

Hail the Independent Thinker: The Emergence of Public Debate Culture on the Chinese Internet

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Investigating the Internet's political consequences in China, current scholarship focuses predominantly on some individuals' ready contention against state apparatuses and unjustifiably ignores how Internet use may bring about cultural changes with political implications among a larger population. This study examines the emerging Chinese online debate culture from early 2006 to mid-2011. Taking the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse, it is based on online ethnography and discourse analysis. It presents a trajectory of the "independent thinking"-centered normative discourses on debate in Chinese cyberspace and how varied social actors interacted with these discourses. The findings suggest that the indigenous public debate culture that has arisen from Internet communication in China entailed certain behavioral and attitudinal changes supportive of democratic governing.

Political education comes to most people . . . from the presence and practice of political institutions themselves. Elections educate us. The ballot educates us. Parties educate us. The division among federal, state, and local jurisdictions educates us. The First Amendment educates us. The product of this education is our citizenship, the political expectations and aspirations people inherit and internalize. (Schudson, 1999, p. 6)

Presenting a history of American civic life, Michael Schudson elucidated how, over time, institutions, ambience, and rules of political practice structure people's political experience. Chinese citizens, however, have none of these items at their disposal. What is particularly unfamiliar to the Chinese, especially Chinese youth, is the notion and substance of public deliberation—of how a person who anticipates antagonistic encounters ought to speak in public to be taken seriously. This is something that they rarely witness, let alone practice. In fact, most seldom realize that they lack such experiences

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because their everyday lives do not highlight their absence. But the public discursive space afforded by the Internet has drastically disrupted this equilibrium. Through participation in and observation of ongoing debates on the Chinese Internet, people experiment with the idea of public debate and deliberation.

However, investigating the Internet's political consequences, the current scholarship focuses predominantly on certain individuals' ready contention against state apparatuses and unjustifiably ignores how certain Internet uses may bring about changes among a larger population, which bear profound implications in China's democratic prospects. The fact that China is in transition, in contrast to having a well-established system of democracy, opens up myriad questions about ongoing cultural changes and personal transformations. On media democratization around the globe, Zhao and Hackett (2005) ask, "To what extent is democratization not simply a political process but also a cultural one, involving the media in processes of identity formation much broader than the provision of political information?" (p. 25).

Employing the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD), this article attempts to capture the emergence of Chinese online debate culture from its turbulent beginnings in early 2006 to the relatively orderly form seen today. It presents a trajectory of the culture's "independent thinking"—centered normative discourses. Speaker and subject positions within discourse are analyzed; how actual social actors interacted with these discursive positions is examined to assess the discourses' power effects, or social impact. Also discussed are aspects of the larger historical conjuncture that gave rise to such discursive configurations. The article concludes with reflections on the wider implications of this debate culture in regard to democratic culture.

Internet Use and Political Change in Authoritarian China: Addressing Cultural Changes

Studies on the Internet and political change in authoritarian societies tend to take political censorship and government manipulation as their primary frame of reference and adopt an oppression-resistance framework. Realizing the naïveté of celebrating the liberating power of the "open network" technology, a substantial body of work examined how "closed regimes" used the Internet for monitoring and censoring purposes (Kalathil & Boas, 2003; MacKinnon, 2008). Approaching subjects directly through this prominent setup of state control, research has concentrated on how subversive voices and activities are mediated and reorganized by Internet technologies in countries such as Iran, Burma, and, more extensively, China (Wallis, 2011). This burgeoning body of literature, albeit interesting, informative, and increasingly sophisticated, has focused on a bounded set of phenomena to evaluate the democratizing power of the Internet: online expression of opposition against the state or the official elitist culture as well as mutual reinforcement of subversive communities. For example, creatively manufactured parody and sarcasm are entertained and disseminated among savvy and rebellious Chinese netizens, forming a subaltern culture of dissent; made aware of government injustice via the Internet, people gather together on- and offline for organized protests (Esarey & Xiao, 2008, 2011; Pu & Scanlan, 2012; Rosen, 2010; Zhou, 2009; Zhou, Chan, & Peng, 2008).

However, this analytical perspective limits the prevalent forms of inquiry in this area. First, most works tend to have a limited chronological focus on static snapshots of web-use patterns and correlations,

or web-fueled, short-lived events. Second, the focus is predominantly on dissidents and activists, research subjects transported from online activism literature. But unlike activist groups that are bound by collective goals or strategic pursuits, general Internet users in authoritarian regimes such as China are much more diverse (Damm, 2007; Giese, 2004). This scholarship tends to implicitly posit a uniform, self-propelled liberal subject, clear of his or her past and ready to function as a citizen of formal liberal democracies (cf. Agre, 2004; Dahlgren, 2006). With ready applications of Western-based theoretical constructs and problematics, intellectual attention is further occluded to things "on the ground" (Pan, 2010). In contrast, a few studies that address the cultural and historical contexts of China report the general online population as actually conservative or apathetic (Damm, 2007; Farrer, 2007; Giese, 2004; Wallis, 2011).

Recently, an intriguing quantitative analysis based on a nationwide representative data set shows that Internet use made the Chinese people less "conformist" in political beliefs, more concerned with how various political institutions function, and more critical of society's status quo (Lei, 2011). Critically, unlike most quantitative research on the topic, this analysis manages to move beyond mere correlation and draws a powerful causal conclusion that the Internet facilitated changes in the political attitudes and practices of its users (as opposed to just attracting users who were like that to begin with). This study suggests that the part still remaining unclear is the "microprocess of politicization" (Lei, 2011, p. 313), referring to microlevel mechanisms that account for the Internet-enabled transformation found in the nationwide data set, the transformation of Chinese Internet users from having "conforming attitudes toward the party-state" to "demand[ing] from the government liberalization or democratization" (Lei, 2011, p. 305).

In sum, the existing scholarship on Chinese Internet use and political change neglects the more general population whose substantial role in democratization must be reckoned with. While radicals can sometimes trigger drastic turns in formal politics, it is with and upon the larger population that the new course engages and sustains (Welzel & Inglehart, 2008; Zaret, 2000). To switch the focus from radical elites and dissidents to this larger population, the social processes that need to be investigated are no longer politically motivated interactions via new technologies but how, microscopically, Internet communication may have worked to bring about cultural changes among people in favor of democratization.

Democratic Culture, Online Debate, and the Rise of Normative Discourses

I propose empirical research to investigate how certain Internet uses in China may have facilitated attitudinal and behavioral changes among ordinary users over time. These changes are to be understood in terms of democratic culture, which generally refers to a supportive culture that institutional establishments of democratic governance presuppose (Zaret, 2000). Ample historical and sociological research has probed notions of civic agency and competence and cultures of citizenship, constituted by meanings and practices that can foster, sustain, or dampen democratic participation (Almond & Verba, 1963; Couldry, 2006; Dahlgren, 2003, 2006; Putnam, 1994; Tocqueville, 2003; Welzel & Inglehart, 2008; Zaret, 2000). The cultural prerequisites for a healthy, functional democracy are not universal (Dahlgren, 2003). They must be evaluated contextually for their historical and sociopolitical underpinnings in either democratization or democracy consolidation, given the society at stake (Sandel, 1996; Schudson, 1999).

Following this agenda, this project investigates the emerging culture of online debate as a case of Internet-enabled cultural changes regarding China's democratic prospects. This choice is justified for several reasons. Most obviously, vibrant online contestations, ranging from elaborate, eye-catching deliberations to abrupt name-calling protests, mark the entire existence of the Chinese Internet, but have scarcely been elucidated (for a rare example, see Farrer, 2007).¹ Second, communicative practices—from the most rational-critical to the relaxed, everyday—cultivate democratic cultures in different ways (Dryzek, 2000; Habermas, 1991; Kim & Kim, 2008). Considering authoritarian China, online debate practices, the rigors of which demand challenging adaptation in participants' mentality and skills, are especially crucial for fostering democratic culture.

In liberal democracies, online disagreements and debates are well researched. Their theoretical rationale is built upon the classic idea that democracy resides in citizens joining each other, hearing out different positions on public affairs, and discussing among themselves. Operationally, researchers sought the existence of, and the interconnection between, diverse voices online; they noted the degree of exposure to ideological disagreement and compared it with offline situations (e.g., Benkler, 2006; Hargittai, Gallo, & Kane, 2008; Hindman, 2009; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). However, analytically, this liberal democracy-based literature rests on a fairly fixed conception of debate and deliberation. This is because, in advanced democracies, social activities such as public argumentation and dialogic politics were internalized before the era of the Internet. As Wright (2012) concludes in his survey of this online deliberation literature, casting online behaviors in the framework of traditional democratic politics is predominant to the extent of being a severe constraint. Research tool kits designed for the context of liberal democracies fall short even further in noticing and accounting for the underlying social processes such as those that China underwent—absent a normative debate culture, a large population suddenly gets to practice public debate with the advent of the Internet, which, in turn, may affect political life and democratization. In the case of China, valid questions reside not in whether certain types of debate/deliberation (as defined in Western literature) exist but rather in how and why specific debate norms took shape and spread in Chinese cyberspace.

Essentially different from debating among acquaintances in social circles, debating online occurs mainly among strangers aiming to advance their arguments and is publicly accessible, thus always open for potential challenges from contrarian audiences. Most Chinese web surfers, I wish to emphasize, lacked the notion of what to expect from, and how to behave properly for, this occasion, a consequence of their isolation from public life and the dialogic politics common to liberal democracies. This becomes more apparent if we historically locate the majority of the Chinese online population and examine their relevant offline experience. Ever since the early years of China's Internet age, people younger than age 30 constituted around 70% of the entire online population (see Figure 1). So while some older Chinese citizens had witnessed the Democracy Wall Movement of 1978 and the Tiananmen Student Movement of 1989, when public speech and street debate flourished briefly in several urban areas, the young

¹ Even studies on the Chinese Internet that employed the conception of the public sphere and deliberation foreground the contentious voices against the state rather than disagreements and debate within online populations (Jiang, 2010; Zhou et al., 2008).

contributors to the Chinese online culture in the 21st century, born in the late 1970s and 1980s, in contrast, are largely alienated from any such experience, thanks to generation gaps and the state's effective control of cultural representation (Bonnin, 2010; Wallis, 2011). Therefore, the emergence of the Chinese online debate culture entails how a new situation became socially defined and acted upon by people in localized processes, during which new cultural norms were formulated via concrete interactions. In other words, this case study promises to shed light on how specific Internet use in China may have facilitated, on a microscopic level, certain cultural changes with political implications.

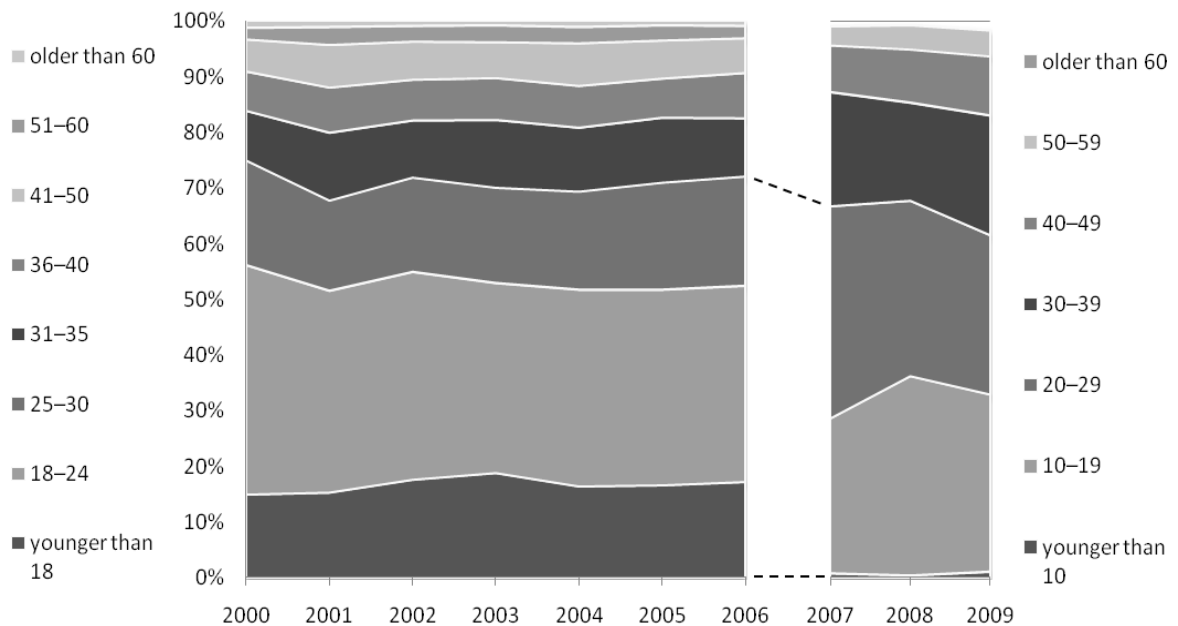


Figure 1. Chinese Internet users in different age groups over time.
 (Compiled from China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC] Annual Reports).
 The age groupings changed in 2007. See legends on both sides for comparison.

The Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse

Normative discourses on debate (hereafter NDoD), or debate norms, generally refer to any meta-evaluative discourse about discussion involving opposing points or contentious speech susceptible to challenge. To trace and analyze the emergence and development of these discourses on the Chinese Internet, this project takes the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD) (Keller, 2011, 2012).

Grounded in the sociology of knowledge tradition founded by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967), SKAD is a program of discourse analysis concerned with how discourse as social practice contributes to the (re)production/transformation of social orders of knowledge (Keller, 2011, p. 51). It considers processings of discourses as “a dialectical interplay between actors producing statements, and the pre-given as well as emerging structurations and sociohistorical means they have to draw upon” (p. 52). This processual dynamic of discourse development links both the micro and the macro level, in the manner inspired by Anthony Giddens’ (1984) structuration. Toward the micro world, SKAD adopts a symbolic interactionist position, which views seemingly stable social rules as manifestations of repetitive joint action and thus subject to the latter’s pressure and/or reinforcement (Blumer, 1969). In this perspective, NDoD prevail through their recurring embodiment in an expanding scope of interactions; these norms are being constantly renewed or redefined as actors engage in debate. Unlike symbolic interactionism, however, SKAD follows Foucault’s conceptualization of discourse in that texts “can be analysed as emergent discourse formations without recourse to the unmasking of ‘real’ or ‘covert’ reasons and intentions of particular social interest groups or actors” (Keller, 2011, p. 51). In other words, SKAD aims to explore the discursive construction of normative orders rather than the interactive dynamic in particular situations—hence, why exactly individuals decide to behave as they do on a certain occasion bears little relevance.

By analyzing concrete texts from the bottom up, SKAD attempts to reconstruct the processes in which meaning structures are socially constructed, objectivized, communicated, and legitimized on the institutional or social actors’ level. It is also concerned with the social effects of these processes. Three analysis dimensions are involved: (1) the infrastructures of discourse production that include the organizational, material, and discursive resources available in the present historical conjuncture that social actors interact with in discourse production; (2) knowledge configuration, or the structuring of discursive content; and (3) the power effects, referring to “different kinds of intended or non-intended consequences emerging out of . . . the social processing of discourses” (Keller, 2011, p. 60). In this project, I consider the power effects of NDoD as occurring through the ways in which individuals, situated in the online discursive field, may interact with these discourses. Specifically, SKAD describes a threefold relationship between discourses and social actors:

- *Speaker positions* depict positions of legitimate speech acts within discourses . . .
- *Subject positions/Identity offerings* depict positioning processes and “patterns of subjectivation” which are generated in discourses and which refer to (fields of) addressees . . .
- *Social actors* are individuals or collectives which draw on the above-mentioned speaker or subject positions and, according to their more or less obstinate (role) interpretations and competences, accept, effect, translate, adopt, use or oppose them, and therefore “realize” them in a versatile way which should be empirically investigated. (Keller, 2011, p. 55)

Applying the sociology of knowledge approach to studying the NDoD on the Chinese Internet makes explicit what debate norms became formulated, appropriated, and reorganized; what conditions gave rise to these specific utterances and their stabilization; and what behavioral and attitudinal changes they facilitated. All these aspects transgress the binary frame of state oppression and popular resistance and address the issue of cultural change via people’s online interaction and contestation.

Methodology

This project emerged from long-term online ethnography and more focused discourse analysis. In the online ethnographic phase since late 2003, I have followed the methodological style in Ward's (1999) cyber-ethnography, which adapts traditional ethnography to the virtual world. My initial interest was in how Chinese users generate and discuss political content online. I spent a great deal of time immersing myself in several major Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and later closely following more than 100 political blogs, cyber-magazines, and their commentary sections. I examined textual artifacts and noted material of interest. During this observation, I witnessed the Chinese online debate culture developing on the ground. The perpetual controversies around political content among Chinese users pressed me to think outside of the immediate state-society contention. It enabled me to reformulate my agenda via more meaningful and relevant problematization of the field—that is, to examine the indigenous rise of debate culture on the Chinese Internet over time.

The subsequent phase of my research is discourse analysis. Procedurally, I designed a multiple-step scheme to collect and make sense of online texts that concern the rhetoric and practice of debate. First was a close reading of five key blogs in their entirety. All five blogs are popular and influential in China and have featured saliently in numerous well-known online debates and controversies, both political and not explicitly so, throughout the formative period of NDoD. Based on my ethnography of the online political spaces over the years, the choices were: Han Han, a Chinese professional rally driver and best-selling author who ranked second in *Time* magazine's "World's Most Influential People in 2010"; Luo Yonghao, an English teacher and businessman, founder of the blog portal Bullog, a site for many high-profile Chinese bloggers; Lian Yue, a former judge and famous columnist whose online presence played a major role throughout an attention-getting, large-scale, peaceful, and successful street protest against urban construction planned by the local government in 2008; Drunkpiano (Liu Yu), a political scientist, popular media columnist, and novelist, author of the 2009 best-seller *Details of Democracy (minzhu de xijie)*; and Daisangebiao (Wang Xiaofeng), a journalist for a cultural magazine who was selected as a representative figure of the global online population that *TIME* magazine named "People of the Year" for promoting digital democracy. I read 3,609 posts on these five blogs, starting from around 2005, when the opening entries were produced, through June 2011; included in my sample of analysis all 221 blog posts that touched on debate norms; and skimmed through readers' comments with special attention to those left after the most relevant posts. I also recorded the debates and disagreements in which these bloggers engaged over the time, marking the nature of issues at stake and that of other and opposing points of view. Out of this process I identified the major, evolving frames and keywords featured in the emerging NDoD.

Honing of these initial discursive identifications, the second stage of my data collection further enriched my sample by including more online discussions about public debate. With the assistance of searching the previously identified keywords ("independent thinking," "brain-damaged," "brainwashed," "50-cent," etc.), I browsed other popular *and* controversial bloggers and several online magazines centered on current affairs. I extracted 78 additional articles of interest from 15 sources. The last stage resorts to wider and heterogeneous material. I looked into top search results ranked by search engines using the same set of keywords; I conducted further online ethnography that attended to ordinary scenes

of online debate on forums and social networking sites such as Tianya, Douban, and SMTH-BBS. These unstandardized, convergent data, a total of 354 items, shed light on mutually reinforcing networks of social understandings (Geertz, 1983).

To present the findings, I first provide a chronological narrative of discourse transformation (knowledge configurations). I then address the power effects, or influences, of the rise and development of NDoD in China by analyzing the speaker positions, subject positions, and social actors involved. This is followed by a discussion of the infrastructures of discourse production.

Emerging Norms on Public Debate in China

Normative Discourses on Debate: The Formative Process

Despite the exponentially expanding online population since the late 1990s, it was not until the blooming of Chinese blogs that a widely influential debate culture emerged; today, its frames and phrases are part of the everyday Chinese vernacular.

NDoD were formulated first through struggles for legitimacy against the existing popular tendency to refrain from open antagonism. In the beginning years, sensational "pen wars" (*bizhang*) were initiated by rising bloggers against long-established cultural figures. The most notable incident was in March 2006, when Han Han, a leading blogger, argued with Bai Ye, an officially sanctioned literary critic, on the existence and boundary of a "high literature circle" in contemporary China. This debate, together with a series of unflinching criticisms and inquisitions issued by bloggers toward senior editors, directors, writers, and officials in the authoritative cultural realm (all with their own blogs), triggered waves of confusion and hostility from the general public. People commented on the virtual battleground that such public inaugurations of war were arrogant and disrespectful, showed too much edge, were merely a shortcut to fame, or had other suspicious motivations. Others pled for peace, seeing no need for public criticism. Faced with myriad judgments laid solely on the action of public disagreement, popular bloggers collaboratively asserted the right to disagree and criticize in public. They stressed the irrelevance of motivations, if any, to the reasoning process. They were well prepared to approach the issue in terms of the "pathetic" Chinese character of acting mellow, worshiping hierarchy, and pacifism without principle:

When Chinese watch others quarrelling, all they care about is deportment, display of grace and amiableness, rather than being right or wrong. Quarreling and criticism are what they are. How can they be like hooking up with girls? [. . . In so doing,] people's attention is blocked off from the actual topic at stake [Daisangebiao, February 8, 2007].²

² All the online material quoted henceforth comes from URLs of either blogs or online magazines, which are cited in the format of [Source, date of publication]. It is clearly indicated in the immediate context if the quote comes from a comment at a blog post. All translations are by the author from Chinese. Alphabetically, the cited online sources are:
Daisangebiao: <http://www.wangxiaofeng.net>;
Drunkpiano: <http://www.drunkpiano-liuyu.net>;

The subsequent phase witnessed how linguistic categories, meant to guide and monitor participants' performance, formed through online interactions. Following the initial phase targeting traditional culture, they underscored that, to participate in discussion, one has to overcome influences of Chinese culture and domestic education. The thought process was referred to interchangeably as "independent thinking," "critical thinking" (*pipanxing sikao*), and other less succinct phrases. Logic was prominent in this discourse. One blogger told a print media interviewer that oriental philosophy differs from Western philosophy mainly in its lack of reasoning [Luo, March 4, 2006]. As for education, bloggers repetitively stressed that the Chinese system offers no opportunity to practice "thinking." A blogger observed acridly, "[it clearly revealed] how problematic our country's education is. It failed to place enough emphasis on Logic 101" [Daisangebiao, March 30, 2006]. In parallel, to consolidate their victory against general inertia from public confrontation, bloggers elevated the tough mentality of the minority as admirable and necessary for constructive discussion. In a post entitled "Why I am the public enemy," blogger Drunkpiano [March 9, 2006] celebrated comradeship between "the few":

There is a photo on Laoyao's [another blogger's] home page, in which he holds a board that reads "Anti-Three-ist: Anti-collectivity, Anti-morality, Anti-popular opinion." As it seems, I am not the only one that alienated myself from the people. I just want to say: Laoyao, when the board gets too heavy, let me give you a hand.

During 2006 and early 2007, argumentation revolved around validity of Chinese medicine, values in high art, attitudes toward sex workers, whether "eco-friendly" disposables live up to the name, and so forth. Like the debate topics, attributes of the adequate debater were mainly cast in cultural terms. The rhetoric gradually developed around the motif of "independent thinking," a phrase increasingly loaded with special connotations that stressed the ability to think despite China's larger, prevailing cultural defect for reasoning. A shift to a more politically charged rhetoric of normative debate took place from mid-2007 and throughout 2008, when a series of major political events occurred, sparking controversy in cyber-China.

This period saw rancorous online debates over a major local protest (against government-sanctioned chemical plant construction), Tibetan unrest, the Sichuan earthquake, and the Beijing Olympics, to name a few—in which people regarded the liberal bloggers' disapproval of the government's claims and practices as radical heresies. In response, the bloggers refined the ideal of the independent-

Han Han: <http://blog.sina.com.cn/twocold>;

Hecaitou: <http://hecaitou.net>;

Izaobao: <http://www.izaobao.org>;

Li Qingchen: <http://www.bullogger.com/blogs/guzhu>;

Lian Yue: <http://www.bullogger.com/blogs/lianyue>;

Luo Yonghao: www.luoyonghao.net;

Memedia: <http://memedia.cn>;

Mujun: <http://blog.future4ever.com/mujun>;

Wanglaoban: <http://www.bullogger.com/blogs/wanderlust>.

thinking debater as unhindered by state ideologies and media messages. In the diagnoses of actual arguments they considered problematic, bloggers cautioned that the party-state always intends to embody "the people," the motherland, and the society and that Chinese mass media function as its "throat and tongue." Liberal bloggers further renewed discourse on Chinese education, this time attacking it for molding uncritical receptors perfect for the totalizing system. The authoritarian state, as the discourse evolved, emerged as the fundamental cause for all factors inhospitable to independent thinkers. Taking a break from debates, a blogger made a historical analogy by quoting an essay on how the masses compulsively participated in the Cultural Revolution: "Behind all the [delirium in broad daylight] were the powerful deterrence of state apparatuses and the tragic figure of the independent thinker" [Lian, April 21, 2008]. Independent thinking now entailed two dimensions: (1) reasoning sensibility and skills and (2) independence of views. The latter was new, but the addition simultaneously politicized the former, which was previously developed from a more cultural domain.

Also starting during this period, negative labels with more political connotations such as "brain damaged," "brainwashed," and "50-cent" appeared frequently during the hot moments of debate. In essence, brain damaged and brainwashed stood respectively opposite to the two constituents of independent thinking. The brain-damaged debater was incapable of logical deduction and of suspending moral judgments; the brainwashed one spoke unwittingly in line with conventional dogmas. The two were related. To quote a youth-operated online news magazine: "[as information flows more freely,] people are no longer willing to be treated as a brain-damaged receptacle for [imposed] ideas, but as individuals who think independently" [Memedia, March 24, 2008]. Brain damage (lack of reasoning techniques) was taken to be an attendant effect of long-term brainwashing (indoctrination). Another odd term, "50-cent," referred to people hired secretly by the party-state in an attempt to guide online public opinion. They were allegedly given 50-cent renminbi per comment posted to praise and defend the state online.

This evolving discursive configuration is presented in Table 1. This phenomenal structure is a tool of SKAD. Inspired by Karl Mannheim's classical notion, it means to showcase how a problem on the public agenda is constructed (Keller, 2011, pp. 58–60). The stages outlined represent how the prominent features of the NDoD, as invoked in the liberal blogosphere, have developed. Therefore, the discursive content characterizing each stage is not mutually exclusive, as norms developing in early stages may be constantly reasserted during later ones.

Table 1. Phenomenal structure: Normative Discourse on Online Debate in China

Dimensions	Concrete Implementation		
	First stage (early 2006 to early 2007)	Second stage (mid-2007 to end of 2008)	Third stage (2008-)
Causes of inadequate debate performance	<p>Incorrect understanding of public debate caused by:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Traditional Chinese culture / "Chineseness" 	<p>A. Failure to exercise independent thinking caused by:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Traditional culture and national educational system 2. Education and mass media under state manipulation—that is, "brainwash" <p>B. Working as government undercover to manipulate public opinion—that is, being a "50-cent"</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Traditional culture and national educational system—that is, "brain damage" 2. Education and mass media under state manipulation—that is, "brainwash" <p>B. Working as government undercover to manipulate public opinion—that is, being a "50-cent"</p>
Responsibilities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. Chinese culture B. Individuals displaying inappropriate performances 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. Traditional culture and, later, the entire state-centralized social and political system B. Individuals lacking the motivation and hard work to counter the systemic influences and better themselves 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. Traditional culture and political system B. Individuals lacking the motivation and hard work to counter the systemic influences and better themselves
Need for action/problem-solving	<p>Learning to appreciate public contention, challenge to authorities, and minority positions</p>	<p>A. Learning independent thinking by mastering logic argumentation and develop independent opinions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Following advice from adequate debaters, observing and practicing debates 2. Being independent from mainstream opinion and conventional wisdoms 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learning independent thinking by mastering logic argumentation and develop independent opinions: 1. Following advice from adequate debaters, observing and practicing debates 2. Being independent from state-controlled education and mass media, and ultimately, from the stance of the state B. Learning to identify unworthy debaters—that is, the brain-damaged, the brainwashed, and the 50-cent
Speaker position/self-positioning	<p>The avant-garde debater with the right notion of public debate</p>	<p>The adequate debater capable of independent thinking</p>	
Subject position/other-positioning	<p>Other Chinese</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. The adequate debater agreeing with the speaker's line of argument in debates B. The sensible and self-responsible individual learning the trade C. The unworthy debater who poisons online debates—that is, the brain-damaged, the brainwashed, and the 50-cent 	
Values	<p>Open declaration of oppositional, or iconoclastic, opinions is a virtue</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> A. The correct line of argument is singular and arrives at the truth; independently thinking people reach this same conclusion. B. Everybody should be self-responsible and self-improving for public debate. C. Patience, tolerance, and mutual dialogue are not featured in assertions of normative debate. 	

Speaker Positions and Subject Positions

Discourses contain speaker positions from which legitimate speech emits. The cluster of discursive configurations implies what qualifications social actors must acquire to take on these speaker positions. They can be seen as self-positioning within a discursive utterance that assures, in a tautological way, the legitimacy of the discursive content. In the case of Chinese discourse on public debate, the speaker position is for “adequate” debaters who are “naturally” endowed with fair judgment of how debate should run. Put differently, NDoD—summaries, diagnoses, and prescriptions of problematic online debates—are uttered with a simultaneous legitimization of the speaker as a normative debater who appreciates public debate and/or who debates as an independent thinker, depending on the discourse.

Notably, the self-referential legitimacy of speaker position persists under the pretense of neutral standards specified in discourse. Many discursive resources were invested in consolidating the neutrality, and thus the authority, of these debate norms to general perceptions. This was achieved particularly by stressing their “universal acknowledgment”—universal meaning outside of today’s China. “There are two kinds of logic,” Han Han wrote sardonically in a particular rebuttal, “one is logic, the other Chinese logic” [January 22, 2007].³ Similarly, a derivative discourse assumed that people growing up in Chinese society tended to lack common sense (*changshi*), a consequence of not practicing independent thinking. Common sense, then, oddly, became something the masses set out to acquire.

Appearing natural and asserting the obvious, online NDoD created three subject positions: the adequate debater, the unworthy debater, and the learner. Luo Yonghao [04/08/06], an influential blogger, wrote:

I think there are three kinds of readers. The first kind is very clear-minded, who thinks [what I said] is an evident point with plain reasoning, and [asks] why [I] wasted time arguing with *shacha* [dumb asses]. The second kind does not differ from the *shacha* I criticized—however clearly I reason, it is useless, since they just keep wrangling with me [pointlessly]. But there is also a third kind. Although erring often, they keep trying hard to think and decide. I often write pieces criticizing *shacha*’s threads of argument, the positive significance of which lies in helping [this third kind of] people.

The first subject position hails the “clear-minded” person who signals as an adequate debater by always being on the same page as the speaker of NDoD. In actual debates, those who can perform properly follow the line of argument forged by popular liberal bloggers (major NDoD producers). The

³ This treatment very much smacks of the “derivative discourse” of Orientalism, in which non-Western intellectuals identify the essential character of their own people and catalogue its vices, measured against the “universal” Western counterpart (Chatterjee, quoted in Fitzgerald, 1996). Not at all necessarily corresponding to actuality, the discrepancy in “independent thinking” ability (itself discursively constructed) between the Chinese and people in democracies had to be constantly re-heightened in the discourse to fuel the Chinese debate norms. Further discussion of this important post-colonial aspect of the debate norms is beyond the scope of the present study.

taken-for-grantedness of this equation influences the power effects of discourse.

In the discourses propagating debate norms, certain types of people—those who allegedly exhibited symptoms of brain damage and brainwashing—were repeatedly deemed unworthy to engage. In so doing, an “other” was excluded from the game. Inviting feedback for their posted arguments, the bloggers always specified that only well-supported and reasoned responses were welcome: “Truth can be gleaned from lively debates—this works only when participants have basic thinking and judging capacities. [. . . A debate] devolves into a shouting match” when one party lacks them [Luo, April 8, 2006]. Particularly intriguing is that some internal voice’s disapproval of such censure in effect reinforced the normative ideal. “Be generous and patient with the youth,” pled one blogger, “many [of us] arrived here [as independent thinkers] after a long journey. Only that some remember it and some forget” [Wanglaoban, April 15, 2008]. Emphasizing “upward mobility,” the bloggers objectified the hierarchical structure of thinking capacity.

With the subject position of the unworthy debater came that of the adequate debater *in the making*. The relation between the two is evidenced in the counterarguments bloggers enjoyed publishing. In these posts, disagreeing comments received were periodically collected, each of these real-life examples provided with either a step-by-step rebuttal or a one-liner to reveal its latent absurdity. As shown in Luo’s quote, this was for the sake of the learner of thoughtful debate. In fact, more often than not, NDoD directly addressed this third kind of subject. They frequently used “you” as the addressee, giving cautions and instructions on practicing public debate and inviting critical evaluation of the hopeless, unworthy debater. Even in the occasional, harsh-sounding pieces in which “you” was derided as incompetent in his or her independent thinking, analyses and prescriptions were offered for self-improvement. For example, a long post entitled “Do you know why you are brain-damaged?” discredited new media consumption, urging serious book reading [Daisangebiao, August 24, 2008]. When “you” was not present in these writings, the subject position of the learner may also latently yet powerfully beckon. Consider the numerous texts addressing the wanting prototype as “Chinese,” standing for the unfortunate product of all harmful structural influences. Every reader on the other side of the screen, whereas nominally being Chinese, has the option of agreeing with the texts nonetheless, since this agreement enables her or him to rise above the unenlightened peers, simultaneously undertaking self-training following the propagated norms.

Social Actors

Popular liberal bloggers, as already described, were the major players in the discursive field. They effortlessly took on the speaker position of the adequate debater from the beginning in 2006. It is noteworthy that they tended to assert debate norms (righteousness of anticonformism or independent thinking) amid debates they themselves participated in. The debate rhetoric always gravitated toward positions taken by the liberal bloggers, implicitly empowering their arguments. Hence, the sequentially incorporated features of the ideal independent-thinking debater—more cultural, skill-centered references followed by more political, viewpoint-anchored criteria—corresponded to the topics of actual debates over time. When the liberal bloggers opposed discrimination against sex workers, for example, they cautioned meddling in moral judgment, lest “traditional Chinese culture” creep into their reasoning. When critiquing

the government-campaigned benefits of holding the Olympics, these bloggers tended to accentuate independent thinking as meaning immunity from the authoritative preaching of the state. The undertone was that if a person adapted to norms, he or she would follow their arguments and reach the same conclusions.

SKAD, however, does not presume the power of discourse from within. To what extent common Chinese Internet users⁴ were recruited by the NDoD and subject to their regulation requires empirical inquiry of these actors. Within the Chinese online population, every year about 20% are newcomers. The varied durations of exposure, conditioned by ever-changing access routines, ensures that individual socialization into the online debate culture is anything but uniform. This section reveals some major patterns of how common users—especially people in their teens and 20s that constituted the majority of the Chinese online population (see Figure 1)—interacted with the NDoD. The three subject positions laid out limited options for the audience and prospective recruits: the adequate debater who mastered the trade and who necessarily agrees with the polemic points of the liberal bloggers in actual debates; the learner who may not think and argue properly for the moment but who invests in self-improvement; and the hopeless debater who pollutes the online environment and utters rubbish.

Many people readily condemned the unworthy debater, indicating their rejection of the third subject position—and also their attempts to claim the speaker position—generated in discourse. This move also helped them gain an upper hand in actual debates. People freely assessed their rivals in this discursive frame by persistently seeking in others' arguments traces of manipulation by the aforementioned baneful forces. Even more vigorously than with the liberal bloggers, labels such as "brainwashed" and "brain-damaged" multiplied in the hands of common users, through which NDoD rippled across in the cyber-debating scenes. "50-cent" also proliferated as a sweeping accusation for pro-state individuals. Observed insightfully by Han Han [February 7, 2010]:

As 50-cents rise to prominence, many gloriously correct [*guanghuizhengque*, used in the socialist propagandist vocabulary for orthodox exemplars] persons open their mouths and are immediately regarded as 50-cents, even though they speak for free. . . . Once [the government] instituted 50-cents, in addition to the bad reputation earned domestically and overseas, all [its] existing supporters are suspect of being 50-cents.

Accordingly, many endeavored to take on the adequate debater position. To demonstrate the independence of their own thoughts, these people realized the discursive configuration by standing up for the liberal bloggers' points of view and by sometimes explicitly declaring their oppositional stances against the brainwashing entities—that is, the state apparatuses. More, it seems to me, considered themselves learners, especially when absent from actual online antagonism. On cooperative instead of competitive occasions, people discuss how to think independently.

⁴ The divide between popular liberal bloggers and common users is analytical rather than empirical. In the real world, the network structure of influence and communicative patterns can hardly produce two groups with clearly separated mentalities and repertoires of actions.

Independent thinking is also characterized by the impossibility of self-diagnosis, which makes the position of the humble learner easier to adopt, thus sponsoring the propagation of the discourse. In a forum discussion, someone explained:

As soon as you realize that you have been simply copying ideas instead of processing them yourself, you enter the realm of independent thinking. In other words, the moment you exercise the ability of independent thinking, you realize [your prior failure at it]. (Sounds like tautology, right?) . . . It seems I began to have a little [ability of independent thinking]. But it feels like a fish bone was stuck in my throat—I can utter a bit of something, but not systematically. [It's] only fragments of thoughts. [Li, June 12, 2008]

Observing online debates, many Internet users deemed it necessary to educate themselves on this capacity. They struggled with the nascent epiphany and tried to embrace it. The online Chinese societal obsession with independent thinking is evident: if you google the English phrase "independent thinking," the engine returns the most popular hits: "independent thinking quotes," "definition," and "independent thinker." In comparison, inputting the Chinese phrase at Baidu.com, the largest Chinese search engine, yields top hits such as "constitution of," "power of," "learn to," and "be good at" independent thinking.⁵

Readers left comments for bloggers that they considered vanguard tutors and received numerous instructions, one of which, illustrative of the tool kit for an independent thinker in training, read: "Sorting through your value system, logical deduction, collecting relevant information as much as you can. . . . To keep thinking independently is not only a matter of courage, but a labor-intensive job in need of diligence" [Drunkpiano, March 31, 2008]. Other more practical suggestions included reading "serious" books, watching others debate, and practicing. In tandem came a flush of plentiful online resources about logical holes and deceptive traps in reasoning, translated from English-language sources.

In sum, as common Internet users answered to NDoD's interpellation, by performing as the purported adequate debater, the learner, or oscillating between the two subject positions, as well as by denouncing the unworthy debater, this debate culture with its indigenous values took hold and thrived. However, suspicion of the validity of these debate norms always existed and, via online interactions, scaled up into saliency.

First, many ordinary people found it hard to handle name-calling and to sustain constructive dialogues, and they expressed their discomfort and disappointment throughout cyberspace. When one posted at a question-answering site, puzzling why in discussions people always throw labels at those who disagree, a passerby comforted the poster: "Don't get stressed. Either you strike back, or you ignore [the names], or, simply don't participate anymore—this has been my personal choice" (BaiduKnows, 2011).

⁵ This was done on October 22, 2010.

More actively, the pretense of neutrality of debate norms was targeted as questionable and, specifically, the import of brainwashing as dubious. Representative of an increasingly common sentiment, one comment read: "Some people . . . thought only being unconditionally antigovernment was 'independent thinking,' 'objective attitude,' and very 'cool.' . . . Your so-called 'independent thought' and 'spirit of doubt' are themselves repetitions of the Western clichés" [Izaobao, March 1, 2008]. The remainder of this section illustrates a recent (partial) transformation of the debate discourse fueled by various forces, a major one being the growth of reflexive, veteran Internet users who began to check the popular liberal bloggers.

The year 2008 was tumultuous for China. Thanks to their continual and intense engagement both online and offline, Chinese liberal bloggers gained a more prominent presence in the public discursive space, expanding their reader and support base. Meanwhile, as the distribution of stances shifted, the notion of being among the independent-thinking minority gradually lost its appeal. On the one hand, some bloggers reaffirmed their privileged status by placing more stress on reasoning skills, suggesting that disapproval of the state apparatuses alone did not make one an independent thinker. For example, Daisangebiao [February 11, 2009] asked those who penetrated the Chinese Internet filtering system to stop self-congratulating, since they lacked the capability to process uncensored messages. On the other hand, people outside the liberal camp began to criticize the simple equation of holding liberal views or being on the right with independent thinking by pointing out that the former may also be the result of brainwashing, only by different sets of influences. As a rising online commentator wrote, "a person prone to [brainwashing] is conveniently brainwashed first by opinion A, then by opinion B. He can never exercise his own assessment" [Mujun, June 5, 2010]. Such scrutiny of the online liberal figures was joined by nationalist and other pro-state forces (in more elaborate versions), popularizing terms such as *youfen* (meaning rightist people without thinking ability) and *meifen* (meaning "U.S.-penny," referring to guns hired by Western anti-China groups), which in effect counterbalanced the established vocabulary implicitly biased toward the liberal end. As the latecomers contested the ideological preconception of brainwashing, critical reasoning gained more acknowledgment as the ultimate foundation of independent thinking. In short, as it backfired on its initiators, the NDoD also strengthened, because a much wider range of players in discursive spaces became involved.

Infrastructures of Discourse Production

Infrastructures of discourse production can include all present in the historical conjuncture, such as sociopolitical structures, institutional arrangements, and cultural resources, within which certain social actors are endowed with speaker positions and the specific discursive configuration is produced and established (see Table 1). I discuss particularly the following components.

The communicative structure: After online debates migrated from BBS onto blogs, turf rules for public debate were initiated by popular bloggers. Compared with the older BBS, the blogosphere came to possess several structural characteristics that facilitated this phenomenon. First, in terms of medium, BBS belonged to everyone and no one, tending to be very anarchic discursive places (Li, 2010). IDs pop up and disappear sporadically in some discussion threads. They lack cumulative records of personal pasts that are easily accessible and comprehensible to passersby. Even for those who mingle a lot in one forum,

only the other inhabitants of this enclave recognize their trustworthiness and authority. Bloggers, on the other hand, have more stable and perpetual online identities (Mo, 2006). They keep consolidating their online selves via ongoing constructions of their personal portfolios that center not on topics of discussion but on their unfolding lives. Moreover, as their readers multiply, the bloggers enjoy an established network position for broadcasting to a wide and relatively stable audience (CNNIC, 2009). In China, the blogosphere has achieved unusual popularity. In contrast, users of BBS remain relatively limited, hitting their peak volume in mid-2006, when 43.2% of the online population reported use of the application. Lately this percentage has stabilized around 30%. Alternatively, since 2005—arguably year zero of the Chinese blog—personal blogs have mushroomed at an astonishing rate. At mid-2010, 231.4 million, nearly 60% of Internet users (17.52% of China's total population), owned a blog, among whom two out of three actively posted (CNNIC, n.d.). Moreover, the Chinese blogosphere attracts an expansive reader base. A mid-2009 survey showed that 72.4% of the online population read blogs at least once per week (CNNIC, 2009).

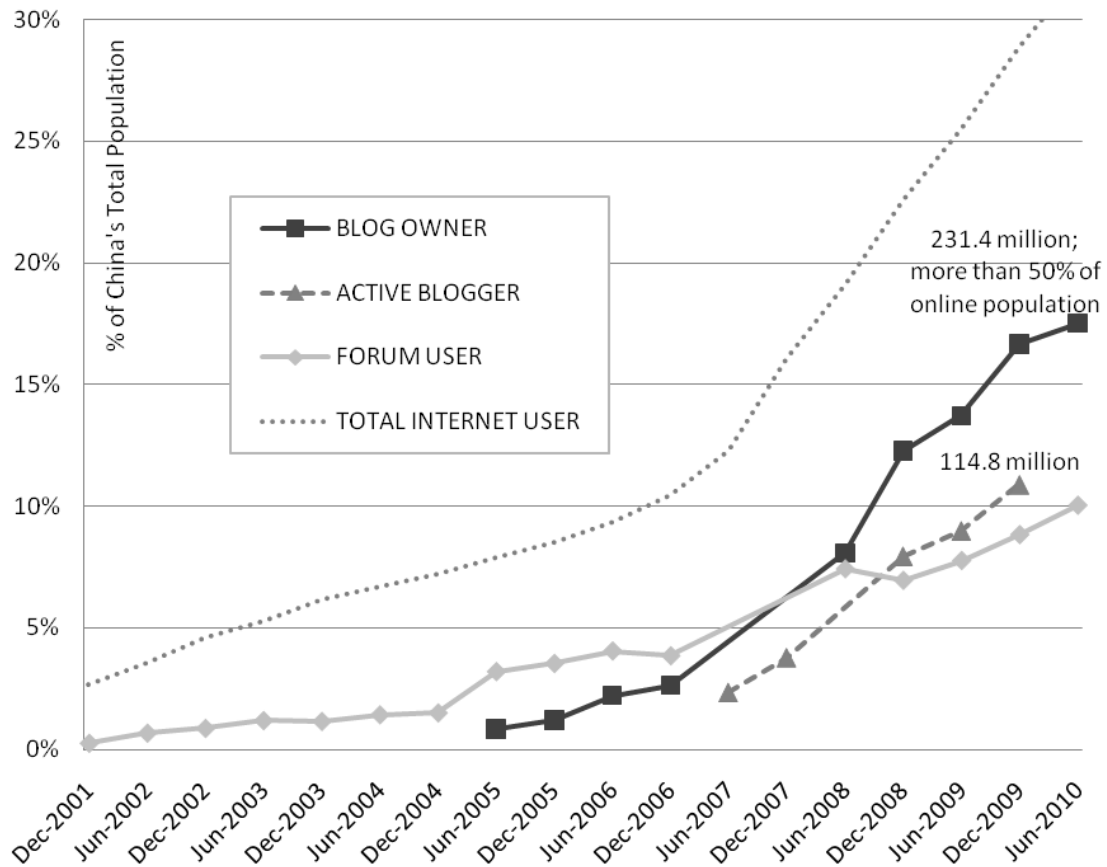


Figure 2. BBS and blog usage in China.
(Compiled from CNNIC annual reports.)

Discursive resources of speakers: A group of popular bloggers, loosely self-identified as “liberal” or “right,” initiated the production of NDoD. In the Chinese context, liberal and right signify differently than in the West. Formally speaking, the Chinese liberal/right camp values individual liberty and calls to limit government power (Feng, 2010); in the popular Chinese understanding, its membership is marked by being critical of the state’s position. In the years when NDoD were being formulated (2006–2008), these bloggers were among the minority in terms of viewpoints. Both aspects worked to the advantage of the discursive content, which calls for an independent-thinking debater. Furthermore, mostly media practitioners and scholars by training, they bound together to constitute a prominent discursive force. The debate norms could never appeal without the vivid debates—unfolded in front of other readers and left to their judgments—in which liberal bloggers forcefully laid out their (on the whole) cogent, witty, eye-opening arguments. The perceived authority of these normative claims was further enforced by mutual

referencing among bloggers. "Why do I click into blogs of [a long list of liberal bloggers] every day when I open my computer?" reads a comment. "It is all because of you guys, sentence by sentence, word by word, I gradually acquired the ability of independent thinking" [Daisangebiao, May 23, 2010]. Similarly, the later weakening and revision of NDoD have to do with the popularization of liberal thoughts that made it almost the new mainstream and with the maturation of other portions of the online population in terms of viewpoints, argumentation, and articulation.

Historical-political environment: The emergent independent-thinker discourse resonated effectively with the larger environment in which the Chinese Web-surfing youth lived. It helped them to confront and make sense of their prior experiences—unpleasant memories in formal education, insipid and circuitous media messages, paranoid online censorship, and so on. In many cases, reinterpreting their surroundings in this new lens, individuals discovered an alternative source of agency that empowered and reinvigorated them. Many Chinese took the project rather personally. In an extremely popular online activity called Treehole, ordinary people volunteered to share their life stories, most of which were identically structured under the "journey toward independent thinking" framework. Eventually the hosting blogger summarized that such courageous self-scrutiny brings one closer to independent thinking [Hecaitou, February 10, 2010]. In myriad participatory acts of this nature, the NDoD continuously reframed individual anecdotes, historical narratives, and social commentaries and, in turn, itself became increasingly enriched, animated, and pervasive.

Conclusion

The prevalent research scheme for the Internet and political change in China remains fixated on the direct contentions between the government and the people. Filtered by this oppositional frame are rich social processes of how certain Internet uses may have facilitated cultural changes—such as increasing critical attitudes toward the government—among ordinary users over time. This study examines how the Chinese debate culture emerged from online contestations among the people themselves. It takes the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse, foregrounding heterogeneity and multifaceted power struggles among the people. It also provides a longitudinal account of Chinese Internet use and cultural transformation, which is still uncommon in the existing literature.

The rise of the Chinese debate culture called for the independent-thinking debater, which entailed two normative aspects. The more abstract aspect pushed for a specifically defined independent self that had profound influence on how deliberations were viewed culturally. Scholars on Chinese deliberative institutions pointed out that the Maoist and Confucian traditions understand the flow of influence to be from the public to the private, and thus deliberation is seen to "reduce social conflicts and the level of opposition, and facilitate compliance with and implementation of state policy" (He, 2006, p. 135). This is the case with deliberative practices in both the high political arena of the National People's Congress and the Chinese Political Consultative Conference and with some small-scale, local-level, temporary institutions set up by the government in recent years (Rosenberg, 2006). In contrast, the online NDoD called for the self-standing and -directing individual, marked by a thinking process clear of all "colonizing" influences from entities external to the individual—including the government, media, the education system, and even peers. Insisting on maintaining such a self as a prerequisite to participation in public

discussion, and effectively hailing people into its subject positions, NDoD worked to reconfigure the prevalent public-private relationship in deliberation in favor of democratic governing.

The second, rather down-to-earth aspect of the emergence of Chinese debate culture concerned reasoning sensibility and skills, emphasizing that certain civic qualities are essential to self-government and must be affirmed and strenuously nurtured. Indeed, Chinese popular liberal bloggers often asserted current civic culture as inadequate for potential political change. Han Han [April 14, 2008] went so far as to say, "The biggest obstacle on the path to democracy is the people." The NDoD counseled appreciation and pursuit of certain modes of public discussion. Seized with a deep anxiety that their immediate surroundings had failed in teaching them the proper means for thought assembly and articulation, many Chinese Internet users under age 30 applied extra attention to formulating and polishing arguments in order to be respected and taken seriously. The societal interest in self-presentation as an independent thinker also induced agentive, personal deliberations of public affairs. These are civic competences widely accepted in liberal democracies as equipment for civic participation and deliberation.⁶ A major setback of Chinese debate culture was that its concentration on self-cultivation devoted little attention to the collective maintenance of a friendly, and thus more democratic, milieu.

The peculiar power of the imperative prescriptions in NDoD, first, lies in sabotaging whatever values or stances are perceived as dominant at the time. In China, it slyly undermined the state ideology through asserting a general critical distance from the authoritative position (note its difference from directly refuting actual authoritative accounts of specific issues). Similarly, it later duly targeted unthoughtful objections to any state-sanctioned phenomena as such objections rose in vogue. In effect, the normative debate discourse potentially fostered the diversification, not concentration, of viewpoints. At the same time, it ideally relied on critical understanding and reasoning competence as a common ground where people could reconcile. Therefore, instead of rendering isolated fragments, this normative rhetoric envisioned a civic community that bonds all independent selves through the norms of speech and debate. This new sense of sociality is already evident on the Chinese Internet. People self-conceived as independent thinkers warmly welcome competent strangers as one of their own. Many online dating profiles seek "independent-thinking" life partners.

Indeed, the Chinese debate norms brought forth a speech realm alternative to the long-established one that had been permeating and regenerating in media and other public institutions. This latter realm is significant mainly for its performative dimension, which means social actors, indifferent to the actual meanings, ritually produce and circulate authoritative texts to signal their participation in the party-state system (Yurchak, 2005). In contrast, the debate norms forged an alternative realm grounded in the constative dimension, a realm where all texts face close inspection and potential overturns. They implored people to read *literally* even authoritative texts (news reports, official documents and speeches,

⁶ Not the focus of this study but worth serious attention is the blatant scientism and sexism in the NDoD that carry stereotypes of the inferior female and those without formal training in sciences (*wenkesheng*). The Chinese case provides a raucous footnote to a general critique of the normative Habermasian public sphere in that the deliberative standards favor privileged social groups and put the unprivileged at even greater disadvantage (Dahlgren, 2006; Fraser, 1990).

etc.) and to remark on their logical and factual flaws. Grassroots-level nationalist and pro-state voices, by applying the normative rhetoric to its liberal initiators, in consequence partook in this speech realm and had to rework their own arguments around logical linkages and substantial evidence. In sum, the emerging NDoD interacted with varied social actors on the Chinese Internet, carving out a speech community more accommodating to democratic governing.

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