



1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45

## 12 New media and subjectivity in China

### Problematizing the public sphere

*Kevin Latham*

#### Introduction

China is undergoing a range of processes of ‘privatization’ in ways uniquely shaped by the Chinese context, its engagement with transformations in the global economy and the partial impingement of ‘neoliberal’ impulses on government thinking and practice (Zhang and Ong 2008).<sup>1</sup> Accompanying these changes, China has also entered a new information age, which calls for a reconsideration of some of our key presuppositions about Chinese society and culture.

As recently as the 1980s China was still an informational black hole viewed from afar by academics, journalists and others who searched eagerly for whatever information they could wrench from the enormous gravitational pull of the Chinese Communist Party and Chairman Mao before that. At that time within China there was a stern, forbidding and sometimes sinister political economy of information that included the collection of personal dossiers and self-criticisms as well as restricted ‘internal’ (*neibu*) publications or sections of bookshops and power-supporting hierarchies of information access.

Over three decades of reform this economy of information has been transformed by the proliferation of all kinds of mass media and telecommunications and network technologies. In recent years new media – particularly the Internet and mobile phones – have played a particularly prominent role in this transformation.

Now, China is suddenly awash with information and driven by an economy of information desire. People crave national and international news, business and economic headlines; they have tens of television channels to choose from as well as hundreds of newspapers, magazines, websites, news groups, radio stations and last, but not least, telecommunications services, including SMS (short messaging services), MMS (multi-media messaging services) and mobile Internet access.

The Chinese authorities openly plan the ‘informatization’ of Chinese society by encouraging industry, commerce and individuals to avail themselves of new information technologies and by boldly pushing forward online government (Qiang 2007). At the same time the government is promoting data broadcasting, normalizing the deployment of broadband Internet, establishing a nationally





unified cable television system, aims to have digitized all television broadcasting by 2015 and since 2008 has been overseeing the rollout of three third generation mobile phone platforms.

By the end of 2010 there were 457 million Internet users in China with 8.65 million domain names and 1.9 million websites (CNNIC 2011).<sup>2</sup> There were also more than 859 million mobile phone users meaning that there were two mobile phones for every three people in the country. As the Internet has developed in China the authorities have also been pushing e-government over the last decade as a means of improving internal procedures and practices as well as better informing and communicating with the Internet-using public. Over the three years from 2003 to 2006, the government set up more than 10,000 websites at the municipal and regional levels and ninety portals offering access to statistics, press releases, regulations, industry and policy information (UNESCO 2006) and by the end of 2010, there were 52,155 domain names registered with the government.gov.cn suffix (CNNIC 2011).<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, China scholars have characterized this shift to digital media in terms of an emerging Habermasian public sphere, focusing particularly on the way that the Internet has opened up new possibilities for political communication among Chinese citizens (see below). However, the development of new media in China's emerging information society necessitates revised understandings of Chinese culture, society and politics. The Party's relationship to the media is not best understood in terms of simplistic notions of control or propaganda and indoctrination models, nor are Chinese consumers simply 'resisting' government control through multiple 'interpretations' of media content (see, e.g. Lull 1991).

Chinese society is now characterized by new forms of openness to information, through the Internet, newspapers, broadcasting, magazines, travel, telecommunications or interaction with foreigners. However, at the same time, there are both new and persisting forms of information control. Electronic government not only makes more information available to the public but also offers new ways of guiding what people know, while an excess of information can also be used as a means of information management and manipulation (Mengin 2004; Qiu 2009).

The first part of this chapter will consider how new media practices in China are involved in the transformation of mediated subjectivities before returning to the question of a public sphere later in the chapter. It asks how understandings of established subjectivities associated with media production and consumption in China need to be revisited in China's new media age. The media in China have long been officially defined in terms of their relationship to the formation of good Chinese citizens. They have obligations and responsibilities to the Party and government which can be traced back to their key role as vehicles of political education and information. Indeed, the Party itself is conceptualized as a medium and as a communications structure facilitating understanding between the Party and the people. This conception has shaped the way that Chinese media organizations are organized, owned, operated and even reformed in the post-Mao era. Even three decades into the reform era, understanding Chinese media

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45





1 requires a careful interrogation of the detailed practices that embody this concep-  
2 tion in everyday life (see, e.g. Latham 2000, 2007a, 2009).

3 New media change many of the fundamental principles of operation of the  
4 media in China. For instance, there is a large private corporate presence in the  
5 operation of the Internet including much content provision, whereas traditionally  
6 the media have remained firmly in the hands of state organizations. Indeed the  
7 operators of China's most popular websites are non-governmental private or  
8 publicly listed companies. Furthermore, new media do not operate on the basis  
9 of top-down information provision, but on user-centred selection. New media  
10 facilitate peer-to-peer communication rather than working on a model of central-  
11 ized mass dissemination. In the Web 2.0 era, Chinese Internet users have even  
12 become the content providers themselves with blogs, online video sites and per-  
13 sonal webspace. All of these observations point to ways in which new media  
14 reconstitute the relationships of power between the media, the state, commerce  
15 and society.

### 16 **New media, new subjectivities?**

17 With new technologies and the development of all sectors of Chinese media  
18 have also come new forms of social interaction, behaviour and practice. Chinese  
19 leisure practices have changed over the last twenty years becoming more family-  
20 centred, individualized, consumption-oriented and depoliticized (Wang 1995).  
21 Telecommunications from pagers to mobile phones have changed the pace and  
22 nature of social interaction from the conduct of business to visiting friends and  
23 family. The Internet has opened up new opportunities for social interaction with  
24 email, chat-rooms, online forums and personal websites. At the same time, new  
25 informal economies of information thrive with the increasing importance of  
26 *guanxi* networks (see, e.g. Croll 2006: 34–35; Fallows 2007).

27 Supporting these diverse changes are new conceptualizations of the Chinese  
28 people. They are no longer simply 'the masses', although this conceptualization  
29 also persists and requires attention.<sup>4</sup> Rather, they are increasingly conceptualized  
30 as consumers of media and other products and as individuals with information  
31 needs and desires. Chinese people are now thought of as having personal tastes  
32 that can and should be catered to in the provision of information services from  
33 video-on-demand to short-messaging services. The population is increasingly  
34 thought of, by media professionals and government officials, in terms of differ-  
35 ent educational levels, financial capabilities, niche interests and local identities  
36 as well as age, gender and rural–urban differences (see, e.g. Whyte 2010).  
37 China's television audiences, especially in the transition to digital, are notori-  
38 ously 'fragmenting' and notions of a national 'imagined community', whether  
39 adopted by scholars or professionals, require increasingly complex qualification  
40 (see, e.g. Xu 2007; Chan 2009; Zhang 2009).

41 General studies of new media, largely drawing upon western examples, in  
42 recent years have often linked the development and popularization of new media  
43 with the formation of new subjectivities. New media, it is argued, have played  
44  
45





their part in the emergence of virtual or online communities and identities, new forms of previously impossible social interaction and various other transformations of sociality (see, e.g. Poster 1990, 1995; Castells 1996; Robins and Webster 1999; Bell and Kennedy 2000).

Similar arguments might be made of China where we can also identify the emergence of new subjectivities and forms of social interaction related to the use and deployment of new media. Karsten Giese (2004: 22), for instance, writes:

As telecommunications has contributed to the creation of peer-to-peer private spaces for communication, the introduction of Internet services to China may, besides others, be interpreted as the creation of multiple symbolic spaces for public communication and discourse, thus bridging individuals and groups independent of space and time.

These new subjectivities might include the notion of the individual consumer subject making ‘free’ decisions and choices in their consumption habits; the personalized subject with preferences, tastes, interests and desires; the online gamer existing partly in a fantasy world of magic weapons, mythical characters and the practice of new loyalties and friendships; the online forum participant represented by an anonymous avatar and expressing opinions not likely to be found in mainstream media or perhaps even voiced in person; various kinds of bloggers; the online Buddhist and many more.

However, these various subjectivities cover a wide range of different social practices and contexts with varying degrees of popular participation or government involvement, geographical locations or relevance to different social groups according to age, gender, sexuality, residence, ethnicity or class. Consequently each has to be understood in its own terms and with careful attention to its specificities in Chinese contexts. This includes attention to what Anna Everett (2003: 7), drawing upon Julia Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality, has called digitextualities – that is the ways in which:

[N]ew digital media technologies make meaning not only by building a new text through absorption and transformation of other texts, but also by embedding the entirety of other texts (analog and digital) seamlessly within the new.

In other words we have to look not only at what is new in new media, but also at its relationships with other media and media literacies (new and old) which may be transformed by them. The Internet, for instance, has transformed the consumption of newspapers in China. The Internet has given access to newspaper articles from all over the country that in the past would never have been available outside of specific geographic or professional contexts. These kinds of changes require careful attention to the specificities of the Chinese context.

Françoise Mengin (2004), emphasizing the socially constituted nature of technologies, has argued that there is a complex relationship between the social





1 transformation of labour and the formation of social classes in China that has to  
2 be mapped onto the arrival of the country's information age. She argues that  
3 recent mutations in the structural organization of labour in China in the reform  
4 period, if anything, work to reinforce the tendency for the Internet to work as a  
5 'technology of control for the political leadership' (2004: 56).

6 Jack Qiu (2009) has also linked the emergence of China's 'network society' (cf.  
7 also Castells 1996) to the formation of new class subjectivities among those whom  
8 he calls the 'information have-less', positioned in the grey area between the more-  
9 commonly referenced 'haves' and 'have-nots'. The have-less include migrant  
10 workers, students, laid-off workers, pensioners and youth, among others. Qiu  
11 argues that we see the emergence of a 'working-class network society' in which  
12 disparate groups of people are connected together through their use of information  
13 and communications technologies (ICTs) in new ways that may hold the potential  
14 for new challenges to established power-holders in society, but which are also  
15 vulnerable to new forms of exploitation and control. Chinese subjectivities, includ-  
16 ing political subjectivities, do not arise simply out of the development of a new  
17 technology in the country, but exist in complex social and cultural contexts shaped  
18 by pre-existing subjectivities and past and present configurations of power.

19 In recent research conducted in Beijing, for instance, I found that many  
20 informants who kept blogs would have not just one blog but two or even three.<sup>5</sup>  
21 In some cases they were negotiating different aspects of their identities using the  
22 medium of the Internet, separating out, for instance, broad opinions and in some  
23 cases a degree of self-promotion on their publicly available blog from their per-  
24 sonal moods, feelings and reactions which they kept for a closer circle of friends.  
25 This can lead to what some writers have termed 'schizoid' personality traits –  
26 the ability to create distance between one's attitudes and an objectified self –  
27 typical of our new media age (Garcia-Montes *et al.* 2006: 74).

28 Similar negotiations of identity and subjectivity are found with the use of bul-  
29 letin board systems (BBS). For instance Karsten Giese (2004: 23) has found that:

31 Mutual anonymity of the actors as one of the main features of BBS commu-  
32 nication obviously contributes to tearing down traditional barriers of public  
33 moral, Confucian values and behavioural rules, striving for harmony, the  
34 conception of face, the sense of shame, or political repression, which usually  
35 limit such discourse within offline social institutions like the *danwei* or the  
36 family. BBS's in this way act as public spaces for experimenting with  
37 alternative identities, be they negotiated alongside ethnic, regional or local  
38 divisions, gender or sexual orientation, shared biographical experiences or  
39 political opinions.

41 These are just a few examples of the ways in which the Internet is involved in  
42 the transformation of subjectivities in contemporary China. There are many  
43 more, but it is beyond the scope of this chapter to detail them all here. However,  
44 what is clear is that the use of new media leads us to explore new forms and con-  
45 texts of subject formation in contemporary China.



**New media and consumption**

Focusing on consumption is another way to explore the transformation of political subjectivities in China (Tomba 2004; Anagnost 2008; Zhang 2008). As well as offering new ways to engage in ‘traditional’ consumption (e.g. buying books) new media consumption may often also become something new in itself. For instance, new media consumers are encouraged to customize their use of web portals, their use of social networking sites, video-sharing sites, reading and writing blogs and much more. At the same time, new media consumption transforms many traditionally understood relationships between consumers and producers through interactivity, production and distribution by consumers themselves or through playfulness, parody and satire.

In the last few years, the phenomenon of ‘*e-gao*’ or online spoofs has clearly demonstrated this combination of a sense of humour with a challenging of traditional hierarchies of media production. Perhaps the most famous example is that of the twenty-minute parody of Chen Kaige’s multimillion yuan epic *The Promise* which netizen Hu Ge posted on the Internet, and which became a nationwide and international talking point, even prompting court action from a humourless Chen Kaige.

The parody spliced together clips from *The Promise* with clips from a CCTV crime programme and, with suitably edited voiceovers, transformed the story into one of murder and steamed buns. In China, where citizen consumer participation in media production has traditionally been minimal and where the ‘ideal’ relationship between media producers and consumers is anachronistically envisioned to be one of education (Li 1991) this kind of media consumption-participation, followed by redistribution and re-consumption may be seen as little short of revolutionary.

This kind of practice changes the relationship between consumption and production and that between consumers, producers, distributors and technology-providers overturning hierarchies and redefining the role of the cultural producer. It changes the economics of consumption with unpaid production and effectively free distribution. It establishes new contexts for undermining, parodying or pirating commercial, artistic production in other sectors and it finds consumers in entirely new subject positions formed in the interstices between state, market, media and popular cultural elites.

However, we need to ask how far the new ‘individualized’ consumer is an emerging social agent and how much an emerging political subjectivity? Chinese consumers are constantly presented with the notions of individuality, personality and consumer choice, but in actual fact the limits of such choice are always already predetermined, among other things, as part of the new state-commercial imperative to consume as an individual. The individual consumer is the vehicle of a convenient political and commercial strategy – a safe subjectivity that has the appeal of individual ‘freedom’.

Jean Baudrillard (1998) famously argued that consumer society is not about the production of goods and services, but the production of ‘needs’. In China we are looking not only at such a production of needs but also at the production of a

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45





1 subject position or subjectivity that Chinese consumers can relate to and associ-  
2 ate themselves with. This is also a subject position marked by the palimpsest of  
3 the ‘masses’ as the preceding dominant rhetorical vehicle used to motivate and  
4 justify media production and consumption. It is against the backdrop of the  
5 masses, with all their lack of individuality, their association with state power and  
6 lack of choice, that the notion of the individual has particularly forceful appeal  
7 in contemporary China.

8 Chinese media producers know and play on this contrast as they juggle their  
9 conflicting obligations to the Party and the market. At this point, we might ask,  
10 therefore, how far the notion of the individualized consumer reflects people’s  
11 consumption practices and how far it reflects what politicians, media executives  
12 and producers have decided that people ought to want and to be?

13 We should not, therefore take ‘the consumer’ for granted. We have to engage  
14 with the consumer him/herself as potentially unknowable as well as the notion of  
15 the consumer as a contingent subjectivity positioned between state, commerce  
16 and society. New media practices, I suggest, offer numerous useful examples for  
17 identifying and investigating such transformations and developments.

18 Consider for instance the case of Jia Junpeng. On 16 July 2009 a posting  
19 appeared in a Chinese World of Warcraft online forum used by many Chinese  
20 online gamers saying: ‘Jia Junpeng, your mother calls you home to eat’ (贾君鹏  
21 你妈妈喊你回家吃饭). It was unclear as to whether the post was real or not, but  
22 that is not really at issue. This was only the start of the story. News of the post  
23 spread like wildfire across the Internet and a wave of spoof images, BBS post-  
24 ings, jokes and blogs followed.<sup>6</sup>

25 It was later reported on the Internet that the posting may in fact have been a  
26 deliberate hoax posted by the operators of the website involved to boost traffic  
27 to their site as a publicity stunt. However, by that time, the phrase ‘Jia  
28 Junpeng, your mother calls you home to eat’ had taken on a life of its own and  
29 was even appropriated by supporters of political dissident Guo Baofeng,  
30 arrested by the police in Fujian Province for allegedly subversive microblog  
31 posts on Twitter (see China Digital Times 2009). This case reveals how one  
32 phrase recycled through new media rapidly over a matter of days situated dif-  
33 ferent internet users as subjects of commercial manipulation, as playful  
34 consumer-producers and subsequently as resistant political protestors. With  
35 such a simple case, of which there are hundreds if not thousands each year, the  
36 relationships between consumption, production, state, commerce, society and  
37 individual subjectivity have moved into entirely new realms of contingent for-  
38 mation and transformation.

### 39 **China’s new media and the public sphere**

40 We can now return to the issue of new media and the public sphere in China.  
41 Various authors have related the development of new media, the Internet in  
42 particular, to the emergence of a Habermasian public sphere.<sup>7</sup> Zixue Tai (2006:  
43 206), for instance writes:  
44  
45





The quick rise of the Internet as a popular tool of public communication in China has essentially turned Chinese cyberspace into a Habermasian public sphere of the twenty-first century, imperfect as it is – important issues are debated and public opinion gets formed.<sup>8</sup>

Other authors, although not necessarily referencing Habermas or the public sphere directly, have linked the Internet in China to similar notions of freedom of speech and information exchange. So, for example, Li *et al.* (2003: 143) conclude: ‘Online chatrooms ... are providing an open space for Chinese to exchange information freely and anonymously.’

At first glance, there would appear to be some grounds for such an argument. As these and other authors point out, the Internet in China, with blogs, BBS, chatrooms, personal webspace, social networking sites and instant messaging does offer Chinese internet users the chance to engage with others’ views and opinions, to express their own and to circulate a wide range of ideas and information. To adopt John Hartley’s terms, the Internet in China does enable ‘the generation of ideas, shared knowledge and the construction of opinion’, it is a realm in which ‘ideas and information are shared’ and it does constitute ‘a network for communicating information and points of view’.

However, I argue that there are several strong reasons why the notion of the public sphere is not helpful for understanding Chinese use and experiences of the Internet, and in many cases new media more generally. First, in his key work on the structural transformation of the public sphere (1989), Habermas explains how the ideal of the public sphere has been corrupted and eroded over the last couple of centuries by a combination of two social and political forces: commerce and state power. In the Chinese case the operation of the Internet is shaped more than anything else by precisely these two sets of forces. Most popular internet services are commercially driven while the state is an omnipresent force in their operation.

As Giese found in his work on BBS and the emergence of new identities, there are many taboos, political issues and activities that are rarely touched upon indicating subtle and sophisticated understandings of government powers and the limits of party tolerance. He found, for instance, that many BBS users, if they wanted to discuss potentially sensitive issues in a forum, would likely do so from an Internet café rather than using their own computers. This example, Giese (2004: 26) concludes:

[S]hows two things: (1) users usually were well aware of the political limits imposed on free speech, but (2) nevertheless decided for noncompliance, because they also knew too well how to evade state control and potential sanctions.

Clearly this is not a straightforward public sphere. Indeed, Giese concludes that by allowing or enabling some degree of limited discussion on politically sensitive issues, new media may actually assist the government in maintaining their







1 authority by offering a kind of safety valve for the release of pent up political  
2 frustrations in a context of limited potential influence (2004: 33).<sup>9</sup>

3 Second, new media and the Internet in particular cover a vast range of diverse  
4 and varied activities and practices, many of which have nothing to do with the  
5 generation of ideas, shared knowledge and the construction of opinion. Over the  
6 last five to ten years there has been a gradual, but steady shift in popular Internet  
7 use from being predominantly motivated by technological interests (e.g. down-  
8 loading software) and looking for information to being dominated by leisure and  
9 entertainment usage. Over the last couple of years, some of the most popular  
10 uses of the Internet have been for downloading music and videos, instant mes-  
11 saging and gaming. In July 2009, the Chinese authorities reported 85.5 per cent  
12 of internet users downloaded music, 72.2 per cent used instant messaging, 65.8  
13 per cent downloaded video and 64.2 per cent played online games. By contrast,  
14 30.4 per cent used BBS and other online forums (CNNIC 2009). News gathering  
15 was the second most popular use of the Internet with 78.7 per cent of users found  
16 to look online for news, but online news production is strictly circumscribed by  
17 regulations that prohibit anyone other than officially recognized news organiza-  
18 tions from engaging in online journalism. Social networking and communication  
19 are increasingly popular uses of the Internet, but they are not the most popular.

20 Here there are two issues to note. First if we are to draw links to the Frankfurt  
21 School at all, the commercial nature of most entertainment use of the Internet  
22 needs to be considered not in terms of a public sphere, but in relation to critiques  
23 of the political implications of the culture industries (Adorno 1991). Second, and  
24 related to this first point, even if we consider the discursive, networking and  
25 communicational aspects of Internet use, these have to be understood not as  
26 neutral forums for the expression of opinion, but realms of potentially 'adminis-  
27 tered' conversation (Yang 2009: 119–120).<sup>10</sup> This 'administration' might be  
28 either commercially or politically motivated.

29 Finally, Habermas's ideal of the public sphere is based upon a notion of the  
30 exchange of ideas and opinions in an unfettered environment among free-  
31 thinking, autonomous, rational subjects. This rational Enlightenment subject has  
32 not only been widely problematized by postmodern and poststructuralist critics  
33 in general and scholars of new communications technologies in particular (see,  
34 e.g. Axel 2006), but is also only problematically imposed upon Chinese new  
35 media use. Not only is the unfettered environment a problem (see above), but we  
36 have also seen how Internet use in China is also involved in the formation and  
37 transformation of new identities and subjectivities. Chinese 'netizens', as Inter-  
38 net users are known – itself a new identity in China (Yang 2009: 217) – adopt  
39 a range of contradictory subject positions in their use of the Internet related to the  
40 complex array of social, cultural and political forces that come into play in dif-  
41 ferent contexts.<sup>11</sup> This requires a more complex formulation of subjectivity and  
42 new media use than the notion of a public sphere is able to offer.

43 In addition to these three issues, it is also important to understand new media  
44 use as a dynamic developing process, not a fixed set of established practices.  
45 China's new media environment is constantly changing as a result of new





technologies, increasing user numbers, the expansion of services and functions, government attitudes and regulations, the expansion of network infrastructure and changing economic and commercial conditions. In January 2002 there were 33.7 million internet users in China. By the middle of 2009 this had soared to 338 million – a tenfold increase in less than eight years. This fact alone affects the scale and nature of government responses to internet use, since in a country of 1.3 billion people, 33.7 million constitutes less than 3 per cent of the population and therefore a relatively small risk to overall social stability or political authority.<sup>12</sup> However, the potential for a quarter of the population – 338 million internet users – most, if not all, of them with mobile phones and the ability to travel to create serious problems for the government is much greater.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the government’s awareness of this fact has been clearly demonstrated recently with the social unrest in Xinjiang where mobile phone networks and internet access were quickly cut when disturbances broke out in the late summer of 2009. Much internet access in the western region was still heavily disrupted months later. These drastic measures indicate the perceived need among the Chinese authorities to be wary of more ‘disorderly’ media (see Latham 2007b) in situations where they are worried about social and political order.

The ongoing contest between authority and those who would challenge it online, is similarly no Habermasian public sphere. Chase *et al.* (2006) explain how peer-to-peer (P2P) networks have enabled Chinese internet users, particularly the technologically minded ones, to evade government controls on content. However, rather than simply showing how censorship can be sidestepped, the authors detail an ongoing game of cat and mouse between P2P users and the Chinese authorities. P2P users have had to continually reinvent their technologies to counteract and keep one step ahead of the censors. They conclude (2006: 95):

The future picture for P2P as a tool of political change in China is decidedly mixed, and will likely be marked by a continuing inconclusive seesaw between new and innovative technical measures by advocates of openness and the technical, political, bureaucratic, and economic countermeasures implemented by Beijing.

Here we see how there exists neither a free realm of open expression nor a completely controlled realm of censorship and proscription. Rather we have a dynamically evolving realm of engagement shaped by complex configurations of social, political and economic forces.

These examples further show that the unitary, coherent, rational, free-thinking and communicating subject presupposed by Habermas’s public sphere is not available as a mediated subjectivity in contemporary China. That does not mean that there is no realm of critical political commentary. On the Chinese Internet there most certainly is. What it is important to understand, however, are the conditions of possibility for the existence of such comments in the interstices between commerce, political power and anonymity often coloured with senses of humour, irony and playfulness.

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45





## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that although there are new forms of informational and communicational freedom in China associated with the use of new media and new technologies, it is important to understand the operating contexts of these new freedoms. I have suggested that the notion of a public sphere is unhelpful for trying to understand this rapidly evolving new media environment in that it narrowly focuses attention on particular limited uses of new media, while also making inappropriate and misleading assumptions about the nature of political subjectivities in contemporary China. These subjectivities have to be understood against a backdrop of the mutually dependent and intertwined operation of the market and government in China.

It is important to remember that the government has actively promoted the deployment and use of the Internet for leisure, commercial and information-gathering purposes. It has put the informatization of the economy high on the agenda in the last two national five-year plans and has strongly promoted the rollout of e-government at central and local levels. This has been done not in ignorance of the potential of the Internet for promoting public debate and political activism, but in spite of it and with the confidence that any such potential can be satisfactorily contained. To date, the indications are that on the whole the authorities have been right to have such confidence.

This does not by any means mean that the Internet is totally ‘controlled’ by the state in China. Indeed, the Internet is a good example of how the notion of ‘control’, like that of the public sphere, is potentially misleading and misunderstood. The Chinese authorities are engaged in a wide range of measures aimed at guiding internet use from technological solutions (keyword filters, blocking websites, etc.) through to the deployment of internet ‘police’ in chatrooms and online forums to monitor, guide and participate in discussion. However, none of these constitutes an entirely effective ‘control’ of internet activity. In fact, to understand how people use the Internet in China it is important to move away from the overarching language of control, democratization, public spheres or freedom of speech and to look at the specific configurations of power that shape particular online or other new media engagements.

## Notes

- 1 Zhang and Ong ‘view privatization as a set of techniques that optimize economic gains by priming the powers of the private self’ (2008: 3) but importantly add ‘that privatization in China promotes a minimalist kind of individual freedom shoehorned into an authoritarian environment’ (2008: 11). They insist that the notion of neoliberalism needs careful qualification in the Chinese context to account for the specific relationships between the state and the market. See also Yan (2003); Kipnis (2007).
- 2 CNNIC defines an Internet user as someone who on average uses the Internet for an hour or more each week.
- 3 For a breakdown of the kinds of information available on government websites by 2004 see Holliday and Yep (2005).
- 4 ‘The masses’ dominated conceptualizations and practices of media in China under





communist control. The fundamental principle of political practice under Mao was the 'mass line', a model of information transfer linking the everyday lives of ordinary people to the Party leadership reliant upon effective structures of communication in which the media played a key role (Blecher 1983). The masses were conceptualized at the centre of both media production and its consumption with the mass line encouraging cadres and media producers to aspire, in theory at least, to equality and homogeneity with the masses.

5 This research was conducted with the generous support of the Economic and Social Research Council whose help is gratefully acknowledged.

6 See <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/jia-jun-peng-your-mother-wants-you-to-come-home-for-dinner/photos> for examples of such images and other internet satires and BBS postings.

7 John Hartley (2002: 191) conveniently summarizes Habermas's core notion as follows:

The public sphere is the arena within which debate occurs; it is the generation of ideas, shared knowledge and the construction of opinion that occurs when people assemble and discuss. Although real and experienced, the public sphere cannot be located in a particular place or identified as an object. . . . The public sphere is where ideas and information are shared. It is where public opinions are formed as a result of communication . . . it is a network for communicating information and points of view.

8 Others who have written of China's Internet in terms of a Habermasian public sphere include Xi (2005: 13–28, 127) and Xu (2007: 4, 201–205). There is also a broader history of discussion about a Habermasian public sphere emerging in post-Mao China that stretches back to the early 1990s. See, for instance, Rowe (1990); Huang (1993); contributors to Davis *et al.* (1995).

9 Reflecting the dynamic growth of the Internet discussed above, there are now signs that BBS constitute and are considered a more significant political challenge than they did at the time of Giese's research. There have been various recent cases in which BBS discussion and rumours spreading rapidly around the country beyond the control of the Chinese authorities have ultimately played a part in setting political and media agendas. One example is that of social unrest in Weng'an County, Guizhou Province in the summer of 2008 (see Latham 2009: 38–39).

10 Yang (2009: 119–120) draws upon Habermas's (1989: 164) notion of 'administered conversation' to indicate how discussion can be guided and manipulated:

In the Chinese cybersphere, the dangers of administered conversation are real. As savvy Web editors grow aware of the profitability of contention, they have begun to manufacture media events as marketing stunts in ways that could humble the authors of the numerous business-marketing books on event marketing.

We might also regard the Jia Junpeng case in this light.

11 Writing about netizens (*wangmin*) Yang (2009: 217) says: 'Perhaps the most important new identity fashioned in cyberspace is the rather mundane term "netizen". . . . But the mundane netizens in China today are synonymous with being fearless, informed, impassioned, and not easily deceived.'

12 It is not only the numbers of internet users that have changed. The qualitative make-up of the country's internet-using population has also been transformed since its early days. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, most internet users were unmarried males in their twenties or thirties, well educated and often working in technology sectors. In 2009, the ratio of male to female users is very close to one, more students than any other occupation use the Internet, and the average user is likely to be in his teens or early twenties with a middle-school education.

13 In fact one could argue that Li *et al.*'s (2003) relatively optimistic portrayal of the





1 Internet in China as laying the foundations for new forms of agenda-setting driven by  
2 Western media and enabling a 'vibrant civic discourse' to emerge in the country, is at  
3 least in some part due to the time at which they were writing, still relatively early in  
4 the development and popularization of the Internet in China.

## References

- 5  
6  
7 Adorno, Theodor W. (1991), *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*,  
8 London: Routledge.
- 9 Anagnost, Ann (2008), 'From "Class" to "Social Strata": Grasping the Social Totality in  
10 Reform Era China', *Third World Quarterly*, 29(3), pp. 497–519.
- 11 Axel, Brian K. (2006), 'Anthropology and New Technologies of Communication', *Cul-*  
12 *tural Anthropology*, 21(3), pp. 354–384.
- 13 Baudrillard, Jean (1998), *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, London: Sage.
- 14 Bell, David and Kennedy, Barbara M. (2000), *The Cybercultures Reader*, London:  
15 Routledge.
- 16 Blecher, M. (1983), 'The Mass Line and Leader-mass Relations and Communication in  
17 Basic-level Rural Communities', in C. Chu Godwin and Francis Hsu (eds) *China's*  
18 *New Social Fabric*, London and Honolulu: Kegan Paul International.
- 19 Castells, Manuel (1996), *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Volume I:*  
20 *The Rise of the Network Society*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- 21 Chan, Joseph M. (2009), 'Toward Television Regionalization in Greater China and  
22 Beyond', in Ying Zhu and Chris Berry (eds) *TV China*, Bloomington: Indiana Univer-  
23 sity Press.
- 24 Chase, Michael, Mulvenon, James and Hachigian, Nina (2006), 'Comrade to Comrade  
25 Networks: The Social and Political Implications of Peer-to-peer Networks in China', in  
26 Jens Damm and Simona Thomas (eds) *Chinese Cyberspaces: Technological Changes*  
27 *and Political Effects*, London: Routledge.
- 28 China Digital Times (2009), 'Guo Baofeng, Your Mother is Calling You Home for  
29 Dinner!' Online. Available at: <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/china/guo-baofeng/>, last  
30 viewed 15 February 2011.
- 31 CNNIC (2009), *Di 24 ci Zhongguo hulian wangluo fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao*  
32 (中国互联网络发展状况统计报告). *The 24th Statistical Report on the Development*  
33 *of the Internet in China*, China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC).
- 34 CNNIC (2011) *Di 27 ci Zhongguo hulian wangluo fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao*  
35 (中国互联网络发展状况统计报告). *The 27th Statistical Report on the Development*  
36 *of the Internet in China*, China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC).
- 37 Croll, Elisabeth (2006), 'Conjuring Goods, Identities and Cultures', in Kevin Latham,  
38 Stuart Thompson and Jakob Klein (eds) *Consuming China: Approaches to Cultural*  
39 *Change in Contemporary China*, London: Routledge.
- 40 Davis, Deborah S., Kraus, Richard, Naughton, Barry and Perry, Elizabeth J. (1995), *Urban*  
41 *Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao*  
42 *China*, Woodrow Wilson Center Series, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 43 Everett, Anna (2003), 'Digitextuality and Click Theory: Theses on Convergence Media in  
44 the Digital Age', in A. Everett and J.T. Caldwell (eds) *New Media: Theories and Prac-*  
45 *tices of Digitextuality*, New York: Routledge.
- Fallows, Deborah (2007), 'China's eBay-MySpace', Pew Internet & American Life  
Project. Online. Available at: [www.pewinternet.org/Commentary/2007/June/Chinas-](http://www.pewinternet.org/Commentary/2007/June/Chinas-eBayMySpace.aspx)  
[eBayMySpace.aspx](http://www.pewinternet.org/Commentary/2007/June/Chinas-eBayMySpace.aspx), last viewed 15 February 2011.







- García-Montes, J.M., Caballero-Muñoz, D. and Caballero-Muñoz, M. (2006), 'Changes in the Self Resulting from the Use of Mobile Phones', *Media, Culture & Society*, 28(1), pp. 67–82.
- Giese, Karsten (2004), 'Speaker's Corner or Virtual Panopticon: Discursive Construction of Chinese Identities Online', in Françoise Mengin (ed.) *Cyber China: Reshaping National Identities in the Age of Information*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1989), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. T. Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge: Polity.
- Hartley, John (2002), *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies: Key Concepts*. Third edition. London: Routledge.
- Holliday, I. and Yep, R. (2005), 'E-government in China', *Public Administration and Development*, 25, pp. 239–249.
- Huang, Philip (ed.) (1993), Special Issue of *Modern China*: 19(2): Symposium: 'Public Sphere'/'Civil Society' in China. Paradigmatic Issues in Chinese Studies III.
- Kipnis, Andrew (2007), 'Neoliberalism Reified: *Sushi* Discourse and Tropes of Neoliberalism in the People's Republic of China', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)*, 13, pp. 383–400.
- Latham, Kevin (2000), 'Nothing but the Truth: News Media, Power and Hegemony in South China', *The China Quarterly*, 163: 633–654.
- Latham, Kevin (2007a), 'Media and the Limits of Cynicism in Post-socialist China', in Harry G. West and Parvathi Raman (eds.) *Enduring Socialism: Explorations of Revolution and Transformation, Restoration and Continuation*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Latham, Kevin (2007b), 'SMS, Communication and Citizenship in China's Information Society', *Critical Asian Studies*, 39(2), pp. 295–314.
- Latham, Kevin (2009), 'Media, the Olympics and the Search for the "Real China"', *The China Quarterly*, 197: 25–43.
- Li, Xiaoping (1991), 'The Chinese Television System and Television News', *China Quarterly*, 126, pp. 340–355.
- Li, Xiguang, Xuan, Qin and Kluver, Randolph (2003), 'Who is Setting the Agenda? The Impact of Online Chatrooms on Party Presses in China', in K.C. Ho, Randolph Kluver and Kenneth C. C. Yang (eds) *Asia.com: Asia Encounters the Internet*, London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Lull, J. (1991), *China Turned On: Television, Reform and Resistance*. Chapter 5. London: Routledge.
- Mengin, Françoise (2004), 'The Role of the State in Greater China in the Age of Information', in Françoise Mengin (ed.) *Cyber China: Reshaping National Identities in the Age of Information*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Poster, Mark (1990), *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Poster, Mark (1995), *The Second Media Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Qiang, Christine Zhen-Wei (2007), *China's Information Revolution: Managing the Social and Economic Transformation*, Washington DC: World Bank.
- Qiu, Jack Linchuan (2009), *Working-Class Network Society: Communication Technology and the Information Have-Less in Urban China*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Robins, Kevin and Webster, Frank (1999), *The Times of the Technoculture: From the Information Society to the Virtual Life*, London: Routledge.
- Rowe, W. (1990), 'The Public Sphere in Modern China', *Modern China*, 16(3), pp. 309–329.
- Tai, Zixue (2006), *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society*, London: Routledge.







- 1 Tomba, Luigi (2004), 'Creating an Urban Middle Class: Social Engineering In Beijing',  
2 *The China Journal*, 51, pp. 1–26.
- 3 UNESCO (2006), 'Chinese e-Government Is Boming', UNESCO website [http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=20664&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=20664&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html) last accessed 11 November 2009.
- 4  
5  
6 Wang, S. (1995), 'The Politics of Private Time: Changing Leisure Patterns in Urban  
7 China', in D.S. Davis, R. Kraus, B. Naughton and E.J. Perry (eds) *Urban Spaces in  
8 Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China*,  
9 Woodrow Wilson Center Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 10 Whyte, Martin King (2010), *The Myth of China's Social Volcano: Perceptions of Inequality  
11 and Distributive Injustice in Contemporary China*, Stanford: Stanford University  
12 Press.
- 13 Xi, Ruiyun (2005), *The Internet, Freedom of Speech, and Social Transformation: An  
14 Examination of the Impact of Cyber-Forums on Policy-Making in China*. PhD Thesis:  
15 State University of New York at Buffalo.
- 16 Xu, Janice Hua (2009), 'Building a Chinese "Middle Class": Consumer Education and  
17 Identity Construction', in Ying Zhu and Chris Berry (eds) *TV China*, Bloomington:  
18 Indiana University Press.
- 19 Xu, Wu (2007), *Chinese Cybernationalism: Evolutions, Characteristics, and Implications*,  
20 Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- 21 Yan, Hairong (2003), 'Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism: Organizing Suzhi/  
22 Value Flow through Labor Recruitment Networks', *Cultural Anthropology*, 18(4), pp.  
23 493–523.
- 24 Yang, Guobin (2009), *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*, New  
25 York: Columbia University Press.
- 26 Zhang, Li (2008), 'Private Homes, Distinct Lifestyles: Performing a New Middle Class',  
27 in Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong (eds) *Privatizing China: Socialism from Afar*, Ithaca/  
28 London: Cornell University Press.
- 29 Zhang, Li and Ong, Aihwa (2008). 'Introduction: Privatizing China: Powers of the Self,  
30 Socialism from Afar', in Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong (eds) *Privatizing China: Socialism  
31 from Afar*, Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press.
- 32 Zhang, Tongdao (2009), 'Chinese Television Audience Research', in Ying Zhu and Chris  
33 Berry (eds) *TV China*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45

