scientific American*, Google is on par with the United States Center for Disease Control in tracking flu patterns. Because searching for “flu symptoms” online is a reasonable indicator of or proxy for actually having the flu, Google is capable of predicting potential breakouts by geographically aggregating all searches pertaining to “flu symptoms.” In addition, Google has the advantage of being real-time, showing developments as they transpire. Because of Sina Weibo’s position as the foremost social media platform in China, the site has the potential to provide a similarly valuable service, perhaps even tracking political movements, responses to environmental degradation, or the spreading of political dissent.

With regards to the Wenzhou train crash, the government was clearly frustrated by the fact that Weibo undermined its censorship guidelines. But the medium also allowed the government to keep tabs on popular perceptions of the crash so as to better

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210 Katie Moisse, “Google Flu Trends Found to be on Par with CDC Surveillance Data.”
improve its handling effort. For example, during Wen Jiabao’s national address from the crash site in late July, the government was able to use Weibo to track real-time responses to the Premier’s speech. Were people responding positively to his address? Were his words placating public discontentment and fostering pro-government sentiments? Or were people expressing resentment towards the otherwise popular political leader? A rough survey with a limited sample size of only fifty posts uncovered forty-four positive posts and only six that were negative, suggesting that the speech was having the government’s desired effect and mollifying public anger.\textsuperscript{211} With an estimated 300 million users hailing from predominantly urban middle and upper class backgrounds, Weibo provides the government with an unsurpassed lens for identifying and tracking popular trends and opinions.\textsuperscript{212} Because users are anonymous and thus feel more comfortable on Weibo, the platform also provides a more unadulterated understanding of popular opinions than even the most carefully conducted survey or opinion polls.

The second major advantage that the government can derive from Weibo relates to its economic value. If operated in a completely open setting, digital social media like microblogs have the potential to enhance economic efficiency, an advantage that is surely not lost on the current development-obsessed regime. Services like Facebook and Twitter strive to make users feel comfortable so that they are willing to share information without inhibition. The more information people share, the more financially profitable their services become, as they rely on information gathering to sell advertising to various entities. Weibo thus has the potential to connect consumers to popular brands and ideas,

\textsuperscript{211} Personal observation/experiment.
assisting in the country’s much anticipated transition from a production-driven to consumption-driven economy. Rapid and uninhibited transfer of information is widely believed to be a key element in a modern, high-tech economy, and Weibo has emerged as China’s most popular and open platform for such exchanges.

Even considering Weibo’s unprecedented ability to facilitate the free exchange of information, this freedom is not without limits. Certain types of information are not acceptable on Weibo, and posts are often removed due to “sensitive content.”\(^{213}\) As a result, users are not as comfortable sharing information on the site as, for example, Americans appear to be on Facebook. In the United States, a new political party or ideology, potentially indicative of popular trends pertaining to the economy, might first advertise itself on Facebook, providing a public lens for government and private groups to track the new group’s developments. In China, similar groups would never reveal their ideas on Weibo for fear of government persecution. Instead, they would come into existence underground, out of the government’s sight.

The third underlying reason that the government allows for the continued existence of Weibo, despite the challenge that the site poses to government authority, is because a degree of informational autonomy is necessary to maintain popular support for the government. If the government denies the Chinese populace a space to vent their societal anger, then their accumulated frustrations could unexpectedly erupt and lead to a threatening anti-Party revolt. On the other hand, if the government allows for some expression that can take place only on a limited set of online platforms, then the existence

\(^{213}\) This happens constantly, but for an example, see the deletion of comments about Chinese linguist Zhou Yongguang’s interview with the BBC in March 2012. (http://cmp.hku.hk/2012/03/28/21035/)
of such platforms can cautiously relieve much of the public’s pent up anger. Qiao Mu, the director of the Center for International Communication Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University wrote: “Thirty years ago it was the farmers that worried them [government leaders]. Twenty years ago it was workers laid off from their state-owned factory jobs. Now it’s netizens. If you don’t let them go online, they will go to the streets.” The government is unwilling to openly tolerate anti-Party sentiment, and yet they realize the impossibility of completely erasing it. As a result they choose to channel such sentiments onto Sina Weibo, a site that is run by a media conglomerate with close ties to and longstanding trust in the government. If left unchecked, the river of dissent on Weibo might entirely topple the Communist regime; but if completely blocked, the river will continually build up pressure, leading to an uncontrollable flood that will affect wide expanses. The government strives to maintain a medium ground where it can control the river by channeling it in specific directions, regulating its flow without risking existential threats.

Efforts to manipulate and channel dissent are by no means new to the present era. A famous passage in the Discourses of the Domains, from the 3rd Century B.C., discusses the subject. In response to a king who believes he has eliminated criticism from his kingdom, the Duke of Shao says:

“You have only blocked it. Stopping up the mouths of the folk is worse than stopping up a river. A river, dammed, breaks through and always causes great harm to people. So it is too with the folk. This is why those who control rivers

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214 Quote from Loretta Chao, “Despite crackdowns, Sina still winning the Weibo game.”
As discussed in the previous chapter, Weibo provides an ideal mechanism to circumvent the Party’s censorship structure, too fast and pyramidical to be effectively controlled. But Weibo does not release all information, and many of the ideas and facts that are disseminated on Weibo do not end up in the traditional media. As a result, Weibo allows Chinese netizens to relieve some of their frustrations and take part in public dialogue in a relatively free manner; but such a dialogue is not entirely unregulated, and it does not reach as large of an audience as television, which remains the country’s most dominant medium in terms of total viewers. During the high-speed train crash, Weibo was responsible for ensuring that important developments became the subject of public discussion, and news concerning the crash dominated Sina Weibo for months. But the government still managed to conceal many of the secrets of the crash, and there is no promising that these secrets will ever be revealed. Weibo, while serving as the main catalyst for the controversy surrounding the crash, also helped placate the worst of public frustrations. It allowed people to express their discontentment and release collective steam without effecting the deep systemic changes that the crash could potentially have prompted.

Additionally, despite Weibo’s rapid growth, its user base is most densely concentrated in the developed urban areas along the eastern seaboard, primarily utilized.

by members of the middle and upper classes who can afford regular access to the
Internet. 217 Throughout the Communist Party’s rule, governmental legitimacy has been
most critically rooted in the support it derives from the countryside, the agricultural
heartland that is key to the country’s sustenance. A majority of Chinese still live in rural
areas – 53% according to the CIA Factbook 218 – and there is a persistent digital divide
between what is being blogged in Beijing and the information that is being consumed in
provinces like Gansu, in the country’s western interior. At present, the Internet
penetration rate in rural China is only 15%, compared with 45% in urban areas. 219
Consequently, many urbanites and intelligentsia who express dissent on Weibo, though
very influential in their society, are not perceived as posing an existential threat to the
Communist Party.

Those who criticize the government from urban centers may also be expressing
sentiments entirely foreign to the urban and rural lower classes, the majority of whom are
not very well informed or politically conscious. The opinions of dissenters like Ai
Weiwei and Yu Jianrong are highlighted in the Western media, and sometimes their
opinions reflect dominant social trends that transcend class divisions. Just as often
though, their ideas and opinions are not popularly espoused, and many average Chinese
remain content with the economic improvements that the government has ushered in over
the past three decades. Though Herbert Marcuse’s concept of repressive tolerance, first

Media,” paper presented by HP Labs, Palo Alto, CA.
218 “China,” the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, last modified April 12,
219 Tait Lawton, “Differences in Urban and Rural Chinese Internet Users,” East West
Connection – Nanjing Marketing Group, April 27, 2010.
articulated in his 1965 work *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, was intended to be applied in
democratic situations, the essay has relevance to the Chinese context. Marcuse writes:

> [T]hose minorities which strive for a change of the whole itself will, under
> optimal conditions which rarely prevail, be left free to deliberate and discuss, to
> speak and to assemble - and will be left harmless and helpless in the face of the
> overwhelming majority, which militates against qualitative social change. This
> majority is firmly grounded in the increasing satisfaction of needs, and
> technological and mental co-ordination, which testify to the general helplessness
> of radical groups in a well-functioning social system.\(^220\)

In line with this theory, the Communist Party might well be tolerating opposition on
Weibo because the medium does not yet pose a severe threat to the Party’s governing
legitimacy. Significant anti-government sentiment may be circulating on Weibo, but the
majority of Chinese remain “firmly grounded in the increasing satisfaction of needs,”
both economic and social.

To summarize, the government is eager to use Weibo for information gathering
purposes; to improve economic efficiency; and because the medium relieves some
popular frustration while reducing the likelihood of regime-changing revolts. But none of
these considerations are absolute, and the government must constantly balance and
reevaluate its censorship guidelines to ensure that affairs do not get out of hand on
Weibo. With the high-speed rail crash, it is apparent that they failed to find such a
balance. The government eventually accepted that Weibo would play a role in reporting
the incident, but it likely did not anticipate the widespread social repercussions that
followed the crash. It also may have underestimated the centrality of trains to middle

\(^{220}\) Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore Jr., and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure
class existence in China – because so many people ride them regularly, the scandal quickly became a hot-button issue and occupancy rates on trains plummeted, causing significant embarrassment for the Party. The government must tread carefully in its treatment of Weibo, constantly weighing the price of control against the benefits of transparency.

Can Sina Weibo be shutdown?

Even if the government were to want to eliminate Sina Weibo, it is not clear that it could practically do so. Unlike Fanfou, which peaked at several million total users, Sina Weibo has already become a massive platform, with an estimated 300 million users as of April 2012. To these legions of users, Sina Weibo is an important element of everyday life, and taking away their most important social networking website could spark sudden and widespread backlashes. Because such a large number of users have grown accustomed to the expressive freedom provided on Sina Weibo, it is also likely that shutting down the site would simply channel their frustrations onto other websites or yet-to-be launched mediums. Even more threatening to the Party, shutting down Weibo risks pushing popular discontentment underground, making it even more difficult for the government to keep watch over protest movements as they develop.

The government has only once attempted to debilitate Sina Weibo; the undertaking was short-lived and met with extreme resistance. On March 31, 2012, amidst the highest-level and most public political scandal that China has witnessed since 1989, Sina Weibo and the second largest microblog, Tencent Weibo, both disabled their sites'
comment functions for 72 hours. After the sudden dismissal of Bo Xilai, a former Chongqing Party Secretary and member of the Politburo, rumors began spreading on microblogs that there had been a coup attempt in Beijing on March 20, 2012. Tencent Weibo posted an explanatory notice on the home page of their microblog:

Recently, rumors and other illegal and harmful information spread through microblogs have had a negative social impact, and harmful information has been relatively predominant in comment sections, requiring concentrated cleansing. For this purpose, this site has decided to temporarily suspend the comment function on microblogs from 8am March 31 to 8am April 3. We express our apologies for any inconvenience.  

While the Tencent notice seems to imply that the decision to deactivate comment functions was undertaken on the company’s own volition, there is little question that the action was ordered by central government authorities, likely implemented through the State Internet Information Office (国家互联网信息办公室). Even considering the limited time span of the move, netizens were infuriated by the government’s brazenness. Many expressed their outrage in anti-government posts, threatening social mobilization if the sites did not return. Others, like Zhang Xin, the popular CEO of SOHO China, the largest real-estate developer in Beijing, pointed out the irony of the government’s decision: “They think that taking away ‘comments’ will terminate rumors. What is actually the best way to stop rumors? To be open and transparent. The more they restrict our ability to express ourselves publicly, the more rumors there will be.”

Facing almost

221 David Bandurski, “Control, with apologies to users and friends,” China Media Project, Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong, April 4, 2012.
222 David Bandurski, “Control, with apologies to users and friends.”
223 Mary Kay Magistad, “China Cracks Down on Social Media Sites over ‘rumors,’” The World (BBC), April 2, 2012.
universal condemnation, the government allowed microblogging sites to reactivate their comment sections on the morning of April 3, as publicly promised. It is likely that the return to commenting might have been delayed further – and perhaps indefinitely – if there hadn’t been such widespread popular backlash.

The government must therefore find a balance between tolerating microblogs and coercing or eradicating them. It cannot allow microblogs to go unchecked, for doing so weakens the reputation and prestige that the Party depends upon for continued legitimacy. But it also recognizes the dangers and undesirability – for the reasons enumerated above – of simply shutting down the medium. The question, from the government’s point of view, is one of the ideal amount of regulation that will allow them to maintain economic growth and modernization while still staying in firm control of the country’s populace. Events over the past year indicate that the government is striving to find such a balance – and not always successfully doing so.

Government Policy Responses

On July 16, 2010, months before Sina Weibo truly emerged as a critical conduit for public discontentment, Zhang Chaoyang, the chief executive of Sohu, a large Chinese search engine with a relatively small microblogging service, published a post in which he summated the decade of technological progress that spawned the Chinese microblog:

The explosion of the microblog in China has been no easy feat [...]. Discussion forums are collective and decentralized in nature. E-mail is personal, peer-to-peer and delayed. Weblogs are centered on the individual and take the collective into account, but they are not quick and timely. Instant messaging approaches real-time, but is only peer-to-peer [...]. The microblog for the first time enables group
relationships, approaches real-time, and can be used at any time and place. This is the product of technological progress and transformation in user behavior chosen from among myriad possibilities, and it was not easy. Won’t everyone please treasure it. 224

Upon first glance, Zhang’s statement reads as an expert’s summary of a decade of technological progress that finally enabled the spatial and temporal qualities of the microblog medium. But Zhang’s final sentence – “Won’t everyone please treasure it.” – betrays a sense of uncertainty over the nascent medium, as if the government were considering shutting down Chinese microblogs altogether.

In fact, in the week leading up to Zhang’s statement, it appeared that the government might be taking preemptive action to cool the freewheeling medium. On July 10, 2010, Sina Weibo unexpectedly became inaccessible to Chinese netizens, with the company releasing a statement claiming that they were in the midst of “security measures.” When the service finally returned two days later on July 12, the site announced that it had become a “beta version,” a term used in technology circles to denote the pre-release stage in software or website testing. 225 The move raised suspicions that the government was gradually preparing to pull the plug on the service, which had, in less than a year, already emerged as China’s most populated microblog platform. To netizens, such developments rekindled memories of Fanfou, the earliest Chinese microblog that was shutdown during the summer of 2009.

224 Hu Yong, “Weibo has reached its time in China’s rise” (微博在中国的兴起正逢其时), Nanfang Daily, August 2, 2011.
225 Hu Yong, “Microblogs are Crucial in China,” China Media Project, Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong, August 6, 2011.
Despite these indications, Sina Weibo’s shift to a “beta version” did not herald its downfall. Rather, in the months that proceeded these first regulatory actions, the site grew exponentially in popularity and importance, serving as the main incubatory platform for the “My father is Li Gang” scandal, the November 15 Shanghai fire controversy, and the tumultuous events of the summer of 2011 discussed in detail in the preceding chapter.

The microblog medium, as demonstrated in these cases, has continued to upset the balance of power between the government and the media, uncovering stories and netting space for commercial and state-run media to expand their coverage of politically sensitive topics. Government attempts to confront microblogs have not been transparent, and much of our understanding of government actions is based on conjecture. It is nonetheless possible to extrapolate from various policy proclamations, editorials in state-run newspapers, and leaked government statements in order to gain some insight regarding the government’s general policy towards microblogs.

As discussed in the previous chapter’s section on the Guo Meimei scandal, a growing chorus of influential voices is calling for the government to create its own Weibo accounts and actively use the medium to engage with netizens. After the eventful 2011 summer, Wang Chen, the Communist Party’s second highest-ranking propaganda official, publicly encouraged all Chinese officials to “embrace Weibo with more openness and confidence.” At a conference held by China’s Information Office of the State Council entitled “Microblogs Serve Society,” Wang, who is known as a more conservative Chinese politician, called on leaders to actively use the medium to
disseminate information about government and society. Such willingness to embrace microblogs signaled that the government was looking to balance— or even co-opt—the medium by infusing it with pro-government official opinions. As of mid-December 2011, Sina Weibo had registered more than 20,000 official government microblog accounts, with 10,000 verified accounts belonging to government departments and another 10,000 belonging to individual high-level officials. By the end of 2011, Tencent Weibo, the second largest Chinese microblog, had verified 21,000 government microblogs, with 13,000 departmental microblogs and 8,000 individual official microblogs. A December 2011 report shows that government microblogs are most concentrated in China’s economically developed regions, with the majority being run by public security and judicial government bureaus.

More progressive local and municipal governments have also used microblogs to realize government-to-public exchanges that would not have been possible in earlier chapters of modern China history. For example, the Beijing municipal government, traditionally hesitant to hold impromptu or unscripted press conferences, launched a Sina Weibo account called “Beijing Weibo Conference Hall” on November 18, 2011. On the account page, Beijing residents are invited to express public concern over hot topics, while government officials are entrusted to address public queries openly on the page.

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Though many netizens remain hesitant to express themselves on the page for fear of government retaliation, Wang Hui, the Beijing director of information office, assures that “[the site] is not just making a show. We shall be sincere.”\textsuperscript{230} To many Internet users, microblog engagement with authorities opens an unprecedentedly relaxed and candid form of official-to-people dialogue. According to an op-ed in the \textit{People’s Daily}, the official Party newspaper, “Government microblogs, through fast and efficient exchange with netizens on the Internet, aim at showing an image of being close to the people, guiding public sentiment actively, experiencing and observing the wills and conditions of the public, and inquiring about policies.”\textsuperscript{231} If microblogs continue to grow and serve this function, the medium will become a place where the government can engage with the Chinese population and boost its own political popularity. Should this trend continue, it would mark a revolutionarily open channel for dialogue and discourse between the government and the populace.

In the aftermath of the tumultuous summer of 2011, there were also rumblings that the government was planning to forcefully intervene in the microblogosphere and regulate the new medium. In the November 28, 2011 edition of the \textit{People’s Daily} newspaper, two members of the Politburo Standing Committee, a body consisting of the nine top leaders in the Communist Party, co-authored an article titled “Actively Carry out Microblog Public Opinion Guidance” in which they called for increased management and

\textsuperscript{230} Unknown author, “Beijing city government shares info on Weibo.”
\textsuperscript{231} Yu Jianbin, “Government microblogs should be ‘magnetic field’ to the public,” \textit{People’s Daily}, March 19, 2012.
regulation of microblog culture. The article referenced a “Decision” – or jueding – reached at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party held in October 2011, strongly suggesting that the article had widespread support from the upper echelons of the Party. Specifically, the article stated that the Party must “conscientiously implement a number of deployment demands in the ‘Decision’ […] concerning the ‘development of a healthy and upright online culture,’ the ‘strengthening of public opinion channeling on the Internet, singing the ideological and cultural main themes online,’ and ‘strengthening the channeling and control of social media and real-time communication tools.’”

The concept of public opinion channeling has been a central part of the Party’s approach to the diversification of media, and it implies a more modern and savvy version of the traditional “public opinion guidance” that came into being in the direct aftermath of the June 1989 Tiananmen crackdown. According to Qian Gang, an esteemed Chinese journalist and current director of the China Media Center at the University of Hong Kong, public opinion channeling “focuses not just on restricting information but on ensuring that the Party’s own authoritative version of the facts predominates.”

On December 16, 2011, the government took an aggressive step forward on public opinion channeling and announced a series of microblog regulations. Among other less significant stipulations, the new regulations required that all microblog users register their accounts under their real names within three months, or by March 16, 2012.

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232 A personal translation.
233 Personal translation.
234 David Bandurski, “More signals on social media control.”
Netizens across the country were unsure of how to react: how could the government, practically speaking, force hundreds of millions of people to register their real identities online? Would there be consequences for those who failed to abide by the regulations? To many, it was clear that real-name registration would increase the likelihood of user self-censorship, depriving the medium of its openly critical quality.

On December 17, one day after the new policy was announced, a renowned Beijing journalist, Zhan Jiang, posted a scathing criticism on Weibo, outlining numerous reasons why the new regulations were unjust and ill advised. Zhan wrote that real-name registration was counter to the “right to know, the right to participate, and the right to express” that Hu Jintao reaffirmed in a speech concerning the Internet delivered on June 20, 2008. In the speech, Hu stated that the Internet “has already become a collection and distribution center for ideas, culture, and information, and an amplifier for public opinion.” Zhan also wrote that real-name registration ran counter to fundamental Marxist principles. Marx was said to be a strong believer in the anonymity of the press, once writing, “As long as the newspaper press was anonymous, it appeared as the organ of a numberless and nameless public opinion: it was the third power in the state.”

Despite widespread opposition to the policy, the government elected to press onward with real-name registration. On March 12, 2012, a spokesperson from Sina Weibo estimated that the service would be able to reach 60% compliance with the real-

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236 Zhan Jiang, “Four reasons to take back new microblog regulations,” China Media Project, Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong, December 17, 2011.
237 Zhan Jiang, “Four reasons to take back new microblog regulations.”
name registration policy by the March 16 deadline.\textsuperscript{239} While the site initially claimed that unverified users would not be able to post on Sina Weibo after the deadline, as of late April, 2012 many people who had not yet registered with their real names still had the ability to post on the site.\textsuperscript{240} At this stage, it remains unclear how rigorously the policy will be enforced, and many are doubtful that the government will actually be able to verify the identities of the site's several hundred million users. Nonetheless, the effort to register users' real names on microblogs provides a strong indication of the government's commitment to reducing the medium's socially transformative power.

The government has most effectively sought to counter microblogs by emphasizing the medium's potential to spread "rumors" that are deemed harmful to the overall stability of Chinese society. Because of China's long history of foreign intervention and domestic chaos, many contemporary Chinese still tend to value imperfect and authoritarian stability over social change and the possibility of unrest. By projecting the medium as a fertile ground for socially deleterious rumors, the government has rendered many netizens skeptical of the positive social effects that microblogs possess. In the ideological and political battle for the fate of the medium, the idea of the "rumor" has come to epitomize the primary danger posed by microblogs, a danger that can only be countered by the government's careful weeding of truth from the medium's presumed falsity. Government control over the medium is therefore deemed necessary for China to maintain its current stability – to sustain the "social harmony" that has facilitated its rapid economic growth over the past several decades.

\textsuperscript{239} Unknown author, "China's Sina sees 60 percent of Weibo users verified by deadline," \textit{Reuters}, March 12, 2012.
\textsuperscript{240} Based on personal experience, as well as a quick survey of friends who are regular Sina Weibo users.
The main problem with the “rumor” tactic lies in the government’s hazy and oftentimes self-interested definition of what actually constitutes a rumor. Technically speaking, a rumor is simply an unverified story or report, typically involving an unclear chain of transmission. But in China, the word has come to connote something that is both untrue by definition, and also harmful and negative. In the West, where a strong tradition of citizen and investigative journalism is able to independently verify the veracity of information, rumors must withstand public and media scrutiny in order to maintain any validity. In China, on the other hand, rumors are only verified if the Party deems it advantageous to do so. If a rumor is not conducive to the Party’s continued rule, it will be suppressed and labeled false, regardless of its actual facticity. For example, many Chinese today maintain that the violent Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989 is a rumor, even in spite of the copious amounts of documentary and personal evidence from the incident. The Communist Party has managed to convince many Chinese, though not all, that descriptions of the violence are Western fabrications intended to tarnish their Party’s power and reputation.\(^{241}\) As such, the Party has transformed a humiliating incident into an opportunity to boost nationalist fervor and anti-Western sentiment – all through the clever invocation of the “rumor.”

As early as 2010, Sina Weibo began appointing a team of employees with the task of discrediting “rumors” that surfaced on their site. Calling themselves the “Rumor Refutal Group,” the team grew from seven people in 2010 to 20 people during the Japanese earthquake and tsunami, a time when rumors concerning the environmental ramifications of the disaster were spreading quickly on the Chinese mainland. Speaking

on the CCTV 12 television program “Law and Society,” Tan Chao, the head of Sina Weibo’s “Rumor Refutal Group,” said that his team “had to act decisively [during the earthquake] to distinguish real news from false news. It was very difficult.” Over the following summer, as the rumor refuters expanded rapidly to reach an estimated 50 members, the group also gained a large following on their own Sina Weibo page. By mid summer, the “Rumor Refutal Group” Weibo account had more than 300,000 followers, many of whom continue to actively help disseminate the group’s apparent refutations of online rumors.

Belief in the social value of refuting online rumors is so intense that numerous citizen-run anti-rumor groups have been established since the 2011 summer. Calling themselves the Piyao Lianmeng, literally meaning “rumor refuting alliance,” the group is said to be a collaborative volunteer effort run by scholars, media workers, lawyers, and university students. Dou Hanzhang, a former Xinhua news agency employee who helped establish the Piyao Lianmeng, said, “We work voluntarily and we do it because we love refuting rumors.” But the group, like the Sina Weibo rumor refutal group, is said to employ a highly selective definition of what constitutes a rumor. For one, it is said that the group focuses excessively on popular rumors, turning a blind eye to the deeper root of social instability – government misinformation. Hu Yong, a Chinese new media expert, has argued that government control over the Internet “is the soil that nurtures rumor,”

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adding that anti-rumor groups should focus their efforts on verifying dubious government information rather than using government sources to fact-check popular topics.  

Rumors, repercussions, and the future

In late March and early April, in the wake of the Bo Xilai scandal, the government went on a rumor refuting offensive, deleting countless posts, shutting down accounts, and criminally charging users who were accused of originating rumors that Bo supporters had attempted a coup in Beijing. Li Delin, an editor of the Chinese business magazine *Capital Week*, made a seemingly innocuous post on his Weibo account on March 19: “Unusual amount of traffic in Beijing. There are military vehicles everywhere. Chang’an Avenue is under complete control. There are plainclothes police at every corner. Some intersections have even been fenced off.” The post was widely circulated, and Li was promptly placed under government detention, despite the fact that hundreds of netizens corroborated the information in his post.

According to Chinese authorities, more than 1,000 people were arrested in the wake of the coup rumors for ostensible “Internet crimes.” Shortly after Li was arrested, Sina announced the deletion of numerous accounts in an e-mail to the site’s entire user base: “Recently, criminal elements have used Sina Weibo to create and spread malicious political rumors online for no reason, producing a terrible effect on society. Users in

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246 Loretta Chao, “China Escalates Crackdown on Internet Amid Scandal.”
violation of the law have already been dealt with by public security organs according to
the law. Together, the account deletions, numerous arrests, and intimidating e-mail
announcement signaled Sina’s most aggressive action yet to counter the growth of so-called “rumors” on the medium. It attempted to conceal China’s typical iron-fisted
information suppression under the cloak of a constructed social imperative – to disprove
and contain rumors that are harmful to society.

Despite the government’s growing unease over microblogs, it remains unlikely
that the government will simply shutdown the medium entirely. The Communist Party is
too dependent on them for information, economic efficiency, and social stability. Even
with the prospect of real-name registration and ongoing rhetoric that vilifies the medium
for spreading rumors, microblogs remain remarkably resilient. Not only has the medium
resisted weakening in the wake of the Wenzhou high-speed train crash controversy,
microblog users have also continued to expand and diversify demographically. Sina
Weibo, the most aggressively political of the microblogging platforms, remains the most
dominant microblog, according to report released by McKinsey & Co. in mid-April.

Just a month after the March 2012 Weibo crackdown, National Public Radio (NPR)
carried a broadcast in which Michael Anti, a noted Chinese journalist and political
blogger, stated, “Weibo now has become the public sphere of Chinese politics.” For
now, at least, this appears to be the case. Unlike any period in 20th or early 21st century
Chinese history, people are empowered to access and disseminate contentious

247 Loretta Chao, “China Escalates Crackdown on Internet Amid Scandal.”
248 Unknown author, “Report: Sina Beats Tencent in Weibo Race,” Caijing, April 27,
2012.
249 Louisa Lim, “Two Crises Highlight China’s Social Media Struggles,” National Public
Radio, April 30, 2012.
information, assess and challenge the Party line, and express their deep-seated criticisms of Chinese society. If the medium remains strong, there is no telling where it will steer the country.
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