

## Book Review: China's Contested Internet edited by Guobin Yang

**China's Contested Internet**, edited by **Guobin Yang**, examines the varied forms of online political activity that have emerged in China over the past ten years, attending to the period before and after the release of Sina Weibo, China's most popular microblogging platform. Although the timing of the volume prevents it from addressing the growing significance of new platform, WeChat, and the mixed methods approach lacks occasional rigour, **Carwyn Morris** welcomes this collection as an invaluable attempt to provide one of the first genealogies of conflict and contestation on the Chinese internet over the last decade.

**China's Contested Internet. Guobin Yang (ed.). NIAS Press. 2015.**

This edited volume, by Guobin Yang, includes ten chapters and an introduction that bring together research examining different forms of contestation related to the internet in China over the last ten or more years. The impact of Yang's previous research, and that of Jack Qiu, is obvious in *China's Contested Internet*, and the book fits nicely into the expanding field of research on ICTs in China. The volume, which contains qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research on the Chinese internet and its impact offline, focuses on the 'many ways of being political' (13) in China and examines the mediation of politics online during a period where new media has mediated many realms of political discussion and action. This results in, according to Jian Xu, 'the patterns of political communication [being] innovated, reformed and transformed' (268).

*China's Contested Internet* is divided into two parts. The first half is a journey through the pre-Sina Weibo era of the internet in China, the majority of which is before 2009, when Sina Weibo (China's most popular microblogging platform, similar to Twitter) was released. This section of the book includes chapters on internet literature, political participation, online activism, ethnic identity and, in the only post-2009 research, hacking spaces. The second half of this volume looks at the Weibo era of 2009 to 2013. In this section, the chapters examine memes, local government microblogs, digital divides, spectating online and collective action. In addition to these two main themes, there is a definite focus on the power of language and linguistics on the internet, how online communities can bring about offline change and, most interestingly for me, a turn towards researching the practices of a mediated and online life in China.

It is no coincidence that the first chapter of each section deals with language and literature. The internet revolves around the written word, and the tonality of the Chinese language, as well as the characters it uses, give ordinary citizens huge scope for innovative and ironic forms of protest even when censorship is rife. The first of these explorations of language is by Thomas Chen, offering a fascinating look at online and offline censorship and their unexpected results. Chen does this by exploring the history of *Such Is This World@sars.come*, an internet novel by Hu Fayun discussing censorship that was itself censored. Chen uses the concept of 'alter-production' to describe the non-binary methods of dealing with censorship in China. This term captures the heterogeneity of responses to censorship, including its unanticipated consequences. These include [a new language of protest and politics](#) as well as attention being drawn to the objects of suppression. In the case of *Such Is This World@sars.come*, the acts of censorship led to the covert spread of the uncensored version of the novel, widespread analysis of censorship in the physical version and an analysis of the author's own self-censorship with regards to the Tiananmen Square protests.

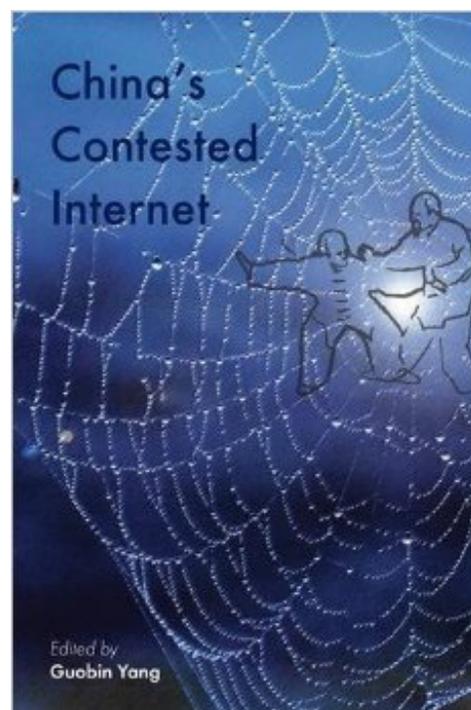




Image Credit: Weibo Party ([bfishadow](#))

Following on from this, in the first chapter of the Weibo era section, Marcella Szablewicz looks at the way memes are used as 'structures of feeling' for disillusioned young netizens, promoting alternative identities that contest mainstream ideas of success. These ideals include being a tall, rich and handsome man (*gao fu shuai*) or a white-skinned, rich and beautiful woman (*bai fu mei*). In contrast, the meme led to people instead identifying as a loser/tool (*diaosi*), or poor, short and ugly (*qiong ai chou*). The formation of new identities is seen by Szablewicz as a politics of potential, making ways of life that run against the norm more acceptable. Szablewicz convincingly links the *diaosi* meme to a growing awareness and discussion of income inequality in China, and asks if the *diaosi* are becoming China's '99 percent'. While reading this account of the *diaosi*, I began to wonder if it is possible to go further. Could the *diaosi* meme be a gateway to the normalisation of other identities, such as female identities that are at odds with China's standard portrayal of the ideal female as a doting mother and housewife? This may include [LGBT identities](#) or a move away from describing unmarried women as 'leftover women' (*sheng nv*).

The remainder of the Weibo era section has a more traditional political theme. In general, it deals with the impact of microblogs on political institutions and on the political engagement of Chinese citizens. The analysis presented in this section has a tightness that is not quite there in the first half of the book, a section that covers a much wider variety of topics over a longer period, including backpacking communities and television talent contests. I enjoyed reading the chapters by Xu and Sally Xiaojin Chen, and Marina Svensson's chapter looking at which voices are heard on Weibo adds to a growing literature on how the internet may not be the loudspeaker that many of the least heard voices need. It also includes compelling evidence that the internet in China is merely reproducing offline power online.

But, while I agree with Svensson's conclusions, basing the analysis of migrant workers on a sample of only 15 Weibo accounts that belong to them seems too limited, especially as [there are thought to be over 250 million migrant workers in China](#). Also, the rather arbitrary decision to make having more than 1,000 followers a point of analysis was confusing: is 1,000 followers the average number of a Weibo account? Perhaps it is time to move away from the use of arbitrary figures, such as 1,000 followers, and start thinking about better ways to analyse how a voice is heard on social media. I myself am a tech-savvy 29-year-old with over ten years of experience using Chinese-language social media and chat programs, and I only have 1,048 followers on Weibo. Furthermore, only 16% of the accounts that follow me have over 1,000 followers, making my followers, many of whom are also tech-

savvy millennials, underperform compared to the migrant workers in this study, 40% of whom have over 1,000 followers. With these points I am not trying to suggest that migrant workers have a greater voice on Weibo than moderately wealthy millennials; instead, I am trying to show how easily statistics can be misrepresented or misinterpreted, and how important it is to be responsible with their use. So, while I applaud the desire of many researchers to use mixed methods studies, these research methods, whether qualitative or quantitative, still need to be rigorous.

Perhaps the greatest problem in researching ICTs and the internet is also part of its beauty, and that is the rapid pace of change. Technologies and the practices of ICT users often evolve faster than the research on them is published. This leaves us with an elephant in the room, and that is WeChat (*Weixin*), the platform that has begun to dominate the internet in China over the last three years, and [the platform that currently has 650 million monthly average users](#). Fortunately, the decision to take a longer historical view on contestation on the Chinese internet means that an absence of chapters focusing on WeChat does little to detract from the impact of this volume and its importance as a comparative tool for contemporary social science research.

In conclusion, part of this volume's value is that, as an edited collection, it gives the reader a detailed look at a variety of topics and time periods, and the chapters also deal with events and trends on the Chinese internet over a period of more than ten years. The range of themes covered by the various authors gives the reader a historical perspective on the Chinese internet that is sorely needed to understand current trends. In a sense, it could be argued that this volume goes some way to being one of the first attempts at a genealogy of conflict and contestation on the Chinese internet. And, while the absence of WeChat is noticeable, [reports of the death of Sina Weibo may have been greatly exaggerated](#), with Weibo still an important realm for political discussion, contestation and more.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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