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Guobin Yang (ed.), *China's Contested Internet*,
Copenhagen, NIAS Press, 2015, 310 pp.

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Book reviews

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China's Contested Internet,
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China's *Contested Internet* is a collective book composed of 10 chapters, seven of which were previously published in a special issue of *China Information* in July 2014. With case studies ranging from around 2006 to 2013, this collection of papers covers some of the most salient phenomena that have characterised the Chinese Internet over the last decade: e-government initiatives such as public consultation on the health system reform project (Steven J. Balla), and municipal microblogs (Jesper Schlaeger and Min Jiang); the rise of online culture and subcultures, for example in literature (Thomas Chen), and amongst Internet developers (Silvia Lindtner), the backpacking upper middle class (Ning Zhang), and self-labelled "losers" (*diaosi* 屌丝) (Marcella Szablewicz); moral controversies about Chineseness and race (Robeson Taj Frazier and Lin Zhang); the rise of "Big V" opinion leaders (Marina Svensson); and the censorship of a *Southern Weekly* editorial in 2013 (Sally Xiaojin Chen).

Guobin Yang chose to group the chapters into "pre-weibo" and "post-weibo" contributions, but the main value of the book does not lie in a discussion of *weibo* as a potential game-changer in the Chinese Internet landscape. True, the period between 2009 and 2013 – when *weibo* was at its height – could be considered a turning point in the history of the Chinese Internet. But there is more than the rise of *weibo* behind it, and it was more gradual than a change of platforms would suggest. With hundreds of millions of Internet users (now about 50% of the population), the Chinese online population has become increasingly pluralistic, hence "disorderly" and contentious. Even more significantly, this period coincides with a specific moment in Chinese Internet politics. In 2010, a *White paper on the Internet in China* kicked off a period of more assertive cyberpolicy and public opinion censorship, more sophisticated influence and propaganda techniques, as well as several waves of repression against prominent opinion leaders.

Against this background, this group of papers samples an exciting new generation of research on the Internet in China that focuses less on critical content and mobilisation repertoires and instead digs deeper (as highlighted by Yang) into the fabric of the Internet and Internet uses, with original methods and fieldwork.

First, it nuances the idea that the Internet has empowered the underprivileged by documenting digital divides, with attention to social status and

gender. For example, Balla notes that 80% of those posting comments on the government-sponsored consultation platform concerning health system reform in 2008 were male; that 3/4 were in cities; and that they were older and more educated than the average Internet user. He also notes that female commentators tended to post more substantial and more positive comments. Looking at various surveys and through several fieldwork studies with NGOs and migrant workers, Svensson also provides an important insight into the ability of different categories of Internet users to "have a voice" on Sina Weibo. She notes that Sina Weibo users are mostly from coastal regions, with rural and migrant users being largely underrepresented and tending to favour other platforms such as QQ or Tencent Weibo. Although women users seem to catch up with men, they are still a minority of the Big Vs on Weibo. These factors clearly affect the communication strategies of NGOs, which can use Weibo for advocacy or information dissemination, but clearly not to reach out to underprivileged communities on the ground.

Secondly, this group of chapters highlights how online features are the results of complex interactions between a variety of actors with diverse, sometimes conflicting motivations and agendas. This is highlighted by Sally Chen's interviews of Southern Media Group staff and participants in the street protest. In their study of the microblog of a municipal government, Schlaeger and Jiang show that the local propaganda department, the local police department, agencies in charge of public policies, and political decision-makers all pursue different goals when they convey a message via microblogging. Conceptualised as "beta institutions" because of their experimental nature, municipal microblogs differ greatly from one municipality and from one service to the other, precisely because the teams are working without precise objectives and have had to develop their own guidelines, contradicting the stereotype of a highly centralised, top-down propaganda machinery.

This underlines yet another important takeout of this collection: it sheds light on the labour performed behind online platforms and even behind censorship. Thomas Chen, looking at the various online and offline versions of the novel *Such is this World@sars.come* (Ruyan @sars.come 如焉@sars.come), shows the painstaking work of Internet users who compared different versions of the novel to detect traces of censorship. In a kind of *mise en abyme*, the novel itself relates how labour-intensive online censorship is, as puns and pictures make sensitive speech difficult to detect automatically. Lindtner's long-term embeddedness in the Shanghai "maker" community also reflects on the "making" of the Chinese Internet from the angle of startups and developers. She looks into the origins and ethics of this particular group, whose ambition is to "create in China" by taking advantage of foreign venture capital, of the CCP's political agenda to create a "better quality" workforce, and of a relatively flexible intellectual property environment in China. One might wonder, then, what kind of industrial model, and therefore what kind of labour will be engendered by these ventures as they grow in size.

The role played by developers is all the more important as the state itself is relying on commercial platforms to communicate and provide public services. Schlaeger and Jiang highlight that the municipality they study has no

access or control on the data generated by its official microblog account, which effectively prevents them from devising a better, more predictive e-government strategy. This asymmetry of power over data in favour of corporations could, of course, be curbed by regulation.

The book also shows the variety and evolution of imaginaries and cybercultures across communities and time. There is a stark contrast between the optimism of the upper middle-class backpackers of 2006 described by Zhang, some of whom had taken to promoting long-term, gradual social change, and the disillusioned "losers" studied in 2012 by Szablewicz. The latter's ambivalent attitudes towards social norms and promises – rejecting and endorsing them at the same time – clearly show that they don't believe in the promises of modernisation anymore, nor do they believe in their capacity to change things, and instead turn to humour and self-mockery. This kind of fatalism answers, also, to Balla's conclusions that subjective motivations are better predictors of online participation than socio-economic factors, and more particularly by a perception that comments can actually bear fruit. The *diaosi* phenomenon described here may highlight the link between subjective motivations for (non)participation and socio-economic positions.

Finally, as underlined by Yang, the book helps grasp the "subtleties of state power" (p. 4) and the "manifestations of the multiple ways of doing politics and being political" (p. 14). Lindtner draws on G. Barmé's concept of a "parasitic" ⁽¹⁾ relationship to show how her respondents take advantage of the system, depend on it, and in many ways transform it. Thomas Chen proposes the term "alter-production" to show how literary production works around censorship constraints and generates many original literary forms. Szablewicz relies on R. Williams' "structures of feelings," ⁽²⁾ and on the literature on desire (V. Fong, ⁽³⁾ L. Hoffman, ⁽⁴⁾ A. Kipnis ⁽⁵⁾), to explain the ambivalences and limited radical potential of the *diaosi* meme. This makes the title of the book, "China's contested Internet," a little misaligned with the content. Indeed, the term "contested" resonates with the title of the very famous book *Access Contested*, ⁽⁶⁾ which in fact points at very different kinds of contention on the Internet, such as the emergence of concern over Internet governance.

Nevertheless, the chapters in this book are in general very well researched and well connected to theoretical literature in political science, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies among others. They skilfully articulate online and offline contexts, with sources collected through a variety of methods ranging from participant observation to in-depth interviews, to surveys and qualitative and quantitative content analysis. They constitute an excellent introduction to the Chinese Internet itself, as well as to research methods and theories on the Chinese Internet, and may be of great interest in a teaching context.

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1. Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999, p. xiv.
2. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 132.
3. Vanessa Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 98.
4. Lisa M. Hoffman, *Patriotic Professionalism in Urban China: Fostering Talent*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2010.
5. Andrew B. Kipnis, *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011.
6. Ronald Deibert, John Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski, and Jonathan Zittrain (eds), *Access Contested: Security, Identity and Resistance in Asian Cyberspace*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2012.

Bill Hayton,
The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia,
New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 2014, 298 pp.

SÉBASTIEN COLIN

Published in 2014, Bill Hayton's work on the South China Sea stands out from much of the recent literature on this maritime space, on at least two counts. The first is that this is a single-author monograph, which deserves credit for providing a historical overview of the South China Sea from prehistoric times to the early 2010s and for analysing the territorial disputes and power rivalries to which it has given rise. In doing so, the work calls upon a considerable body of academic literature, as well as interviews the author conducted with various actors, newspaper articles, and a number of reports and working papers. The book thus offers a broad synthesis that sets it apart from the numerous, albeit very interesting, collective works that have been published in recent years, many of which are the proceedings of conferences organised on a regular basis throughout the region. ⁽¹⁾ Whilst scholars working on the South China Sea will find in Hayton's book some worthwhile information and some useful and even highly valuable references, they will find little that is surprising in its overall approach. This is not a fundamental problem, however, as in my view this book is one of the first essential works for anyone (student, journalist, or diplomat) who wishes to gain insight, here quite comprehensive, into the hot spot that is the South China Sea today.

The second particular feature of *The South China Sea* lies in its largely journalistic style of writing. This is only natural, given that Hayton has been working for several years as a reporter for *BBC News*. His style takes the form of long digressions on certain actors or personalities directly or indirectly involved in the dispute, or by descriptions of key episodes in what has been a troubled history, to say the least, of this maritime space. The various narrative devices employed by the author contribute to constructing a detailed history of actions undertaken by the different players: for example, the completion of China's annexation of the Paracel Islands in January 1974, something directly experienced by Gerald Kosh, an American soldier who was on a South-Vietnamese ship at the time (pp. 72-78), or the way in which the small American oil company Crestone managed to obtain an oil concession from China in waters claimed by Vietnam (pp. 123-127), or Cambodia's opposition to any mention of the question of the South China Sea in the joint communiqué issued at the meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers in Phnom Penh in 2012 (pp. 192-200). As a researcher with a careful eye for historical detail, I think these accounts have their own importance, although some descriptions, such as those concerning Wu Shicun, president of the China National Institute for South China Sea Studies (p. 248), do not

1. See, for example, Tran Truong Thuy and Le Thuy Trang (eds), *Power, Law, and Maritime Order in the South China Sea*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2015, 378 pp.