Critical Masses, Commerce, and Shifting State-Society Relations in China

Ying Zhu
University of New York, College of Staten Island

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive
Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons

https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/710

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
Critical Masses, Commerce, and Shifting State-Society Relations in China

February 17, 2010 in Media, movies by The China Beat | 4 comments

This essay is based on the script of a talk Ying Zhu gave at Google’s New York offices on February 12, 2010. Sections in bold were not part of the original talk, but have been added by the authors to tease out some of the issues that were left without further elaboration due to time constraints.

By Ying Zhu and Bruce Robinson

Editor’s note: This piece originally ran with Ying Zhu listed as its sole author. After it appeared, Ying Zhu informed us that it should be described as a co-authored commentary, in recognition of the extraordinary contribution to it by Bruce Robinson, with whom she had collaborated closely on a related project; we have followed her wishes; and both Ying Zhu and China Beat ask that in further attributions or discussion both authors be equally credited for this work.

I have recently been reading new books about China with titles like What Does China Think? and How China’s Leaders Think: The Inside Story of China’s Reform and What This Means for the Future — good books that give us genuinely valuable insight into the thinking of many of China’s leading political and intellectual lights. But what they make me think is that we may not be thinking enough about what Chinese society thinks, so I would like to take the opportunity to discuss the concept of China’s emerging “critical masses,” and the power that the critical masses have in shaping the future of China.

I would like to propose that the Chinese people are more and more the masters of their own destiny, and maybe yours. As you know, sometime in 2008 China surpassed the U.S. as the country with the largest number of Internet users. That’s the same year that it became the world’s largest greenhouse gas emitter. It is also the United States’ leading creditor, owning, by most accounts, over 1 trillion dollars of U.S. debt, and it will soon pass Japan as the world’s second largest economy. So as Americans, as citizens of the world, and especially as Googlers, you all have something riding on China’s choices now and in the future, even without the current controversy. And speaking of that controversy, naturally, I should factor Google’s recent adventures in China into the overall scheme of my take on Chinese media and society.

I want to say first that I am thrilled to be here at the reigning search engine of “Life, the Universe and Everything.” Thrilled, but I might also say “in thrall,” since in my line of work it has become nearly impossible to operate without constant resort to the little magic box that transforms keywords into the raw material of articles and books. Maybe you could get it to do the writing too, in addition to dating?

Once, of course, there was no Google. Back in the days before Google, say 30 years or so “BG,” communications scholars used to give too little credit to audiences, who they regarded as mostly passive recipients of messages contained in a one way flow of mass mediated communication.

We are repeating the same pattern today in paying too much attention to China’s leaders and intellectuals, and to the surface content of media messages, without considering how Chinese audiences use and interpret media and produce their own mediated information. We also tend to emphasize government control and censorship of the media and the Internet, citing the “Great Firewall of China” without considering either the real extent of information available, or what people do with it. We are not alone in this. The Chinese state may also be giving audiences too little credit, persisting in a deep-rooted conviction that national unity and political stability can only be maintained through paternalistic management of culture and information.

What emerges in China is a commercialized and vastly expanding information society. We’ve heard about censorship and crackdowns; but as you know much better than I do, people who want to DO find means to bypass the Great Firewall. Vigorous public discussion and networking on the Internet and via social media have become central features of contemporary Chinese society. So, for the fans of The X-Files, I don’t know about the “truth,” but the information is out there, even in China. And
people do process information on their own terms, incorporating a variety of resources, which leads to the "Critical Masses" concept.

Mao began his revolution with rhetorical paens to the masses. The masses of Mao’s time, however, were mostly shut off from the outside world, and were entirely at the mercy of a hyper-authoritarian state. That reality has been utterly annihilated in post-Mao China by the twin detonation of colossal economic development and globalization. China’s masses are now better off, better educated and much more aware of and sophisticated about their own world and the world outside China. No longer isolated, nameless masses, they are critical masses in these three related senses: “critical” to the tenure of a one-party state that is no longer in a position to easily put down a popular rebellion; “critical” in the sense that they identify problems and demand, and indeed influence state action; and “critical” in the sense that they constitute ready networks of audience members and information consumers with the potential to be moved to collective action by a catalyzing event or issue that transforms passive association into active participation in groups of like-minded citizens expressing their passion in forums ranging from online debates to street-level demonstrations or even extended political or cultural campaigns.

Originally a scientific term, critical mass doesn’t mean “mass” in the sense of huge numbers. The “critical” prefix is a qualifier. It means “just enough to achieve some certain effect in some particular situation.” So not masses in the Maoist sense of revolutionary masses. In fact, the effect of China’s development and mediatization is that China’s “masses” have been extensively de-massified into a much more pluralistic society of people divided along socio-economic lines into smaller interest groups. Local interest group actions constitute the bulk of China’s recent critical mass activities such as the taxi driver strikes and localized and short-term protests about job losses and property confiscations.

A recent article in The Guardian reports that rebellious Chinese netizens have built imitation websites of both Google and YouTube as a protest against the state’s regulatory censorship of Google. As reported in this article, YouTubecn.com offers videos from the real YouTube, which is blocked in China. The Google imitation is called Goojje and includes a plea for Google not to leave China. The separate projects went up within a day of each other in mid-January, just after Google’s threat to leave China. The issue of copyright infringement aside, the sites enable access to sensitive topics in tightly controlled China. Videos on social unrest in China can be found on the YouTube imitator, which is in English. Quoted in the Guardian article, the founder of the YouTube knockoff, Li Senhe, told the Christian Science Monitor “I did this as a public service.” It was reported that some Chinese quickly welcomed the fake YouTube site but doubted that it would last long. Regardless, the appearance of the sites is a typical instance of creative and public questioning on the Internet.

Writing for Financial Times, James Kynge describes “the last crazy days of Google.cn,” as Chinese netizens, in anticipation of an expected crackdown, have gone “crazy” surfing the Google China site because it has allowed, for the first time, uncensored searches in Chinese. “I’ve been doing all sorts of crazy searches, really distracting myself from my work,” one netizen as quoted by saying, “I’ve done Tiananmen Square, the love affairs of national leaders, the corruption of leaders’ children. Everything.” No doubt the surreptitious joys of this user are shared by many like-minded “netizens.” However, the most recent information I gathered from China is that some of these links are leading nowhere, as they are obviously blocked by the Chinese censors.

A similar case is the odd fortune of James Cameron’s sci-fi eco-fable, Avatar. The film quickly won the hearts and minds of audiences in China, who rose to Hollywood’s defense when the state abruptly removed Avatar from 2-D screening rooms to make way for the domestic New Years blockbuster, Confucius. This has resulted in a popular anti-Confucius outcry, which is about to push Confucius, a “main-melody” film, off China’s screens. I should explain that a “main melody” film or television program is anything that fits the state’s recommended thematic and ideological line. [1]

As China Daily reports, the wave of anti-Confucius sentiment following the removal of Avatar from 2-D is a backlash against official maneuvering. The backlash has unintended consequences—“Amidst the outpouring of anger and frustration toward movie industry manipulations are the voices that point to the thoughts of Confucius as a negative force in Chinese history. The anti-Confucius sentiment runs
counter to the State’s trend of promoting Confucius and his teachings as a quintessentially Chinese alternative.” “Just a year ago this situation was unimaginable. Then, you said one bad word about Confucius and you risked a “flame war” that would incinerate you.” [2] The article then comments, facetiously, that “What serious scholars could never [succeed] in demystifying, and whom former chairman Mao Zedong, Lu Xun and all the revolutionaries failed to topple from the pedestal, the film authorities did with one simple stroke — by throwing a boomerang at Pandora…and instead hitting the man they had crowned with a halo.”

The China Daily piece goes on to say that “The same is true of managing controversial online content. While most people have no qualms [about] shielding minors from unhealthy websites, they are uncomfortable with an all-encompassing monitoring system such as Green Dam. The filtering of bawdy jokes on the mobile platform is also backfiring, [turning] erstwhile sympathizers of censorship into champions of personal rights.” This leads us back to the Google case, and to the mixed popular response that it has evoked.

The Global Times, a subsidiary of the Beijing-controlled People’s Daily, asked thousands of its readers if they thought the Chinese government should submit to Google’s conditions. The survey reportedly generated an overwhelmingly strong response to the effect that Beijing should stand up to Google. [3] Over the weekend, I chatted with a newly arrived visiting new media scholar from a top-ranking university in China. She told me that the majority of her students consider it opportunistic for Google to threaten to leave China just when a new round of Internet crackdowns is raising eyebrows among Chinese netizens. Her students think that Google is exploiting anti-crackdown sentiment and that its threat is mainly a gesture to please the U.S. government. Setting aside the Chinese students’ lack of nuanced understanding of how U.S. politics and commerce work, I find the students’ cynicism less surprising than disappointing. Questioned about how her students and people around her react to the hacking effort to spy on political activists, she was taken aback, asking whether there is evidence to support this claim. Apparently there has been little discussion on the political aspect of the attack. The mainstream Chinese media either downplays or omits entirely the part about the attempt at obtaining information about the political activists.

Acknowledging that there had been vague coverage of this particular aspect of the Google protest on China’s mainstream media, the Chinese visiting scholar probed, ”Is there inside information that you know that we don’t know?” I told her that there is nothing “inside” about it — the reports are out in the open. I was keenly aware of the patronizing tone I took while trying to suggest to her what it means to have a free flow of information. For that, I apologized. I then asked her about people’s reactions to reports that the hacking might be linked to the Chinese state. She asked tersely, ”Is there any evidence?” She told me further that most of her students use local portals, so Google’s threatened departure wouldn’t cause much inconvenience. Only a limited number of elites in China routinely use Google, she said.

My conversation with the Chinese visiting scholar points to a missing link between Google and many Internet users in China, which might have contributed to Google’s initial lukewarm grassroots reception in China. But the tide seems to be turning in Google’s favor. As Google’s recent defiance has made it headline news among the average Internet users in China, this has paradoxically made Google more accessible and sympathetic among the Chinese public who had otherwise paid scant attention to the technological giant and who were led to believe that Google was nothing more than an imperialistic Western firm who desired to have a stake in China’s market. In other words, in turning the issue of Google from a technological phenomenon into a social one, Google is now receiving much wider attention than it ever had in China. Google is finally beginning to generate a large enough critical mass.

It is instructive here to compare Google’s experience with the Avatar case. Pulling the 2-D version of Avatar to make way for Confucius was not quite the overanxious political move that it has been portrayed as in the West. Western news reports have suggested that the state removed Avatar because it felt threatened by the film’s enormous popularity and some of its thematic content. The fact of the matter is that it was unusual to begin with for a Hollywood blockbuster to get a release window so close to the Chinese New Year holiday, which is normally reserved for major domestic releases. So ending Avatar’s run about a week ahead of the holiday’s start was more or less
according to the usual practice. Nevertheless, the state’s action was so abrupt, and the film was so popular, that audiences were considerably miffed. Miffed and moved to action, going online and on social media sites in huge numbers to express their passion for the blue people of Pandora and against poor Confucius. The response was quick, widespread and intense, transforming passive association — audience membership — into active participation in a popular movement. Markets, too, joined the campaign — many theaters simply ignored the government’s order to remove Avatar — and recently the government responded by restoring Avatar to more screens. So, a catalyzing event turns an audience into something more like a public, and the government takes some accommodating action.

There have been many, many more instances of passively associated networks of people online and on social media turned into active publics over some passing event or concern, and more still of active networking and public expression about the major issues of the day in China. I am sure you are all familiar with another recent instance of an apparently successful popular movement organized and carried out primarily online and in social media — the campaign against the Chinese government’s plan to equip all new computers sold in China with a new Internet monitoring program called “Green Dam.” The government backed away from its plan after the strong public response. Green Dam or something like it may still come back — the current information crackdown makes that clear — but what is equally clear is that public discourse and public opinion have become regular, increasingly forceful features of state-society relations in China.

Here I must emphasize that the advent of development, mediatization and critical masses actually goes a long way toward lessening the likelihood of a true mass rebellion or revolution aimed at regime change. The critical mass dynamic, or the rise of public opinion and state-society negotiation, constitutes a participatory outlet for public frustration, and it divides people into interest groups. So critical masses are challenging in some ways, but can also contribute to regime stability.

Now I want to comment on the differences between the Avatar and Google situations: first, that the continuing lack of easy access to unfiltered information is certainly a factor in the lukewarm-to-cynical reception of Google’s action among many Chinese people. But there are ways around the Chinese firewall, and there are enough people actively working around it to assure that a constant stream of unauthorized information flows through the networks of public discourse. It is also true, however, that just like most Americans, most Chinese use the Internet and social media primarily for entertainment, social networking and other mundane purposes. Given the vast array of what is available inside the firewall, they do not feel especially deprived of information, and they normally do not have any great reason to doubt the news reports of their own media or to go looking, for instance, for something more about the Google story than the mainstream media tell them. Even a professor of new media at an elite Chinese university does not regularly go looking for contrary or divergent information about news events unless she has a particular interest or she trips across an unexpected lead. So it’s not surprising that the politically targeted computer hacking, downplayed in mainstream Chinese news reporting on Google, escaped widespread notice. To most people in China, the Google story is only about differences over the state’s censorship policy. That is, of course, reason enough for many to sympathize with Google’s position, and many do, only not as much as they might with all the details.

A second difference between the two cases is the way that Chinese nationalism has become part of the Google discourse. In her speech regarding Internet freedom and U.S. policy in Washington on January 21, Hillary Clinton reminded the audience of comments that President Barack Obama made on Internet freedom during the webcast section of his November “town hall meeting” in Shanghai. As Clinton said: “In response to a question that was sent in over the Internet, he [Obama] defended the right of people to freely access information, and said that the more freely information flows, the stronger societies become. He spoke about how access to information helps citizens to hold their governments accountable, generates new ideas, and encourages creativity.”

Clinton and Obama both have been about as diplomatic as it is possible to be without simply ignoring the whole affair. Indeed, American newspaper columnists and some congressional representatives have urged the Obama administration to take a more aggressive stand. Despite the diplomatic language, the Chinese government has seized on the Clinton and Obama speeches as evidence of a
U.S. government plot to use Google and the rhetoric of “free information flows” as cover for its real goal of flooding China with American-sourced information and entertainment.

An article originally posted on the People’s Net, and which has received wide circulation in Chinese mainstream media, cited the following comments from the CEO of a Chinese online gaming company:

The Internet is the best media for the “smart power” diplomatic strategy that the United States has been promoting. The U.S owns Google, Facebook, Myspace, YouTube, Twitter and other international resources that have widely spread and well accepted around the world. It also retains control of the majority of Internet root servers, as well as the most cutting-edge Internet technologies. The former can be referred to as its soft power in the cyberspace, while the latter becomes the hard power of its hegemonic control of the global network. As a military R & D project by the U.S. Department of Defense, the Internet to some extent serves the political, commercial and cultural interest of the U.S. For example, if the U.S. takes a dislike to a country, it can make it disappear from the Internet world by blocking the country’s suffix from the root servers. In the cyberspace, hegemony is no longer based on the actual geographic boundaries, but on the border of information. Internet is nothing but a reproduction of the Western “battleship and armament” 170 years ago. [4]

Framings like this can be quite effective. Nationalist sentiment runs high in China, fueled by pride in China’s rising place in the world on the one hand, and by an abiding sense of China’s historical humiliations at the hands of Western imperialist powers on the other. Chinese netizens are certainly interested in free information flows, but they do not want to be lectured to by foreigners, particularly American leaders. This makes it a good bet for the Chinese state to portray the battle as Google and the U.S. government vs. China (meaning the Chinese people), on both moral and nationalistic grounds.

Here is a quote that presents the issue of Internet freedom as a moral one: "Xia Hong, the PR man for a company called China InfoHighway...offered us a view that ... 'A network that allows individuals to do as they please, lets them go brazenly wherever they wish, is a hegemonistic network that harms the rights of others.'" This sounds like twisted logic, at least to me, but in the context of an emotional argument about the U.S. trying to dominate China by overwhelming it with weapons of mass information, and about a history of humiliation, it can give “free information flows” a run for its money.

And speaking of money, a final difference between the Avatar and Google cases that I want to address is the economics of each. Media regulation in China is now a bargaining process in which the twin forces of state control and commercial imperatives must negotiate with each other. And market imperatives and the state’s ideological directives often work in unison, sharing a common interest in cultivating a stable climate of favorable public opinion. Google made little progress in gaining financial grounds in China precisely because it is up against the dual forces of politics and economy. As Zachary Karabell notes in Time magazine, China is brimming with thriving homegrown web franchises: “These companies have a distinct advantage over foreign competitors because their founders and senior managers are part of the same elite class as the regulators who enforce the various and mostly unwritten rules of censorship. They have offices in Beijing, and they lobby the Chinese government through uncharted back channels and are in what amounts to a continuous dialogue about what is and what is not acceptable.”

In other words, the Chinese state and local economic interests have worked in unison in dismissing Google’s request for an open and uncensored Internet system. And here again, Karabell asserts that “the narrative of China’s emergence and a burgeoning world of hungry entrepreneurs not willing to play second fiddle to America as the back story for the Google imbroglio might ring true for many Chinese.”

In the case of Avatar, the public triumphed in their resolve to keep Avatar on screen partly because they had the backing of Chinese theater chains that wanted to maximize their profits from screening Avatar. Confucius is expendable when the financial well-being of the cinema chains as part of the Chinese film industry is at stake. [5] Google, however, does not have local partners analogues to theater chains whose financial interest contributed to the victory of the Chinese Avatar fans.
Back to the unidentified user of Google’s uncensored site mentioned in Kynge’s article — the user acknowledged that “There is no way that Google will get away with this. They will have to leave China for sure.” Many China-watchers in the West too have subscribed to the surging wisdom that, in a battle with the Chinese state, the Chinese way would always come out a winner. As Geremie Barmé concludes in a recent article about the China affair: “As China gets stronger and more wired, it will still be limited by intellectual narrowness and Sinocentric bias. Pluralism and the open-mindedness that comes with it — the worldly curiosity of previous great powers and the idealism that often supports it — simply are not present. More to the point, they are not about to be encouraged.”

As much as I appreciate Barme’s and others’ insights, I can not help asking, “Encouraged by whom, the Chinese state and its party organ? How about a little more faith on the self-motivating Chinese netizens?” In the case of Google, based on what I’ve gathered, the tide of public opinion expressed on the Internet and in social media appears to be turning now in Google’s favor. It at least looks as if a critical mass of public interest and opinion is building that will influence the ongoing negotiations between Google and the Chinese state.

In an interview Han Han, the popular Chinese blogger, gave to the Chinese website Tudou.com, Han speaks of the Google event in phrases that echo the legendary news anchor Edward R. Murrow’s famous sign-off line as he bid his farewell, “Good night, and good luck.” The video posted on Tudou was taken down, but a different site posted the transcript. I include here excerpts of Han’s interview in English:

Of course I feel quite sorry about Google’s leave. From Facebook to Youtube, now it is Google, some many excellent international websites have left us. I personally respect Google’s behavior and spirit, and for me it is not important whether they are for commercial purpose or not as long as they can benefit other people. ... So I can only say I’m sorry that all kinds of good websites have left us. The Chinese Internet has become the biggest regional network in the world. If so, let’s practice how to climb up the firewall and other techniques. We all need to perfect the (climbing) skill. My young friends and young media people, let’s speak up and have our voice heard. This is the trend of history that cannot be stopped. Any effort to prevent this from happening will be scorned upon in the future.... So I say, goodbye and good luck. [6]

And, based on my anonymous sources, a certain segment of Chinese elites are wary of, if only on an economic ground, the imminent danger of a market monopoly of a couple of big Chinese search engines in the absence of Google. It seems that some consensus is emerging between the public opinion and the opinions of the elite Chinese Internet think tanks on the necessity of keeping Google in China.

Finally, some Chinese bloggers do broach the topic from a different end of the moral spectrum, endorsing Google’s courage in standing up to the Chinese censor and condemning Google’s Chinese counterpart, Baidu, for cozying up to the Chinese state at the expense of people’s rights to free information and social justice. As Zhang Luqiang writes in his open web article “Google Too Heavy to Bear”: “China’s social information system has been highly distorted under the strict control ... though Google is imperfect, it was the only company that didn’t completely lose its principle during China’s recent Internet crackdown. ... Chinese companies should have their own value and principles. The Chinese Internet companies with no value or principle should be the targets of our condemnation. Chinese Internet companies should learn from Google, and obtain their value and principle. ... Baidu not only worked with the Government on Internet censorship, but also helped their corporate customers block out negative information. Any corporation with moral value can never compete with it. Baidu’s dirty business of covering negative information for its customers was exposed after the ‘tainted baby formula tragedy that claimed the lives of many Chinese infants.’” [7]

All of which is making it difficult for the Chinese state to be nonchalant about Google’s departure, if it ever departs. Last but not least, a Chinese student seeking a graduate degree in the U.S. told me passionately that Google has a moral obligation to stay and “prepare itself for a long-term struggle rather than giving up the Chinese market so quickly,” “If it truly sees its mission as to make information available and accessible to people.” In a nutshell, dare I predict that neither China nor Google can afford the absence of Google in China?!
Finally, I’d like to touch briefly a framework of “convergence” I am developing with my co-author for a book on CCTV that might shed some light on the current situation.

Towards A Theory of Convergence upon “Lifestyle Choice” [8]

The convergence notion refers to a global trend, in intensively mediatized societies, toward what might be called “informal participatory politics.” Now in both the established democracies and the regime-sustaining politics of authoritarian states, government is perceived as less and less able to deal effectively with citizens’ concerns, since it is constrained by the terms of participation in an integrated global system to let market forces operate with minimal interference. Furthermore, elections and elected officials in both democratic and authoritarian states are increasingly beholden and responsive to moneyed interests and expensive, image-driven media campaigns. As a result, we are witnessing a shift from traditional civic life and political participation to a new age of “lifestyle politics” driven by “values” articulated at the level of individual behavior and popular action in consumer choices, online exchanges, demonstrations, and other informal forums.

As opposed to given, organic, primordial identities, a lifestyle is an active choice about identity. The general historical movement has been away from given and secure identities and meaning determined by parentage, religion, and work toward moral relativism and meaning/identity unmoored, left increasingly to personal choice. Globalization accelerates this existential shift, which is both liberating and frightening. You are freer to choose larger parts of your own identity, but how exactly do you make that choice? How is one set of values better or more “true” than another? This accounts for a great deal of modern anxiety. In fact, when the new Pope came into office, almost his first words were a warning that “relativism” is the chief threat to contemporary humanity.

The critical problem of existential anxiety about meaning, identity, and moral relativism is common to both the West and China, and neither governments in the West nor China are equipped to deal with the problem, which adds up to public cynicism about government and traditional political action directed primarily toward government action. Thus, people have taken it upon themselves to cope with new personal challenges for managing careers, social relationships, and family life.

For instance, consider Whole Foods, the organic, gourmet food market started in Austin, TX in the 1970s, which soon grew into a global chain appreciated by “foodies” and liberal, earthy, holistic types everywhere. When founder and CEO John Mackey spoke out against Obama’s healthcare reform effort in a Wall Street Journal op-ed piece, saying, among other things, that there is no right to healthcare in the Constitution. This was a shot to the heart of Whole Foods’ main clientele, many of whom immediately decided to boycott, demonstrate and demand Mackey’s resignation.

The example contains a couple of lifestyle political actions. First, many Whole Foods customers have been shopping at the market for years as an expression of lifestyle choices about supporting organic farming, natural products, fair trade practices and so on. They are willing to pay a premium for something that they believe contributes to their own health and to a healthy planet. That is an example specifically of “prosumerism,” or supporting businesses and business practices that conform to various ideals. Now they feel betrayed, and their choice not to shop at Whole Foods, to demonstrate outside stores (in New York, among other places) or to go online and rant against Whole Foods, is another instance of lifestyle activism.

Yet lifestyle politics is not just about consumption. The concept of lifestyle extends beyond the pursuit of leisure and consumption practices to involve the expression of individual rights and a consciousness about the social responsibilities associated with a given lifestyle. It is about associating with a group or class of people in order to claim rights and recognition against the insecurities of contemporary, globalized society. As W. Lance Bennett, among others, has argued, the political and economic transformations and
consequent widespread personal anxiety and insecurity (job insecurity, decreasing real wages, destabilized identities, cynicism about traditional politics) are the driving forces behind the shift from traditional civic life and political participation to a new age of “lifestyle politics.”

Thus, we suggest a developing point of convergence between China and the West in politics and political participation. In the case of China, changes accrued from rapid development and its re-engagement with the outside world have produced a quasi-public sphere that compels the state to actively cultivate and incorporate public opinion into a more overtly deliberative policy making process. Still autocratic in form, China’s polity has become more responsive in practice to a distinctly media-driven civil society in which audiences emulate publics. Here it is very important to note that popular public approval of the government is currently higher in China than almost anywhere else. At least two recent studies (one by a group led by Andrew Nathan and another by the PEW Research Center) find very high public support both for the form of government and for China’s current “direction.” So China’s critical masses seem to be very far from thinking about regime change. They are mainly concerned about their local pieces of the pie.

In a nutshell, authoritarian states that adapt and accommodate in anticipation of a revolution might persist indefinitely. Elsewhere, though, the “color revolutions” are examples of authoritarian governments substantially failing to keep up with development, relying too much on suppression and too little on accommodation of modernizing publics. I should emphasize that once frustrated publics actually succeed in forcing democratic reform, they are as likely to support neo-authoritarians as liberal democrats (such as in Ukraine and Russia), and will probably swing back and forth between the two, much like how Americans have swung between Democrats and Republicans.

The Internet, obviously, has been vital to this new breed of identity politics. The Internet as a public space affords a platform or voice to anyone with access to a computer or a cell phone. It is forceful because of its inherent “brushfire” characteristics: information can catch fire and grow into full-blown political movements in an instant, and it can be sustained in smoldering underground networks indefinitely (it’s hard to put out). On the other hand, the quality of this super-charged public discourse can become questionable. It is highly democratic in the sense of participatory access, but it is also rife with problems. It is characteristically messy and frequently uncivil. It is highly vulnerable to manipulation and deceit, and it is ripe with willful ignorance, misinformation, and misguided faith in numbers and volume as proof of truth.

The Chinese nationalists drunk on Chinese exceptionalism and the Americans who are convinced that they have the patent on democracy and human rights can beat each other over the head all day about which side comes out the winner. The point is that they are using the same stick, with many of the same attendant hazards. Ultimately, though, participatory politics demands a well-informed citizenry, free speech, a vigorous exchange of ideas, and a free press as essential conditions, regardless of cultural and historical differences between the East and the West. And well-informed Chinese masses will benefit both Google and the Chinese state.

Ying Zhu is Professor of Media Culture at the City University of New York, College of Staten Island.

Notes


I should mention here the existence of the so-called "Fifty Cents Party," a group of Chinese Internet users who are paid by the state agencies to post whatever the state wants them to say. The pay is 50 cents per message.

My New York-based research assistant, Miss Yuan, translated the text from its Chinese original to English for me.

Here I wish to express my sympathy towards Hu Mei, the director of Confucius, whose well-intended film is unfortunately caught in the firestorm of Avatar. Hu is a personal friend, a thoughtful director with a unique affinity to historical epics. I have fond memories of discussing Confucius (then a project in development) with her in the summer of 2008.

This text was also translated from Chinese to English by Miss Yuan.

Earlier in the article, the author wrote that the cover-up of the tainted baby formula prolonged the tragedy, and that it is a pity that the 1.3 billion Chinese people were forced to obtain information vital to their health from the foreign media.

Both the concept of "critical mass" and the theory of "convergence" receive substantial treatment in my new book on CCTV.

Be Sociable, Share!