Bloggers, hackers and the King Kong syndrome

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It is tempting to celebrate the emergence of the Internet as the dawn of a new era, promising possibilities for political change, civic participation, and obliteration of traditional geographical confines. More specifically, the rise of new technologies is often heralded as breaking open regimes that do not live up to the hegemonic ideologies of democracy and capitalism. Jeroen de Kloe reveals the two interlocking narratives which continue to preoccupy Western academic and popular discourse on the Internet in China.

**King Kong in China**

The first of these narratives regards stories related to online protest, which at times triggers offline protests. For example, the protest in the summer of 2007 against the building of a chemical factory in Xiamen was generally perceived as a consequence of protest postings by blogger Zuola. The second is stories related to issues of censorship and digital human rights. These narratives are often intertwined and they will be the most popular, if not worn out, metaphor mobilized to point to the assumed omnipotence of the government.

Lokman Tsui has rightly observed that such a metaphor builds on a cold war rhetoric in which China is positioned as the constitutive outside of ‘the free, open and democratic West.’ His observation resonates with what literary critic Rey Chow refers to as the King Kong syndrome, ‘producing China’ as a spectacular primitive monster whose despotism necessitates the salvation of its people by outsiders.

Indeed, the motif running through the two interlocking narratives concerning Internet in China is precisely the urgent need to expose, discipline and punish this monster, to tame it, hopefully, to the world of ‘liberal’ and ‘democratic’ societies. Not surprisingly, what is being played out in the Chinese cyberspace is more messy, and thus more ambivalent than such narratives want us to believe. Rather than taking a clear position, I want to explore this messy digital domain called ‘the Chinese Internet,’ drawing on my research – online and offline – among bloggers (in 2008) and hackers (in 2004), before returning to deliberate on the destiny of our giant monster.

**Citizen voices?**

When I met Wang Xiaofeng in 1997, he was a rock journalist; 10 years later, he has become one of the most popular bloggers of the mainland. As many fellow bloggers, he combines his job as a journalist with his blogging, while the latter has become a commercial enterprise in China: the more readers you have, as a journalist with his blogging, while the latter has become the more advertisements and money you can attract. Wang’s style is ironic and cynical, poking fun at everything around him. To him, blogging offers a way to play with language, to experiment online with words and phrases that would not easily pass censorship. During the wave of pro-Tibet protests and corresponding pro-Beijing nationalism surrounding the Olympic torch relay in April 2008, Wang ridiculed the popular ‘Love China’ T-shirts as well as the ‘Love China’ sign used by millions of MSN users in their name tag. His response to the boycott of French products (called for in protest against the dismissal of the Dalai Lama), was simple, ‘if there is one thing that the meeting between French President Nicolas Sarkozy and the Dalai Lama), was simple, ‘if there is one thing that

The outspoken blog by Michael Anti, for instance, was removed by Microsoft after he voiced his critique on the dismissal of the Dalai Lama. His observation resonates with what literary critic Chow refers to as the King Kong syndrome, ‘producing China’ as a spectacular primitive monster whose despotism necessitates the salvation of its people by outsiders.

Blogging is a form of ‘citizen voice?’ Let me return to the King Kong syndrome, which confuses a monster to be tamed and brought to the civilized world. What we eventually witness, at least in King Kong films, is buildings crumbled, windows smashed to pieces, and the order of the day radically disrupted before the primitive monster ends up being killed by modern weaponry. I will therefore make two appeals from this brief account of Internet in China.

First, such chaos and fragmentation that King Kong brings with it is precisely what we need to acknowledge and accept when we try to make sense of China and its Internet. Too often, accounts on Chinese Internet communities are driven by an agenda that is drenched in a cold war rhetoric that will not bring us very far. Second, the death of King Kong should force us to rethink narratives of civilization, and the hegemonic mantra of ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’ and ‘human rights.’ The problem is not the lack of reflection upon the production of knowledge over China and its intricate relation to power and ideology. The basic Foucauldian (and Saussurean) question of why we produce what tropes of knowledge is all too often ignored.

**Techno nationalism?**

If we move from the blogosphere towards hacker cultures in China, we encounter a scenario of chaos and expectation of politics. The definition one gives of China’s blogosphere is likely to be very much informed by a specific political agenda – if one likes to see politics, one can find politics, just as if one is looking for needy sex blogs, one can also find precisely that. The examples I have cited point to the impossibility of speaking of the Chinese blogosphere – there are many spheres, which are as complex as the prefix ‘Chinese’ is problematic in its privileging of the nation-state above other possible cartographies either more localised or more globalised.

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