SEARCHING GUANGZHOU: REGIONALIZING CHINA'S WEIBO

Wilfred Yang Wang
Queensland University of Technology

The proliferation of *weibo* (micro-blog) services in China has attracted rich scholarly and media attention in recent years. This Twitter-like service allows its users to share messages of up to 140 Chinese characters. Moreover, users can share visual images and video, attach URLs, and re-post and 'LIKE' messages that they find interest in. *Weibo* was first introduced by Sina.com in 2009. Other major online providers, such as Netease, Tencent and Sohu have also launched their own *weibo* (Sullivan, 2012). By the end of December 2013, *weibo* services in general had 280 million users in (CNNIC, 2014). For the purpose of study, the term 'Weibo' only refers to Sina Weibo.

Many commentators focus on Weibo's prominent role in state-public contentions. While the political dimension is not to be disputed, learning about how a region's (or city's) distinctiveness intersects with new communication technology can offer an alternative perspective to explore digital media. This essay proposes a 'regional approach' to rethink about China's Weibo. Inspired by Sun and Chio's project of regionalizing Chinese media (2012), instead of viewing China's Internet as a singular whole, the aim here is to explore how regional identities intersects with new media technologies.

The economic reforms underpins the processes of regionalization and decentralization are the basic rationales of China's development, where inter-regional differences are encouraged and facilitated (Goodman, 1994). Tim Oakes (2000, p.670) further argues that comparing to 'the nation-state', ''the local' and 'the regional' are now regarded as more salient scales for asserting cultural identity'. Guangzhou is then not merely an administrative unit, but being the capital city of Guangdong, the first region to launch China's economic reform, Guangzhou's transformations and experience over time offer the realm to manage one's sense of self and belonging. Weibo intersects with this identification process and mediates the tension between the region and the nation.

Two national projects in recent Chinese history merit attention to contextualize Weibo in Guangzhou: the project of economic reform and the project of national identity. These two projects come hand in hand as economic reasons can justify the legitimacy of a national identity that is constructed by the CCP, and it can be achieved through 'standardization'.

The policy of *tuipu* (推普), 'promoting Mandarin', has been one of the most consistent

and determined policy by the CCP since the 1950s (Wang, 2001). Guangzhou media, however, were largely exempted from this policy as the government was hoping the preservation of Cantonese media would attract Hong Kong investors during the 1980s (Xinhua, 2010). This is no longer the case today as the mainland economy is increasingly independent from Hong Kong's investments. In July 2010, the Guangdong provincial government proposed to replace Cantonese broadcasting on Guangzhou's major television networks with Mandarin. The proposal triggered public anger and a street protest was organized on Weibo on 25 July 2010. The provincial government was forced to drop the proposal.

It is not new for Weibo to articulate local disputes, but the intersections between 'Guangzhou characteristics' and Weibo's technical features was intriguing. For example, the majority of Weibo posts were typed in Cantonese expressions. The freedom of tying and language choice on Weibo became the critical practice that has gathered the identity solidarity for the protest. Weibo's function of video sharing also made Cantopop songs (from Hong Kong) to flourish during the protest and became the 'protest anthems' to distinguish Cantonese and Mandarin culture. The use of the language, music and other cultural resources intersects with Weibo's technical aspects of connectivity, networking, sharing and visualization. The performance of identity was both personal and political: it was politically subversive because it confronted the government will of *tuipu*; it was personal because it speaks to Guangzhouers' culture and daily life. While Weibo's technologies allow the mobilizations, it was the recognitions of cultural identity that connects the otherwise unrelated individuals to share a common course.

This protest provides an interesting lead to think about regional specifics of the Chinese Internet rather than seeing online protest and discontent merely as 'class action' or 'generational shift'. Instead, the specific cultural uniqueness and social transformations, such as the Cantonese language and its proximity to Hong Kong, guide Weibo politics and culture.

Informed by the above observations, I have conducted another longitudinal study by collecting Weibo posts over a period of twelve months (20 July 2012 to 30 July 2013) from a *Weibo* group: 'Eat, Drink, Play, Fun in Guangzhou' (EDPF). The group mainly provides news and information about leisure and entertainment in Guangzhou. The study thus aims to explore how Weibo intersects with local identity through the realm of everyday lives.

Two major findings merit attention. First, Weibo's networking function such as 'Accounts that we both have followed', and 'My followers have also followed' sections indicate the 'mutual-following' and 'mutual-promotion practices' between city groups and their followers. EDPF does not present itself as the only and exclusive 'local group' to its followers; instead, it recommends other Weibo groups that provide useful information about Guangzhou lives. It seems like Weibo groups, such as EDPF, attempt to formulate a network of identity that its algorithmic networking function helps its users to recognize the online presence of their geo-identity, and to develop a sense of belonging to the city.

Second, local identity is scoped by *Weibo*'s function of 'visualisation'. Visual images or audio materials are attached to nearly every collected sample in this study. Visual materials set the 'boundaries' of identity and it helps making identity visible and tangible to people. Visualization in this case, suppresses imaginations by creating 'identity boundaries'.

This essay briefly reflects on the approach of regionalizing Weibo. The regional approach aims to explore how geo-identity intersects with digital technologies. While I make a case of Guangzhou here, I mean to put forth a possible way to rethink China's Internet. Through Guangzhou, we can learn more about the revitalization of sub-national regions within China's Great Firewall, and how Weibo helps to articulate the re-narration of a region, which can potentially become the re-narration of a nation (China).

References

"China's Internet A Giant Cage", *The Economist*, 6 April 2013, Retrived on 30 October 2014, From http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21574628-internet-was-expected-help-democratise-china-instead-it-has-enabled.

CNNIC. (2014). *The 33rd Statistical Report on Internet Development in China.* China Internet Network Information Center. Retrieved on 21 February 2014 from http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201401/P020140116395418429515.pd f

Goodman, D. S. (1994). The politics of regionalism: economic development, conflict and negotiation. In D. S. Goodman, & G. Segal, *China deconstructs Politics, trade and regionalism* (pp. 1-20). London and New York: Routledge.

Sullivan, J. (2012). A tale of two microblogs in China. *Media, Culture & Society, 34*(6), 773- 789.

Oakes, T. (2000). China's Provincial Identities: Reviving Regionalism and Reinventing "Chineseness". *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 667-692.

Sun, W., & Jenny, C. (2012). Introduction. In W. Sun, & J. Chio, *Mapping Media in China Region, Province, Locality* (pp. 3-12). USA and Canada: Routledge.

Wang Peiying. (2001). Discussing the regulations in the constitution of 'Nation wide promotion of Putonghua' (Lun Xianfa Guanyu 'Guojia Tuiguang Quanguo Tongyong de Putonghua' de Kuiding). *The Journal of Beijing College of Politics and Law, 27*, 9-11.

Xinhua. (2010, 07 09). *Proposal for news in Mandarin angers Guangzhou citizens*. Retrieved 05 09, 2013, from Xinhua News: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010- 07/09/c_13392543.htm