Bloggers, hackers and the King Kong syndrome

de Kloet, J.

Published in:
IIAS Newsletter

Citation for published version (APA):
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.

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 chocolate factory in Xunen 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 latter has become 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 destesty 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, style is ironic and cynical, poking fun at everything around as a journalist with his blogging, while the latter has become more globalised.

Second, the death of King Kong will not bring us very far. Second, the death of King Kong reconsidered

What, then, can we learn from these observations on bloggers and hackers? Let me return to the King Kong syndrome, which continues to haunt China. The public imagination has grown to expect a monster to be killed and brought to the civilized world. What we eventually witness, at least in King Kong films, is buildings crumbling, 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 entrenched 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 is all too often ignored.

References

Chow, Rey. ‘King Kong in Hong Kong: Watching the “Handover,”’ from the USA,’ Social Text 35 (Summer 1998)