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Online discussions in China.

The collaborative development of specific norms for individual expression.

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Abstract

The numerous conversations and debates that take place on the Chinese Web confirm the Internet as a legitimate platform for public expression. Through their participation, Internet users collectively elaborate a specific normative framework that partly differs from the theoretical model of deliberation. Some interviews with users clarify the role they attribute to online expression.

March 2008. The world's eyes are focused on China, while Tibetan riots break out in Lhasa. Press agencies compete with different versions of the story and Youtube is blocked again. In the context of a severe censorship, thousands of Internet users express various kinds of reactions online, most of which follow the official line, sometimes with a virulent tone,¹ making it doubtful whether it is possible to merely discuss the Tibetan question in China.² The Chinese Internet is very dynamic and prolific. Even though the organization of political movements through the Web is forbidden, more and more mobilizations have occurred since the Sun Zhigang case in 2003, when thousands of Internet users expressed their indignation with the arbitrary treatment of migrants.³ These mobilizations are neither strictly political nor totally distinct from entertainment. Indeed, the Internet provides a powerful mobilization tool for politically engaged people,⁴ but the most influential movements occur when massive numbers of people feel touched by one particular case or scandal, and when they express their opinions on diverse conversation tools, like forums, blogs or even instant messaging. These informal exchanges about social issues are focused upon by several international observers⁵ because they do have political consequences.⁶ For example, Internet exchanges play an important role in the new models of agenda setting⁷ and the authorities cannot but pretend that they take into account the opinion of the people.⁸ Consequently, the question of popular deliberation has become an important stake in China. It is extensively researched as a modern technique of government.⁹ Indeed, deliberation is often considered as a way to obtain more popular support in the process of decision making, be it a real development of popular participation or a mere camouflage of top-down policies.

¹ Sophie Taylor, "Chinese seethe on Web over rare riots in Tibet", *Reuters*, 15/03/2008, via <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/15/AR2008031500633.html>.

² Rebecca Mckinnon, "Tibet... Is discussion possible?", in <http://rconversation.blogs.com/rconversation/2008/03/tibet-is-discus.html>.

³ Isabelle Thireau and Hua Linshan, "De l'épreuve publique à la reconnaissance d'un public: le scandale Sun Zhigang", *Politix*, vol.18 n°71, 2005, p. 137-164.

⁴ Yang Guobin, "The co-evolution of the Internet and civil society in China", *Asian Survey*, vol. XLIII, n°3, 2003, p.405-422.

⁵ *Danwei* www.danwei.org; *Global Voices Online* <http://globalvoicesonline.org/>; *China Digital Times* <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/>; China Media Project <http://cmp.hku.hk/>.

⁶ As an example, in dec. 2007, environmental protesters obtained the relocation of a chemical plant away from the seaport of Xiamen, see Peter Marolt and Sophia Ong, "The Xiamen PX project: A succinct summary of a complex issue", <http://www.civicchina.com/?p=43>, 30/01/2008.

⁷ Wang Shaoguang, "Changing models of China's policy agenda setting", *Modern China*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 2008, p. 56-87.

⁸ President Hu participated in a chat on Strong China Forum on June 20th, 2008. He declared: "The web is an important channel for us to understand the concerns of the public". Rebecca McKinnon, "'Authoritarian Deliberation' on the Chinese Internet", <http://rconversation.blogs.com/rconversation/>, 20/06/2008.

⁹ Ethan J. Leib, "The Chinese Communist Party and deliberative democracy", *Journal of public deliberation*, vol.1, n°1, 2005.

Nevertheless researchers already underline some specificities of popular participation in China, which in some regards can hardly be called deliberation anymore.¹⁰

In fact, years of development of the Internet in Western countries have proved that it offers a very diverse environment which, far from fulfilling old democratic dreams, leads to new questions on the issue of public discussion.¹¹ As Peter Dahlgren¹² argues, the Internet offers a “myriad of communicative spaces” that are both distinct and interlaced. Considering such questions as digital divide, commercialization, and the fact that the users are still dependent on their socio-cultural background, these spaces are not always perfect for deliberation. Are Internet users really better informed? Do they accept to be confronted to antagonistic opinions? What kind of public opinion can emerge from online discussions? The development of the Internet forces researchers to explore old questions again with fresh eyes.

Deliberative discussion can be defined as “a situation in which 1) at least one of the interlocutors tries to produce a change in the opinion of the other, 2) by the means of impersonal propositions”, and “it requires that each of the interlocutors uses the faculty that allows to detach oneself from the singular and the immediate to reach the general and the durable, that is to say reason.”¹³ According to this definition, an exchange of arguments is possible only if the participants believe that they can convince each other, and reciprocally be convinced by each other. This means that they consider that they share some interests in common, despite their respective social belongings (it is also what Boltanski calls *distanciation*).¹⁴ They need to accept contradiction and to be able to articulate arguments to make their point understood by other participants. This ideal-type may not exist anywhere on the global Internet,¹⁵ but it serves as a comparison reference to question popular participation on the Internet.

I argue that average Internet users do not praise the theoretical model of deliberation, if defined as a rationalized exchange of contradictory arguments between peers, resulting in the elaboration of a public opinion. Instead, the collective definition of online rules and values both confirms the Internet as a legitimate platform for individual expression and contributes

¹⁰ Zhou Xiang, "Is an online public sphere emerging in China? A comparative study of deliberativeness of Chinese online discussion forums", and Min Jiang, "Authoritarian deliberation: public deliberation in China", Papers presented at the Annual Convention of the International Communication Association, May 2008, Montreal.

¹¹ Patrice Flichy, "Internet, un outil de la démocratie?", www.laviedesidees.fr, 2008.

¹² Peter Dahlgren, L'espace public et Internet", *Réseaux*, n°100, 2000, p. 157-186.

¹³ Bernard Manin, *Principes du gouvernement représentatif*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1995, p252.

¹⁴ Luc Boltanski, *La souffrance à distance*, Paris, Métailié, 1993.

¹⁵ Bernard Manin et Azi Lev-On, , "Happy accidents: Deliberation and online exposure to opposing views", <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-07-19-manin-en.html>. In this article the phenomenon of deliberation occurs only by "accident".

to elaborate a specific normative framework that partly differs from the values adopted in Europe. This is not a denial of the real revolution brought by the development of the Internet in China, but rather a call for a more careful observation of the specific logics that drive people's involvement in this complex space.

I intend to approach this issue through the study of some Internet users' perceptions of online conversations on IM, e-mail, forums, and blogs, which are the spaces where most online social interactions happen. They have been asked about their usage of these services, their opinion on the rules of each kind of Internet service, and the values that they find important to respect online.

Published contents of forums do reveal some online deliberation, but it is difficult to evaluate their representativity. A large part of the Internet users' activity is in fact not visible to the public. For instance, it is impossible to reach the majority of the Internet users, who only read comments online and never publish their own points of view. Discussions start with the decision to get involved or not, so we can not settle for online contents, but we should instead focus on the users themselves and their motivations. Some interesting surveys provide information on Internet users' "value orientations".¹⁶ For example, more than 80% of the Chinese Internet users approve of Internet control.¹⁷ These figures are useful to get a large picture of the Internet population, but they put together very diverse situations. It is doubtful whether the declarations of urban and rural users, youngsters and adults, can be aggregated together, so we need further qualitative exploration, to better understand the meaning of such declarations in smaller groups of users.

During a fieldwork in Beijing in 2006-2007 for a PhD research project, fifty persons between 18 and 40, both men and women, were interviewed; they use the Internet for personal purposes at least one hour per day. Their profiles are randomly diversified in terms of profession, income, living area in Beijing. As my research initially focuses on Internet usage in the post-reform generation, I have chosen to interview mainly young adults between 20 and 30. That generation happens to be the main group of Internet users in the Chinese statistics, as the emergence of the Internet phenomenon still concerns in majority the very specific category of urban, young, educated Chinese people.¹⁸ Considering the huge differences

¹⁶ Chinese Internet Research Conference, "Session 3: Roland Soong", <http://jmsc.hku.hk/blogs/circ/2008/06/13/session-3-roland-soong>.

¹⁷ Guo Liang (dir.), *The CASS China Internet Project Survey Report 2007*, <http://www.markle.org/>.

¹⁸ CNNIC, *Statistical survey report on the Internet development in China*, 2007, www.cnnic.net.cn.

between social categories in China, especially between rural and urban China, it is important to keep in mind that my observations are limited to this specific group.

By choosing the criteria of Internet usage only, I hope that this sample incorporates most of the various attitudes of "average" users in this group, though any representativity is illusory in qualitative research. This approach sheds more light on passive users who are seldom observed in Internet inquiries. The results are inevitably different from interviews of active users, whose patterns of communication logically include more involvement into the public space. One should not be surprised to find more political indifference in this sample than in some Internet forums, and this angle will inevitably have consequences on the overall analysis of the dynamics of the Chinese Internet.

A horizontal regulation under constraints.

"Very yellow, very violent"

As I did not particularly target politics, but wanted to explore the interviewees' personal opinions about online discussions, I opted to use the word "social issues" in the questions. Social issues potentially cover parochial questions such as neighborhood disputes as well as large economic or social problems like education policy reform. I thought that this was broad enough to let the interviewees react on topics that have some general dimensions, without bothering them with so-called "sensitive" topics.

Quite surprisingly, the interviewees identify as "social issues" such cases as murders, adultery, all kinds of scandals involving some physical or moral violence. Such a proliferation of sinister details and sexual scandals was unexpected, but a significant number of the interviewees mentioned tabloid-like cases first, when asked for examples of recent "social issues" they had paid attention to, like this young lady:

I read comments, only if it really interests me, if it particularly calls my attention, like a few years ago in Harbin, more than twenty kids were killed and I was very touched because I found that very sinister. Then there were reports on it, the police intervened, actually this case was discussed for about a year. If they had solved the problem quicker it would have been different, but at that time there were lots of forums that talked about it, and we expressed our opinion.

- Did many people express their opinion?

- Yes, a lot, because it shocked everybody (gongfen). It was a Web café manager, his girlfriend had gone and he went crazy, so he took children to his place, and cut their limbs. Then one of them was cleverer, he managed to escape and the case was published, but by that time there were already twenty children dead at least.¹⁹

There are countless cases like this one on the Chinese Web and the interviewees are obviously very sensitive to them. The violent nature of some parts of the Internet is largely denounced in the national media. The Internet is described as a wild place where one can easily be confronted to pornography, coarseness, verbal and visual violence. It is not a place for children, because it is “very yellow, very violent”,²⁰ as a middle-school student said last January, when she was interviewed for a CCTV broadcast.

There is room for scandals on the Chinese Internet indeed. Some are of moral nature, dealing with cases of animal cruelty, such as the famous story of a woman crushing the head of a baby cat with her high heels.²¹ She became the victim of a real manhunt online and offline. Other cases underline class struggle, like the “BMW case”, in which a massive quarrel happened after peasants damaged a luxurious car.²² Of course, the most violent reactions occur when patriotism is involved, as witnessed in some anti-Japan campaigns.²³ Any topic involving Japan on mainstream Web portals attracts violent comments and insults directed at “Japanese pigs” or worse. In the same category, the recent riots in Lhasa also witnessed “a vitriolic outpouring of anger and nationalism directed against Tibetans and the West” on the Chinese blogs.²⁴

The existence of a rather high level of violence online, including rude vocabulary, intolerant opinions, and pornography is not a Chinese specificity. The Internet is not easier to control than the average communication channels and it is host to a variety of extreme situations almost everywhere in the world. In the Chinese context, Internet users have specific reactions toward this phenomenon though, and their own perceptions of the possibilities and limits of the Internet can give us some clues about their vision of the do’s and don’ts in Chinese society.

¹⁹ XYH, piano teacher, 27.

²⁰ Joel Martinsen, “The yellow, violent mob culture of a Chinese BBS”, *www.danwei.org*, 16/01/2008. The yellow colour metaphorically represents pornography in China.

²¹ Joel Martinsen, “Animal cruelty in the mainland press”, *www.danwei.org*, 02/03/2006.

²² Raymond Zhou, “BMW drives wedge between rich, poor”, *China Daily*, 18/01/2004, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2004-01/18/content_300105.htm.

²³ Wang Jing, “Tangchao yamen beijing shi ‘taiyangqi’” (Chinese). http://epaper.bjd.com.cn/wb/20060707/200607/t20060707_45533.htm.

²⁴ Sophie Taylor, “Chinese seethe on Web over rare riots in Tibet”, *Reuters*, 15/03/2008, via <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/15/AR2008031500633.html>.

Collective need for regulation

As an example of the difficulty to find the right tone for discussions, let us read a few sentences from a forum, written right after a celebrity named Sun Haiying had declared that "homosexuality is a crime":

*Even though Sun Haiying's speech was a little exaggerated, he is right to disapprove of the idea that one can be gay. Homosexuals are unhealthy, both psychologically and physically. They would like to be accepted by the society, which is understandable and deserves compassion. But one can not throw torrents of insults at people who disapprove of homosexuality. [...] We must tolerate, learn and understand more and we need less insults, ignorance and attacks. Opinions should not be so extreme and we need to keep respectful towards other people.*²⁵

The juxtaposition of a very radical opinion about homosexuality on the one side and the vocabulary about compassion, understanding and tolerance on the other side is interesting. Obviously it is difficult for that person to deal with his own feelings, and express his opinions respectfully. He acknowledges the necessity of being tolerant with each other, whatever the intensity of the feelings, and his own degree of disagreement, for the sake of keeping the Internet peaceful.

The simultaneous presence of many people within a common space requires some self-regulation from each of the participants, according to implicit rules that are progressively and collectively elaborated. In other words, the constraints of sustainability of the forums and blogs make a minimum level of tolerance compulsory. Therefore the users are forced to learn the techniques of co-existence, to measure the subtle limits within which one does not harm each other's ego. This means that they need to decide whether they agree or not with what other people express on the Web, and with the fact and manner of publishing it. They must also decide what reaction to adopt and they need to learn moderation and politeness. They can ignore other people's opinions if they dislike them, and visit other kinds of websites, but they can not prevent the others from expressing themselves. They can express their own agreement or disagreement with their own words, and find the right balance between emotions and rationalization. Otherwise they can also make their own comments about the very tone of the forum (or other platform) and give some advice to the other users about the right online behavior.

²⁵ translated from byron730319, http://bbs.news.tom.com/i_741_83477.html (in Chinese), 15/08/2007, via <http://blogenchine.com/2007/08/> (in French).

A rather unified normative lexical field emerges in the interviews. One case after the other, a whole framework of norms is established by trial and error. The central values of this framework are moderation and responsibility, which are the attributes of a certain kind of modernity or "civilization".

People insult him with very dirty words, they don't even look at the nature of this person, you see? The only impression people give me is to let go their violent anger, they cannot really manage to discuss the case. Why do I say that I don't have new friends on the Web, it's because I believe that if you have emotions to let go, it is not the right way to do it, you need to be more civilized.

- So what should you do then?

- You can express your own opinion on this topic, but you should not attack the personality or the body of this person. So people who post on these forums today are of a rather bad quality'.²⁶

Personal attacks are one of the biggest concerns of the interviewees, together with crude vocabulary. It is notable here that H.J. criticizes the "quality" of the people who make personal attacks, which is somewhat contradictory. It is a common pattern that the interviewees classify people into good and bad, and have the very behavior that they are criticizing, that is to say attacking people instead of criticizing their ideas.

The most obvious particularity of the Internet as a publication space is that it is shared between lots of users who do not necessarily have the same opinions and behaviors. According to the interviewees, one should try not to have any influence on the others, for fear of hurting them or creating a conflict:

There is no precise rule, for example something, one should express it according to one's most truthful opinion (zui zhenshi de xiangfa), treat this thing with the most correct attitude (zhengque de taidu). If this thing is not accurate, it can be attacked with bad intentions. One should treat this thing with moderation (pinghe), think over questions from this kind of correct attitude (zhengque de taidu), one should not be too violent. Because when you publish it, there is an influence on other people who read it for sure, so if you speak up there you must be responsible (fuzeren), especially responsible towards society, towards the Web, you mustn't believe that there is no sense of reality on the Web, that it's fake (xujia). The Web has

²⁶ H.J., salesman, 28.

*two faces, one is real and one is fake, so when you discuss a question online it is the same, serious things must be taken seriously (renzhen).*²⁷

In this quite representative quote from a young mother, truth, moderation, and responsibility are keywords, as opposed to violence and falsehood. Entering a public space like an Internet forum provides opportunities and also implies that one must act as an adult, a responsible person who needs to pay attention to the others and to the society in general. Notably, her rather vague description of "the society" and "the Web" not only refers to other people and their feelings, but also to the nature of the topic, the kind of space, and - probably - the level of surveillance in this space. The Web is not only virtual. One should be aware that the same rules apply online as offline and that speaking out online can have real consequences.

"Responsible", in this case, has a multiple meaning and refers to a vast quantity of codes that cover both expression forms and conversations contents. Indeed, the majority of Internet users agree that some things should not be mentioned online, especially political contents. They often remind it to each other, and even exclude some participants from discussions when they have inappropriate opinions or behaviors. One of the interviewees said that he had stopped publishing dissenting opinions when some other users started to insult him and said that he was a bad citizen.

This means that the collective rule-setting, which is supposed to play a regulation role and set the framework for peaceful collective exchanges, is also likely to result in collectively censoring some people's opinions. Only by watching the Web discussions, Internet users can guess all or part of the informal rules that are elaborated and respected by the majority of other users.

Self regulation and censorship

Many interviewees say that they lack self-confidence when it comes to writing their opinions online. For them it is important to have enough knowledge, to master the language and to take time to organize arguments. Unfortunately the fast rhythm of postings on some popular forum threads prevents them from achieving the required quality of expression, so they just give up. In fact, these interviewees perceive the necessity of having certain particular skills to get legitimacy and be heard on the Web, like what Gaxie calls "compétence".²⁸

I don't like sending too much information in too public sites like discussions on forums.

- Why?

²⁷ G. J., 32, clerk in a car-decorating company.

²⁸ Daniel Gaxie, *Le cens caché : inégalités culturelles et ségrégation politique*, Paris, Seuil, 1978.

- *On the one hand because I don't have time. Because if it is public and you see an interesting comment, it is often too late, you need some time to write your answer, to think about it, the topic has already passed, and er... It seems that generally speaking I don't have interesting comments to make. But blogs, or that kind of discussions, you can talk, you can take your time... It's more interesting.*²⁹

Other platforms can provide better conditions for expressing views, like smaller forums or blogs, where the relationship between the main author and the visitors is more personal, and the format of the comments is less interlaced. That makes them feel more comfortable with opinion sharing, but at the same time, the mainstream platforms are progressively reserved for those who feel confident enough to express themselves. This favors the emergence of educated people and experts as important figures on the Chinese Web.

When people enter the Web, they are not totally anonymous and they need a certain status to be taken more seriously. This is why some experts, considered as more objective or impartial, gain more authority in the public forums:

*And one can read comments from different kinds of people, among which experts, members of a [soccer] team, coaches, Internet users. And then for instance when I watch sports, I pay attention to important meetings, related news, there are a lot. The contents are far more numerous than those of traditional media.*³⁰

This extract shows that one does not write comments totally anonymously. The status of the participants is important and other users pay attention to their opinions according to their level of recognition. In that interviewee's mind, one speaks as an expert or as a player, and there is no neutral status in the exchange:

Because this sort of things does not relate to us, our level of interest isn't high, and if you haven't experienced it yourself, when you express opinions on it you always bring a subjective bias. After all if you're not an expert who has researched the topic, it's not necessary to say anything about it.

- *So you think that only experts should publish their opinions?*

- *At least it should be experts or people who have experienced it in person before, who have really endured it personally.*³¹

Interestingly, this interviewee does not make any difference between witnesses and experts. Both are presented as more "objective" than average people in the sense that they have more

²⁹ Z.L., marketing, 25.

³⁰ Z.L., marketing, 25.

³¹ L.G., store manager, 24.

information on a case, they understand better the protagonists' motivations and interests. In fact, the word "objective" is almost an equivalent of "close to the case" in the mouth of L.G., whereas it would suppose "taking distance" in Western theory.³²

Consequently, the very demand for objectivity is presented here as an obstacle to public participation. Here, speech can have a different value depending on the speaker's status, though his or her authority can come from different sources. One can put himself as a specialist or at least a privileged witness of some situation, as someone who has experienced something interesting from a specific point of view, be it as an actor or as a privileged observer. Every writer and reader weighs other users' ideas according to his or her own perception. The conversation is not necessarily closed because of this selection, but it can be organized, subjectively arranged by the users, instinctively and collectively, so that some participants have more weight in the discussion and their ideas are put on top of the agenda.

This collaborative process is done within the limits of the spaces' written rules and under the guidance of the moderators who are responsible of the published contents in any case. There is a real demand for regulation on the users' side, so moderators play a very important role on the forums, just as they do in Western countries.³³ They can censor all kinds of excessive postings. They can give more visibility to some comments that they find relevant by putting them at the top of the page. They can also remind the users of the explicit and implicit rules of the space.

The moderators have the power to delete messages and they often do so. This role is often described as crude censorship by Western Internet observers who tend to forget that this function is also crucial on the Western Web platforms. Indeed, the Chinese moderators' role is quite ambiguous, as they also do a necessary work to guarantee that the space stays peaceful and allows good exchanges:

About that, I have set up my own forum before, I mean my personal forum, so I have some understandings of the backstage processes, because I need to protect myself from being attacked. There are some malicious comments, and there are some people who maliciously leave messages on your forum, and then they denounce you, this situation happens very often. So if you want to avoid this situation, you have to talk to the managers of some other big forums like that, discuss with them. Of course we have some discussion topics that are quite

³² Luc Boltanski, *La souffrance à distance*, Paris, Métailié, 1993.

³³ Stéphanie Wojcik, "The Three key roles of moderator in municipal online forums", paper presented at *Politics: Web 2.0: An international conference*, Royal Holloway, University of London, April 17-18, 2008.

*specialized, like how to avoid this situation, how to find methods of control when I want to control something.*³⁴

Sometimes, moderators also end up deleting opinions that are not in line with the national positions. Understandably, they do so to protect themselves and the sustainability of their forum, even more than to annoy the author of the comment. There is no better example than Japan on this point:

*Every website that has a comment page has a manager, the manager's task is to clear up the garbage, the rubbish comments. So for them being a little against Japan, criticizing Japan, [...] basically, what they want to express is to propagate this aspect, to propagate the fact that Japan is bad. If you say something else on the website they will delete it, it is useless.*³⁵

This obvious censorship must not lead us to condemn Internet regulation as a whole. It is demanded and justified by the users themselves because it also protects them from some virtual conflicts, and it promotes a politically and socially secure atmosphere for them to participate. Thanks to the filtering process, they feel that whatever they write, it will be published only if it is checked and positively appreciated by the moderator.

Paradoxically, limited as it is, the framework of the Internet still offers an important platform for expression. This is already a huge step in the Chinese context where expression has long been a monopoly of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Publication, which has long been the privilege of propaganda, is being vested by individuals. The resulting profusion of contents, among which some are poorly "civilized", creates new kinds of anxieties for Internet users, therefore they are contributing to the elaboration of a framework of formal and informal rules. The users are learning how to behave in this sphere, how to co-exist with each other without shocking each other or feel shocked by the others. In that sense, the Internet in China offers some space for a constantly evolving user-based construction of a set of rules that is negotiated, obeyed and checked by the users themselves.

They take into account the constraints of the regime, and the collaborative dimension of rule-setting is very ambiguous. It both enables Internet users to validate a framework of discursive values that they find appropriate, and contributes to maintain a kind of collective surveillance or even censorship. Individuals prove to be subjects of the norms as well as their objects.³⁶

Therefore these norms should be observed at the grassroots level of individuals themselves, in their practices and representations. The way they legitimate norms enlightens some aspects of

³⁴ C.L., designer, 26.

³⁵ F.R.T., student, 21.

³⁶ Michel Foucault. *Histoire de la sexualité. 1 La volonté de savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976.

the social order, and therefore clarifies the conditions and particularities of popular participation online.

Internet users are promoting such values as politeness, objectivity, moderation, that seem to echo the Western discursive tradition. This should not lead one to conclude to the advent of deliberation, but only that of some aspects of it. These aspects have a specific significance in the Chinese context and deserve to be explored more precisely.

Personal expression vs. collective deliberation.

Despite the strict control on critical expression, the tone of the comments often crosses the most basic lines of politeness,³⁷ which leads me to wonder once again: "is discussion possible?"³⁸ and more precisely: what discussion is possible?

The values enhanced in online discussions in China enlighten Internet users' position towards the function of public expression. The very fact that one can discuss the rules, and assess the existence of some censorship proves that the Internet is already taken for granted as a popular expression platform. All the normative vocabulary used by the Internet users to qualify the legitimate online behavior can be analyzed as the manifestation of the role they attribute to this platform of expression.

Assertion of individual expression

The excesses allowed by anonymity are not always disapproved of. According to several interviewees, almost everyone needs some space to relax from a stressful daily life, and very few spaces allow the people to express their feelings, so Internet violence is just natural and even necessary. Most of the interviewees believe that the Internet is the right place for bursting out with anger, frustration, excitement, and all kinds of extreme emotions that can not be expressed openly elsewhere. An above quoted young lady expresses that indignation (*gongfen*)³⁹ is her main motive for participation on the Chinese Web. Another interviewee has the same feeling:

³⁷ See this video that aims at proving the inalienable Chinese identity of Tibet. The comments, in English, are addressed to Westerners and half of the sentences contain the word "f***": "Tibet WAS, IS, and ALWAYS WILL BE a part of China", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9QNKb34cJo&feature=related> (consulted 06/06/2008).

³⁸ Rebecca Mckinnon, "Tibet... Is discussion possible?", op.cit.

³⁹ X.YH, piano teacher, 27.

Most people want to relieve themselves from what dissatisfies them in the society, or what dissatisfies them in other things. Most of them just want to let off steam (faxie).⁴⁰

All in all, it seems that the Internet has immediately been adopted by its users as a good space for popular expression and they find that it is worth coping with the drawbacks so that the population can use this opportunity for expression. Here is one typical example of the conclusion which almost all the interviewees draw about the role of the Internet.

What can the Internet bring to China? It can accelerate society's progress and technological development. But I think that it is also a platform for everyone to exchange, it is a place to express their own points of view. In fact I think it's quite good.⁴¹

Some avatars of Internet violence can reveal a form of mobilization. For example, a specific category of young Internet users is called "angry young" (*feng qing*) because of their excessive positions online.⁴² Some describe them as disrespectful and violent, whereas others say that these young are just desperately trying to express their critical vision of the current society, that is becoming too competitive and amoral. Many scandals that cause widespread impulsive reactions undoubtedly reveal great popular concern for such questions as safety,⁴³ equity, value of human life, class struggle, or national pride, and they can be analysed as the affirmation of these new social norms,⁴⁴ but I do not want to develop this aspect here. Instead, I want to concentrate on the very modalities of the debates, and on Internet users' perception of the online exchanges of opinions and the rules that organize them.

The anger of these youth challenges the tolerance of other Internet users and it reveals the limits of online expression in their mind. Freedom of speech is acknowledged under conditions.

Debate and polemic

First of all, according to most of the interviewees, freedom of speech supposes that one should not contradict each other's opinion:

So I think that other people have their opinion, and I have mine, and it is not worth struggling about it, when you have seen it, it's over. It is useless to start analyzing if things should be

⁴⁰ C.H., designer, 26.

⁴¹ X.YH., piano teacher, 27.

⁴² John Kennedy, "China: don't anger the youth", *Global Voices Online*, 09/08/2006, <http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/2006/09/08/china-dont-anger-the-youth/>.

⁴³ Isabelle Thireau et Hua Linshan, "De l'épreuve publique à la reconnaissance d'un public: le scandale Sun Zhigang", *Politix*, vol.18 n°71, 2005, p.137-164.

⁴⁴ Luc Boltanski, Elisabeth Claverie, Nicolas Offenstadt et Stéphane Van Damme (dir.), *Affaires, scandales, grandes causes*, Paris, Stock, 2007.

*like this or like that, everyone is free, right? So we can watch a little, but when it's over, I'm not the kind of guy that makes comments or judges the quality.*⁴⁵

H.J. does not like to contradict other Internet users because he feels that it would result in refusing their own freedom. Moreover he feels that contradicting someone on the Internet equals to judging the quality of the person and his or her speech. As a result, the very respect of other people, of free online expression and the principle of tolerance lead this person to refuse contradictory debates and to choose the "exit" option.

Having opposed points of view, highlighting the opposition and exchanging arguments is often perceived as attacking other Internet users. It is seen as something uselessly aggressive, when one should just ignore the opinions of the others and leave them alone.

Of course, one can not underestimate the role of censorship in the defiance towards debate. Having a different opinion is taking a risk at some point. The interviewees express the necessity to be careful, and speak in the terms allowed by the authorities, that is to say in accordance with the tone of official media like the People's Daily. It is necessary to "play the melody of harmony".

*For sure, you must not speak about the leaders of the country, you can not say anything about national leaders, and in your dissertation you shouldn't mention things about the country's leaders. I think that in China it's impossible, every point that you want to criticize, when you are in China you can not say it. It is not like abroad, if you want to go against the tide, it is not possible. It's like you, you're writing a dissertation, you must follow the tone, write articles in accordance with the theme, you must not leave the theme. China is trying to reach the harmonious society, you must be careful to know if this is the harmony of the Internet, the harmony of China, you must write with the colors of harmony, this is Chinese culture, you can not change it, everybody is like that.*⁴⁶

"Chinese culture" serves as a justification for what is first something forbidden by the communist system and censored by the authorities. It is far easier for Internet users to publish conformist opinions than to test original ideas, otherwise they would take the risk to "sing another tune". The musical metaphor is obviously an attempt to make the limits of expression look natural. They are part of Chinese culture and they are not questionable in the eyes of the interviewee. This effort to legitimize the situation reflects the personal appropriation of the national rules by this user.

⁴⁵ H.J., salesman, 28.

⁴⁶ M.N., chef, 26.

It also reflects his position towards the foreign interviewer, in front of whom it is important not to criticize the country. Once again, this supports the idea that unanimity definitely looks better than discord, especially on a space that serves as China's showcase in front of the rest of the world. Internet is not considered here as a place for public discussion, but as a tool for displaying the most modern image of the country.⁴⁷

In that context, being exposed to diverse opinions most often lead the interviewees to avoid getting involved into a debate. Arguing with people who belong to other groups and who do not have the same point of view is most often perceived as a bad behavior. The interviewees were often asked what their reaction would be if they came across an opinion on the Web, with which they did not agree at all. Their answers almost invariably contained pejorative vocabulary like "polemic", "argue", "quarrel", that were not inferred by the tone of the question.

By contrast, the meaning of tolerance becomes slightly different from what it would be in another context. It is more than an attitude of respect towards other people's opinions. It implies not to contradict their opinions and to stay indifferent to them. It is thus associated to a list of other values, some of which are picked in the Chinese philosophy.

*"Zhongyong" [happy medium] means something like letting go, not doing polemic, it sounds a little like that, it sounds a little like Buddhist or Christian thinking, it means that I am not going to quarrel with you about issues, like power or money, even if I must have desires, but my behavior or my character will not be like that.*⁴⁸

For P.Y., the Chinese way of proceeding in discussions is the most subtle, and it is more efficient to manage relationships. Let us read further his interview.

One must have an amenable behavior (suihe), like this it facilitates relationships, it is easier to cooperate (gongshi), in fact I think that it is easier to succeed in all domains. In China we often come upon that sort of situations, for example you don't agree with someone, with your boss, or you don't agree with your client, if you quarrel violently, even if you're right, maybe he won't agree. It is different abroad, if you have an opinion you can say it directly, you can tell everybody we need to do like this, and then they do like this, but not in China. We speak in a more subtle way (weiwan), we express our point of view in a more subtle way, if it's my colleague, or if it's my friend, I must use this sentence, we think more about how to say things

⁴⁷ The Internet plays dozens of interlaced, paradoxical and complementary functions. We do not mean that the Internet is only a showcase, but that when asked about the specific question of disagreement, the interviewees tend to privilege this aspect.

⁴⁸ P.Y., manager in a medicine company, 25.

*to settle issues. You can not expect from the Chinese to settle issues the same way as Westerners do, it would confuse things. If I start to argue violently on some questions with people, I don't believe that after that we could still solve issues together and in peace. So I think that it is understandable that when I read on the Internet that the Chinese should take inspiration from Western thinking, I don't agree. We need to learn some things, but on other things we need to respect ourselves, the context is different.*⁴⁹

It seems that it is impossible to solve a disagreement in the eyes of P.Y. Discussion neither has the power to settle questions, nor to overcome them, it can only underline discord and make it even more insuperable. The reference to a commercial situation implies that the reference to tradition is mainly used for strategic purposes. Indeed, the strategic context is the ultimate reference to decide what elements can be kept or not within the various elements of the Chinese traditions.

Chinese Internet users mobilize various justifications for feeling uncomfortable with debate. Whatever the justifications, the function of online expression is obviously not to exchange arguments and convince each other. It is a space available to put one's testimony, record one's diary, drop off some emotions, separately from the other users.

In this context, what dialogue is possible between the different Internet users?

Diversity, pluralism, and public opinion

In an article about a French radio broadcast, in which telephone operators had to select listeners for speaking on-air, Dominique Cardon⁵⁰ studies into details the sometimes arbitrary criteria that determine the legitimate participation in that kind of public space. Apart from the basic requirements of politeness and level of language, the persons in charge of the selection privileged listeners who were able to highlight a certain level of general interest through their personal testimony. They needed to find the general dimension that can have an interest for the whole society, in their particular situation. Under that condition, they could be selected to participate in the radio broadcast.

In this sample this detachment pattern is almost never referred to, and even sometimes criticized. One belongs to a group and he is representative of that group, be it regional, professional, national, by income or else. Paradoxically social belongings are taken for granted by the interviewees, and they do not consider the idea that each individual's various

⁴⁹ P.Y., manager in a medicine company, 25.

⁵⁰ Dominique Cardon, "Comment se faire entendre? La prise de parole publique des auditeurs de RTL", *Politix*, vol.8 n°31, 1995, p 145-186.

belongings (sexual, educational, professional and so on) could be contradictory. When they describe their social belongings, the interviewees portrait a highly stereotyped and segmented society.

For example, M.N. tells us that the population's mentality depends on the geographic origins of the people. One of the pleasures derived from the Internet is to compare the habits of the North and the South, which incites people from each region to play the assigned roles:

There can be topics like this, there are Beijingers and Shanghainese, Beijingers can represent typical Northern people, and Shanghai represents a typical city of the South, and people from these two cities compare their characters.⁵¹

This interviewee was quite enthusiastic about this experience. For him it represented the pleasure of sharing a common space and enjoying co-presence on a same virtual platform. Indeed, such a comparison encourages tolerance and diversity, but in this kind of conversations, you can only speak for yourself and never be representative of the others. There is no common point between people from different social categories, therefore they can not speak for one another, let alone criticize one another's opinion. Apparently, different people's interests are necessarily antagonistic:

I think perhaps some people can represent an association, that is to say he can represent a fixed crowd, for instance a profession, perhaps some people can represent the workers, some people can represent the farmers, some people can represent the white collar workers, but the person who speaks on behalf of the white collar workers benefits definitely cannot represent the lowest level social citizens, this is certain, then let's say the lowest level of the society definitely cannot represent such a high level social stratum as white collar workers, they definitely cannot represent each other.⁵²

Given that everyone has different points of view on each problem, and that everybody has his own life style, different educational levels, we don't understand things the same way, so it is difficult to say that we are going to make comments, maybe sometimes you find something is wrong, it is not correct, and someone else finds it's right, everything is possible, I think that everything has two faces, there can not be only one opinion on something.⁵³

In this vision every citizen's opinion can only be considered as corporatist, selfish, and partial. Every category is seen as having contradictory points of view, and the multiple faces of the

⁵¹ M.N., chef, 26.

⁵² C.H., designer, 26.

⁵³ X.YH., piano teacher, 27 .

individuals that result from their personal backgrounds are neglected. It seems difficult to imagine that these people could find a common position together.

The tolerance that is valued in this model is that of diversity, not that of pluralism. In the ideal type of pluralism, several points of view can emerge in one single group, and be shared in order to be discussed. There is a natural paradox in the concept of pluralism. There must be a basic agreement between everyone on the very fact that disagreement is possible and even fruitful.⁵⁴ On the contrary, in the model of a segmented and stereotyped society, the diversity of opinions can only be the result of diverse social situations. Consequently, they are not arguable and relativism is the only possibility to deal with divergent opinions.

Given this description of the society, a "public opinion" that would be the result of exchanges of views between the different social categories, seems unlikely to emerge. The word "public opinion" is used by the interviewees though, with a quite unexpected definition, and it reflects their perception of a segmented society:

*In Harbin, it was also in the North-East, there was a nurse in Harbin who crushed the head of a kitty with her high heels, we call that the "cat case". When it broke out, when the photo was published, it was already on TV, people found where she worked, they called the hospital, her home, they prevented her from living normally, that's how it happened. After that the hospital fired her, they had to, otherwise it was impossible to work normally, this is the pressure of public opinion.*⁵⁵

Here, public opinion is not the result of a diversity of opinions, or that of a debate. Instead, the Internet users are unanimous and they collectively condemn the actions of the woman. There is no collective exchange of opinions nor any organized reaction, but only a massive, arbitrary and excessive personal harassment that resulted in the punishment of one particular person and her entourage. The general dimension of public opinion is replaced by a singular example which has almost no impact for the rest of the society. Public opinion represents here a large number of people who have the same opinion, and who have always had that opinion, even without exchanging with one another whatsoever. In other terms, this kind of massive mobilization results in the enforcement of shared moral norms, rather than the elaboration of a public opinion, conceived as the result of public discussion, and opposed to a simple aggregation of multiple individual opinions. This does definitely not fit the ideal-type of deliberation, but some ideas are still exchanged, and they can spread very quickly without necessarily being discussed online.

⁵⁴ Jean Leca, "La démocratie à l'épreuve des pluralismes", *RFSP*, Vol. 46, n° 2, 1996, p 225-279.

⁵⁵ L.JJ., tourism, 23.

Expression on the Chinese Internet is not separated from social and political constraints. It is inextricably embedded in Chinese society. Nevertheless the rules are debated, commented on, reappropriated by the users, within the limits of what is permitted by the authorities. This very appropriation process reveals that Internet users are coming to grips with public expression platforms. The values defended by the Chinese Internet users, like diversity, tolerance and free opinion, have specific meanings in their minds and they must be understood in the light of the local context. Now, popular expression is legitimate within some limits that constantly evolve, even though it is most often devoted to testimonies and anonymous psychological release. For lots of Internet users, online expression is more an individual opportunity to release emotions than a collective tool to debate divergent opinions.