



Selected Papers of Internet Research 15:
The 15th Annual Meeting of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Daegu, Korea, 22-24 October 2014

SOCIAL IMAGINARIES OF THE INTERNET IN CHINA

Haiqing Yu
University of New South Wales

Abstract

Chinese Internet studies is a fast growing area. Broadly speaking, an underlining dichotomy between control and resistance, or between the “evil” and “control-freak” Chinese government and the “good” and rebellious netizens, has been central in many works in Chinese Internet studies. Others invoke an enthusiastic and celebratory perspective, focusing on the development of civil society and uptakes in media marketization and globalization and their democratic potentials. Still some others voice guided optimism about the Internet development and diffusion in China, and argue that the dichotomy between control and rebellion, centralization and decentralization, or state and society may not be sufficient to portray the unruly, diversified, stratified, Balkanized activities online. A more nuanced analysis of the Chinese Internet reveals that many different groupings, associations and movements, individual and collective creative expressions, diversified ways of entertainment, communication and consumption, and even the dominating state and market power are all flexible and mutable. None is static; they all respond and adapt to the influences of technologies, institutions, social practices of both the online and the offline, and even the regional and global techno-geopolitics.

It is time that we looked closely at how ordinary Chinese people (not political, economic and intellectual elites, or technological geeks) view their Internet in relation to themselves as individual human beings and an imagined community, rather than how we interpret their activities and experiences online. It is also time that we viewed the Internet as a lived space and experience that intersects, infiltrates, absorbs, and at the same time defies boundaries between the online and offline world, legitimate and illegitimate cultures. The Internet surely has boundaries if it is viewed as a technological and material device, machine, or design. At the same time, the Internet does not respect any boundary especially when it is viewed as an immaterial, abstract existence or way of life. Hence the concept of social imaginary is apt in capturing the largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of the unlimited and indefinite nature of the Internet.

The concept of social imaginary is a useful analytical tool for making sense of and critically assessing the multiple dimensions of communication, association or simply

Suggested Citation (APA): Yu, H. (2014, October 22-24). *Social imaginaries of the internet in China*. Paper presented at Internet Research 15: The 15th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Daegu, Korea: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

living in the Internet age. Here I employ Charles Taylor (2002)'s definition of the social imaginary as an open and flexible concept that incorporates a sense of normal expectations and common understanding to enable collective practices that make up our social life. It incorporates a widely shared sense of legitimacy that interweaves what things usually are with how they should go. It is not a set of theories but an ethos that enable ordinary people to make sense of their social surroundings. It is the repertory of images, metaphors, stories and legends, which are often taken for granted, that is central to my discussion of social imaginaries of the Internet in China. I discuss social imaginaries of the Internet age in China through two metaphors that are most often used or implied by my respondents: the Internet as a battlefield and a playground. They are emblematic of how ordinary Chinese relate to the Internet.

The Internet as a Battlefield

The Internet as a battlefield metaphor has been used to describe the effort by entrepreneurs, private Internet companies and ICT starters to compete with one another to come up with the next new idea and capitalize on it to reap the maximum profit, and by average Chinese netizens to “scale the walls” to access censored websites. Although not everyone uses the word “battlefield” (*zhanchang*), the sense of urgency and desire to gain an upper hand over one's competitors or potential rivals permeates casual conversations with urban young and middle-aged male netizens.

On the business side, the battlefield is epitomized by a new Internet-related business dubbed as China's “1984 industry,” which represents the private-public, business-state relationships and partnerships in China's Internet and ICT development; and by a recent taxi hailing app war between China's two biggest Internet companies Tencent and Alibaba, which symbolizes the new battlefield in mobile media.

For ordinary netizens, the real battlefield does not happen on the street but on their palm top and laptop. China's more than half a billion Internet users have managed to “scale the wall,” to have fun, engage in e-commerce, and feel free to express themselves. Apparently a business to provide “scaling the wall” (*fanqiang*) service has thrived. On Baidu, if one searches “fanqiang software,” “proxy,” “ssh,” or “VPN,” one will get thousands if not millions of results that teach you how to download, install, use, and update (free or paid) software in order to access blocked websites, often with the proxy servers based in the US, Japan or Taiwan. One can even buy such services on Taobao (China's largest virtual bazaar, equivalent of eBay+Amazon) by searching “proxy” or “ssh.”

The efforts by the Chinese government to reduce the digital divide by providing and lowering the cost of mobile phone and Internet services to its mobile population have allowed even the poorest and most isolated to air their grievances and yearnings online. Equipped with smart phones and computer, China's migrant factory workers and sanitation workers have joined in the emerging labour movement.

The Internet as a Playground

The Internet as a playground metaphor views “play” as a prominent and ubiquitous feature of the Chinese Internet and central to the heteroglossia in contemporary Chinese culture. The most popular services and content that Chinese netizens access online—games, music, fan communities, BBS, blogging and microblogging, video streaming, e-literature, various social networking services, instant messaging, and e-business—all incorporate “play” elements to attract and retain users.

The Internet provides aggregated sources of a rich variety of entertainment. It is also a playground where young hormone-charged impulses release and play up. It is the space where they get their real sex education, tell their sexual stories, become popular as sexual dissidents, experiment with novel sexual practices, search for casual sexual partners, and get their ego stroked. Hormone economy combines online forum, social networking, gaming, e-commerce, video streaming, e-literature, online dating, and instant messaging to create a virtual playground with Chinese characteristics.

The playground of the Internet is a gendered and embodied space loaded with gender stereotyping that reinforces patriarchal structures. Women are still subject to heterosexual and masculine authority as objects of desire. Chinese hostesses of virtual live broadcast rooms, female sex bloggers and cross-dressing idols have not been able to disrupt gender and sexual representations of women. At the same time, the playground is also a battlefield and laboratory to seek, incubate and test new ideas, to rebel against authority and stereotypes, to fight against injustice and oppression, to vent grievance or simply “let out some steam,” to connect with family, friends and fellow human beings, to amuse oneself to death; but fundamentally it is the way of life.

Conclusion: The Internet as the Way

The Chinese Internet can be studied in relation to concepts and perspectives other than access and usage (development and growth, sociocultural and economic impact), or censorship and resistance (democratization, freedom of speech, and citizen activism). The Chinese view their Internet as the way of life and way of thinking about themselves and their country. The Internet has changed how people related to one another; how they make choices about their lives, both individually and collectively; and how they imagine the future. It is dissolving the geopolitical, cultural, class, gender, and other hierarchical boundaries and enables both the beautiful and the ugly to surface and compete at the same level.

References

Taylor, C. (2002) “Modern Social Imaginaries,” *Public Culture*, 14(1), pp. 91-124.