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Chapter 11 Nationalism vs. Democracy - China's bloggers and the Western Media

Abstract: Over 300 Million Chinese access the Internet regularly. While these netizens (Internet + citizens) have often been portrayed as a potential force for democracy, this changed with the unrest in Tibet, and the run-up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008. As this chapter shows, many Chinese netizens began to defend China's honour against the perceived betrayal and attacks by the Western media. They began to see democracy and the protection of Chinese interests as polar opposites as Western comments on China damaged democracy's reputation among the upwardly mobile, emerging Middle Class active in Chinese cyberspace.

Keywords: Western Media, Chinese cyberspace, democracy, nationalism

INTRODUCTION

2008 was a year that carried many Chinese hopes for a brighter future for China, and for more respect for China from other countries. Chinese netizens in particular expected China to open up more and to allow them unrestricted access to those parts of the world-wide web that had so far only been accessible through Internet proxies from within China. Outside China, many expected an opening-up of China as well. Editorials in Western newspapers suggested that the Olympics would contribute to irreversible political change in China that would ultimately lead to free and multi-party elections.

To the contrary, both Chinese netizens and others discovered that there was an unbridgeable chasm between their views on China's current situation. Many in Europe and America thought of China as a country firmly under the control of an oppressive and hated Communist regime, whose 'subjects' were trying to duplicate the wave of revolutions against totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe during the late 1980s and the 1990s. They thought that the Beijing Olympics would provide a stage for a grass-roots movement to emerge from hiding and – with the support of Western politicians and the Western media present at the Olympic games – push for human rights and democratic changes in China (see

e.g. Miles December 2007; Spiegel Online 8 August 2007; Tisdall 15 October 2007; Watts 14 October 2007).

China's netizens had very different expectations for the Beijing Olympics, and far less of a desire to start a revolution. China's Internet users were interested in more freedom – but only on the Internet. They wanted their voices to be heard and respected, not censored – but only on the Internet. In general, China's netizens showed that they were proud of China and its achievements over the past 30 years, and that they supported the Chinese government as the agent of reforms behind China's economic development.

CHINESE CYBERSPACE – A BRIEF BACKGROUND

The Internet in the People's Republic of China – A brief background

The Internet in China emerged a few years after the Internet in Europe and America, and its structures and set up reflected the different settings under which it emerged. (For more details on the history of China's Internet see CNNIC 2008).

Four organizations were set up by the central government to provide Internet access in China: the China Education and Research Network (CERNET) and the China Science and Technology Network (CSTNet), both of which were set up for academic and research institutions, and ChinaNET, as well as the China Golden Bridge Network (ChinaGBN) to provide commercial Internet access. The first Internet Café opened in China 15 November 1996 (CNNIC 2003), and the general public was allowed to connect privately to the Internet for the first time in early 1997, but had to use the already established networks instead of creating competing private initiatives. This has had the effect that China's netizens are only able to access and use spaces that the government or government-controlled institutions have established and still exercise control over.

The state or state-controlled entities own the physical backbone of the Internet in China, including the limited number of connections between the Chinese and the worldwide Internet, and so the central government can exercise greater control over Chinese cyberspace than most other governments can over the Internet their citizens access. The government in China is not so much trying to restrict their citizens' access to the Internet, but implicitly or explicitly allowing everything that goes on in Chinese cyberspace. The relative freedom Chinese

netizens enjoy in cyberspace is a freedom ultimately granted to them by the central government or its agencies, although often more from a laissez-faire attitude than from a decision to grant them more freedom.

The Chinese Central government's attention focuses on content that is judged to be harmful to Chinese society, e.g. pornography, religion, political activism, and ethnic separatism, etc. These types of content suffer under close scrutiny and periodic government crackdowns. The emphasis of the Chinese State is not laws and regulations, but instead co-option of netizens through self-regulation and self-discipline.

Since 1997, state-run and state-controlled institutions have repeatedly called on Internet users to exercise self-discipline. When pushed, the central government has shut down those parts of the Chinese Internet that displease China's leaders very quickly. Such interventions are the exception rather than the rule, though.

Even the 'Great Fire-Wall of China' (GFW) presents itself to the user not as an inflexible and clearly defined barrier, but instead as a multi-faceted and ever-changing system of highly localized rules. The only 'national' rule is that

access to websites outside China is relatively slow when compared to websites inside China, which is the result of the limited number of connections between Chinese cyberspace and beyond. This technological bottleneck makes frequent visits to websites outside China unattractive, which diminishes the interest of casual Chinese Internet users in sites perceived to be plagued with a lack of speed and frequent time-outs.

In addition to the GFW, the Chinese government also employs ‘soft’ barriers for Chinese netizens who want to access the Internet, the ISP-enforced blacklisting of specific words, or phrases, the coercion of multinational technology corporations, and real-world access controls through obligatory photo-ID based registration in Internet cafes. None of these barriers are insurmountable. Savvy Chinese Internet users and expatriates in China regularly avoid them through the use of proxies, web-page-forwarding or mirroring. Their value lies more in the deterrence of casual Internet users than in the containment of advanced or expert users, which seems good enough for the Chinese government (Herold 2008 for more details).

Chinese netizens

Since 2005, numerous incidents in China's cyberspace have demonstrated growing feelings of community among Chinese Internet users and indicated the development and the official acceptance of something like a civil society in China's cyberspace. This virtual civil society has repeatedly caused disturbances in the real world and in the willingness of Chinese netizens to criticise the government and those developments in Chinese society they disagree with.

Events that disturbed both online and offline China were e.g. the charges of infidelity a World of Warcraft gamer posted against his wife in April 2006 (Fox Knight 2006; French 2006), the uncovering of slavery in brick-making factories in 2007 (Watts 2007; Associated Press 2007), the story of 'Beijing Boy' in 2007 (Soong November 2007; Agence France Presse 29 May 2007; Zhang 30 May 2007), and many more. Each of these events demonstrated the willingness of Chinese netizens to discuss societal and political problems in Cyberspace and their ability to mobilise enough support that the government acceded to their demands. The Chinese government has displayed a surprising degree of permissiveness towards these online debates in China, although they do shut down any debates that openly discuss politically sensitive topics. Netizens have been able to continue their discussions through the use of euphemisms and code

words, which again demonstrated the lax character of official Chinese controls of the Internet.

Netizens have been permitted to organise themselves, to discuss problems they have with the government or government policies, and to attack and persecute others both online and in the real world through the use of the infamous 'Human flesh search engines' (Renrou sousu). From the treatment different groups of netizens have received over the past years, online dissent has to be coupled with outspoken activism offline, before the authorities intervene, arrest people, and order the shutdown of sites.

As Hartford (2005) has shown in an article about the electronic mailboxes of the mayors of Hangzhou and Nanjing, parts of the Chinese government have even used the Internet to interact with ordinary people in China. The response of Chinese netizens has shown that there is a willingness of Chinese cyberspace to engage with government officials and a trust in the government, despite the history of the past 50 years (See also Guo 2007; Tang 10 July 2008; Yang 2003).

China's netizens have shown themselves to be patriotic and supportive of China and its future development. Any grass-roots movement that fights for democracy in China is unlikely to develop as long as the Communist party manages to improve the objective conditions and the subjectively felt and perceived state of the Chinese economy (MacKinnon 2008). China's netizens approve of the strengthening of China, which means they approve of the Chinese Communist Party provided it improves the country domestically and on the international stage. This might explain the willingness of state officials to allow Internet users the freedom they currently enjoy.

One issue Chinese netizens do complain about is any form of corruption and censorship in Chinese cyberspace, often using materials published on European or US news web sites (see e.g. the archive of translated blog posts on Roland Soong's site 'EastSouthWestNorth' at <http://www.zonaeuropa.com/archive.htm>). In February 2008, several netizens around the former Nanjing University professor Guo Quan attempted to start the China Netizen Party (CNP – see Kennedy 8 February 2008). This party was immediately shut down and all mention of the CNP eradicated on the Chinese Internet. Netizens were not however discouraged from discussing the issues raised by the CNP through using codes and hiding the debates inside discussions of other topics.

However, 2008 was supposed to be the year in which China opened up to the world, the year in which the Chinese Internet would be less censored, the year of China's 'coming-out-party', and many netizens anticipated great change. With people from all over the world coming to China to take part in the Beijing Olympics, many expected that the Chinese government would be forced to make irreversible changes to the way in which China was governed. Netizens in particular seemed to expect easier access to overseas web sites and support for their issues from outside China. However, an article by Zhang Heci (27 January 2008) on Observechina.net had already warned that people outside China had very different agendas from those inside China and that even democracy activists outside China

Do not want to face the reality that is China, with all the huge changes in recent years. [...] They need to portray China today as the darkest and cruellest era. They need to posit that the Chinese people cannot live any longer under the brutal rule of the Chinese Communists.

(Zhang 27 January 2008)

Tibet exploded on 14 March 2008, and the world sided with the Tibetans against China. China's netizens decided that they had to protect China against the treachery and the attacks launched in particular by European and American media organisations.

BETRAYED RAGE – CHINA'S NETIZENS AND THE WESTERN MEDIA

Two angry Chinese youths

A widely-read Chinese blogger by the handle of 'Hecaitou' published an entry on his blog in March 2008 with the title 'When Helping becomes Hurting' (Soong March 2008). The post contained several images from Western news reports about protests against China that were taking place across Europe during the Tibetan unrest in March 2008 and an attack against Western 'prejudices against the Chinese people'. He wrote that the European protesters' 'efforts not only provide no material help, but they stir up the nationalistic fervour of the Chinese people and let the resulting anger flow and spread everywhere.'

Hecaitou accused Westerners of believing that ‘the Chinese have been brainwashed’ and that ‘all Chinese are ignorant, undeveloped and close-minded.’ He insisted that ‘many Chinese people know as much as they do and in fact visited a lot more websites than they have.’ After all, young Chinese do access a variety of European and American news sources and web sites, and also interact with other Chinese netizens in Chinese cyberspace, while only very few non-Chinese have the language skills necessary or the desire to access Chinese sources. He was full of contempt for the presumed attitudes of Europeans and Americans:

The westerner stoops down condescendingly to stretch out a helping hand to the wretched little yellow men so as to educate and instruct them. They are totally oblivious to the possibility that they are dealing with live human beings who are thoughtful and sentient.

(Soong March 2008)

While the language is harsh, netizens across Chinese cyberspace agreed fully with the sentiments expressed. The young and affluent Chinese who populate Chinese cyberspace and who regularly access Western reports on China, felt betrayed, hurt, and increasingly furious. Euro-American calls for the freedom of

expression and their insistence on the virtue of listening to diverging opinions seemed not to apply to them. Chinese opinions were *a priori* wrong and the result of brainwashing by the propaganda-machine of a totalitarian Communist regime.

In the absence of respect and equality, what is the point of dealing with the westerners? Presently, the westerners must be wondering about the reaction of the Chinese people to the current events. Once again, they treat the unexpected outcome as the result of successful brainwashing or overflowing nationalism. But they would never reflect on the implications of their actions on the Chinese people.

(Soong March 2008)

The perception of Hecaitou and others, that Westerners treated them with contempt and did not acknowledge the legitimacy of their opinions, enraged many Chinese netizens and other Chinese people.

The Olympic year of 2008 had been anticipated with unrealistic hopes by many Chinese as the year during which China would be accepted as an equal by the

developed world. However, the contempt and criticism that China's netizens encountered on Western websites during March and April 2008 destroyed such hopes. Instead many, including Hecaitou, began to feel furious and saw China threatened by an unwarranted and unfair attack:

Previously, I did not particularly care about the Olympics because I did not feel that it had anything to do with me. But now the Olympics is like a pair of testicles that someone else is holding in his hands in a threatening manner, but his purpose is not to change the practical situation of the Chinese people at all. [...] Thanks to their concerns, the Chinese people have rallied at an unprecedented speed underneath the national flag. They have voluntarily given up many rights and freedoms, in order to avoid more injuries and insults from the outside. These westerners are not helping their friends. They are only helping to create an enemy as well as an Asiatic orphan.

(Soong March 2008)

Although it is tempting to disregard Hecaitou's comments as just one voice among millions of Chinese netizens, he was far from alone in expressing these sentiments. His blog entry was copied to many of China's major bulletin boards

and discussed widely. Most Chinese netizens agreed with him. Additionally, it would be wrong to dismiss these feelings of Chinese netizens as mere ignorance of the diverse and broad mediascape of European and American countries. Many thousands of young Chinese at universities and in employment in the USA, Canada and Europe are highly media-savvy. These Chinese, living abroad were just as upset about the European and American news portrayals of China, as their fellow netizens back in China.

On 1 April 2008 a Chinese living in Germany with the Internet handle 'Schweinsteiger' posted a long entry on the ChinaRen BBS forum (see Soong 1 April 2008). In his entry he described the interactions and in some cases verbatim conversations with his co-workers in their shared office during March 2008, beginning before the Tibetan unrest and the following few weeks. The entry caused a stir in China, with over 650 replies on the original posting and multiple cross-postings of the entry on other web sites.

According to the post, his co-workers repeatedly used German news reports in their attempts to convince him that the Chinese government was evil. They attacked China, the Chinese government, the Chinese Communist Party, and the

Chinese people in general, and refused to believe anything reported within China. They told him:

Your media are lying and what you see is not real! If you want to criticize German media, you better go home and criticise your own Chinese media first! [...] Your television channels are telling lies. What right do you have to say that the German media are lying?

(Soong 1 April 2008)

After several days of the poster attempting to set the record on Tibet and China straight, his German colleagues tried to strengthen their argument by enlisting the help of non-German news sources. These Western news sources supported the German version of events in Tibet, although they did not offer any additional proof, but instead merely used the same images and sources as the German news media. In the end, this led to the following exchange, which demonstrates some of the frustration felt by increasing numbers of young Chinese when interacting with Westerners:

She said: 'Even this Spanish website is saying that the Chinese government is suppressing and killing peaceful demonstrators, etc.'

I said: 'I know. The western media are all lying.'

She said: 'But why is the whole world saying that and only China does not say so! Don't you feel that your government is lying to you? It is obvious that your government is the liar! Why else would all the countries condemn China?!'

I said: 'Right. All the countries are saying that China is bad, but none of them can produce any evidence to support their version. Only the Chinese government has produced the evidence. We have the video images. Those people were not demonstrating peacefully. They were murdering people. None of those video images were shown in the western media, which used those fake photos to smear China.'

She said: 'You are showing the fake video images fabricated by the Chinese government!'

I don't know what to say to a person like that.

(Soong 1 April 2008)

After recounting the interactions during this time, 'Schweinsteiger', the poster, summarises what he believes are the main problems for China's image in Germany, and therefore for any Chinese wanting to live or study in Germany:

1. The propaganda in the western media has achieved their goals -- the German people believe. Not only do they believe, but they believe it firmly to the point where all dissident voices are regarded as lies.
2. The marketing effort by the Dalai Lama over the years has been successful beyond expectations. Every German that I come across treats him as a 'great spiritual leader.' Everything that he says is true and everything that he does is correct.
3. Chinese students in Germany are unpopular. My colleagues indirectly reveal those feelings. They even tell me directly: 'We are really worried about what happens if one day you learn what we know.'
4. It is a mistake for China to even exist. The faults of China can be stacked from the ground to the heavens. Furthermore, under the leadership of this demon government, things are getting worse and worse.
5. Bloodshed and massacres occur everywhere in China. When a Chinese citizen says the wrong thing, he will be arrested immediately and subjected to extreme torture in jail.
6. China does not have the right to host the Olympics. Anyone who attends the Olympics is supportive of genocide to a certain extent.

(Soong 1 April 2008)

He ends his posts with a number of frustrated statements that portray how much he feels betrayed by the West in general, and Germany and its news media in particular. These sentences echo the betrayal expressed by Hecaitou on his blog and are in turn mirrored in many of the comments left on blogs and bulletin boards across Chinese cyberspace. However, these sentences also demonstrate the growing conviction among young Chinese that China should no longer listen to other countries, and should instead focus on growing stronger, so that one day it might no longer have to listen to the lies and accusations of the Western media and Western governments:

Anything good about China must have been fabricated by the Chinese government; visual images favourable to China were staged by the Chinese government; any photo favourable to China was the result of PhotoShop work. [...] China is hopeless with no redeemable value. All the opposing voices against China are right, and they will support those voices. [...] I feel that it is a long and endless struggle with them. This struggle cannot be resolved through any debate or discussion of facts. This can only be done through the construction of the motherland. When the motherland is strong, even stronger, they will shut their

mouths! Each one of us Chinese overseas students is working hard and enduring the suffering. Several decades into the future, will China collapse like the Germans hope? Or will China be so strong that they will collapse?

(Soong 1 April 2008)

China's cyberspace declares war on the Western media

The frustrations expressed by individual Chinese netizens like Hecaitou or Schweinsteiger grew into a feeling of rage across China's cyberspace. This rage and the desire to take action grew throughout the Tibetan unrest and the subsequent disturbances during the Olympic Torch relay in Europe. It led to two Internet expressions of anger that challenged Western media organisations and served as a call-to-arms for China's youth.

On 15 April 2008, 'a twenty-eight-year-old graduate student in Shanghai named Tang Jie' (Osno 28 July 2008) uploaded a short video clip to a video-sharing website under the Internet name 'CTGZ' entitled '2008 China Stand Up!' The video was later also cross-posted to YouTube, and on YouTube alone it was

watched 50,000 times and attracted over 1,500 mostly positive comments (see clover19862003 17 April 2008 for the video and the comments).

It was a homespun documentary, and it opened with a Technicolor portrait of Chairman Mao, sunbeams radiating from his head. Out of silence came an orchestral piece, thundering with drums, as a black screen flashed, in both Chinese and English, one of Mao's mantras: 'Imperialism will never abandon its intention to destroy us.' Then a cut to present-day photographs and news footage, and a fevered sprint through conspiracies and betrayals. [...] A cut, then, to another front: rioters looting stores and brawling in Lhasa, the Tibetan capital. The music crescendos as words flash across the scenes: 'So-called peaceful protest!' A montage of foreign press clippings critical of China – nothing but 'rumours, all speaking with one distorted voice.' [...] 'Obviously, there is a scheme behind the scenes to encircle China. [...] One final act of treachery: in Paris, protesters attempt to wrest the Olympic torch from its official carrier, forcing guards to fend them off – a 'long march' for a new era. The film ends with the image of a Chinese flag, aglow in the sunlight, and a solemn promise: 'We will stand up and hold together always as one family in harmony!'

(Osnos 28 July 2008)

Evan Osnos managed to track Tang Jie down on behalf of the New Yorker and interviewed him about the video and what led to its creation. Similar to Hecaitou, Tang Jie had been angered by the events surrounding the Tibetan unrest and the protests in Europe, which he had followed on

American and European news sites, in addition to China's official media. Like others his age, he has no hesitation about tunnelling under the government firewall. [...] He is baffled that foreigners might imagine that people of his generation are somehow unwise to the distortions of censorship.

(Osnos 28 July 2008)

In his view, most young Chinese are very aware of censorship and of the way the media report events in China. Instead of seeing this as a disadvantage, though, he argued that the awareness of censorship is an advantage young people in China have over their peers in Europe and America, as 'we are always asking ourselves whether we are brainwashed. [...] But when you are in a so-called free system you never think about whether you are brainwashed'. The

reports Tang Jie was able to access on European and Western websites, however, were filled with negative reports and attacks on the Chinese government, the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese people who did not rise up against the oppressive regime. To Chinese netizens

it smacked of a conspiracy. It shocked people like Tang, who put faith in the Western press, but, more important, it offended them: Tang thought that he was living in the moment of greatest prosperity and openness in his country's modern history, and yet the world still seemed to view China with suspicion. [...] Like many of his peers, Tang couldn't figure out why foreigners were so agitated about Tibet—an impoverished backwater, as he saw it, that China had tried for decades to civilize. Boycotting the Beijing Games in the name of Tibet seemed as logical to him as shunning the Salt Lake City Olympics to protest America's treatment of the Cherokee.

(Osnos 28 July 2008)

While Osnos attempts to trace Tang Jie's attitudes back to a general feeling of discontent with China's increasing Westernization, Tang Jie himself, and many others like him in China's cyberspace seem to disagree. What they express is

not a fear of the Westernization of China, but instead the belief, based on their experience and their perusal of Chinese and Western news sources,

that the United States will seek to obstruct China's rise [...]. Disparate issues of relatively minor importance to Americans, such as support for Taiwan and Washington's calls to raise the value of the yuan, have metastasized in China into a feeling of strategic containment.

(Osnos 28 July 2008)

Echoing the thoughts of many young Chinese, Tang Jie dismissed human rights and democracy as unimportant for the moment, while stating that 'we value all the values of human rights, of democracy' and calling the Tiananmen movement of 1989 'misguided and naive'. These sentiments disturbed Osnos to such an extent that he felt compelled to get a second opinion on Chinese views of democracy and the Tiananmen movement from Liu Yang, a Chinese studying at Stanford University in the USA. However, this 26-year-old student not only agreed with Tang Jie's sentiments, but argued that 'if 4 June had succeeded, China would be worse and worse, not better.' Liu Yang concluded by stating a common sentiment in today's China:

Liu said that he is not willing to risk all that his generation enjoys at home in order to hasten the liberties he has come to know in America. 'Do you live on democracy?' he asked me. 'You eat bread, you drink coffee. All of these are not brought by democracy. Indian guys have democracy, and some African countries have democracy, but they can't feed their own people. Chinese people have begun to think, 'One part is the good life, another part is democracy,' Liu went on. 'If democracy can really give you the good life, that's good. But, without democracy, if we can still have the good life why should we choose democracy?'

(Osno 28 July 2008)

The restrictions placed on the Chinese population by the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party are seen as necessary evils that support China's rapid development. Most of the steps deemed necessary for the continued development of China, e.g. a strict birth control system, government control of exchange and interest rates, strict investment rules, a flexible interpretation of existing laws, etc. would be impossible to maintain in a democratic system under a strict rule of law.

Tang Jie is not a single, naive, lone, nationalistic young man, and his video not just the result of successful brainwashing. His video expressed the thoughts and feelings of many young Chinese as the comments on his video and the discussions across Chinese cyberspace show. Just how organised, and how well-read in Western news sources Chinese netizens are, was shown around the same time by the reactions to a new Chinese website at www.anti-cnn.com.

During the height of the Tibetan unrest in March 2008, and its attendant media frenzy in Europe and America, many Chinese felt that the Western reporting of the events left a lot to be desired. Many of the reports about Tibet in the Western media contained mistakes and misrepresentations. They portrayed the situation as the brutal suppression by the Communist Chinese state of a non-aggressive, peaceful movement led by Tibetan monks.

Rao Jin, 24, the founder of a small technology company in Beijing, said he was so angry about what he sees as foreign journalists' prejudice against China that last week he created a Web site, <http://www.anti-cnn.com>, to document what he calls mistakes and bias in Western media. He said more than 1,000 people have e-mailed, volunteering to spot errors.

(Drew 24 March 2008)

Anti-CNN started in late March 2008 as a single web page with pictures of Western news programmes, reports, and web pages, and proof of the mistakes they contained (the website has changed since then, but their initial reports have been discussed by MacKinnon 26 March 2008; People's Daily Online, 3 April 2008; and the entries in Soong, March 2008). By now, Anti-CNN has grown into a massive website with original articles, opinion pieces, news reports, videos, and a discussion forum which attests to its immense popularity among Chinese netizens. The original web page, however, led with a statement that expressed Rao Jin's disgust with Western reporting standards:

See the true despicable and shameless face of western media. For a long time now, certain western media best represented by CNN and BBC, in the name of press freedom have been unscrupulously slandering and defaming developing nations. In order to achieve their unspoken goal they mislead and they ensnare, switching black for white, confusing right and wrong, fabricating...willing to go to any length. In their reports on the riots in Tibet Western media's performance once again shows to the world their repulsive true face.

(Kennedy 24 March 2008 - also the following quotes)

This was followed by a call-to-arms to all Chinese netizens who were asked to join in and to track down other falsehoods in Western media reports ‘not limited by language, content (text or photos) or country’, as ‘the more evidence of their crimes we collect, the more space we’ll have fought and won for ourselves.’ The enthusiastic response by Chinese netizens to this call-to-arms demonstrated within a few days not only how biased and erroneous Western reports about the situation were, but also how well-informed and widely-read Chinese netizens were, as well as how angry they were with ‘the West’.

Western media organisations had been allowed to get away with such – to the Chinese netizens – obvious falsehoods without being penalised for them by European or American authorities using laws e.g. against libel or defamation. This signalled to most Chinese that the Western media were acting with the approval of Western governments, and so the introductory statement closes with a wider ‘declaration of war’:

This is a struggle of resistance against western hegemonic discourse. We need to fully recognize that this will be a long-term, difficult and complex battle. But regardless of the outcome, we all firmly believe: Western nations' days of using several of their crap media in an absurd attempt to fool people with their rotten words will soon be over for good!

(Kennedy 24 March 2008 - he also uses the phrase 'declare war')

As Western journalists, expatriates living in China, people going to see the Olympic torch relay, people coming to Beijing for the Olympic Games, etc. discovered, many young Chinese took this appeal to stand united and to protect China against all attacks very seriously. Young Chinese are proud of their country, and they do not appreciate the constant criticism and scorn heaped on China by Western countries and the Western media. As Schweinsteiger put it in his conversation with his colleague:

China is developing rapidly now and the western nations are scared and uneasy. Therefore, everybody is against China. I have been in Germany for two years, and I have not read a single piece of good news about

China. China is always wrong in everything that it does. Do you feel that such a grand country can do nothing right?

(Soong 1 April 2008)

Reflections on a bad year

Since the end of the Beijing Olympics, Chinese cyberspace became quieter, at least in its attacks on Western media organisations, although this might have more to do with the much reduced interest in China in Europe and America, than with any change in sentiments. Western journalists and Chinese netizens have moved to new topics and the misrepresentation of China in non-Chinese news reports is no longer a matter of daily debates.

These sentiments had not been forgotten. The calm led to calmer reflections of the relationship between China and other countries. Two essays, posted online in early September, show that the earlier events and passions may have led to a much deeper rift between China and Europe or America, and that Western concepts such as ‘democracy’ may have been discredited as a result.

On 2 September 2008, a Chinese netizen by the name of 'Mr. Li' submitted a letter of complaint 'to the Chinese section of the BBC website with the challenge to publish it. The BBC did just that. The essay has been re-posted widely across Chinese Internet websites' (Soong 14 September 2008). Mr. Li claimed to be a pro-Western Chinese man who had graduated from university in 1990 and 'actively participated in the entire process of the student movement' of 1989. He stated that he used to believe in China's need for democracy and that he used to think that Western media 'were the only credible media that are fair, balanced and truthful'.

Mr. Li's attitude towards Western news media began to change when he spent several years in eastern Europe during the 1990s and realised that 'during the four or five years when I could only see the western media, all the reports that I saw about China were negative and critical'. He pointed out that this struck him as odd as the struggling China that he saw reported in the media was very different from the prosperous and fast developing China that he encountered during his visits home. During the years that followed his belief that Western media were deliberately misrepresenting China in their reports was strengthened, such as the reporting on Hong Kong's return to China as the 'Death of Hong Kong'. During 2008, the misrepresentations reached a climax and Mr. Li charged that

the western media may not realize that they are losing China! They are losing the admiration and trust of the young generation of China, pushing them towards nationalism. All this occurs because the western media do not really understand China and they have no intention of really understanding China either.

(Soong 14 September 2008)

Instead of trying to understand China, its people, and its government, Western media were projecting East European labels onto China, in the belief ‘that the Chinese government is a dictatorial and totalitarian government, which must necessarily be unpopular among the people.’ This misunderstanding has led Western media to assume that the only truthful voices in China are those of dissidents, or ‘overseas political exiles’.

Claiming to speak for the ‘middle-class and intelligentsia that came into being’ since the reforms in China started in the late 1970s, Mr. Li argued that the Chinese ‘want China to go even further with reforms’ and affirmed that ‘they basically support the Chinese government’. These reforms were mainly

economic reforms at the moment, but even so, it was his belief that ‘democracy and the rule of law are the ultimate goals of modernization for China’, even if in the present circumstances it was more important for China to ‘maintain a strong and powerful central government’.

His criticism of Europe and America, and in particular with the Western media was that they ‘seem to want democracy for the sake of democracy and they don’t care what happens to China after democracy and freedom come’ and he accused them of using ‘democracy and freedom as pretexts to divide and weaken China’ so that China would not rise up to challenge the current status quo, but follow the lead of the former Soviet Union and disintegrate into a number of small and largely irrelevant successor states.

Following Mr. Li’s essay, the BBC also published comments on the essay by several netizens. Almost all of the Chinese commentators agreed with the opinions expressed by Mr. Li, while non-Chinese commentators refuse to engage with the arguments put forward. They instead attempt to devalue the essay and its supporting comments, arguing that ‘many Chinese people are still the wrong audience with whom to discuss democracy and freedom.’ Through this highly problematic prejudice against the entire essay and the refusal to

engage in a constructive debate with its points, Mr. Li's position is ironically supported as it proves that these non-Chinese 'have no intention of really understanding China'.

About a week later, on 9 September 2008, another Chinese netizen with the handle '300 Spartan Heroes' posted an entry on the popular Tianya bulletin board (see Soong 11 September 2008 for a translation and the quotes below) with the title 'How the Western Media Lost the Young Generation in China.' The essay itself repeated many of the accusations against Western media that others had written about earlier in the year, but in an interesting twist, the article seemed to receive the blessing of the Chinese government through the so-called '50 cent Party' (Wu-Mao-Dang), bloggers who are suspected of being paid to produce pro-government comments on bulletin boards and blogs in Chinese cyberspace (Xiao 28 October 2008). Many of the comments left for the essay on Tianya were too supportive and positive, while also praising the quality of CCTV programming or the accuracy of Chinese news reporting. Other commentators pointed to the ludicrousness of such statements and the debate in the comments soon evolved into a debate about the existence of the '50 cent party' instead of talking about the originally posted essay (Pan 14 September 2008).

Nevertheless the original essay raised a number of important points in the debate between Chinese netizens and the Western media. It should not be ignored, particularly as it attempted to move beyond even Mr. Li's letter to the BBC to provide an analysis of the process by which the Western media 'lost' the Chinese youth instead of merely accusing them of wrongdoing.

The main premise of the essay was that 'Western nations' are intent on 'promoting their values' through the 'hard methods' of waging wars (in Afghanistan and Iraq) and the 'soft methods' of the 'Western media using their international speech rights to say awful things about countries which do not have Western-style democracy. [...] The Western media are very good at that and they can pull these types of reports out of thin air.' While Europeans and Americans tend to see 'the government', 'the media', and 'the public' as separate and as having different beliefs and agendas, for the author of this essay, there is a highly apparent continuity between non-Chinese attitudes towards, and statements about, China and the Chinese people. This continuity was based on the monopoly the Western media has held over information about China, but has recently begun to be undermined through the increase in the number of people travelling from or to China.

If there are no western tourists coming to China and no Chinese studying overseas, the western media could say whatever they want and they own the international speech rights. If you cannot see for yourself, you have to trust them. But times are different, as more and more western visitors come to China and more and more Chinese tourists travel overseas. [...]The western tourists are perplexed because China is completely unlike what their own media are reporting. The overseas Chinese students are perplexed because very few western media reports have anything good to say about China. [...] Those who have seen the real China realized that they had been deceived by the western media.

(Soong 14 September 2008)

The author '300 Spartan Heroes' continued his essay by arguing that this discrepancy between the experienced reality of China and the reports in the Western media have had an especially damaging impact on China's new middle class and on intellectuals, the two main groups supporting (and driving) the development of China – and the ones who profit the most from the continuing economic development.

Over the past three decades, the Chinese government has led the country to an astonishing economic growth, and many citizens have benefited from it. The Chinese who travel overseas during this period are the rapidly rising middle class and the intelligentsia. When they see the good things in China being badmouthed in the western media, what else is this but hypocrisy?

(Soong 14 September 2008)

Echoing the opinion of many Chinese today, the essay then reiterated the desire of the Chinese people to live in a democratic China, but that a democratic system for China was not as important as the well-being of the Chinese people and the Chinese economy. Using the government actions (and the implied media reactions to them) of the USA in Iraq and of France and Great Britain in Africa as illustrations for his point, '300 Spartan Heroes' argued that

ultimately, the Chinese people want to achieve prosperity and national power through democratization. But the western media seem to only want democracy for the sake of democracy and they don't care what happens to China afterwards. The Chinese form of democracy guarantees first and foremost the right to survive and develop. But the

western media wants to promote its own form of democracy according to its own ideas. They don't care what happens to a country afterwards.

(Soong 14 September 2008)

The poster finished his essay with an appeal to the Western media 'to keep up with the times', in that the current levels of global travel between different countries meant that even in the media 'truth should come first' as lies would no longer be tolerated by people who have experienced the truth first-hand: 'The media ought to observe the basic rules – to report in an objective and fair manner. This is easier said than done for the western media.'

SOME CONCLUSIONS

During the course of 2008, Chinese netizens demonstrated repeatedly that they are both media-savvy and active in their perusal of Western media reports on China (see the aggregator of links to Western news stories at the Back China site <http://rss.backchina.com/eng/>). However, they also showed great naivety in expecting Western media reports to comment on China in a positive manner, or to acknowledge China's status in the world community. The combination of their expertise in accessing European and American news reports with these

naive beliefs caused them to be bitterly disappointed and enraged when unrests erupted in Tibet in March 2008, and Western media reports sided unanimously with the Tibetan people against China.

While more aware of many of China's problems, and engaged in almost constant criticism of Chinese officials at all levels of the country's governmental structures, Chinese netizens are ultimately patriots and proud of China's achievements over the past 30 years. They belong to the winners of the Chinese reforms since 1978, to the newly emerging middle-class and intelligentsia, who are enjoying unprecedented levels of freedom and comfort in today's China. They were deeply hurt by the reporting style and the content of articles on China in the Western media, which they saw as malicious lies and fabrications published with the intention of stopping China's rise in the global community.

When they complain about unfair treatment on Western news sites, their complaints are ignored, belittled, made fun of, and become the basis for more criticism of China. They found that anything positive they wrote about China, and their posts defending China and its government, were treated as evidence of the success of the brainwashing techniques of the evil Communist government

in Beijing. Engagement was not wanted, only a 'conversion' to the Western point of view was acceptable to both Western media organisations, and Westerners leaving comments on blogs and news sites where Chinese netizens dare to raise their objections (Bianxiangqiao 2 August 2008; Branigan 23 March 2008; Fassler 15 April 2008; Forney 13 April 2008; Jenne 27 March 2008; Morford 21 March 2008).

Western bloggers insulted Chinese netizens further by stating that they did not understand how Western media worked, that Western media was very diverse, that Western media was much better than Chinese media, that they had been brainwashed, and that they were too sensitive. Yet the vast majority of these Western 'experts' on China and its government could not read enough Chinese to access the Chinese Internet. The unfairness of the situation, and their own inability to convince Westerners that maybe they were wrong about China, caused many young Chinese to disassociate themselves from the West and Western ideas.

The Olympics are over and slowly being forgotten, but for the relationship between China's youth and the Western media little has changed. The rift and the disillusionment among young Chinese belonging to the increasingly vocal

and powerful middle-class and Chinese intelligentsia is a serious and dangerous development for China's relationship with the rest of the world.

After the end of the Olympic games, a disappointed Chinese netizen put his feelings into a poem that spread through Chinese cyberspace like a wild-fire (Soong 26 August 2008 for a translation). The poem is built around the idea that no matter what China does 'there will always be someone' who criticises China. Nothing China does is right or good. While the poem only mentions the Olympic Games, many of the commentators in Chinese cyberspace added lines about Chinese policies in general, giving the poem an even greater significance.

The perceived behaviour of the Western media and Europe and America in general has disillusioned many of China's netizens with the West. They have led to an attitude in Chinese Cyberspace that is very pro-China, and very supportive of the continued rule of the Chinese Communist Party and the stability this rule brings. Chinese netizens are very much in favour of the continued economic development of China, and convinced that China does not need democracy or the rule of law. To silence its critics, it instead needs to grow much stronger, so that Europe and America will no longer dare to criticise it. Instead of an opening-up of China, it seems that Western reporting on China

during 2008 has provoked a circling of the wagons, and a strengthening of nationalist feelings coupled with a thorough distrust of the Western media and their message of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law that will be difficult to overcome.

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