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A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE USES AND LIMITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN  
CHINA

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## ABSTRACT

When looking at China at the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, it would be hard to imagine that 50 years later the country would be allowing its citizens to sound off on public social networking sites about everything from what they ate for breakfast to their complaints with government corruption. Since the rise of the Communist party, information control has been a central feature of Chinese culture and China's leaders' maintenance of social and political order.

But as China has become a major player in the 2014 world economy, the Internet — and the social media networks it has given rise to — have proven to be integral to China's ability to compete on the global scene and — in some cases — been beneficial to both the government and the country as a whole. Chinese citizens have begun to use social media to expose the corruption of local officials, bringing to light certain societal ills like pollution, food safety, and human trafficking. Others have used social media to engage in e-commerce and consumer spending. For its part, the Chinese government has begun to use social media both passively and actively to mine and shape public opinion, reflecting a degree of sophistication that is consistent with the government's understanding of the power and the impact of information.

But while China has allowed its Internet and social media to exist, certain limitations have become apparent in the way that citizens use social media, particularly those who use it for the purpose of political commentary. In many cases, those limitations stem from the government's inherent desire to control the flow of information, a tendency that has manifested itself through complex censorship techniques, including the removal of individual posts or users' entire accounts.

Going forward, the Chinese government is likely going to continue to walk a fine line when it comes to what uses of social media it does and doesn't allow, and the permitted uses of social media in China are going to reflect the government's willingness to allow uses that in some

way furthers its own goals. For example, if average users are going to criticize individual officials for legitimate displays of corruption, the government will probably allow those posts to go uncensored. On the contrary, those uses that demonstrate a potential to spark collective action will likely face increasing limitations. This thesis will explore the many ways in which Chinese people are currently using social media and identify the demonstrated limitations to those uses.

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## Chapter 1

### Media Climate

One of the central fixtures of modern China and its rise to power has been the rise of the Internet. Since the mid-1990s, the number of Internet users in China has increased at a dramatic rate. According to annual survey data collected by the government-run [Chinese Internet Network Information Center](#) (CNNIC) there were 2 million Internet users in China in 1998 (Liang 2011). In December 2012, the number of Internet users in China had reached 513 million, according to CNNIC (Pierson 2012). In July 2013, CNNIC reported that China had 591 million internet users and 460 million mobile web users (Millward 2013). At the end of September 2013, 604 million Chinese were using the Internet (604 million netizens).

While there are millions of Chinese using the Internet in modern China, Internet users are not necessarily social media users, and a clear distinction must be made between the two. As explained later in this thesis, some of these Chinese social media sites are considered to be the comparable versions of western social media sites, though they contain more and different features as well. In the United States, two of the most popular social media sites are Facebook and Twitter. In China, a few of the most popular social media sites are Renren, Sina Weibo (often referred to as just “Weibo”) and WeChat.

The term “microblog” is a more refined way of talking about both western and Chinese social media, though more often heard in conjunction with Chinese social media. In China, the word “microblog” translates to “weibo,” which literally means “tiny blog” and usually implies some kind of limitation on characters in each microblog post. For purposes of this thesis, the term “Weibo” is used to refer to Sina Corp’s weibo site (Sina Weibo) and not “weibo” as the general

term for microblog. Tencent also has its own weibo site — Tencent Weibo — though it is less frequently used than Sina Weibo. On Twitter, which is considered a microblog, the characters in each Twitter post are limited to 140 or less. On Sina Weibo, also a microblog, the characters in each Sina Weibo post are also limited to 140 characters — but since those are Chinese characters, messages can actually be much more rich. Business Insider estimates that 140 Chinese characters would equate to roughly 70 or 80 words (Taylor 2012).

The distinction between Internet use and social media use is an important one. The central focus of this thesis is how and why social media is used in China and the direct and indirect limitations that the Chinese government imposes on the uses of social media, not necessarily how the Internet is used (or censored) in China. That being said, there are crossovers in terms. The term “netizen” — which is literally a combination of the words “Internet” and “citizen” — is often used to describe both Internet users and social media users, though the two are not the same (Schiavenza 2013).

Social media users and microbloggers are a diverse group, but there are certain numbers and statistics that can be used to describe them (Minter 2013). According to [a media report](#) by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, “74.88 percent of users only have a high school education, according to the report, dubbed as the Blue Book of new media in China” (Yu 2013). 29.24% of microblog users are in the age range of 20-29 years old; 26.54% are 10-19 years old; and 25.14% are 30-39 years old. 7.8% have monthly income of 5,000 yuan or more (Yugong 2013).

There’s also another significant and distinct contingent of social media users, commonly referred to as “Big Vs.” The term “Big V” is used to refer to those influential users whose identities have been verified on microblog sites and who often have thousands or millions of followers. The verification process is also common in the United States on both Twitter and Facebook, though it includes users who don’t necessarily have as many followers as those in China but are otherwise deemed influential by employees of the networks — for example,

journalists. A more typical example of comparable Big V in the United States would be someone like Kim Kardashian.

Though most Chinese social media and microblogging sites were initially intended to be used primarily on desktop computers, data indicates that there has been a recent shift in devices on which China's netizens are accessing the Internet — and social media. Numbers show that they are increasingly accessing the Internet on mobile devices. According to a statement made in November 2013 by Ren Xianliang, vice minister of the State Internet Information Office, “About 464 million people, or 77 percent of the country's total netizens, were regularly getting online via their phones as of June this year” (604 million netizens). As mobile use pertains to social media, [a McKinsey report](#) in April 2012 noted that “there were more than 100 million mobile social users in 2010, a number that is forecast to grow by about 30 percent annually” (Chiu 2012).

In the social media sphere, there are three main companies whose social platforms garner the most use: Renren, Sina and Tencent. Renren was one of the earliest social networks to emerge on the social media scene, if not the first. Founded in 2005 by Joe Chen, Renren most closely resembles Facebook and literally means “everyone.” At first, Renren was referred to as Xiaonei, which means “in school,” and was designed to be a social network specifically for college-aged students. (Facebook also began as a network exclusive to college students, though it, too, has evolved since.) As noted on its website, “The [Renren] community is highly engaged by university students and young white collar professionals across the country. The Company's SNS business started in 2005 under its prior name Xiaonei, which meant ‘On Campus’, synonymous to its initial roots within universities” (Products and Services).

In March 2008, Renren launched its mobile-compatible version, and after months of trial, the mobile version was officially announced in December 2009 (Open Platforms). By March 2011, there were approximately 117 million active Renren users (Baldwin 2011). On May 4, 2011, Renren went public, trading on the New York Stock Exchange under the symbol RENN.



Since going public, however, Renren's popularity has seemingly waned. In an interview, Yifei Wu — a 21-year-old Chinese student studying at Penn State University — said that in terms of popularity, "Renren came first, then Weibo. Renren wanted to connect people through schools, but then everyone started using it and it became less cool." Significantly, since its May 2011 initial public offering, Renren's shares have lost four fifths of their value (Mishkin 2013), dropping from approximately \$17 to \$3.20 a share.

Sina Corporation is a leading Chinese media conglomerate that trades on the NASDAQ under the symbol SINA and whose market capitalization was approximately \$3.2 billion in April 2013 ([Quartz](#)). Sina Corporation's CEO is Charles Chao, whose first position with Sina was Vice President of Finance, a title he acquired in September 1999 (Peng 2011). One of Sina's leading products is Sina Weibo, a microblog launched in August 2009 that most clearly resembles the western social media/microblogging site Twitter. The primary function of Sina Weibo is to post short updates that are 140 Chinese characters or fewer. Other users can follow you and see your updates posted on your profile page, and in turn, you can follow others' updates.<sup>1</sup> Besides a user's profile page, the other main page on Sina Weibo is the home page.<sup>2</sup> As of March 2011, Sina Weibo had 100 million members ([Sina release](#)). By November 2013, Sina Weibo's registered user-base was 600 million (Millward 2013). According to statistics from Tech in Asia, the number of active daily users as of September 2013 was far less — approximately 60.2 million. In comparison, Twitter announced on February 5, 2014, that it had passed 241 million monthly

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<sup>1</sup> Attached as Appendix A is a screenshot of my Sina Weibo profile page, where you can see my first post that says "Testing out Weibo." Elsewhere on the page, there is a section for trending topics, not unlike the trending topics that are a key feature of Twitter.

<sup>2</sup> Attached as Appendix B is a screenshot of my Sina Weibo home page, which includes a post by suggested user Chen Jing Xi Li about a fire at Shangri-La on January 11, 2014 that burned hundreds of homes.

active users, and that “184 million of which were monthly active mobile users as well” (Protalinski 2014).

Based on recent user data, Sina Weibo’s popularity appears to be waning. A third party tool called [WeiboReach](#) tracked the use of Weibo by its verified and influential users and found that those users were less active in 2013 (Millward 2013). According to [a report](#) released by the government-backed China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) Sina Weibo’s “user base fell 9% to 280.8 million, from 308.6 million the year before” (Kuo 2014).

Two primary factors are likely to have contributed to this decline in user base: first, the surging popularity of the social media platform Weixin, or WeChat, which is discussed below. According to the same CNNIC report, approximately 37% of users who stopped using Sina Weibo began using WeChat. Second, the drop may be due in part to the relative vulnerability of Sina Weibo to censorship. In a September 2013 piece for the Wall Street Journal, Josh Chin and Paul Mozur speculated about this trend: “Longer term [the censorship] could turn Sina into a company more focused on the buying and selling of goods and as a forum to keep up with celebrities and post travel logs rather than one centered on public exchange,” they wrote (Chin 2013).

Tencent is another leading Chinese media conglomerate that trades on the Hong Kong stock exchange. The company’s increasingly popular platform Weixin has positioned Tencent to be one of the leading tech companies in China. Weixin, otherwise known as WeChat, is a mobile messaging service that is likened to the messaging app WhatsApp, which [Facebook acquired](#) for \$19 billion (Panzarino 2014). WeChat allows users to perform a variety of functions, including holding private chats, seeing others’ “moments,” and sharing some of their own.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Attached in Appendices C-H are screenshots from my personal WeChat account that demonstrate the various features of the app.

WeChat is relatively new in relation to some of the other social networking sites and microblog sites, but its demonstrated popularity is surging. The app was first introduced in January 2011 (Century 2012) and within its first two years in existence WeChat had acquired more than 300 million users (Schiavenza 2013). As of August 2013, figures indicated that WeChat has as many as 400 million users (Pasick 2013) and 236 million monthly active users — nearly triple the number from a year earlier (Mozur 2013).

For a variety of reasons, WeChat could very well be the network to watch — something that The Atlantic’s Matt Schiavenza [discussed in detail](#) in July 2013 (Schiavenza 2013). One possible reason for this, Schiavenza said, is that WeChat is focused heavily on its international reach. According to The Next Web, 70 million of its users are outside the U.S. (Russell 2013) and it is available in 18 active languages. Worth noting, too, is that messages sent by international WeChat users are not censored, though a technical glitch in January 2013 briefly restricted certain messages. As Steven Millward (2013) [points out](#), “if a web company wants to expand overseas — like Tencent with [WeChat] — then the legal and cultural practices of the Chinese web have to be shaken off.”

Also, WeChat is highly linked and tethered to mobile. In fact, you can log in either using your phone number or a login and password. Because so many social media users are using mobile devices and WeChat is primarily designed for mobile, it’s already highly popular. In a lecture at Penn State University on September 12, 2013, Joe Chen said, “Mobile messaging is the most important product. Probably more important than social networking. People are moving away from social networking and toward mobile messaging.” (It is assumed that when Chen says social networks, he means social networks in the traditional sense, as websites that are most frequently accessed on desktops.) In the context of western social media, Chen says, “A lot of students are tired of Facebook, looking for something new, especially on mobile.” As Chinese

Penn State student Lily Wang noted in an interview, “We don’t use WeChat at the computer, because we don’t have the application on the computer.”

Another appeal of a mobile-first application, Chen noted, is the higher level of privacy associated with mobile platforms that are tethered to phone numbers. In the lecture, Chen said that regulations are “very strict” on traditional social networking sites like Weibo or Renren, and that mobile messaging-oriented sites are “clean slate” because of some degree of increased privacy. Charles Custer echoed a similar sentiment in [his column for Forbes](#), noting that “[WeChat and Weibo] are not mutually exclusive, and Weibo’s biggest problem isn’t WeChat—it’s the fact that transmitting lots of interesting information is now perceived as risky [on Weibo]” (Custer 2014).

And for a platform designed only for mobile whose primary feature is a simple chat, WeChat also offers a variety of other features that can make it a more holistic platform than just a simple person-to-person chat application. As pointed out in a January 2014 article by David Barboza in the New York Times, “Weixin [is] no mere copy of an existing service but an amalgam of various social networking tools: part Facebook, part Instagram and even part walkie-talkie. Rather than send a short mobile phone message by typing Chinese characters, which can be time-consuming, users simply hold down a button that records a voice message” (Barboza 2013). In his lecture, Joe Chen noted the appeal of the kinds of applications that bring together multiple features in that kind of way. “I think that photo sharing, one of the main missions of social networking, will be transformed by mobile messaging — the two will be put together,” Chen said.

## Chapter 2

### Censorship

#### Media Censorship

The media censorship in China is thorough, complex, and an integral part of how social media functions in China. Generally, many Internet websites (including social media sites like Facebook and Twitter) are blocked. As of November 15, 2013, the Chinese versions of the Wall Street Journal and New York Times were also blocked, according to [Tech In Asia](#) (Bischoff 2013). Sites such as <http://www.blockedinchina.net/> and <http://whatblocked.com/> allow users to search or look up what sites are unavailable. As of November 6, 2013, the following are sites that are blocked, partially blocked, or accessible in China, as listed by <http://whatblocked.com/>:

#### GFW Status:

News & Information	Social & Communication	Photos & Video	Tools & Sharing
BBC News	Facebook	Hulu	Internet Archive
CNN	Twitter	YouTube	Google Apps
The NY Times	Blogger	Vimeo	Google Search
Google News	Tumblr	Dailymotion	Scribd
Wikipedia	WordPress.com	Flickr	Bitly
Digg	Google+	ImageShack	Hightail (YouSendIt)
Reddit	Skype	Ustream	The Pirate Bay
LiveLeak	LINE	Blip	Evernote
WikiLeaks	Gmail	Imgur	Chrome Extensions
Feedly	Outlook (Hotmail)	Instagram	Dropbox
IMDB	Yahoo Mail	iTunes Store	Slideshare
Bloomberg	LinkedIn	Vine	Google Drive (Docs)
Aljazeera	Foursquare	Picasa	Google Sites
The Guardian			

#### Key:

- Red = Blocked / inaccessible
- Yellow = Partially blocked / unstable
- Green = Available / accessible

There are, however, ways to get around the so-called “Great Firewall” that China has erected to block access to these sites. Connecting to Virtual Private Networks, or VPNs, essentially allows users to leap over the Great Firewall to access sites that would otherwise be blocked. In essence, Roman Loyola [explains](#) for Macworld, “a VPN takes the Internet data you’re transmitting and receiving and sends [‘tunnels’ in networking lingo] it through a private, encrypted channel so that no other servers—such as the Chinese firewall—can read it in transit” (Loyola 2013).

Free speech — and repression of free speech — are familiar issues to journalists who cover China. Western journalists have had a difficult time gaining entry to China. Some have been denied visas because of their reporting. In May 2012, Al Jazeera correspondent Melissa Chan — who wrote exposes like [this one](#) about illegal detention centers — was expelled after 15 years of reporting from the country (Mustafi 2012). Most recently, On November 8, 2013, Reuters reporter Paul Mooney — who covered human rights issues in China — was [denied a resident journalist visa](#) after his old one expired (Jacobs 2013).

How free or not China’s Internet is rests in the eye of the beholder. Charles Chao, Sina Corporation’s CEO, emphasized the need to examine China’s situation in a historical context. During [his recorded keynote](#) at the China 2.0 convention in October 2013, Chao made the following remarks: “We see a lot of progress in terms of openness and freedom of media [in] the last 15 years. We have to put these things in a historical context. A lot of U.S. Internet companies can’t be successful in China because they always use U.S. standards...to judge China, which is wrong, because China is in a very different stage” (Stanford 2013).

### **Social Media Censorship**

For the average Chinese user, censorship of social media takes three forms: first, censorship by the government; second, self-censorship by the social media sites; and third, self-censorship by the users. Censorship by either the government or by social media sites can be done

in three major ways: posts on microblogs can be removed; certain terms can be blocked from showing up on social media platforms; and, in the most extreme circumstances, accounts can be eliminated altogether.

Regarding government censorship of social media, one of the main identified concerns is the spreading of rumors and the so-called “rumor mongers.” In [a People’s Daily post](#), a National Peoples Congress member was quoted as saying that China has “a large number of [postings] that are illegal, indulgent, irresponsible, contrary to social morality, rumor-inducing, and carrying inflammatory rhetoric” (Moses 2013). But the line between rumors and truthful postings is far from clear. “Some things are true and some things are not true — you can never be sure,” said Yiming Zhu — a news producer for International Channel Shanghai who is currently visiting the United States — in an interview. “Even sometimes official news agencies post things online that aren’t true at all.” As such, the legitimacy of the government’s responses to these kinds of posts is not clear. “The lines between what is legitimate information control and what is beyond the bounds of censorship is getting blurrier by the day,” said Jason Ng — a Google Policy Fellow at The Citizen Lab and research consultant at China Digital Times — in an interview. “A lot of the arguments that authorities in China use for justifying censorship are based on western ideals and ideals about how to balance state security and that sort of stuff.”

Harvard University professor Gary King (2014) and a team of researchers looked at how government censorship of social media works, doing three things in an attempt to illuminate the intricacies of the process:

“First is an observational study where we download all social media posts before the Chinese government can read and censor those they deem objectionable, and then detect from a network of computers all over the world which are censored. Second, we conduct a large scale randomized experimental study by creating accounts on numerous social media sites spread throughout the country, submitting different randomly assigned types

of social media texts, and then detecting which types are censored. And finally, we supplement the current approach of conducting tentative confidential interviews with insiders via a participatory study, by setting up our own social media site in China, contracting with Chinese firms to install the same censoring technologies as existing sites, and reverse engineering how it all works.”

In this fashion, King and his team were able to identify the censorship “triggers” that provide meaningful insight into the kinds of content that are of greatest interest to the Chinese government. Among other things, King found that the type of posts that were most frequently censored were those “about real world events with collective action potential” (King 2014).

King’s conclusions are more or less in keeping with government policy, which indicates that people who complain of injustices through social media will typically remain invisible, whereas finding an audience can land users in dangerous territory. On September 10, 2013, the Supreme People’s Court and Supreme People’s Procuratorate issued an [official interpretation](#) of policy regarding rumor spreading (Speech Crimes). As outlined in Article 246 (1) of China’s Criminal Law, “people will be charged with defamation if online rumors they create are visited by 5,000 internet users or re-posted more than 500 times,” (Rumor Spreading) which could result in them facing imprisonment for up to three years (Government Crackdown). The interpretation also further identified which situations would be considered harmful to social order or national interests. According to the non-governmental organization Chinese Human Rights Defenders, “the situations include ‘causing negative international influence,’ ‘harming the state’s image and severely endangering national interests,’ ‘inciting ethnic and religious conflicts’ and ‘initiating mass incidents’” (Government Crackdown).

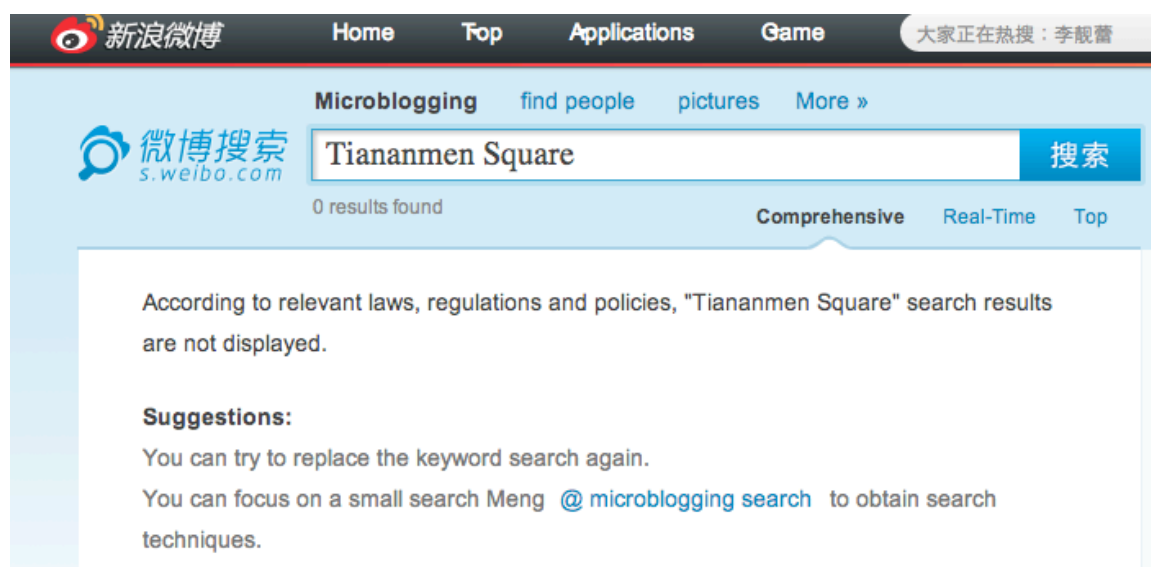
As a relatively new development, with potentially far-reaching chilling effects, this new interpretation of policy is yet to be known. [As pointed out](#) by Tea Leaf Nation’s Liz Carter, there was not much social activity during the October 7, 2013, typhoon that hit China (Carter 2013). A



[Weibo account](#) associated with Southern Metropolis Daily speculated that “many Internet users fear that their posts would be treated as rumors if retweeted more than 500 times, so information about the disaster couldn’t be disseminated widely” (Carter 2013).

One of the results of this government censorship is self-censorship on the part of the social media companies themselves. “Companies have a lot of incentive to never even get close to that line,” explained [Jason Ng](#), who catalogues the blocked terms on Sina Weibo [in his blog](#) and also wrote a book — “Blocked on Weibo” — about which terms are blocked and why.

To see how censorship in China is done logistically by the social media companies, Reuters reporters visited Sina Weibo’s censorship office in Tianjin, which employs 150 male college graduates and is staffed around the clock. In one 24-hour period, the Reuters staff reported that employees can reportedly censor up to 3 million posts per day (Li 2013). If, for example, a user was to search “Tiananmen Square” in the Weibo search bar, the following shows up:



In an interview, Ng said that the biggest takeaway from his own research about censorship was that there seemed to be a strongly arbitrary basis to the censorship of many words. “I think the sheer number of terms that are related to seemingly innocent topics gives credence to

the notion that what's happening is [a lot of] sub-censorship and demonstrates how the media corporations are involved in the censorship process," Ng explained in an interview.

This kind of self-censorship is evident in western media, not just companies like Sina, though on a much smaller scale. In late October, Bloomberg News reportedly elected to kill some stories that might jeopardize its reporters' ability to report from China, according to the New York Times (Wong 2013). (Matthew Winkler, Bloomberg Editor-in-Chief, later denied that he killed the stories, as noted in [this post by Politico](#).) In the Atlantic, James Fallows said, "This is a really depressing illustration of a "news" organization knuckling under in the face of economic pressure" (Fallows 2013).

Finally, there is apparent self-censorship on the part of the social media users themselves. As will be elaborated on in Chapter 5, many social media users elect to use the platforms in predominantly social ways, abstaining from posting the kind of content that would be censored by either the Chinese government or social media sites in the first place. "I don't post anything political, because I work in media so I should be careful," said TV reporter Yiming Zhu. "Basically what I post are things about my personal life or telling people to watch [International Channel Shanghai]."

## Chapter 3

### Social Media as a Form of Political Commentary

Social media as a form of political commentary certainly exists, but its use in this context is, predictably, quite limited due to the political restrictions generally in China. Whether used by a Big V or by an ordinary citizen, social media as political commentary presents perhaps the clearest example of the inevitable collision between two competing forces: an individual's expressions of his or her critiques of the restrictive nature of the Chinese political state, and the Chinese government's institutional needs to limit such critiques or expressions of criticism. In contrast to the role that social media played in the Arab Spring movements in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, social media in China will likely not be permitted to function in that way.

Big Vs who use social media as a form of political commentary are increasingly facing scrutiny and being subjected to a government crackdown as a result of their posts, which tend to be critical of government (Buckley 2013). "What's happening now is sort of a short term crackdown to appease hard-line folks," Jason Ng said in an interview. And as to how long it'll last, that's anyone's guess. "It's just a round of enforcement," Yiming Zhu said in an interview. "After this round, those celebrities will recognize that they have to be responsible for whatever they say and whatever they post online."

Hao Qun — who goes by his pen name Murong Xuecun — is a Big V with a reported 1.1 million followers on Weibo until his account was deleted following politically charged comments. Before this occurred, he had used social media for the political purpose of criticizing government policies of censorship. "His growing frustrations have pushed him to become one of

the most vocal critics of censorship in China,” [writes Edward Wong](#) (2011), a frequent contributor to the New York Times and a leading commentator on issues of Chinese media. Murong has also written four novels, the themes of which are often critical of corrupt officials and businessmen. “Mr. Murong’s books are racy and violent and nihilistic, with tales of businessmen and officials engaging in bribe-taking, brawling, drinking, gambling and cavorting with prostitutes in China’s booming cities” (Wong 2011). Murong Xuecun posted portions of his novels to his blog or Weibo. In a piece for the [Guardian](#), Murong wrote, “As in 1957, 1966 and 1989, Chinese intellectuals are feeling more or less the same fear as one does before an approaching mountain storm: the scariest thing of all is not being silenced or being sent to prison; it is the sense of powerlessness and uncertainty about what comes next” (Murong 2013).

Another prominent Big V who has used social media as political commentary is Xia Yeliang, a Peking University economics professor. Xia signed a democracy manifesto in 2008 — referred to as Chapter 08 — that said, “Our political system continues to produce human rights disasters and social crises” (Feith 2013). In 2009, Xia wrote an open letter “to a senior Chinese leader criticising him for imposing tight controls on expression” and also reportedly used his social media accounts to criticize Peking University (Peking University).

Peking University’s School of Economics voted to expel Xia Yeliang in October 2013, something that — though not a direct result of his social media activity — reflects the general intolerance for vocal political commentary on digital platforms. The Associated Press notes in [a South China Morning Post article](#), “Xia’s expulsion comes as China’s recently installed leadership has further tightened controls on public discourse, arresting popular bloggers for spreading so-called rumours and activists who have called for anti-corruption measures” (Peking University).

Charles Xue — whose screen name was Xue Manzi — is another Big V who actively used social media as a form of political commentary. A Chinese-American venture capitalist, Xue

attracted more than 12 million followers on his Weibo account. Many of the posts on his account were liberal-leaning messages that raised somewhat provocative questions. For example, in a post that was included in a China Central Television (CCTV) [segment](#), Xue “wondered whether China’s water, whose quality is always in question, contained contraceptives” (Wan 2013). Charles used his Big V status as a way to broadcast political commentary by ordinary social media users, frequently reposting their original posts that encompassed a broad array of criticisms about everyday life. For example, Xue gained widespread publicity for having used his Weibo account [to spread a message](#) from a young, poor girl who needed money for treatment for her sick grandmother (Thomas 2013).

In a recent, highly publicized rebuke of his social media activity, the Chinese government detained Charles Xue on suspicion of soliciting prostitutes in August 2013. Thereafter, Xue confessed to his “crimes” on TV as part of a recent trend of public confessions (Ramzy 2013). On China Central Television (CCTV) Xue said, “My irresponsibility in spreading information online was a vent of negative mood, and was a neglect of the social mainstream” (Custer 2013). In [a column](#) for Forbes a year later, Custer elaborated to say that Xue’s arrest “[affected] other power users, leading to lower activity rates and fewer highly active accounts. These accounts were responsible for passing along a lot of the news that made Weibo so interesting, but the crackdown on rumors has made the passing-along of news (even news that has nothing to do with politics) seem dangerous unless it comes from an official source” (Custer 2014).

The limitations of social media as a form of political commentary are entirely understandable when viewed through the prism of modern Chinese history, beginning with the Communist takeover of the government in 1947 and continuing through the events of the Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square. This conclusion is consistent with the results of a study by Harvard University professor Gary King. He found that the Chinese government is more concerned with posts that demonstrate “collective action potential...regardless of whether they are

for or against the state” than those posts that criticize “the state, its leaders, and their policies,” which he says are routinely published (King 2014). Particularly in the case of Big Vs, their mere number of followers elevates the reach of their posts and commentary.

Perhaps one of the biggest limitations to social media being used for political commentary is the self-censorship on the part of ordinary users. As Custer writes, “I think political engagement on China’s web is often overstated in the Western press. One would get the impression from some articles I’ve seen over the past few years that Weibo users come online specifically to complain about the government, but in my experience most of the time, most of them are just there to chat with friends and pass along any photos or news in their feed that they find interesting. Often, this isn’t political at all” (Custer 2014).

## **Chapter 4**

### **Social Media as a Means of Exposing Official Corruption and Bettering the Lives of Citizens**

The demonstrated use of limited social media to better the lives of ordinary citizens has allowed this type of social media exchange to flourish in a relatively productive way, and as used to expose official corruption and better the lives of ordinary citizens, social media has emerged as an agent of change. But the limitations on the use of social media in this context clearly exist, and the lines between this form of social media and the use of microblogging as an expression of political commentary are not readily apparent.

An early incident of social media being used for good was related to the treatment of migrant workers and took place in 2003. As Oliver August (2007) writes in a [Wired Magazine article](#), after a young migrant worker named Sun Zhigang failed to produce proof of his identity during a street check and died in police detention, “Sun’s friends protested his death on discussion boards, and soon other sites picked up a campaign demanding police accountability and reform of the laws affecting migrant workers. Before the unprepared system monitors could react, an avalanche was in motion.” Though not the case in all scenarios, in this instance, the outcry on digital platforms directly led to policy changes. “A few months later, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao abolished the law requiring China’s 120 million migrants to have special identity papers,” August (2007) writes.

Pollution is also an increasingly important social issue in China, and citizens have used social media to express their grievances.<sup>4</sup> “For a government that has relied on economic

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<sup>4</sup> The public concern over pollution in China is well-founded. On January 7, 2014, state media reported that the pollution in China causes 350,000 to 500,000 premature deaths every year, according to

performance as a cornerstone of its legitimacy, it has had few incentives to slow down economic development for the sake of environmental protection,” [writes Tao Xie](#) (2014), a professor of political science at Beijing Foreign Studies University in a piece for CNN Opinion. “The China model thus boils down to ‘development at all costs’” (Tao 2014). Activist Deng Fei has used social media to draw attention to this issue by encouraging Weibo users to post photos of polluted rivers near their homes, according to [Tea Leaf Nation](#) (Carter 2013). His post reportedly said, “How is the river in your hometown? While you’re home for the holidays, take a photo of the river or stream in your hometown and upload it to weibo for us to see” (Custer 2013). As Charlie Custer — the reporter who wrote the piece — noted, “Sina Weibo has proved to be fertile ground for this, and we have seen the same story play out with corruption over the past few years and more and more weibo users realize that corruption isn’t just a local issue after reading weibo accounts of ‘local’ corruption all over the country. Deng Fei appears to be trying something similar here, as while one river being full of trash is a local problem, everyone’s rivers being full of trash might point to a larger problem” (Custer 2013).

Social media has also been used as a way to raise awareness for food safety issues. In a Yale Global [article](#) from 2012, reporter Mary Kay Magistad writes about how a graduate student named Ma Jun created a blog in January 2012 dedicated solely to raising awareness about food safety after he learned that restaurants near him were using toxic chemicals to make pork taste like beef (Magistad 2012). By May 2012, his blog had received 5 million views after — according to Ma Jun — word spread on Weibo (Magistad 2012).

Another use of social media as a means of bettering the lives of Chinese citizens has included efforts to raise money for charitable or community purposes. Deng Fei was an

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Reuters (Hornby 2012). The government is now allowing information regarding China’s air quality readings to be accessible. Many, like one from AQUICN, show air quality readings in China as compared to other countries.



investigative reporter who worked for Phoenix magazine in Hong Kong. Over time, he became more of an activist and spearheaded a campaign to provide financial support for women whose rural homes had been subject to state expropriation. In one instance, Deng learned that two women had family members who set themselves on fire and needed medical care, so he asked people who had followed his live blogging to send money to cover the medical expenses (Ford 2012). Deng raised \$3.7 million in six months from individual donors for his cause, according to [the Christian Science Monitor piece](#). Deng Fei and another also used their social media accounts to find missing children.

Social media has also become an increasingly popular way for both ordinary citizens and Big Vs to expose corruption by government officials. According to the Annual Report on Development of New Media in China released in June 2013 by the [Chinese Academy of Social Sciences](#), a government think tank, “from 2010 to 2012, 156 corruption cases were exposed online, double the number of traditional media” exposes (Yu 2013).

One example of such a case is when, in August 2012, a bus collided with a tanker in Shanxi Province and Yang Dacai, chief of the Shanxi provincial work safety administration, showed up at the scene of the crash. Photos of him began to circulate on the Internet because he appeared to be smiling while standing amidst the wreckage. Shortly thereafter, Weibo users began posting photos of him wearing luxury watches (Gu 2012). “One day after the Shanxi accident, Sina Weibo users posted five photos of Yang wearing five different luxury watches, including a \$63,000 Vacheron Constantin and a \$10,000 Rolex. Many netizens questioned how a government worker who would have not been making more than \$15,000 a year could afford so many expensive watches on his public salary.” (Gu 2012). One such photo appears below:



Though Yang apologized for the photos in which he was smiling, and also said that he had saved up money over the years for the luxury watches, Yang was relieved of his position on September 21, 2012 and sentenced to 14 years in prison for corruption, as originally reported by state media (Kaiman 2013).

In February 2013, a social media campaign was used to highlight the expensive cars owned by members of the People's Liberation Army. Yu Jianrong, a social activist and professor, who has been [Referred to](#) by Tea Leaf Nation's Rachel Lu as "one of the most influential people on Weibo," (Lu 2012) broadcast a request on his Weibo account for other users to post photos of the Army officers with their cars. Yu Jianrong reportedly stopped using Sina Weibo in 2012, and was rumored to have become the assistant head of an almost deserted village in 2013 in an attempt to escape government criticism. "Yu, in one of several microblog posts from Guizhou, wrote he did not 'flee' the capital from the ongoing crackdown against 'Big-Vs', influential commentators on Sina Weibo, refuting many online rumours," [writes](#) Patrick Boehler in the South China Morning Post. "Hundreds of people have been detained in China, including several well-known Big-Vs, in a concerted effort to rein in online debate" (2013).

Luo Changping, a journalist in Beijing, is well known for his use of social media to expose public corruption by Liu Tiannan, the former deputy minister of the National Development and Reform Commission. On his personal Weibo account, Luo shared information about Liu's corruption — which included accepting bribes, faking his master's degree and having extramarital affairs, [according to](#) the South China Morning Post. Through his Weibo account, Luo was able to effectively expose the corruption. "In May, Luo's saw his efforts pay off. Liu was sacked and put under investigation by the CCDI" (Zhang 2013). On November 8, 2013, Transparency International [awarded](#) Luo the 2013 Integrity Award, producing [a video feature](#) on Luo to highlight his rise as a journalist (Luo Changping).

The use of social media to expose official corruption and to better the lives of ordinary Chinese citizens has become widespread, and the use of social media in this context is entirely consistent with the Chinese government's strong emphasis on eradicating corruption among party officials and government bureaucrats. Similarly, the Chinese government recognizes the

importance of improving living conditions among its 1.3 billion citizens. Nevertheless, there are limits to the use of social media to expose official corruption and to better lives.

To some extent, these limitations turn on the status of the microblogger — whether he (or she) is a Big V or an ordinary citizen. In this sense, something like a sliding scale appears to exist. If the microblogger is a Big V — and thus, the potential for collective action is greater — the limitations on the use of social media to expose official corruption or to better the lives of individual citizens will be stricter, even if the initial intention of the post otherwise aligns with the government's interests. Importantly, the individual bloggers who criticized Yang Dacai for wearing expensive watches did not, themselves, pose a threat to the government, but they did supply the government and the public with constructive information, raising an important question about how a provincial administrator of work safety could afford five luxury watches.

Recent events involving Luo Changping perhaps best illustrate the degree to which a user's status can lead to corresponding limitations on social media uses outside the context of political commentary. When Luo received the 2013 Transparency International award, “news of this was banned on the mainland by the central propaganda department,” writes Zhang Hong (2013) of the South China Morning Post. Within a matter of weeks thereafter, Luo was removed from his position as deputy editor of *Cajing* magazine. An unnamed reporter at *Cajing* magazine said that SEEC Media Group — the magazine's parent company — characterized the decision to remove Luo as “a usual position change and a need of the magazine's work arrangement.”

In all likelihood, the issue with Luo was not that he exposed corruption. The government itself took action against Liu Tiannan on the basis of Luo's posts on Weibo. However, Luo's reassignment and apparent demotion was undoubtedly caused by the government's concerns that Luo's posts had attracted a wide following, thus elevating his status to that of a Big V. Once Luo became an international star, with a significant amount of influence over public opinion, the government effectively took steps to remove Luo from the blogosphere.

For these reasons, the uses of social media to expose official corruption and to better the lives of ordinary Chinese citizens will continue to flourish because such uses are not likely to endanger the political and social fabric in China. This kind of use of social media, although it does not necessarily reflect well on the party, seems to be allowed by the party — at least for now — because of the utility it serves. “Social media can be a way for [the government] to hold local officials accountable,” Jason Ng said in an interview. “People have this ability to complain about the ecosystem online, and it can serve as a way to hold officials accountable.” So while Internet activists including Deng Fei and Luo Changping use social media to raise awareness and draw attention to certain issues, those uses are distinct from the uses of people like Murong Xuecun, who use social media to provide political commentary that in the eyes of the government doesn’t actually work constructively toward any kind of end.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Social Media as an Expression of All Things Social**

The uses of social media in China as an expression of all things social are vast, and generally mirror the ways in which microblogs are utilized in the United States. Despite the potential of social media platforms to be used to foment political change, most Chinese do not seem to be changing their behavior as social media becomes more heavily integrated into their lives. On the contrary, most Chinese use social media in ways that are classically social, and many simply have no interest in using social media for those purposes. As such, the Chinese government does not appear to have imposed many restrictions upon the social uses of microblogging, presumably because the benefits of social media for social purposes in a country of 1.3 billion citizens vastly outweigh the potential drawbacks.

The average user of social media in China appears to use this form of digital media primarily as a basic means of communicating, as a way to keep in touch with friends and family who are far away, or as social newswire. Many seem to have no interest in using it as a political tool. As Yifei Wu — a student from Shanghai currently studying engineering at Penn State — says, “most people just post about their daily life.” This observation is echoed by Lily Wang, a sophomore from southern China, and by Siqi Han, a junior from northern China. Both of them use social media to comment on their own lives or to interact with others. And for the most part, the government likely allows Chinese to use social media in social ways because of the relatively small threat that it poses to the state. Additionally, the limited censorship of social uses of microblogs gives the illusion of an Internet that is free and open.

For people like Lily and Siqi, the evolution of their use of social media platforms has mirrored the waxing and waning popularity of various sites. Lily said that the first social media platform she used was QQ, an instant messaging service developed by Tencent, and that in primary school, most of her classmates' had shared their QQ numbers with her so that she could connect with them. Then, in secondary school, she started using RenRen, followed by Weibo. Now, for social purposes, the platform du jour is WeChat. "Social media has changed a lot for me," Lily said in an interview. "Before we had social networks, we had to text or call our friends. But now that we have WeChat, I basically never use the telephone to call people."

For Lily, WeChat has become the primary form of connecting through social media. Lily is just one of WeChat's 236 million monthly active users as of August 2013, nearly triple the number from a year earlier (Mozur 2013). This service is Lily's "prime communication tool." Her friend, Siqi, does the same, noting that she checks WeChat every five minutes or so, or whenever she receives a notification that one of her friends has contacted her. "WeChat for me is more like text," Siqi said in an interview. "It's how we communicate. Weibo and RenRen are more ways to post things that don't directly go to an individual person."

Though he is a bit older than college-aged Lily or Siqi, TV journalist Yiming Zhu emphasized that social media — specifically WeChat — is his primary way of communicating with people and forging relationships. While he is visiting the United States and taking courses for three months at Penn State, Yiming Zhu met up with a few Chinese students studying at Penn State. When they did so in mid-November, instead of exchanging phone numbers or RenRen account information — much as students in the United States might exchange Twitter handles — they all exchanged WeChat account information. "That just speaks to how popular it is," Yiming Zhu said. "Three or five years ago, that wouldn't have been the case."

Social media in China is also used to keep in touch with family or friends who are in other cities or even in different continents. For students like Lily and Siqi who are studying in the

United States, social media serves as an important link to family. According to the latest “Open Doors” survey of international enrollments, the number of Chinese students enrolled in U.S. universities increased by 21.4% in 2012-13 (Redden 2013). Lily says that for her, WeChat serves the same purpose as Skype. (Like Skype, WeChat offers both voice and video options.) QQ is another form of social media that students use to keep in touch with their parents. Though Lily thinks that QQ is the easiest for parents to use — she says that “everyone’s” parents use QQ — her own parents prefer WeChat to keep in touch with Lily in the United States.

For many Chinese, social media is not just a means of contacting friends directly to communicate or make plans. Social media — particularly Weibo and RenRen — can often serve as a platform on which people can “lifecast,” or broadcast certain things about their lives and, conversely, read their friends’ posts about daily events in their own lives. In this way, social media functions as a social newswire. “RenRen is where you might see someone post that they had a boring day, and Weibo is where you might see a picture of their lunch,” Yifei Wu said. “You can have restrictions on your profile for RenRen, but not on Weibo — you just see the posts of anyone you follow.”

Different users engage with this social newswire to varying degrees, choosing to either participate, observe, or do a little bit of both. Siqi said she will occasionally forward to others her friends’ posts on Weibo — like, for example, instructions on how to apply certain kinds of makeup. “I’ll see interesting links to some articles or videos that people will forward to one person or another person,” Siqi said in an interview. “I’ll see that link and then pass it on to more of my friends.” In contrast to Siqi, Lily takes a more observational position, sometimes choosing not to contribute to the social newswire, but rather just reading about what her friends are saying or doing. “I use social media just for fun to see what my friends are doing and what they’re thinking,” Lily said in an interview. “I don’t even always post to social media — sometimes I just see what other people are posting.” On the far end of the spectrum, someone like Yifei Wu



refrains altogether from posting on social media. Interestingly, he also expresses disdain for the social content he ends up consuming — whether he likes it or not. “So many people post all the experiences of their life, like a story,” Yifei Wu said. “It’s kind of bullshit — a post like, ‘Just got food, here’s a picture of it.’ I see that all the time.”

Scholars in China also use social media as a way of exchanging ideas and information. Baohua Zhou — a professor at Fudan University in Shanghai who studies the media’s impact on political institutions — said in [an article](#) for McClatchy that as an academic, social media provides fertile ground for exchanges of thoughts. “These are platforms where we can get diverse information, discuss things, learn from experts in other fields, and also maintain friendships,” Zhou said (Kern 2013).

Even when used in a purely social way, all microblogs and mobile networking platforms like WeChat are still subject to limitations, whether imposed by the Chinese government, the social media sites themselves, or by individual users. Nevertheless, these limitations rarely seem to evoke much concern because the primary experience for most users is social, not political.

For someone like Yifei Wu, using social media as a social newswire, and refraining from posting much himself, makes him reasonably comfortable that his online activity does not conflict with the lines that have been drawn between acceptable and unacceptable uses of social media. “I’m not scared about the censorship because I don’t post to social media a lot,” Yifei Wu said. And though someone like Lily does occasionally post to social media, she said that censorship does not bother her at all. In fact, she believes that the censorship of “rumors” is a good thing, even if it takes place in the context of posts that are merely social. “If we post sensitive words, those words are blocked,” Lily said. In her view, this is actually beneficial. “Most young people and teens use those sites so maybe it’s for the best that they aren’t exposed to bad things.” This sentiment, although perhaps naïve by western standards, probably serves to match the Chinese

government's willingness to allow the continued growth of social media despite the potential dangers that social media poses to the stability of the political order in that country.

As discussed in Chapter 7, the government itself has begun to use social media to shape public opinion, and, simultaneously, to examine and understand public sentiment on a wide range of issues. For this reason, the use of social media as an expression of all things social fundamentally advances the government's interest in routinely taking the pulse of its citizens.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Social Media as an Instrument of E-Commerce and a Driver of Consumer Spending**

The economic uses and benefits of social media in China also explain the rapid expansion of microblogs and mobile networking platforms. In China, as is true in many regions throughout the world, social media is closely tied to e-commerce, a component of consumer spending that has become increasingly profitable and beneficial for advanced economies. In 2012, the Chinese e-commerce market was responsible for 1.3 trillion RMB (\$190 billion USD) worth of transactions — a 66.5% increase since 2011 (Shu 2013). The 2013 “Cyber Monday” holiday that took place on November 11, 2013, resulted in Chinese consumers spending more than \$3.3 billion online shopping (Timmons 2013).

In the past three decades, China has emerged as a powerhouse on the world economic playing field. In the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, China’s economy averaged 10% annual growth, [according to](#) the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. Throughout this period, China’s economic model has emphasized investment and export-led growth over consumption, although it is becoming clear that this economic model is increasingly less viable (Schlefer 2014). The Chinese must move beyond low wage exports and transition to a new economic model that depends upon the increased buying power of its own consumers (Schlefer 2014). Following the March 14, 2013, election of Xi Jinping as President of the People’s Republic of China, “the party has shifted priorities, mainly to find a new source of growth for a slowing economy that depends increasingly on a consuming class of city dwellers,” Ian Johnson writes in [a June 2013 piece](#) in the New York Times.

One essential component of increased domestic spending in China is e-commerce.

According to [a report by McKinsey](#), e-commerce sales are expected to reach 2.7 trillion RMB or 420 billion US dollars by 2015 (Chiu 2012). [A McKinsey article](#) also noted that “it has a greater influence on purchasing decisions for consumers in China than for those anywhere else in the world” (Chiu 2012). McKinsey attributed this in part to Chinese citizens’ skepticism of formal institutions, noting that as such, “Chinese consumers disproportionately value peer-to-peer recommendations” (Chiu 2012).

Among the leading e-commerce marketplaces are two that are owned by the corporate giant Alibaba. According to the Economist, Alibaba’s estimated value is between \$55 billion and more than \$120 billion (Timmons 2013). In its scale, Alibaba resembles a tech company like Google or Yahoo<sup>5</sup>. In fact, Yahoo owns a portion of stock in Alibaba (Carlson 2013). Alibaba owns two major sites: Taobao, likened to eBay, and Tmall, likened to Amazon. From college student Lily Wang’s perspective, the sites are mostly used by middle class citizens who are interested in spending a lot of time browsing. In an interview, she said that the online descriptions of the products actually overstate the quality of the products. “I think eBay and Amazon are probably better in terms of quality. But [the Alibaba products are] cheap. White collar people use the sites the most, I think. They all use work time to shop online. Even if they don’t buy things every day, they’ll go on and browse.” Lily also noted, “It’s an addiction — people who shop online have an addiction to that just like people have addictions to other things.” Between them, Taobao and Tmall processed 1.1 trillion yuan (\$170 billion USD) in transactions last year, more goods than passed through Amazon and eBay combined (Bazaar).

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<sup>5</sup> Google’s market capitalization is approximately \$408 billion, and Yahoo’s is \$40 billion.

Alibaba is currently a privately owned company but is expected to make an initial public offering sometime later this year.

Alibaba is increasingly being tied to social media sites — primarily Sina Weibo — and this close tie serves to underscore the important role of social media in advancing the Chinese government’s goal of transitioning to greater consumer spending. On January 8, 2014, China Daily reported that Alipay — Alibaba’s e-payment feature — teamed up with Sina Weibo in a partnership that will allow Sina Weibo users to connect their Weibo accounts to their Alipay accounts in order to make purchases easier and faster. On March 12, 2014, it was reported that Alipay had teamed up with China CITIC Bank and would be issuing virtual credit cards that could be used anywhere online, including a variety of shopping outlets (Bischoff 2014). In the China Daily article, Alibaba’s Fan Zhiming is quoted as saying in a press conference, "Sina Weibo has more than 500 million users, and Alipay has more than 100 million mobile phone users. We look forward to the year of 2014, in which there will be a bruising battle between Weibo payment and WeChat payment" (Meng 2014).

The partnership between Alipay and Sina Weibo comes on the heels of a significant transaction in April 2013, when Alibaba bought an 18% stake in Sina Weibo (Guilford 2013), and the mutually beneficial relationship between Alibaba and Sina Weibo is reflected in other ways. Alibaba spends significant advertising dollars on Weibo. According to Tech In Asia, Sina CFO Herman Yu said [in a conference call](#) that “20 percent of Weibo’s advertising revenue is thanks to its partner Alibaba” (Millward 2013).

Like the partnership between Sina Weibo and Alibaba, Internet and social media giant Tencent has also partnered up with a major e-commerce company. Tencent [announced](#) on March 10, 2014, that it would be paying \$215 million for a 15% stake in JD.com, “China's second-largest e-commerce player by transactions,” (with Alibaba being the first largest) (Mozur 2014). As noted by the Wall Street Journal’s Paul Mozur, the Tencent-JD.com alliance is “aimed squarely at Alibaba” and “will seek to drive traffic to JD.com's e-commerce services via Tencent's WeChat” (Mozur 2014). Likewise, within 24 hours of Alipay announcing its plans for

virtual credit cards, so too did Tencent. As Paul Bischoff noted in [his second May 12, 2014 piece](#), “Tencent is also aiming for 1 million users of the WeChat credit cards, which applicants can apply for within the app” (Bischoff 2014).

At the moment, there seem to be few limitations on the use of social media in the context of e-commerce. In a Wired Magazine [article](#), Oliver August (2007) offered this explanation for the apparent lack of restrictions: “Rigorously policing encryption technology would undermine e-commerce, which is vitally important to the government’s crusade to lift the economy. If all encrypted credit card details and other sensitive corporate information had to pass through surveillance bottlenecks, whole sections of the economy would be harmed. When forced to choose, the government seems to trust that raising incomes is a better way of securing power than spying on dissidents.”

But when it comes to Internet firms encroaching on traditionally government-dominated financial spheres, there may be more limitations. Soon after both Alibaba and Tencent announced that they would be rolling out virtual credit cards, China’s central bank ordered them to stop processing those payments through those virtual credit cards, according to Quartz’s Lily Kuo. As Kuo points out in [her piece](#), “The central bank’s move is a reminder that the battle for China’s millions of middle-class Internet users isn’t just between the two Internet giants, which have been expanding into private banking and money market funds. The two companies are now encroaching on the turf of some of China’s largest financial institutions, many of them owned and operated by the government” (Kuo 2014).

The natural synergies between social media and e-commerce is likely to prove a powerful driver in China’s transition to an economic model that requires increased consumer spending. If so, then the use of microblogs and mobile networking platforms is consistent — at least in the economic context — with the broader goals of the Chinese government, one of which is to strengthen the hold of the Chinese communist party. In an article by Andrew Browne in the Wall

Street Journal (2013), one writer offered his view that a healthy Chinese economy was critical to the continued vitality of the country's basic form of government: "In the China that Mr. Xi hopes to create [the] individual is finding new value as a consumer of goods and services and, insofar as a consumer economy is driven by the private sector, as an innovator and entrepreneur. The new catchphrase, trumpeted loudly in the Third Plenum document, is 'people first' development. But what appears to be the state's generous new bargain with the individual is, in fact, rooted in a utilitarian need to boost incomes to support the continuation of Communist rule." Whether this interpretation of China's commitment to a consumer-driven economy is correct, it does help to explain the government's otherwise surprising tolerance toward social media generally.

## **Chapter 7**

### **The Chinese Government's Use of Social Media to Mine Public Opinion and Shape Public Thought**

Increasingly, the Chinese government is using social media itself to communicate with citizens and to shape public thought. As analogized by Chinese blogger and journalist Michael Anti, “If Weibo is a battlefield, [the] government seeks to occupy it, not destroy it” (Magistad 2012). This can come in multiple forms, including the government monitoring social media to mine public opinion as well as using social media as a mouthpiece to shape public thought.

The Chinese government is allocating more and more human resources to mining public opinion. As noted by Simon Denyer in an August 2013 [Washington Post article](#), “the government is [now] trying to understand public opinion on an unprecedented scale. In response to government demand, opinion monitoring centers have sprung up in state-run news organizations and universities to mine and interpret the vast rivers of chatter on the Internet” (Denyer 2013). One such example is the People’s Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Center, which analyzes comments on social media and sends those summaries to party leaders (Denyer 2013).

The Chinese government is also using social media accounts in more active ways. As originally reported in China’s [2012 Sina microblogging government report](#), government departments in China had approximately 60,000 Weibo accounts at the time of the publication of the report (Denyer 2013). One of the primary ways in which the government uses these accounts is to disseminate official news, according to Michael Anti, who says that “now, when someone in the central governments wants to take action against a local government or some princelings [children of senior party leaders], they put the news directly on Weibo or Twitter” (Magistad 2012).



One of the most recent and highly publicized examples of the Chinese government utilizing these digital tools is when it chose to live-blog the trial of Bo Xilai, former Chinese Politburo member who was charged with bribery, in an effort to make itself appear more transparent. Not only did the government allow for a “vigorous defense...as evidence of the rule of law and a fair and open trial,” but it posted to a live blog available in China and abroad, and “included Tweets in English by state-run Xinhua News Agency and CCTV, one of the few media outlets allowed in the otherwise closed courtroom” (Wan 2013). As Eva Pils — associate law professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong — noted in a August 22, 2013, [Bloomberg article](#), “[The government] perhaps decided, ‘We will look really bad if we do the ordinary show and everyone says it’s just another one of these scripted trials.’ What is essential is that the authorities clearly remain in control of the trial. Bo Xilai is not able to mount a genuine defense” (Sanderson 2013). In this way, the government used social media to effectively control the narrative and attempt to shape the public’s thoughts about its handling of the trial.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Conclusion**

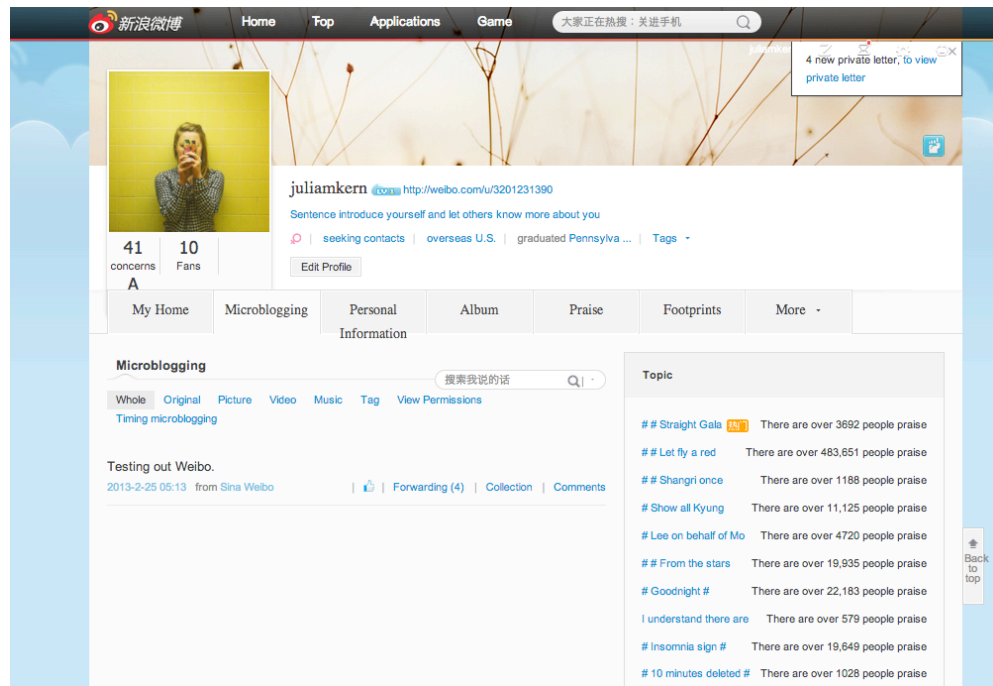
In just 15 years — from 1998 to 2013 — the number of Internet users in China has grown from just 2 million (Liang 2011) to 604 million (604 million netizens). And in just ten years, millions of China's netizens have taken to using various social media platforms to talk about everything from mundane aspects of daily life to big-picture concerns, ranging from relatively innocuous person-to-person communications to strongly critical posts about government corruption.

While recent crackdowns on Big Vs and increasingly complex methods for censoring social media sites may seem to indicate that the limitations on social media use are stricter now than ever, there's reason to believe that social media will continue to flourish. First and foremost, while much is written about the politics of social media exchanges, the reality is that most interactions are non-political. Even in the minority of cases, it's highly unlikely that social media will ever become a means for grassroots mobilization — as proven by the government's history of swift reactions to social media posts that seem to have the potential for collective action.

But more than that, the government increasingly seems to recognize that social media serves a variety of constructive purposes. It could prove to be a critical component of China's movement toward a more consumer-based economy, as Internet companies forge relationships with e-commerce giants. It will also continue to provide the Chinese government with useful information regarding incidents of corruption, as well as opportunities for the government to mine and shape public opinion.

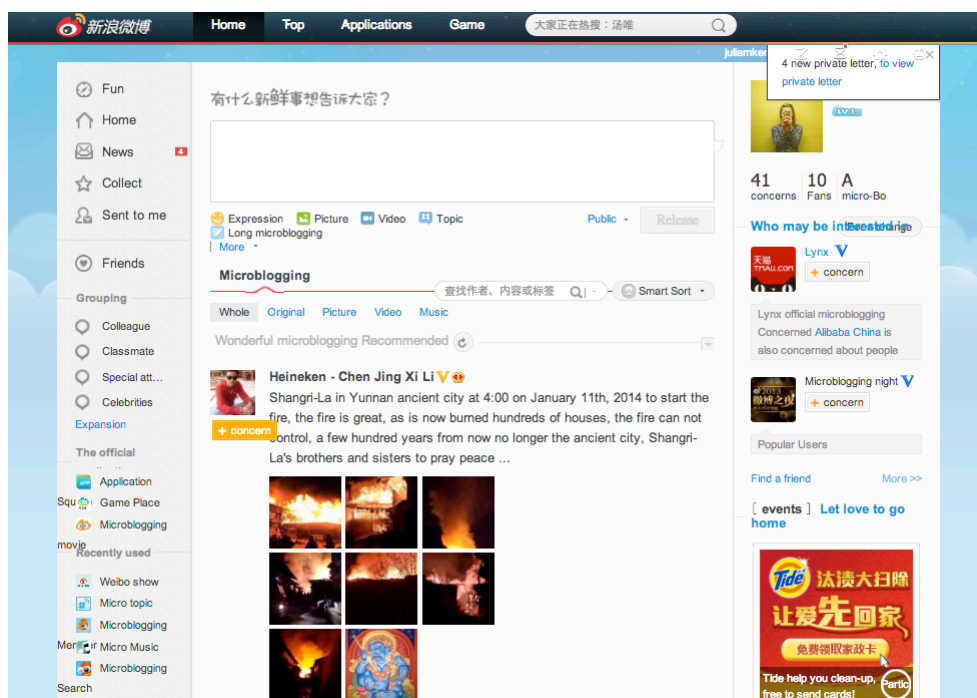
## Appendix A

### Screenshot: Sina Weibo Profile Page



## Appendix B

## Screenshot: Sina Weibo Home Page



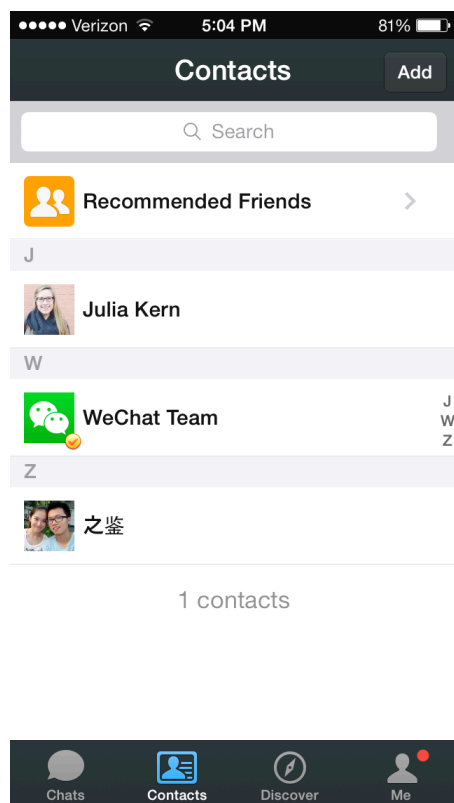
## Appendix C

### Screenshot: WeChat Chats



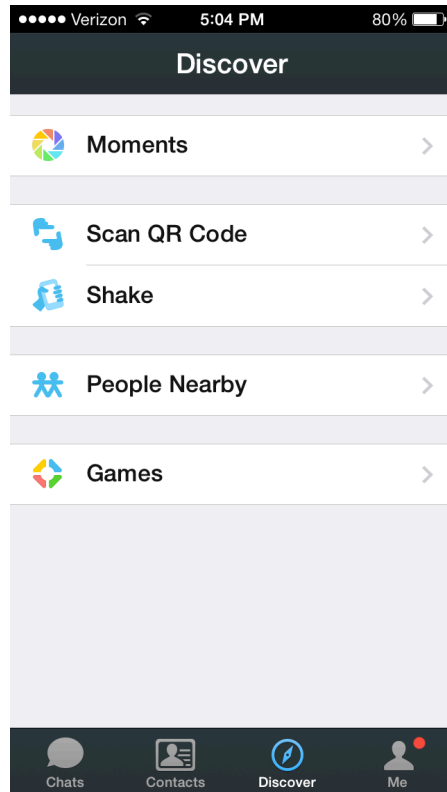
## Appendix D

### Screenshot: WeChat Contacts



## Appendix E

### Screenshot: WeChat Discover



## Appendix F

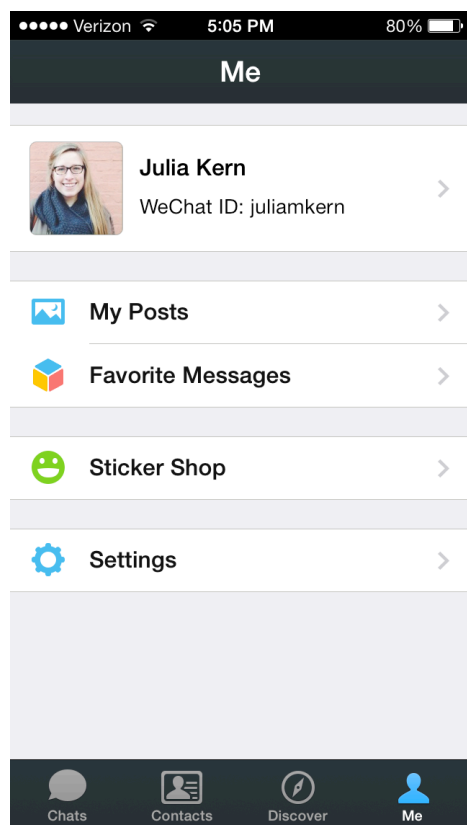
### Screenshot: WeChat Moments





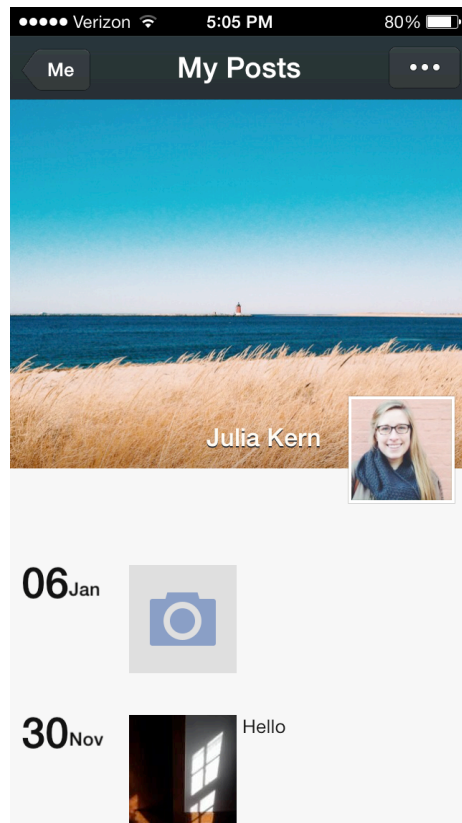
## Appendix G

## Screenshot: WeChat Me



## Appendix H

### Screenshot: WeChat My Posts



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[idUSTRE7433HI20110504](http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/04/us-renren-ipo-idUSTRE7433HI20110504)

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[makers.html?gwh=D2FCEAC4D782257849DE1F8EDCFF82B7&gwt=pay](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/11/world/asia/china-cracks-down-on-online-opinion-makers.html?gwh=D2FCEAC4D782257849DE1F8EDCFF82B7&gwt=pay)

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## ACADEMIC VITA

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**EDUCATION** **Penn State University, Schreyer Honors College** | May 2014  
**Journalism Major, Spanish Minor**

### MEDIA

**[Onward State](#)** | August 2013 to Present

- Using community tools like Google Forms and Fusion Tables to collect user-generated content and power individual reporting projects (like [this one](#))

**[Digital First Media](#)** | May 2013 to August 2013

- Aggregated wire service content and original content to produce stories (like [this one](#)) that ran on DFM sites like the Denver Post and New Haven Register

**[The Daily Collegian](#)**

Social Media Manager | Fall 2011 to Spring 2013

- Ran the Daily Collegian's [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [Storify](#) accounts
- [Used social media](#) to cover the Sandusky scandal and ensuing events
- [Facebook](#) page [ranked No. 1](#) in College Media Association's Apple Awards

Senior Reporter | Fall 2010 to Spring 2011

- Wrote [stories](#) about the University Administration and related campus news

**[McClatchy News](#)** | March 2013

- Reported on social media in China from Shanghai and Beijing
- [Story](#) published by McClatchy in July 2013 appeared on Miami Herald site, among others
- Managed the digital presence for the group of student reporters, including [WordPress blog](#), [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#) accounts

**Schreyer Honors College Public Relations** | Fall 2012 to Fall 2013

- Wrote [feature stories](#) about faculty and students in the Honors College

**Fox News** | May 2012 to August 2012

- Interned with the Business Development Department, designing a "companion" smartphone/tablet application for FOX viewers and pitched the application to FOX executives