Bloggers, hackers and the King Kong syndrome

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Bloggers, hackers and the King Kong syndrome

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 Nanmen was generally perceived as a consequence of protest postings by blogger Zuxia. The second is stories related to issues of censorship and digital human rights. For example, Wang Xiaofeng posts scandalous stories related to issues of censorship and digital human rights. The last two will 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 and the narratives running through it. What we eventually witness, at least in King Kong films, is a bricolage with the impossible of speaking of the Chinese blogosphere 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 imposibility 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 – 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 could serve as a metaphor to be transformed 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 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 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 knowledge over China and its intricate relation to power and ideology.

References

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On the black prison story, see: http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/10/17/china-co-operation-20-on-beijings-black-jails/