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Upcoming Event: Ying Zhu on Google and China

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Ying Zhu, Professor of Media Culture at the City University of New York, College of Staten Island, will be giving a talk on Friday, February 12 at Google’s Manhattan headquarters, beginning at noon. Although the event is not open to the public, a limited number of guest passes can be arranged; anyone interested in attending can contact her by e-mailing Ying.Zhu[at]csi.cuny.edu

Ying Zhu’s presentation, titled “Emerging Critical Masses and Shifting State-Society Relations in China,” will focus on Google’s recent tensions with China, as well as the adventures of Avatar in Chinese theaters, to explore the concept of China’s emerging “critical masses” as constitutive of a quasi-public sphere invested with people power. No longer isolated, nameless masses, today’s Chinese audiences and social media users are critical masses: “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 shape, 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 a critical mass of like-minded citizens expressing their passion in forums ranging from online debates to street-level demonstrations or even extended political or cultural campaigns. Zhu argues that media-centered critical masses are a central dynamic of China’s changing state-society relationship. Additionally, she suggests that this emerging dynamic is not limited to China, and identifies points of convergence between China and the West in politics and political participation. She proposes that the electoral politics of established democracies and the regime-sustaining politics of authoritarian states alike are trending toward a quasi-democratic “politics with globalized characteristics,” with important prospects and problems in common.

Ying Zhu is co-editor, with Stanley Rosen, of the forthcoming book Art, Politics, and Commerce in Chinese Cinema.