

# 'Following is power, Surrounding Gaze changes China' - On the Chinese Blogosphere



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## Chapter 1 Introduction

*‘Following is power, Surrounding Gaze changes China.’<sup>1</sup>*

*More participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action (...) social media have become coordinating tools for nearly all of the world’s political movements (...) communicative freedom is good for political freedom. (Shirky 2011)*

On 22 April 2011, a Friday morning, Yao Jiaxin, the student murderer, was finally sentenced to death<sup>2</sup>. Yao knocked down a peasant woman named Zhang Miao while driving on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2010. Zhang sustained only slight injuries from the traffic accident. However, when Yao got out of his car and saw Zhang jotting down his license plate number, he stabbed Zhang eight times to death with the knife he brought with him, because he feared “Peasants would be pestering.”

In China, where the death penalty is meted out much more often than in any other country in the world and the idea of “Repay a life for a life” is so deeply entrenched, few people expected Yao to escape capital punishment, especially when this is clearly a murder out of malice rather than a manslaughter. However, on the News Channel of China Central Television (CCTV), the state broadcaster in China often viewed as the mouthpiece of the central government, Yao wept in an exclusive interview for his tragic fall from a genius pianist to a perpetrator and implored for mercy and forgiveness. A Chinese criminal psychologist also rationalized Yao’s felony on the state television, which sparked a new public furor over the broadcaster’s questionable stance. In addition, many exceptions are made by the judiciary for Yao’s case. When Yao was on open trial on March 23, 400 students were invited to court. The court claimed that due to the publicity before the trial, it is necessary to consult the public opinion and take it into account when passing verdict. So for the first time in recent years, the court polled the 400 students present for their take on the issue.

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<sup>1</sup> “关注就是力量,围观改变中国” (Guan Zhu jiu shi liliang, Wei Guan gaibian zhongguo.) A widely circulated internet meme in China. It was first used by Southern Weekend (the largest weekly newspaper in China, known for its investigative journalism) to conclude the democratic power that the Chinese grassroots netizens had demonstrated by blogging during the year 2010. (With reference to <http://www.worldling.cn/u/driftergu/Blog.aspx/t-193>)

<sup>2</sup> All the online incidents cited in this study are edited summaries based on related information retrieved from Sina Weibo (a leading micro-blogging service in China, which will be detailed in Chapter 2) during September 2010-July 2011.

It's not surprising that the poll shows the majority in court are in favor of giving Yao a second chance, as most of the students come from Yao's college.

This quickly aroused a heated online condemnation. Netizens mobilized human-flesh search engines<sup>3</sup> to find out the background of Yao. It is said that his father is a secondary division level veteran. The car he drove was a gift from his father, which is a luxury for most Chinese families. Many netizens cannot help but ask why CCTV speaks on behalf of afflicters rather than the afflicted? Is it because they belong to the privileged class? If Yao were a peasant's son, would their voices be heard? A consistent and powerful public voice quickly came into being: Yao doesn't deserve to live! And finally, the grassroots won and the internet was a buzz with cheers for the victory of the public opinion.

Although it has been in China for only a few decades, the Internet's impact on China's politics has been highly visible just as illustrated in the example cited above. The Internet has enabled Chinese grassroots individuals to take over large portions of public discourse that have formerly been closely controlled by the semiotic power of the party-state (Zhou 2005). In a country where the government has defended its prerogative of defining meaning for decades this in itself is no small feat. However, what requires further investigation is the mechanisms by which the Internet has led to political changes. This is especially important in the case of China, where the regime remains authoritarian.

Chinese blogosphere, as a part of Chinese virtual public sphere, is "turning into an arena for political debate" (Schlæger 2011). As Schlæger observes, the role of Chinese blogosphere as an arena for political debate stands in sharp contrast to the Chinese traditional media which, not surprisingly, usually present the officially acceptable version of social incidents, and public debate does not really take place in the newspapers or on TV. In that context, the blogosphere with its capability of user generated content provides opportunities for expression of critical opinions that would previously have been forbidden in the public sphere (Schlæger 2011). To be sure, blogs do bring new political dynamics into China's public sphere. This study conducts an investigation of various types of discourses produced in Chinese blogosphere, so as to detect its mechanisms and democratic potentials. The case under study is Sina Weibo, a representative of newly emerged micro-blogging services in China.

## **2.1 Research questions and methodology**

### **Research questions**

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<sup>3</sup> Human-flesh search engines is a Chinese phenomenon: they are a form of online vigilante justice in which Internet users hunt down and punish people who have attracted their wrath. The goal is to get the targets of a search fired from their jobs, shamed in front of their neighbors, run out of town. It's crowd-sourced detective work, pursued online — with offline results. (With reference to <http://baike.baidu.com/view/542894.htm>)

This study is organized around a set of research questions:

1. What are the contexts of the Chinese blogosphere? Answering this question can help understand the conjuncture from which the central research topic of this study has generated. The Chinese Blogosphere is not only the result of the internet technology, but also the result of long historical, social and cultural processes that contemporary China has gone through. Only in studying and theorizing those contexts, can we understand what the Chinese blogosphere itself is.
2. What are the mechanisms of the Chinese blogosphere? The answer to this question is significant for understanding how the Chinese blogosphere works as a discursive public sphere in an authoritarian regime like China. This question will be tackled at two different levels: at the micro level, by a case study of Sina Weibo, I try to figure out the mechanisms of a specific micro-blogging service; at the macro-level, the unique mechanisms that the Chinese blogosphere employs to realize its democratic potential will be investigated.
3. What are the democratic changes that the Chinese blogosphere has led to? What's the point of telling a story the conclusion of which is you can't change anything? As argued by Grossberg (Gao, Feng & Chen 2010), Cultural studies is committed to producing knowledge that may help to change the world. So, it is important for us to investigate the changes brought to China's society by the blogosphere.

## Methodology

The methodology developed for this study mainly revolves around internet ethnographic field work as well as field work in offline China. As a method, internet ethnographic field work can be faster, simpler, and less expensive than ethnography, and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews (Kozinets, 2002). Moreover, as far as this study is concerned, most of the data about the Chinese blogosphere can only be obtained from the Internet, so it is natural that I use internet ethnographic field work as the main method for collecting data. The general process of my internet ethnographic field work consists of 3 steps:

### 1. Gaining entry to the Chinese blogosphere

There are a wide range of choices of online communal forms, including blogs, web-rings, chat rooms, SMS (short message services), game spaces, bulletin boards, and mailing lists. However, I match my research questions and interests to the blogosphere and the Chinese blogosphere is the main field where I conduct my field work. Before beginning formal data collection in the Chinese blogosphere, I first initiated contact as a participant of two leading blogging services in China: Netease Blog<sup>4</sup> and Sina Weibo<sup>5</sup>, with the former a representative of personal blogs in China, and the latter a representative of micro-blogs (the equivalent of Twitter).

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<sup>4</sup> With reference to <http://shy2005mp2007.blog.163.com/>

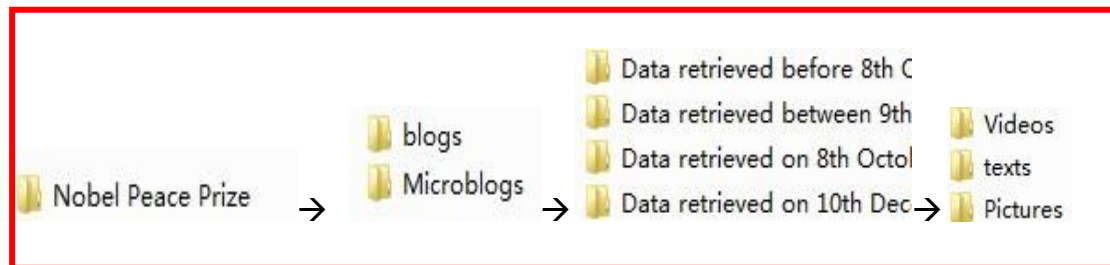
<sup>5</sup> With reference to <http://weibo.com/275410390/profile/>

I started my personal blogging at Netease Blog on 16th June 2006, the second year of the emergence of blogging in China<sup>6</sup>, and my micro-blog at Sina Weibo was started on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2010, about one year after the service was launched in August 2009<sup>7</sup>. I post blogs regularly on these two blogging services. So far, I have made 565 friends at my Netease blog and 333 followers at Sina Weibo. By blogging and communicating with my followers and other bloggers, I have accumulated rich experiences both as a blogger and an observer in the Chinese blogosphere.

## 2. Data collection

The methods I use to collect data when conducting online ethnographic fieldwork in the Chinese blogosphere include observation, screen-printing, downloading, and online interview with some prominent bloggers. When I find some data interesting, in the beginning I usually conduct a long term observation to judge if it is really relevant to my research. When I have decided that this data is valuable, I would collect the data by downloading or screen printing and then label the data in a systematic manner. In order to make my observation grounded, I do my data collection in a continuous manner as long as new insights are being generated. The following example illustrated in figure 1.1 is how I label the data collected for one case in this paper: the Nobel Peace Prize case<sup>8</sup> in a systematic manner.

Figure 1.1<sup>9</sup>:



In a root folder named “Nobel Peace Prize”, I store all the data about Nobel Peace Prize that I have collected. This root folder has two folders at the subdirectory level: “blogs” and “micro-blogs”, containing the data that I collected from blogs and micro-blogs respectively. At the subdirectory level of both the folder “blogs” and “micro-blogs”, four folders are listed containing data retrieved in different periods of the Nobel Peace Prize incident: “data retrieved before 8<sup>th</sup> October 2010”, “data retrieved on 8<sup>th</sup> October 2010”, “data retrieved between 8<sup>th</sup> October 2010 and 10<sup>th</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Although still debatable, 2005 is generally regarded as the year of the emergence of blogs in China with the establishment of the first blog service Blogchina (With reference to <http://www.blogchina.com/> ).

<sup>7</sup> See the first annual report of Chinese Weibo (<http://wenku.baidu.com/view/7fe75c88d0d233d4b14e6976.html>)

<sup>8</sup> A case study will be elaborated later in this chapter, revolving around a Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo winning the Nobel Peace Prize 2010.

<sup>9</sup> For all the figures in this paper: English translated version of the whole figure is given when necessary, or, only the relevant points are marked out and translated if necessary.

December 2010” and “data retrieved on 10<sup>th</sup> December 2010”<sup>10</sup>. Further at the subdirectory of each of these four folders, three folders are listed containing data of different media types: “videos”, “texts” and “pictures”.

According to Kozinets (2002), the limitations of internet ethnographic field work draw from its more narrow focus on online communities, its inability to offer the full and rich detail of lived human experience, the need for researcher interpretive skill, and the lack of informant identifiers present in the online context that leads to difficulty generalizing results to groups outside the online community sample. However, these limitations can be ameliorated somewhat by careful use of convergent data collection methods that bridge offline and online research in a systematic manner (Kozinets 2002). This is why I also conduct offline interviews with some bloggers and try to understand them and their blogging by face to face communication. All the data in this study are cited with the approval of the interviewees.

### **3. Data analysis**

Distinct from data mining and content analysis, internet ethnographic field work is a method that emphasizes the cultural contextualizing of online data. This makes data analysis a crucial part of this research. I analyze various discourses produced in the Chinese blogosphere to examine how meanings are constructed at different levels of a discourse in a rich context and to detect the embedded power relations.

Discourse is not constructed in a vacuum: in addition to the text, there is the environment in which the text is produced as well as the wider social practice to which it belongs (Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 68). Blommaert (2005: 56) proposes more contextualizing possibilities brought by some “forgotten” contexts which function beyond the discourse and social structure, thus offering better prospects for critical analysis. These contexts are not features of single texts, but of larger economies of communication and contextualization.

In this study, the potential of the blogosphere for opening up public discourse cannot be fully evaluated if the context in which it is produced is ignored and if issues of power involved in this context are not addressed. So, when conducting discourse analysis, I try to account for those various discourses as contextualized activities rather than as objects. To be specific, I conduct discourse analysis at three different contextual levels: first, at the discourse level, I interpret the discourse with the help of its preceding and following contexts; second, I take the whole Chinese language online community<sup>11</sup> as a context, by examining some related discourses like other reports on the same day, to obtain more background information. Moreover, I also try to count the whole China society as a context, to dig out the power relations hidden in the contexts beyond the demonstrability of language.

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<sup>10</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> October 2010 is the date when the Nobel Peace Prize 2010 was announced; 10<sup>th</sup> December 2010 is the date when the Nobel Peace Prize 2010 was awarded.

<sup>11</sup> The new interpretation of language community can be found in Jan Blommaert (2005).



## 1.2 The development of civil society in China

Between the state and the mass of individuals there is another non-governmental realm. Civil society is usually used to refer to a nongovernmental arena (McAfee 2009).

The emergence of a nascent civil society in China finds its roots in China's economic and social reform process initiated in the late 1970s (Moore 2001). According to Edele (2005), at least two consequences of China's economic booming can be recognized. One is the growing income disparities. A middle class with a stronger economic base and higher education has started to emerge in seaside cities, while many rural regions in the western parts of China remain extremely poor. The other is environmental degradation and pollution. Faced with pressing social and environmental problems, the Chinese government increasingly finds its own capabilities insufficient to address them. This is why the government has been transferring some of its functions to a variety of social groups. Since the early 1990s, the Chinese government has been advocating this strategy under the slogan "small government, big society", and the number and variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and their role in society at large, has significantly increased. At the end of 2008, there were 414,000 NGOs and 1,597 foundations in China.<sup>12</sup>

So, it is fair to say that a burgeoning civil society is developing in China. According to *Civil Society Index Report for China* (2006)<sup>13</sup>, the development of civil society in China provides at least three positive factors in favor of the emergence of a Chinese online public sphere, of which, the blogosphere is an important part. First, it has increased social space. Various NGOs provide a third space besides the state-controlled public space and private space, which enables grassroots Chinese to get together and discuss public concerns. Second, the emergence of civil society has increased social concerns. NGOs' activities cover a wide range of issues in China, while they are particularly well-represented in the fields of environmental protection, poverty alleviation, trade promotion and community development. Their activities help arouse people's awareness of those social concerns as well as educate people's responsibility as public citizens. Third, as the backbone of this budding civil society, the rising middle class has developed a workable relationship with the state, which enables them to coexist peacefully with authoritarian governments. The middle class does so based on self-interest while being wary of how its actions are perceived by authorities, thus managing protests carefully so it can continue to reap the economic rewards of state capitalism. Consequently, any move towards democratic structures facilitated through mobile communication will be slow and carefully managed in a

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<sup>12</sup> This data was declared by Huang Fujin, a senior Chinese government official at The First World Large Scale Foundations Forum in Beijing on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2009. (With reference to [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2009-12/09/content\\_12618917.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2009-12/09/content_12618917.htm))

<sup>13</sup> A report about the development of Chinese civil society, written by NGO Research Center, SPPM, Tsinghua University. (With reference to [http://www.civicus.org/new/media/CSI\\_China\\_Executive\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.civicus.org/new/media/CSI_China_Executive_Summary.pdf))

way that benefits government and the current power structure, especially when focusing on politically and socially sensitive issues. In a period in which Chinese society is undergoing rapid transformation, both the individuals' ability to express themselves politically and the state's ability to improve modes of governmentality cannot be underestimated (Zhou 2005). This kind of negotiating between Chinese individuals and the government set the basic tone for their communication in the blogosphere.

However, civil society in China is far from a well-developed one. As Zhu (2004) observed, the emerging grassroots NGOs in China are facing various problems, such as whether their status is legal or not, the lack of human resources and funds, and the need for building up creditability and popularity (Zhu 2004). Legal organizations such as trade unions, business associations and professional associations are limited in facilitating the civil society in China due to their dependence on the state, both economically and administratively (Wank 1995, 75; White et al 1996; Zhang 2007). None of them are allowed to conduct any anti-government democratic activities. In one word, the degree of agency, or autonomy of China's civil society is still very low due to the authoritarian regime. This, on the bright side, makes it necessary and natural for the politically restrained unnamed individuals to turn to the Internet and continue to transform the public space by blogging beyond the state control.

### **1.3 The development of mass media in China**

Among the factors that contribute to the make-up of a public sphere, the media plays the most crucial function (Panikkar 2004). Panikkar argues that the mutual relationship between the state and the media, either as oppositional or as complementary, is influenced, among others, by the nature of intervention by the state in the public sphere.

According to Sun & Chang (2001), before Chinese reformation in the late 1970s, the mass-media has been subjected to government control. The recruitment of personnel as well as the editorial guidelines was all decided by the government. Media didn't need to care much about markets or readership because they were financially supported by government subsidies. This allows the party state to manipulate and centralize the information flow to create and preserve a political homogeneity. The predominant role of all media was as an organ of the party, with their political orientation and fundamental policies depending largely or totally on those of the Party. They functioned as a tool for the Party and government to create and disseminate political propaganda, rather than acting as a public sphere for citizens to discuss public and political issues (Sun & Chang 2001). The concept regarding mass-media as a public sphere seems alien and contradictory to the concept of the party state.

When China started economic reformation, the Chinese media also started to change. The party state reduced their financial support for the media gradually, which means that most media have to rely on themselves financially. As a result, media are becoming increasingly commercialized, with their commercial attributes admitted. Media have had to take market and economic factors into account in their daily decision-making, including struggling to enhance their reputation and audience in order to take advantage of those revenue sources tied to audiences (Wang & Bates 2008). Keen market competition has acted as a stimulus for shifting media content and coverage to come closer to reflecting the interests and needs of the general public; pursuing their own professional goals and interests while at the same time serving the audience (Li 2002).

According to Wang and Bates (2008), during this process, Chinese media have developed a certain level of editorial freedom and independence, gradually. Government control still exists, but media in China have become more of a communicating channel both for government and ordinary people, rather than just the "mouth and throat" of the Party. Media start to play a role, albeit a limited one, on public concerns such as anti-corruption. They not only keep people better informed, but also increase awareness of their rights. As a result, people have a greater and clearer sense of their rights, obligations and responsibilities, as well as common values of society. They become more active in speaking out and making suggestions on how to run a better society, encouraged by reforms in the political process and in the media (Li 2002).

However, the Party still maintains its political control over those financially independent mass-media. The direct evidence is that the Chinese citizens are forbidden to express dissent regarding politics via the mass media. If any mass media dares to go across the line, they will be warned, punished or stopped. One of the ethnographers for this study, Gong Xiaoyue<sup>14</sup>, who had been the former chief editor of a leading critical newspaper in China, was forced to quit for an article criticizing the dictatorship of the party state. The restraints from government prevent the traditional mass media from playing its full role as the watchdog on behalf of the public, which has accelerated people's shift to new media to look for new discursive spaces.

It is within this context that the blogosphere begins to grow and diffuse. Adoption and use of blogs have been rapid and widespread, which will be elaborated in the following section. Following up the achievements made by NGOs and mass media, the Chinese blogosphere starts to take the lead in transforming Chinese public space.

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<sup>14</sup> He is one of the important ethnographers in this study. More detailed information about him will be given in Chapter 2.

## 1.4 The Internet and internet censorship in China

The potential extent of the Internet is delineated by two major factors: the technical properties and the size of the internet itself, and the amount and kind of Internet use among the population (Webster 2009). In the Chinese case, the technical properties of the Internet include complex content and access controls stemming from China's internet regulations. The second factor, the question of how far the Internet reaches a broadly defined global Chinese population can be answered by the following figures which demonstrate a wide penetration of Internet into Chinese people's life.

According to the 27th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China<sup>15</sup>, there are 457 million netizens in China and the penetration has achieved 27%. The size of this large online population forms a huge marketplace for ideas. Hartford (2000: 255) has suggested that the internet development in China would result in "the inexorability of the political opening - alternative sources of information, communications channels beyond government control". Moreover, Zheng and Wu (2005: 525) have found that the Internet seems to have made a more substantial political impact in China than in democratic countries. They cite a litany of public opinion results in support of their point. In China, nearly 80% of the people think that by using the Internet they can better understand politics, compared to 43% in the United States, 31% in Japan, and 48% in South Korea. Further, nearly 61% of Internet users in China think that by using the Internet, they can have more to say about what the government does, compared to 20% in the United States, 24% in Japan, and 26% in South Korea. They attribute the difference to a perception that in democratic countries, people have channels beyond the Internet to express personal opinions and to participate in public affairs, while in China people don't have as many alternative venues.

While China's constitution guarantees freedom of speech, the government employs a "subversion of state power" clause to punish those who are critical of it. China employs an Internet censorship system which is widely considered to be one of the most sophisticated in the world<sup>16</sup>. Backed by more than 40 laws and regulations, the PRC tries to control the Internet by means of the following:

### Legislation

All internet service providers in China have to get registered to get a license. Non-licensed Web sites are forbidden to publish new information but only those already released publicly by other news media.

### Technological projects

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<sup>15</sup> Published by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) (With reference to <http://www1.cnnic.cn/uploadfiles/pdf/2011/2/28/153752.pdf>)

<sup>16</sup> See research profiles of China at The OpenNet Initiative: <http://opennet.net/research/profiles/china>

The most well-known technological project is The Golden Shield Project, which is owned by the Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China, known outside of mainland China as the Great Firewall of China. According to Clayton, Murdoch and Watson (2006), the system blocks content by pinpointing IP addresses from being routed through. It consists of standard firewalls and proxy servers at the Internet gateways. Another technological project for censorship is the Green Dam Youth Escort<sup>17</sup>. In 2009, the authorities forced manufacturers to ship machines to be sold in mainland China with the Green Dam software, and manufacturers were required to report the number of machines shipped with the software to government. The official statement claimed its objective was "to build a green, healthy, and harmonious online environment, and to avoid the effects on and the poisoning of our youth's minds by harmful information on the internet", but it is really a thinly concealed attempt by government to expand censorship.

### **Self-censorship**

A very effective type of Internet censorship in China can be called "panopticon" (Boyle 1997; Tsui2001). According to Tsui (2001: 13-14), "panopticon" originally refers to a type of prison, a Greek-based neologism for "all-seeing place". The design of the Panopticon is crafted so that all cells can be viewed from one central position and that prisoners cannot tell whether they are being watched, and thus a fear of constant surveillance is induced. The constant fear of being watched regulated the prisoners and induced "proper" behavior. Boyle proposes a model of "privatized Panopticons", which seeks to decentralize multiple instances of the "panopticon". It is based on the notion of implementing the regime into the architecture to avoid the need for policing after the fact. The privatized Panopticons are responsible for what happens on their part of the network, resulting in a high degree of self-regulation. Given China's political environment, the "panopticon" encourages self-censorship through the perception that users are being watched. The enforcement of censorship creates a chilling effect where individuals and businesses willingly censor their own communications to avoid legal and economic repercussions.

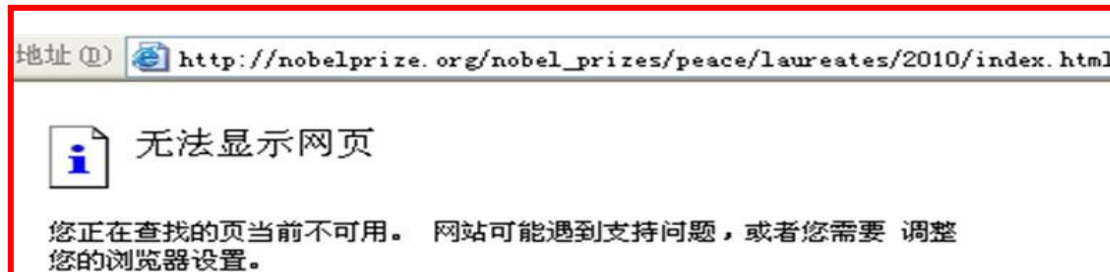
In the following section, I will discuss a case study of the censorship exercised by the party state during an incident which caught worldwide attention in the year 2010, i.e. the Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo winning the Nobel Peace Prize for 2010.

During this incident, Chinese government utilized all possible means to prevent netizens from obtaining information about Liu Xiaobo and his winning of the Nobel Peace Prize. With the Great Fire Wall, the official website of the Nobel Prize Committee was blocked as shown in figure 1.2. Google and international interactive media like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have experienced the same fate.

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<sup>17</sup> The data concerning the Green Dam Youth Escort were retrieved from the official website for this project: <http://211.103.158.33/lvhang/>

Figure 1.2: What the official website of the Nobel Prize Committee looked like in China during the Nobel Peace Prize incident.



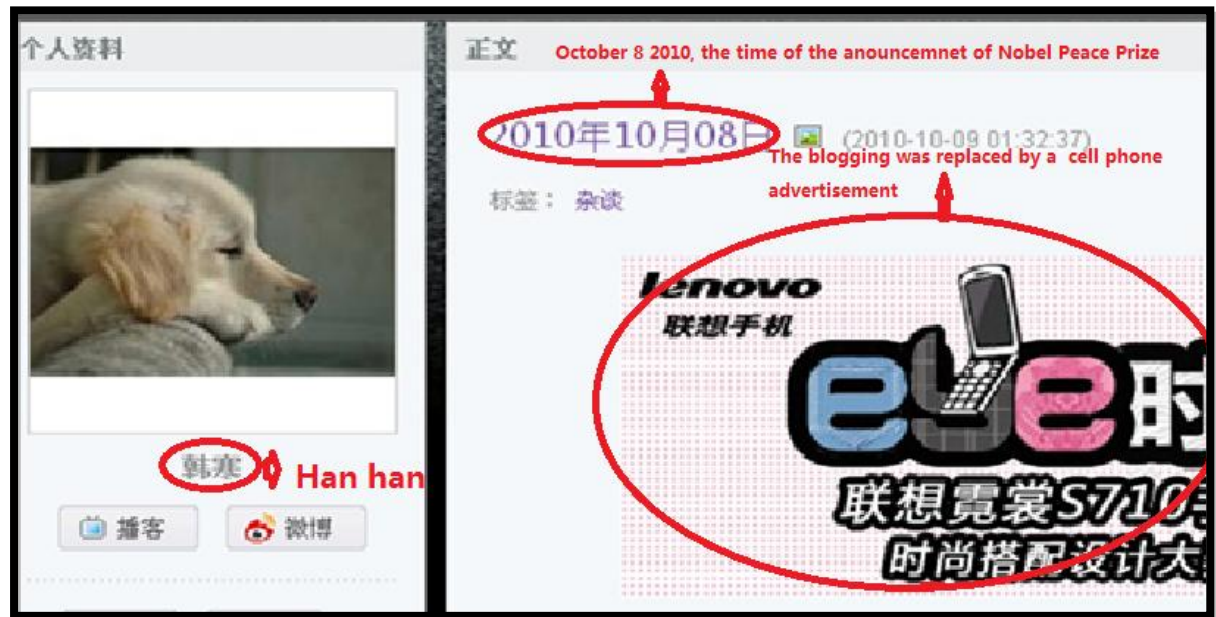
The English translated webpage:

This page cannot be played.

The page you are looking for is currently unavailable. The website might be experiencing technical difficulties; you may need to adjust your browser settings.

Domestically, forums, blogs, BBS (bulletin board systems), SMS and other interactive media were forbidden to publicize any information about the Nobel Prize incident; a massive group of online policemen were busy removing any post mentioning “Nobel Prize” or “Liu Xiaobo”. Even the carefully crafted article written by Han Han - China’s most influential writer and public intellectual, who is also well-known for his high techniques of getting around censorship - was deleted immediately by webmasters. On the early morning of 9<sup>th</sup> October 2010, the second day of the announcement of Liu Xiaobo winning the Nobel Peace Prize, Han Han posted his article titled *on 8<sup>th</sup> October 2010* in his blog at a leading portal in China, Sina.com, but this article was deleted immediately and replaced by a cell phone advertisement as shown in figure 1.3.

Figure 1.3: Han Han’s blog on 9<sup>th</sup> October 2010



During those sensitive moments, on Sina Weibo, a leading micro-blogging service in China, the “topic searching” function was disabled as illustrated in figure 1.4 a and figure 1.4 b. Figure 1.4 a is what my Sina Weibo homepage looks like before and after the Nobel Prize Incident: in the search bar (搜索), two options are available: searching by content (微博) or by name of the blogger (找人). Figure 1.4 b is what happened on 8<sup>th</sup> October 2010: in the search bar, the topic searching option has disappeared, leaving 找人 alone.

Figure 1.4 a:

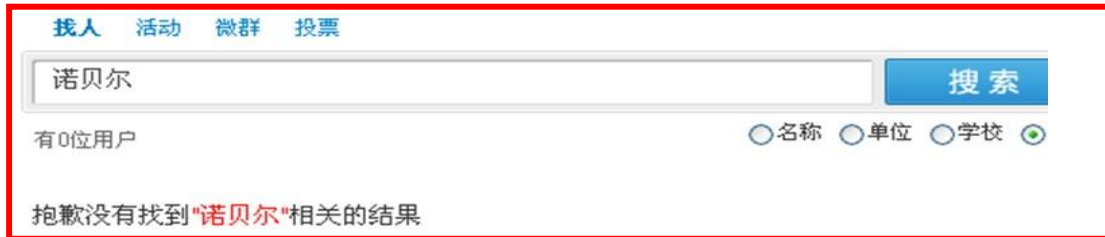


Figure 1.4 b:

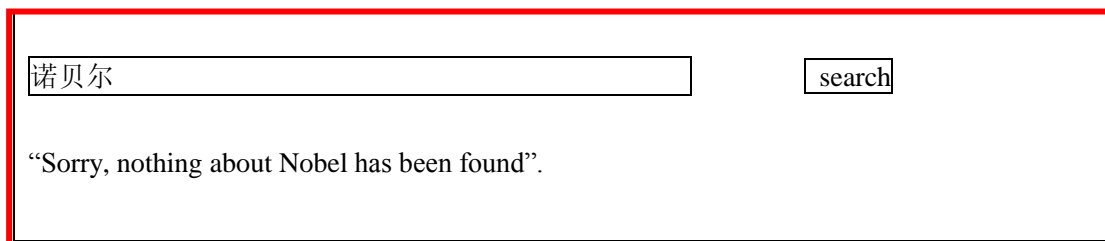


At the same time, a sensitive word filtering system was enforced, and typing “诺贝尔”(Nobel) into the search bar would result in nothing as shown in figure 1.5.

Figure 1.5:



The English translated webpage:



The following is my own censorship story on Sina Weibo during the Nobel Prize incident. On 10<sup>th</sup> December 2010, the Nobel Prize ceremony for 2010 was held in Oslo without the Peace Prize Winner Liu Xiaobo, and he was represented by an empty chair. After I learned this from the Internet, I composed a very short sentence about the empty chair and the ceremony which goes like “*An empty chair, a haunting melody, and a sincere story.*” and posted it on my Sina Weibo. Immediately one of my followers commented on this post as shown in figure 1.6.

Figure 1.6: One of my posts on my Sina Weibo





However, when I tried to respond to 妙手仁心边走边唱's comment, a notice popped out saying, "Sorry, this post had already been deleted, you cannot comment on it.", as marked out in figure 1.7.

Figure 1.7:



During the incident, the Global Times<sup>18</sup> published the results of a telephone poll of 866 *Beijing*, *Shanghai* and *Guangzhou* residents, which the journal said was chosen at random. The journal said there was a low recognition of Liu among the public in China, as more than 75 percent of respondents had no idea who the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize was<sup>19</sup>. This result of the poll should be attributed to the effective work done by the powerful censoring machine.

<sup>18</sup> Global Times is one of the mouth pieces of the party state in English towards the outside world. ( With reference to <http://www.globaltimes.cn/www/english/language/>)

<sup>19</sup> 6 of 10 Chinese demand Norway apologize: survey. Global Times, 18 October 2010. Their purpose for conducting this survey is to show the world that most Chinese people don't support Liu Xiaobo.

## Chapter 2 The Chinese Blogosphere

### 2.1 A general introduction of the Chinese blogosphere

Since first coined on September 10, 1999 by Brad L. Graham, as a joke<sup>20</sup>, and then re-coined in 2002 by William Quick<sup>21</sup>, the term “blogosphere” was quickly adopted and propagated by the blog community. It is of merit to turn to Wikipedia, in many ways the definite source of public wisdom on topics related to the Internet for a well acknowledged definition. The definition of the blogosphere given by Wikipedia<sup>22</sup> emphasizes its connotation of community and its function as a public space: “The blogosphere is made up of all blogs and their interconnections. The term implies that blogs exist together as a connected community (or as a collection of connected communities) or as a social network in which everyday authors can publish their opinions.” The blogosphere has been increasingly treated as a gauge of public opinion, and it has been cited in both academic and non-academic work as evidence of rising resistance to globalization, voter fatigue, and many other phenomena (Keren 2006), and also in reference to identifying influential bloggers (Agarwal et al 2008).

In China, the blogosphere is turning into an arena for grassroots individuals to express their opinions and conduct political debate. The country recorded its first blog in August 2002. Up to 2009, there had been more than 100 million blogs, a growth of some 6.38 percent from the end of November 2007<sup>23</sup>. Up till June 2009, China Blogger Scale has already reached to 181 million. The proportion of the Netizens with blogs is 53.8%<sup>24</sup>.

According to Luo (2007), the development of blogosphere in China can be divided into two phases. When the Internet was introduced into China in 1996, its democratizing potential and power was underestimated by the government. Therefore, few restrictions were initially imposed on it. Instead, the government provided a large amount of free web space to individual users. It was at that time that BBS flourished.

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<sup>20</sup> With reference to [http://www.bradlands.com/weblog/comments/september\\_10\\_1999/](http://www.bradlands.com/weblog/comments/september_10_1999/)

<sup>21</sup> With reference to [DailyPundit.com](http://www.daily pundit.com) via [http://web.archive.org/web/20071227073108/http://www.iw3p.com/DailyPundit/2001\\_12\\_30\\_dailypundit\\_archive.php](http://web.archive.org/web/20071227073108/http://www.iw3p.com/DailyPundit/2001_12_30_dailypundit_archive.php)

<sup>22</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogosphere>. While Wikipedia's authority varies from one subject to the next, descriptions of technical topics are generally quite thorough (Puschmann 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Xinhua News Agency January 7, 2009. (With reference to [http://www.china.org.cn/china/news/2009-01/07/content\\_17067885.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/news/2009-01/07/content_17067885.htm))

<sup>24</sup> CNNIC report in June 2011. (With reference to <http://www.resonancechina.com/2010/05/21/chinas-181-million-bloggers/>)

Those engaged in current affairs, such as Nation Strengthening Forum<sup>25</sup> and Development Forum<sup>26</sup> are especially popular. Because of government's ideological monopoly in the other forms of mass media, Internet forums have become a major venue for the public to exchange information and voice their opinions on political issues. These small-scale online discussion forums are the germ of the blogosphere in China.

With the flourishing of online forums, the government became wary of the effect of counter discourses created and circulated on the Internet. A series of new laws and regulations were issued, seeking to control discussion on forums and on other interactive web domains. It was at that moment that a posting censorship system and key-word filtering as a censorship measure were put into force.

The emergence of blogs and micro-blogs in China since 2005 marks the beginning of the second phase of the development of the Chinese blogosphere. Blogging as a new media provides the grassroots equal opportunities for becoming a journalist, a commentator and even a public opinion leader at a low cost. Blogs and micro-blogs start to take lead in formulating China's online public sphere, and blogosphere becomes the most vibrant part of China's cyber space.

However, challenges in recent years to authoritarian governments around the globe, especially the African revolutions, plus violent uprisings in parts of China itself have made Chinese authorities increasingly wary of leaving such an open discursive blogosphere unchecked, the medium some officials see as central to fanning the flames of unrest. On 25 May 2011, China made public the fact that they have a division in their military based solely on the internet<sup>27</sup>. They claim that this division, called "Online Blue Army", specializes in cyber-attacks, and its goal is to increase the security of the Internet and to principient attacks on it. Although people doubt the real task of this army, there is no doubt that the PRC has quickened its pave in Internet control.

The restricting policies posed negative influence on the development of blogosphere. However, most bloggers manage to find innovative ways to minimize or bypass the restraining efforts and the blogosphere has gradually started to work as a public sphere for the grassroots to discuss public affairs and influence public policy. It is proved in China that once you allow access to a wider range of communication sources, and open the door to public expression and debate, it is hard to reverse the course and return to a closed media system again.

## 2.2 Case study: Sina Weibo and its functioning mechanisms

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<sup>25</sup> With reference to <http://bbs1.people.com.cn/boardList.do?action=postList&boardId=1>

<sup>26</sup> With reference to <http://forum.home.news.cn/listthread/50/0/1.html>

<sup>27</sup> With reference to <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90786/7392068.html>

Blogosphere is constituted mainly by blogs and micro-blogs, in which blog is the conventional form and micro-blog is the newly emerged but increasingly popular one. Conventional blogs used to contain properly composed entries, arranged in a reverse chronological order. Some of the entries were very-in-depth. Over time, blogging has given way to micro-blogging (Shakeel 2010). Micro-blogging is a broadcast medium in the form of blogging. As a whole, micro-blogging essentially means that posted entries will be short, very concise text (Kaplan & Haenlei 2011). Distinct from traditional media, users can post micro-blogging via their cell phones, pagers and other mobile devices, making them independent of desktop (or even laptop) computers, which in addition to being less portable take relatively long to start up and cannot be comfortably used in any given environment (Shakeel 2010). This makes micro-blogging relatively inexpensive and accessible to enable anyone to publish or access information (Benkler 2006). In the Arab revolutions and revolts of 2011, social media like Facebook and Twitter did not cause the revolution, but they did speed up the process by helping to organize the revolutionaries, transmit their message to the world and galvanize international support. As one Cairo activist succinctly put it, "We use facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world."<sup>28</sup> "In the same way that pamphlets didn't cause the American Revolution, social media didn't cause the Egyptian revolution," said Sascha Meinrath, director of the New America Foundation's Open Technology Initiative. "Social media have become the pamphlets of the 21st century, a way that people who are frustrated with the status quo can organize themselves and coordinate protest, and in the case of Egypt, revolution."<sup>29</sup>

Micro-blogging has been prominent in China since the 1990s. Although Facebook and Twitter receive a lot of negative press in China, social activity is still alive with local social platforms. The most popular platforms include Tencent (the equivalent of Skype), RenRen (the equivalent of Facebook), and Sina Weibo (the equivalent of Twitter). China shut down Twitter access after it was used to transmit images and messages about riots against the government in western China. You Tube and several social networking sites received a similar fate. PRC's chief concern lies in the Internet's power to mobilize. However, the CCP encourages leading domestic portals to develop local micro-blogging services. Micro-blogging services are gradually taking the lead in formulating Chinese blogosphere in China. In this study, we investigate a leading Micro-blogging service in China, Sina Weibo.

Sina Weibo was modeled after Twitter. Its micro-blogging service was launched on 28 August 2009 and had attracted 50 million users by November 2010<sup>30</sup>. Unlike Twitter, Sina Weibo is in Chinese, which makes it the preferred choice for the

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<sup>28</sup> With reference to <http://www.miller-mccune.com/politics/the-cascading-effects-of-the-arab-spring-28575/>

<sup>29</sup> With reference to <http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2011/02/egypts-revolutionary-fire/>

<sup>30</sup> Chinese portal website Sina.com has published its first white paper targeting the Chinese micro-blog market. (With reference to <http://hi.baidu.com/zhaquanyi/blog/item/23552b2d61097e3a349bf75a.html>)

Chinese users. Sina Weibo is one of the few micro-blogging services who are still found on China's internet, after the CCP banned Twitter and similar services for refusing CCP to monitor their content. With millions of posts every day and an exponentially growing population, statistics have shown that Sina Weibo is the top micro-blog service in China<sup>31</sup>. These statistics were based on indices, including brand recognition and frequency of users.

While Sina Weibo essentially uses the same concept as Twitter, there are some differences in mechanisms which ensure its survival and prospering in China's unique social and political environment in which it is placed.

### **Stringent self-censorships**

Unlike Twitter, the users of Sina Weibo risk having their blogs deleted by moderators, if their blogs contain anything deemed politically sensitive. In China, Sina Weibo is best known for its blogging platform, and is among the most widely read blogging platforms in the world. Sina Weibo is fully aware of the limits in which it can operate. The borders in which Sina Weibo can maintain its functionality are guarded by a team of moderators. Upon discovery they remove any politically sensitive blog immediately and during certain sensitive incidents, e.g. the controversial Nobel Peace Prize awarding, they disabled the topic-indices for a certain amount of time. In general, Sina Weibo plays nice with Chinese government. This is one of the basic mechanisms that ensure Sina Weibo's survival and prospering in China.

### **Multi-functional mediating system**

Blogospheres are mediated spaces of discourse. Sina Weibo has a more powerful multi-functional mediating system compared to Twitter.

First, unlike Twitter's "replies", Sina Weibo's comments do not appear independently in the feed; instead, they are listed under the entry, more like a traditional blog. All discussion around a single micro-blog entry, therefore, can be seen easily in one place. This is similar with the following comments of traditional blog or a post on BBS, which helps the participants to learn the general story of the issue very quickly, and makes it easier for them to comment on the same topic as soon as possible.

Secondly, on Sina Weibo, embedded picture and video attachments allow users to attach pictures, video and audio to their postings -something one can't do easily with Twitter. By clicking on thumbnails that can be easily added to any entry, pictures or video can be viewed without leaving the page.

Thirdly, the portal page of Sina Weibo features far more than that of Twitter, with extensive lists including rankings for individual entry, topic, and user popularity.

Lastly, Sina Weibo boasts an "eager" automatic URL-shortening function. Enter any "http://..." address -regardless of length-and it will be shortened to something like "http://Sina Weibourl.cn/kljlkj".

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<sup>31</sup> See above.

These functions provide more choices for bloggers to get information, post messages and comment on other blogs. This makes Sina Weibo a fast and efficient information mediating system.

### **Real name system**

Although Twitter has now brought them in, verified real name accounts are a prominent feature of Sina Weibo; they are given out more readily to all kinds of celebrities and brands. Every verified account receives a “v” at every entry they post. Dahlberg (2005) proposed sincerity as one of the criteria that a space must meet in order to be considered a public sphere. The participants in a public sphere must appear to be believable to each other and the outside public (Hauser 1999). The real name accounts ensure the credibility of the Sina Weibo as a blogosphere.

So in sum, it is these mechanisms that support Sina Weibo to survive and prosper in the special political environment of China and contribute to the emergence of Chinese blogosphere.

## **2.3 The democratic potential of the Chinese blogosphere**

As McDorman (2001) argues, the internet encourages not only more meaningful individual participation but also a more egalitarian dialogue. Increased participation and dialogue enhance the prospects of successful mobilization against the authorities. Shirky (2010) also argues that as the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked grassroots are gaining more opportunities to engage in public discourse, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action. Therefore, it is not innocent to think that the democratic power generated in blogosphere can spark and accelerate revolutionary changes and this has already been proven by the revolutions in Egypt, Tunis and Libya.

However, the potential of politics in blogosphere also depends on the cultural, economic and political settings in which the network is placed. In a hyper-controlled political system like China, what is happening in the blogosphere are mostly politics carried out on the micro-discursive level, which would lead to subtle social progress in bottom-up manner rather than a radical revolutionary change (Hu 2011). Hu claims that Twitter and all its clones (the various social media offered by major portals) have become important tools in China for organizing activism like social resistance and civic investigation. But rather than leading to a “Twivolution”, he argues that social media would lead to more subtle social progress in China. The Chinese case confirms Shirky’s (2011) argument that the real power of social media lies in supporting civil society and the public sphere, with impacts that should be measured in years and decades, not weeks or months.

The forms of politics occurring in the Chinese blogosphere are at the same time belonging to grassroots politics. The grassroots can be defined as the bottom of the political pyramid, opposite the “establishment”, which controls the top. While the establishment concentrates power in relatively few people in the highest echelons of power, the grassroots includes virtually everyone else, those common people who do not necessarily hold any political office and who may even be getting their first taste of politics in a particular cause<sup>32</sup>. Political freedom is a major concern of the grassroots politics. Freedom of speech and the right to protest are essential to grassroots politics. People in Western society can take these right for granted, but there are still many countries in which one can be imprisoned for protesting.

The politics happening in the Chinese blogosphere are true grassroots movements, of which, the direction, message and methodology are all driven from the ground-up.

In our case study, I have observed two types of grassroots politics in Sina Weibo, i.e., Wei Guan and Whistle-blowing, which are both conducted in a discursive and bottom-up manner. By a close analysis of the discourses produced in Sina Weibo, I try to detect the meanings and power relations embedded so as to explore the democratic potential of Chinese blogosphere.

### **2.3.1 Grassroots politics 1- Wei Guan (“surrounding gaze”)**

Wei Guan, meaning “surrounding gaze”, is a byword for apathy. Invented by Chinese writer Lu Xun<sup>33</sup>, this term describes the cultural phenomenon of Chinese who would look on indifferently, as their fellows were subjected to injustices. Wei Guan has taken on a new and different meaning in the Internet age. The term now points to the social and political possibilities of new communications, such as blogs and micro-blogs, which might promote change by gathering public opinion around controversial social incidents through discursive activities conducted by grassroots netizens at the micro-level. As pointed out by Hu (Yee 2011), the change in this expression stems from this age of the Internet in which we now find ourselves, and especially after the emergence of blogosphere. Put another way, there has been some evolution of Wei Guan in the era of Internet. In the process of this evolution what might be called “the politics of Wei Guan” has emerged.

As Twitter-like micro-blogging service spreads in China, the number of virtual bystanders has grown exponentially, and Wei Guan has become an important form of virtual grassroots politics. Let us have a look at how people Wei Guan on Sina Weibo through two cases<sup>34</sup>.

#### **Case one: “Yihuang demolition incident”**

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<sup>32</sup> This definition of grassroots is taken from *How the grassroots works*, a newsletter at [renewamerica.com](http://www.renewamerica.com/grassroots.htm) (With reference to <http://www.renewamerica.com/grassroots.htm>).

<sup>33</sup> Lu Xun (September 25, 1881 – October 19, 1936) is one of the major Chinese writers of the 20th century. Considered by many to be the founder of modern Chinese literature, he wrote in baihua (the vernacular) as well as classical Chinese. Lu Xun was a short story writer, editor, translator, critic, essayist and poet.

<sup>34</sup> The description of these two cases is based on the information obtained from Sina Weibo.

In Yihuang County Jiangxi Province, several officials were removed from their posts in September 2010 after three residents set themselves on fire in protest at the forced demolition of their home — one of whom later died.

Mainstream media were initially silent on the news. But when the daughters of one of the victims were stopped as they tried to travel to Beijing to petition authorities over the case, they reached out to Chinese journalists for help and their plight was broadcast and seen by millions on social media like Sina Weibo. These reporters posted their story on the Internet and soon a huge online campaign for their cause sprang up. A few days later, authorities announced the suspension of the officials, including a local Communist Party chief.

### **Case two: “Wang Peng trans-provincial arrest incident”**

Wang Peng, a college graduate who worked in Gansu province, kept writing posts on the Internet to disclose that his former classmate Ma Jingjing was illegally employed as a public servant through an improper entrance exam conducted by Ningxia autonomous Region Government with the help of Ma's parents, who are both local government officials. On 2 December 2010, Wang, who was working in Gansu province, was arrested by the local police attached to the Ningxia autonomous region, which technically is a trans-provincial arrest. Obviously, Wang's arrest had something to do with Ma's parents.

This news rapidly spread across Sina Weibo. From 2 to 4 December, more than 10,000 comments were made on this topic. Most of the bloggers condemned the local police's abuse of power, questioning what really happened to Ma and his parents. Such huge pressure exerted on the Internet finally urged the local government to release Wang only two days after his arrest.

To conclude, Wei Guan is the minimum level of public participation. In fact, it is very far from the kind of politics in which people participate, reach a consensus, make decisions, and then act. Therefore, it would be pretentious to conclude that by means of Wei Guan we can change the reality of China directly, as this would be based on a naive reading of the Chinese situation. On the other hand, we should not for the same reasons make the mistake of underestimating the importance of Wei Guan in social media. It lowers the threshold of public participation, enabling many people to express their views and desires. These micro-expressions, when combined together, can form forceful public opinion. The fact that some parts of government panic when faced with public demands in the social media shows that Wei Guan is a force of its own. Apart from this, the so-called “surrounding gaze” means that people can see each other. This is very important. According to Hu (Yee 2011), the problem of people in contemporary China is not ignorance, but apathy, which is more harmful than ignorance. It represents a kind of witness and caring about each other on the part of the citizenry, this will surely encourage grassroots political participation.



### 2.3.2 Grassroots politics 2-Whistle-blowing

*Micro-blogging is China's version of Twitter that allows users to broadcast messages each of which usually contains 140 characters, together with other social networking sites. It has become wildly popular in China recently. It's often used to break news or expose scandals. (Global Times 20 April 2011<sup>35</sup>)*

This is a report from a mouthpiece of the PRC, *Global Times*. It is stated very clearly that this "China's version of Twitter" is "often used to break news or expose scandals". This shows us one important difference between Sina Weibo and the micro-blogging services in democratic societies such as Twitter, which does not really stand out as a whistle-blower, since the mass media in the west enjoy much more freedom in whistle-blowing scandals. While in China, mass media are still supervised by the party state, scandals of the interest groups are basically excluded from the public discourses. However, "through micro-blogging, people can talk about topics rarely seen in China's traditional mass media", said Liu Shu<sup>36</sup>, who is the vice president and editor-in-chief of Phoenix New Media<sup>37</sup>. Micro-blogging in China is doing something similar to whistle-blowing.

In a highly autocratic society like China, those grassroots individuals have much less freedom compared with people in the west to speak their minds in the presence of power. In order to articulate their own voice, the grassroots create a secret discourse that represents a critique of power spoken behind the backs of the dominant. At the same time, the power groups also develop a private dialogue about practices and goals of their rule that cannot be openly avowed. Scott (1990: 3) uses the term "public transcript" to describe the open, public discourses generated during the interactions between grassroots and power groups and the term 'hidden transcript' for the critique of power that goes on backstage, and the private dialogue between power groups that are not heard by the grassroots.

In China, hidden transcripts used to be hidden very well. The secret rules of power groups are seldom heard by the grassroots, and the critique of power that goes on offstage usually remains offstage without broad circulation. This can be illustrated by how those endless man-made disasters were dealt with in China.

Man-made disasters occur with some regularity in China. Many of them are fires or accidents at mines and factories and are blamed on corruption, ineptitude, shoddy production, negligence and all-out push to develop. Safety rules are routinely ignored. For instance, in 1975, 62 dams in Henan Province crumbled over three days or were intentionally destroyed in the midst of record rainfalls, killing at least 175,000 people.

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<sup>35</sup> This is Editor's Note for an article published in *Global Times* on 20 April 2011, entitled "Media revolution, 140 characters at a time" (Retrieved at [http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2011-04/20/content\\_22401953.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2011-04/20/content_22401953.htm))

<sup>36</sup> This is one of the interviews included in the article *Media revolution, 140 characters at a time*.

<sup>37</sup> Phoenix New Media provides dedicated and comprehensive portals to well-educated Chinese audiences of over 100 million. The portals, which are available on internet and mobile platforms, provide news and information generated from in-depth interviews, commentary columns, and social networks. The key features offered by Phoenix New Media help address Chinese netizens' diverse needs on information, expression, interaction and entertainment.

Official figures on the disaster were only declassified in 2005 and journalists were not allowed to report in depth on the disaster<sup>38</sup>.

However, the emergence of the blogosphere has given the grassroots a communications toolkit, which allows anyone to become a whistle-blower. According to statistics of Sina Weibo<sup>39</sup>, 62% of the most influential incidents happening in 2010 were brought to light by Sina Weibo within one day, 14% within 3 days. These hidden transcripts generally fall into two types: the scandals of the authorities and the resistance of the grassroots against the power which is also intentionally covered by the authorities.

### **Whistle-blowing the scandals of the authorities**

In this section, we use the corruption issue to illustrate how bloggers whistle-blow the scandals of the authorities on Sina Weibo.

First let us review the public transcripts about the corruption issue. The following is an excerpt from an official annual report of the government's anti-corruption work for the year 2010 issued by Information Office of the State Council, entitled *China's Efforts to Combat Corruption and Build a Clean Government*.<sup>40</sup>

*"The CPC and the Chinese government have been making great efforts to combat corruption and build a clean government, which has yielded notable results. Practice over the past few decades has proved that the path of combating corruption and building a clean government with Chinese characteristics conforms to the fundamental reality that China is still in the primary stage of socialism. It also conforms to the wish of people of all ethnic groups in China as well as the rule in fighting corruption and safeguarding integrity."*

According to this report, the CPC did a very good job in combating corruption and people are satisfied with the government. And then, let us have a look at those hidden transcripts about corruption that were disclosed on Sina Weibo.

In November 2010, a post entitled "micro-blogging of a corrupted Party Secretary" (as shown in figure 2.1) got circulated on Sina Weibo. In the form of a serial diary, this post recorded the daily work and life of a police chief, full of details of power-for-money and power-for-sex. Provoked by the shameless behavior described in the diary, netizens started to human-flesh the prototype and finally they got him and even publicized his picture on the Internet. The Party Secretary in the diary is Hubei Enshi prefecture public security bureau deputy director Tan Zhiguo, and this was confirmed by later investigation by the authorities.

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<sup>38</sup> With reference to <http://factsanddetails.com/china.php?itemid=325&catid=13&subcatid=84>

<sup>39</sup> With reference to <http://wenku.baidu.com/view/5504afc689eb172ded63b735.html>

<sup>40</sup> With reference to <http://www.lawinfochina.com/wbk/displayModeTwo.asp?id=72&keyword>

Figure 2.1: the micro-blogging of a corrupted Party Secretary



English translation of the diary content in Figure 2.1:

March, 1999. Finally, the appointment arrives! And now I am the director of the public security bureau as I expected! And I am now much closer to the political center of the prefecture, which means much more opportunities to me. I just can't wait! Finally, I can say good bye to D county where I have been working for 7 years. It is in here that I have degenerated into a corrupt official. Anyway, there is nothing to yearn for. I am tired of the restaurants and women here. I am looking forward to those new opportunities in the larger pool!

### Whistle-blowing the resistance of the grassroots

The revolts of the grassroots in China are usually intentionally covered by the authorities to avoid flaming larger scale uprisings. After the emergence of blogosphere in China, most grassroots regard whistle-blowing the covered revolts by blogging as a feasible way to make a change in the existing power relations. It is a discursive protest at the micro-level, an effective form of grassroots politics.

In this section, we focus on a severe social problem in China: “house and demolition”, to investigate how the hidden transcripts of the revolts of farmers are being whistle-blown on Sina Weibo.

First, let us have a look at the public transcripts with regards to “house and demolition” as demonstrated in figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2: President Hu Jintao is visiting low-income families in Beijing.



According to Xinhua News Agency, 30<sup>th</sup> Dec 2010 - Chinese President Hu Jintao has visited low-income families in Beijing ahead of the New Year. Hu dropped in on the low-rent apartment in east Beijing where Guo Chunping and her daughter live. Guo, renting the two-bedroom apartment from the government, told the president that thanks to the low-rent housing policy, she and her daughter could finally settle down. “We did not have a stable place to live for years. Now, living in this apartment, we finally feel at home and safe,” she said, “The rent is affordable.”<sup>41</sup>

From the public transcripts, it seems that people are satisfied with the current housing policies, and the authorities and common citizens are enjoying a harmonious relation. While at the same time, the hidden transcripts which reflect the fierce conflicts caused by demolition can be found frequently on Sina Weibo,

The following is a post retrieved from Sina Weibo titled *A demolition squad come to our village...* It is composed of a serial of photos<sup>42</sup> and has been forwarded more than 2000 times as illustrated in figure 2.3.

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<sup>41</sup> With reference to [http://www.dawanews.com/chinabiz\\_view.asp?id=9832](http://www.dawanews.com/chinabiz_view.asp?id=9832)

<sup>42</sup> These photos are picturing various violence demolition incidents occurring in China which are hardly seen in the public discourse. Here the blogger has edited them together as a serial.

Figure 2.3: A demolition squad comes to our village...





To conclude, those hidden transcripts show another aspect of demolition, which is composed of conflicts and violence. The publication of these hidden constraints enables the grassroots to realize the constraints that they are suffering and the rights they should have, which is actually a kind of enlightenment. Apart from this, just like what grassroots may achieve by Wei Guan ("surrounding gaze"), whistle-blowing also enables people to see each other and understand each other, realizing the existence of each other. This represents a kind of witness and caring about each other on the part of the participants in the Chinese blogosphere.

Whistle-blowing usually concerns fragile pieces of news rather than systematic descriptions of a story. These news pieces are usually not accurate, complete, and verified, and the authors of the news can be anyone who has access to the micro-blogging service, not necessarily a journalist with a certificate in the traditional sense, this is why the unverified messages on micro-blogs are usually defined as gossip or rumors by the authorities and excluded from dominant discourse<sup>43</sup>.

However, rumors and gossip are possibly perhaps the most deadly ways of speaking; when they are defined as a type of grassroots politics and used as a weapon for the grassroots individuals to fight for their rights, they may have the power to damage the best system.

### **2.3.3 The social progress led to by the Chinese blogosphere**

"Chinese bloggers were not only a group interested in virtual space, but also an important force in real life. The online public opinions can even influence government policy-making", said Gao Lulin, deputy head of the Internet Society of China<sup>44</sup>. Various forms of grassroots politics conducted in the blogosphere, rather than lead to a radical revolution, would lead to more subtle social progress by encouraging Chinese grassroots' participation in public discussion, supervising the abuse of state power and improving the communication between the government and the grassroots. As far as this study is concerned, one progress that the Chinese blogosphere has facilitated is having influenced the policy-making procedure of the government.

A prominent example of this point is the Sun Zhigang Incident, which incidentally prompted revising the law of population mobilization. It is labeled as progress within China's legal system.

Sun Zhigang, a college graduate, was working in Guangzhou after moving away from his home in Hubei Province in the spring of 2003. Recently arrived, he hadn't obtained his temporary residency permit. He was arrested for vagrancy and taken to a detention center. Sun wasn't allowed to verify his identity; he was beaten harshly by

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<sup>43</sup> E.g., the leading mouth piece newspaper of Chinese government *China Daily* published an article titled *How to get rid of rumors in a micro-blogging era?* on the 8<sup>th</sup> August 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Xinhua News Agency, January 7, 2009. The Internet Society of China, devoted to tracking development of the Internet in China, is a non-government institution sponsored by 70 organs, including Internet service providers, network access carriers and research institutes. (With reference to [http://www.china.org.cn/china/news/2009-01/07/content\\_17067885.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/news/2009-01/07/content_17067885.htm))

the clerks working in the detention center and died in the following hours. The news story rapidly spread across the Internet through reposting on portal sites, the creation of an online memorial page, online protests and petitions against police brutality, and forums discussing the vagrancy of law. This civic voice rapidly developed into a forceful public opinion, and three months after Sun Zhigang's death the detention law was abolished and a new vagrancy law was issued according to which detention of the homeless is illegal<sup>45</sup>.

Another aspect that Chinese blogosphere contributes to the development of virtual democracy in China is its positive influence on the communication between the authorities and the grassroots individuals.

The Internet itself is a revolution. It has completely changed the way people communicate. In the case of China, the Internet has greatly changed the communication between the authorities and grassroots netizens. So far this study mainly discusses Chinese grassroots bloggers' efforts to enhance the influence of counter discourses and construct a discursive blogosphere; while the Chinese authorities are generally referred to as the executor of the Internet censorship and speech control, or as the beneficiary of the authoritarian regime. However, changes really take place gradually along with the development of the blogosphere, especially in the ways the authorities communicate with grassroots bloggers. One prominent example of this is the emergence of a great number of Government Micro-blogs. According to the first report on China's Government Micro-blogs<sup>46</sup>, up to 20<sup>th</sup> March 2011, there had been about 2400 Government Micro-blogs in China, among which, 1708 Government Micro-blogs are verified accounts.

The first government official micro-blog was started by the public security bureau of Zhaoqing City in south China's Guangdong Province in February 2010. As far as our data is concerned, till 24<sup>th</sup> February 2011, about 3000 government departments and 1200 individual government officials have opened their Sina Weibo accounts. They use micro-blogs as a way to publicize policy announcements and other information, as well as to hear complaints and opinions from the public. As far as we have observed, those online governmental micro-blogs have at least improved two aspects of communication compared with the traditional bureaucratic style.

The first change is that micro-blogs help officials discard official-speak, pre-packaged Party jargon, and learn how to communicate with people with the right language style.

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<sup>45</sup> There are many comments on the social significance of Sun Zhigang Incident, which acknowledge that the public opinion formed on the internet has led to the progress in legal system of China. The following article is a representative one of these comments:

*On the Internet as the platform for forming public opinions*, with reference to <http://bbs.ifeng.com/viewthread.php?tid=1935015###>.

<sup>46</sup> Issued by Fudan University on 22 April 2011. (Retrieved at <http://www.bjcity.cn/show.php?contentid-206177.htm>)





English translated version of the notice:

Your attention Please!  
Stop and have a look!  
Are you ready to guard against swindlers?  
So much online cheating!!!! Yes or no!!!!  
Fake lottery winning news, yes or no!!!!  
Fake matchmaking clubs, yes or no!!!!  
Fake exceptional price tickets, yes or no!!!!  
Pretending your friend and asking for money, yes or no!!!!  
Interest-free mortgage, yes or no!!!!  
I am sure you have experienced the above at least once, haven't you!!!!  
All of them are swindlers!!!! My friends!!!  
You cannot afford to be cheated and hurt, my friends!!!!  
Do remember to call 110, my friends!!!!  
Contact us at 88899110  
Or at: /http://weibo.com/futiangongan  
You have kept all these information in your mind, haven't you!!!!

The notice was written in “PAOXIAOTI”, this new writing style was created by the netizens and circulated on the internet. But now, it is used in an official document for routine work of the government. This demonstrates a valuable discourse style change made by Government Micro-blogs.

The second improvement the Government Micro-blogs have made is that the authorities respond much more quickly to the questions the bloggers raised. Usually, questions will be answered once they are asked, and problems will be followed through once they are raised. Figure 2.5 illustrates a Micro-blog opened by a local government department in Hefei, the capital city of Anhui province. This department is in charge of the demolition and move-in of a large neighborhood in Hefei City. In the beginning, they encountered fierce resistance from the residents. Then they started a micro-blog on Sina Weibo with a nice name, and a female identity. They have done a good job in communicating with the residents in the neighborhood online as well as other bloggers, answering any questions and trying to be responsible for any problems raised by people.

Figure 2.5: The Micro-blog of a local government department in charge of the demolition and move-in of a large neighborhood in Hefei City



In sum, taking advantage of the openness, swiftness and interactiviness of the Internet, Chinese grassroots bloggers successfully expand the influence of critical discourses in Chinese society by blogging. New critical elements begin to receive wide attention, exerting an increasingly powerful impact on policy making as well as the communication between the government and the grassroots individuals. These improvements promise even more gradual democratic progress in China.

## 2.4 The discourse style of the Chinese blogosphere

As a type of public sphere, the blogosphere is an arena of discursive relations, a theater for debating and deliberating. Participants in the blogosphere use discourses to render meaningful every aspect of the social structure and the power relations involved. So, discourse analysis is central to the study of blogosphere. Analyzing how meanings are constructed at different levels of those discourses and what power relations have contextualized them will help understand the defining characteristics of Chinese blogosphere.

However, it is more difficult to analyze discourses produced on a blogosphere. The reasons are: first, the powerful multi-media function developed by micro-blogging services makes the discourse field much more convoluted, as all possible media forms can be the components of a discourse (texts, images, pictures, audios, videos, symbols, and so on); second, micro-blogging tends to cut information into small pieces of discourses, which are scattered around every corner of the virtual world. One needs to pick the pieces up one by one, and investigate how the meaning is realized. These factors have been enhanced in China, making the discourses produced in the Chinese blogosphere even more convoluted than on the western micro-blogging services. The main reason lies in the fact that the repeated attempts at state control over the Internet force Chinese bloggers to be very careful with their manner of expression. Taking advantage of the powerful functions of blogging and micro-blogging services, Chinese bloggers have created many highly context-dependent discourses, which require more contexts to obtain an appropriate interpretation.

In the remaining part of this section, we are going to analyze some discourses produced on Sina Weibo, which consist of various characters, texts, memes and metaphors usually containing profound political, social and cultural meaning, pithy symbolism and dark humor. It is purposely created by bloggers on Sina Weibo to bypass censorship and express their feelings and opinions.

Let us look at some of the discourses circulated on Sina Weibo during the night of 8th October, right after the announcement of Liu Xiaobo (刘晓波) winning the Nobel Peace Prize for 2010.

First, in order to get around the strict censorship, bloggers deployed various means to refer to Liu Xiaobo's name. These word games worm their ways through the censorship system, evolving from a new word form or phrase to some established democratic codes. The following variants of the name **Liu Xiaobo** (刘晓波) appeared on Sina Weibo during the night of 8th October:

刘小bo

“小” is a homonym of “晓” and “bo” is the Pinyin for “波”

流波波

“流” is a homonym of “刘”, “波波” is reduplication of “波”.

某某BO

“某某” means “some”, as in “Some Mr. Smith was looking for you just now.” And “BO” is the Pinyin for “波”.

某N奖得主

“Some Nobel Prize winner” -Here N is an acronym for Nobel.

## 刘无敌

“无敌” is the given name fabricated by the blogger, meaning “having no enemies”, suggesting Liu's final statement “I Have No Enemies”, which he delivered in a Chinese court in 2009 before he was jailed.

## 那谁谁

那谁谁 is a rhetorical way in Chinese to refer to someone that the speaker does not want to, or cannot address directly.

## 刘/-晓。、波

Here, some punctuation marks are inserted between the three characters of Liu Xiaobo's name.

## 刘和平

Literally “Liu Peace”. “和平” is a given name made up by the blogger, meaning “Peace”, suggesting Liu Xiaobo winning the Nobel Peace Prize.

Among these word games of Liu's name, there is typical example which goes:  
*Congratulations! “Sensitive word” won 2010 “sensitive word” “sensitive word” Prize!*

Here, the first sensitive word refers to “Liu Xiaobo” (刘晓波), and the second sensitive word refers to “Nobel” (诺贝尔) and the third one refers to “Peace” (和平), which were all set as the sensitive words to be blocked from micro-blogging during the incident. The blogger creatively used the term “sensitive word”(敏感词) to replace those forbidden terms, expressed his feelings towards the incident in a quite humorous and artful way.

In the following, I try to interpret some posts publicized on Sina Weibo during the night of the 8<sup>th</sup> of October 2010:

1. *To a prisoner (116°46'E , 39°92'N): a fabricated charge put you into jail, they locked your body with chains, trying to destroy your soul with loneliness. However, you dipped ink from the ashes of the revolutionary victims and composed the most brilliant poem in history.*

In this post a metonymy is used. The smart blogger addresses Liu Xiaobo as “a prisoner” with an exact longitude-latitude location, which actually is the location of the prison where Liu Xiaobo is jailed.

2. *Today, I am ....am happy....the whole stammer world are .....are happy....you ....you....you know what I mean.*

In this post, a metaphorical reference to the speaking style of Liu Xiaobo is used, who is a stammer.

3. *You may say I'm a dreamer. But I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us. And the world will be as one.*

John Lennon's song 'imagine' is quoted here to express the desire for freedom.

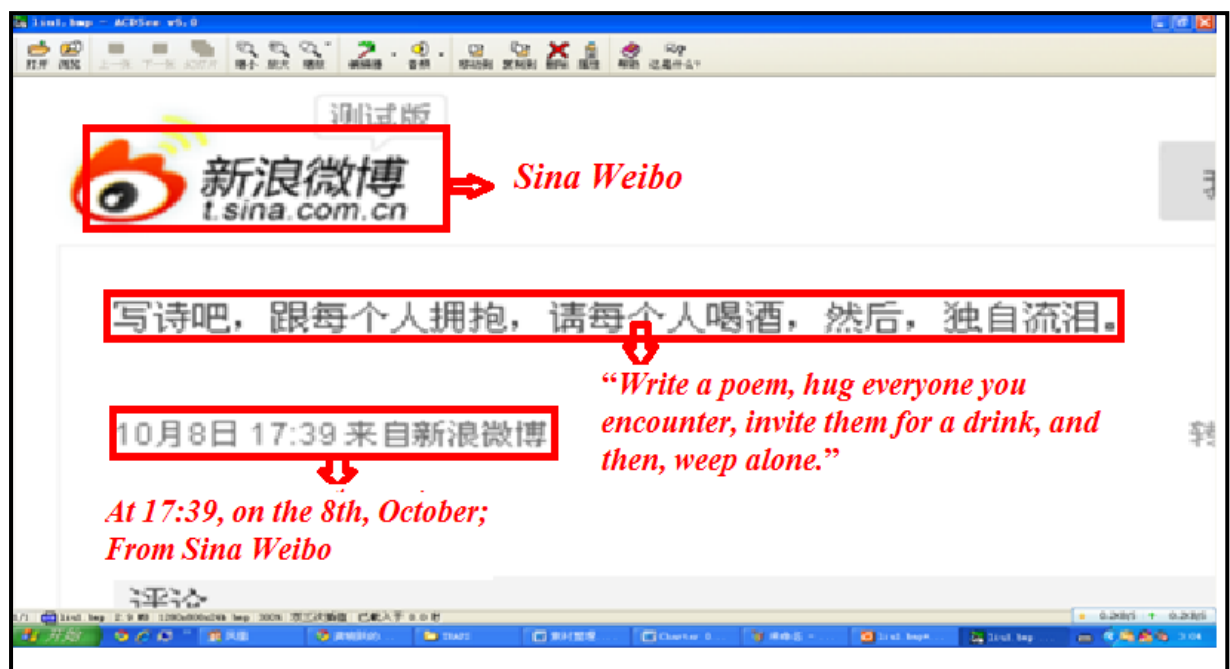
4. *Did I say anything? Absolutely nothing! Because I know that all the posts here will be "River Crabbed."*

By emphasizing "I said nothing", the blogger has already sufficiently conveyed what he really wanted to say; second, a Chinese Internet meme "River Crab" (河蟹), which is a near homophone of another Chinese phrase (和谐), which can be translated as "harmonize", is used here as symbolic defiance of the widespread Internet censorship in China.

Large amount of metaphoric discourses created by the Chinese grassroots bloggers make the Chinese blogosphere a highly context-dependent one. In order to interpret the discourses appropriately, one needs to understand the online language practices very well and it is also a must for him/her to be good at exploring the extensive political, economic and social contexts of China to understand the complicated power relations that help generate these discourses.

Figure 2.6 is a typical case of highly context dependent discourse on Sina Weibo, posted on the night of the 8<sup>th</sup> October 2010 when the Nobel Peace Prize was announced.

Figure2.6: A post on Sina Weibo on the night of the 8th October 2010



There is only one sentence in this piece of discourse, lacking preceding or following context. The sentence literarily means “Write a poem, hug everyone you encounter,

*invite them for a drink, and then, weep alone.*” This seems like a personal emotional expression. However, with more contexts being explored further, the implied meanings of this text gradually emerged.

Firstly, the exact time of the post, at 17:39, on 8<sup>th</sup> October 2010, is exactly the time when the Nobel Peace Prize was announced by the Nobel Prize Committee. Secondly, the identity of the blogger gives us further cues for interpretation.

Figure 2.7: The homepage of Gong Xiaoyue’s blog on Sina Weibo



From the profile at the top of the homepage, as displayed in figure 2.7, we know that the blogger’s name is Gong Xiaoyue, from Changsha, a southern city of China. The logo of his personal home page of Sina Weibo goes like this: *a better attitude for doing media business—when you are in the room, be in the room*, which implies that he is a media person. By reading more of his posts, we learn that he is the chief editor of Xiao xiang Chen Bao, a leading critical newspaper in China. He is also a verified real name blogger with almost 80 thousand fans. There are also links on his profile,



providing us with more clues. For instance, on the homepage of his Sina Weibo, a link to his another blog address is given: <http://gongxy.blog.tianya.cn/>

Figure 2.8: Gong Xiaoyue's blog in Tianya Club<sup>49</sup>.



As shown in figure 2.8, this is a traditional blogging service on a leading forum in China: Tianya, in which Gong Xiaoyue is writing long essays on current affairs. In his blog, there is a long article titled "On 8th October 2010", explaining his thoughts and feelings about the incident of 8 October 2010, and the short sentence he posted on Sina Weibo ( see figure 2.6) is an excerpt from this article as marked out in figure 2.8.

When we explore further, another story about the blogger which happened a month after the Prize announcement also assists us contextualizing Gong Xiaoyue's micro-blog. In November 2010, XiaoxiangChenbao published a series of articles to commemorate the Xinhai Revolution<sup>50</sup>. These articles were criticized by publication

<sup>49</sup> Tianya Club is one of the most popular Internet forums in China; currently it is the 12th most visited site in the People's Republic of China and 72nd overall. (With reference to <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/tianya.cn>)

<sup>50</sup> Also known as the Revolution of 1911. The Chinese bourgeois democratic revolution led by Dr Sun Yat-sen which overthrew the Qing Dynasty.

authorities for alluding towards CCPC's autocratic governing, and Gong Xiaoyue was forced to quit<sup>51</sup>.

Up to now, we know well that Gong Xiaoyue is a radical democratic media editor, whose blogs contain critical thoughts regarding China's social reality rather than personal, emotional expression. This makes it possible to make an appropriate interpretation of Gong Xiaoyue's one-sentence post on Sina Weibo: which, although without any sensitive words, is actually an expression about his feelings towards Liu Xiaobo winning the Nobel Prize and his concerns about the future of China.

In this case study, given the high context of a one-sentence discourse produced at a particular moment, an appropriate interpretation requires many more layers of context than the text itself. The time, the author, his other posts, links to other resources, other media, and even the offline society, all can be relevant in the contextualization process.

Forced by censorship and endowed with a pictographic writhing system, Chinese bloggers find it a necessary and natural choice to create highly context-dependent discourses when blogging. At the same time, the evolvement of social media like micro-blogging dramatizes the disparity and complexity of online discourses. These factors have jointly created a high context blogosphere in China which requires even more contexts to obtain an appropriate interpretation of the critical meanings created there.

In sum, the Chinese blogosphere has empowered the grassroots segments of the populace by giving them a voice and the power of meaning-making through alternative language usages and interpretations. In a regime where the authorities have decided the prerogative of defining the correctness of a language and meaning for decades, this is already revolutionary.

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<sup>51</sup> The information in this paragraph was obtained by my two online interviews with Gong Xiaoyue and one face-to-face interview.



## Chapter 3 Conclusion

With its capability of user generated content, the Chinese blogosphere has enabled Chinese grassroots individuals to take over large part of public discourse that were formerly controlled by the state power, and has empowered a lower social segment that otherwise would have no access to channels for articulation of its political views. In a country of which its population has been treated as subjects rather than citizens throughout its history, this is revolutionary. By analyzing various discourses created in the Chinese blogosphere, my aim is not only to direct our attention to an “extremely colorful and active realm in Chinese cyberspace” (Zhou 2005) that has been little studied but also to make us think about the democratic potentials of the Chinese blogosphere and the mechanisms that the blogosphere uses to achieve democratic changes.

As what we can see in the case study of Sina Weibo, at the instance-level, as a new medium relatively inexpensive and accessible to enable anyone to publish or access information, with mechanisms like self-censorship system, multi-functional mediating system, and real name system, micro-blogging services in China do function as discursive public spheres which enable grassroots participation. At the collective level, two types of grassroots online discursive politics have been observed in this study: Wei Guan and Whistle-blowing. These politics are very far from the kind in which people participate, reach a consensus, make decisions, and then act; they belong to the micro discursive level of public participation, promising gradual social progress rather than radical revolution, which exhibits a unique mechanism by which the Chinese blogosphere achieve its democratic potentials. These grassroots politics are of great significance to the democratic process of China. They lower the threshold of public participation, enabling grassroots Chinese to express views and desires. At the same time, participating in these grassroots politics enables people to see each other and understand each other, realizing the existence of each other. This represents a kind of witness and caring about each other on the part of the citizenry. Specifically, the aspects that the blogosphere contributes to the development of virtual democracy in China include its positive influence on policy-making and on the communication between the authorities and the grassroots individuals.

It is fair to say that the blogosphere is playing an increasingly important role in transforming China's public space and reshaping China's authoritarian regime. It is in this sense, that we insist on the democratic potential of the Chinese blogosphere, arguing that the Chinese blogosphere, despite its constraints, is helping to facilitate the virtual democracy in China.

One of the points that the technologically deterministic expectation that the Internet itself will change China have neglected is the dynamics the unique political,

economic, social and cultural contexts of China brought to the emergence of Chinese virtual democracy. China has constructed different power-relations domestically as well as a different kind of relation between locality and globalization in which the Chinese blogosphere finds itself. In another word, China has a different conjuncture, which is less logical, but much more complicated. The premises for blogosphere in the west are not all applicable to China. If confined within the west perspective, it is impossible to understand the complexity of the Chinese case, much less the varieties in other societies. We have to base our study on the specific conjuncture of China as implicated by this study.

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