Elaine J. Yuan, **The Web of Meaning: The Internet in a Changing Chinese Society**, Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2021, 200 pp., $50.00 (hardcover).

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The Web of Meaning: The Internet in a Changing Chinese Society, by Elaine J. Yuan, is a comprehensive analysis of the role of the Internet in recent social changes taking place in China, with innovative methods that bring together the analysis of big data and critical discourse. China and the Internet is always a popular research area, with many books produced over the last two decades, but Yuan's book is still outstanding among them. It is a theoretically deep and historically rich account of this subject, challenging many conventional frameworks used to understand the Internet and Chinese societal transition.

The Web of Meaning provides an excellent example of addressing the Internet and Chinese society, two simultaneously moving targets. The cases being analyzed are fairly recent, mostly within the past 10 years, but they are situated very well in the historical context of China's economic reforms and the embrace of globalization. This book sees the changing discursive practices that form new social relations as a result of the decentralization of state power, the expansion of market logic, and social stratification. It spends a half chapter providing a rich historical review of the transformation in the cultural realm under China's social and economic reform. In particular, the marketization of media, which paved the way for the centrality of the Internet in social life, has been given detailed accounts. In the chapters that follow, the changing concept of privacy is seen as a result of the changing boundaries between public and private, and the associated institutions and relationships, resulting from the growing individualization out of the marketization of society. The Diaoyu Islands dispute is by no means a stand-alone event that was only made possible by Weibo. In fact, the author traced the development of popular nationalism and demonstrated with detailed analysis of how this instance of cybernationalism is deeply rooted in the frustration over those in power and increasing social inequality. The case of Alibaba could only happen within China's transition to market economy and becoming an integral part of the global market.

This book makes a significant theoretical contribution to our understanding of how the Internet plays its part in China's recent social change. Conceptualizing the Internet as a symbolic space that represents multiple social actors in contemporary China, Yuan creatively applies field theory to the Internet in China, where multiple parties are displaying and mobilizing their symbolic powers to define new social categories and identities.

As Yuan points out in the introduction, this book challenges popular dichotomies such as state and society, and liberation and control, as the conventional framework to examine the Internet in China. For a long time, the discourse of the Chinese Internet has been dominated by a group of liberal-leaning intellectuals,
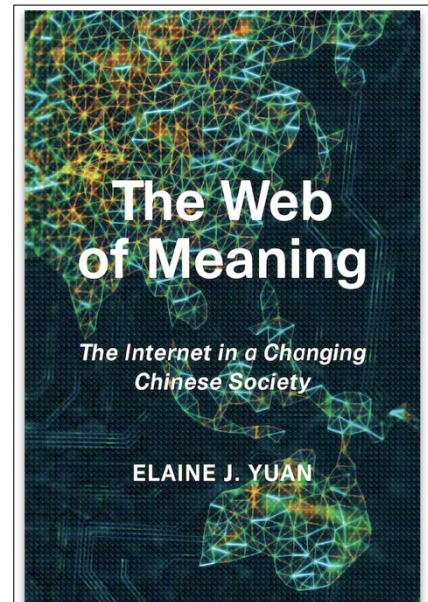
focusing on the potential of the Internet to bring about civil society in China. This model that views the Internet as the opposite of state power overlooked more critical issues that involve class differences and social inequality by viewing the Internet, or "netizens," as a homogeneous entity and the state as a homogeneous power and suppressor. However, in the analysis of the three cases, Yuan has demonstrated that, in fact, what has been understood as the power of civil society really just represents middle class interests. The voices of the working class and those who have less discursive power on the Internet are generally underrepresented in the middle-class-led public discourse on the Internet. The examples in the first chapter, the emerging discourse of *diaosi* and *shamate,* represent the socially and economically marginalized, which could be ideal cases to show the widening social gap. However, when they first appeared in online discourse, they were highly despised, and only when more influential users adapted the term for self-mockery did they become widely accepted. These two examples illustrate how discursive formation and symbolic meanings are not equally representative of the voices of all members of society.

The central concept of this book is the network. Here the meaning of "network" is three-fold: technological, political, and market, represented by three case studies that outline three major social tensions in transition: public and private, social groups and nation state, and production and consumption. The first case, about how the public talks about privacy on social media, represents a technological network, illustrating the changing boundary between public and private under the transition to a market-oriented economy. The Internet has enabled the discussion of privacy, and, as shown in the analysis, such discussion has always been accompanied by mentioning technologies, such as digital devices and platforms, in which the practices of privacy take place. The second case, cybernationalism, represents a political network connecting individuals that are creating diverse meanings of national identity. Through the analysis of distinct topics from Weibo posts, Yuan has illustrated how network communication enables the construction of pluralistic meanings of national identity, challenging the conventional understanding of nationalism as a state-orchestrated ideology, and showing how Internet-based nationalism could even challenge the status quo. For example, people were using this opportunity to express their desire for social equality and justice—by calling the "city inspectors" (*chengguan*) to fight against the Japanese as a way to call for the awareness of how unlicensed street vendors, the poor and powerless lower class, were often brutally treated by them. The third case, Alibaba, China's leading e-commerce corporation, belongs to the network market, which is a product of the centrality of market in the lives of Chinese people. The insertion of "network" into the market has produced new symbolic meanings around activities of market exchange. In Yuan's analysis, we see how the network economy discourse has served to deconstruct the meanings associated with traditional market activities that have a clear distinction between buying and selling, with a central role of capital or corporations in it, but has given new meanings to entrepreneurs and "prosumers," a blurred identity of the two sides of traditional market economy, as they all become nodes of a network.

What distinguishes this book from others about the Internet and contemporary China is that it takes a holistic approach to examining the different cases, which enables us to see how social institutions are shaped by discourses across different domains. It also challenges the "public sphere" model of analyzing the Chinese Internet. Moreover, seeing the Internet as a symbolic space moves the analysis beyond simply attributing the changing dynamics of the Internet to institutional factors, such as media ownership and state control. With the centrality of discourse, we can see how multiple social actors play their roles, which do not often take a side of "control" or "resistance."

This book is also methodologically innovative. Overarched by a critical discourse analysis, the three case studies are based on very different research methods and approaches that are appropriate for the nature of the individual cases. It shows how much a critical and cultural studies scholar can benefit from using computational methods as a tool. Big Data has largely expanded the capacity of researchers to analyze large volumes of data that can be harvested from the Internet. The methods associated with such huge datasets would enable us to see the big picture better, but there are still challenges in working with large corpuses of textual data with computer-generated models to automatically categorize them in meaningful ways. Yuan has provided an excellent example of how a critical and cultural approach is not just serving to supplement big data analytics but has a much more central role—to provide a closer look at the texts for meanings that are deeply embedded in the context. A critical discourse analysis could capture the multilevel dynamics of Internet discourse and society. Through analyzing discursive practices, this study has successfully recorded major social changes at different levels.

Even though the results cannot be completed without critical discourse analysis, the author made innovative modification of unsupervised machine learning methods (topic modeling), by pretraining and labeling a set of Weibo posts, turning them into a training data set, and performing LDA modeling as supervised learning model, which largely improved the interpretability of the topic modeling results.

The Web of Meaning is certainly among the best works about the Internet and contemporary China that documented the changes of the Web 2.0 era. Like Guobin Yang's *The Power of the Internet in China* (Yang, 2009), which has a comprehensive and detailed documentation and theorization of the Chinese Internet and society that is largely based on the era before social media, Yuan has made a great contribution to theorize the practices of the Web 2.0 era. It would be an ideal reference for researchers who are interested in understanding the complexities of the cultural landscape in contemporary China, and for those who are interested in doing mixed-methods research with computational approaches and qualitative analysis.

Reference

Yang, G. (2009). *The power of the Internet in China: Citizen activism online*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.