Microcensorship in China

Controlling the narrative or "letting a hundred flowers bloom"?

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Abstract

This thesis looks at government censorship of Chinese social media, with a focus on the especially vibrant medium of micro-blogs – weibo 微博 in Chinese. It looks in detail at what kind of content is more likely to be censored, and how effective that censorship is. The approach is to conceptualise the Chinese online environment and the state-user interaction. Using these findings a hypothesis is then formulated, which suggests that the main focus of censorship of social media in China is on pre-emptive measures, directed against the organisation of social collective action online and offline. On the whole, the conclusion is that an online/offline dichotomy is too simple to describe the Chinese online environment. This hypothesis is then tried and proven valid by the method of a case study, where deleted posts from Sina Weibo collected on the database WeiboScope Search are analysed.

Key words: China, social media, weibo, censorship, WeiboScope Search, protest

Word count: 9145

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1   Introduction

The choice of the subject of this thesis sprung from my previous interest in censorship and social media in non-democratic liberal systems – as well as my will to capitalise on previous studies in Mandarin Chinese. Social media is a complex environment, and in China made all the more so due to the heavy presence of state censorship and public opinion channelling. I believe that the knowledge of Chinese social media and e-governance initiatives by the state is vital for an understanding of Chinese society as it navigates the many obstacles that it will surely come up against in the decades to come. I hope that this study will contribute to that knowledge.

1.1   The Chinese micro blog

Chinese micro blogs (微博 *weibo* in Chinese), with inspiration drawn from the Western micro blog portal Twitter, is a form of social media where users share content or post messages with a maximum length of 186 characters per message – hence the 'micro' format, as opposed to conventional blogs which have no such restrictions. As with Twitter, this allows for a fast rate of reading, posting, and dissemination of information.

A difference from micro blog platforms in other countries is that the Chinese writing system – based on logograms instead of an alphabet - allows for a much larger amount of information to be communicated in such a small space. A difference from for example the international Twitter is that on most weibo services it is possible to comment directly on specific posts instead of just having a forwarding function. More than that, the user can also attach pictures and videos directly to posts, or send private messages to users in a chat function similar to instant messenger services, or create groups for specific interests.

The two largest social media platform providers, QQ's Tencent Weibo[1] and Sina Weibo[2] - the object of study for this thesis – boast between 200 to 250 million users each, about a tenth of whom are active on a daily basis. In terms of data generated, users of either service make a collective amount of 100 million posts a day, equalling the total amount of daily posting on Twitter, a service encompassing the entire West. Of these websites statistical surveys have found that users who frequent Sina Weibo generally are more highly educated than those who frequent the somewhat bigger QQ Tencent Weibo Site. (Lee 2012) In

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[1] http://t.qq.com/
[2] http://www.weibo.com/

comparison to Twitter, and certainly because of the language divide, Weibo has only recently caught the attention of Western scholars.

Since the establishment of the internet in China it has been subject to censorship and control by the Chinese state. Expansion of infrastructural capacities have been matched with increased structural control over the flow of information online. However, with the miraculous ascent in popularity of social media in China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has recognized the change that has been brought upon the power structure of Chinese society, and calls have been made for officials to pay greater attention to online based public opinion. At the same time, the elaborate system of censorship that encompasses all other aspects of media and information distribution in Chinese society has now been expanded to include social media as well.

1.2   Research question and demarcation

What are then the fundamental principles guiding the censorship policies of social media in China today? In this thesis I will argue that it is evident that instead of controlling the narrative as it does with traditional media, when dealing with censorship of social media the Chinese government has shifted its focus to mainly prevent large scale incidents such as demonstrations or riots.

Due to the limitations connected to my primary sources, I have decided that my main focus of analysis is to deduce the primary focus of the first phase of censorship measures on Sina Weibo. This leads to the following research question:

What kind of social media content primarily tends to be censored in China?

Contrary to the international Twitter, in China there is no absolute monopoly in the micro-blogging sphere, and Sina Weibo has many contenders. However, for the purpose of this thesis, I will use Sina Weibo as the object of my study. This is firstly due to my own familiarity with that particular service provider. Secondly, to my knowledge it is the only site that has databases set up for the collection of censored posts, making it an extremely convenient object of study. I will use the database provided by the WeiboScope Search project set up by Hong Kong University. Thirdly, Sina Weibo has by far the biggest active user body of all social media providers in China, only rivalled by Tencent Weibo.

1.3   Recent studies on censorship

Three recent studies have provided valuable insight into the possible raison d'être of the internet censorship policy of the Chinese government. A Carnegie Mellon University study conducted by David Bamman, Brendan O'Connor, and Noah A. Smith analysed the orientation of active deletion of messages by censorship administrators by making a statistical analysis of 56 million messages containing words deemed to be politically sensitive and cross-referencing findings with 11 million Chinese-language messages from Twitter. The study found a set of politically sensitive terms whose presence in a message leads to anomalously higher deletion rates. The study further noted that censorship measures on Sina Weibo correlates highly with spikes in media coverage of sensitive stories. (Bamman et al 2012)

A second study, *How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression*, conducted by Gary King at Harvard University (King et al 2012) found that, contrary to current understandings, posts with content critical of the state and its leaders are not more likely to be censored. Rather, the focus of censorship is oriented towards attempting to forestall collective social activities (群体性事件) tied to circumstances in the present or that may occur in the future. To this end, content that represent, reinforce or spur social mobilization is deleted. More importantly, even content that is positive of the government but still might give rise to social mobilization is deleted. While the study examined censorship of discussion boards and not micro blogs, it is likely that the reasoning concerning censorship of discussion board content follows the same guidelines as that of micro blogs.

The Carnegie Mellon study found that of 1.3 million Sina Weibo messages containing sensitive keywords checked, 212,583 messages or 16 % had been deleted within a month of collection. This correlates with the Harvard University study's find of a rate of deletion of a similar quantity. The study also found that the rate of message deletion was not uniform throughout China; rather messages originating from regions with more sensitive relations with the Chinese state, such as Tibet, Qinghai or Xinjiang, deletion rates were as high as 50 %. These finding might relate to the fact that protests are more likely to occur in provinces where the support for Party rule is the lowest. In the bigger cities like Beijing and Shanghai, deletion rates were between 12 to 16 %. (Bamman et al 2012)

The fact that deletion rates of sensitive messages is higher in some provinces can be attributed to the fact that outlying provinces have lower population numbers and density than those of Eastern China, making content easier to control. It also implies a stricter policy of information control of local Public Security Bureaus, due to tense relations with local minority groups. However, when looked at with the findings of the Harvard Study in mind, it is possible to argue that message deletion in these provinces is done to forestall social mobilization in regions that are especially sensitive to such activities.

A third study by MIT Sloan School of Management attempted a 'reverse engineering' project of the Weibo deletion process[3]. The study found evidence of what appears to be the practice of large scale pre-emptive deletions during days leading up to events that in the view of the Chinese state could cause social instability – here, correlating with the findings of the Carnegie Mellon University study regarding spikes in deletions during periods of sensitive reports in traditional media (Tschang 2012). For example censors started deleting posts related to famous dissident-artist Ai Weiwei several days before his arrest in Beijing in April 2012. This indicates a pre-emptive take on public opinion channelling. The study also found that posting politically sensitive information after 11 P.M on a Friday would result in a greatly decreased rate of deletion – probably because most of censorship measures are undertaken by a human workforce as opposed to automatic systems, pointing to the manpower restrictions of the government's censorship project (Ibid.).

All three studies found that any mention of the censorship administrators themselves, or of the censorship system as a whole, would always lead to deletion of the message and related responses. (Bamman et al 2012) (King et al 2012) (Tschang 2012)

In summary, the answers provided by the three studies described above imply that government censorship of online social media is a hands-on process, organised and directly supervised by the central authorities. Furthermore, in combination the findings suggest that the censorship apparatus is largely concerned with preventing large scale incidents. Posts that are critical of the government are not specifically targeted, as could be thought when one views the censorship policies undertaken for traditional media.

I will use the findings of these three studies, as well as my background research regarding internet and social media in China in general, to formulate a hypothesis below.

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[3]A summary of the study is available here: www.niemanlab.org/2012/05/reverse-engineering-chinese-censorship-when-and-why-are-controversial-tweets-deleted: accessed 2013-03-16)

2   Hypothesis

2.1   State and users

Before describing the censorship of Sina Weibo specifically, I will first attempt to conceptualize the relationship between the state and user in the Chinese online environment.

By the year 2013 the number of Chinese citizens using the internet is reported at a total of 564 million, about 42% of the total population of 1.3 billion. In contrast, internet usage in Scandinavian countries is often around 90%, and in the US around 70-75%.[4] A total of 1 billion – 76% of the population – Chinese own a cell phone, of which 420 million are smart phones and used to connect to the internet (CNNIC 2013). I would like to underline that the role of the spread of mobile phones in China cannot be understated. Here, citizens have previously had few channels of communication, and the platform that the cell phone provides is almost revolutionary.

In terms of regional differences, the internet coverage somewhat mirrors already existing socio-economic divides. In general, most websites are hosted from Beijing, Guangdong or Shanghai, the three main metropolis and economic powerhouses of China. Out of over 2,680,000 websites, only 972 are hosted in Tibet. Rural internet usage in rural areas is much lower on average than in urban areas – 23.7% versus 59.1%. Internet communities dealing with regional issues are more tightly controlled in the periphery than in the central cities as well.(Ibid.)

The Chinese internet can be argued despite regulations to be a very vibrant place, in some ways proving false earlier expectation on the limitation of submitting internet to political oversight. The fact that English language sites such as Facebook, Twitter and search engines such as Google are blocked has proved to be of only minor consequence as they have been replaced by domestic alternatives which often cater better to Chinese tastes while allowing a degree of political oversight by censorship authorities.

There has been misgivings regarding an online medium restricted by censorship affecting economic development. However, as has been pointed out by associate Professor Marina Svensson of Lund University, among the emerging economic power houses of the world, China is far ahead when it comes to internet penetration despite its authoritarian political system. In comparison to China's

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[4]Global statistics on internet penetration can be found at http://www.itu.int

40%, India measures just 10.2% of the population, Thailand 27.4%, and Indonesia 22.4%. When it comes to North African countries affected by the Arab spring, where social media was seen as an important catalyst in social organisation, the figures are even lower on average: Tunisia 36.3%, Egypt 26.4%, Syria 19.8%, and Libya 5.9%. (Svensson 2012:32)

This all argues for the fact that the Chinese government is not as afraid of online and offline public opinion as it might seem. Rather, it actively promotes the expansion of internet infrastructure, despite the supposed threat to one Party rule. Tim Hardy likens the Party's treatment of internet based public opinion with The Hundred Flowers Campaign of the 1950s[5] (Hardy 2011:22). Government think tanks and policy organisations seem to agree: according to the "30th Statistical report on Internet development in China" published by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC 2013), the Chinese internet and social media services are today extremely vibrant. Perhaps due to the restrictive atmosphere of official newspapers, there is evidence that public opinion has increasingly been shifted onto online discussion boards and other social media.

The Chinese government has tried to catch up with this change. The importance of the expansion of internet based mediums as a method of communication has not bypassed the Party, and steps have been taken to conquer this new channel of communication for public diplomacy purposes. The study of the online sphere is taken seriously by the Chinese government. A report published by the Chinese Academy of Governance, "2012 Government Micro blog Evaluation Report 2012 年中国政务微博客评估报告" (CAG 2012), details the changing approach of the state when dealing with online based public opinion, urging better education of cadres in the handling of social media. Among other things, it states that cadres need to achieve a better understanding of how Chinese society has changed through the expansion of internet access among Chinese citizens. With the objective of better handling of public opinion, as of the end of 2012 a total of 176,700 government departments, institutes, ministries and officials have opened Weibo accounts. However, it has been noted that officials with Weibo accounts tend to be lower level cadres (Ibid.).

Not all censorship measures by the Chinese government have this soft approach however. More generally known in the West is the Chinese internet censorship project, codenamed *Project Golden Shield*, which was started in 1998 and passed inspection by the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) in 2006. One of the project's components deals with the blocking of foreign sites, in the West better known by its nickname *the Great Firewall of China*. Project Golden Shield's methods of control include IP blocking, DNS filtering and redirection, URL filtering, packet filtering and connection resets between users and specific websites.[6] (Zattrain and Edelman 2003) In addition, it is believed that more than

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[5]The Hundred Flowers Campaign (百花运动) was a period between February 1956 to August 1957 where the CCP encouraged its citizens to openly express their opinions of the communist regime. After a slow start, the movement gained momentum, and before long open critique and condemnation of the communist system and the CCP was heard. In retribution, Mao Zedong launched the Anti-rightist Campaign (反右运动) in 1957 to deal with those who had been too harsh in their critique.

30.000 state employees are tasked with policing the Chinese internet (Hardy 2011:22)

For users within China, there are ways of evading these measures by using secure connections or virtual private networks (VPN). However, a user of the Chinese internet is unlikely to encounter the Great Firewall during daily usage of domestic sites. The application of the Great Firewall of China, coupled with the cultural isolation and size of the country itself, has made the Chinese internet a thing apart from the rest of the global cyberspace. The average Chinese internet user rarely venture outside of the domestic internet domain, nicknamed the *Chinternet* by pundits.

This structure of control over the internet by the government is enhanced by a system of self-censorship whereby censorship of sensitive material is mostly done by the service providers themselves. Hosts are required to terminate sites that contain illegal material, and domestic social media sites delete sensitive material themselves, saving the central government from a huge drain of resources, while somewhat putting a restraint on the implementability of internet censorship policies (Hardy 2011:27) (Svensson 2012:38). The posts analysed in the case study later have been deleted by Sina's in-house administrators.

However, at this point I would like to present another perspective of the state-user relation in the Chinese online environment. As I mentioned above, the expansion of internet infrastructure in China was directly initiated by massive government investment. It would make little sense for the Chinese government to build this kind of infrastructure just to have to devote enormous resources to its restriction. In fact, many researchers agree that the Chinese government sponsors online debate to some extent. In the article *Flatter world and thicker walls? Blogs, censorship and civic discourse in China*, Rebecca McKinnon argues that:

> The Chinese government has also pursued a nationwide e-government strategy: using online mechanisms for citizen feedback, complaints and suggestions, etc. as part of a strategy to bolster regime legitimacy (Kluver 2005a). Forums, chat rooms and blogs also serve as a "safety valve" by allowing enough room for a sufficiently wide range of subjects that people can let off steam about government corruption or incompetence, thus giving people more things to do with their frustrations before considering taking their gripes to the streets.
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> (McKinnon 2007:33)

That is to say, in Chinese society there exists a certain code of conduct for citizens to criticize the government and its policies, and this code of conduct exists online well. The nature of online censorship in China is not categorically oppressive, and online political discourse might have many legitimate functions sanctioned by the government.

For instance, one of the positive changes that online media has brought with it is a greater level of governance. The Chinese state has historically been troubled

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[6]A more detailed account of the technical aspects of the Great Firewall is available here: http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/filtering/china/appendix-tech.html, accessed 2013-04-10

with poor feed-back in central-local communication, more specifically in the gathering of information about the plights of the poorest strata of society and the corrupt dealings of local governments. With the decentralisation that three decades of economic reform has brought, this problem is as acute as ever. The expansion of online social media has somewhat mitigated this problem. (McKinnon 2007)

Furthermore, if one follows the reports on Chinese internet censorship in Western media, it would be easy to get the sense that Chinese internet users and the Chinese government are engaged in an endless tug-of-war where individual freedom of speech is in the balance. However, just as internet users anywhere else Chinese internet users are not mainly concerned with democratic discourse, but with entertainment. According to the latest statistical report by CNNIC, a slight majority of 54,7% of users use micro blogs, only 48,8% of all internet users use social networking sites, and only 26,5% use discussion boards and forums (CNNIC 2013). It can be argued that only a fraction of these users actually engage in political discussions. Of these an even smaller fraction of individuals will be engaged in discourse that is openly critical of the government; and as I have explained, there is a great distinction between critique levelled at the central government and critique levelled at local governments.

In short, according to the available research data the average Chinese internet user is not very much concerned with the prevalence of government control over the internet, if they are even aware of it in the first place. Furthermore, and perhaps harder to understand for a Westerner, they might even condone such control and restriction of their personal freedom for the greater good of online and offline society. According to the survey *Most Chinese Say They Approve of Government Internet Control* conducted by Deborah Fallows of Pew Internet & American Life Project in 2008, 85% of respondents stated that they had a positive stance towards government management and control of the internet (Fallows 2008).

One example of this is the newly introduced "Weibo Contract"[7], which, at least theoretically, now binds users to refrain from activities such as personal attacks, scams, sexual harassment, as well as subversion against the state. The nature of the contract should serve as a good example of the *raison d'être* and fundamental principles of social media censorship, as well as Chinese internet regulation as a whole. Just as the previous study on censorship presented above suggests, internet regulation is not wholly concentrated on stifling critique of the Party. This point I have already expounded upon in chapter 1.3 "Recent research on censorship". With a general outline of the interplay between the internet user and the state in place, I will now move on to the subject of social media and censorship.

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[7]The contract is available here, Mandarin version: http://service.account.weibo.com/roles/gongyue

2.2   Social media and censorship

On Sina Weibo, censorship is conducted through search term blocks (where specific words are blocked temporarily or permanently, obstructing users' ability to find posts with characters containing these words) and through active deletions of posts, as well as account deletions and suspensions. Seven hundred administrators tasked with censorship activities work for Sina Weibo alone. (Ramzy 2011)

In times of specific need, such as political scandals, Chinese domestic media has reported on an increase in the number of administrators employed by Sina for censorship purposes. For example, such an increase was announced after the website was temporarily shut down for clean-up purposes after the Bo Xilai scandal broke in March 2012[8] (Chao 2012). In the earnings report for the second quarter of 2012, Sina reported that its expenses totalled €56 million, an increase from the figure of €48 million reported in the same quarter in 2011. The report stated that the increase was primarily the cause of personnel-related expenses and infrastructure-related expenses, and were mostly related to the weibo.com domain. (Sina 2012) This suggests that the burden of censorship is placed on the service providers themselves, and that the Communist Party values the protection against social instability higher than the restriction such measures might have on economic growth.

Despite censorship measures, it is apparent that at the current date micro blogs can still act as an important medium for spreading information about mass incidents, and in the organisation of collective social action. Micro-blogging has in China, just as in the rest of the world, blurred the boundary between consumer and producer of media. With the advent of cheap camera equipped hand-held devices and widespread 3G internet access, users can quickly create and spread news. China is world famous for its ambitious censorship project of traditional media, placing at number 173 in the 2013 ranking of the Press Freedom Index (PFI) by the Reporters Without Borders (2013). The introduction of micro-blogging onto the Chinese internet has potentially changed the face of censorship in China, by requiring censors to police the content of over 200 million producers of information, as opposed to traditional media where control of publication is relatively easy in comparison.

This is evident in the elaborate tactics used by users who are aware of the presence of censorship on weibo. To evade censorship, users sometimes resort to for example using pinyin (the official system of transcribing Chinese characters into the Latin alphabet), by writing in English or any other language, by writing in abbreviations, the use of slang, creating new words or using different characters with the same pronunciation as the intended word, or by employing a word in a

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[8]Bo Xilai was the member of the Politburo and Party Secretary of Chongqing, a large city in central China, until his downfall in the first months of 2012. The offical motive was his implication in his wife's murder of English businessman Neil Heywood. However speculations of his ousting being due to political maneuvering were and still are numerous.

new context[9] (Svensson 2012). The use of videos and pictures in spreading messages is a common tactic among Chinese internet users, since these bypass automatic censorship systems, and must be deleted manually by administrators. In the case of mass protests, they are an especially effective form of communication.

During the summer of 2012, social media proved essential to the *Not in My Backyard* (NIMBY) demonstrations in Shifang, Sichuan province, and Qidong close to Shanghai. Here, social media based public opinion was evidently an effective medium for spreading information and for organisers to gain support. Even more importantly, despite a relatively fast censorship response the events were observed and commented on by millions of micro blog users all across China, making social media the 'window to the world' for the protesters. According to Qian Gang of the University of Hong Kong's *China Media Project*, between 1 and 4 July "there were around 5.25 million posts on Sina Weibo containing the word 'Shifang'. Of these about 400,000 included images and close to 10,000 included video." (Qian 2012)

In the case of Shifang and Qidong, local leaders had approved the construction of industries which gave rise to environmental concerns among local citizens. Since local media are controlled by the local government, and cross-regional reporting of investigative journalists is becoming increasingly restricted by central government policies (Nieman Lab 2011), internet based social media proved to be one of a few effective mediums available for people to spread the message of their grievances to a wider audience.

The result of the at times violent protests – broadcasted on micro blogs – was the cessation of construction of the polluting factories. A week after the Qidong riots – which in traditional media were given little attention after the initial protests most likely due to a government ban on reporting – senior members of Hu Jintao's leadership group encouraged cadres to "listen closely to the masses" (Xinhua 2012). The message was for local leaders to first try to mediate through dialogue instead of relying on brute force to end demonstrations (Caixin 2012). This can be seen as a call for increased attention to be paid to public opinion; social media based public opinion included.

As mentioned above, it should be noted that on the whole these protests follow accepted methods of social discourse between the Party and the People. At the moment these mass incidents take the form of demonstrations against local governments, and demonstrators and social media users frequently appeal to the central government for help. The central government is seen as a benefactor and mediator between the People and corrupt local governments. As such, at this time these demonstrations are not "democracy demonstrations", even though some calls for democratization might be heard. As proposed by MacKinnon, the same is true for social media activities online (MacKinnon 2007:33). Furthermore, as mentioned above censorship in China matters little to the vast majority of Chinese

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[9] One example is the word "harmony", 和谐 hexie in Chinese. Originaly state jargon, it has been employed by internet users to indicate censorship. When a post has been censored it has been harmonised. Incidentally the pronounciation is a homophone of the word for river crab 河蟹, which is also used for the same purpose. Another example is the expression "to be invited for tea", 被喝茶 bei he cha in chinese. This means that someone has been taken in for questioning by the police, often related to the fate of online activists.

citizens. Most do not even realize that censorship is taking place, and might only be faced by this fact in cases of mass incidents. Even then it seems like the blame is placed on the local government instead of the central government, which is largely perceived to be acting for the good of the nation and people. (Hardy 2011:23)

However, it is apparent that the central government is becoming increasingly aware and concerned about the implication the increased exposure and attention mass incidents get thanks to social media. An example is the scandal surrounding Feng Jianmei, a woman who was forced to abort her 7 months pregnancy and had the dead foetus placed on the bed beside her. This picture was uploaded to social media, and received widespread attention for several weeks, sparking a debate about the one-child policy and the Family Planning Commission, as well as giving attention to similar cases all over the country. In the wake of this scandal, officials were implored not to 'implement policies too zealously' in Party newspapers, and to be mindful of how their actions might be interpreted if magnified by the social media lens (BBC 2012).

Another example is the anger on social media after the devastating floods in Beijing and northern China during the summer rains of 2012, killing at least 79 people and causing the collateral damage of at least 10 billion Yuan worth. Critique of the lack of preparedness of the local government reached high levels on social media, despite efforts by traditional media to direct public opinion towards a focus on rescue efforts and reconstruction programmes (BBC 2012).

Perhaps the most potent example is the social mobilisation surrounding the Wenzhou train crash in July 2011. Two trains collided near Wenzhou close to Shanghai, killing 40 people and leaving over 192 injured (Chen 2011). Traditional media kept silent, but weibo was filled with videos of what looked like a state initiated cover up, where the wreck were buried by bull dozers before they had been examined by a technical team. The reactions online inadvertently sanctioned further investigative reports by traditional media, and has lead to a potential death sentence for the once almighty Minister of Railways Liu Zhijun (Li 2013).

By presenting these examples I wish to alert the reader to a fact that may be true for all political systems characterised by restricted access to information; the threat that social media poses to Party legitimacy if not handled correctly cannot be stressed enough. I argue that, while expansion of social media is indeed in the interest of the CCP, just as it cannot restrict it totally it can ill afford to let it develop freely. Censorship is but one – although vital – part of e-governance strategies developed by the Chinese state. Indeed, according to the report made by CNNIC, it has become increasingly vital for provincial cadres to understand that covering up local problems might cause greater damage to the prestige and legitimacy of the Party as a whole, when and if these problems reach a wider audience through social media. The increase in government Weibo accounts speaks for the fact that the government is taking more and more seriously the role that social media has in China (CNNIC 2013).

It should be noted that social media in China has – just as studies of Western Twitter suggest – not become a loud speaker for the politically dispossessed. In

general the existing power structures of Chinese society remain intact online. Those who already have political or social clout are more likely to be heard online (Svensson 2013). The examples listed above all prove this, as they only gained popular momentum after getting picked up by a famous user who could act as a popularising proponent. Preliminarily I would suggest that the same should then be true for the focus of censorship on weibo; posts made by and originating from famous users should be more often targeted than posts made by average users.

In this chapter I have argued that, while the censorship activities by Chinese internet regulators are among the most draconian in the world, it is a mistake to think that all regulators do is to monitor and delete content sensitive to the Chinese Communist Party and the government. Firstly, the advent and spread of the internet and social media in China has enabled the Chinese government to overcome the historic problem of poor feedback of local grievances to the centre because of too many layers in between. Here, just as with the internet in China as a whole, social media provides the central government with a channel of information regarding activities by grass root cadres that could upset the social balance. However, the delicate balance of censorship that this requires is a constant challenge of allowing users to report on local problems while making sure that these posts do not lead to collective social action that could potentially spark revolts on a wider scale.

2.3   Formulation of hypothesis

The combined results of the studies conducted by Western researchers and my background research regarding Chinese internet censorship measures and relationship between user and state suggests that the main function of censorship measures by the Chinese government is to prevent large scale incidents, regardless if these incidents are for or against the CCP.

Censorship is also done with an eye on events reported in traditional media that might have political consequences, and on future events that might have a mobilising effect on the populace. There is a higher deletion rate in peripheral provinces with a historically bad relation with the Party. Also, any mention of the censorship administrators or the censorship system will be deleted.

For this purpose I believe that looking for *mass incident potential* (henceforth MIP) in posts is critical to understanding censorship guidelines. I have defined MIP as content that openly encourage protest, that speak about historic examples of protest, that refer to ongoing protest or future protests connected to certain dates. I have also included references to ongoing discussions that might have the potential of inspiring social protest.

To test the validity of this hypothesis, I will now conduct a case study of deleted social media posts.

3   Case Study

3.1   Method

3.1.1   WeiboScope Search

Since the launch of Sina Weibo in 2009, researchers at the University of Hong Kong had very limited understanding of the impact of social media in China economically, politically, and socially. At the same time it was obvious that some form of change had taken place in Chinese society during the end of the 2000s. For example, the kind of discussion that followed the ousting of Bo Xilai in 2012 did not happen after the ousting of the Shanghai Party Secretary Chen Liangyu in 2006. The study of Chinese social media was far behind that of the more accessible Western counterparts, and therefore a whole slew of projects were started. At the time, very little was known about the underlying principles of censorship of social media by the Chinese state. The result was the construction of a database of deleted posts on Sina Weibo, named *WeiboScope Search*[10] (from now on called WBS for convenience). WBS was set up by the Journalism and Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong. By the beginning of 2012 researchers started to share their findings with the public, and at the same time the database was also made available online (Chiu 2012).

The database is relatively simple in construction. It consists of a "crawling software" that scans the time lines of 5000 users with more than 100.000 fans several times a day, storing posts that have been deleted since the last scan. As such, the database does not take into account the postings of less active and less popular users. However, I still believe that studying the deleted posts made by influential users is valid and can provide results that can be generalised. I would argue that censors pay extra attention to posts made by active and popular users, since their impact on public opinion is proportional to their fan base. I would also argue that any form of social organisation can only happen if it catches the attention of key users – here again due to the socio-economic structures remaining intact online.

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[10]The database is available here: http://research.jmsc.hku.hk/social/search.py/sinaweibo/

It has been pointed out that the database provides inaccurate results in regards to the actual time of deletion of posts (Nieman Lab 2012). The program does not capture the time of deletion, but rather the first time a message has been spotted as missing by the software. I have taken this into consideration when constructing my case study, not placing as heavy emphasis on the exact time of the day a post has been deleted.

The public version of WBS lists the last 500 deleted posts in order of original date of posting, followed by the time it was discovered as missing. Therefore any case study using the public version of WBS has to be conducted with a very hands-on approach, the researcher making sure that the database is checked regularly for new developments. Posts are presented in their entirety, as they would look on Sina Weibo, with the profile picture of the user visible, as well as any pictures the users have attached to their post. Only videos are not stored in the database, probably due to space and bandwidth restrictions.

Since deleted posts are presented in order of the date of original posting, on the public version it is possible that the researcher has no way of seeing posts that are found and deleted more than twenty four hours after their original posting date. However, posts that are deleted during the first wave of posting can be argued to be of the highest priority to censors, and therefore show the daily changes in censorship directives. While the search function of WBS is not available to the public due to the great strain this would put on the Centre's resources[11], this does not affect the prospects of this thesis. I have constructed the case study to take these facts into consideration.

It has not been possible for me to ascertain if the deleted posts recorded by WBS are all the posts by the selected users that have been deleted on Sina Weibo in total, or if the system has missed some of the activities of censors. However, if the database is indeed incomplete, my case study is still valid, since it would mean that the population studied is randomised instead of specifically selected (Esaiasson 2012:63). I would argue that a randomised selection of deleted posts between specific dates of sufficiently great numbers is still a desirable population for testing. However, since previous studies using WBS have gone forward with the assumption that the database provides an adequate overview of deleted posts (Tschang 2012), I have decided to do the same.

3.1.2 Construction of case study

The goal of this case study is to try the hypothesis that I have formulated above. The selected start date for the case study was 5 May 2013, the end of the Labour Day holiday in China. This date was selected due to the holiday's relationship to traditional leftist values in China, which I thought would play into the Bo Xilai scandal of spring 2012, where Mao-era reminiscences were a big part of the so

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[11]It is however possible to contact the Centre personally and ask for access to certain segments of the data. Time contraints for this thesis made this option unfeasible however.

called "Chongqing model"[12]. Also, the Bo Xilai case has gained increased attention lately due to rumours of an impending trial (Phillips 2013), fuelling online public opinion on the subject. The end date of the case study was 11 May 2013, a somewhat arbitrary date selected due to time constraints, but still sufficiently removed from the start date to make a valid analysis possible. As mentioned above, due to the construction of WBS and the limitation of only being able to see the last 500 deleted posts, I have decided that my main focus of analysis is to deduce the primary focus of the first phase of censorship measures on Sina Weibo.

Previous studies have focused on finding and constructing a comprehensive database of sensitive key words that might lead to deletion if present in a message (Bamman 2012 and King 2012). Since I wanted to have a more qualitative approach to my case study, I decided that the posts would be judged and classified on a holistic basis; this makes sense since Chinese internet users who are aware of the presence of censorship use cryptic language. Sensitive key words change over time, and trying to map them out for this short thesis would be too time consuming.

Therefore my approach was to read each post individually and then code it to a category related to its general content, rather than a specific key word present in the message. For example, a post that read "Do you object?!!! No I do not"[13] might seem like a very arbitrary deletion. However, when viewed with current events in mind, it was obvious that it was related to the rape and subsequent death by suicide of migrant worker Yuan Liya on 4 May (Kaiman 2013). It was therefore coded into the "Beijing protest" category. While this approach proved to be very time consuming, I believe it was the only way to make my analysis accurate enough.

I have read and analysed a total of 1858 deleted posts between the selected dates as shown on WBS. I have then coded these posts into categories, related to their content. Categories were created as the case study progressed, with a total of 29 categories. For the sake of inter-subjectivity I decided that the categories would be as general as possible, so that anyone who read a post would – hopefully – assign it to the same category as I did (Esaiasson 2012:24). For example, posts about political activists like Chen Guangcheng (陈光诚), his brother Chen Guangfu (陈光福), Ai Weiwei (艾未未), or other activists, have all been coded as "Activists", and posts regarding the private life of the highest leaders of China have all been coded as "Highest leaders". This is also related to the goal of my case study; I aim to prove that my hypothesis regarding the general guideline of censorship is true, not to map out specific key words.

My operationalisation of MIP has been by looking first at the tone of posts assigned to a category, and then cross referencing that category with current events. This operationalisation rests on the findings of the research presented in

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[12]Refers to the social and economic policies implemented during the tenure of Bo Xilai as Party Secretary in Chongqing, characterised by neo-leftist influences and the launching of "Red Culture", drawing parallells to social movements during the Cultural Revolution.
[13]有异议吗？！！！没有"

chapter 1.3 above; it requires the researcher to have intimate knowledge of modern Chinese history as well as ample time to scan both domestic and international media.

Assigning a post to a category would sometimes be very straight forward, and other times less so. Some posts touched on a variety of categories, and in these cases I had to use reason to assign the post to what I considered to be the most relevant category. For the sake of statistical comprehension I decided that posts could not be assigned to more than one category. Thereafter, to see if censorship efforts are influenced by offline events, I also cross checked these posts with events of that particular day that were present in the media and on social media. This proved to be vital to my case study, as it showed that censorship efforts are closely tied to daily events. Some events are not touched at all upon in the media, but feature heavily online, while others have a great presence online and in the media, but are not censored as heavily despite the critical tone the discussion might have of government policies.

3.2   Results and analysis

Below are the results of the case study (see Table 1). I have arranged the categories in alphabetic order for convenience. I have also calculated the overall frequency of a specific category in relation to the total amount of deleted posts, and I have grouped categories that are characterised by high MIP together at the top of the table, for clarity. Below I will explain the most important categories to the reader.

What stands out, but what I also expected, was the high rate of deleted posts on the high MIP subject of Bo Xilai – these posts account for a grand total of 21.5% (400). This category had, understandably, no coverage whatsoever in Chinese domestic media. These posts were in a large number not original posts, that is to say that very few users wrote the post themselves, but instead forwarded already existing posts that they found on the subject. A very large number also contained pictures or used cryptic language. It is interesting to note that even content that spoke negatively of Bo Xilai or the leftist ideology of the Chongqing model were deleted. What is also remarkable is the category's constant presence all through the case study. Only on the last day did the quantity measure below 30. This would speak for a censorship policy directing extra attention and giving higher priority to anything that could relate to the political scandal of last year.

Another interesting category are posts on the Mao Yushi controversy. Mao is a well known liberal economist who in 2011 published an article that was highly critical of Mao Zedong (Economist 2011). He quickly became the target of leftist supporters who accused him of being a traitor to China and to the Communist Party. On 4 May 2013 Mao Yushi had to cancel a speaking event in Changsha, Hunan, due to online remarks indicating that he had been harassed online and

offline, sparking debate between his supporters and left-wing Maoists (Bai 2013). Here it is important to point out that very few posts of ordinary users that are negative to the Mao Zedong legacy, or that are negative to the Reform and Opening up of Deng Xiaoping, are subject to speedy deletion. This category concerns online remarks made by already politically and socially powerful individuals. As such, this also proves that the power structures of online society mirrors those of Chinese society as a whole.

Table 1 – Deleted posts on Sina Weibo 5-11 May 2013

Category	5.05	5.06	5.07	5.08	5.09	5.10	5.11	TOTAL	% of TOTAL
Beijing Mall suicide					193	30	5	228	12.3%
Bo Xilai	94	34	30	52	38	136	16	400	21.5%
Corruption	17	26		8		1	2	54	2.9%
Diaoyu Dao				4	1		1	6	0.3%
Forced Demolition		1		3				4	0.2%
General anti-system	16	10	8	28	12	10	7	91	4.9%
General protest	3			1	18	16	6	44	2.4%
Mao Yushi contro.		23	99	15	4		8	149	8.0%
Minorities/Tibet/XJ	2	8		6	4	2		22	1.2%
NIMBY KM/CD/SH	1	12	102	31	3		12	161	8.7%
Police/state brutality		5	6	11	3	8	3	36	1.9%
Publicise property	9	2	1		6		2	20	1.1%
Tiananmen	1	2	2	4	10	4	1	24	1.3%
Activists	13	4		4	6	11	9	47	2.5%
Against Leftists				6		10		16	0.9%
Against rightists				8		8	11	27	1.5%
Censorship	15	2	4	17	6	13	11	68	3.7%
Disaster relief	6				1		3	10	0.5%
Falun Gong				4		1		5	0.3%
General environment		3		1				4	0.2%
Highest leaders	5	19	15	22	2	3	7	73	3.9%
Lao Gai				4				4	0.2%
Petition to WH				17			8	25	1.3%
Pornography	9	4				1	1	15	0.8%
Religious cadres			3	1	1			5	0.3%
Seven don't mention						126	68	194	10.4%
Xi Jinping	7	1		2	3	11	4	28	1.5%
Zhu Ling			15	29		5		49	2.6%
Other	8	11		6	4	9	11	49	2.6%
TOTAL	206	167	282	286	315	406	196	1858	100.0%

Both the "Bo Xilai" and "Mao Yushi scandal" categories deal with public opinion that could have a seditious and inflammatory effect on the population, and that might lead to a greater level of organisation among the groups involved. They may also be connected, since critics of Mao Yushi are often leftists in ideological leanings. Hence they often refer to Bo Xilai in their posts, directly or indirectly.

The "Beijing Mall Suicide" category has been briefly explained above. This category was subject to the third highest rate of deletion at 12.3% (228 posts) of the total. The deleted posts indicate that this incident came under censorship scrutiny due to the large crowd that gathered in the southern Beijing district of Fengtai, demanding that the police investigate the woman's fall from the fourth floor of a shopping mall. Rumours suggested that the girl had been raped, presumably by five local Communist Party members. Demonstrations in the capital is an extremely sensitive subject, and has high MIP. The incident was reported on in domestic media, and censorship measures indicate that the authorities wished to control the effect that the piece of news would have on online public opinion. The high rate of deletion on the first day at 193 posts indicate a concentrated effort by censors.

The "NIMBY KM/CD/SH" deals with posts that had content on the NIMBY demonstrations in the cities of Kunming, Chengdu, and Shanghai (BBC 2013). The first two demonstrations took place roughly on May 5-7, and the last one in Shanghai had just started to make a presence on WBS as the case study concluded on May 11. This category had a comparably high rate of deletion at 8.7% of total (161 posts), and was, as the Beijing Mall Suicide, subject to a concentrated effort of deletion. While I had expected the high rate of deletion of posts related to Bo Xilai, the presence of categories related to protests and popular movements provides much credibility to my hypothesis. Offline, the approach to the handling of demonstrations by the central government varies; some types of demonstrations lead to a change in policies or even concessions on the part of local or central governments. NIMBY protests especially is a case where local citizens have in the past successfully made their will heard. Therefore it is interesting to note that NIMBY protests receive roughly the same treatment by social media censors as more politically problematic protest such as the Beijing Mall Suicide. I would argue that this is due to the fear of the central government that local legitimate protests might spread to other places affected by similar problems, and that, if connected, they might create a much larger problem that has great ramifications for system stability. This is an echo of the Tian'anmen protests of 1989 – also a high MIP category for the same reason – of which the current censorship practices could be argued to have sprung from.

The "General anti-system" category were posts that were critical of the one-party system, pro democratic reform along Western lines, of the economic system of reforms, and with the "One country, two systems"-policy[14] towards Hong Kong. These kinds of posts all had the inherent quality of having varying degrees of MIP, since many called for people to "wake up" to what they saw as the reality of Chinese society. Posts coded as "Corruption" often called for a public drive to publicise the property of Party members, or for exposure of corruption. This is a hot topic in China, and despite having official sanction under the Xi-Li administration, online anti-corruption drives can often spread very quick, giving it a high MIP.

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[14]一国两制

In contrast, the "Zhu Ling" category, posts dealing with the thallium poisoning case of a Qinghua student in the 1990s, saw a comparably low rate of deletion (2.6% of total, or 49 posts), despite having a heavy presence on Sina Weibo, and despite the effect it had on government policies (Li 2013). This speaks mostly for the fact that this category had a lower priority for censors due to not having as great a potential for inciting protest as the other contemporary categories above; it is an isolated, though tragic, incident that is quite unique. It is possible however that a "clean up" phase is initiated later. This is somewhat indicated by the straggling five deleted posts on May 10. Further research using the search function of WBS would test the veracity of this hypothesis.

Posts dealing with an online drive to send petitions to President Barrack Obama through the White House website originally sprung from the Zhu Ling controversy, but quickly changed direction entirely. Some of the deleted posts called for the liberation of China by American troops,[15] or the international standardisation of bean curd jelly (豆腐脑) in its salty variety.[16] These posts were probably deleted mainly due to having sprung from the Zhu Ling case, and not for their actual content.

The "Against rightists" and "Against leftists" categories were posts that could not specifically be placed in the categories related to Bo Xilai or Mao Yushi, and that dealt with for instance the Deng Xiaoping legacy or the privatisation drive since the "Reform and opening up".[17] Posts in this category were not directly system critical, and they could portray the current system in both a positive and negative light. The same was true for posts relating to Xi Jinping – a lot of which had degrading or satirical content regarding the President or the "Chinese Dream",[18] the new political term coined by the Xi-Li administration. Also, posts with information on the highest leaders of the country and their private lives were dealt with in the same way. This could perhaps be due to the known attitude of the Chinese leadership regarding the wish to remain aloof from the masses. These categories were not designated as MIP categories, since they were perceived to be more part of public opinion channelling initiatives than attempts to forestall social protest.

Categories where MIP was hard to determine were "Activists", "Disaster Relief", "Falun Gong" and "Lao Gai(Labour camps)". In general, however, posts in these categories were not seditious, but rather were aimed at a small number of users using cryptic language. Posts on the same subjects with higher MIP were coded as "General anti-system".

The "Censorship" category were posts that dealt with the censorship system itself, and that detailed previous activity by users that had been subject to censorship. Connected to this is the "Seven don't mentions". A document from within the censorship administration, with seven topics that should be avoided by all party members in all official speeches and functions, had started to circulate

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[15]中国人民求解放！
[16]我们请求美国政府将豆腐脑的官方味道定位咸味，即使用料酒，生抽，木耳，香菇碎，黄花菜和鸡蛋制成的卤汁调味
[17]改革开放
[18]中国梦

on Sina Weibo some months ago. On May 10 He Bing, professor at the University of Political Science and Law in Beijing and a member of the CCP, argued against this policy. This led to his account being suspended, once more fuelling the debate online, as well as the rate of deletion. It is interesting to note that post in this category increased in general after heightened censorship efforts tied to other categories. This echoes the findings of both the Bamman and King study (Bamman 2012 and King 2012). The Censorship category has not been designated as a MIP category as such, due to the ambiguous attitude towards censorship of Chinese citizens presented above.

In total, posts with high MIP account for about 70% of all deleted posts. It must be pointed out that due to the construction of the database, it is possible that this rate gets lower as posts of other categories fill up the database. However, we can see here that the prevention of mass incidents is by far the primary objective of censorship efforts on Sina Weibo.

4   Conclusion

Through the case study I have proved the veracity of my hypothesis. The only thing I could not verify was the higher rate of deletions in China's periphery. However, this has already been sufficiently proved by previous studies.

In general, censorship of social media in China must be seen as part of a much bigger context. An online/offline dichotomy is too simplistic by far. Censorship is done with an eye on current events and how they might affect online public opinion. The greatest focus of censors is on preventing and obstructing the spread and organisation of large scale popular protest. This is different from government treatment of local protests. Protest serves as an indicator for the central government of local conditions; social media may also have this function. However the magnifying lens that it puts on events, and the influence it gives actors with an agenda differing from that of the central government, has caused the central government to focus on restricting the spread of posts with high mass incident potential. To this end, it is not remarkable that almost all posts subjected to speedy deletions are made by or have content relating to influential online or offline persona, and very few posts by ordinary citizens receive the same attention by censorship administrators.

This does not speak against the fact that the government is using social media to its own advantage. The interplay of state and user online is complex. It is characterised by a steady drama of cooperation and coercion, and is not so much a tug-of-war as a relationship of negotiation and compromise. State control of the internet is not necessarily seen as malevolent by Chinese citizens. The use of social media to break scandals and mobilising opinion against corrupt officials is a legitimate use of social media, and serves Party goals as long as it is kept within boundaries of control. Whenever possible, the Party does its best to steer online public opinion into a direction that benefits it the most. In general, primary censorship measures are influenced by a fear of another Tian'anmen incident, and not by a fear of losing ideological control.

As a closing remark, I would like to point to the subtitle of this thesis: "controlling the narrative or letting a hundred flowers bloom". I would say that the Party has done neither, or a bit of both. The Party has realised the need for a relatively free form of public opinion in China, and has encouraged its development. At the same time it has been loathe to let go of the reins completely. Instead of drawing parallels to the past, researchers of the Chinese internet should focus on understanding the new and fresh perspective of Chinese society that the internet and social media has created in China.

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