

Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission on “Lessons from Tiananmen and Implications for the United States”

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Co-Chairs, members of the Commission: thank you for giving me the honor of speaking before you today. My name is David Wertime and I am a Senior Editor at *Foreign Policy* magazine, where I focus on China, particularly Chinese media. Prior to joining FP, I spent almost two years co-founding and operating Chinese media analysis site *Tea Leaf Nation*, which was subsequently acquired by FP’s parent company. I am a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer who served in China, and also a fellow at the Truman National Security Project. My testimony today reflects only my own opinions.

Chinese media has undergone a dramatic evolution since 1989. One significant shift is the rise of the Internet in China, and to that end, my testimony today will focus on online Chinese media. Particularly important to my analysis is the recent phenomenon of Weibo, a Chinese micro-blogging platform launched by private company Sina in August 2009<sup>i</sup> in the wake of Twitter’s blocking<sup>ii</sup> in June 2009. Weibo allows for the wide sharing of 140-character posts and combines some features of its Western antecedents, Facebook and Twitter. User numbers are contested, but according to Sina statistics, Weibo had 96.7 million active users per month by December 2012, and 129.1 million by December 2013.<sup>iii</sup> (Research has shown<sup>iv</sup> most of these active users are simply sharing others’ original posts.) More recently, WeChat, a mobile discussion platform centered around discussions between invite-only groups of friends, has become China’s most popular social network, with parent company Tencent most recently claiming<sup>v</sup> a total of 355 million active monthly users on that platform and its international counterpart.

***The current state of Chinese media and information flows***

The ascent of Weibo, WeChat, and other Chinese web platforms boasting tens of millions of users mean that Chinese citizens now possess the power — one once reserved only for the Communist party — to publish their opinions directly to a (potentially vast) audience. They can sometimes, but not always, do so without prior delay or interference from authorities, giving them first-mover advantage over larger, more cumbersome, more controlled mainstream outlets. Just as the experience of publication has been personalized, so too has censorship. Countless millions of Chinese have seen their own online posts deleted (or held, then never published), meaning they have come face-to-face with the machinery of state information control for the first time.

Chinese media’s portrayal of unrest and dissent can be roughly plotted along a spectrum. At one end lie closely controlled Communist party mouthpieces, which include official news services like Xinhua and *People’s Daily*. These outlets do not pathologize every instance of dissent, but their treatment of it is strictly in accordance with what the party deems in its own interests. At the other end of the spectrum lies citizen media. This includes opinions on Weibo, genuine citizen journalism such as the live sharing of images and videos during a protest or in the aftermath of a crisis, as well as “self-media,” which refers colloquially to articles or newsletters published by individual users on WeChat to a “public account” to which other WeChat users can

subscribe. The spectrum between the two endpoints is populated by both left-leaning (conservative) and right-leaning (liberal) publications. These institutions all face some degree of censorship as well, but authorities do not vet their every word *ex ante*. In certain cases, particularly social media, dissent is valorized in a way unseen in mainstream or at least “mouthpiece” outlets.

A complex dialogue results between mainstream and social media. Mainstream reporters sometimes use social media platforms to leak stories that were spiked within their own organizations. Western reporting of topics banned in China can be reintroduced via a social media backdoor. Social media can also provide a counter-narrative to the official line, which is sometimes strong enough to force mainstream media to change its tune, or even to retract its story. Finally, online discussion itself can become an object for mainstream reportage, with outlets as staid as Xinhua routinely quoting web users and exploring trending online topics. In this way, social media chatter becomes news on its own, and dissent, even of the virtual sort, becomes collectivized.

It is important to note that most discussion on social platforms is apolitical. This reflects the existence of censorship and potential adverse consequences, but also the interests and inclinations of online users. But politics nonetheless lurks in the background, casting a wide shadow that can blanket even seemingly innocuous topics. Indeed, because Chinese authority is chary of anything that smacks of independent collective gathering or organizing, it sometimes censors content that may strike observers outside the party as innocuous. For example, in March 2011, Weibo censors frequently deleted terms like “iodized salt” and “radioactive iodine”<sup>vi</sup> after false rumors had spread that it would defend against radiation emanating from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in Japan; this in turn threatened to create street-level unrest as panicked citizens initiated a run<sup>vii</sup> on, of all things, table salt.

Because of the Internet’s ability to rile the masses and to create nation-wide awareness in a near instant, it can lend even moderate political organizing, with no ambition of nationwide reach or street protests, the appearance of a potentially devastating assault on Communist hegemony.<sup>viii</sup> This was likely a factor behind the harsh sentence meted out to Xu Zhiyong, a rights lawyer who was sentenced early this year to four years in prison. Remarkably, charges against him included “disturbing order” in “public spaces on the Internet,”<sup>ix</sup> a redefinition of “space” that effectively acknowledges the latent organizing power of the Chinese web.

### ***The limits of dissent***

Expression of dissent on the Internet and in social media is tightly circumscribed, but in a particularized way. The online presence of mainstream news outlets face limits at the institutional level; an editor can as surely be fired for an online editorial as one in print. But on social media, the picture complicates. An influential May 2013 study<sup>x</sup> by Harvard researchers argued convincingly that “when the Chinese people write scathing criticisms of their government and its leaders” online, “the probability that their post will be censored does not increase.” This study applied to over 3.6 million blog posts on 1,382 blog sites, not Twitter-like micro-blogs. But there is little reason to think the government approaches the two differently, since its overarching goal remains the same: “clipping social ties” between users to make collective action less likely, as the Harvard study writes.<sup>xi</sup> It appears that authorities have been largely successful in meeting this limited objective. Street protests often gather steam and

international recognition via social media, but there are precious few examples of discussions that begin on social media and then spill onto the streets.

Chinese online censorship is fast, pervasive, and diverse. One study puts the average proportion of censored posts at 13 percent,<sup>xii</sup> and another at 16 percent,<sup>xiii</sup> although the data sets analyzed are different. Most online censorship of this variety occurs within 24 hours, and often does so during surges in chatter — not surprising, as spikes indicate that an issue has become resonant enough for authorities to consider it dangerous.

A February 2014 experimental study by Harvard researchers<sup>xiv</sup> shows that both authorities, and in-house censors at the private companies that run Internet platforms, employ a wide suite of censorship tools. These include, but are not limited to, keyword blocking (holding for review all posts mentioning a certain word), search blocking (preventing other users from finding certain terms via search, even if other users have written about them), and the blocking of posts that depend on the identity of the user or even the time of day. The study found that this diversity occurs partly because websites have significant leeway to select their own censorship methods. One common approach is the automated review of a hand-selected set of keywords. Posts are automatically held, then reviewed by human beings, who determine whether to release or delete them. About 63 percent of those posts held are effectively deleted.<sup>xv</sup>

The application of censorship methods is not uniformly consistent across the map. A March 2012 statistical analysis<sup>xvi</sup> of 56 million Weibo posts found that the frequency of censorship varied greatly depending on the location of the user. In Tibet, for example, 53 percent of posts within the group studied were censored, making it the most censored province. Last on the list was Shanghai, with only 11.4 percent deleted, followed closely by Beijing, at 12 percent.

Many censorship methods have an automated component, while also involving a human "in the loop." This is partly because natural language processing is highly difficult when applied to written Chinese. Not only are there no spaces between words, but online users employ an ever-evolving lexicon of coded slang (including homophones, words that sound similar to those censored, and homographs, words that look similar to those censored) as well as memes, which are repeated phrases or images that themselves lack a clear meaning but carry political or cultural connotation in a dynamic online context. This helps explain why some estimates set the number of Chinese government censors at between 20,000 to 50,000.<sup>xvii</sup> This number must be added to in-house censors employed by the private companies or organizations behind many major online platforms. While in China, Harvard researchers were advised by one source<sup>xviii</sup> that for every 50,000 users, Chinese platforms should employ two or three of their own censors.

When technical methods fail, the government turns to old-fashioned intimidation. In its initial stages, this involves dispatching government agents to speak in person with the writer, sometimes in the writer's home, sometimes in a government facility or another location. Tactics often begin with a warning, and can escalate from there. This method is referred to colloquially as being "invited to drink tea."<sup>xix</sup> More severe methods involve physical intimidation, violence, or criminal prosecution — sometimes, but not always, for infractions that relate on their face to the underlying "crime" of posting dissident speech.

Compared to the vast numbers using Chinese social media, the actual prosecution or arrest of online dissent, broadly defined, appears rare. Instead, authorities have focused on those high-

profile individuals who drive the discourse by creating the content that others read, share, and sometimes discuss. This method, combined with the technical censorship apparatus, is intended to dissuade would-be dissidents from sharing their most heterodox thoughts publicly, where they might gain a following.

Indeed, while the immediate loss of localized social control has long been a bugbear for Chinese authorities, the party appears to have realized somewhat belatedly that the social web, often highly critical of government, also threatened its ability to control its message. By August 2013, Chinese authorities had initiated what is widely understood to be a crackdown<sup>xx</sup> on Weibo, which included the detention and arrest of hundreds of micro-bloggers, as well as new rules with stiffened penalties for spreading “rumors” online.

In particular, this action ensnared several “Big V’s,” online slang for highly influential micro-bloggers (with a “V” by their name showing their identity has been verified) who boast millions or even tens of millions of followers. This action included the arrest<sup>xxi</sup> of Charles Xue, a U.S. citizen originally from China, on prostitution charges. At that time, Xue had over 12 million Weibo followers. In the wake of this crackdown, there was an observable<sup>xxii</sup> (if not quantifiable) drop in the amount of potentially heterodox political speech on that platform. But its latent power remains, even if it is not always realized. Even now, Weibo’s “Big V’s” are able to affect the national conversation faster, with fewer filters, than any party mouthpiece. Even users who merely log on to read an opinion-maker’s post, with no intention to comment or to share, are still affected by that information.

Crucially, censorship, punishment, and intimidation are deployed on what appears to be a highly *ad hoc* basis that leaves the proverbial red line ambiguous. This is likely intentional, as it exerts a chilling effect on speech that edges toward dissent while also providing ample pretext for the assertion of party authority. Although censorship methods are multifarious and there are few bright-line rules regarding dissent, the government can be described as using a sliding scale that provides significant leeway for web users with little influence to express anti-government views, but which pinches far more closely on major influencers and “Big V’s.”

Authorities also place pressure on private service providers to bring raucous user bases to heel. This has been of limited success, because companies like Tencent and Sina are hopelessly conflicted; they must follow government orders, but also must attract and keep users in order to survive. The government repeatedly reminds private companies of its authority; in April, it announced<sup>xxiii</sup> a campaign to “sweep out pornography” and “strike at rumors.” Later that month, the government fined Sina and suspended<sup>xxiv</sup> the company’s online publication license (a move that does not affect Weibo). Worrisome for Tencent, on May 6 state-run Xinhua ran a Chinese-language article<sup>xxv</sup> with the partial title, “Weixin, how much longer can I love you?”

### **The destabilizing power of media in China**

If any media outlet in China could exercise a destabilizing influence, it is likely social media, which has demonstrated the power to bring regional protests to national attention, crystallize areas of public controversy, and break news that China’s propaganda apparatus wants silenced.

That does not mean that social media will inevitably destabilize the Communist party. Paradoxically, Chinese social media can legitimately be seen as exercising both a potentially

destabilizing and a potentially stabilizing influence. It is potentially stabilizing because it acts as a check on the worst instances of the most blatant corruption, arguably acting as a moderating influence on officials who fear online backlash that could derail their careers. It also allows authorities to monitor on-the-ground sentiment, altering policies on the fly to avoid citizen backlash. Chinese state media has reported<sup>xxvi</sup> that over two million people monitor online activity on behalf of the government, not to censor, but to gather public opinion.

Authorities will continue to manage this potentially volatile force closely, attempting to give citizens enough outlets to air grievances that the accumulation of dissent does not reach a tipping point. But authorities run the constant risk of misestimating the threshold. They also have difficulty controlling the reaction to extremely fast-moving news — unpredictable by definition — that can potentially crystallize into criticism.

### **Recommendations for the United States**

In the absence of institutionalized democratic means to transmit public opinion to policy-makers, Chinese officials have few alternatives to monitoring online opinion to gauge public sentiment. In fact, it may be one reason they have not shut down platforms like Weibo, despite social media's ability to be a thorn in their side. Although online chatter is surely skewed toward the salacious, the controversial, and the extreme, it is nonetheless the best tool available to gauge Chinese on-the-ground sentiment. It can, on occasion, even force the Chinese government to respond by felling corrupt officials or instituting policy changes.

Because of social media's function as both a bellwether and an important part of the Chinese government calculus, the United States should also work to monitor Chinese online discussions in a rigorous, systematic way. (It must also employ its own "humans in the loop" to provide context and analysis for any findings.) Although such chatter largely limits itself to the anodyne, even the trivial, the Chinese social web remains a contested space, one in which certain individuals retain the power to undermine the official narrative. Should a major upheaval occur, however probable or improbable, the Internet is a strong candidate to provide the spark, because of its capacity to knit together Chinese citizens from different regions and different walks of life.

U.S. government entities and individual officials should also increase the amount of direct engagement with Chinese web users on native Chinese Internet platforms. To be sure, many U.S. "soft power" victories on the Chinese web have germinated from purely domestic events that bore no initial relationship to China. Web users in China regularly track, and comment upon, the conduct of U.S. officials and compare it with government behavior at home. (For example, in May 2012, over 20,000 Chinese web users shared details of the asset disclosures of high U.S. officials, which formed an unflattering contrast to Chinese officials' opaque finances.<sup>xxvii</sup>) But targeted, thoughtful, direct engagement on Chinese social media — even in the English language — allows the United States to showcase its comparative transparency. This engagement need not be explicitly political to provide that implicit contrast.

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- <sup>iv</sup> Patrick Boehler, 2014. "Almost all Weibo messages are generated by just 5 per cent of users," *South China Morning Post* (April 10)(updated) [<http://www.scmp.com/news/china-insider/article/1469338/weibo-less-active-expected-says-new-study>]
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[<http://www.tencent.com/en-us/content/ir/news/2014/attachments/20140319.pdf>]
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- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>viii</sup> Yiyi Lu, 2014. "Clique-Bait," *Foreign Policy* (January 27)  
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[<http://gking.harvard.edu/files/gking/files/censored.pdf>]
- <sup>xi</sup> Ibid., p. 1
- <sup>xii</sup> Ibid., p. 6
- <sup>xiii</sup> David Bamman, Brendan O'Connor, and Noah A. Smith, 2012. "Censorship and deletion practices in Chinese social media," (Volume 17, Number 3 - 5)  
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- <sup>xv</sup> Ibid., p. 13
- <sup>xvi</sup> Bamman, et al
- <sup>xvii</sup> Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret Roberts, 2013. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review* (May), p. 1  
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<sup>xxvii</sup> Anka Lee and David Wertime, 2013. "Why John Kerry Must Listen to China's Social Web," *The Atlantic*, March 6 [<http://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/03/why-john-kerry-must-listen-to-chinas-social-web/273765/>]