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New Media Practices in China: Youth Patterns, Processes, and Politics

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This article examines the dynamics of new media in China with an emphasis on youth uses and practices. While much attention has been devoted to the government's regime of censorship and control, this review takes a cultural approach, drawing from a range of academic and popular sources to examine how various practices, discourses, relationships, and representations have been articulated to new media technologies in China. After providing background on China's demographic and telecommunications landscape, the discussion covers networked community and identity, gaming, networked public sphere and civic engagement, and new media prosumption. The review shows that diverse new media practices emerge in China within the tensions and contradictions of the government's desire to simultaneously expand new media technologies and control what are perceived as "harmful" influences. Within a highly commercialized and more liberalized sociocultural environment, new media technologies have opened up new spaces for multiple modes of expression, and as such, they are constitutive of complex processes of social change in China.

In early 2008, scandalous photos of Hong Kong star Edison Chen, posing with various actresses, flooded the Chinese Internet. Labeled "sexy photo gate," it was followed in March by "text-message gate," when a deluge of spam SMS flooded the inboxes of millions of China's mobile phone customers. Preceding and following these incidents have been numerous "gates," involving everything from a photo-shopped picture of a rare tiger, to tainted food products, to compromised news anchors, to promiscuous Chinese teenagers. These disparate events, which were discussed, debated, and—in some cases—debunked online and off, speak volumes not only about the growing pervasiveness of new media in China, but also about the dramatic changes that have taken place in the country since the government's policy of "reform and

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opening" began in the late 1970s. Over the last three decades, rapid urbanization, marketization, and globalization, as well as a policy emphasis on "informatization" and a degree of media liberalization, have ushered in new values, life opportunities, and modes of being in the world for China's 1.3 billion people.

In the midst of such transformation, through a "compromise legitimacy," the Communist Party has promised to deliver economic growth and "a relatively comfortable lifestyle" in exchange for "self discipline" by ordinary citizens in matters of social or political dissent (Lu, 2000). Since 2004, the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao leadership has sought to construct a "socialist harmonious society," and since 2006, to build a "socialist new countryside" to address increasing societal unrest and economic disparity (Zhao, 2008). The diffusion of new media technologies such as the Internet and mobile phones has become an important part of both realizing and upsetting these goals. The government has invested heavily in telecommunications infrastructure as a means of spurring on development and modernization, yet it is also wary of what it perceives as harmful influences—moral, political, social—that are spread through such technologies. Certain online content and Web sites have always been banned, but modes of censorship intensified at the end of 2008 and throughout 2009 and 2010, as thousands of Web sites, both foreign and domestic, were shut down for having "pornography" and "vulgarity," which appeared to many observers to be umbrella terms for politically sensitive content. However, in contrast to many Western scholars' focus on whether the Internet will democratize China or solidify the state's authoritarian hold, most everyday users are not overly concerned with such issues and, in fact, support some form of censorship (Damm, 2007; Guo, 2007). And while the Internet and cell phones certainly circulate viewpoints and feelings that subvert the official discourse, the government has been quite adept at using these technologies to maintain its hegemony.

In the context of such tensions and transformations, this article seeks to capture the dynamism of new media practices in China, particularly among youth and young adults. To do so, I draw from published academic work across a range of disciplines in English and Chinese, though more consideration is given to research in English, since recent meta-analyses have shown that, in much Chinese-language new media research, little attention is paid to cultural issues, and theory-based research is rare (Kluver & Yang, 2005; Wei, 2009). I also rely on Chinese government surveys, marketing analyses, and popular sources, as well as my own research over the last several years.[2] This article does not purport to critique the "state of the field" of academic scholarship on new media in China. Rather, through putting these various pieces together—that is, by "mapping the assemblage" of new media use—my goal is to examine how different practices, discourses, relationships, and representations are articulated—or linked—to new media technologies within China's contemporary sociocultural context (Slack & Wise, 2005). These articulations are at times competing and contradictory—such as when new media simultaneously invoke tradition and moral panics—and they reveal the complex, contingent, and mutually constitutive relationship between culture and technology. Until recently, much research on the Chinese Internet has focused primarily on governmental control or infrastructure development (Kluver & Yang, 2005). However, this obsession with censorship obscures investigation into many of the important social transformations

[2] With the tremendously fast pace of change in Chinese society in general and new media in particular, marketers are often best informed about trends that then become areas of scholarly research.

that are occurring in China in tandem with the diffusion of new media (Damm, 2007; Tsui, 2005; Yang, 2009).

In the following section, I first set the context by providing background on relevant demographic information and telecommunications development and standards. I then discuss new media practices through four broad themes: networked community and identity, gaming, networked public sphere and civic engagement, and new media prosumption. These themes provide an analytical framework for understanding new media use at the individual, peer group, and collective levels as these arise within cultural norms and institutional structures, yet clearly, various practices and discourses overlap across realms.[3] I conclude by discussing implications and outlining directions for future research. At the outset, it must be noted that the field of Chinese new media scholarship is vast and continuously growing, and this article is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, the focus is on users located primarily in urban areas, and censorship, policy, and economic issues are addressed only to the extent that they influence what appear to be key emergent social practices and discourses.[4]

Demographic and Telecommunications Context

Demographic Data

China has about 1.3 billion people, accounting for one fifth of the total world population, and those aged 29 and under comprise roughly 40% of the total population (National Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Due to China's one-child policy, instituted in 1979, nearly all of China's urban youth have grown up without siblings. Because they enjoy the attention of their parents, as well as doting grandparents, they are often called "little emperors" who are spoiled and do not know how to "eat bitterness" (*chi ku*). However, these youth also face tremendous pressure, as huge expectations are often placed on their shoulders in terms of academic performance and future professional success. Nearly all urban youth graduate from high school, and many go on to higher education. In the countryside, the situation is quite different. Many rural families are larger, and rural youth are often disadvantaged compared to their urban peers, particularly in terms of material standard of living, access to quality education, and future opportunities. Most "go out to labor" (*waichu dagong*) in urban areas after finishing middle school or part of high school. Because of their rural *hukou*, or household registration (a system that has been severely eroded but not completely eliminated as a result of the reforms), in the city, they face discrimination and exploitation. In recent years, however, even college-educated urban youth have had a hard time in the job market, particularly those who have relocated to larger cities like Beijing to find work.[5] In 2009, an estimated 6 million university graduates joined the millions who were already unemployed (Rosen, 2009).

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[3] For example, Yang (2009) does not make an analytical distinction between the use of the Internet for political activism and to assert new lifestyles.

[4] There are significant differences between large ("Tier 1") cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou; provincial capitals and certain coastal ("Tier 2") cities; and poorer, less developed regions ("Tier 3") in the interior. Much of this article covers practices that can be presumed to be located in Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities.

[5] The millions of these youth are now called "ant tribes" (Pierson, 2010).

Both these youth and their rural counterparts have been cause for concern for a government that values social stability, perhaps above all else.

Chinese youth, both those known as the "post-eighties generation" (born during the 1980s) and the "post-nineties generation" (born during the 1990s), have been viewed by many as somewhat paradoxical. Overall, they have enjoyed a higher standard of living than previous generations, and although they have been subject to "patriotic education" since elementary school, they have never experienced the radical struggles and political mobilizations that characterized youth in earlier decades of the People's Republic of China. They are perceived by older generations to be devoid of a clear moral compass, obsessed with the Internet and mobile phones, shallow, and materialistic (Rosen, 2009). While they enjoy Western entertainment and fashion, they also have a strong mistrust of Western media (ibid.). They are more individualistic than their elders, and some are described as "angry" and nationalistic (to be discussed in more detail later). In general, they manifest a need for self-expression far greater than their elders (Li & Zhang, 2009).

Telecommunications

China's telecommunications landscape has developed rapidly over the last couple of decades. Through a series of reforms and restructurings designed to increase competition (the latest was begun in May 2008 and completed in October 2008), there are now three major telecom companies in China, all state-owned, and all offering fixed-line, broadband, and mobile services: China Telecom, China Mobile, and China Unicom. These are all overseen by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), formed in 2008 to replace the Ministry of Information Industry.

The government's emphasis on expanding telecommunications can be seen in the fact that, in 1980, shortly after the reforms began, there were only 4.1 million fixed-line telephones in China, for a teledensity (the number of telephones per 100 persons) of 0.4 (Lee, 1997). By 1990, this number had tripled (He, 1997), and by 2007, China had roughly 365 million fixed-line telephone subscribers, with a teledensity of 27.8 (MIIT, 2007). This figure had fallen to 310 million by early 2010 (MIIT, 2010). Despite these declining numbers, urban areas have more than double the number of fixed-line phones in the countryside, although rural areas have also seen tremendous growth in recent years, a result of both government policy and market strategies.

Mobile Phones

The drop in the number of fixed-line phones directly corresponds to China's remarkably rapid expansion of mobile telephony. In 2004, there were about 355 million mobile phone subscriptions in China, and by the end of 2008, the figure was 640 million (MIIT, 2009). By early 2010, China had roughly 766 million mobile phone subscribers, the largest number in the world, representing a penetration rate of about 58% (MIIT, 2010). Because major cities are relatively saturated with mobile phones, for the last few years, the majority of new mobile subscribers have been in rural areas. After much delay, China

finally issued 3G licenses in January 2009 to the three state-run carriers,[6] and within a year, there were roughly 16 million 3G mobile subscribers (MIIT, 2010).

About 90% of mobile phone users in China rely on prepaid phone cards, which come in a range of plans (e.g., caller pays, bulk text messaging). Although Chinese people rarely let their mobile phone go unanswered, and business people in China make voice calls frequently, the majority of mobile phone users, including youth, communicate primarily via text message. In 2007, 592.1 billion text messages were sent, for an average of 1.6 billion/day and a daily revenue of 160 million yuan, roughly US$21 million (Mo, 2008). In most cases, text messaging is not necessarily used for reasons of courtesy to those occupying the same public space (as in Japan). On the contrary, loud mobile phone conversations on public transport, in restaurants, and on elevators are not uncommon. Rather, one reason for the prevalence of texting is that it is cheap. Text messages in China are often self-written, but the use of pre-written messages is also common. These types of messages are widely available and can either be copied from inexpensive books for sale at kiosks and small stores or downloaded from the Internet, though most people merely forward messages they have received. The message contents usually include jokes, sentimental poems, erotica, or holiday greetings. Because text messages often contain politically and morally subversive content, He (2008) argues that SMS, as a "fifth" media channel, has become a "major carrier of the nonofficial discourse." Though texting is ubiquitous, as of December 2009, 233 million Chinese had used their mobile phone to surf the Internet, which represented nearly 61% of all Internet users, according to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2010). As usage costs have fallen, among a broad range of youth recently there has been a shift from texting to Internet chat, often via a social networking site, as a primary means of mediated communication.

The mobile handset industry in China consists of both global brands and a number of domestic manufacturers located in southern China that release new models much more frequently than in other parts of the world (Qiu, 2009b). A recent trend has been the popularity of "copycat" or *shanzhai* phones that are relatively cheap and loaded with functions (Qiu, 2009b).[7] Some look like replicas of popular models, such as the iPhone, but are labeled things like "Hiphone." Others are shaped like cigarette packs or cute mice (see Figure 1). Low-income groups such as migrants use shanzhai phones in order to get the most for their money. They have also been appropriated by trendy, urban kids who enjoy collecting the various designs (Yang & Li, 2008). Urban youth who are very brand conscious and concerned with quality, however, look down on migrants who use shanzhai phones, seeing them as striving for something out of reach (Zhou, 2010). Still others buy them to express a nationalist sentiment by not buying a global brand

[6] China Mobile, the world's largest mobile phone operator and home to about three quarters of China's mobile phone subscribers, was given a license for TD-SCDMA, China's domestically developed 3G standard, which has been heavily supported by the government. China Unicom and China Telecom were granted licenses for WCDMA and CDMA 2000, respectively, 3G standards already used globally.

[7] *Shanzhai* is a term used to cover a broad array of copycat or "fake" goods, ranging from electronics to fashion and media productions.

such as Nokia. Ironically, however, in purchasing these phones, they are undercutting China's legitimate domestic phone market (Zheng & Chen, 2008).

Figure 1. *Shanzhai Phones, Shenzhen, August 2008 (Wallis).*

Internet

Internet growth in China has also been rapid and unevenly distributed between the cities and the countryside. As of December 2009, China had 384 million Internet users, the largest number in the world, representing a 28.9% penetration rate, with roughly 72% concentrated in urban areas (CNNIC, 2010).[8] About 90% (346 million) of China's Internet users access the Internet via broadband. Many use desktop computers for such access, although the use of mobile phones, as mentioned above, has grown quickly. Most urban families have a computer with a broadband Internet connection in their homes, for which the monthly fee is around US$20 for unlimited use. For those without home or school access—in particular, rural-to-urban migrants—Internet cafés are extremely important and are used by about 42% of Internet users, though this figure has decreased since 2008. The majority (about 62%) of China's Internet users are under 30 years old (CNNIC, 2010). In the early stage of China's Internet development, there was a substantial gender gap in usage (Bu, 2002). This gap has decreased, but it has not disappeared. The most recent data reveal that about 54% of Internet users are male, and nearly 46% are female (CNNIC, 2010).

[8] On discrepancies in counting "Internet users," see Bialik (2008).

A focus that seems to be more prevalent in Chinese language research is gender differences in Internet usage (Bu, 2002; Yang, Wang, Chen, & Wang, 2004; Zhou, 2005).

As of December 2009, the top 10 Internet activities in China were the following: listening to or downloading music, reading news, using a search engine, instant messaging, playing games, watching videos, using a blog or personal space, emailing, using a social networking service, and reading net literature (CNNIC, 2010). Furthermore, 30% of China's Internet users participate in a Bulletin Board System (BBS) or forum (ibid.). Though Chinese use the Internet to read news, according to Guo (2007), much of this news is "infotainment": he thus argues that Chinese cyberspace is mainly perceived as a place for socializing and entertainment. China's Internet users spend a lot of time online—44% of their free time, compared to 30% for Internet users in the United States. They are also more likely to describe their Web-based activities as "fun" (TNS, 2008). In general, Chinese cyberspace provides an arena where people are able not only to enjoy themselves, but also to express opinions (particularly those that might not be sanctioned offline), build community, engage in fantasy, and mobilize for collective action (within limits).

Direct and indirect means—whether technical, ideological, economic, or administrative—are used to control the Internet (Wacker, 2003). Numerous regulations and forms of digital surveillance also exist, including various "pledges of self discipline" issued over the years that companies must sign, as well as efforts by the government to have forum participants and bloggers on non-commercial sites register with their real name. Thus far, the former has been more successful than the latter, as controversial content is routinely removed after it has been posted, but real-name registration has not been consistently enforced (MacKinnon, 2008b; Qiu, 2004).

Networked Community and Identity

New media technologies have become key tools for expressing lifestyles and for processes of community building and identity formation in China, especially for youth and young adults. Such processes align with what appear to be universal tendencies, yet they also reveal particular characteristics that have emerged within the context of China's three decades of reform. Since opening its first public Internet service in 1995, China's virtual realm has been marked by competing and complementary agendas of the state and the market (which can't be so clearly separated in China), as well as by grassroots movements and community formations whose networks merge online and off (Qiu, 2004). Within a highly commercialized sphere, where freedom and control coexist (Lagerkvist, 2006), the use of BBS, blogs, instant messaging, social networking sites, and text messaging have paradoxically enabled both unity and fragmentation in the social sphere.

BBS and Blogs

BBSs are one of the oldest Internet applications in China, having remained popular since the mid-to-late 1990s. They are operated by noncommercial (e.g., universities) and commercial Internet Service or Content Providers (such as Sina, Sohu, and Tianya), as well as by government entities (e.g., the *People's Net*). These forums are a virtual space where people feel comparatively free to post news and

opinions, largely because their "free-for-all structure" allows for more anonymity, even though many are more closely regulated now than they were in the past (MacKinnon, 2008b). Most BBSs are devoted to myriad lifestyle topics, including art, culture, education, health, love, cars, and finance (Damm, 2007). Group identity and community are built on such interests, as well as through the use of playful language and homonyms that are only understood by participants (Giese, 2004; Yang, 2009). It is noteworthy that BBSs are also used frequently to merge online and offline activities, as many are aimed at regional, local, and ethnic affiliations (Damm, 2007; Giese, 2004; Yang, 2009). Moreover, although many Web sites and affiliated BBSs maintain a socially conservative stance regarding gender and family (Damm, 2007; Giese, 2004), others offer space for various subaltern groups to form community and have a voice that is often silenced in the real world. For example, Chinese-language lesbian Web sites are an important emotional resource, as well as a form of imagined community for their participants, particularly since, in many areas of China, there is still "stigmatization by locally dominant pathologizing models of homosexuality as illness" (Martin, 2009, p. 229).[9] Within modes of state control, self-censorship, and commercialization, "the gay space in Chinese cyberspace" offers a realm for self-expression and diversity through *tongzhi*, or "comrade" (a euphemism for gay or lesbian) literature, chat rooms, forums, and news (Ho, L. W. W, 2007). To Giese, "the real subversive potential of the Internet in China" arises not because BBSs (and blogs) are used for overtly political expressions (which I address later), but because of the anonymity, freedom of expression, and opportunity for negotiating identity that such spaces allow (2004, p. 23).

Though fora are a major space for developing community online, blogs are another realm for individual expression and cultivating identities that both challenge and maintain the status quo. The first blog went online in China in 2002, and since then, the number of blogs has increased dramatically every year. By the end of 2009, there were 221 million bloggers, accounting for nearly 58% of all Internet users (CNNIC, 2010). Not all of China's millions of blogs are active, nor are they all political. Like their Western counterparts, most are personal narratives written by young people, usually college students, about their daily lives (MacKinnon, 2008a). Though the Chinese blogosphere has become an important source of information outside official (state) media channels for many, the most popular blogs in China are those written by celebrities, including movie stars, authors, athletes, and successful entrepreneurs (Nie & Li, 2006). During one point in 2006, the blog of Chinese actress Xu Jinglei beat BoingBoing as the most frequently visited blog in the world. Recently in China, the popularity of her blog has been displaced by that of author-racecar driver Han Han, whose unconventional and, at times, provocative manner has made him a youth icon and the bane of the existence of China's literary and cultural establishment.

What first catapulted blogging into popular consciousness in China, however, was the sex diary of Mu Zimei, a young woman in Guangzhou who stirred up controversy in 2003 when she began blogging about her active sex life (often quite explicitly) and her rejection of conventional notions of romantic love. After a notorious post about a one-night stand with a Chinese rock star, Mu Zimei's blog became the number one blog in China for a time, gained substantial attention from numerous media outlets, and invoked admiration, as well as scorn. As Farrer (2007) notes, the "Mu Zimei phenomenon" brought the issue of sexual politics into the Internet age in China and inspired dialogue and debate by the general public, scholars, and journalists from commercial and party organs on an array of topics, including

[9] Homosexuality was illegal in China until 1997; in 2001, it was no longer classified as a mental illness.

freedom of expression, privacy, sexual morality, and women's rights. Although Mu Zimei's blog was eventually shut down, she was fired from her job, and her book was banned, she continues to make headlines—for example, by uploading podcasts of her sexual encounters. She has also gained the admiration of many young Chinese women and has inspired numerous imitators, who don't necessarily conform to urban, elite standards of fashion and aesthetics, yet who still use the Internet as a platform for their own personal agenda and viewpoints (ibid.). These women and other subalterns, including some rural-to-urban migrant bloggers, reveal that the "personal is political" in China, although not in the manner in which "Chinese politics" is usually conceptualized in the West (Yang, 2009).

Social Networking Sites and Chatting

Though BBSs and blogs are well-established aspects of Chinese new media culture, social networking sites (SNSs) are a relatively new entry. Chinese versions of MySpace and Facebook exist, but their numbers of registered users pale in comparison to domestic SNSs. China has its own version of Facebook, begun in 2005 by two Tsinghua University graduate students and initially called Xiaonei ("on campus network"). In 2009, it was renamed Renren ("everyone's network"), reflecting the fact that, in 2007, it opened its virtual doors to high school students, and then to white-collar workers. It has a close rival in Kaixin001, targeted at yuppies. One distinctive feature of Chinese SNSs is that they combine networking features with several online games, such as Kaixin001's "Parking War" and "Friends for Sale." Market research on users of Renren, Kaixin001, and Facebook found that these sites were crucial for young people to manage their identity and sociality both online and off, and that the sites allowed for "moderate socializing" with minimal intrusion into private life (Li, Zhang, & Yu, 2009). Social networking sites like Douban, which lets users post recommendations and reviews of various forms of media, have also been instrumental in the construction of a transnational imagined Chinese community (Ho, K-C, 2007). Even sites that aren't social networks per se, such as Hudong, an encyclopedia Web site far more popular in China than Wikipedia (whose Chinese version has been blocked for much of its existence) include social networking functions, such as forums and chat, and many attribute the success of China's domestic Web sites to these types of functionalities (in addition to games).

Reflecting a shift in China's Internet user demographics, the most popular social networking sites in China are 51.com, which attracts rural, third-tier city users, and Tencent's Qzone, which is targeted at teens and has nearly 388 million active users.[10] Qzone's success reveals that, while quite new to China, SNSs should be understood within the context of the chatting and instant messaging (IM) culture that has existed online in China for a number of years. The most popular IM platform in China is Tencent's QQ, with 533 million active users at the end of 2009, where roughly 93 million of them are instant messaging at any one time (Tencent, 2009).[11] QQ is also closely connected with youthful Internet users and young adults who are from lower socioeconomic strata, such as rural-to-urban migrants. For many Chinese Internet users, QQ is the first application they have used, and the growth of QQ has been closely aligned

[10] For an overview of the top four SNSs in China, see http://social.venturebeat.com/2010/04/07/china's-top-4-social-networks-renren-kaixin001-qzone-and-51-com/

[11] Researching among young migrant women, I was much more likely to be asked my QQ number than my e-mail address.

with the development of the Chinese Internet (Koch, Koch, Huang, & Chen, 2009). QQ at once represents China's domestic technological achievements and the threats brought by and through such technologies, including Internet addiction, pornography, and sexual solicitation (ibid.).

Mobile Identities

While the above discussion has focused on identity and community as these are articulated to Internet applications that until recently were accessed primarily via a desktop or laptop computer, the mobile phone has also emerged in China as a key tool for identity and community building, albeit with distinct uses by diverse populations. In terms of in-depth academic research on mobile phone use, usually the focus has been on either the urban *or* the rural-to-urban migrant population, though exceptions where both populations have been included in the same study do exist (e.g., Fortunati, Manganelli, Law, & Yang, 2008; Qiu, 2009a). This split in research design is in line with what are perceived to be vast gaps between these two populations in terms of material resources, life conditions, and opportunities. In the early days of the mobile phone's diffusion in China, the phone was linked to an urban, sophisticated, fashionable lifestyle, as in other places around the world (Wei, 2006). Now, both young migrant workers in Southern factories, and "cool" urban youth express similar connections between owning a mobile phone and perceived social status or maintenance of "face" (Chu & Yang, 2006; Yang & Chu, 2006; Wang, 2005), so much so that the former often spend two or three times their monthly salary on a phone (Law & Peng, 2006; Yang & Chu, 2006). In addition, gendered differences in preferences of mobile phone types, usage patterns, and discourses *about* mobile phones have also been found among both groups (Fortunati et al., 2008; Lin & Tong, 2008; Wallis, 2010).

While marketers are obsessed with studying China's urban youth as a lucrative market, content providers like Kongzhong and Sina offer games, horoscopes, and other subscription services that intentionally cater to a primarily lower-income youth demographic.[12] Cartier, Castells, and Qiu (2005) and Qiu (2009a) argue that "working class ICTs" such as the *xiaolingtong* ("Little Smart"), a less expensive mobile phone with limited geographic mobility (it runs off the fixed-line telephone system), and prepaid calling cards, enable migrants to become part of the "information have-less" (as opposed to have-nots). However, throughout 2006 and 2007 when I was in Beijing, the popularity of Little Smart phones was declining, as the costs of standard mobile phones had decreased. Recently, the government decided to phase out Little Smart to make room for 3G networks.

While some argue that mobile phones, and text messaging in particular, contribute to a Chinese culture increasingly marked by "excessive, trivial and meaningless information overload" (Guo & Wu, 2009, p. 41), mobile phones have particular affordances for China's migrant population, who often have minimal access to landlines outside of public phones. Migrants use mobile phones to maintain as well as to expand their social networks (Chu & Yang, 2006; Law & Peng, 2006; Wallis, forthcoming). Dating via the mobile phone—where a relationship is initiated and sustained through text messaging and voice calls with a face-to-face meeting not taking place for several months—has also become common (Law & Peng, 2006; Wallis, 2010). In using mobile phones to autonomously establish intimate relationships, some young migrant

[12] Author interviews with Kongzhong and Sina employees, Beijing, August 2008.

women challenge parental authority in such decisions, yet they also engage in practices that blend the traditional with the technological—for example, relying on intermediaries for introductions (Wallis, 2010). Others, however, enjoy meeting strangers via mobile networks designed to help people find friends or lovers (Law & Peng, 2006; Lin & Tong, 2008). Though people from all walks of life in China send pre-written messages, rural-to-urban migrants rely on such messages to compensate for low literacy levels (especially difficulty with inputting characters), and to communicate emotions they feel they cannot properly express in their own words (Lin & Tong, 2008; Wallis, 2010). Most pre-written messages are meant to cater to the tastes of lower social strata (Cartier, Castells, & Qiu, 2005).

Gaming

Gaming in China has become a huge phenomenon in recent years, both in terms of China's own domestic gaming industry and through the sheer number of gamers. Digital gaming in China began in the 1980s with video arcades and home game consoles (Cao & Downing, 2008). Since then, China's online gaming industry has developed into a multibillion-dollar business. While PC-based games are still played, massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft*, as well as domestic titles, including NetEase's *Fantasy Westward Journey* (loosely based on *Journey to the West* and the legend of the Monkey King; see Figure 2), are extremely popular, especially among youth. By the end of 2009, some 265 million Internet users played online games, an approximately 42% increase from the previous year (CNNIC, 2010). Such growth was attributed to the enriched content and format of gaming products, as well as to various social networking sites adding gaming elements to their offerings.

Figure 2. *Fantasy Westward Journey (Google images).*

Games and Traditional Morality

The popularity of online games in China has brought a focus in both popular and official discourse on the negative effects of gaming. In Guo's (2007) study, 55.5% of users and 49.5% of non-users of the Internet agreed that online gaming should be managed or controlled. The Chinese government has been a major proponent of controlling online gaming because of what it perceives as a direct connection between game-playing and Internet addiction, and because of its desire to promote a "civilized" or "healthy Internet culture." The state-run media feature stories fairly regularly on the perils of Internet addiction—exhaustion, failure in school, and even death. Murderous gamers have also been the source for sensational news. To deal with such issues, the government has taken a number of measures, including everything from setting up boot camps to cure Internet-addicted youth, to electronically limiting the number of hours a day a minor can play an online game without experiencing a reduction in game points (through a program called an "anti-indulgence system") (Li, 2007), to forbidding the opening of new Internet cafés throughout most of 2007. However, the government does not want to ban gaming altogether, especially in light of what a huge revenue source it is.[13] Instead, it exhorts gaming companies to exercise "self discipline" and make games that are "healthy." In early 2008, the Ministry of Culture endorsed 10 games (all Chinese made) that were ostensibly healthy and combined entertainment with education (Zhou, 2008). In general, these games also align with the state's view that games should promote traditional Chinese culture and values. In this social context, games that draw upon Chinese history, legends, and martial arts are, indeed, popular. Chan (2006) notes that discourses of Asianness within games produced not only in China, but also in Korea function as a "common reference point for in-game narratives, characters and imagery," invoking both authenticity and hybridity.

The tension between the perceived benefits and drawbacks of online gameplay is also reflected in the academic literature on gaming in China. In one body of research, especially studies that adopt a social-psychological perspective, online gaming is often associated with Internet addiction. For example, Huang et al. (2007) have developed a "Chinese Internet Addiction Inventory" to assess the correlation between long hours online (usually gaming) and mood changes and conflicts. Similarly, Wu and Li (2005) compared "normal" university students to those that have failed in their coursework and found online game playing to be a factor in the latter's poor academic performance. In contrast to fears about gaming and Internet addiction, other research has noted that discourses about the harmful effects of the Internet seem to be a stand-in for more general anxieties associated with the rapid changes going on in Chinese society, which have led to what many regard as a breakdown in traditional values and created a vast generation gap between Chinese youth and their parents. For example, in their analysis of Internet-addiction and video-game related suicide discourses in China, Golub and Lingley argue that a "medicalization of social relationships" and the rise of "new forms of self-fashioning enabled by new media that are not socially sanctioned" have emerged as constitutive of more general changes in the nation's moral order (2008, p. 60).

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[13] The revenue is not only generated directly in *yuan*. Tencents' "Q coin," a virtual currency used to pay for online content and services, is converted by some into *yuan*. Tencent has also partnered with Chinese banks in developing virtual debit and credit cards. In 2008, the government announced that profits made using virtual currency are subject to taxation.

Still another body of research on gaming seeks to find the positive benefits and the informal learning that takes place through game playing. Echoing work done in other cultural contexts, Liu (2006) argues that MMORPGs teach Chinese college students about cooperation, teamwork, and the ability to deal with real-world issues. In a similar vein, Lindtner et al. (2008) stress the collaborative learning that takes place among *World of Warcraft* players in Internet cafés in China and argue that cultural values and socioeconomic considerations combine to construct a hybrid cultural ecology of online gaming. Wu, Fore, Wang, and Ho (2007) studied "web marriage" games and concluded that, although overall these games are constructed to reinforce traditional gender roles and heteronormativity, they nonetheless allow players to deconstruct gender binaries, question the significance of marriage in the real world, and develop intimate friendships. The authors thus emphasize the potentially socially transformative role of online gaming. This contrasts with voices in the Chinese media that express concern that such games contribute to the erosion of traditional morality, in particular because the predominantly adolescent and young adult players simulate and narrate virtual marriage (and divorce) with others that they usually do not know in the real world (McLaren, 2007).

Labor and Nation

Perhaps most clearly revealing the intersections of culture, economics, and moral discourses articulated to gaming in China is the phenomenon of "gold farmers"—primarily young males of rural origin who are paid paltry wages to play online games, especially *World of Warcraft*, 12 hours a day in what can justifiably be called gaming sweatshops. Rather than reaping the rewards of their gameplay, the gold farmers instead turn over whatever game coinage they accumulate to their employer, who then relies on a middleman to sell the virtual loot to a distant customer, usually Western, who does not have the time and/or inclination to advance in the game by their own efforts and skill (Dibbell, 2007). Though such practices exist in other countries, China is believed to have the largest number and most extensive network of gold farmers. On the Chinese Internet, advertisements for such work can be found easily,[14] as can reports on the hardship faced by these gamers, who are often treated like "indentured servants" by their bosses, and as disappointments by their parents (Fan, Pang, & Yang, 2008). Like their counterparts laboring in factories, their long hours and meager pay are still considered by most to be a better option than actual farming in the countryside.

In various realms, the gold farming phenomenon has generated debates about everything from gaming ethics to labor in the virtual, global economy, and it has even inspired a documentary (see http://chinesegoldfarmers.com/). Outside China, especially in countries such as the United States, Chinese gold farmers have been the target of much hostility because they are perceived as violating the spirit, if not the rules, of the game. Many have argued that gamers who legitimately compete in *World of Warcraft* are justified in their anger at the gold farmers. However, others have noted troubling discourses in the game realm in which frustration with the gold farmers (and similarly with Chinese adena farmers in *Lineage II*) becomes justification for hostility toward China and Chinese people more generally (Nakamura, 2009; Steinkuehler, 2006; Yee, 2006). It appears that, as gameplay competition becomes divided along racial and ethnic lines, the resentment generated in the game becomes mapped upon and aligned with

[14] See http://bbs.jhnews.com.cn/redirect.php?tid=472192&goto=lastpost

deeper anxieties and suspicion of China as a "threat" and as a country that doesn't "play fair" (e.g., intellectual property, copyright).

Just as the practice of gold farming raises issues of race and nation, online gaming has also been a space for overt expressions of nationalism (which will be examined in more detail in the next section). Strains of nationalism run through government discourses related to both the promotion of China's domestic gaming industry and the actual game content. Some Chinese gamers, as well, have used cyberspace to voice overtly nationalistic sentiments and to mobilize against perceived threats to their (virtual) national sovereignty. The most well-known incident occurred in 2006 within *Fantasy Westward Journey,* when a virtual mob of thousands gathered to protest a Jianyi (fictional city) government office that was alleged to have an image remarkably similar to a Japanese "rising sun" flag on its wall. The protestors scrawled anti-Japanese insults onto the virtual space and demanded the image be removed. This incident was apparently linked to a player who had had his name and guild (both anti-Japanese) revoked.[15] Writing about the event, Jenkins (2006) notes it reflects the gamers' internalization of government policies that seek to promote Chinese national culture and pride within games, yet most likely in ways never anticipated.

Networked Public Sphere and Civic Engagement

The tension between the government's promotion of new media for its own means and the ways such technologies are put to use is not only evident in the realm of gaming. One of the most fascinating aspects of new media culture in China is how the Internet and mobile phones have been utilized by "netizens" for deliberation, civic engagement, and collective action in ways that merge the online and offline realms.[16] Such uses have rekindled debate about whether a public sphere and civil society exist in China (Lagerkvist, 2006; Tai, 2006; Yang, 2003, 2009). In such discussions, the focus is not necessarily on Habermas' conceptualization of a bourgeois public sphere, nor is democracy seen as a necessary precursor or end result (Jiang, 2010; Zheng, 2008). Furthermore, commercialization is often viewed as beneficial, rather than destructive, as market competition has allowed for more diverse voices to appear (Tai, 2006; Zheng, 2008). Chinese cyberspace, with youth often at the forefront, has become an active realm for public discussion, information dissemination, and mobilization in ways that are both sanctioned and discouraged by the government.

Discussion, Dissemination, and Mobilization

In a 2007 survey of 1,104 Chinese aged 16-to-25, 72% said they use the Internet to express personal opinions, compared to 56% of Americans (IAC, 2007). According to a 2008 *China Youth Daily* survey, more than 90% of nearly 2,900 respondents indicated they used the Internet to "often" or "occasionally" express their views online, and, interestingly, 70% agreed that users should exercise "self

[15] For details on how this incident was treated in the mainstream media and blogosphere in China, see http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20060709_1.htm

[16] Yu (2006) uses "netizen" to mean "citizen on the Internet" thus distinguishing those who use the Internet for rational debate (exercising citizenship) from those who use it for fun.

discipline" (Li, 2008). It is noteworthy that the latter survey was conducted shortly after President Hu Jintao made his first public online chat in the *People's Net's* "Strong Nation Forum" (*Qiangguo Luntan*). This forum was created in the wake of the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade as a space for virtual protest and the expression of nationalist sentiments (Jiang, 2010). Since then, other instances of "Chinese cyber nationalism" have occurred, as BBSs, blogs, and chat rooms have been used to voice outrage, some of it quite violent, and to mobilize protests online and off against what are perceived as affronts to China's national sovereignty or dignity, as in the anti-Japanese protests in 2005 (Wu, 2007). Like the more recent controversies surrounding the March 2008 uprising in Tibet and the 2008 Olympic Torch relay, much of this nationalist fervor has been attributed to government instigation and to China's "angry youth" (*fenqing*). However, nationalism is only one motivation for youth engagement and mobilization that, depending on the context, is either condoned or condemned by the government.

The state clearly seeks to harness the power of new media to maintain its own legitimacy and seek support for its policies. Through efforts at "public opinion guidance," it tries to demarcate the limits of political discourse online (Zhao, 2008). Nevertheless, modes of social mobilization and populism that are encouraged by the government create opportunities for other social forces to push their own agenda and promote social change (Zheng, 2008). Both state and private commercial and non-commercial Web sites, forums, chat rooms, text messages, and, more recently, microblogging have been used to voice a range of expressions, and to organize activities that often contest the official discourse (Jiang, 2010; Yang; 2009; Zheng, 2008). For example, during the SARS outbreak in 2003, ordinary citizens used text messaging and the Internet to counter the government's attempt to block dissemination of information about the epidemic through traditional media channels (Tai, 2006). Yu argues that this practice constituted a "third realm" in state-society relations and a means of "informed citizenship" (2004, p. 31).[17] BBS and text messaging have been especially powerful means for disseminating information about other government cover-ups and corruption, including the case of Sun Zhigang, a young college-educated migrant who was beaten to death while in detention for failing to carry his temporary residence permit. The outrage over his death—much of it expressed online—eventually resulted in significant changes to the law (Zheng, 2008). In 2007, BBSs were also key in exposing child slave labor at an illegal brick kiln in Shanxi province (Yang, 2009). Influential bloggers also play a role in leading public opinion (Esarey & Xiao, 2008). For example, Ai Weiwei has incurred the wrath of the Chinese government for his "Numbers" project, designed to make public the names of students killed in the May 2008 earthquake in Sichuan. Zhou Shuguang ("Zola"), a young citizen reporter, has covered everything from unrest in Tibet to the infamous "nailhouse" in Chongqing (where the owners refused to move as bulldozers razed everything else around to make way for new development).

However, in contrast to the way that new media technologies are playing a vital role in the growth of a nascent public sphere in China, they have also been used for a peculiar form of cyber vigilantism known as the "human flesh search engine" (*ren rou sou suo*), basically an Internet mob that tracks down real individuals for alleged crimes, posts their private information online, and heaps verbal abuse upon them (Liu, 2008). One of the most notorious cases involved a woman, who, after posting the details of her husband's extra-marital affair online, jumped from a window to her death. After her "death-

[17] Others have examined more negative aspects of mobile phones during SARS, including their use for spreading rumors and inciting panic buying (Ma, 2008; Yang, 2004).

blog" spread on the Web, netizens took it upon themselves to find the "cheating husband," provide his personal information for all to see, and then harass him in real life (the husband later won a lawsuit against the Web site that posted the blog). Other targets have been a woman who smashed a kitten's head with her high-heeled pumps and a Chinese student at Duke University who tried to mediate between pro-Tibet and pro-Chinese protestors during the Olympic Torch relay.[18] Some attribute this form of mob behavior to Mao-era customs of "people's war" and "struggle," or to a "herd mentality" (Eberlein, 2008), while others liken it to a mode of irrational morality (Yin & Meng, 2009). A 2008 survey conducted by the *China Youth Daily* online found that nearly 80% of those polled agreed that human flesh search engines should be regulated in some manner, with 20% fearing that they themselves might become a target (Tian & Li, 2008). The "human flesh search engine" does have its positive side, however: It has been mobilized to expose corrupt officials, such as a mid-level Nanjing bureaucrat who somehow could afford exorbitantly priced packs of cigarettes and a $15,000 watch, as well as a Shenzhen official who allegedly tried to force an 11-year-old girl into a restroom at a restaurant.[19]

Censorship Regimes and Creative Resistance

The spread of new media has contributed to what Zheng (2008) calls "political liberalization" in China, and the government has acknowledged that public opinion expressed and debated online can increase accountability and transparency. Even so, the degree of freedom netizens have to address "sensitive" topics ebbs and flows with the political winds of Beijing. Not surprisingly, a whole body of Western-based scholarship and media accounts are concerned with examining the government's protracted efforts at controlling the Internet and censoring information through technological methods such as the "Great Firewall" (Zittrain & Edelman, 2003). Human censors, especially college students, are also employed (French, 2006), as are "Web commentators," derisively called the "Fifty Cent Party," who are trained and supported by Party organizations to infiltrate forums and BBS to promote the Party line and report "harmful" content (Bandurski, 2008).[20] Mobile phones are an additional source of concern for the government, but despite new filtering and tracking techniques, it is impossible to monitor all SMS content (Qiu, 2007). Thus, in some areas, "softer" control measures have been used, such as sponsoring contests for ordinary citizens and local officials to write "red" ("healthy" or encouraging) messages and quash so-called "yellow" (sexual or pornographic) messages (Zhang, 2006).

While many noticed a somewhat relaxed atmosphere in the period leading up to and during the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the subsequent crackdown since early 2009 on Web sites deemed "vulgar" or "pornographic" mentioned earlier seems motivated as much by a desire to limit social and political commentary as it does to clean up "harmful" sexual content. This appears particularly true in the wake of Charter 08, a document posted on the Internet in December 2008 that called for greater democratic and

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[18] For a Chinese BBS post on the major "human flesh" searches so far, see http://www.xici.net/b309590/d73127046.htm See also http://dzh2.mop.com/ and http://www.ren-rou.cn

[19] For video and translation of Chinese BBS posts about this incident, see http://www.chinasmack.com/videos/government-official-attacks-11-year-old-girl/

[20] For the government's view on the necessity of such commentators, see http://www.china.com.cn/review/txt/2009-02/15/content_17279916.htm

legal reforms and quickly garnered over 8,000 signatures.[21] With 2009 a year of several significant anniversaries, the government launched its most extended censorship campaign to date, blocking thousands of Web sites and applications, including circumvention technologies such as Virtual Private Networks (VPNs).[22] However, even in the midst of such extreme censorship, netizens and their supporters could claim at least one victory: the July 2009 retraction by the government of its earlier insistence that all new computers in the country have the Green Dam Youth Escort content-control (or censorship) software pre-installed or able to be installed.[23]

Despite the actual reality of censorship in China, the majority of Internet users do not seem to be as concerned about this. However, for users who want to express views the government might frown upon (or worse), there are technological solutions like VPNs and anonymizing tools. Another way users have gotten around censors is through employing software that changes the direction of text (Ye & Fowler, 2008). Netizens have also invented extremely creative, non-technological methods to get their messages out. For example, after the July 2009 riots involving Muslim Uyghur's and Han Chinese in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang province, all online discussion, photos, and video of this event were blocked. To get around such censorship, clever Internet users employed a practice called "tomb digging," or "digging up" earlier posts about Xinjiang or Urumqi, and then adding comments about the riots (Liu, 2009). Other means of avoiding censorship include using encoded language through relying on the use of oblique references and metaphors, and through taking advantage of the richness of the Chinese language, with its multiple homophones. Still another practice is to split headers in an otherwise blank posting so that the user has to pull the pieces together (Esarey & Xiao, 2008; Giese, 2004). Through these and other creative techniques, Chinese cyberspace has become a realm for polyphonic expressions to exist outside the dominant discourse, and as such, it is constitutive of social change in China.

New Media Prosumption

In the previous section, I focused on new media practices that involve *processes* of deliberation and activism. In this final section, I discuss new media "prosumption," or new media *products* that arise from the breakdown of the traditional distinction between producers and consumers (Tapscott, 1996). Such prosumption, or what Jenkins (2006) calls "convergence culture," is one more important phenomenon of China's new media assemblage. Some of its earliest forms emerged in the late 1990s, when young amateur writers created Web sites to distribute their works and engage in discussions about

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[21] For more on Charter 08, including translations, see http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2008/12/china-detains-prominent-dissident-ahead-of-human-rights-day/
Liu Xiaobo, one of the main drafters of Charter 08, has been serving an 11-year jail sentence since December 2009. In October 2010, much to Beijing's consternation, he was awarded the Nobel Peace prize. On the role of microblogging in spreading news of his award, see Hu (2010).

[22] These included the 1919 May Fourth (student) Movement, the 1959 Tibetan uprising, the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations and June 4 crackdown, the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and the October 1, 2009 60th anniversary of the founding of the PRC.

[23] For an overview of the Green Dam controversy and the apparent final demise of the software, see http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2010/07/13/green-dam-troubles-mount/

poetry and literature (Hockx, 2005). Today, Internet literature is a lucrative revenue source for both writers and companies like Shanda Literature (Jiang & Elegant, 2009), while mobile phone novels by both amateurs and professionals are read in installments in text or voice (French, 2004). Some have disparaged such literature, while others see it as a positive literary development.

More recently, the advent of high-speed broadband and the widespread availability of inexpensive webcams, editing software, and digital video recorders have given rise to a form of new media prosumption in China called *e'gao*, a combination of the words "evil" and "to make fun of" that now signifies a multimedia expression that spoofs or pokes fun at an original work (Jiao, 2007). *E'gao* has its roots in Japanese *kuso*, a subculture associated with both gaming and satire. And though some trace the origins of *e'gao* to the 1980s, in China, *e'gao* is closely linked to tech-savvy, digital youth, and in fact, is seen as a youth culture phenomenon (Hu, 2008). *E'gao* has indeed become hugely popular: Plug in the word in Chinese search engine Baidu, and over 56 million links appear. Over the past few years, *e'gao* has become an umbrella term used to cover an array of practices, including photo-shopping images, creating lip-synching videos or parodies of famous films, and imitating celebrities in a humorous way. While some view *e'gao* as having no agenda or logic, others see in these types of productions a youth subculture based on bricolage and resistance (ibid.). Both of these motivations—as humorous fun and as small forms of protest against the cultural and political establishment—can be seen in the following examples.

There is an endless array of photo-shopped *e'gao* images circulating on the Chinese Internet. This practice is most closely associated with "Little Fatty" (*Xiao Pang)*, a Shanghai teenager (real name Qian Zhijun) whose picture was snapped by someone at a gas station and then uploaded to the Internet in 2003. His round face and slightly hesitant sideways glance somehow captured the imagination of a slew of photo-shoppers, and his image was soon replacing the visage of everyone from the Mona Lisa to Jackie Chan or Johnny Depp, as in Figure 3.[24] Explanations for why Little Fatty's face generated such a craze abound, but perhaps most interesting is how the phenomenon demonstrates a newfound means of creative expression and satire in China, with pop culture themes that cross global and cultural boundaries. It also reveals new channels for stardom and success: Apparently as a result of his Internet fame, Little Fatty garnered a television show and a movie deal.

[24] In English, see http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/the-new-cultural-revolution-how-little-fatty-made-it-big-424469.html. In Chinese, with images, see http://www.gs.xinhuanet.com/jiaodianwt/2004-05/20/content_2160773.htm

Figure 3. *Little Fatty (Xiao Pang) (The Sun,* UK*).*

E'gao circulates as video as well, and though not the first, perhaps the most famous *e'gao* video production is Hu Ge's "The Bloody Case Caused by a Steamed Bun" (*Yige Mantou Yinfa de Xue'an*). The 20-minute film, widely available on YouTube and Chinese video-sharing sites such as Tudou, is a parody of Chen Kaige's 2005 *The Promise*, one of the most expensive films ever made in China at 350 million yuan (US$4.2 million), and one that was largely panned by critics and the public alike. In contrast, Hu's video cost virtually nothing and soon became a viral sensation. Filmed in the manner of China Central Television's "Legal Report," the story follows the investigation by police of a murder resulting from a fight over a steamed bun. The short film gained even more notoriety after Chen Kaige decided to sue Hu for copyright violation. When online forums exploded with commentary and support for Hu, the case was eventually dropped, signifying a victory for "little people" against China's power brokers and cultural authorities (Yang, 2009). Moreover, this outcome convinced many that Hu's spoof represented the "spirit of the grassroots [*cao gen*] majority" (Yu, 2007, p. 427). In the wake of Hu's success, several other grassroots artists have gone viral, most notably the Backdorm Boys (*Houshe Nansheng*), two art students from Guangzhou whose lip-synching and face-making catapulted them into fame, first as viral stars, and then as celebrities with a multi-year contract.

While most *e'gao* is only indirectly political, images containing visual mashups with political meanings have also become a trend. One example, shown below, is the "river crab wearing three watches," which appeared in 2007 in the Chinese blogosphere. Because the current government has enacted various policies and made numerous public announcements regarding the need to build a "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*), when blog or forum posts containing "sensitive" material are deleted by censors, or when a Web site is blocked, it is common for the one censored to say he or she has been

"harmonized." As MacKinnon (2007) notes, the river crab meme emerged as a play on the Chinese words for "harmony" and "river crab," both homophones that use different Chinese characters. Because the word for harmony or harmonious is so frequently used sarcastically online, it is often censored, and thus those who are discussing censorship use the characters for river crab. Because a well-known blogger, Wang Xiaofeng, writes under the name *Dai sange biao*, or "wear three watches," itself a play on the official Party policy of the "three represents," eventually someone photo-shopped a crab wearing three watches, as in Figure 4.

Figure 4. *Crab Featured Wearing Three Watches.*
(http://rconversation.blogs.com/rconversation/2007/09/eating-river-cr.html)

Videos with indirect political commentary have appeared, as well. A parody that took an earlier "red classic" propaganda film about the Chinese revolution and converted it into a tale of a boy trying to win a CCTV singing contest raised the ire of some who viewed it as disrespecting China's revolutionary heroes and history (Esarey & Xiao, 2008). In early 2009, anyone who followed Chinese cyberspace, both in China and abroad, could not escape the tale of the "Grass Mud Horse" (*Cao Ni Ma*), a short video featuring alpacas in the wild, set to a nursery rhyme-like song. The three words in Chinese for "grass mud horse" also sound like an obscene epithet involving one's mother, and other references in the lyrics are also homophones for dirty words. Due to the "story" in the video, where the Grass Mud Horse lives free in the desert and defeats "River Crabs," the obvious meaning is that it is a potty-mouthed protest against Internet censorship. For this reason, it has been called a "hidden transcript" deployed as a "weapon of the weak" in the contested space carved out by the subordinated (Lam, 2009). In spite of its quick banning, the Grass Mud Horse phenomenon has spawned cartoons, other videos, and even merchandise.

Grass Mud Horse [video] (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKx1aenJK08).

As Meng states, *e'gao* is a significant mode of cultural expression in China because, as a decentralized form of communication, it challenges both "the established mechanisms of media production and distribution as well as the officially sanctioned norms of media content in China" (2009, p. 52). She further notes that its carnivalesque and iconoclastic attitude toward "mainstream" and "officialdom" are a means for ordinary Chinese to express criticism and dissatisfaction in a media environment that is heavily censored. Well aware of this side of the *e'gao* phenomenon, the Chinese government has taken steps to control its dissemination. In 2006, the *Guangming Daily*, a Party newspaper, held a conference and urged the government to put an end to *e'gao* (Esarey & Xiao, 2008). In 2007, the government declared that all music that was changed from its original form first had to be submitted for approval before being uploaded. In 2008, new regulations limited the broadcasting of videos to Web sites of state-controlled companies. *E'gao*'s irreverent humor and "nothing's sacred" attitude have also generated concerns by conservative scholars that it degrades the common culture, and, in the hands of "angry youth," imperils the goal of building the government's "harmonious society" (Lu, 2007). As with online gaming, youth have been viewed as especially vulnerable to its corrupting influence. In addition, issues regarding copyright and intellectual property have been raised, as with the Hu Ge case. Nonetheless, *e'gao* shows no sign of abating, especially as it has now merged with the *shanzhai* (copycat) phenomenon. It is thus likely to continue as a vehicle for creative expression and counter-hegemonic voices.

Conclusion

The 2010 Google controversy with China stirred up, once again, the West's fixation with Internet control in China. However, while various modes of censorship and control certainly constrain new media use in China, this review reveals that myriad practices, processes, and politics are nonetheless articulated to such technologies in a dynamic, multi-faceted assemblage. In recent years, as the post-80s and post-

90s generations have integrated these technologies into their lives, new identities, communities, and lifestyles have emerged, as have modes of civic engagement and new media production that challenge established rules and norms. New media technologies thus have been constitutive of individual, social, and political changes in China—some quite progressive, and some not.

The virtual sphere in China is not monolithic, nor are its occupants. For example, for China's young adult migrant population, who, compared to their urban counterparts, face disparate access to social and economic resources and a highly circumscribed social world, the significance of the *connectivity* afforded through new media technologies should not be underestimated, nor should the way they are used by migrant women to challenge traditional arrangements of power and authority in establishing intimate relationships. For China's gamers, the online realm offers a world of fun, fantasy, and escape, or, if one is a gold farmer, a life of extreme competition for minimal reward and quite a bit of drudgery. Those who use new media for social change, on the other hand, struggle not for gold coins or other virtual loot, but are, instead, engaged in a delicate undertaking, as they push the conventional limits on freedom of expression and undermine the government's discursive authority. In this way, they are involved in a Gramscian "war of position," a protracted struggle, with both wins and losses, as "the state and society are mutually transformative via their interactions" with new media (Zheng, 2008, p. xviii).

Throughout 2009 and 2010, the lengths the government went to in order to block Web sites, censor news, and harass dissidents, even after all of China's "sensitive" anniversaries had passed, were unprecedented. As the nation's economy faces serious challenges—the lowest economic growth rate in 10 years, 20 million migrant workers laid-off, and millions of college graduates who cannot find work—there is still substantial potential for social unrest, and if it happens, new media technologies will certainly be involved. On the other hand, most of China's digital youth will most likely continue to use new media technologies the ways other youth around the world do—to listen to music, chat with friends, express intimate feelings, play games, poke fun, and browse news. When they use it to debate issues and mobilize against corruption and injustice, they will continue building China's virtual public sphere. And in engaging in these forms of personal expression, they will feel, in one young migrant woman's words, that their lives are "much richer." Future research should focus on these sociocultural processes and reflect on how these emerge within particular circumstances and discourses. In this way, we will gain a deeper understanding of the larger societal transformations taking place in China, and about the role of new media in these.

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