

Wired China: Digital Media and Online Culture

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Digital technologies play an increasingly central role in China's socio-cultural, political, and economic sphere. There are, however, certain characteristics to the Chinese cyberspace that significantly differ from other regional contexts, such as distinct social media platforms, particular online genres, but also specific mechanisms of censorship, and (counter-)discursive strategies. The online workshop¹ focused on a wide range of cybercultural practices, embedding them in a broader socio-political and historical context. The eight panels covered topics such as cyberculture and -politics, webfiction, digitalization processes in the art sphere, and the role of social media and popular culture.

The first panel, „Web Fiction and Community“, included talks on online fiction in China and Hong Kong, for example on entanglements of internet fiction with Hong Kong history and identity, or popular Chinese online genres such as *xuanhuan* and *zhaidou*. QIAN CUI (Zurich) argued that by imagining alternative worlds inspired by traditional Chinese philosophy, *xuanhuan* fiction achieves to fill an ideological void at the heart of China's younger generations. The panel showed the existence of heterogenous reading cultures that cater to the tastes of different socio-economic strata in the Sinosphere, leading to community building and identification processes.

The second panel further elaborated on relationships between cyberspace and Chinese politics by focussing, for example, on time-travel *chuanyue* and alternative history *jikong lishi* genres. They both challenge official historiography by suggesting alternative, collectively created historical narratives. JESSICA IMBACH (Zurich) focussed on Liu Cixin's debut novel *China 2185* to argue that the emergence of digital technologies in the

1980s enabled a new understanding of the role of technology in China, one that saw China's technological modernity no longer as a repetition of the West. LORENZO ANDOLFATTO (Heidelberg/Fribourg) talked about grassroots resistance in times of „a changing internet in a harshening political environment“ by analyzing *hechaji* („tea-drinking“) websites that were active in 2011. He focused on the relation between subjectivity and narrative and also asked, in line with Caroline Levine's understanding of a correspondence between literary and political forms², about the politics of *hechaji* narratives.

The third panel was dedicated to digital technologies in the Chinese art world and the cultural Sinosphere. Its focus was less on digital art in the narrow sense, than on the entanglements of art production, exhibition practices, and promotion strategies with digital technologies. The author, HELEN HESS (Zurich), presented a paper on recent digitalisation processes in the Malaysian art world triggered by repeated movement control orders (MCO) in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. Focussing on Malaysian Chinese women artists and curators, she investigated whether digitalization in the art world has the means to transcend borders and/or marginalisation based on gender, ethnicity, and class.

The fourth panel, „Digital Society“, included talks on psychological counselling services on WeChat, the Social Credit System, and the digital silk road. For instance, as MARYLAURE BLOCH (Geneva) pointed out, the Social Credit System is still in its pilot stage, meaning that, so far, only local projects have been realized. The policy has not yet been applied on the national level. Bloch focused on local digital solutions, the significance of meritocracy in Chinese culture, and, finally, emphasized that the international perception of the Social Credit System mirrors fears of the power of digital technologies.

The fifth panel, „Memes and Virality“, in-

¹The workshop received financial support from the Graduate Campus (University of Zurich), VAUZ (Association of Junior Researchers at the University of Zurich), and the Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program Asia and Europe (University of Zurich).

²Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Course Book. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

cluded topics like online *xiangpi* poetry, but also censorship and counterstrategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. ELVIN MENG (Chicago) talked about texts going viral in China despite being censored. He introduced different kinds of censorship, as well as different strategies deployed to bypass it, such as calligraphy versions, emoji versions, or translations of the same texts. Meng raised the question whether these mutations of texts compromise their originality, which provokes inquiries into the authenticity of adaptations, and, as a consequence, the issue of fake news. Referring to the WHO's recent assessments of the current situation, Meng stressed that we're not only fighting a pandemic, but also an „infodemic“.

In his keynote lecture on digital nationalism in China, FLORIAN SCHNEIDER (Leiden) covered topics such as Chinese cybernationalism, global Coronavirus nationalism, and the relation between popular nationalism and state-led nationalism. He emphasized that it is not possible to draw a clear line between the elites and the masses, due to the existence of a diverse range of nationalist actors beyond the nation-state. He pointed out that rather than being a top-down phenomenon, Chinese state nationalism intermeshes with popular nationalist discourses.

JENS DAMM (Tübingen/Paris), Schneider's discussant, stressed that when talking about different forms of digital Chinese nationalism, the differences between Mainland China and Taiwan, or Hong Kong, should be taken into account as well. Damm pointed to the importance of thinking about wired practices beyond China proper.

The panel on „Social Media and Popular Culture“ included topics such as online music culture and TV serial productions. RUXIN JIA (Heidelberg/Venice) focused on a popular TV series called *Women in Beijing* and the phenomenon of cross-platform digital media branding of red lipstick. She pointed out that this specific cross-platform collaboration involves various agents, such as content producers, actresses, digital news, cosmetic brands, but also Weibo users.

The seventh panel, „New Media / New Voices“, covered papers on influencer culture, podcasts, and AI poetry. FAN YANG (Am-

sterdam) talked about feminist podcasts in China, pointing out that in theory, podcast production is available to anyone, since the software is easy to use and the hardware affordable. Nevertheless, most podcasters in China belong to a „cultural elite“, because the hosts are „anticipated to possess both cultural and social resources“. Yang, furthermore, argued that Feminist podcasts are usually more in-depth and rational, and usually not as commercialized as, for example, „Weibo feminism“. JOANNA KRENZ (Poznań) compared AI poetry generators, both in Chinese and English. She claimed that due to the randomness of the outcome, it is not possible to make a comparative cross-cultural or cross-linguistic analysis of AI-generated poems. However, according to Krenz, it is possible to „close read“ and compare the source codes that produce these poems.

The speakers of the eighth panel addressed topics such as re-territorialization, environmentalism, and image-text relations. ZOE GOLDSTEIN (New York) proposed a reading of Chinese cyberpunk fiction from an ecocritical point of view. Talking about the role of electronic waste (e-waste) and the notion of a „dirty cyberspace“, Goldstein pointed out that datacenters have the same amounts of emissions as the airline industry. Furthermore, certain areas in China, such as Guiyu in Guangdong province, have suffered from severe environmental damage caused by e-waste. And it is mostly migrant workers, who are affected by environmental destruction. WAN-CHUN HUANG (New York) talked about the relation between text and image in *danmu* videos. *Danmu* allows the spectatorship to express their thoughts and feelings about the video and directly interact with the medium. The viewers' reactions appear on the surface of the video, and the more comments there are, the „louder“ the viewership's presence gets, as Huang put it. These „loud“ reactions form clusters, or „bullets“ as the Chinese term *danmu* suggests, that are no longer recognizable as text. This leads to a blurring of the distinction between text and image. Huang, consequently, argued that *danmu* should be referred to as „image-text“.

According to JUSTYNA JAGUSCIK's (Zurich) closing remarks, inquiries into voice

and visibility in the digital world, access and agency, and, finally, distinctions and stratification of digital China, were central throughout this workshop. The participants' contributions significantly demonstrated that, on the one hand, digital media and online culture lead to increasing national and transnational exchange, but on the other, they also reinforce inequalities. The notion of „wired China“ has proven to be a productive concept to tackle these phenomena, while at the same time critically reflecting on the varying national and transnational wired relations and the role of dominant and marginalized voices within the cyber Sinosphere.

Conference overview:

Panel 1: Web Fiction and Community

Moderator: Justyna Jaguscik

Helena Wu (Zurich): Writing (Web Fiction) in Invisible Ink. Fictionalizing the Present and Historicizing the Future

Cui Qian (Zurich): Reimagining Tianxia in the Digital Fictional Space

Jun Sujie (Zurich): Reading and Writing Boys' Love (BL) Farming Fiction

Zhang Jiahua (Edinburgh): „Domestic Fights“ (zhaidou) Fiction. A Feminist Reading of Online Middle-class Culture

Panel 2: Cyberculture/Cyberpolitics

Moderator: Justyna Jaguscik

Gwennaël Gaffric (Lyon): The Rise and Fall of Cyber Time-travel Fiction

Jessica Imbach (Zurich): The Digital Brain in Cyberpunk Fiction

Lorenzo Andolfatto (Heidelberg): Semantics of Tea-drinking: Shaping Citizen Subjectivity in Contemporary China

Liu Jun (Copenhagen): Multimedia Censorship in Chinese Social Media

Panel 3: Digital Art

Moderator: Qian Cui

Kim Jiyun (Seoul): The Posthuman in Lu Yang's Post-internet Video Art

Tan Diyi (Zurich): Art and Dialogues in the Times of the Covid-19 Epidemic. Interviews

and Reflection on the Outreach Projects in Guangzhou

Helen Hess (Zurich): Art without Borders? Sino-Malaysian Art Spaces in the Age of Digital Culture

Daniela Zhang (Bratislava): Contemporary Art and Artists on WeChat

Panel 4: Digital Society

Moderator: Lena Kaufmann

Rao Yichen (Hong Kong) / Xie Jieyi (Canberra): Becoming Digital Middle Class by Virtual Island-hopping. Gaming Capital in China's Animal Crossing Fever amidst COVID-19 Outbreak

Barclay Bram Shoemaker (Oxford): Getting to Know Yourself. How WeChat Is Changing the Understanding of Mental Health

Marylaure Bloch (Geneva): The Social Credit System in China: Imagined Future and Engineered Values

Marianna Levtoy (Zurich): Digital Silk Road: Chinese Generation 5.0. Takes Lead in the Industrialisation 4.0

Panel 5: Memes and Virality

Moderator: Jessica Imbach

Paula Teodorescu (Bucharest): The 2000s Xi-angpi Poetry Site „Memetized“ on Social Media. Avant-garde „Replicators“ from Weixin and their Relevance Today

Elvin Meng (Chicago): Viral Text: Translation, Censorship, Community

Lai Yaqian (Beijing): Against Oblivion. The Visual Communication of The Whistle-giver

Keynote Lecture

Florian Schneider (LIAS, SAS, Leiden University): China's Digital Nationalism. Online Challenges to Sovereignty in a Time of Crisis

Respondent: Jens Damm (ERCCT, Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen; EURICS, Paris)

Panel 6: Social Media and Popular Culture

Moderator: Qian Cui

Liu Chang (Heidelberg): Recounting the Early Development of China's Online Music Culture

Jia Ruxin (Heidelberg/Venice): Cross-platform Collaboration of Digital Media and the Making of Women in Beijing's Lipstick Hype

Panel 7: New Media / New Voices

Moderator: Helen Hess

Rui Kunze (Erlangen): Cooking Authenticity. The Vlogger Li Ziqi and China's Influencer Culture

Yang Fan (Amsterdam): The Ecology of Feminist Podcasts in Mainland China

Joanna Krenz (Poznań): „If Recently the Art of Language Text is a Natural Compatriot“ (Xiao Bing). AI Poetry in a Comparative Perspective

Panel 8: Rewiring Genre

Moderator: Jessica Imbach

Yang Renren (Vancouver): Genre-fiction Generator, the De-Territorial Program(mer), and Tangjia sanshao's Fantasy of Re-territorialization

Zoe Goldstein (New York): Renewable Resistance: Chinese Cyberpunk Fiction and the Afterlives of our Digital Things

Huang Wanchun (New York): Danmu Visuality. The Temporal-spatial Tension of Cross-platform Spectatorship

Justyna Jaguscik (Chinese Studies, University of Zurich): Closing Note and Discussion

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