Captive artists: Chinese University students talk about the Internet

David Kurt Herold

Assistant Professor for Sociology,

Dep. of Applied Social Sciences,

HK Polytechnic University,

Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong

Email: David.Herold@polyu.edu.hk

Abstract:

In his essay The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction Walter Benjamin states that the ruling system of his day 'sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves' (241). He argues that an emphasis on possibilities provided to citizens, in particular through new technologies, channelled the creative energies of the population into acceptable and government-controllable forms, while preventing any chance of the emergence of a real movement to challenge the status quo.

This paper wants to apply Benjamin's notion of a captive creativity to the results of a research project into the way in which students in Shanghai talk about the Internet, and will argue that even in their criticism of government controls and government censorship, the students do not genuinely challenge the existing status quo, but accept it as unavoidable and without alternatives. While they express a desire to greater freedom and less censorship online, they do want the government to sift the information available for 'false rumours' or 'slanders', and they want the government to ensure the Internet is used for the 'harmonious' 'development' of China, instead of the spreading of 'unhealthy information'.

The paper will conclude that the Chinese government has been incredibly successful and sophisticated in the way it has established control over the Internet in China, Not only are they able to exert control over the contents of web pages, but they have also managed to impress their own perception of the Internet onto public discourses about the Internet and its function in Chinese society.

Introduction

The Chinese Internet with its 500+ million Internet users (CNNIC, 2013) is usually discussed by casting the Internet as a 'force for democracy', enabling ordinary citizens to enter into a more equal interaction with the autocratic, but technologically less sophisticated Chinese government. As early as 1996, Wei Wu argued that China needed to exercise caution in its development of an information 'superhighway' and 'fully consider its unique political, economic and cultural characteristics' (Wu, W., 1996: 710 – see also Hao, Zhang, & Yu, 1996). By 1997, Liu Kang saw the rapidly growing Internet in China as a sign of China's assimilation 'into the global popular culture market' (Liu, K., 1997: 100) that was changing not only Chinese culture, but also political realities in the People's Republic of China. This point was made even more strongly by Geoffry Taubman who argued that the Chinese Communist Party's 'sway over the ideational and organizational character of domestic affairs will be diminished as a result of the Internet' (Taubman, 1998: 268).

By 2000, S. David Cooper predicted that with the growing influence of the Internet on China and China's Youth, 'Communist officials will have no choice but to gradually relinquish control' (Cooper, 2000: 114), as young Chinese had less in common with their parents or grandparents than with the Americanized global audience of the Internet. Others, however, urged caution and argued that as long as 'the devices, the technicians, the users and the sociopolitical context' of the Internet were located in territories under the control of nation-states, e.g. China, the Internet could not really challenge national governments (Qiu, 2000: 2 – see also Tan, Foster, & Goodman, 1999).

A decade later, the situation has not changed significantly. Many more studies have been published about the supposedly unstoppable, democratizing influences of the Internet in China (see e.g. Chase, & Mulvenon, 2002; Tai, 2004; Giese, 2006; Goldsmith, & Wu, 2006; MacKinnon, 2008; Yang, 2008, 2009; So, & Westland, 2010; Esarey, & Qiang, 2011). However, the Chinese state has also been shown as remaining in control and able to censor and delete online postings to the point of shutting down entire segments of Chinese cyberspace (see e.g. Heacock, 2009; Summers, 2009; Lewis, 2010; Mudie, 2010), and as continuing to exercise a high level of online and offline controls over the Internet's infrastructure (compare e.g. Qiu, 2000 and Fallows, 2008).

Chinese Internet Users appear to be ambivalent in their attitude towards government controls. In many studies they are portrayed as (young) rebels against the strict controls imposed by government authorities who use creative forms of protest to avoid government censorship (see. e.g. Gong, & Yang, 2010; Li, 2011; Meng, 2011; Tang, & Yang, 2011; Wang, 2012). Other studies, though, present them as acquiescent or even supportive of government policies towards the Internet, with some even supporting stricter government controls over the Internet to ensure a secure environment

for the future development of the Internet as a place for business and entertainment (e.g. Guo, 2007: 13-15; Wu, X., 2007; Liu, F., 2011: 172-179).

Against this background, this paper will apply some of the ideas expressed by Walter Benjamin to provide a different perspective on the Chinese Internet and its embedding into the socio-political context of the PRC. This paper will argue that instead of serving to democratize China, the Internet has managed to distract the attention of many Chinese away from their offline problems and channelled their anger into comparatively harmless online protests that are memorable more for their cleverness and creativity than their effectiveness in changing Chinese society (see also Leibold, 2011). The resulting habit of *offline* obedience combined with *online* creative protest serves to strengthen the Communist Party's rule instead of weakening it (MacKinnon, 2010; 2011).

This will be followed by a discussion of the results of a survey conducted with 70 university students in Shanghai in 2012, which shows that the opinion many young people have about the Internet mirrors that of official statements rather closely. The Chinese students presented the Internet as place in which they could express themselves more freely than offline, even if they had to be creative not to run afoul of government regulations. At the same time, the freedom they enjoyed online scared the students as well, and they wished for an increase of government control and regulation of cyberspace so they might better enjoy their online freedom.

The paper will conclude that the Chinese government has been very successful in pushing its interpretation of the Internet and its role for China's socio-political environment. The government and its officials are seen as legitimate targets of criticism online, but within the limits set by the government, which are also supposed to be policed by government officials to protect the freedom of netizens to express themselves online.

Re-reading Benjamin

Walter Benjamin's essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* is an impressive analysis of the changes brought about by newly emerging technologies in the 1930s. Despite its embedding into this specific historic context, though, by changing a few words, his essay is just as applicable to other technologies and their impact on society, e.g.:

> With the increasing extension of the press [change to: radio, television, Internet, Web 2.0, mobile ICT devices], which kept placing new political, religious, scientific, professional, and local organs before the readers, an increasing number of readers became writers – at first, occasional ones. (Benjamin, 1969: 232)

A re-reading of his essay raises a few uncomfortable questions about academic research when compared to the waves of (academic) hype following the introduction of the Internet, the advent of Web 2.0, or the emergence of Sina's Weibo in China:

> [T]oday there is hardly a gainfully employed European [change to Chinese] who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other comments on his work, grievances, documentary reports, or that sort of thing. Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. The difference becomes merely functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer. (Benjamin, 1969: 232)

The thought that technology can be used to increase the communicative repertoire and reach of the individual and thus subvert existing power relations between authors/senders/media and readers/receivers/audiences is not a new one. Benjamin, though, argues that far from being ignorant of or helpless against these developments, governments can use them to strengthen their own power by seemingly acceding to the demands of their citizens. Government

> sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves. The masses have a right to change property relations; [… the government] seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result […] is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses [… offline] has its counterpart in the violation of [… a technology] which is pressed into the production of ritual values. (Benjamin, 1969: 241)

Fame based on the inspired or merely clever use of technology can become a powerful tool of government authorities to channel the energy and anger of citizens into *certain kinds* of criticism that are easier to address, or to ignore. The pursuit of technological fame through cleverness and originality additionally serves to occupy and distract citizens who might otherwise have spent their energies organizing (offline) protests, instead. When focusing on being the first to report a specific outrage online, or on posting a better caricature or photoshopped picture, Internet users 'accept' the situation *offline* without objecting to it, while their creative output garners them fame, and an emotional outlet *online*. Offline obedience combined with online creative protest then becomes a habit that fosters trust in the ultimate 'right-ness' of the government's approach to issues:

> For the tasks which face [… citizens] cannot be solved […] by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation [i.e. creativity]. The distracted person, too, can form habits. More, the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction proves that their solution has become a matter of habit. Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble. (Benjamin, 1969: 240)

Instead of demonstrating in the streets against corruption, pollution, mismanagement, …, or even rising up in an attempt to change a system that is commonly seen as dysfunctional or worse, the shift of protests into creative postings online has resulted in a degree of creativity on the Chinese Internet that underlines Benjamin's final warning:

"*Fiat ars – pereat mundus,*" [= Let there be art, and let the world perish] […] the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology. […] Mankind['s …] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.

The Chinese government on the Internet

Over the past decade, both government authorities, as well as state-owned media outlets have made numerous statements illustrating their desire to move citizen protest online, as well as instructing government officials in how to manage their interactions with Internet users. The statements spell out the state's desire to appear responsive to the needs of its citizens while at the same time emphasizing the need to manage public opinion so as to ensure that the public order is not disturbed, and that the supremacy of the Chinese Communist Party is not challenged.

In the most concise and open prescription of these aims with echoes of Benjamin, in 2009, the China Youth Daily published an article with ten recommendations on how local governments should handle online communications (China Youth Daily, 2009). The article suggests treating netizens as a pressure group more interested in communication than in action, and that the best way to engage them was to communicate with them early, often, and honestly – while attempting to set the topic of communication. Local governments are encouraged to report the facts (but not the causes) online whenever anything happens, and to guide public opinion through intermediaries, so as to lead, rather than be led in their interactions with netizens.

The message to be conveyed by this management of online interactions is three-fold. Problems are to be defined as *social*, not as *political* problems, all problems are *local* in nature, not *national*, and the government is very responsive to citizen complaints (China Youth Daily, 2009). The aimed-for end result is a firm belief in a benevolent central government acting fast to help its citizens whenever it is made aware online of problems at the local level.

All problems are discussed as *social* not as *political* problems to avoid the possibility of political challenges to the rule of the Communist Party in China. Social problems can be solved through localized actions taken by government officials, while political problems would require a reconsideration of the political paradigms guiding the state in China, and as such encourage dissent with China's dominant political ideology. Citizens are supposed to leave politics to the Chinese Communist Party and government officials, while they get on with their lives.

Problems are to be treated as local problems to prevent the emergence of large, coordinated, social (and political) movements outside the control of the government. Although most of the problems of

ordinary citizens can be traced back to systemic issues with the Chinese state, e.g. corruption at all levels of government, a weak rule of law, etc. each problem is treated as a 'new' and unique, as well as a localized problem, with the result that even neighbouring villages do not band together to fight against e.g. the selling off of their land to property developers (Herold, 2011).

The impression that is created with the tacit support of the people emphasizes that the (central) government is very responsive to citizen complaints if they are made *online*. If ordinary citizens are in trouble, it is the fault of officials at lower levels who oppress them, and prevent the central government from finding out what is going on. As soon as citizens complain about the state of affairs online, though, the central government will come to their aid. In a remarkable twist, this not only blames local officials for all the problems China has at the moment, but also the citizens themselves. If only they complained about this online, if only they managed to mobilize enough support online to attract the attention of the central government… then the central government could help them. 'Chinese democracy' only works if people get involved – *online*. As Global Times, the English-language magazine of China's main newspaper, the People's Daily, put it:

> The Internet brings the government and the public closer in their grasp of information. Many times when emergencies arise, public reaction has influenced government decision-making. In a sense, *the public has directly participated in the governing of the country*, and their influence has sometimes grown beyond what the public can do in a normal representative system. (Global Times, 2011, March – added emphasis)

The Internet is supposed to facilitate the interaction between government and people, so as to enable ordinary citizens to participate in 'the governing of the country'. *Netizens* are provided a direct link to the highest levels of government that enables them to influence and supervise the Chinese state, *IF* they can attract the attention of enough other Internet users to then be noticed by government officials: Clever online creativity instead of offline protest as a route to success in the exercise of power.

Chinese officials are very active online, and are just waiting for netizens to become active and to participate in the state's governance (China Daily, 2010). Both the flow of information, as well the expression of opinions are supposed to happen online, where it takes creativity to be noticed.

> Internet supervision is playing a very important role in promoting democracy and ensuring the people's right to know, which should be fully encouraged and supported. (Xinhua News Agency, 2009)

In June 2010, the State Council of the PRC published a White Paper on the future of the Chinese Internet, which spelled out their perception of the role of the Internet and of Chinese netizens in supervising local officials and solving local problems. A large part of the White Paper focuses on the exchange of information between netizens, and their right to use such information exchanges to

supervise government officials. The White Paper asserts that Chinese people have 'increasing demands for information', which officials should not ignore, and which are supposed to be met 'government at all levels', so as to answer the 'people's right to know', as 'the Internet has become an important channel for people to obtain news' (Information Office …, 2010).

> In China more and more people are collecting information, enriching their knowledge, establishing businesses and realizing their aspirations, and communicating to know each other better through the Internet. Soon after earthquakes hit Wenchuan in Sichuan Province and Yushu in Qinghai Province, and a severe drought plagued southwest China, netizens used the Internet to spread disaster relief information, initiate rescue efforts and express sympathy and concern, fully demonstrating the irreplaceable role of the Internet. The Internet has revolutionized our way of work and lifestyle. (Information Office …, 2010)

The White Paper also formally outlines the duty of officials at all levels of the state to 'give prompt explanations to issues of public concern', i.e. questions raised on the Chinese Internet about events offline should be answered promptly by local officials. According to the White Paper, the Chinese state requires 'governments at all levels to […] give prompt explanations to issues of public concern', so that 'the Internet's role in supervision is given full play' (Information Office …, 2010).

> The Chinese government has actively created conditions for the people to supervise the government, and attaches great importance to the Internet's role in supervision. Governments at all levels are required to investigate and resolve in a timely manner all problems reported to the government by the public via the Internet, and to inform the public of the results. (Information Office …, 2010)

Offline Chinese society is increasingly chaotic, with hundreds of so-called 'mass incidents' happening all over the country every day, and corruption running rampant (Herold, 2011). In this situation, the Chinese state and the Chinese Communist Party have placed a strong emphasis on the promotion of a 'harmonious society' in China, in which all citizens live and work together peacefully (and quiet) in order further to develop China's economy so as to ensure China's rise among nations.

Open political discourse has been problematic, and almost non-existent in China since the events around Tiananmen square during the spring of 1989. The increasing disparities in the fast developing country, combined with real and perceived problems of ordinary Chinese trying to make ends meet, demand an outlet, though. Discourse has to happen, and the government has to be seen to be responsive to the needs of its citizens, without losing their confidence, or their own claim to legitimacy. An attempt to substantially address the many problems in Chinese society would almost certainly be doomed to failure similar to the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s – something the Chinese government does not want to risk.

The chosen solution to this dilemma appears to be similar to Benjamin's interpretation of photography and the cinema in 1930's Europe. While offline political discourse remains highly

restricted, netizens have been given more leeway online, and government officials have encouraged some – though not all – online creative protests. This promotes an online expression of protests that does not challenge the rule of the Chinese Communist Party over the Chinese state, and contributes to keeping offline China 'harmonious', and its citizens happy.

The Chinese state, and to some extent the citizens of China have accepted this state of affairs, and appear to have internalized the interpretation of the Internet as provided by the Chinese government, as a calming narrative that changes how citizens perceive society, the state, their own identity, etc. The state does not have to worry anymore about the growing unrest among its citizens as long as everyone involved believes in the efficacy of online protests. All parties experience success in following its rules, thus reinforcing the underlying beliefs in the 'reality' of the narrative. If problems emerge, a perfect solution is available to each individual citizen of China. As long as they can convince a large enough number of Internet users of their cause, the state will act to remedy the situation. If Chinese netizens fail to rally behind the original poster, their cause appears 'not worthy', hence the emphasis on online creativity or on the clever re-mixing of existing materials.

Within this system it is no longer 'the government' that an individual Chinese citizen has to convince, but instead the 'court of public opinion' online. Netizens decide whether or not individual citizens deserve to be helped by the authorities. Not the authoritarian state, but large numbers of netizens make the decisions, and – at least within the narrative – even China's laws and regulations are subject to the 'will of the people'. Creative protest online provides help from a trustworthy (central) government. If a protest fails to succeed, it just wasn't creative enough.

In an example of how even disasters are used to promote this system, in 2011, widespread online discussion about the collision of two high-speed trains near Wenzhou led to the disobedience of censorship rules by offline media outlets in China (Branigan, 2011). Many journalists speculated that this show of power by Chinese Internet users would lead to stricter censorship of Sina Weibo (e.g. Waldmeir, 2011), but official news sources in China appeared to say the opposite. In an article published August 2 – two weeks after the collision, the People's Daily encouraged government officials at all levels to use Sina Weibo to interact with ordinary citizens in 'equal and earnest dialogue', which in turn meant that those ordinary citizens had to take their protests online to be heard by the listening government officials:

> Only by answering the concerns of web users in a timely and accurate manner through the platform of the microblog can the ultimate objective of opening these microblogs be reached – understanding public feeling, and alleviating public concerns. (translated in Bandurski, 2011)

What is important in this statement, is the emphasis on 'managing' the people through the online interactions. The aim of the engagement with citizens online is not the increased involvement of citizens in the governance of the country, but instead the control over political discourse itself, with the implied disenfranchisement of citizens offline, in the 'real' world. The People's Daily article concludes with a revealing statement about the goals of the state in these interactions, as it places the emphasis on good leaders of the state being able to lead netizens rather than being led by them, and on their ability to do so while gaining in popularity.

> Mastering the use of the internet shows a leader's quality and ability. We hope that more and more leaders show their capacity for speech on the internet and on microblogs, and find popularity. (translated in Bandurski, 2011)

Judging from the responses of the students in Shanghai, the government's message about the role of the Internet in China's socio-political setting has been well-received by its intended addressees. China's young people want to be protected online by their government, while they engage in diverse activities that also include 'some' criticism of government officials, who are nevertheless expected to help improve the 'quality' of China's Internet users.

Young students in Shanghai

The research conducted for this paper constitutes one part of a series of research projects into Chinese perceptions and usages of the Internet. For this particular research conducted in May 2012, 70 students attending a series of lectures on Media Studies were asked to fill in an open-ended questionnaire with five questions (see below). A follow-up study is currently underway and interviews and focus groups are being conducted with the same group of participants based on their replies.

Who uses the Internet?
What is the Internet used for?
Is the Internet good or bad?
What belongs to the Internet?
How would you describe the Chinese Internet in your own words?

Questions asked

In answer to the first question, the replies included everyone in society, with an emphasis on age, i.e. the younger a person, the more likely he or she is to use the Internet. Surprisingly, though, quite a few of the students stated that people had to have a certain minimum age (one of them mentioned 18), or educational level (high school student or above) to access the Internet, with education in particular being regarded as a crucial predictor of Internet use. 20% of the students also specifically mentioned the government or government officials as users of the Internet.

The usage of the Internet as seen by the students reflected the statements in the State Council's Whitepaper on the future of the Internet (Information Office…, 2010), with over 90% of the students mentioning that the Internet was useful as a source of information, and 80% stating that the Internet was important as a channel of communication. Only about 50% of the students mentioned 'entertainment', and 20% 'study' as one of the uses of the Internet, the latter of which raises interesting questions about the relationship between 'information' and 'study'.

Only three of the respondents stated that the Internet could be used to criticize or 'supervise' the government and its officials to increase transparency in government and increase 'civic participation in politics'. However, over 30% mentioned that it offered more 'freedom' than offline China and 10 students thought the Internet could be used to find solutions to problems of individual Internet users.

More than half of the respondents described the Internet as both good and bad, stating in particular that many Internet users were not behaving appropriately when online. Problems online that were mentioned in this context included 'fake information', 'slanders', 'excessive gaming', 'Internet addiction', and 'cyber crime', again mirroring official statements on the Internet.

Answers to the question on what belongs to the Internet showed that for most Chinese people the Internet still includes a wide variety of different kinds of technologies and settings that go beyond the range of most Internet users outside China. Bulletin boards, FTP servers, Web portals and similar 'older' features of the Internet were mentioned alongside more 'modern' features such as microblogs, social networking sites, or smartphone apps.

The most informative (and the longest) answers were given by students to the final question of the questionnaire. Their answers expressed their ambivalence about the government's relationship with the Internet. Many of the students stated openly that they thought the Internet was 'under the government's surveillance and control', that there was 'no freedom of speech online' because the 'Chinese government controls the Internet too much'. They wished for more freedom to access information censored by the government, even if 'everybody knows how to jump over the wall [evade censorship by using an international proxy] now, if you want to know you can certainly find relevant information'.

Despite their expressed desire for less censorship, though, most students also expressed unease over the ways in which the existing freedom of the Internet was used by Chinese Internet users, as 'the overall quality of netizens was not good enough'. They thought that online China was still in the early stages of its development, and that the 'Chinese Internet is very immature, it lacks a degree of order, it's full of fake information and cyber-violence and other negative aspects', which meant the government 'should control it more in order to keep the order online'.

The students would have preferred more freedom to express themselves online, without having to find ways in which to evade government censors, but were anxious over the 'many people [who] use the Internet to do something illegal', which made it 'necessary and important to establish order on the Internet' and to increase the control the government exercises over the Internet.

> The Chinese Internet seems public and democratic, but actually what we said is also controlled by the 'government', some new types of communication tools appeared, which allowed people state their opinions freely, but which also led to bad atmosphere on the Internet. In China, Internet is indeed helpful for economics, politics, Culture and so on, but the security and the environment of Internet should be enhanced.

> Chinese Internet is not open enough, for example, many foreign websites are not open to Chinese netizens. Governments greatly restrict people' free speech. Also, Chinese Internet has a tendency to develop toward 'public toilet' – everyone just let out all the discontent and anger onto the Internet, which is why we see negative emotions all over the Internet. Thirdly, Chinese Internet is getting more real, many Internet forums now require documents that prove netizens' identities such as the identity cards. It is beneficiary because people will take up the responsibilities of their Internet speech, meanwhile better for prevention and punishment of Internet crimes.

The answers given to this last question in the questionnaire appear to suggest that the Internet has to be controlled by the government – and should be controlled even more strictly – because it lacked 'standardisation', as 'there is no special law and rule to govern its activities'. This means that on the Internet there is 'insufficient control, which leads to bad information all over the Internet, and at the same time, incomplete control obstructs people's rights of free speech'. Only a stricter control of the Internet by government authorities is thought to lead to greater freedom of expression online.

> The Chinese internet is not strict and not particularly safe. Many websites have unhealthy information, a lot of advertisements.

> The Chinese Internet is not safe, there are many cyber-cheats, cyber crimes etc. Chinese Internet security needs to be stricter. It enriches people's lives, allows them to watch TV and movies on the Internet and listening to music becomes a way for people to entertain themselves.

> Because the Internet has some hidden flaws, we should pay attention to protect our personal information and data, meanwhile be conscious to follow the moral code, refuse and stop bad information from spreading. At the moment, the Chinese Internet lacks relevant administrative institutions, so abuses of the Internet can lead to social problems.

> The Chinese Internet is full of power and energy now. It develops so fast that sometimes we are confused about it. And furthermore, the Internet in China is not completely developed, yet, there are few laws to set rules for the Internet. People who surf on the Internet lack a legal consciousness.

Many of the students expressed that they thought the Internet was unsafe and dangerous and they wished for protection online. This protection was supposed to be provided by government institutions who are thus cast in the role of an online policeman enforcing Chinese laws online so as to guarantee the right to express themselves freely to law-abiding Internet users.

A conclusion: Ambivalence, fears, and obedience

In stark contrast to many of the studies predicting the emergence of a democratic system of government as the ultimate result of the introduction of the Internet to China the current study suggests that the situation is more complex. The Internet is not a 'Western technology' inculcated with 'Western' values that are transmitted to all who make use of it. At best, Internet technologies appear to open up new communicative spaces that are utilised based on specific local socio-political contexts.

The approach of the Chinese government to the Chinese Internet has been one of active engagement with the emerging technologies and their users. Instead of trying to keep up with a fast-changing technological environment, 'the government' often seems to be several steps ahead in the adoption and ideological embedding of new technological developments into the existing Chinese environment, e.g. by communicating with Internet users directly on a fast increasing number of officially verified microblogs (compare Xinhua News Agency, 2012 with Chen, 2012).

The Chinese government has continuously pushed their own interpretation of the role of the Internet in China to its citizens – partly in an attempt to 'harmonize' offline China by allowing more leeway for protests online. Judging from the responses given by the participants in the current research, the Chinese government has been highly successful in 'selling' this message to the people. Participants frequently even used the same terms or phrases as official government publications to express their feelings about the Internet in China.

In an eerie echo of Walter Benjamin's description of photography and the cinema, the students in Shanghai appeared happy about having more freedom online than offline, and expected the same government limiting their freedom offline (and online), to guarantee it online, while they engaged in activities that interested them – from entertainment and individual study to the expression of social or political protest. Their fears of the behaviour of un-supervised other Internet users outweighed their desire for freedom leading to an ambivalent and contradictory, but seemingly unquestioned attitude towards the role of the government online, and ultimately to an unthinking, habitual obedience to government rules in a (creative) quest to divert themselves – *fiat delectatio, pereat libertas* [Let there be entertainment, and let freedom perish].

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