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de Kloet, J.

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Bloggers, hackers and the King Kong syndrome

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 Kloet reveals the two interlocking narratives which continue to preoccupy Western academic and popular discourse on the Internet in China.

Jeroen de Kloet

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. The Great Firewall of China may well be the most popular, if not worn out, metaphor mobilised 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, 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 'I Love China' T-Shirts as well as the 'I 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 meeting between French President Nicolas Sarkozy and the Dalai Lama), was simple, 'if there is one thing that I boycott, it is stupid things.' At the same time, he also points his critique towards Western journalists; he writes on his blog: 'Western journalists always hope that the Chinese people they interview will touch upon sensitive issues and give sensational

remarks. They try their best to make their interviewee look like a dissident.' One of his best known stunts took place in March 2006, when Wang posted on his blog that 'Due to unavoidable reasons with which everyone is familiar, this blog is temporarily closed.' As he expected, it was only a matter of hours before the 'news' became known worldwide through global news channels. Subsequently, he revealed it was a hoax, to put up a mirror to the Western media that is so obsessively searching for cases of censorship.

Informed by such complexity as demonstrated by bloggers like Wang Xiaofeng, any study of the Chinese blogosphere must try to be alert of metanarratives and stay close to the specifics. The outspoken blog by Michael Anti, for instance, was removed by Microsoft after he voiced his critique on the dismissal of critical journalists at the Beijing News. This shows how global capitalism is deeply complicit with censorship practices in China. At the same time, to avoid foreclosing the political potentials of digital technologies, I have to be reminded of yet another specific incident. Last October, blogger Zuola went with a number of activists to one of the 'black prisons' in Beijing, where political activists were illegally detained. This group of activists, through their mobile devices, immediately uploaded their story to Twitter and their blogs, complete with pictures and sound recording of the harassment that took place when policemen started to fight with two of the visiting activists. In this case, new technologies did open up immediacy to citizen politics as we know it.

Again, I must hasten to add: such examples are not only rare, but also risk reducing 'China' to the conventional understanding 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 seedy 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.

Techno nationalism?

If we move from the blogosphere towards hacker cultures in China, we enter a grey zone that often borders on the illegal. Yet, this zone is equally complex, making, once again, simple generalisations impossible, if at all desirable. In the West, most media attention has been given to the nationalistic hackers of China, who, allegedly spend their holidays breaking into Taiwanese, Japanese or American sites, to add a PRC flag, or insert political slogans. Sharpwinner is such a 'red hacker', who believes 'Chinese hackers have a strong sense of politics.' On his involvement in the attacks on the website of the

American White House, he explains: 'Those .gov and .mil sites are always our targets. For the White House site, we have spent most of our time to find the loopholes.' The attention they get is much to the dismay of hackers like Goodwell, a Beijing-based hacker who looks down upon 'scriptkiddies' like Sharpwinner who simply copy codes to hack other sites. 'I think [the hacking war between China and Japan and the US] is just awkward and boring. The real hackers have no sense of boundaries, they have nothing to do with politics, politics should never infect technology.' To Goodwell and his friends, the spirit of hacking revolves around curiosity: 'As a hacker, I think you should never give up, you should always study on, whether you fail or succeed, so as to develop new technologies.' While relentless curiosity should be a driving force that binds hacking cultures, China, in the view of Goodwell, is a bad place for hackers: 'In America, hackers may have their own culture and ideology, in China people have no sense of hacking culture and ideology. In China, you first need to secure your income. (...) Chinese have no sense of cooperation, no team spirit, if they developed a certain program or system, they may not share it.' Following Sharpwinner and Goodwell, it seems that the grey hacking zone in China is criss-crossed with fault lines of (a)political longings as well as (un)willingness to share and cooperate. The lack of shared cultural practices makes it, indeed, difficult to speak of a hacker culture in China, a stark contrast to my research experience in New York among the hacker communities there, where sharing (manifest, among others, in their meeting places, conferences and gatherings) was largely the norm.

King Kong reconsidered

What, then, can we learn from these observations on bloggers and hackers? Let me return to the King Kong syndrome, which configures a monster to be tamed and brought to the civilised 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 civilisation, and the hegemonic mantra of 'democracy', 'freedom' and 'human rights.' The problem is the lack of reflection upon the production of knowledge over China and its intricate relation to power and ideology. The basic Foucauldian (and Said-ian) question of why we produce what tropes of knowledge is all too often ignored.

Jeroen de Kloet
University of Amsterdam
b.j.dekloet@uva.nl

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Bloggers
(from left to right):
Michael Anti, Zuola
and Wang Xiaofeng.

