The Chinese Blogosphere as a Site of Social Engagement and Contestation

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The Chinese blogosphere is not identical to its English forerunners since its inception in 1999. From social constructivist (Doolittle and Hicks 2003) and connectivist (Downes 2007; Siemens 2005) perspectives, socio-cultural and political conditions, beliefs, and values as well as various practices of bloggers could have contributed to such dissimilarity, in addition to continued technological innovations and numerous networked communications. In this regard, it is worth examining the trajectory of the Chinese blogosphere in relation to social contingencies to understand the complex socio-technological interactions. Such a history-in-making account, though situated in a very short time span and not intended for producing a complete picture of Chinese blogs and the Chinese blogosphere, will be helpful for understanding the niche that has shaped this cultural space. It will be equally useful for furthering research in some of the emergent areas, as the following sections will reveal.

In what follows, this article provides a historical snapshot of the Chinese blogosphere. The analysis will then focus on describing several key aspects of the Chinese blogosphere including virtual elitism, political cynicism, commercialization, and gender reconstruction and empowerment to unpack the interactions between the virtual and the physical spheres. For this purpose, this article adopts a netographic line to frame the analysis of the Chinese blogosphere. Netography, through its connections with conceptions of virtual ethnography (Hine 2000; Hine 2005; Murthy 2008), textography (Smart 2008; Swales 1998), discourse studies (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002) and social semiotics (van Leeuwen 2005), emphasizes the researcher's online presence on the site as either an informed insider or a lurking observer (cf. Kozinets 2010).

A netographic account of the blogosphere confirms that the Chinese blogosphere as a site does not have a clear-cut border that is marked by legitimatized access. The distinction between participation and observation, as well as between various types and sources of text, also becomes blurry. A researcher online is researching the site as long as a research focus is present: identifying relevant persons, issues, and phenomena, collecting and accumulating data, evaluating significant emergences, and critiquing and theorizing ideas. A netographic account of the Chinese blogosphere in this regard is mainly concerned with who uses blogging, for what purposes, what kinds of blogging are recognized, how they develop and garner recognition, and who says what, in which channel, to whom, and to what effect (c.f. Danet 2001; Laughey 2007). The Chinese blogosphere, from this account, is then seen as a provocative example for researching digital media, alongside an ethnographic site for observing, experiencing, and exploring virtual social occurrences, and as a text for analyzing. A netographic framing thus facilitates the examination of the broad social situations around and beyond blogs as well as the immediate context embedded in individual blogs.

A Historical Snapshot of the Chinese Blogosphere

For a start, it is necessary to provide a brief historical snapshot of the Chinese blogosphere to contextualise the analysis. The blog, formerly known as the weblog, was introduced to the Chinese Internet in 1998, not long after its appearance in the United States. At its earlier stage, blogging tools were mostly used by IT communities in China, identical to the practice in the US. However, by the end of 2006, the number of blogs in Mainland China had

reached 60 million (CNNIC 2007) and become a mainstream social media space for average users. In 2006, a number of Chinese blogs such as Laoxu Boke, one of China's female celebrities, were ranked at the top of the blogosphere according to the statistics from Technorati (www.technorati.com). By the end of 2008, the population of the Chinese blogosphere had virtually outnumbered that of the United States (CNNIC 2008).

When compared to international examples, the Chinese blogosphere is young but it is catching up quickly. The importance of Chinese blogs as media, instruments for business, education, and research, and channels for personal expression is becoming widely recognized. Over just a few years, its influence has been extended from the blogosphere to other parts of the Chinese Internet and societies. A growing number of Chinese journalists are also blogging, providing a greater variety of information and analysis than they are able to do in their official news outlets. Some Chinese academics have begun to use blogs as a platform for discussing and publicizing their research. Some educators are using blogs to share curriculum and communicate with students. A few Chinese government officials at the local and national levels have taken blogging as a way to improve communication with their constituencies. Some people have turned to blogs in order to publicize human rights violations that they or their loved ones have experienced, and to appeal for justice when being prevented from obtaining legal services.

The Chinese blogosphere is unique. Technologically identical with other blogospheres, though minor differences do exist due to cost and intellectual property right constraints, the Chinese blogosphere has developed its own characteristics due to the authoritarian political system and Confucian sociocultural tradition. Increasing interest among Chinese and overseas scholars in the phenomenon of Chinese blogs has resulted in a number of publications in the past few years. Inside China, some of these studies have explored, for example, how blogs can improve second language teaching and learning, for bettering school literacy education, and for facilitating communication between teachers and students. Other studies have discussed the prospective application of blogs to businesses in terms of, say, marketing and public relations (e.g., Cheng 2005; Mo 2005). As Zhou (2006) summarizes in his survey of the blog-related publications archived in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the majority of the early research in blogs in Chinese focussed on the applications of blogging for educational and commercial purposes. These studies are either introductions to blogs as a whole, or reflective descriptions and commentaries of blogs and certain blog phenomena.

Research conducted by some so-called independent research centres is rather dubious in that their aim of featuring 'blog research' is for gaining currency through branding their contribution to blogs such as several pioneering Chinese bloggers, mass media and new-born profit-driven Internet research labs (e.g., http://research.bokee.com). Aside from the credibility of this kind of research, there is also an overt neglect of the fact that Chinese blogs have increasingly become a culturally and linguistically significant phenomenon and entity, which is worth in-depth research.

In recent years, research on the social impact of blogs upon Chinese society has also risen. Some researchers (Xiao, 2006; Zhou, 2008) argue that the emergence of blogs in the Chinese Internet has been revolutionary as it has helped blur the boundaries between the public and private sphere, leading to a state of so-called 'carnival' (kuanghuan) (see Farrell 2005). They contend that the popularity of blogs in the Chinese Internet may reflect the public's growing discontent with the elite discourse that has dominated Chinese media both online and offline. Researchers have addressed the effect that blogs may have had on certain social practice. For instance, Ye (2006) examined a famous writer Yu Hua as a case to explore how blogging has influenced the style, the content, and the reception of his writing (blogging). The clash between traditional literary writing and blogging, as Ye points out, is inevitable and transformative for the literary world.

Outside China, concerns have been directed at influences of blogs on the progress of democracy (such as China digital times at http:/www.chinadigitaltimes.net; Danwei at www.danwei.tv), the formation of civic society (He, Caroli, and Mandl 2007; Lih 2004; Lum 2006; MacKinnon 2007; MacKinnon 2008; Zittrain and Edelman 2003), and censorship (Zittrain and Edelman 2003). These organizations and research have principally seen blogs as a better window, medium, and channel than the traditional mass media, for understanding Chinese society and its evolving social networking systems. China Digital Times (http://chinadigitaltimes.net/), for example, is a blog-like bilingual news website founded by Xiao Qiang, an adjunct professor at University of California at Berkeley in 2003. It provides independent reporting, translations from Chinese cyberspace, perspectives from across the geographical, political and social spectrum, and daily recommendations of readings from the Chinese blogosphere. Though not purely research-oriented, the news and analysis it has collected has produced a useful database for researching Chinese blogs, especially those blogs with political orientations.

He et al. (2007) compared differences between Chinese and German blogs by analysing 700 blog pages and

exploring how far these distinctions can be identified and related to known cultural differences between the two countries. They found that Chinese blogs are more graphically oriented and more attentive to the communication between bloggers and commentators than German blogs. They suggest that cultural idiosyncrasies such as collectivism (Chinese) and individualism (German) may be the major factor that has resulted in these differences. Their study, regardless of lack of fine-grained differentiation of types (personal or collective; video, photo, podcasting) and phases (early or recent) of Chinese blogs, suggests that researchers should be aware of the influence of cultural (as well as linguistic) factors in conducting blog research.

MacKinnon (2007) analyses the importance of blogs for China correspondents and calls for more comparative research so that the relationship between blogs and international news can be better understood. From this point of view, Mackinnon (2008) further argues that blogs may be a catalyst for long-term evolutionary political change because they help enlarge the space for collaboration and conversation on subjects not directly related to political activism.

Chinese Blogs: Characterization and Controversies

Alongside the netographic line, the following sections of this article will describe several distinct features of the Chinese blogosphere in relation to Chinese sociocultural and political traditions and trends such as the Confucian tradition of elitism and self-censorship.

Translation, Legitimation, and Social Elitism

To understand the Chinese blogosphere requires an understanding of how elitism operates in the nation. It is known that the original formation of the blog was propelled by the grassroots desire for (active and meaningful) social (and especially political) participation but the blog's inroad to the Chinese websphere was initiated and constructed by elite social groups. These are the people who had earlier access to the web spheres than the average Chinese and who had the capacity to capitalize on these resources. The trajectory of the Chinese blogosphere, from its very beginning, was a top-down momentum. Instead of a movement for the powerless to question and challenge the powerful, it was manipulated by elite groups to maximize their gains in whichever ways were possible. It was only until as late as 2003 when a group of female bloggers such as Muzi Mei, Zhuying Qinttong, and Liumang Yan started blogging that the elites' manipulation all of sudden started to crack. The use of blogs has since erupted among average Internet users, consequently leading to the so-called grassroots movement of Chinese blogs. Still, attempts to reinstall, restore, and reinforce elitism into the blog-like social networking media were visible from the translating practice of the original English term of blog into Chinese and have never waned ever since.

During the early days of the Chinese blogosphere, three translations of the term blog were used interchangeably, namely, 网记(wangji), 网志 (wangzhi), and博客(boke), each of them as a text indexing certain social intentions and actions. The first two names are literal translations of blogs with minor differences. Wangji was a shortened name for网络日记 (wangluo riji) describing the blog as online or web diaries. In addition to the denotation of Wangji, Wangzhi, a shortened name for wangluo rizhi, places an emphasis on the possible role that blogs may have for personal development and attainment through blogging. It is known that the Chinese character Zhi has another layer of meaning of setting personal goals besides recording activities and events.

Strangely, the third translation, boke, has little semantic relevance to the blog. It is neither a literal nor a free translation of blog; rather, it is a coinage of two seemingly different characters. The first character博 (Bo) refers denotatively to being learned, knowledgeable, to the academic degree Doctor of Philosophy (boshi xuewei), or academics with a PhD degree who would be regarded as social elites responsible for authoritative knowledge production and interpretation. Similar to the Taiwanese translation部落格 (Buluoge), which translates the blog phonetically, the pronunciation of Bo is roughly close to the sound of the first letter of blog. The second character客 (Ke), following the translation fashion of other Internet terms such as hackers (黑客Heike), geeks (红客Hongke), Flashmakers (闪客 Shanke), and wikipedia contributors (维客Weike), is known in Chinese either as distinguished guests of the powerful or professionals. Without providing adequate background knowledge, Boke can easily conjure up an image among blog newbies of elite professionals who enjoy authoritative status in certain fields.

Disputes over the translation of the term blog into Mandarin Chinese were rampant among the pioneers. Although the first two versions appeared earlier, they were outnumbered soon by Boke and have become largely

invisible in the Chinese blogosphere and the web sphere. The competition for naming blogs in Chinese is not simply about names; rather, it embodies the tension over power among various social groups of interest. From a historical perspective, naming an object or a phenomenon is a complex issue and can incur profound consequences. In Confucian text such as Lunyu, inappropriate naming in its very extreme can impair personal wellbeings and national solidarity. It is evident that the preference of Boke over the other two names implies a stronghold of Confucian elitism and the victory of the elite over the ordinary in the Chinese blogosphere from the very outset.

Fang Xingdong, self-elevated as the "Father of Chinese blogs", envisioned blogs in China as a prime means for business and governing. Fang's idea, inherently a manifestation of social elitism, was shared by many other bloggers. He may regard himself as a superior gentleman (Junzi) in the Confucian sense empowered to define for the Chinese bloggers what the blog is and to instruct them how to blog. On the other hand, Anti, a well-known Chinese blogger, regarded blogs much as columnist syndicates for producing opinion leaders. In his view, the grip on the discursive power inscribed in blogs is the key for developing a business model and enhancing profits; that is, whoever dominates the blog discourse can take the lion's share of the market. For them, the Chinese blogosphere opens up new opportunities for making fortunes, creating celebrities, and garnering public attention due to blogs' capacity to aggregate opinions, thereafter creating and modelling new lifestyles for the average person.

The elitist imperative permeates the development of the Chinese blogosphere and blogs via the translation of the term, the popularity of blog columnists, the attention to celebrity blogs, and the promotion of so-called grassroots blogs. The resistance to the populist from the elites, especially those who are in control of political power, is manifested in every possible aspect of the Chinese blogosphere. As such, some personal blogs may well be a fabrication concocted by certain groups with higher social standings to tame or shape the public's opinions and imaginations (Nie and Li 2008). The owner of a personal blog, in other words, may not be a single person but a team or teams with a carefully conceived agenda or strategic plan. Similar personal blogs founded by various departments of local and central governments are also seen everywhere, though disguised as independent individuals.

Censorship and Resistance

In addition to the persistence of China's elitism, the interplay between the Chinese authority's censorship on the Internet and its netizens' reaction is a key factor that has influenced the Chinese blogosphere and its development. In Mainland China, under the Communist Party's rule, the media is regarded as the mouthpiece of the Party and the government. It is largely controlled and constantly censored by the Chinese Communist Party Propaganda Department. Although commercialization has provided spaces for entertaining, educating, and informing the masses, the state maintains a strong censorship of any news that may impact on the Party's control (Fu 2005). Rules and regulations on which the censorship is based, though never known to the public, are enforced by media institutions and publishers at different levels (Jiao 2007). From the mid-1990s onwards, the Department began permitting several so-called privately-run media outlets but its restrictions over their operations have rarely been relaxed. The arrival of the Internet has nevertheless posed a great threat to the Department's control and has forced it to develop new censoring mechanisms such as the China National Network and Information Centre (CNNIC), the Internet Society of China (ISC), and the Great Firewall (GFW). Likewise, the growth of blogs has occurred under strict surveillance from the day blogs first entered the Chinese Internet.

Internet censorship in China takes three basic forms: blocking, content filtering, and official registration. Blocking is mainly targeted at overseas websites and services that have been blacklisted as unfriendly and harmful. It can be either permanent or temporary depending on the content of websites and China's political situation. Content filtering prevents Chinese Internet users from viewing sensitive or improper web content (Pan 2006). Such content as the events of Tian'anmen Square, the on-going calls for democracy, Taiwan independence, and Tibetan independence are inaccessible to the Chinese residents. Other content such as pornography, which had been left largely unattended for a long period of time, has recently received official attention in an upsurge of public condemnation of moral decay (Zittrain and Edelman 2003). The Great Firewall has become the most notoriously developed Internet software used to filter and block information from outside China.

Websites and web service providers are required to regulate their web content and to assist the government in cracking down on pornography websites, services, or agents. They have been requested to submit website details to CNNIC for official registration since November 2005. Chinese authorities can order web service providers to provide their customers' confidential information whenever necessary. For example, in 2005, MSN Space gave away a political dissident's blog identity to the China National Network and Information Centre, which led to his arrest

and the shutdown of a number of blogs (Wood and Smith 2005).

For their own safety, the majority of bloggers have not become involved in political debates and have avoided explicit sex presentations when constructing their blogs. Censorship has influenced and will continue to influence the development of Chinese blogs in terms of blog types, functions, genres, and content. Dissatisfaction in the Chinese websphere, however, has grown. For example, in 2006 some Chinese bloggers, who were unhappy with the Great Firewall's blocking of Google which provides a free searching service, used cyber-voodoo to express their anger (MacKinnon 2006), as shown in Figure 1. The text at the top left of this image says: "This person has made it impossible to access Google." The text on the bottom says: "A click on this website equals one needle prick."

此人使
google
无法访问

点击本网页
等于扎一针

A variety of strategies in and through software has been created by Internet users to circumvent the Great Firewall and avoid being identified (Lum 2006; Zittrain and Edelman 2003). One of the many ways used is to manipulate words in search of sensitive content. For example, some users use Chinese characters with the same pronunciation to avoid their content being filtered. Some separate phrases that might be searched with spaces to deceive the filtering mechanism. Some users have even used the traditional Chinese way of writing from right to left vertically to publish their opinions. Anti-filtering and anti-blocking softwares are also being developed by individuals and organizations to circumvent the Great Firewall. Many proxy-hunting softwares (such as Freegate and Ultrareach) are available for free downloading and some are even sent by certain organizations (such as Falun Gong) to users via emails, MSN, and other communication tools.

Conflicts between the censor and the censored are numerous in Mainland China and the authorities are not always victorious. For example, the Chinese Industry and Communication Ministry's demand that all computers sold in China after July 1st 2009 preinstall a filtering software Green Dam Youth Escort (Luba huaji huhang). The filtering software was supposedly designed to protect children and teenagers from pornographic and violent content while its hidden agenda was to monitor computer users' activities. This software could record computers users' information and report it back to the company and the government. The infamous project was strongly challenged by average Internet users, IT professionals, diplomats and was consequently postponed, perhaps permanently. The incident was arguably regarded as the first major victory of Chinese Internet users over the autocratic censorship of the government (Bradsher 2009). However, the victory might have resulted from a strategic compromise from the Chinese authority. According to Lagerkvist and Sundqvist (2013), as long as the regime's legitimacy remains intact, the Chinese authority can even encourage so-called "loyal dissents" to flag its political tolerance and transparency.

It is inevitable that the balance of political and social power and control is shifting as the use of and the dependence upon the social media deepens (Esarey and Qiang 2008). The blog-like social media (including micro-blogging) can be used and manipulated as a medium, tool, and space for political and social change in China but should not be mistaken for the sole cause of social and political change (Goldsmith and Wu 2006; MacKinnon 2008), which are encompassed by complex social, economic, and political forces.

Entertainment, Tabloidization, and Political Cynicism

Another distinctive feature of the Chinese blogosphere is its concentration on entertainment and its trend

towards tabloidization. It is noticeable that the majority of Chinese bloggers rarely express overt political opinions, especially those pertinent to the Party's power construct. Political statements, if any, are either opaquely expressed or constrained by the owners themselves or by the censors. Many of the popular bloggers would rather excessively deploy irony, parody, and innuendo that require their readers to read between the lines. With a deeply rooted fear of prosecution, reinforced by the memory of the past sufferings before and around 1989 and the present tightening of ideological boundaries, bloggers interested in political issues have to closely follow clearly understood but 'unspoken' rules. Democracy, for example, may be a trendy word used frequently in government announcements and reports and in talks of many government officials; in actual application, the meaning of democracy has a clear-cut distinction among Party and non-Party members (Zhao 1998). Issues such as multi-party system, general election, and separation of powers are totally prohibited from even being mentioned in media and other channels. Other topics such as the Tian'anmen Square massacre, Falungong, and Tibetan independence can never overtly appear, except in condemnations of these movements in the Party's publications. In other words, any political discussion on blogs that has the intention of denying or weakening the Party's legitimacy and reign would be forbidden and punished.

Such a political climate has many consequences on the Chinese blogosphere as the majority of its participants are self-claimed intellectuals or professionals. Many of them, educated in the Party's schooling system, employed in public service sectors, promoted by way of continued education at provincial or the Central Party Schools (dangxiao; a higher education institution designed for professional development of the Chinese Communist Party's high profile members) are the beneficiaries of the shares distributed among powerful interest groups. Irrespective of the size of their share, their status in China is in rather stark contrast to the commoners such as workers and peasants who have been sophisticatedly and clandestinely exploited and oppressed before and after the Opening and Reform. Bloggers, under such circumstances, may instinctively choose to take an opportunist approach. Political expediency in this sense is commonplace: many of the bloggers continue taking the Party's side and some of them are alleged to be accomplices of the Party disguised as blog columnists or popular grassroots bloggers to influence public opinions as opinion leaders. Some of these have been publicly recognized such as Yu Qiuyu and Wang Zhaoshan, given their experience in Mao's period and connections with the authoritarian institutions and media. Some are not easy to identify such as Han Han, Guo Jingming, and Acosta who are idols of the younger generations of the 1980s and 1990s. These bloggers form the pro-Party alliance composed of various groups and generations in the Chinese blogosphere.

For those bloggers who are unwilling to cooperate with the Party's propaganda machine, cynicism offers a practical alternative to either eluding or resisting this situation without directly confronting the Party. Usually, their blogging would be themed with lifestyle content such as fashion, travel, pets, and games, enabled by the continued economic growth, a major achievement the government is apt to take credit for.

Figure 2 is a visual collage of four sections of the front-page of the Xinlang blog service provider (henceforth BSP) in 2006. As it illustrates, the eighteen channels or tags, by which the content of blogs are linked to wider communities, are labelled entertainment, sports, culture, women, IT, finance, automobiles, real estate, education, games, military, constellation, cooking, interior design, babysitting, health, photos, and e-magazine. Among these popular tags in sections b), c), and d), many of them are about entertainment celebrities such as Li Yapeng and Zhang Liangying, and other tags are related to entertainment, sports, foods, and travel. No channels or tags are entitled politics, current issues or affairs. In fact, on the homepage of the Xinlang BSP, there is only one sub-channel entitled 'point of view' (guandian), which includes blog entries which discuss certain non-politically provocative social issues.

Probably only a small proportion of Chinese blogs are designed for providing entertainment services while the majority are set up for miscellaneous ends. However, visiting the homepage of many of Chinese BSPs will certainly give an impression that entertainment-oriented blogs are prevailing, if not monopolizing, the Chinese blogosphere. On many BSPs such as Xinlang BSP, the entertainment section is the most popular (see Figure 2) teeming with celebrities, gossips, tabloid news, and other. For example, the number one popular blog on Xinlang BSP is Laoxu Boke, whose owner is an entertainment celebrity famous for her singing, writing, acting, and directing (see Figure 1). Her blog is then not just a personal blog but a hub for her fans to express their admiration for their star and at the same time exchange information and develop communities related to the stardom of Xu. It is also a place where Xu presents her relationship with her fans and other parties such as film producers, agents, and colleagues to the public, consequently creating a space for group or team promotions instead of just promoting an individual pop star.

a) entertainment, sports, culture, women, IT, finance, automobiles, real estate, education , games, military, constellation, gourmet, interior design, parenting, health, photos and images, and e-magazine

b) hot tags: beauty, movie, webcam, kusuo, photo, jokes, Tang Wei, horror , gossip, privacy, amusement, game, Zang Baizhi, Zhou Xingchi, Liu Dehua, Liu Yifei, gigs, Zhou Jielun, Zhang Liangying.

c): Li Yapeng, national soccer team, sex and lust, Xie Tingfeng, Korean TV drama, Buying property, extramarital affairs, stocks and shares, NBA, Yaoming, beauty , privacy, gourmet, Hai Yan, secrecy, travel, military ambush, Liu Xiang, Tang Wei, Zhang Weiying, the Red Mansion Dream, homosexual, job seeking.

d) hot tags: beauty (17180), sexy (23464), model (7377), photo (12877), Forbidden City (790), Beijing (529), Jiuzhaigou (1064), Lijiang River (1025), arts (133), Forbidden City (790), Tibet (3982), ancient beauty (914), American national geography (256), bikini (146), Tang Jiali's artistic photos (128), Gourmet (1115), beauty blog contest (74041), artistic photographing (318), Lomo (604)

Personal blogs are further exploited by paparazzi, a newly emergent occupation in free market China, for disseminating material to the tabloids about the celebrities. By publicizing celebrities' private lives, tabloid magazines, journals, and websites make profits while celebrities retain and expand their publicity, consequently leading to a win-win situation, regardless of some so-called urge for privacy protection. Take Sohu BSP for instance. The number one popular blog is not authored by a celebrity or a public figure but by Song Zude, who is an entertainment reporter or paparazzi known for his bluntness and outrageous spying.

The prevalence of entertainment and tabloid content in the Chinese blogosphere may correspond with China's continuing economic prosperity in the past three decades as well as Chinese people's demand for lifestyle change such as leisure and holidays. In this regard, it may also indicate the Chinese public's reluctance to pursue social goals at the expense of their hard-earned lifestyle change through political reforms or structuring, not to mention revolutions. An overemphasis on or dominance of such sections may indicate an indifference caused by political pressure. Nevertheless, it is understood that different social dynamics are in formation for visibility as well as legitimacy.

Portalisation and Commercialization

In alignment with the prevailing tabloidization, the quest for profit or commercial interest is another driving force that has changed the landscape of the Chinese blogosphere at an early stage. Portalisation is the tendency of bloggers to redevelop their blogs into personal web portals. An individual blog, instead of simply publishing personal updates, syndicates a number of services such as websites, chat rooms, forums, journals, conferences that may potentially transform blogs into commercial organizations. In fact, portalisation is especially popular with celebrity and A-list bloggers. For example, Laoxu boke (www.blogs.sina.com.cn/laoxu), a female celebrity blog, is operated as part of the blogger's own personal web (blog) portal. As Figure 3 illustrates, Laoxu's blog portal includes her profile (about Jinglei) and a hyperlink to her blogsite (Laoxu's blog), online chat service (chat rooms for Jinglei's community), a bulletin board system (BBS for Jinglei's community, and a fan community (Jingmeng or Jinglei's community). In addition, it links her two businesses (Flower Village and Shops at Jinglei's community) as well as a downloading service (downloads at Jinglei's community) she personally financed. A blog in this sense has gone beyond being purely a personal space and may perform a number of related functions, services, and communities.

Individual bloggers' interest in portalising their blogs is directly influenced by their BSPs. Unlike BSPs in English-speaking countries such as Live Journal and Wordpress, the majority of Chinese BSPs have been developed from web portals such as Xinlang (www.sina.com.cn) and Sohu (www.sohu.com). Consequently, these BSPs may have many features in common with the web portals with which they are associated. Such a way of providing blogging services is a strategic move to enlarge the web portals' market share through simulating content, consumers, and consequently the market. Blogs hosted on these BSPs are consequently encouraged to develop their own personal portals when

their popularity reaches a threshold, for realizing various purposes such as profit and popularity.

(Note: in brackets are translations of the Chinese text)

Commercial interest is a driving force that has shaped the development of the Chinese blogosphere and blogs. By providing blog services, BSPs not only expand their market share but also compete for customers. Bloggers in this sense have little common ground with traditional customers. They are the customers of certain BSPs as receivers of their hosting and other content services. However, rather than paying their BSPs for hosting services, bloggers contribute their time and energy to creating content in return, not just for themselves but also for their BSPs, in line with respective regulations, customer agreement, or the code of conduct. In particular, bloggers are requested to allow their BSPs to access their registered information. Blogs, including their owners, become an asset of their BSPs and even, possibly, their products, depending on their capacity and BSPs marketing plans. An alliance, then, is formed, especially among certain powerful groups of blogs. The sections on those BSPs, for example, are not simply a collection of tags or themes; rather, they could be seen as a way to brand the blogs according to their content and influence. Understandably, the more influence a blog has, the more buying power it brings to the BSP. That blogger, clearly, would have more power in bargaining with the blog service and more incentives to offer to the BSP for better service as well as financial return. The dissolving or blurred border between business and customers then complicates the traditional understanding of commercialization.

Gender, Sex, and Female Bloggers' Presence

Apart from the above-discussed features, the most remarkable difference between the Chinese blogosphere and the Western (English-language) blogosphere which was characteristically dominated by male bloggers, was the predominant influence of female bloggers at the early stage of the Chinese blogosphere. Although blogs were introduced to the Chinese websphere by several male bloggers in 1999, the most well-known blogs by 2006 were mostly authored by female bloggers such as Liumang Yan, Furongjiejie, Anyawa, Yuwang nüshen, Hongyi jiaozhu, Eryue yatou, to mention just a few. It was only at the end of 2006 that a number of male blogs such as Duyao, Jidi Yangguang, Bijibijie, Shangdong'erge, Furong gege, and Yaofeiniangniang began to emerge in the Chinese blogosphere.

Two hypotheses may account for this difference. First, early blogs were considered personal journals or diaries that are seen as feminized. Some research (Lu 2008), for instance, indicates that more women than men preferred keeping diaries and revealing their experiences, emotions, feelings, and desires. Although the reliability of some such findings could be problematized, to some extent they offer alternative interpretations of women's dominance in the early phase of the Chinese blogosphere to the mainstream account. Second, blogs provide Chinese women an unprecedented space for voicing their identities and subjectivity (Jiang & Wang, 2005. Such early gender imbalance may then be a reflection of the tension between genders, predominately men and women, or an intermittent swing of gender power.

Sexual content is prevalent in the Chinese blogosphere. Some are related to gendered relations and lifestyles; for example, gender roles of women and men are variously described in fashion blogs in relation to clothing, shopping,

or body-building. Most of them are situated in urban contexts, especially in metropolitan cities of Shanghai, Beijing, or Guangzhou and authored by people from various occupations including from public service sectors. Some blogs, with little heed to the regulations, update explicit depiction of sexual content such as sexual intercourse and nudity. The early group of female Chinese blogs including Muzi Mei, Zhuying Qingtong, and Sister Lotus are good examples of this kind. Yet, due to the influence of blog censorship, the so-called "explicit" content might be seen as "implicit" to many viewers in the Western countries and could not be considered instances of soft porn.

Different as they are, these types of sexual content are built upon sexuality as well as desire, and their representations are socially situated and conditioned. For example, the popularity of Mu Zimei's sex blog (which was later compiled as Yiqing shu) can hardly be understood without careful consideration of the historical context of sex in China and its current configurations. Many researchers and bloggers would agree that Muzi Mei has become, on any account, a symbol of the Chinese blogosphere rather than a single female blogger and a particular type of Chinese blog (Jiang and Wang 2005). To some extent, Muzi Mei together with her followers such as Zhuying qingtong, Liumang yan, and Eryue yatou has overshadowed the path of the Chinese blogosphere and the social-political situations in which it occurs.

Traditionally, though sex has been accused of being a source for improper conduct in dominant Confucian teachings and some Buddhist beliefs, it has never been officially criticized or disavowed in practice. Even in the Song Dynasty when Cheng and Zhu Confucianism was the mainstream, stating, "maintaining the universe order but cleansing human desires", the abandonment of sexual activities remained only in words but had never been widely practiced. On the contrary, studies in fields such as anthropology, history, and literature have shown that Chinese culture is abundant in diverse sex representations in various forms of literature, music, performances, and fine arts (Cecilia Lai-wan, Eric, and Celia Hoi-yan 2006). The fact that almost no emperor has ruled out prostitution, either state-run (公娼gongchang) or private-owned (私娼sichang), indicates that sex transactions were not rendered as crime by law; part of high court officials' and intellectuals' social life was rather fashioned by their romantic relations with sex workers in brothels (青楼/妓院qinglou/jiyuan). Even homosexual activities and relations (男风nanfeng) were not uncommon among concubines, high officials, intellectuals, and landlords at the imperial court. A number of genres of Chinese poetry were dedicated to describing the life of prostitutes and their relations with the poets. The reasons for this co-existence, however, are not the concern of this article.

This tradition, however, was disrupted when the Chinese Communist regime came into power in 1949 (Liu and Finckenauer 2010). Under the name of purification, prostitution was eradicated, polygamy and gay relations eliminated, and sexual activities enclosed in households only between officially married couples for the purpose of reproduction. Romantic relationships between opposite sexes was demonized as capitalist poison and therefore prohibited. Even marriage needed approval from the government officials (领导lingdao) of an institution (单位danwei); its successful approval depended on the couple's class (出身chushen). Apart from ideological and technological constraints, absolute impoverishment also prevented the majority of Chinese from pursuing sexual pleasures. It is then not a surprise, after economic austerity became history, that sex-related content serves as a trigger and stimulus for blogging in Mainland China given the strict censorship of traditional media such as printed media, radio, and TV (Johannen, Gomez, and Gan 2004). Practically, in new media such as blogs, accessing to enforce control is not always feasible, which further encourages the rampancy of sex-related publications and the quick formation of like-minded groups and communities in the Chinese blogosphere.

Concluding Remarks

The long tradition of Confucian elitism, reinforced by the widening class segregation and the paradox between rapidly increased population and dwindling (natural and social) resources in the 21st century (Fan 2010), has profoundly shaped the course of the Chinese blogosphere and blogs. The Party's omnipresence and its desire to cling to power have further complicated the power relations. Some groups have benefited from the opportunities endorsed by this power structure, some groups have been resistant, but the majority of blog users have learned to become resilient to pressures by choosing to avoid conflicts unless provoked or cornered. Compromise among these social groups is variously reached in forms of nationalism and personal flaming. In other words, the Chinese blogosphere has become a site on which various social parties, groups, and societies are competing to express their power and voice.

More significantly, the nature and infrastructure of the blog has welded the Chinese blogosphere into an unprecedented world for business in which the division between enterprises and their customers has become almost invisible. Every blog is a potential product carrying a certain brand name, be it the name of a blog service provider or even an abstract name such as happiness. The blogosphere, therefore, is creating internet syndicate through content while at the same time making such agglomeration an unlikely occurrence given the diversity of Chinese bloggers and the divergence amongst them.

Sexual desire in this regard prepares an almost automatic response to oppression as either resistance or reclusion. In so doing, it does to a greater extent help change the status quo of gender relations and positions in the Chinese blogosphere and society. The Chinese blogosphere, while preserving the history and resource of the Chinese languages, provides an alternative for the revival of not only the Chinese language but also of other semiotic means. Chinese blogs and their aggregation as a blogosphere is primarily valuable for research into the Chinese websphere and society.

It seems that Chinese blogs are becoming increasingly web portal-like, featuring content such as sex, entertainment, and personal details, while at the same time avoiding interest in sensitive political issues. Factors such as economic growth have had a direct impact upon Chinese bloggers' lifestyle representations. Other factors such as political correctness may implicitly affect the content of Chinese blogs and their way of blogging. Considering the critical function of blogs as a space for personal and collective expression, the tension between institutional surveillance and bloggers' resistance plays an important role in shaping the Chinese blogosphere and the characteristics of blogs.

The review of research in Chinese blogs at home and abroad suggests that there is a need to consider Chinese blogs as socio-culturally situated, conditioned, and evolving. Nardi et al. (2004) point out that blogging is a congregation of social activity in which blogs create the audience and the audience creates the blog at the same time. The Chinese blogosphere, then, is not a closed world but part of a larger communication space in which diverse media and face-to-face communication may be brought to bear. New affordances featured on blogs have greatly enhanced the depth of text and fostered a stronger articulation of the social (Davies and Merchant 2006; Davies and Merchant 2009). These dynamic connections challenge conventional conceptions of writers and readers as well as of text in online environments (Miller and Shepherd 2004; Miller and Shepherd 2009). Emergent social contingences in the Chinese blogosphere discussed in this article are disproportionately investigated given their impact on and significance for Chinese society. Further investigations are necessary and critical for understanding the blogosphere's influence over Chinese society, culture, and vice versa.

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