Online Discussions in China: The Collaborative Development of Specific Norms for Individual Expression

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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 this context of severe censorship, thousands of Internet users express various 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 organisation of political movements through the Web is forbidden, more and more mobilisations have occurred since the Sun Zhigang case in 2003, when thousands of Internet users expressed their indignation over the arbitrary treatment of migrants. (3) These mobilisations are neither strictly political nor totally distinct from entertainment. Indeed, the Internet provides a powerful mobilisation 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 through diverse conversation tools, such as forums, blogs, or even instant messaging. These informal exchanges about social issues have become a focus for a number of international observers (5) because of their political consequences. (6) For example, Internet exchanges play an important role in the new models of agenda setting, (7) and the authorities have been obliged to at least pretend that they take public opinion into account. (8) Consequently, the question of popular deliberation has become an important factor in China, and 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 merely window-dressing for top-down policies. Nevertheless, researchers have already underlined some specificities of popular participation in China, which in some regards can hardly be called deliberation anymore. (10)


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.
In fact, years of development in Western countries has proved that the Internet offers a very diverse environment that, far from fulfilling old democratic dreams, leads to new questions on the issue of public discussion. As Peter Dahlgren argues, the Internet offers a "myriad of communicative spaces" that are both distinct and interlaced. Considering such questions as digital divide, commercialisation, and the fact that users are still dependent on their socio-cultural background, these spaces are not always perfect for deliberation. Are Internet users really better informed? Are they willing to confront 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 at least one of the interlocutors tries to produce a change in the opinion of the other, by means of impersonal propositions," and "it requires that each of the interlocutors uses the faculty allowing detachment from the singular and the immediate to reach the general and the durable, that is to say reason." 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 they believe that they share some interests in common, despite their respective social allegiances (what Boltanski calls distanciation). They need to accept contradiction and to be able to articulate arguments to make their point understood by other participants. This ideal may not exist anywhere on the global Internet, but it serves as a point of reference to assess popular participation on the Internet.

I argue that average Internet users do not promote the theoretical model of deliberation, if defined as a rationalised 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 to elaborating 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 take place. The users were asked about their use of these services, their opinions of the rules for 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 how representative they are. A large part of Internet users’ activity is in fact not visible to the public. For instance, it is impossible to reach the majority of 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 cannot settle for online content, but should instead focus on the users themselves and their motivations. Some interesting surveys provide information on Internet users’ “value orientations.” For example, more than 80 percent of Chinese Internet users approve of Internet control. These figures are useful to obtain a big picture of the Internet population, but they combine 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 among smaller groups of users.

During fieldwork in Beijing in 2006-2007 for a Ph.D. research project, 50 persons between 18 and 40, both men and women, were interviewed. All use the Internet for personal purposes at least one hour per day. Their profiles are randomly diversified in terms of profession, income, and residential district 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 Chinese statistics, as the emergence of the Internet phenomenon still largely concerns the very specific category of urban, young, educated Chinese people. Considering the huge differences 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 claim of representativity is illusory in qualitative research. This approach sheds more light on passive users who are seldom included in Internet inquiries. The results are inevitably different from interviews of active users, whose patterns of communication logically include more involvement in the public space. One should not be surprised to find more political apathy in this sample than in some Internet forums, and this angle will inevitably affect 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 interviewees’ personal opinions about online discussions, I opted to use the word “social issues” in my questions. Social issues potentially cover parochial questions such as neighbourhood disputes as well as large economic or social problems such as education policy reform. I thought this would be broad enough to allow interviewees to react on topics that have some general dimensions, without troubling them with so-called “sensitive” topics.

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

> I read comments only if it really interests me, if it particularly attracts my attention, like a few years ago in Harbin, more than 20 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 left and he went crazy, so he took children to his place, and cut off their limbs. Then one of them was smarter, he managed to escape, and the case was reported, but by that time there were already 20 children dead at least.

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 with pornography, coarseness, and verbal and visual violence. It is not a place for children because it is “very yellow, very violent,” as a middle-school student said last January when she was interviewed for a CCTV broadcast. There certainly is space for scandal on the Chinese Internet. Some scandals are of a moral nature, dealing with cases of animal cruelty, such as the famous story of a woman crushing the head of a kitten with her high heels. She subsequently became the victim of a manhunt online and offline. Other cases underline class struggle, such as the “BMW case,” in which a mass conflict developed after peasants damaged a luxury car. Of course, the most violent reac-

19. XYH, piano teacher, 27.
tions 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 no 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, however, Internet users have specific reactions toward this phenomenon, 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.

**Collective need for regulation**

As an example of the difficulty of finding the right tone for discussions, let us read a few sentences from a forum written immediately after a celebrity named Sun Haiying 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 society, which is understandable and deserves compassion. But one cannot 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 vocabulary concerning compassion, understanding, and tolerance on the other side is interesting. Obviously it is difficult for this person to deal with his own feelings and express his opinions respectfully. He acknowledges the necessity of mutual tolerance, whatever the intensity of the feelings, and his own degree of disagreement, for the sake of maintaining peace on the Internet. 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 on sustainability of the forums and blogs make a minimum level of tolerance compulsory. Users are therefore forced to learn the techniques of co-existence, and to measure the subtle limits within which one does not harm the other’s ego. This means 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 cannot prevent others from expressing themselves. They can use their own words to express their agreement or disagreement, and find the right balance between emotion and rationalisation. They can also comment on the tone of the forum (or other platform) and give some advice to other users about appropriate online behaviour.

A rather unified normative lexical field emerges in the interviews. In one case after another, 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 “civilisation.”

> 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 release 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 release, this is not the right way to do it, you need to be more civilised.

> - So what should you do, then?

> - You can express your own opinion on this topic, but you should not make personal or physical attacks on 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. criticises the “quality” of the people who make

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personal attacks, which is somewhat contradictory. It is common for interviewees to classify people into good and bad, and to commit the very behaviour they are criticising, that is to say, attacking people instead of criticising their ideas.

The most obvious particularity of the Internet as a publication space is that it is shared between many users who do not necessarily share the same opinions and behaviours. According to the interviewees, one should try not to influence 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 (pinhe), think over questions from this kind of correct attitude (zhengque de taida), one should not be too violent. Because when you publish it online, 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 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 others and to society in general. Notably, her rather vague description of “society” and “the Web” not only refers to other people and their feelings, but also to the nature of the space, 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 multiple meanings and refers to a vast quantity of codes that cover both the forms of expression and the content of conversations. Indeed, the majority of Internet users agree that some things should not be mentioned online, especially political content. They often remind each other of this, and even exclude some participants from discussions when they exhibit inappropriate opinions or behaviours. 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 collective rule-setting, which is supposed to play a regulatory role and set the framework for peaceful collective exchanges, is also likely to result in the collective censorship of some people’s opinions. It is only by watching the Web discussions that 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 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 organise arguments. Unfortunately, the fast pace 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 that particular skills are required to gain legitimacy and be heard on the Web, what Gaxie calls “competence.” (28)

I don’t like disseminating too much information in sites that are too public, like discussion forums.
- Why?
- 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 discussion, 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 users feel more comfortable with opinion sharing. At the same time, the mainstream platforms are increasingly reserved for those who feel confident enough to express themselves. This favours the emergence of educated people and

27. G. J., 32, clerk in a car-decorating company.
29. Z.L., marketing, 25.
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 who are considered more objective or impartial gain more authority in public forums:

And one can read comments from different kinds of people, including 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’s a lot. The contents are far more numerous than those of traditional media. (30)

This extract shows that comments are not written with total anonymity. The status of the participants is important, and other users pay attention to their opinions according to their level of recognition. In this 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 thing 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 differentiate between witnesses and experts. Both are presented as more “objective” than average people in the sense that they have more information on a case, and they better understand 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 imply “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 present 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 organised and subjectively arranged by the users, instinctively and collectively, so that some participants have more weight in the discussion, and their ideas are put at the top of the agenda.

This collaborative process is done within the limits of the spaces’ written rules and under the guidance of moderators, who are responsible for 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 users of the explicit and implicit rules of the space.

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 Western Web platforms. Indeed, the Chinese moderators’ role is quite ambiguous, as they also perform work necessary to guarantee that the space remains peaceful and allows good exchanges:

About that, I have set up my own forum before, I mean my personal forum, so I have some understanding 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 specialised, like how to avoid this situation, how to find methods of control when I want to control something. (34)

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

*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, criticising 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 should 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 virtual conflicts, and it promotes a politically and socially secure atmosphere in which they can participate. Thanks to the filtering process, they feel that whatever they write will be published only if it is checked and positively assessed 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, long the privilege of propaganda organs, is being vested in individuals. The resulting profusion of content, including some that is poorly “civilised,” creates new kinds of anxieties for Internet users, and they respond by 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 feeling shocked by 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. These rules 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 maintaining a kind of collective surveillance or even censorship. Individuals prove to be subjects as well as objects of the norms. (36) These norms should therefore be observed at the grassroots level of individuals themselves, in their practices and representations. The way individuals legitimate norms casts light on some aspects of social order, and thereby clarifies the conditions and particularities of popular participation online.

Internet users promote values such as politeness, objectivity, and moderation, that seem to echo the Western discursive tradition. This should not lead one to conclude the existence of deliberation, but only 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 strict controls on critical expression, the tone of 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 stressed in online discussions in China cast light on Internet users’ position toward the function of public expression. The very fact that one can discuss the rules and assess the existence of censorship proves that the Internet is already taken for granted as a popular expression platform. All the normative vocabulary used by Internet users to qualify legitimate online behaviour can be analysed 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 the stress of daily life, and very few spaces allow people to express their feelings, so Internet violence is 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 cannot be expressed openly elsewhere. One of the young women quoted above expressed the view that indignation (gongfen) (39) is her main motive for participation on the Chinese Web. Another interviewee has the same feeling:

*MOST PEOPLE WANT TO RELIEVE THEMSELVES OF WHAT DIS SATISIFIES THEM IN SOCIETY, OR WHAT DISSATISIFIES THEM IN...

35. F.RT, student, 21.
37. See this video, which 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 “*WTF*”, “Tibet WAS, IS, and ALWAYS WILL BE a part of China,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9QKZ34cJo&feature=related (consulted 06/06/2008).
39. X.YH, piano teacher, 27.
other matters. Most of them just want to let off steam (faxie). (40)

All in all, it seems that the Internet has rapidly been adopted by its users as a good space for popular expression, and they find it is worth coping with the drawbacks so that the population can use this opportunity for expression. Here is one typical example of a conclusion that 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 and 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 mobilisation. For example, a specific category of young Internet users is called “angry youth” (fen qing) because of their extreme positions online. (42) Some describe them as disrespectful and violent, whereas others say that these young people are just desperately trying to express their critical vision of current society, which is becoming too competitive and amoral. Many scandals that aroused widespread impulsive reactions undoubtedly exposed 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 an 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 online exchanges of opinions and the rules that organise them.

The anger of these youths challenges the tolerance of other Internet users and reveals the limits of online expression in their minds. Freedom of speech is acknowledged conditionally.

Debate and polemic

First of all, according to most interviewees, freedom of speech supposes that one should not contradict another’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 analysing if things should be 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 negating their own freedom. Moreover, he feels that contradicting someone on the Internet is equivalent to judging the quality of the person and his or her speech. As a result, this respect for other people, for free online expression, and the principle of tolerance, lead this person to reject contradictory debate and choose the “exit” option.

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

Of course, one cannot underestimate the role of censorship in the rejection of debate. Having a different opinion involves taking risk at some point. The interviewees express the need to be careful and to speak in the terms allowed by the authorities, that is to say, in accordance with the tone of official media such as 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 cannot 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 criticise, when you are in China you cannot 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 achieve a 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 colours of harmony. This is Chinese culture, you cannot change it, everybody is like that. (46)
“Chinese culture” serves as a justification for what is 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 of “singing 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 legitimise the situation reflects the personal appropriation of the national rules by this user. It also reflects his position towards the foreign interviewer, in front of whom it is important not to criticise 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. Here the Internet is not considered a place for public discussion, but rather as a tool for displaying the most modern image of the country. 

In that context, being exposed to diverse opinions most often leads the interviewees to avoid getting involved in 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 behaviour. The interviewees were often asked what their reaction would be if they came across an opinion on the Web with which they completely disagreed. Their answers almost invariably contained pejorative terms such as “polemic,” “argue,” and “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 contradicting their opinions and remaining indifferent to them. It is thus associated with a list of other values, some of which are based in 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, my behaviour or my character will not be like that.

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

One must have an amenable behaviour (suihe), this way 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 situation, 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 it this way, and then they do it 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 to settle issues. You cannot expect Chinese to settle issues the same way as Westerners do, it would confuse things. If I start to argue violently on some question with people, I don’t believe that after that we could still solve issues together and in peace. So I think it is understandable that when I read on the Internet that Chinese should take inspiration from Western thinking, I don’t agree. We need to learn some things, but in other matters we need to respect ourselves; the context is different.

It seems it is impossible to resolve a disagreement in the eyes of P.Y. Discussion lacks the power to either settle questions or overcome them; it can only underline discord and make it even more insuperable. The reference to a commercial situation implies that tradition is mainly referenced 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 Chinese tradition.

Chinese Internet users mobilise 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. Rather, it is a space available to position one’s testimony, record one’s diary, or release some emotion, separately from other users. In this context, what dialogue is possible between different Internet users?

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.


49. P.Y., manager in a medicine company, 25.
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 Cardon (50) details the sometimes arbitrary criteria that determine legitimate participation in that kind of public space. Apart from the basic requirements of politeness and level of language, the persons in charge of selection preferred listeners who were able to highlight a certain level of general interest through their personal testimony. They needed to find a general dimension in their particular situation that could hold the interest of society at large. This was the condition that qualified them for participation in the radio broadcast.

In my sample, this pattern of detachment is almost never referred to, and is even sometimes criticised. An individual belongs to a group and he is representative of that group, be it regional, professional, national, by income or something else. Paradoxically, social belonging is taken for granted by the interviewees, and they do not consider the idea that an individual’s various labels or allegiances (sexual, educational, professional, and so on) could be contradictory. When they describe their social allegiances, the interviewees portray a highly stereotyped and segmented society. For example, M.N. tells us that the population’s mentality depends on geographic origins. 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 their 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 the 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 others. There is no common point between people from different social categories, so they cannot speak for one another, let alone criticise one another’s opinion. Apparently, different people’s interests are necessarily antagonistic:

“I think perhaps someone can represent an association, that is to say, he can represent a fixed group, for instance a profession, perhaps some people can represent workers, some people can represent farmers, some people can represent white collar workers, but the person who speaks on behalf of white collar workers’ interests definitely cannot represent citizens in the lowest social stratum, this is certain. Then let’s say the lowest level of 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 lifestyle, different educational levels, we don’t understand things the same way, so it is difficult to say we are going to comment. 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, each citizen’s opinion can only be considered corporatist, selfish, and partial. Every category is seen as having contradictory points of view, and the multiple faces of individuals resulting from their personal backgrounds are neglected. It seems difficult to imagine that these people could reach a common position together.

The tolerance valued in this model is that of diversity, not pluralism. In the ideal type of pluralism, several points of view can emerge in one single group and be shared for discussion. 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 other hand, 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 possible means of dealing with divergent opinions.

Given this description of society, a “public opinion” that is the result of exchanges of views between different social categories seems unlikely to emerge. The word “public opinion” is used by the interviewees, however, with a quite un-

53. X.YH., piano teacher, 27.
expected 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 kitten 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 of 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 organised reaction, but only a massive, arbitrary, and excessive personal harassment that results in the punishment of a particular person and her entourage. The general dimension of public opinion is replaced by a singular example that has almost no impact on the rest of the society. Here public opinion represents a large number of people who have the same opinion, and who have always had that opinion, even without any exchange of views whatsoever. In other words, this kind of massive mobilisation 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 definitely does not fit the ideal of deliberation, but some ideas are still exchanged, and they can spread very quickly without necessarily being discussed online.

Expression on the Chinese Internet is not removed from social and political constraints. It is inextricably embedded in Chinese society. Nevertheless the rules are debated, commented on, and re-appropriated by 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 Chinese Internet users, such as diversity, tolerance, and free opinion, have specific meanings in their minds that must be understood in the light of local context. Now popular expression is legitimate within limits that are constantly evolving, even though most often devoted to personal testimony and anonymous psychological release. For many Internet users, online expression is more an individual opportunity to release emotion than a collective tool to debate divergent opinions. •

55. L.JJ., tourism, 23.