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# Inside and outside the Firewall

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A cultural analysis of Chinese students' Internet habits and the impact of location

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## **Abstract**

### Inside and Outside the Firewall: A Cultural Analysis of Chinese Students' Internet Habits and the Impact of Location

This thesis is a cultural analysis of Chinese students' Internet habits and how these are affected when they move abroad, in this case to Sweden. Fieldwork has been conducted in Shanghai and Sweden. The aim is to understand the Internet in everyday life with an emphasis on the local experience. The questions guiding the research are:

- How do students in Shanghai and Chinese students in Sweden use the Internet in their everyday lives?
- How does physical location influence the students' Internet behavior and the way they gather and view information?
- What are their thoughts on the Internet regulations in China and how are these affected by moving to Sweden?

The theoretical framework builds on the second generation of Internet research that places emphasis on the offline context and embeddedness. The theoretical framework furthermore draws on Foucault and his writings on power and surveillance as well as a discussion on discourse and digital literacy.

The research has revealed the effect that physical location has on Internet habits and how students perceive information. When the students move abroad they enter a new context where they are not only able to access more information but they also gain access to a new educational system and social networks that enable and encourage political discussions. In this process the students create a more critical thinking towards information gathering and start to carefully examine sources. For some of the students this changes the way they view the Internet regulations in China and they start to reject the regulations on a rights-based premise, rather than on a pragmatic level, which was previously the case.

Keywords: Chinese students; Abroad; Internet habits; Location; Routines; Digital Literacy; Discourse

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The MFS Scholarship Programme gives Swedish university students the opportunity to carry out fieldwork in low- and middle income countries, or more specifically in the countries included on the *DAC List of ODA Recipients*, in relation to their Bachelor's or Master's thesis.

Sida's main purpose with the MFS Scholarship Programme is to stimulate the students' interest in, as well as increasing their knowledge and understanding of development issues. The Minor Field Studies provide the students with practical experience of field work in developing settings. A further aim of Sida is to strengthen the cooperation between Swedish university departments and institutes and organisations in these countries.

The Department of Human Geography at Lund University is one of the departments that administer MFS Programme funds.

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Cecilia Andersson

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Background

In January 2013 Foreign affairs published two articles on the political state of affairs in China. The first was titled *The Life of the Party* and the second *Democratize or Die*. The articles discuss, as their titles suggest, China's political landscape and future. As I glance around the newspaper stand I notice that almost all magazines covering international news have a section on their front page dedicated to China and its political development. China has undergone rapid changes during the last three decades which include changes such as a shift from planned to market economy, fast economic growth, and rapid popularization of the new information and communication technologies (ICT:s.). These changes have brought about a rapid increase of Internet users which has created discussions on the Internet's potential to affect China's political future (Liu, 2011).

The societal and political impact of the Internet is a topic that has created a strong academic interest, not only in regards to China. The development, and spread, of the technology has been praised as well as criticized. Papacharissi (2010) notes that we have become accustomed to greeting the new, including new technology, via the discursive polarities of utopia and dystopia. In regards to political development and the Internet, the utopian view envisions the infrastructure of the Internet giving individual citizens a new platform for freedom of expression and enabling a political shift towards democratization. The dystopian outlook however believes that rather than giving individuals more freedom the Internet reinforces authoritarian rule and governmental power (Kalathil &Boas, 2003). China is home to the largest number of Internet users in the world with an Internet environment that is heavily restricted by the government (Zheng, 2008), making its development particularly interesting in this regard.

### 1.1 Aim

The aim of this thesis is to understand how Chinese university students who are living in the context of this ongoing discussion on the Internet and political development *use* and *perceive* the Internet. Internet research has by some scholars been divided into first and second generation where the first generation viewed the Internet and cyberspace as a placeless place whereas the second generation gives credit to the importance of offline context and how the technology is

embedded in everyday life (Miller & Slater, 2000; Bakardjieva, 2011). This thesis is situated within the second generation of Internet research that acknowledges the importance of offline context. In fact, this research not only acknowledges the importance of offline context but aims at exploring how it shapes usage and perception. My aim is to investigate the students' Internet habits as well as their thoughts on the restrictions imposed on the Internet in China and how these are affected by moving away from China, more specifically to Sweden. Sweden and China have very different sets of laws where the Internet in China is more restricted than that in Sweden (Freedom House, 2012). By conducting fieldwork in both sites I hope to shed light on how local context affects usage and perception.

Liu (2011) notes that there is a lack of research on Chinese youth, specifically on a "micro" level that analyses the experience of individual users (p.2). With this thesis I wish to add to the body of work focused on "micro" level analysis on China with an emphasis on youth and their lived experiences.

## **1.2 Research questions**

This research is an analysis of how Chinese university students use and perceive the Internet with emphasis on offline context. The basis for the thesis is ten weeks of fieldwork in Shanghai and two months of fieldwork in the south of Sweden. All of my research participants are Chinese university students, the once interviewed in Sweden are Chinese students who moved to Sweden for their university studies.

The main research questions are:

- How do students in Shanghai and Chinese students in Sweden (Lund and Malmö) use the Internet in their everyday lives?
- How does physical location influence the students' Internet behavior and the way they gather and view information?
- What are their thoughts on the Internet regulations in China and how are these affected by moving to Sweden?

### **1.3 Structure of the thesis**

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. In the Introduction chapter the aim and research questions guiding the study are outlined. Chapter 2 gives a thorough description of the fieldwork process as well as reflections thereupon. The theoretical discussion underpinning the thesis will be provided in Chapter 3. The analysis and empirical findings have been divided into three chapters: *The Internet in Everyday life* (chapter 4), *Physical Location and Internet habits* (chapter 5), and *The Internet and surveillance* (chapter 6). Chapter 7 outlines the conclusions and provides a discussion on applicability.



## Chapter 2: Fieldwork process, methods and material

### 2.1 Overview of the fieldwork process

The material for this study is the outcome of two periods of fieldwork; ten weeks in Shanghai during the winter of 2009/2010 and two months in Sweden during the spring of 2013. In October 2009, as a bachelor student in development studies, I was granted a scholarship by the department of Human Geography at Lund University to go to China and conduct fieldwork. The fieldwork from Shanghai was originally intended to become a thesis on its own but due to unforeseen events that did not happen at the time. As I prepared to write my thesis in cultural analysis I saw an opportunity to incorporate the data from Shanghai. The original aim of the project, as stated in my scholarship application, took off from Amartya Sen's notion of development as freedom:

Expansion of freedom is viewed, in this approach, both as the primary end and as the principal means of development. Development consists of the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency. The removal of substantial unfreedoms...is constitutive of development. ( Sen 1999: xii)

From this view I argued that freedom of information and freedom of expression can be seen as components of personal development and development at large, in this context manifested through the Internet. I choose Shanghai as my fieldwork site due to the high level of Internet users and also in order to be able to find students who speak English, eliminating a need for a translator. The aim of the study was twofold: to investigate what the students use the Internet for and how they view the Internet in regards to self-expression and accumulating information. The central research questions were:

- With what purpose do they use the Internet?
- How does it affect their gathering of information and ability for self-expression?
- What possibilities and negative effects do they believe the Internet will bring about for them?
- How do they perceive the restrictions imposed on the Internet?

The research questions are thus similar but have been slightly modified.

Development studies and cultural analysis share an emphasis on qualitative methods and the methods used in this thesis are predominantly qualitative. The qualitative methods that have been used are field notes, observations, and interviews. The one quantitative method that has been used is a survey.

Davies (2008) notes that ethnographic research produces a wide variety of data and that the quantity of data produced by a single fieldworker is usually immense. With field notes and transcriptions this usually adds up to a lot of text. This was certainly the case for me. All in all I have conducted ten individual interviews and two group discussions with four participants. I have 12 hours of audio recording and circa 4 hours of video recording which in turn has resulted in 136 pages of transcriptions. All interviews were conducted in English without an interpreter present.

## **2.2 China**

*It is my second night in Shanghai and I am standing at one of the communal computers in my hostel trying to use one of the proxy servers which is supposed to help me navigate around the restrictions on the Internet and give me access to Facebook. At the computer next to me stands a girl of my age. I must have looked frustrated or confused because suddenly the girl taps me on the shoulder and points to her computer screen where she writes in Google translate from Chinese to English: do you need help? I politely smile at her and then use her keyboard to thank her and explain that I do not need any help. As one of my first encounters in China it symbolizes the way the Internet can be used as a tool for communication and also the difference between using the Internet in Sweden and China. Throughout my time in Shanghai people showed me different ways of “jumping the (fire)wall” to get access to information otherwise restricted. I thus find it necessary to give a brief introduction to laws and regulations in China that are especially relevant for this study before moving on to look at the different methods used.*

### **2.2.1 A brief historical overview**

The Chinese Communist Party took power over mainland China in 1949 with the party leader Mao Zedong. They are still the ruling party and hold monopoly on political power. During his time in power Mao instigated several political reforms; the Great Leap Forward (1958-61)

and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) being the most famous ones. The Great Leap Forward was a social and economic campaign aimed at rapidly reforming China's economy through industrialization. The plan was unsuccessful and led to widespread starvation and 20 million people died. The Cultural Revolution was instigated to remove counterrevolutionary fractions in the country's institutions and leadership. It was labeled as a class struggle and attacks were made on so-called intellectuals in order to remove bourgeois influences. Millions were forced into manual labor and thousands were executed (He, 1997)

Deng Xiaoping took over after Mao's death in the 1970's. He instigated widespread economic and social reforms. With Deng in power, China was put on the path towards market economy. However, the Communist Party's political control was maintained. During Deng's rule the Tiananmen Square protest took place which gained international attention. During the protests, which have also been known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre, students protested on the Tiananmen Square demanding political reforms. The event culminated when the Chinese government ordered in military tanks to clear the square. There is still confusion regarding the number of casualties (Gough, 2004).

The Communist Party still holds the political power in China and is not a electoral democracy. On the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress, in the fall of 2012, Xi Jinping was announced new president (Freedom House, 2012).

### ***2.2.2 Rules regarding the Internet and associational life***

The usage of the Internet in China began within the academic and scientific sectors during the late 1980s and it was opened for individual users in 1995. Since then, the number of users has grown rapidly; from 20 million in 2001 to nearly 564 million users in 2012 according to China Internet Network Information Center. The penetration rate was estimated to 70 percent in Shanghai and Beijing during 2012 whereas the penetration rate for China as a whole was 42 percent (CNNIC). The Internet in China was developed at the same time as that in Europe and the US, however, its structure and set-up was quite different. As private access was granted, the government maintained ownership and control over the access routes to the Internet and private enterprises and individuals could rent bandwidth from government owned entities. According to Herold (2011), this difference means that the central government in China has a much stronger

position than governments elsewhere. It starts from a position of control over and ownership of Chinese cyberspace. The government does not have to gain control over the Internet, instead it has to explicitly or implicitly allow everything that happens on the Internet in China. While American and European governments have to legislate themselves the power to control the Internet, this is the default position for the Chinese government (Herold, 2011).

Since individual users gained access to the Internet the Chinese authorities have issued extensive regulations directed at Internet service and content providers, Internet café operators, and Internet users themselves. The Chinese authorities have constructed a system of massive control. The system is constructed to create what the authorities label a "healthy" and "orderly" online environment. To ensure Internet users compliance with the regulations the authorities have two main strategies: filtering material and promotion of self-censorship. A firewall prohibits access to websites that the authorities deem politically sensitive/subversive. Critics of the firewall have named it "The Great Chinese Firewall" (Kalathil & Boas, 2003 and Liu 2011). According to OpenNet Initiative (2012): "China maintains one of the most pervasive and sophisticated regimes of Internet filtering and information control in the world". In their latest country report Freedom House (2012) labels the status of the Internet in China as "not free". In their report they also put forth an academic study that reviewed censorship across nearly 1,400 blog-hosting and bulletin-board platforms in China. The review estimated that 13 percent of posts were deleted, many within 24 hours of a particular term becoming sensitive or indicating collective action potential. According to Freedom House the control measures on the Internet contributes to the Chinese Internet increasingly resembling an intranet. Thousands of websites are blocked and sites such as Youtube, Flickr and Wikipedia are heavily restricted (Liu, 2011).

It is possible to get passed the censorship with the help of proxy servers and other circumvention technologies. A proxy server is an intermediary web server that the Internet user can use to access other websites indirectly so that the Internet service provider only sees that you are visiting the intermediary site but not the final destination site (Human Rights Watch, 2006).

One of my informants, Shen Yi, who is a professor at Fudan University in Shanghai, puts forth that Internet usage in China has gone through different phases:

First China gained access to the global infrastructure in about 1994-95. From 1994-97 or -1999 is the first stage. During that time the Internet was very expensive and few people could afford

personal computers so only certain groups (students) were using the Internet. But after 1999 things changed a lot because the computer became very cheap in China so huge amounts of young generations became Internet users. They are not very well educated. Generally speaking about two thirds of Internet users, they're education is lower than college which means it will be difficult for them to read or write in English. (Shen Yi, Interview, 2010-01-25)

The Internet has thus gone through different phases, from a situation when the Internet was predominantly used by students, with a high level of education, to spreading to other parts of society.

As this thesis places an emphasis on offline context, a few words regarding rules and laws that affect offline life is called for. The fact that China is not an electoral democracy has implications for societal and political life. In their latest report, Human Rights Watch (2012) conclude that the Chinese government remains an authoritarian one-party system. They further note that freedom of expression and association are arbitrarily restricted. Freedom House (2012) puts forth that citizens who attempt to form opposition parties or advocate for democratic reforms have been sentenced to long prison terms in recent years.

### **2.3 Observations**

Prior to leaving for China I had made contact with a researcher at Fudan University, as having a contact person in the destination country was a prerequisite for receiving the scholarship. I got in touch with my contact person through the help of snowballing technique by contacting someone who seemed relevant and then they directed me towards another person (Desai & Potter, 2006). My contact person thought that he was a good fit since he conducted research on the interaction among IT, media and Chinese foreign policy. Furthermore, he thought that university students was an important group to study and that I should definitely be able to find students to interview at Fudan University.

I arrived in China on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 2009. However, my contact person and I were not able to have a face-to-face meeting until January 4<sup>th</sup> 2010. During that time I worked on my interview questions and acquainting myself with my surroundings. I lived in a hostel in an 8 bed dorm which I, for the first few weeks, mostly shared with Chinese university graduates that where in Shanghai in pursuit of a career. One of the girls introduced herself as Serena, explaining that she was a big fan of the American TV-show *Gossip Girl* (the main character is named

Serena). Serena was in Shanghai for an interview with Ernst & Young. Most of the staff members at the hostel were in similar situations. During the two months that I stayed at the hostel I started socializing with the members of staff outside of their work hours. The conversations with the staff members and other residents helped me form an initial impression of the field that I was looking into and enabled me to do some unstructured interviews (Davies, 2008). Many of the initial conversations with the staff revolved around my private life with questions regarding my age, why I was not married, and how much I had paid for the trip. In return I also got the opportunity to ask them questions. Throughout this period I made field notes. Wolfinger (2002) contends that writing field notes can seem deceptively straightforward and that comparatively little academic attention has been paid to it. My note taking mostly resembles what Wolfinger terms “the salience hierarchy”; less structured notes of things that caught my attention rather than using a specific structure. I did however take more thorough notes after interviews. I have found the notes useful when analyzing my data and reflecting on the fieldwork, they help me recall certain situations and settings even as time has passed. Had I been able to go back with the knowledge I have gained through cultural analysis I might have reflected more on my note taking and perhaps noted different things. Wolfinger (2002) puts forth that field notes inevitably reflect the ethnographer’s background knowledge (tacit beliefs). Thus, different things might have caught my attention today, with the knowledge that I have gained through my master’s program.

#### **2.4 Interviews, survey and group discussions**

In Shanghai I conducted semi-structured interviews. I had an interview guide that I followed, starting with questions regarding how often they use the Internet and what they do online and then moving on to their thoughts on the restrictions and political development. With this layout my intention was to start off with questions that I believed were easy to answer and gradually moving towards questions that I deemed to be of a more sensitive nature; such as their thoughts on censorship. The informants were gathered through a snowballing technique where one contact led me to another (Davies, 2008; Desai & Potter, 2006). My contact person let me come and introduce myself in one of his classes and there I handed out a survey and also gave the ones who were interested in doing an interview the possibility to leave their contact information on the survey. The survey consisted of questions regarding how often the students use the Internet and what they do online. The initial survey helped me gain insights into how frequently

the students use the Internet. One of the students showed particular interest in my fieldwork and helped me find more interviewees by bringing me along to a sort of career fair audition.

All interviews were recorded upon agreement with my participants and that enabled me to be fully engaged in the conversation rather than being preoccupied with note taking. All interviews were recorded with my pink little recorder that I had bought for the trip and the recordings were then transferred to my computer for processing. Most interviews lasted around half an hour and were conducted at various locations. The interviewees were between the age of 20 to 29 and five were men and six women. Desai and Potter (2006) stress the importance of picking an interview location that makes the interviewee feel comfortable. I generally let my interviewees choose the location; one was conducted in a university building, one at my hostel, both group interviews were conducted in a university seminar room and one in the person's office. Due to the nature of my topic, I was very specific in giving information about my research, within which realms I was conducting it, and how it would be used. I have chosen to change the names of my participants in the thesis in the pursuit of protecting their anonymity (Davies, 2008).

One of my main concerns when going into the interviews were getting people to talk and failing to create the right atmosphere for this was my biggest fear. In regards to the group interviews they took on the shape of group discussions and the participants talked a lot amongst themselves and they also asked me questions. Most of the interviews turned out well in the sense that people did not shy away from answering my questions, most of them were quite outspoken. However, one interview was extremely challenging and the actual interview part of our meeting only lasted for about ten minutes. The interviewee answered my questions with very short sentences and it was difficult to get her talking. I did not wish to drag words out of her and thus the interview did not last long.

## **2.5 Sweden**

The fieldwork in Sweden differed from that in China in that I was now in my home country looking for foreigners rather than being in a foreign country looking for natives. Thus, my everyday experiences were not filled with doing observations in the same way rather I was seeking out specific situations. The fieldwork was thus more contained to the interview situation, which was the method that I had decided to keep working with.

### **2.5.1 Swedish laws and regulations**

Before moving on to outlining the fieldwork conducted in Sweden, a brief description of the Internet's development in Sweden and Swedish regulation relevant for this study will be outlined. Similar to China, the Internet came to Sweden in the 1980s and at that time it was predominantly used by academic institutions. Internet has grown rapidly and during the mid 1990s public commercial Internet services grew and the Internet became increasingly commercialized (ISOC-SE, 2003). According to the Swedish Statistical Bureau (SCB), 6,6 million people had access to the Internet in Sweden by 2012. Among people in the age of 16-74 years old 94 percent have access to the Internet.

According to Freedom House (2012) access to the internet is unrestricted by the government. In their report *Freedom of the Press 2012* they put forth that: "freedom of speech is guaranteed by law, and the country has one of the most robust freedom of information statutes in the world. However, hate-speech laws prohibit threats or expressions of contempt based on race, color, national or ethnic origin, religious belief, or sexual orientation" (p.321). These regulations are applicable both online and offline. (Freedom House, 2012)

In 2008, Sweden passed a law that was met with a lot of debate, the FRA law. The law enables the signals intelligence agency (FRA) to monitor the content of all cross-border cable-based Internet traffic to combat "external threats" such as terrorism and organized crime. However, they can only gain access to the information after obtaining court permission and upon the explicit request of government or defense agencies (Geens, 2012).

Promoting freedom of speech is a prioritized topic in the Swedish foreign policy and on their website one can find the quote "Internet is free – Internet is freedom- Internet is freedom of speech" (Regeringen.se).

## **2.6 Interviews**

In order to get in touch with Chinese university students in Sweden I used the snowballing technique and reached out to friends and various student organizations (Desai & Potter, 2006). The people that I have interviewed in Sweden are Chinese students who came to Sweden to study; some of them have stayed in Sweden after they finished their studies while others have gone back to China. The interviewees were between the age of 23 to 32 and four were women and two men. The interviews were predominantly done in group rooms at libraries or in university buildings. Similarly to the interviews in China, I recorded all of them upon agreement



but rather than using a recorder I used my smart phone. Again, all interviews were conducted in English without any interpreter present. A few were conducted online through the communication software Skype and were audio and video recorded.

The interviews in Sweden were also semi-structured with open ended questions. I used the interview guide from my Shanghai fieldwork as my starting point for developing the questions. The questions touched upon the same issues as those in Shanghai but I made certain changes in how I phrased myself. In the interviews in Sweden I focused more on getting the interviewees speaking of their experiences such as when they first started using the Internet; creating more of a narrative. The interviews in Sweden were longer than those in China and most lasted around one and a half hour but some were as long as two and a half hours. The length of the interviews enabled me to talk more about the participants everyday life and background before moving on to questions regarding their opinions on the Internet regulations and development. Most interviews took on a relaxed conversational tone.

## **2.7 Reflections and ethical considerations**

As I was preparing for my trip to China, people kept telling me that I had to be very careful when interviewing as it is a sensitive issue that I am researching. I am in no way unique in my endeavor to research a (politically) sensitive issue and with that the need for reflexivity. In *Reflexive Ethnography*, Davies (2008) deals with the issue and puts forth that: "in its most transparent guise, reflexivity expresses researchers' awareness of their necessary connection to the research situation and hence their effects upon it" (p. 7). In his PhD dissertation *The Internet in China* (2006) Lagerkvist acknowledges that there exists a myriad of normative positions among Western researchers regarding China and that he is no exception. He puts forth his strong belief in freedom of expression and that his research topic in part grew out of his normative position. Furthermore, Lagerkvist notes the difficulties in accepting what his interviewees say to him without questioning their autonomy as individuals while repeatedly being faced with official political discourse. I too, hold the same position on freedom of speech and have a strong belief in democracy. I hold a bachelor degree in human rights and development and as such am no stranger to the ever ongoing discussion on particularism versus universalism and the notion held by some that human rights is a Western phenomenon imposed on other countries with the help of economic globalization. In regards to China specifically, the concept of Asian values that focus

more on community rather than individual rights is frequently brought forward (Ignatieff, 2001). Although I found that I was able to have relatively open discussions with my informants, it did cross my mind that some opinions they held fitted neatly in with the government's agenda. In turn my opinions very much mimic that of traditional Western thought on individual rights and freedom of information found among my peers as a student of human rights.

Sunderland and Denny (2007) put forth that data is not so much gathered as it is produced and that our views and assumptions are never-ending filters for the questions that we ask. We must thus: "interrogate our assumptions and our observational filters whatever, whomever, and wherever we are researching" (p. 51). With this in mind, it becomes crucial to reflect on the fieldwork process which I will do in the coming section. There I will reflect on the entire fieldwork process; from recruiting participants to conducting interviews and finally transcribing them.

### **2.7.1 Recruiting**

As mentioned in the previous section I had the help of my contact person in getting in touch with my participants in Shanghai and he gave me access to his class room. Not all participants were recruited through him but he was an important person in the recruitment phase; a gatekeeper with the ability to withhold or grant me access to people relevant for my research (Scheyvens, Nowak & Scheyvens, 2003). In *A Counter-Narrative of a 'Failed' Interview* Nairn, Munro and Smith (2005) problematize the recruitment process. One of the issues in their interview setting was the way that the participants were chosen; the participants were students and it was their teacher who had recruited them. This setup created issues in regards to the interviewees' participation; they did not seem engaged with the questions. Nairn et al. conclude that it would have been better to work on recruiting students in a different manner rather than through their teacher who is in a powerful position in relation to the students. I believe that this is a very important conclusion and one that I have learned firsthand through my fieldwork in Shanghai. One of the first interviews I conducted was with a student who I came in touch with through my classroom presentation and he was very eager to do an interview. I let him choose the location, as I wanted him to feel comfortable to speak openly and he chose a building on campus that he knew would not be crowded. I did not have any problems getting him to reply to my questions and he was very polite towards me while also seeming forthright. However, he took a strong interest in the research that I was doing and at the end of the interview he asked me for

some suggested literature on human rights and explained to me that he was doing some research on his own and that my contact person was his supervisor. He also wondered if maybe I needed a research assistant. This end to the interview made me question how openly he had actually been talking to me and how important it was for him that my contact person knew that he had helped me out; thereby showing that he is a good and ambitious student. I had emphasized that everything was confidential but still I do not know how much this connection affected how openly he felt he could speak and how much he was aiming for answering the questions in a manner that would be approved by his supervisor. Furthermore, since he had an interest in human rights research and in being my research assistant there was also the possibility of him trying to reply to the questions in a manner that would please me.

Prior to leaving for China I had participated in a preparatory course as well as courses on method within my department. In both instances the concept of power in the relationship between researcher and participants was discussed. As researchers we were encouraged to be aware of the fact that we might be perceived as being in a higher position of authority while out doing fieldwork than we are back home in our ordinary lives. Scheyevens et al.(2008) note that power imbalances between researcher and participants exists on two levels; real differences associated with money, education and other resources, and perceived differences; which exist in the mind of those participants who feel that they are inferior, and researchers who give the impression that they are superior. I find that within my fieldwork the two different types of power imbalance both came into play. While I was hanging out at the hostel doing observations I would sometimes get comments on the status of my university if I mentioned my contact with Fudan University. I would also get comments on my financial situation and how I paid for my research. In the interviews at the university I noticed a difference between those that I recruited and introduced myself to on my own compared to those that were the outcome of me being introduced in their classroom. One way this difference manifested itself was the way the students treated me as a researcher; the students that I had recruited on my own asked me more questions about my opinion on certain issues and regulations as well as what I thought about China. Furthermore, the students who were recruited through the classroom were more eager to help me out and two of them offered to be my research assistant. One of them sent me an email signed with his name and the different university departments where he was a research assistant. I thus realized that he perceived me to be in a more powerful situation than I was; both of us were actually bachelor

students. This perceived position might be due to the way that the teacher introduced me in their class room; explaining that I was a guest researcher from Lund University rather than saying that I was a visiting student. If I could go back I would spend some more time deliberating the recruitment process.

As I recruited participants in Sweden I was very conscious of the recruitment process and the potential issues related to it and accordingly made sure that no one was recruited through a person in a position of power over them. The organizations that I contacted gave me the opportunity of introducing myself and handing out my contact information so that people could voluntarily sign up rather than being suggested by someone in a position of power. In one case, a teacher I had contacted at Lund University passed on the information to one of her students but she still contacted me on her own. A few of the interviewees were friends of a friend so as such they might have felt socially obligated to participate. However, I believe that the relationship was beneficial for the interviews. The interviewees opened up to me quickly and really seemed to trust me. In general all the students that I interviewed in Sweden were curious about my research and my thoughts on China as a country.

### ***2.7.2 Interviewing***

As mentioned, I conducted two group interviews in Shanghai. These were similar to small focus groups and in regards to that method, Fallon and Brown (2002) note that “moderators should cultivate an air of objectivity, and should chair group meetings sympathetically but assertively” (p.199). I found this particularly challenging when it came to talking about political opinions in my group interviews and sometimes the participants asked me questions that forced me to share an opinion which the following excerpt shows:

*Me: Mm. So would you say you are quite happy with where China is today?*

*Jing: Are you happy with what Sweden is today (laughs)?*

*Me: Yes and no, personally I do not think a country is ever at a point where it is perfect. There are always certain topics and issues that can be improved. It is always developing and changing.*

*Jing: Yeah, I think that's the point. I mean in every country there will always be issues that people will not be satisfied with. Even in the United States there democracy seems to be perfect but a lot of people are sick of the bi-party system and they just attack each other for the sake of attack and they bring nothing substantial to their people. (Jing, 2010)*

In this part of the interview we were talking about political development and they had talked about how foreigners sometimes took more interest in China's political development and were more critical than Chinese people. When the participant responded to my question with a question of her own, I found that I had to present an opinion. However, I wanted that opinion to encourage the students to speak openly. By explaining that I think that countries are constantly changing and developing and are never in a state where they are "perfect" I hoped that the participants would feel free to speak openly about both negative and positive opinions. I do believe that I managed to achieve that and the discussion continued with what type of development they would like to see in China.

Regarding interviews Davies (2008) notes that "interviewers would be wise to problematize all statuses whether shared or disparate, in terms of how they may affect their interaction with interviewees" (p. 112). She also points out that shared status, such as shared gender, does not guarantee understanding. One shared status between me and my participants was the age. There was no age difference of more than five years between me and any of my research participants. I believe that for the most part this was beneficial for the interviews. We also shared the experience of being students, and in the case of the Chinese students who had moved to Sweden, we shared the experience of having studied abroad. However, although we have certain things in common there are also many diving points and one of those diving points that had particular impact on the fieldwork process was the different political systems that we have grown up in. This came to be of particular importance since many of my interview questions were political in nature. One of my interviewees explained that she had not expected the discussion to get so political and at first I thought that might become a problem. However, she was very frank with me and even told me that she was a member of the Communist Party. In fact, several of the people that I interviewed told me about their personal story in regards to the party. There were discussions regarding how you go about becoming a member of the Party and why, or why not, they had tried to join.

How to phrase things in order to create an open conversation setting was one of the most challenging aspects throughout the fieldwork process. This was not made easier by the fact that I am a western scholar researching a topic which carries Western connotations to many people (Sewpaul, 2007). When discussing questions such as human rights and freedom of expression a lot of time would be spent defining the concepts, as many of my participants did not have a clear understanding of what the concepts meant or perhaps we did not mean the same thing when we talked about them. I often found it more fruitful to talk about these topics without labeling them, rather than talking about “freedom of expression” we might talk about censorship or other topics related to it. This setup helped me feel more certain that we were in fact talking about the same thing. Overall, I found that I managed to get people to open up to me and since my interviews were semi-structured I had room for adjusting some questions based on the situation and where the interview was going. There was also a level of “learning-by-doing”; several of my interviewees thought that human rights was a big and intangible topic and I thus learned that I needed to exemplify and break it down in order to make it tangible so that it could be discussed.

### ***2.7.3 Transcribing***

After interviews comes the process of transcribing which is a seemingly straightforward, but in reality not an entirely straightforward, task. While I was in Shanghai I made sure to check that my audio recordings were working properly and transferred them to my computer. However, I did not finish transcribing them until I was back home in Sweden. The interviews that I conducted in Sweden were all transcribed soon after being recorded. Lampropoulou (2012) notes that: “transcription is important as it consists of the first step of the analysis of the data and involves a series of decisions that have to be made by the researcher. These decisions have to be consistent, since both analysis and interpretation will be based on the transcript” (p. 76). One of the decisions that need to be made in regards to transcription is the amount of information that should be included. Another aspect that Sunderland and Denny (2007) highlight is that: “researcher stance, theoretical perspectives, technologies, and technique of recording all affect what is found “(p. 51). In light of this, I decided to listen to all of my Shanghai interviews again and transcribe them anew. When first transcribing the interviews I had not written down the entire conversations but rather the segments that appeared to be relevant at the time and then written time stamps and short descriptions when I skipped sections. This time around I decided to

transcribe everything and also include comments on silences and unintelligible talk; I did this with all the interviews. By doing so I found things in the interviews that I had not deemed important when transcribing them the first time but that were of great value for this thesis.

This section was my way of interrogating my observational filters and reflecting on issues that have affected the fieldwork process in different ways. In the next section I will outline my theoretical framework.

## Chapter 3: Theoretical discussion

### 3.1 Online and offline

The Internet – a global computer network providing a variety of information and communication facilities, consisting of interconnected networks using standardized communication protocols (Oxford Dictionaries Online, 2013).

Cyberspace - the notional environment in which communication over computer networks occurs (Oxford Dictionaries Online, 2013).

As the aim of this thesis is to understand how students use and perceive the Internet, a useful place to start is to look into the actual meaning of the term, and other concepts related to it. As we do this, we find a fairly technical description of the Internet but one that places emphasis on communication and information. In essence, the Internet is a global computer network that enables the transmittance of information and communication. The Internet is based around the sharing of information and connectedness. The *World Wide Web*, however, is not synonymous with the Internet but is an information system *on* the Internet which enables documents to be connected to other documents and enables the searcher to look for information (Oxford Dictionaries Online, 2013). There are several important distinctions to be made when carrying out research regarding the Internet, which the following discussion will illuminate and deal with.

As mentioned in the introduction, the onset of the spread of the Internet created both utopian and dystopian visions of how the internet would affect our societies. Within the utopian view the Internet is generally upheld as an open platform and a hyper-interactive medium. In this context it is argued that the Internet is an open and accessible public sphere where anyone who has access to the technology can express themselves freely (Kitchin, 1998). The Internet as a research field spans across several decades and during that time the emphasis of the research has shifted and new ways of thinking of the Internet has emerged. Initially cyberspace was frequently portrayed as a placeless place. In the book *Internet: an Ethnographic Approach* (2000) Miller and Slater label these early visions as the first generation of Internet research. They further emphasize that the Internet: is not a monolithic or placeless ‘cyberspace’; rather it is numerous new technologies, used by diverse people, in diverse real-world locations” (p1). From this line of argumentation they conclude that there is everything to be gained from an ethnographic approach



towards the Internet. The authors conduct research on the Internet in Trinidad and argue that it is not a limitation to conduct research this way, in one place, but rather an advantage; by understanding the particularities of the Internet in Trinidad it is possible to do comparative ethnography.

In the anthology *Digital Anthropology* from 2012 (edited by Miller and Horst) the importance of placing the Internet in its context is again emphasized. In his chapter *Rethinking Digital Anthropology*, Boellstorff stresses the importance of a clear understanding and a distinction between the virtual (the online) and the actual (the physical or offline). In his words:

This relation has pivotal ontological, epistemological and political consequences: it determines what we take the virtual to be, what we take knowledge about the virtual to entail and what we understand as the stakes of the virtual for social justice. I focus on the greatest negative ramification of an under theorized notion of the digital: the mistaken belief that the virtual and the actual are fusing into a single domain (p. 39).

This statement makes clear not only his standpoint, that the virtual and the actual are not fusing but are indeed separate domains, but also the importance of defining the relationship. My thesis takes off from this standpoint and I too argue that the online and the physical (offline) are separate domain and that socio-cultural realities are thereby important factors for understanding how people relate to, use and understand the Internet. In this discussion, Löfgren and Wikdahl (1999) argue that: “The trivial fact is that even in cyberspace we are situated, localized – any communication must take place and claim space “ (p.42). Conducting fieldwork in both Sweden and China gives me the opportunity to further explore this.

However, this is not a viewpoint that can be taken for granted. Liu (2011) note that while she believes that the Internet needs to be understood within its specific socio-cultural context this perspective is often downplayed in existing research on young people and the Internet. She finds that much of the research on the subject is influenced by the concept of a “Net generation” which often adopts a fairly standardized perspective from within the developed Western world and assumes that the Internet holds the same meaning for young people all over the world. From that viewpoint there is little recognition of who they are and the socio-cultural and biographical situations in which their lives are embedded. Agreeing with Miller, Liu puts forth that: “by

treating the Internet as a globally uniform culture in its own right, transcending local and national boundaries, it sheds little light on locally specific Internet experiences “(p.3).

There seems to be a growing body of literature emphasizing the need for looking at the Internet in the context of everyday life. However, Makardjieva (2011) puts forth that: “the Internet in everyday life is a newly emergent continent on the map of Internet research that has not been properly explored and charted yet” (p.58). What distinguishes looking at Internet in everyday life compared to the earlier Internet research she finds can be captured by a few keywords; *users*, *offline context*, and *embeddedness* (p.59). Makardjieva further argues that by removing the Internet’s extraordinary status and looking at it as it unfolds in everyday life enables us to use conceptual frameworks and methodologies established in other areas of social and cultural studies. Miller and Slater (2000) opt for starting their investigation of the Internet from within the complex ethnographic experience, rather than starting from the concept of virtuality. In their study they found relatively little Internet use in Trinidad that could be usefully constructed as virtual. It created new mediations but not a new reality. In this instance online spaces are important as part of everyday life, not apart from it. In regards to the online-offline discussion, Liu contends that:” recognizing the embeddedness of online activities in offline realities does not mean to say that online experiences do not affect offline realities. Online experiences may also influence people’s perceptions of reality and behavior in physical places – at least potentially” (p. 4). That is the overlapping theme in this thesis – understanding the effects of location in regards to Internet habits and perception. It is thus crucial to look into factors that influence said environment. In the next part I will therefore discuss the Internet in regards to surveillance and discourse.

### **3.1 Surveillance**

As described in the background section one of the major dividing points between China and Sweden is the level of political freedom. China has rigid control on political life, online and offline, which justifies a discussion on surveillance (Freedom House 2012).

Foucault has had a strong impact on the field of surveillance ever since he published *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* in 1977 (Hope, 2013). In the book Foucault describes the punitive change that France has undergone; from physical punishment to regimented incarceration with the aim of creating individuals who police themselves. An integral part of the idea of self-surveillance was Foucault’s discussion on the Panopticon (Hope, 2013

;Foucault, 1979). The notion of the Panopticon is derived from the architectural drawings of Jeremy Bentham which is a construction of a prison with a watchtower in the middle and cells around it. This architecture means that the prisoners are not able to see into the watchtower and thus do not know if anyone is there or not while the prisoners are constantly exposed. As Foucault (1979) explains: “the Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever being seeing: in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen” (p. 201f). Drawing on this model Foucault suggested that constant surveillance could encourage individuals to monitor and adjust their own behavior. As noted by Hope (2013), for Foucault surveillance is merely one aspect of panopticism which includes a wider discourse on disciplinary technology, regimes of control, the keeping of records, and attempts to influence self-perception. Furthermore, Hope notes that discourse has a central role in such training;

“encouraging individuals to behave in a prescribed manner, whilst reproducing the means of control through acceptance and the ongoing replication of normalizing judgments. In this context, normalisation refers to the process whereby certain standards of behavior become hegemonically accepted as naturally the ones that should be adhered to in society. Consequently, emergent discursive constructs act as regulatory forces that have productive power, they demarcate, circulate, and differentiate (p. 37).

By combining punishment, observation and normalizing discourse this type of power can succeed and lead to self-monitoring. This vision also shows how a small number of people can exercise control over a large group of individuals (Hope, 2013).

While for Foucault the notion of power is closely linked to that of resistance, Hope (2013) puts forth that his arguments regarding resistance in regards to the panopticon are underdeveloped and thus researchers within the field consequently might be tempted to focus on the institutional exercise of power while ignoring resistance. In his research Hope is looking into schools and he explores student’s resistance through false conformity, avoidance, counter-surveillance and playful performance. He puts forth the concepts of “sousveillance” (p.47); the use of observational devices to mirror and confront the monitoring. The strategy within sousveillance is not to circumvent the surveillance but rather confronting it by watching the watchers.

Certain authors have questioned Foucault's theory of panopticism for the fact that he did not consider surveillance technologies operating in the 1960s and 1970s (Hope, 2013). In his article *The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault's 'Panopticon' Revisited* (1997), Mathiesen proposes the synopticon where the many watch the few as a counterpart to panopticon and questions Foucault's narrative: "In his account of society as developing from a situation where the many see the few to a situation where the few see the many, Foucault fails to take in account all of the waves of major synoptical development (...). Perhaps he could not foresee the developments in the 1980s and 1990s, but the major trends were certainly visible in 1975" (p. 221). With synoptical development he points to particularity that of mass media. However, Mathiesen does not altogether reject the notion of the panopticon but rather seems to think that we as individuals are living amidst both concepts and concludes that:

Taken as a whole, things are much worse than Foucault imagined. The total situation clearly calls for political resistance. But to muster such double resistance is a difficult task, because the call for resistance may- in line with what I have argued in this article- be silenced by the very panopticon and synopticon which we wish to counteract " (p. 231).

Hope (2013) notes that, using Foucault's term, the images that we are faced with through mass media would influence how people think and act and that this could be viewed as a normalizing mechanism. He takes the example of the effect that celebrity chef Jamie Oliver's television series had on public opinion regarding the unhealthy food that school children eat in the UK. However, he contends that while critics suggest that the panopticon has come to exert an oppressive influence as the dominant model of surveillance, its value cannot be contested and finds that while Foucault's discussion of panopticon might be underdeveloped in certain areas, such as resistance, it still provides a convincing analysis of the operation of disciplinary power.

In regards to China specifically, Tsui (2003) puts forth his belief that the Internet in China is being shaped in accordance with the panoptic concept. Tsui looks at how the Chinese government establishes Internet control from legal, economic, social, and technical perspectives and puts forth that: "surveillance is no longer solely a matter practiced by the government but instead flows through social conduits on all levels, resulting in a dispersion of disciplinary power that conveniently runs along the very same grid of decentralized structure that is characteristic of the Internet" (p.72). One of the ways that this dispersion of surveillance happens, according to

Tsui, is through the market forces; making companies and internet café owners to sign and agree to certain conditions. Tsui further notes that, China's relationship with the international community has significant effects for the way that Internet surveillance is justified; within this context the Internet is upheld as yet another way for Western imperialism. Accordingly, social norms enhance the span of the panopticon. Furthermore, Tsui points out whether the average Chinese netizen actually cares for what are seen as increasingly American or Western imposed norms and values and that in China, nationalism is the dominant online ideology. Another significant factor being the language barrier; most people still have trouble reading English and rather prefer to read content in their native language; Chinese. While the anonymous nature of the Internet might be a hindrance for panopticism, as the visibility of the inmates is a prerequisite for it to work, this has been overcome by forcing people to conduct user registration. Although internet café owners sometimes ignore the registration requirement they are still dependent on making money and the crack downs that the government sometimes does on Internet cafés has a deterring effect (Tsui, 2003).

Golsmith and Wu (2006) contend that the Chinese censorship is not only efficient but also subtle. No screen appears saying "blocked by the Chinese state", instead the blocking takes the form of technical error. For example, sometimes the New York Times is available on computers in China and sometimes it is not. This uncertainty coupled with the general unreliability of the Internet helps mask efforts of censorship.

### **3.3 Access to information and discourse**

One of the aims of this thesis is to understand how physical location affects my respondents Internet behavior and how they gather and view information. Goldsmith and Wu (2006) note that the Internet has been celebrated for allowing open, universal communication and puts forth a quote by cyberlibertarian John Perry Barlow: "Information wants to be free" (p.51). However, according to them, information does not in fact want to be free; "it wants to be labeled, organized, and filtered so it can be discovered cross-referenced and consumed (p.51)".

Turning again to Foucault, Blom (2004) recognizes Foucault's impact on surveillance studies and also comments that his influence on contemporary thought is much wider and points to Foucault's writings on knowledge and power. Foucault (2001) puts forth that "power exists only as exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action" (p. 342), and as such power is not something that is owned but rather exercised. Further, Foucault argues that power is not

just found in institutions that are referred to as political; “power relations are rooted in the whole network of the social” (p. 345). Foucault connects the concept of knowledge to power through the investigation of discourses of modernity such as medicine, madness and sexuality (Blom, 2004). Foucault was interested in the spread of discourses that have given shape to modern societies and subjects and he elaborated the idea that discourses do more than describe a society and its subjects: it defines them. Hence, the discourse of criminology defines the criminal (Bell, 2011).

Mills (2004) notes that Foucault’s work is neither a system of ideas nor a general theory but she finds that the most useful way of investigating the term discourse is by looking at how Foucault uses it when discussing power, knowledge and truth. Foucault, as cited in Mills (2004):

Truth is of the world; it is produced there by virtue of multiple constraints [...] Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth: the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (p. 16).

Thus, truths are not just there but rather something that societies have to work to produce. Foucault is not concerned with which discourse is true or not but the process of how a discourse come to be the dominant one. From a Foucauldian perspective, knowledge and power are intertwined and all the knowledge we have is a result of struggle. Mills (2004) gives the example of schools and universities and that what is studied there are the results of whose version of the events are represented. Given that each society has its regime of truths, moving from one country to another could thereby entail moving from one discursive reality to another. In this thesis I am interested to learn how the students gather and view information as well as their thoughts on the Internet regulations in China. Drawing on discourse analysis, enables looking into the boundaries of knowledge and truths that are created in each society and how the students deal with and relate to these boundaries.

Börjesson (2003) explains that to study discourse is to think about what is said, how it is said and how else it could be said. Discourses sets the boundaries for what is socially and culturally accepted as “true”, “credible”, and “reasonable” (p.21). In *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (2002), Jørgensen and Phillips start off their discussion with a preliminary

definition of discourse as “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)” (p.1) Bringing in discourse to my theoretical framework thus complements the concept of offline and online with the added dimension of looking into how the students “talk about” and “understand an aspect of the world”. Furthermore, it enables me to look at how the students relate to the restrictions imposed on the Internet as well as how they view information and online behavior.

In regards to the Internet as a source of information, Buckingham (2008) notes that while learning with and through these new media, young people are also learning how to learn. In concurrence with other researchers of the second generation of Internet research, Buckingham questions the concept of a digital generation. He finds that the concept has a tendency to ignore the banality of much new media news. Rather than being characterized by spectacular forms of innovation and creativity, much usage tends to be geared towards mundane forms of communication and information retrieval. Although, within this information retrieval there is a freedom in the information process where young people are learning primarily through discovery, experimentation and play rather than through following instructions. As we have concluded, discourses affect what is considered to be true in a certain context and in line with this, Buckingham (2008) puts forth :

Media content is of course not necessarily neutral or reliable: it represents the world in particular ways and not others, and it does so in ways that tend to serve the interest of the producers.

Activities such as chat and game play are heavily bound by systems of rules (p. 17).

For Buckingham this raises the question not of how young people learn with technology but of what they need to know about it. He puts forth the need for digital literacy. For him, literacy goes beyond functionality and knowing how to access information and should emphasize being able to evaluate information and turn it into meaningful knowledge. In fact, he contends that critical literacy is not just about making distinctions between reliable and unreliable sources but also about understanding who produces media and how these media represent the world and create meaning. Critical and digital literacy is connected to discourse in that critical analysis is constructed around an awareness of different origins of content and context. Thereby an awareness of different discourses and regimes of truth is created. Hence, questions that are relevant for discourse analysis are also crucial for critical and digital literacy, such as the boundaries for what is socially and culturally accepted as credible and reliable.

## Chapter 4: The Internet in everyday life

The aim of this thesis is to understand how Chinese students *use* and *perceive* the Internet. Our starting point for this investigation is to look into how they use technology in their everyday life. In order to better understand their current relationship to the Internet, I will start the investigation by looking at how and when they became Internet users.

### 4.1 Playing games and connecting with strangers – becoming Internet users

As has been portrayed earlier in the thesis the Internet became available for the public in China in 1995. My informants are in their twenties and early thirties and they were thus born between the years 1991 and 1983. This means that the Internet became available when some of them were 4 and others were 12. During the interviews we talked about their first Internet experiences. Many of my informants first came into contact with computers and the Internet in school. The ones who did not have their first Internet experience in school had it in Internet cafés. Very few of them had their first experience in their own home. Bao had her first experience of the Internet in school and this sparked an interest in her. They already had a computer at home and using the Internet made her want to tell her mum to get Internet at home as well:

*Actually the first time when I get to know about computers was when I was in the fifth year of my primary school. I was around 13 years old. At the time, I was quite early in the generation that get to know about computers. But there was no Internet at all. It's just you know dos system. And then I think in my junior school, last year, in Shanghai, we have some ADSL, something like that. And then I, actually I want to tell me mom that: Ok now we have a computer at home and I want access to the Internet (Bao, 2013).*

Most of my informants remember having a computer before having access to the Internet. Whereas they as children were curious and eager to start using the new technology and explore the possibilities, the parents had a more skeptic approach and worried about things such as viruses. Bao continues to tell me how her mother was very concerned but finally agreed to getting Internet at home. Laughingly she tells me that one of the first things she learned to do online was to play card games:

*I think in the year 2000 and then my mom finally agree that ok we gonna have Internet at home. At that time and then, actually the first thing I learned from Internet is like how I can play card games. (Bao, 2013).*



Looking back at their early Internet experiences it is clear that many of them have similar stories to tell me about connecting with strangers and playing online games. For most, the first Internet experience was associated with games and play rather than work, which came to be more important for them later on when going on to college and university. Cheng explains how his family purchased a computer and gained access to the Internet when the technology was new but that he was not allowed to use it. When he got his own computer he mostly used it for gaming:

*My family purchased the first computer. That was really early by Chinese standard and at that time I was amazed but my father did not let me touch the computer so I was basically just watching what my father was doing. At that time it was basically just news browsing for my father and then he would tell the story. [...] But when I first personally get involved with computer it starts with gaming. I didn't really use that much computer for Internet or news browsing before I went to college (Cheng, 2013).*

Connecting to strangers within China was a main interest for several of my informants when they began using the Internet. Fu-Han had used a computer previous to using the Internet and explains that it was a strange and exciting feeling to be able to get to know people far away:

*At that moment I used the Internet just to meet new people and make some friends. You know in QQ.<sup>1</sup> That's the first software that I use. It was very strange when I used it because I had used a computer before but you could use it (the Internet) to get to know people so far away. It was exciting (Fu-han, 2013)!*

When speaking of far away, Fu-han means far away within China since back then he did not speak English. For most of my informants they mostly connected with people within China.

Löfgren and Wikdahl (1999) puts forth that the link between technology and cultural competency is largely a question of everyday power over the technology: who gets hold of the remote control? The introduction of a new technology in the household can also give children an advantage over the their elders as youth might know more about the new technology, although that was not the case for my research participants. Speaking through the concept of offline and online it is possible to discern that in their initial encounters with the Internet, school and parents

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<sup>1</sup> The program QQ that Haoling mentions is a very popular chat program and all of my informants have used it. QQ is similar to ICQ (I seek you) which enables users to send direct messages to other users.

were important factors influencing my informants access and usage. The parents were the ones who purchased the computer which would give access to the Internet and most often the computers were kept in a shared common room so very little privacy was available. Not only did the school and parents have an impact on the practicalities surrounding their Internet use but also in expressing what the computer and the Internet should be used for. When talking about playing games and other online entertainment pastimes it becomes evident that most of the students know that gaming is not what their parents wanted them to do. One research participant tells me that she tried to use the Internet every week but that her mom wanted her to focus on homework and not playing games:

*Yeah, I tried to use it every week, especially after I came back from school. But my mom just is so worried about, you should work hard on your homework not playing so I tried to do it every weekend (Bao, 2013)*

Liu (2011) comments that the Internet's attraction among youth and children has been a major concern in China. Within academic and lay discourse, Internet addiction has been portrayed as a serious and widespread problem. The Internet's "harmful" effects are in line with the general concern of the moral slide which resonates in the discussion on modernity and risk. Furthermore, she notes that the Chinese leadership has viewed modernity as signifying both hope and danger. Given this, she finds that it is not surprising that the Internet as an ultimate symbol of modernity is also viewed in this ambivalent manner (Liu, 2011). In regards to the way children should act, Cheng tells me that from a young age being obedient is premiered and tells me that where he comes from, if you want to give a compliment to a child or its parents you say: "this kid is very obedient". This resonates with most of my informants almost apologetically explaining that their initial relationship with the Internet was driven by entertainment. Entertainment was deemed a wasteful and inappropriate way to use the technology.

In this early phase it is possible to conclude that the Internet had not yet been domesticated in my informants' lives. Berker et al (2006) explain that when a domestication process of a technology has been "successful", the technology is seen as comfortable, reliable and trustworthy rather than a problematic and challenging consumer good (p. 3). My informants had not yet reached the state where the Internet was a comfortable and not challenging technology but rather something that created discussions regarding how it should be used, for what, and how often.

## 4.2 Being frequent Internet users

Looking at everyday life from a theoretical standpoint, different perspectives surface although centering around the same concept. For Bakardjieva (2011) the obvious and quantifiable meaning of everyday life is that of the most repeated actions, the most travelled journeys and the most-inhabited spaces. She further acknowledges that everyday life has been associated by value and quality – everydayness. Accordingly, “this quality can be defined by boredom and oppressive routine, but it can also be seen as marked by authenticity and vitality, an unobtrusive, but always present potential for growth and change” (p.61).

As children the Internet was not a part of my informants’ everyday life and habits but as they grew older they domesticated the technology and it became a part of their daily life. Fu-Han explains that nowadays checking the Internet is a part of his morning ritual:

*First things when I wake up I just open the Internet, before I go to university, I wake up and put on the Internet or when I have work I go to the office and open it. [...] First I check with the news, political news and the second part is IT information, about new technology development, and then third I check about sports (laughs) (Fu-Han, 2013).*

All of my research participants use the Internet on a daily basis and other than entertainment they use it to search for news and course related material as well as social networking. In fact, all of my informants are members of at least one social media site, most of them several ones. Some of them are online a major part of their active day. Li, for instance, will use the Internet up to twelve hours a day if able to while days when she is busy she might use it for four hours:

*It’s very different from every day. If i have a lot of exam or tired, then about 4-5 hours a day. If I’m free or have to search for some homework data, I use it about 10-12 hours a day. [...] Most of the time I spend on reading Internet news, see a cartoon, check my e-mail, messenger chat (Li, 2010).*

Although Li spends as much time online as she can, she does not use social media very much. She is a member of the Chinese counterpart to Facebook but explains that she rarely uses it. In contrast to Li, who spends a lot of time online, Qing does not consider herself a very

technological person. However, she still uses a computer and the Internet frequently but explains that it is mostly for practical matters: “I’m not a technological person but I do use computers. I use computer and the Internet when I need it to search like study things and information like how to apply for a school” (Qing, 2013). Although Qing does not consider herself to be a very technological person she still checks her mobile phone several times during our interview and rather than wearing a watch she uses her phone to keep track of time. For her, there is a distinction between different types of the technology. It is possible that she does not consider telling time by using her mobile phone a technological act; it is just something that is practical and based on easy access. Having domesticated the technology it is possible that she sees her phone more as an everyday tool than a technological gadget.

In reference to everydayness and the most repeated actions it seems that, for most of my informants, the Internet became a part of their routine when they started high school or college. Then it became a part of the way that they conduct their school work and gained value as a tool. What they use the Internet for is related to what they are doing in their life; for example studying. The experiences show that very little of what they do online is virtual, in the sense that it is something apart from everyday life. Rather, they way they use the Internet is grounded in their offline context and their needs. My informants use the Internet for mostly mundane activities such as staying in touch with friends and looking up information. The same picture is painted when looking at the questionnaire that I handed out at Fudan University in Shanghai. In the questionnaire thirty-nine out of forty-two students indicated that they used the Internet on a daily bases. The other three still used the Internet several times a week. Similarly to the informants that I conducted the qualitative interviews with, the respondents of the questionnaire used the Internet for school, news browsing, social networking and playing games. Thirty-three of them were members of a social networking site.

Liu (2006) contends that “implicit in the Western narrative about the Chinese Internet is the assumption that Chinese users are either busy inventing ways to circumvent the government’s censorship measures in pursuit of “the forbidden truth” or are left at a loss in front of the Great Firewall” (p.46). However, she finds that this depiction is not accurate when it comes to the everyday online lives of Chinese netizens<sup>2</sup>, whose Internet usage is mostly geared towards entertainment and socially connecting. My findings are in line with Lius’ argumentation.

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<sup>2</sup> A netizen is someone who frequently uses the Internet (CNNIC).

However, as I will show in the next chapter, their way of using the Internet and how they perceive it is affected when they move abroad. I will also show that although they are not left at a loss in front of “the Great Firewall”, it is still a factor to be taken into account when looking at my informants’ everyday experiences and how they perceive the Internet and its possibilities. As Liu (2011) herself argues: “ we need to view the Internet as a technology in interaction with some key institutions which affect young peoples’ lives in significant ways, such as the state, the family, the school, higher education institutions, the market and the workplace “(p.4).

## Chapter 5: Physical location and Internet habits

From the previous chapter we can conclude that using the Internet is a part of my informant's daily life and routines. They use it for news browsing, school work, social media, and entertainment. In this chapter we will investigate what impact physical location has on Internet routines and how the students gather and view information.

### 5.1 Same same but different- new location same routines

A lot of my research participants' online activity can be captured by the term information gathering; searching for news, shopping, or finding articles for school. When talking about information gathering it becomes clear that all of my informants agree that the Internet has changed the way they gather information. Most of them think that the Internet is a time saving technology that makes information gathering more efficient. Jing explains that it saves her from spending hours at the library and is a good way to learn English:

*I think the Internet has changed greatly how we gather information. Like in the past you would spend an entire day in the library but today you can save a lot of time by using the Internet. And also you can get news from abroad and it is a good way to learn English (Jing, 2010).*

In talking about information gathering the conversation often turns to different search engines, mostly Google and Baidu (a Chinese search engine). One thing that stands out in the descriptions is that my informants maintain their old Internet habits as they move but that they use new outlets. They still do the same things online but they do it through a different website or channel. Rather than using Baidu as their search engine they now use Google and the same goes for Youku which is now replaced by Youtube:

China	Sweden
Baidu	Google
Renren	Facebook
Youku/Tudou	Youtube
Weibo	Twitter

Another thing that stands out is the way they make use of social media. When it comes to speaking with Chinese friends that they meet in Sweden many of them still use QQ or Renren.

However, with the international friends they make, they use Facebook; they maintain two different spheres of communication. Not only do they use different software to communicate with people but Yuan also tells me that she thinks that the way of communicating in Sweden is different than that in China. In Sweden she finds that people use email a lot more than back home and that if she wants to meet a professor she needs to book an appointment ahead of time; through email:

*Everyone use email a lot. In China I don't think we use email that often. [...] Like when I was in China I don't check my email every day, maybe every month.[...] And it feels like here everything needs to be booked, like if you want to meet a professor you need to email them first but in China not so often (Yuan, 2013).*

These different social media networks was something that I became aware of when I was conducting fieldwork. When I contacted Chinese organizations in Sweden, they told me that the best way to distribute information about myself was to send it out via QQ. However, when I was recruiting Chinese students' face-to-face, they wanted me to contact them via Facebook.

Lian tells me that she really enjoys using Youtube to watch different shows and learn more English. In China she would use Tudou when she wanted to watch shows online but since she found Youtube, she only uses that. She explains that she had never used Youtube before coming to Sweden. For her, Youtube is more of a Western thing, and she thinks that that is a common understanding in China. Lian further tells me that while she is in Sweden she wants to use Youtube as much as possible to practice English because she knows when she goes back that she will have to go back to using Tudou. In regards to social media, she explains that before she moved away from China she had no need to use Facebook: all her friends used Renren and she did not have any friends from overseas. Back home she did not feel like anything was missing in her life, Facebook and Youtube was just not relevant to her.

Routines frame the everyday use of the Internet for my informants and it is also through these habits that the changes that come from moving become visible. In regards to social media, Jing, who did an exchange in the US and then went back to China, notes that once back in China she, cannot access Facebook. Prior to leaving for the US she did not use it but there she established a new habit which is hard to maintain in China. She explains that she cannot access Facebook without using a proxy server and that she has not kept in touch with her American friends:

*(Laughing) Yeah, my American friends think I have disappeared magically. I can't use certain functions of Gmail either, it's not that stable (Jing, 2010).*

Both Cheng and Fu-Han tell me that they have maintained similar Internet habits when moving from China to Sweden. However, although the routine might be the same, the outcome is different. Fu-Han tells me that nothing is stopping the information flow so he can access more information:

*Here, actually almost the same. But I can access things better; there is no wall on my face. Nothing stops me so I can read. I was quite interested before but I cannot read it (Fu-Han, 2013).*

Cheng, who spent a few years in Sweden and then returned to China, says that although the routine might be the same, what he expects to get from the Internet changed when he moved from China to Sweden. Rather than just being a tool for entertainment it became a carrier of information. He became even more aware of his new Swedish relation to the Internet once he moved back to China:

*I think it is a whole set of routines when you turn on your computer but something in the routine has been changed, like what you expect to get from the Internet has been changed. For example, before a computer for me is like an entertainment tool but in Sweden I feel like there is so much more information that I can get. I do feel that way. I did not really have this explicit feeling at first but I really got this understanding after I came back to China again because a lot of the information was being restricted (Cheng, 2013).*

As such, Cheng's routine has made him aware of the differences that exist. If we view everydayness as the most repeated actions and that everyday life is steeped in routines that we almost do without thinking (Bakardjieva, 2011), then exercising that same routine but getting a different outcome makes a break from the routine. It is no longer the most repeated - taken for granted- action, rather it becomes a filter through which a difference becomes evident. The technology suddenly has new possibilities, in Chengs' case the Internet moves beyond being a tool for entertainment.

My informants' habits and routines are not just affected by being in a different country but also by other factors in their offline context. Lian, for instance tells me that she has a different kind of freedom in Sweden because she is living on her own and only has to care for herself, not



her family. She feels independent and has more free time to explore the things that interest her. In Sweden she lives on her own whereas back in China she shared a room with four other people. She explains that in China she could never live on her own as a student since her parents are paying for her education and that having a place of her own would be expensive. The independence for her does not just affect her on a practical level but on a mental level. Having time on her own has also allowed her to form her own opinions in a different way. Back home, she was more aware of what other people thought of her which does not affect her in the same way in Sweden. This scenario is a common theme among my informants'; back home they would live at home or in shared accommodation whereas in Sweden they can have a place on their own, or at least their own room. This also means that while using the Internet they have more access to privacy since they can do it in their own space. Thus place and Internet habits are not only connected to nation boundaries, but other differences that this move brings about.

## 5.2 Accessing new information – finding new truths

As we have established, my informants' tried to maintain the same everyday routines as back home, also in regards to the way they use the Internet. However, the result of these habits was different than at home. One main difference being that they could access more information online. With the restrictions on Swedish Internet being much less rigid than those imposed on the Chinese Internet, all of my informants have stories to tell about new things they have learned since arriving in Sweden. Almost all of them tell me that they had certain things that they wished to learn more about, several of them wanted to know more about China and certain political events. Qing tells me that she has learned a lot since she came to Sweden and that some of the information has really hurt her, such as knowing more about the Cultural Revolution in China:

*Oh gosh. There's a lot. I mean. It hurts me a lot. It does really hurt me a lot actually. Like the Cultural Revolution. When I come here I search on Youtube and I see the truth. I got that information in Shanghai because one of my foreign teachers he told me and at that time I didn't believe that. I don't believe that my people got killed; it's like oh my god! Yeah, then I search it on here to see the truth. That really hurt me a lot (Qing, 2013).*

She is not alone in this experience. Most of my informants have had similar experiences of being told that certain information is skewed by the Chinese government. One informant told me that

her middle school history teacher had let the kids read by themselves from the history books because she did not want to pass on the information:

*When I was in middle school I learned from the books and I remember very clear that I had a history teacher in middle school and she, when we went through one lesson she just said: ok you can read it yourself because I don't want to tell you the wrong history but you are supposed to know this one (Yuan, 2013).*

Yuan furthermore tells me that she learned about the Tiananmen Square massacre from a documentary that one of her friends had gotten a hold of. Thus, the information that they find online outside of China is not completely new to them. What is new is being able to search for information and find more and different versions of history being retold. Fu-Han had a very strong interest in finding information that was produced by a different source than the government. This interest had been growing in him for a long time before he left China:

*Especially I mean, it doesn't happen in one night, it happens gradually, I always wanted to look for websites outside of you know that Great firewall that is there to stops us from getting some new information. So before I come to Sweden I, for two years, I've done more and more to get information outside of because I have so many questions. I gradually don't believe what the official website talk about.*

In particular he wished to know more about the Tiananmen Square massacre. He was nine years old when it took place and as an adult he has started questioning the information that he has received regarding the incident:

*Actually, in 1989 I'm quite old, 9 years. I know something, I see that something is happening in my home town on the streets but normally I only get information from the television and all the television talk about it another way, another direction so I'm beginning to doubt about it. Gradually on the Internet I find something truthful that is not like what they told me before. It is different. And they want to stop me, the wall, from looking and discovering. So that happened when I come to the websites outside of China and get some information.*

Finding this information is not only associated with being able to access the information online but also about being able to talk to people about it. At his job in Sweden he talks a lot to his co-workers about these issues. Back home he feels like there is no interest for these type of discussion among the people around him and so there is no outlet for his thoughts in his everyday

life. In fact, he mostly speak about these issues with other foreigners because he feels more uneasy discussing it with Chinese strangers, since he does not know what kind of opinions they hold. So as such, the new offline context in Sweden enables a new way of discussing information. Fu-Han explains that one reason why he does not discuss these types of topics back home is because his friends around him are not interested. He expresses that he is disappointed because he feels like young people in China do not care about political matters. This has been a common theme throughout my fieldwork. In both Sweden and China, the students' tell me that young people in China do not care about politics. They have furthermore expressed that foreigners, who are usually labeled Westerners, care more about the political situation in China than the Chinese themselves. This is confirmed by foreigners' interests in discussing these matters and resonates with Fu-Han finding it easier to find people to talk to outside of China. Hence, most conversations regarding accessing new information have a tendency to spark a discussion on politics.

One of my informants, in contrast to most of them, says herself that she is not interested in political matters. However, this changed for her when she moved to Sweden. One of the reasons she that she was not interested in politics back home was the fact that she felt like she was just being fed information about how good socialism is. It was a Swedish friend who woke an interest in her for discussing political development. The friend came to her with some news and began talking and discussing the matter.

It is noteworthy that all of mine informants have expressed that young people in China do not care about politics, although they are themselves young and care about the topics. Also noteworthy is their definition of politics which, in general, does not include material and economic wellbeing. Most of them find that young people are concerned with their economic wellbeing rather than "politics":

*Political indifference is very popular here in China. Like the government wants the young people to focus on economic development so the message is, you do not have to care about politics focus on your school and your job (Jing, 2010).*

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*People simply don't talk about it and if you talk about it – I've tried to talk about it with several of my close friends and they are simply saying: yeah of course we know this – there is dictatorship and it is not a fair system but what can you do about it you know (Cheng, 2013).*

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*I'm sorry to say. I criticize a lot of people I love but I feel they don't care. I feel rather disappointed because they don't care about the freedom. They don't care about democracy. They care about their salary; how much they can buy; how much money they can make; how can I get enough money to buy a house; a good car (Fu-Han, 2013).*

Thus, they find that young people are not interested in discussing matters related to form of government or human rights. Most of them did think that their friends would be interested in discussing matters related to economic reforms. In contrast, within the Western world, there is a strong interest in China's political development and the potential for democratization. Moving to Sweden thus entails gaining access to information as well as new people to discuss matters with, people with a different background. One of my informants does not necessarily believe that the lack of discussions in China is due to a lack of interest but more due to a silent understanding of the way things are. Lian feels like maybe there is a Western way of thinking and a Chinese way of thinking and that the focus is different.

All the students that have left China feel like they receive more information when they are abroad. However, the students that I interview in Shanghai still find that the Internet gives them access to information that would otherwise not be available to them. Several of them think that the Internet is the easiest way of finding information that is illegal. By using proxy servers they believe that there is little information that they cannot access.

From a Foucauldian perspective, knowledge and power are intertwined and all the knowledge we have is a result of struggle. Schools are a good example; what is studied there is the results of whose version of the events is represented (Mills, 2004). When the students move from China to Sweden they enter a new discourse which depicts China's political history differently than the version been taught in school. As we have seen, this change not only means being able to find more information but also creating new social networks with people with backgrounds in other regimes of truths (Foucault, 2001). They begin positioning themselves in relation to, what most of my informants' label, the Western world. Going through that process

not only makes them question the information that they are given by the Chinese government but information and news in general, which I will elaborate on next.

#### 4.4 Creating new ways of filtering information

From the previous discussion we can contend that as the students move from China to Sweden they gain access to new information, both online and offline. One recurring theme throughout the interviews have been that gaining access to new information makes them question all information that come their way, new and old. They do not just embrace the new knowledge that they find and receive but rather create ways of assessing the information. Many of them explain that when searching for news they compare Chinese news with, mostly American news, and then find the truth somewhere in the middle of the stories. For Fu-Han this has led to a situation where he does not trust any news reporting:

*Uh actually, I don't trust any information. Once I learn or start reading something from outside China then I go and read it back to read what comments the Communist talk about this issue and then I compare. Actually to be honest I don't believe both. I look at what they say and the others say and I will compare with my own judgment (Fu-Han, 2010).*

When it comes to news reporting regarding China he finds that there is no balance; the news in China are 100 percent positive whereas he thinks that BBC and CNN are overly critical and mostly shows the bad side of China. Cheng also feels like he cannot trust anything but he stills thinks that he gets more information from the Internet when he is in Sweden. He describes it as gaining access to raw data that he can build upon:

*And I feel like I have this, I'm not like totally trust whatever I find on the Internet, even when I was in Sweden. But I do feel like the information provided by internet, first of all it's more comprehensive and second of all it can be very detailed of certain events. And third of all you don't really have just one school of thought; you have a lot of different discourse or perspectives out there. So it's sort of like a raw data that you can build upon to draw your own conclusion.*

This way of contrasting information is something that many of my informants who have moved abroad rely on. Bao, who wanted to find out more about what happened in 1989 tells me that she is still not sure what happened even though she has tried to research it in Sweden. She has found

things on Youtube and American news but doubt if she can trust it. She explains that she saw an interview with some Chinese students on American TV but thinks that the students probably gained a green card into the US by appearing on the show so how can she be sure that they are telling the truth. One thing that Bao has noted, which relates to questioning and weighing information differently in Sweden, is that the education system is very different. She explains that in China she is used to the teacher explaining what is right and what is wrong and on the examination there is only one correct answer, not a lot of discussions like in Sweden. She also tells me that they are not encouraged to speak and that her classmates are afraid of answering questions; fearing that the answer might be incorrect. This is in agreement with statements from other interviews regarding the educational differences. In Sweden they are expected to find information on their own and argue their case. Many of them have found that this also impacts their relationship to information and truth. Yuan thinks that one difference is the way that the education is structured, that in China it is more about knowledge input but in Sweden there is a lot of focus on discussion:

*I think the way of giving classes is quite different. Like in China it's more like knowledge input and you have a big class and the teacher is up there and uh the teachers is saying why it is like this and like that and how it is supposed to be. But here it is more discussion and you can join (Yuan, 2013).*

This difference is also put forth by some of the students that I interviewed in Shanghai who tell me that they had a guest lecturer from Sweden who wanted to have more discussions in the classroom. The researcher that I interviewed at Fudan University explained to me that Chinese peoples' awareness of the restrictions on the Internet, the wall, has helped people to become more critical in their way of thinking:

*When you talk to people in mainland China, they will tell you that there exists a wall and they know that everything in mainland China may have been censored so they suspect everything they read in the Internet. And I think it has helped them to develop a kind of habit of critic thinking, sometimes they just don't believe anything from the government sources or sponsored sources, they will try to find those outside sources, outside the wall (Shen Yi, 2010).*

In this process of moving abroad, and even just going outside of the firewall, the students are becoming more digitally literate. They start evaluating the sources of information and how it

has been produced and by whom. For some, this creates a situation where they do not trust any media source and they work hard at comparing the different versions that they find. The students often start speaking through polarities where the news from the United States become a representation of the Western world and is contrasted by the news put out by the Chinese government. In this circumstance, they are both becoming aware of different dominant discourses. They become more aware of different viewpoints and start reflecting on the differences between “the Western” and “the Chinese” way of thinking. For many of them this leads to a new understanding of concepts such as human rights, democracy, and freedom of speech. For some, this leads to a rights based approach towards freedom of expression. However, this does not mean that they completely reject everything that the Chinese government stands for. Although, most of the students wish to see a more democratic China, few think that China would be ready for a complete political transformation at this point in time. These topics will be further discussed in the following Chapter where I look into the Internet and surveillance.

## Chapter 6: The Internet and surveillance

We now move to the final question that this thesis seeks to investigate: what are the students' thoughts on the Internet regulations? One of the main differences, as elaborated in Chapter 2, between the Internet in Sweden and in China is the way the Internet is regulated. In China, the Internet is under rigid surveillance whereas in Sweden there is a high level of Internet freedom. There is also a difference in form of government: in China the Communist party has monopoly on political power and Sweden is a democracy that holds elections every four years.

### 6.1 Locating the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable online behavior

Something that is noteworthy regarding the Internet regulations in China is that all my informants seem to have a common understanding of what you can and cannot do online. This also translates to awareness of what you can and cannot do in the offline world. When discussing these matters, the conversation quickly turns to political opinions since that is one of the areas targeted by the regulations. For instance, Cheng explains to me that he can write something online which criticizes the government and that would be censored but if he shouts out the same critique with a sign on a square he would get arrested and sent to prison. There is a difference between what you can do online and offline. As long as you only state facts but do not try to create a movement, then you are pretty safe. He gives the example of the existence of gay bars in China but how there could never be a gay parade:

*If they are just saying facts, it's ok. But you can never take it out into practice, as a notion for a public movement. It's very like, gay bars are always allowed in china but you would never be allowed to have a gay parade in China (Cheng, 2013)*

They all agree that there is a limit to how far you can push your opinions online and they seem to agree that you can and it is line with what Cheng put forth. As long as you are only a "threat" online you can speak out a bit. In one of the group discussions in Shanghai, one of my informants (in agreement with the rest of the participants) explained that as long as you are not too extreme you can voice your opinion; if you attack the Party or a political leader then you have crossed the line:



*If you just focus on a certain issues, it will be fine but if you start to attack the Party or a certain political leader you cross the line. So it's just my understanding but maybe they have more rules about what is extreme. I don't know (Jing, 2010).*

Fu-Han has never had contact with the authorities himself but tells me that if you criticize something online, then first you would get deleted and monitored, if you kept on writing critical things then you could be invited to tea at the police office. According to him this is a polite way for the police to have a discussion with you regarding your behavior.

None of my students had first-hand experience dealing with the authorities in these matters. One of my informants offered to test the boundaries by posting something online, although naturally I declined the offer. However, he did tell me that he had, at times had his posts deleted from Weiboo (Chinese Twitter). When that happened the post had been removed and replaced by information that the post had been deleted due to the nature of the content.

Although all of my informants can explain to me what they are allowed to do and not online, most of them have a harder time explaining how they know where the line is drawn. Some explain that you just know because you get deleted if you write something wrong. Others tell me that they know that there is a list of forbidden words but they do not know who makes the list or how often it gets changed. One of my informants tells me that there is no way of knowing for sure or confirming that the list exists but he believes that it does. It is noteworthy, that all of my informants share the same understanding of the limits of online behavior but no one can explain how they know. Qing, who shares the same understanding regarding the Internet regulations, does not know who makes the rules and laws regarding the system:

*The law in China is also tricky, I mean, it's not developed quite good, not like Western countries. They are still working on that. I think they are still working because when the economic goes quickly something changed in there slightly. Also the law takes time, to get into the right position. So I don't understand that part of the law, who made it and not.[...] I don't know, I don't know that part. Um. The party maybe, I really don't know (Qing, 2010).*

One way of finding out how not act seems to be by following famous people in China and their Weiboo flow and from their get a sense of what gets deleted. Another way is to search for information on Baidu and on Google and from the different search result it is possible to

conclude what is a sensitive topic. Bao tells me that when she searches for information in the two search engines, sometimes the results are completely different. She sometimes gets results that are not related to her search topic:

*We have a copy on Google, the name for this search is Baidu. If you search the same thing on Baidu and search the same thing on Google, the resultants are totally different. And I also find that if you search Baidu the results are sometimes going to be very funny things like you never mean to search that but you get access to Google and then you can find something you want.[...] I can access in Google but the thing is like the results of Google are not really the things, they are filtered.*

She is not alone in finding that when she uses different search engines, she gets different results. Cheng explains that it is a bit crazy because sometimes things that he thinks are quite normal and not very controversial gets completely censored and cannot be found on Wikipedia, as an example he mentions Christianity.

The rules regulating online content are not fixed but rather fluent, according to my informants. Fu-Han tells me that there was a traffic accident in Beijing that caused a lot of attention and during that period there was certain information that was banned online for a while. He also explains that the rules are not clear but that you just have to keep updated and compare and follow what is happening:

*They change a lot. They probably have some kind of list of what words are illegal and it is longer and longer every day but maybe half a year later they will open it again and ok so half a year has passed so we can open it so there I no lines about what is legal and illegal (Fu-Han, 2013).*

One concept that was put forth to me in an interview in Shanghai, in regards to the Internet regulations, is that of a half-dollar party. The belief is that there are people who are paid by the government to go into chat forums and different online forums to steer discussions away from negative sentiments regarding the government and its politics. This phenomenon has since been discussed in all of my interviews and all of my informants believe in it. They call it a half-dollar, or half-Yuan party, because the people who do it are supposed to be paid half a Yuan per comment. As with the list of banned words, most of them do not have any proof but still believes in the concept. Several of them say that it is possible to identify the people who are working for the government by the comments they make in the forums. Jing explains that if someone is

criticizing the current policy online, there will always be a person who comes out and defends the government:

*When someone come up to the Internet and start criticize the current policy, there I always some guy who jumps out and say: we support the government! And what we are saying is wrong. And some people say that this kind of group of people is hired by the government and every time they write a comment they get paid a half dollar each. So we call it WuMaoDang, it is not half dollar but half Yuan [...] I don't know, we don't know if it is true or not, maybe it is funny joke (Jing, 2010)*

Fu-Han tells me that he thinks that it is an efficient strategy for the government in order to influence young people's opinions. However, he does not see himself as being affected by it because he can immediately figure out if the opinion is from the government. In fact, he is the only one who has told me that he knows someone who gets paid to write comments online. Although, he does not condone having that type of work, he understands that his friend does it because he comes from a poor family:

*Actually I have a classmate who is working for this. He is working like this! [...] I make joke to him. But actually I understand, he comes from a poor family and poor areas and that job is very important for him. I make joke on him because I don't like this way to make money. I think it is bad but on another way I understand it. It is not easy for him. For his life, he has to do something to get food and I'm just a little disappointed on not having his opinion on how bad it is what he is doing. He just think, ok I do my job and get money from government (Fu-Han, 2013).*

In only one interview, the half-dollar party was not mentioned and then I asked an explicit question regarding it. The interviewee had never heard about it but when I explained the meaning of it, her responsive was that there is probably some truth to it, if people believe in it.

## **6.2 Thoughts on Internet regulations**

In the previous discussion we established that my informants have a shared understanding of what they are allowed to do and not allowed to do online. The next question then is how they are affected by the regulations. How do they as Internet users feel about the regulations? And how is this linked to physical location? When looking at my informants opinions of the Internet

regulations three different types of opinion are recurring which I will discuss in the coming section: *Internet regulations as an inconvenience, the Internet regulations as a violation of rights, and Internet regulations as a safeguard against harmful or untrue information.*

### **6.2.1 Internet regulations as an inconvenience**

The ones who criticize the regulations on a pragmatic level generally do not see anything wrong with using proxy servers to access information that is unavailable. Their biggest concern is that it takes very long to access the information and that is a source of frustration. Löfgren and Wikdahl (1999) note that one of the inherent features of new communication media in the twentieth century has been the increasingly rapid wear and tear. The way the market for these products work means that to be updated, one needs to constantly make new investments. A computer program becomes dated within a few years. In this context, speed is at the core. They note that e-mail transformed letters into snail-mail. In regards to how the Internet is perceived, they note that as things move faster: “waiting one second extra for the modem to connect may feel like an eternity” (p. 54).

One of my informants tells me that it can take her several hours to access Facebook, whereas when she access other pages (not banned by the firewall), time is not a problem. Jing tells me that while she understands that there are political reasons to why the regulations exist it is still frustrating not being able to find things:

*Yeah It is very frustrating to be honest. Especially, I mean we can understand that maybe because of some history , like different people have different understanding, we can understand that. But it is not necessary to block everything which seems to be unfavorable to you but they're not, they just make inconvenient for people (Jing, 2010).*

Although the inconvenience of the regulations is put forth by several people, there are some who think that in reality you can find whatever you want online; if you really want to find information then you can. For instance, Dong tells me that he does not think that the censorship does much harm because people can still find things online:

*I think the censorship does not do so much harm to the Internet users because the guys who really want to find information they will find a way. So if you just get some news or find some music it is ok but if you want to get some special news or some special information you can find this, it is not banned so bad (Dong, 2010).*

The opinion that the Internet regulations are inconvenient was mostly put forth by the students that I interviewed in Shanghai. They were also the ones who tended to hold the opinion that you can access most things if you want to. This opinion was also put forth by the researcher who I interviewed at Fudan University who believed that if people wanted to see something outside of the wall, then they could.

### ***6.2.2 Internet regulations as a violation of rights***

Some of the students put forth that they thought that the Internet regulations were a violation of their rights; they saw themselves as having a right to information. This rights based approach was almost exclusively expressed by the students who had gone abroad and either were still abroad or had returned to China. They also agreed that the regulations were inconvenient but discussed the matter from a more rights-based approach. Qing explains to me that she thinks that freedom and truth are two separate but very strong words. She does not necessarily feel freer in Sweden because she thinks that the bureaucratic system in Sweden with long processes is hard to grasp as a foreigner, and for her that is the opposite of freedom. However, she believes in the truth and that people have a right to find out the truth. At the most basic level she thinks that at least Google and Facebook should be legal. In her opinion, people should be able to speak out without being deleted; “whatever they think they should be able to speak” (Qing, 2013). She sees the Internet regulations as one big machinery and being deleted for her is not so much a punishment, rather she sees it as people doing their jobs and explains that everyone is under the power: “it’s under the power, people who work for that is also under the power. Hm, but yeah that’s what I think” (Qing, 2013).

Fu-Han also wishes for the Internet in China to have less censorship. For him it is connected with his desire for China to move towards democracy. He believes that freedom of speech and democracy is human nature and that it cannot be stopped forever. He tells me that he felt free when he left China and these opinions have continued to grow in him. He used to think that Communism was the only way for China but he has changed his mind about that along the way:

*Before I still don't think communist is a good way but I think that there is no better way for China. I think it is not so good but you have no option. I can't find some better way. So I always talk to my friends and then I say uh the communist is bad choice for Chinese people but only choice for Chinese people. So I prefer to accept it and was satisfied over there. [...] But gradually I find that: no it should be better. Especially when the Taiwan have more good democracy, I read a lot about Taiwan you know because it is much more easy to learn from Taiwan because we have same culture, same tradition (Fu-Han, 2013).*

However, although he hopes for a democratic future in China he emphasizes that China is not ready for it yet: the level of education needs to be increased first.

Similar to Fu-han, Cheng tells me that his opinions regarding the restrictions online changed when he was abroad. When he left China he did not feel that there was much information that he was missing out on. He was aware that there was information that he was not accessing but it did not bother him much. At that point, he was still very defensive regarding China. He did not feel like his rights were being violated in China or anything like that. His mentality started to change when he was in Sweden and he was overwhelmed by the information input regarding human rights and the dictatorship in China. Although he did not embrace all the information, a lot of the information he felt was related to a strong Western doctrine. Initially the situation disturbed him and made him upset. It also triggered a lot of passion and made him restless. It made him unsure of a lot of things and he relates it to the quote: "the more you know, the more you know you don't know". He explains that the way he was doing things was so built into his routines and his unconsciousness that when this change started to take place it made him reflect on his entire way of thinking. After being abroad and coming back, he felt like it was hard to readjust his thinking again. He feels as though in order to fit in with his friends he needs to shed the thoughts and discussion regarding political development. He expresses that he sometimes wish that he had never left China because now he is more discontent than before. In order to have an outlet for these feelings and opinions he has started to use Weibo. There he tries to put out some of his opinions about why the country is the way it is and try to get people to re-examine their lifestyle. He also tries to follow people on Weibo, like lawyers and journalists, who are working for change. He explains that he uses Weibo for this purpose because he is not crazy enough to go to Tiananmen square and do something like start a fire.

Bao tells me that she thinks that people have a right to have information about what is going on and for that reason things should not be blocked or banned. She also thinks that people have the right to voice their opinions but she thinks that it is more complicated in China than in Sweden because of the large population and peoples' lack of education. In line with Fu-Han, she believes that China needs to mature and ensure a higher level of education for the people before being able to enforce complete democratic reforms. However, she also points out that she does not think that the way she acts online would change that much even if the restrictions were removed. She mostly wants to be able to talk to her friends on Facebook and social media without worrying about what she can and cannot say. She is not looking to personally put out a lot of political opinions online.

### **6.2.3 The regulations as a safeguard against harmful or untrue information**

The third discernable opinion regarding the Internet regulations in China was mostly found among the students that I interviewed in Shanghai. Although, no one expressed a desire to keep the regulations exactly the way they are, several research participants explained that they saw a need for some kind of restrictions. The line of argumentation was that the regulations needed to be in place in order to protect people from websites that are dangerous and harmful as well as from having information that is untrue being spread. The need to protect the young and the uneducated was frequently brought forward. Although, most of them thought that certain information that is blocked should be available to them, they thought that it was still important to have a system in place. Within this discussion, truth was an important issue. Mei, told me that some websites are dangerous and that if untrue information is spread, then it can damage the image of the country:

*Some websites they are actually dangerous. Because if the website is not being checked whether it's content is true or not so if they publish something which is harmful or maybe damage the image of our country I think it's not good so to some extent we should do some censorship (Mei, 2010).*

Wei was also concerned with the truth and said that people should not be speaking out towards the government if maybe they are just upset about something unrelated in their personal life:

*Maybe some blackout is rational because some opinions are too extreme and I don't think that is very good for young kids [...] I think just to talk about it honestly. Not to talk about it just to express anger*

*about your life, for example; I got dumped by my girlfriend so now I will say something bad about the government. It's not very good (Wei, 2010).*

Most of the students who carried these opinions still thought that the censorship had a good side and a bad side. The bad side being that there is certain information that they wished to be able to access, but they could still relate to the government's decision regarding the Internet. These students had a tendency to be more critical of the way that the international news depict China and that there is too much focus on all the things that China does that goes against the Western way of living, such as democracy. Wei explains that the overseas news-agencies do not know about China close to the people and they do not realize that people in China are just living their lives:

*I think most of the time, the overseas news-agencies do not have the chance to know about this very close to the people. They can just see this problem, and netizens talk about it so they know about it but most of the time this is not very common for China because most of the time people are just living here and enjoying their lives. I think maybe they are not so, how do you say, they are not so objective about the Chinese government. I think that China is definitely going to be more democratic but maybe the way is not the same as in Europe or America because Chinese people are different, and the culture is different and I think that it is very important.*

This group of students still wanted to access information but unlike the other two groups that I have described, they were more positive towards the regulations and the government. Also, they did not necessarily see the connection between freedom of speech and political rights. For them, the regulations were more related to ensuring protection for uneducated people and kids.

Looking at the three different discernable groups of opinions regarding the regulations on the Internet in China, it is also possible to view the impact of location. The group of students that had moved abroad tended to have a different motivation for questioning the regulations, based on their rights to freedom of expression and information. With this group, it was also possible to note that prior to moving abroad, they had opinions that were more in line with the group that thought the regulations were an inconvenience. Some have gone through the process of moving abroad and then moving back to China again, and those informants were the ones who held the strongest opinions against the censorship. The end goal for both the rights-based group and the



group that thought the regulations were an inconvenience, is similar; a freer and faster Internet. However, their line of argumentation is what separates them. The rights-based group has taken on a more ideological rejection of the regulations where they find themselves violated by the constraints rather than inconvenienced.

It seems as the proxy servers become a coping strategy for the students who want to gain access to information that is restricted, they log onto websites that allow them access. The frustration is then related to access through these servers is very slow, which illuminates the existence of the restrictions and becomes a cause of frustration. Once the students move abroad, the concept of the proxy servers are no longer a sufficient coping strategy because the reason for their frustration is caused not only by speed (or lack thereof) but rather the feeling that their rights have been violated.

For the ones who thought that the regulations needed to be in place as a safeguard against harmful and untrue information, the end goal was to ensure that the information found online is true. This view was only expressed by students who were living in China and had not been abroad. This group of students was also critical towards the international media image of China that according to the, only puts emphasis on the problems in China, ac. By –more or less- agreeing with the regulations, they are positioning themselves against a Western paradigm that they feel are attacking China without substance. In this Western depiction, they feel that there is a lack of knowledge regarding China and everyday life.

### **6.3 The few watching the many and the many watching the few.**

When discussing the Internet regulations in China and how to act online, the students also put forth another side of it and that is their ability to use the Internet to monitor the acts of the government and the people in power. Almost all of them believe that the Internet will somehow affect China's political future. Mei tells me that the Internet gives them so many more channels to supervise the government and thereby the government is forced to tell them what is going on:

*It will make it much better because we have the Internet and we have many more channels to supervise what the government is doing, they have to tell us what they are doing and so I think it is a better way (Mei, 2010).*

The view it as the Internet giving them access into a political arena which is otherwise closed off for them. Also, by joining together online the government has to respect them. Mei continues to tell me that as people they do not have much power but in this context it becomes a tool for gathering and speaking to the government, forcing the government to respect and listen to them:

*Because we people, we don't have that much power but with the Internet is a good tool for us to gather together and tell what we want to tell the government what we need so it is a very good channel. Individually we don't have power but when we join together they have to respect us and they can now learn how to respect peoples' opinion.*

Being able to supervise the government's actions is something that comes across in this discussion and I am told about a case where an Internet group with local residents joined together and investigated a case regarding corruption of government officials.

Speaking of the government is not completely straightforward since, as we established previously, several of my informants cannot explain how the political system in China works or who makes the laws. During my interviews, the term government and the Party is often used interchangeably. The term does not necessarily point to the national government but just as often to the local governments and the officials who work there. The term government comes across as being the same as a government official or people who hold a position within the Party. One informant tells me that in China they do not talk about politicians as such but rather they are referred to as "public affairs official". The same informant explains that lawyers in China use Weibo in order to get information out regarding injustices in rural areas and about the unjust law system. He further explains that being on Weibo, and thereby in the public eye, protects their personal safety. By being on Weibo, people know what they lawyers are doing and if they go missing, people demand to get information about it:

*I'm following a lawyer and once in a while he would just disappear and people would, we would twitter him with his name and say: this person, this lawyer has disappeared for two days, whoever knows the news broadcast it. And then it will be two days later and the person himself will twitter: ok I got beaten up because I was relentlessly following a case. I was beaten up by the police and they shut me in the house and they warned me never to do this again otherwise I would be in jeopardy (Cheng, 2013).*

So being famous warrants the safety of these people, according to my informant. He believes that if a lawyer who did not have lots of followers did the same thing then they would be taking a big

risk. My informant thinks that although it is a small step that it is still a very positive development. Another one of my informants puts a lot of hope into Weibo and thinks that it could be something that will affect China's development. He explains that the authorities have no way to control the information on Weibo until after it has been published and even if that happens in half a day, during that time people are able to read it. He thinks that can have an impact on the way that people think since it gives them access to learn about other opinions.

As elaborated on in the theoretical discussion in Chapter 3, Foucault argued that people who are aware that they are under constant surveillance (in combination with other control mechanisms) would adapt their thoughts and behavior. Tsui (2003) argues that the Internet in China is shaped in accordance with the panopticon architecture and that there is control from legal, social, economic, and technical perspectives. In regards to their behavior, it is evident that some of my respondents adapt their behavior in line with the Internet regulations in order not to be censored or noticed by the government in a way that could jeopardize their personal safety. By searching for information they learn what they can and cannot say and by spreading this information they also become a part of the normalizing and controlling mechanisms. They are very aware of what they can and cannot do online without having anyone explicitly tell them.

They become aware of the surveillance through different ways, not being able to access information being one way. They are aware that they are being monitored and act accordingly. However, with the Internet granting them access to information that was not previously available to them, the Internet is not perceived as a monitoring device but rather a gateway to information and political action. For the students who have not left China, the Internet is seen as a device that lets them supervise the government just as much as the government gets to supervise them. The concept of synopticon, where the few watch the many, and sousveillance, where monitoring devices are used to confront the ones doing the monitoring, become relevant concepts in this discussion. In fact, several of the students believe that the Internet gives famous dissidents protection by being able to use Weibo (Chinese Twitter) to write publicly about being arrested and what the police have done to them. Thereby, they can also spread information that affects the way people think, at least potentially. The students themselves are also conducting acts of resistance by using proxy servers to grant them access to information that is restricted. Although, being able to do this is associated with having the technological know-how or money to pay for it. As in the case of the half-dollar party, one of my informants shows an understanding for the

people who get paid to write pro-government comments online, he feels like they do not know any better and that they are poor and need the money.

While Tsui (2003) argues that the Chinese Internet is completely in line with that of the panopticon, I would argue that although the panopticon is – to some extent- applicable to the Internet in China, it is still not a perfect system. One of the features of the panopticon is constant surveillance and not knowing whether you are being watched or not which would in turn create individuals who act as though they are constantly being watched. However, with Weibo, my informants tell me that one of the positive features is that the government do not censor until after something has been written, which can take them at least a few hours and up to twenty-four hours. Thereby, people have learned that the guards are not always in the watchtowers. Although, the price to be paid for breaking the rules might be incarceration once they get found out, for a certain amount of people it still becomes a worthwhile form of resistance. Another challenge in regards to the panopticon is that of online anonymity. While the Chinese government forces people to register when they use Internet café's, and my informants also note that people can be located through their IP-address, one of my informants told me that in certain geographical areas they are not as strict. This means that people have more anonymity.

These circumstances pose a challenge when discussing China as a panopticon. Although there are attributes that are reminiscent of that of a panopticon, the reality is more complex. Dupont (2008) identifies this complexity surrounding the application of the panopticon onto Internet surveillance as “the openness paradox” (p.259). He argues that the same openness that makes electronic surveillance fairly easy to carry out, also empowers application writers who wish to resist surveillance:

While the technical protocols that underpin the Internet are public and standardized, therefore making surveillance relatively easy to carry out, the very same openness empowers application writers (programmers), who are free to design and distribute new tools of surveillance and resistance (Dupont, 2008:259).

For Dupont (2008) this leads to a rejection of the panopticon as an analytical framework. My findings point to the difficulties in expressing that China is the ultimate panopticon. However, I argue that the panopticon, in combination with Foucault's thoughts on power and knowledge, is relevant as it showcases the outer boundaries of surveillance. This complexity is also an example

of the benefit of adding concepts such as the synopticon and sousveillance to the analysis. It helps to capture the Internet usage which has led to the many watching the few just as the few watch the many.

Within the discussion of panopticon, the role of physical location also plays a part. Not only for how my informants experience the Internet regulations but also when it comes to the offline realities within China. As one of my informants explained, there is stricter control on the Internet in Beijing because that is the capital and what someone writes on Weibo there, might easier leak to international media. On the flipside, he also believes that the people in the bigger cities have more knowledge and the awareness of the surveillance and know how to circumvent the technology. According to my informants, the people in the rural areas and people little education are the ones who suffer the most from the surveillance, in terms of access to information. They believe that the people with less education have a harder time identifying what is government propaganda and not, and therefore, more often believe the news from the government. For the students that move abroad, there is a geographical shift in their concern and they start speaking about “Chinese people” or “young people in China” not caring enough about politics or not questioning the information from the government enough.

One of the areas where my students share similar opinions is in regards to the Internet affecting China’s future. They all believe that the Internet will make things better for them and that it gives them a voice. The students believe that the Internet has opened an arena for public discussion that was previously not open to them and that it lets them—to some extent- supervise the government. The major dividing point between the students in this regards, is that the students who have gone abroad are more eager to create change. They find it harder to accept the way things are and are more likely to get involved in the political arena.

## Chapter 7: Conclusions and applicability

### 7.1 Summary

The aim of this thesis, as stated in the introduction, is to understand how Chinese university students *use* and *perceive* the Internet. Emphasis is placed on the impact of physical location in regards to Internet habits.

Using the Internet is an everyday occurrence in my informants' life and a tool for both entertainment and searching for information. Much of their early Internet habits were shaped by offline factors such as school and parents. When they were young they had little private time with computers and for most of them, their Internet habits reached a new phase when they started high school or university. All of my informants use the Internet every day and some use it up to fourteen hours a day. When the students move abroad, they bring with them their habits from back home but in regards to the Internet, these habits create new result in the new context. They can access information that was previously censored. The way they experience this new information is related to offline factors, such as a new educational environment and new friends. The way they view this new access to information is shaped by the new social networks they find themselves in, where discussion of a political nature are enabled and encouraged. In the new educational system they experience truths to be more fluent and are encouraged to argue a position, rather than being taught what is wrong and what is right.

When moving, the polarity of East and West come to the forefront and starts to have new meaning. They find themselves embracing opinions that they had perhaps previously rejected in defense of China. In this process they start questioning a lot of the information that they come across and thereby become more digitally literate. However, for some of them, this leads to a situation where they do not trust any news or source. They question the news from the Chinese government and are critical towards American news in the same way. It has become evident throughout this study that physical location plays a role in shaping the how the students' view information. Not just by being able to access more information but through discussions with people who have grown up with a different set of truths. Through the words of Buckingham (2008) it is possible to say that they reach a point of critical literacy where they not only make distinctions between reliable and unreliable sources but also about understanding who produces

media and how these media represent the world and create meaning. Their new opinions are shaped just as much by the new offline environment as it is by the information online. For example, living alone has been an important way of being able to explore new opinions without influence of friends or family. Thus, the importance of physical location is not only related to moving between nation boundaries but between different discourses and truths.

In regards to the surveillance on the Internet in China, it became evident that all the students shared an understanding of what they can and cannot do online, and offline, particularly in regards to political expression. They expressed that they can write certain political things online as long as they do not encourage any form of action. Although, they find it harder to articulate how they know these things, they found out through searching things online and following what famous people write on Weibo.

Although their understanding of what you are allowed to do online was shared, they had different opinions on the Internet regulations in China. There were three discernable groups of opinions; the regulations as an inconvenience, the regulations as a violation of rights, and the regulations as a safeguard against harmful or untrue informations. Within this discussion it was possible to relate the opinions to physical location. The informants who felt that the regulations were a violation of their rights, were almost exclusively students who had studied abroad and either stayed abroad or returned home. Prior to leaving China, these students explain that their opinions were much in line with those expressed regarding the regulations being an inconvenience. Before moving abroad, they felt that they had access to most of the things that they needed but after being abroad, they embraced more of a rights based way of discussing and thinking. Hence, after moving they had the opinion that their rights were being violated. The other two groups mostly consist of students who have not left China. The group that sees the Internet as an inconvenience, find it frustrating that it takes so long to access things through proxy servers, which they have no problems using. The group which support the regulations the most, tend to be more critical towards the international media coverage on China, which they think is biased and focuses too much on the negative side of China.

As we look at the Internet as a technology in interaction with some key institutions which affect young people's life such as state, family and educational differences, we can conclude that the Internet must be understood within the local experience. And the local experience in this case

shows that Internet access is not just related to access and age but other institutions, such as school. I would thus argue that it is hard to purely speak through the concept of a Net generation if we wish to understand the experiences that youth have with the Internet. In order to really understand how they *use* and *perceive* the technology, we need to focus as much on the offline reality that surrounds it, as that which takes place on the computer screen. In the next and final section, I will explain how this information can be applied within the context of development as well as education.

## **7.2 Applicability: Development and the Internet**

Insights into the Internet habits of Chinese youth, as well as how these are affected by place can be relevant for many sectors, such as enterprises targeting that group. However, since the fieldwork for the thesis has been partly financed by Sida (the Swedish International Development Agency), I find it particularly relevant to focus on applicability in relation to development. Sida works with international development on behalf of Swedish tax payers and their areas of work include democracy, human rights and equality (Sida.se). A cornerstone of the work aimed at democracy is freedom of expression and it is in this area that, I argue, the findings of this research can be applied. Within the discussion on the Internet and development, the digital divide is often put to the forefront. The digital divide refers to problems generated by unequal access to the Internet and exists both within and across societies. The digital divide tends to focus on physical access to the technology and is often and economic as well as a geographic issue (Braman, 2011).

The results of this study shows that if we wish to affect the way that Chinese youth view the Internet in regards to freedom of expression, it is not enough to merely provide them with physical access. In order to get to the point where a shift could take place, we need to understand what freedom of expression means to them. How do they understand the concept? What does it mean to them in their lives? Many of the students that I interviewed, even the ones who studied international politics, struggled with the concept and found it too large and intangible. It was viewed as something not relevant to them, a Western thing. Freedom of expression can easily become something associated with the Western doctrine if nothing more than physical access is provided. If the goal is to spread an understanding of freedom of expression that will make them demand it for themselves, then it needs to be anchored in their localized reality. As this study



showed, most of the students found that they had the access that they needed, it was only a bit slow. However, the ones that had moved abroad and had been a part of a new social and cultural context, where democracy is the norm, had a different experience. They not only found the Internet regulations an inconvenience but a violation of their rights.

Wheeler (2011) touches on the debate between economic development and democratization and notes that the experience from Asia show that economic development is possible without political reforms towards democracy. This is a point that many of my informants who have been abroad make; that Chinese youth do not care about politics because they are focused on economic development and material values. In this definition, they are pointing to politics in regards to form of government. They find it hard to have conversations regarding politics because their friends are preoccupied with their careers. Cheng, who has been abroad and now is back in China, puts forth that when he talks to his friends about political development they think that he is too idealistic and tell him:

*Let's just go out and get some money and they think that I'm too idealistic and they are persuading me to get my feet on the ground and get some work (Cheng, 2013).*

This carries important connotations for thinking about what efforts need to be emphasized when working towards spreading the concept of freedom of expression. It is crucial to relate it to something that the youth feel is relevant for them in order not to have it be an attack on the way they live their lives. Enabling study exchange programs would thus seem to be of more relevance in some cases than merely ensuring access to the technology. By granting the students access to the Swedish academic system, they also gain access to an environment where the discussion is as important as knowing what is right and wrong (within certain limits). That is precisely what this study has shown; that the students who have moved abroad become more digitally literate, in the sense that they started questioning sources and who produces media, how and why. These are all important cornerstones in them understanding why freedom of expression matters. Becoming more aware and having access to investigate sources also sparks a political interest. As for them, not being granted access to certain information then cuts down their ability to question content. I would thus argue that to grant international students subsidized education in Sweden is a worthwhile form of aid, if spreading an interest for freedom of expression is the end goal.

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