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From "big character posters" to blogs

Facets of independent self-expression in China

Despite predictions to the contrary, the Internet has not brought about abrupt political change in China and is not likely to do so anytime soon. Its significance and implications for Chinese society lie elsewhere, writes Martin Hala.

The exponential, truly phenomenal growth of the Internet in China since the mid-1990s has attracted much attention internationally. After rather slow and lukewarm beginnings, China has embraced the Internet with a vengeance. Commercial Internet services became available in China in 1996; from an estimated 630 thousand users in 1997, by the end of 2006 the online population had grown to 137 million, with 90.7 million enjoying broadband connections.¹ Today, China boasts the second-largest Internet population in the world, second only to the US. One in ten Internet users worldwide is Chinese. Of course, measured on per-capita basis the numbers are less impressive: with 9.9% Internet penetration, China scores far below most of the developed World, and even below some of its neighbours such as South Korea or Taiwan. The low penetration, nevertheless, also suggests potential for further growth.

Apart from reading news and searching for information on the web, the two forms of online activity disproportionately popular in China are BBS (electronic bulletin boards and online forums) and blogs. Available surveys suggest that about half of Chinese Internet users are active in various online forums, and about one third on blogs.² Both empower users to publish their views online in a simple way without much technical expertise. BBS provide more anonymity, while blogs offer more profile for individual writers, who typically go by elaborate pen-names, yet whose identity is more often than not quite well-known. The first blogging services were introduced in China in 2002, but for a few more years remained in the shadow of BBS. The steep growth of blogging in China after 2005 is widely attributed to the 2005 crackdown on the most outspoken forums, which drove many users to blogs.³

Could the Internet, and BBS and blogs in particular, play the role that samizdat performed in other communist societies? The answer to such a question, or even the inclination to ask it, probably depends on your understanding of the role and impact of samizdat to begin with. There does not seem to be a straightforward answer to such an inquiry. However, there appear to be at least two distinct areas in which to make meaningful comparison between the two methods of self-publishing: first, samizdat and online publishing as forms of self-expression, and second, as catalysts for the development of an alternative public sphere.

Even after such narrowing down, any comparisons will necessarily be speculative. Due to the vagaries of history, we can only hypothesize what would have become of samizdat in the age of networked computers. The first laptop and even desktop computers were indeed employed in the late samizdat production in central and eastern Europe, but only for graphic design and printing and not for distribution. Their utilization, in any case, was too minimal and last minute to draw any conclusions. The Internet revolution arrived too late for European samizdat to merge with it.

In fact, the very idea of the Internet would have seemed antithetical to samizdat, in the sense that the availability of such a powerful tool for information sharing and cross-border dissemination would have been unthinkable in the kind of closed societies in which samizdat publishing flourished. In other words, the communist regimes in eastern Europe would never have allowed the Internet in their fiefdoms; were they to have done so, they would have had to transform themselves into entirely different systems. And that is exactly what has happened in China in the last decade or so — the networked China of today is as different from the old Soviet bloc as it is from its former Maoist self. It has undergone a thorough transformation which renders most comparisons with traditional communist societies largely meaningless. Likewise, the Internet has superseded any traditional forms of samizdat just as the current Chinese system has supplanted conventional communism.

With this disclaimer, we can proceed to try some comparisons nevertheless. To do so could be useful in deconstructing some common misconceptions about the Internet's potential social and political impact, as well as the nature of online censorship and self-censorship in China. We need not rely solely on comparisons with eastern European samizdat. China boasts its own proud tradition of underground and unofficial publishing. We should therefore begin with a brief overview of the samizdat tradition in communist China before the Internet.

Papers printed, pasted, and mimeographed: unofficial publishing in China before the 1990s

Communist China, at least until the Cultural Revolution, was characterized by a lack of open internal dissent. Most outspoken anti-communists left the mainland in the aftermath of the Civil War (1946–49); the rest were wiped out — together with many people perfectly loyal to the communist regime — in the violent campaigns of the early 1950s. There was, in fact, so little open dissent that the authorities had to manufacture it by means of another campaign, the Hundred Flowers (1956), which ultimately provided them with an excuse for yet another unnecessary and brutal crackdown.

The monstrous failure of Mao's "Great Leap Forward" (1958–59), an economic experiment which resulted in an estimated 20 to 43 million deaths by starvation during the Three Years of Bitterness (1959–62), finally generated some criticism from within party ranks. This criticism, sometimes thinly veiled, was voiced in the official media, and through regular inner-party channels. It created tensions that eventually burst into open conflict within the party leadership and led to the near breakdown of the whole system during the Cultural Revolution (1966–69, or 1966–76, depending on how one counts).

The resultant collapse of state authority unleashed the latent conflict present in society at large, which had built up over the previous 17 years of communist

rule. The post-1949 regime had imposed upon the otherwise fairly homogeneous Chinese society a kind of "class apartheid". All citizens were categorized according to the official "class line" (*jieji luxian*) into clearly defined groups ("classes"); these had nothing to do with citizens' own social standing or political orientation, but rather with that of their family at the time of the revolution in 1949. This static classification governed the social mobility — or lack of it — for everybody, including those born after 1949 into a thoroughly transformed society. The "class line", which during the Cultural Revolution came to be called a "bloodline theory" (*xuetonglun*) by its opponents, in effect created a hereditary hierarchy that divided society into largely antagonistic camps.

The eruption of open conflict set the underprivileged losers within this system against the privileged winners in a bitter struggle that eventually bordered on full-fledged civil war. Despite a clash of interests, both sides claimed to be the true followers of Chairman Mao and employed similar rhetoric, derived from Mao's often obscure quotations, or from his cryptic "latest instructions". Neither side clearly formulated, much less expressed their true interests, and instead resorted to bizarre verbal acrobatics, which only added to the general chaos and confusion.

It was this period of turmoil that finally opened the floodgates for unsanctioned, unofficial opinion, often expressed in forms that could be vaguely designated as samizdat. Initially, arguments, more often merely denunciations or personal attacks, were presented in the form of hand-made "big character posters" (*dazibao*) (so-called because of the large lettering used) pasted onto walls. Eventually, the polemics became more sophisticated and most moved into semi- or unofficial newspapers published by various Red Guard factions on either side of the "class line". These "small papers" (*xiaobao*) were printed using simple techniques, in relatively small print-runs, without prior censorship. Most never rose above primitive ideology full of mechanical rhetoric; nevertheless, a few individuals, and after a while entire groups, did managed to cross the lines (class, blood, or otherwise) and express independent opinion not directly subservient to any of the political dogmas of the time.⁴

Independent opinion was not bound by censorship, but was of course liable to subsequent reprisals. One of the early martyrs of the movement, a 19-year old student named Yu Loke, is still remembered, though not widely mentioned, in today's China as a pioneer of free expression. He was executed in 1966 for writing and publishing a booklet denouncing the "bloodline theory" as feudal atavism. (Ironically, many of his views prevailed shortly afterwards among the officially sanctioned factions of the Red Guards.) Some of the "rebel" factions later went on to formulate their own understanding of what was going on in China and published it in the form of political manifestos or theoretical and polemical articles. These wayward groups paid the price when Mao finally authorized a wholesale crackdown on all Red Guard factions, which by now had proved fundamentally ungovernable. Most of their exponents ended up enduring "re-education" through hard labour in poor, remote rural areas, where many stayed for a full decade.

Some of the former Red Guards nevertheless resurfaced during the first real samizdat upsurge, the Democracy Wall Movement (1978-79), after Mao's death in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping's eventual triumph over Mao's residual satraps. Armed with their bitter disillusionment over the Cultural Revolution and their subsequent years in the wilderness, along with practical skills in

mimeograph and other printing techniques developed ten years earlier, the former Red Guards embarked on a frenzy of publishing activity that answered Deng Xiaoping's call to "liberate the minds" (*jiefang sixiang*) and "search for truth from facts" (*shishi qiu shi*). After a flood of handwritten *dazipaos* pasted on the walls of Xidan in central Beijing, the first real samizdat magazines appeared with names like "Beijing Spring" (*Beijing zhi chun*) and "Today" (*Jintian*). Some (such as the former) were devoted to politics, others (such as the latter) to unofficial literature.⁵

The most remarkable personality to emerge from this movement was a former Red Guard turned electrician named Wei Jingsheng. Wei authored the best-known piece of the time, titled "The fifth modernization", and also published a samizdat magazine called "Explorations" (*Tansuo*). With his clarity of vision and courage to speak the unspeakable, he transcended the prevalent discourse of the time. Where many still paid lip service to the official policy of the "Four Modernizations" (in agriculture, industry, science and technology, and defence), Wei clearly stated that without a fifth modernization — democratization — the other four lacked purpose. Where others glamorized Deng Xiaoping as a liberator, Wei unequivocally called him a "new dictator".

This finally exceeded the limits of tolerance of the new leadership around Deng Xiaoping. By this time, they had consolidated their newly gained power and felt no more need for expressions of popular support in their struggle with remnant Maoist forces. In March 1979, Deng personally ordered the arrest of Wei Jingsheng and within a year the whole movement was dispersed, together with its magazines. After a show trial, Wei was sentenced to 15 years in prison. The samizdat magazines disbanded in subsequent crackdown. Some, like "Beijing Spring" and "Today", later reappeared as samizdat publications in the West.

This crackdown basically ended what can be understood as samizdat publishing in China. The next great popular upsurge, the protest movement focused around Tiananmen Square in April and May 1989, was not accompanied by significant unofficial publishing. During much of the movement, official media operated without censorship, and there was little need for an alternative press. The bloody crackdown on June 4 was followed by a period of brutal repression that made any attempts at samizdat publishing all but impossible. For a while, overseas Chinese student groups used fax machines to send anti-government materials back to China, but this method proved largely inefficient.

When China finally re-emerged by the mid-1990s from the shadows of Tiananmen, it was a different society. The new market drive initiated by Deng Xiaoping during his legendary 1992 "Southern Inspection Tour" utterly transformed the economy and much of society. China has undergone a metamorphosis that has enabled a nominally communist country not only to join the accelerated process of globalization after the end of Cold War, but to become one of its central motors. China's metamorphosis prepared it for the unfolding Internet revolution and is what makes the Chinese Internet today so different from the previous samizdat publishing in China and central and eastern Europe. The society has changed, and so have its forms of self-expression.

Half full or half empty? Self-expression and censorship on the Chinese Internet

Deng's Southern Tour in effect introduced a New Deal for the Chinese. After the half-hearted attempts of the 1980s, capitalism was finally embraced in full. Chinese people could now unleash their long-dormant economic potential and try to get ahead in material life. To get rich was no longer a taboo; it had suddenly become "glorious". What's more, people could now enjoy the fruits of their (and others') labour without much state meddling in their lifestyles — they could pretty much do whatever they wanted in the private, as long as they did not foolishly venture to challenge the party's monopoly on power. They did not even have to love the party anymore — but please, no swearing in public.

This ideological coup was a huge success. The Communist Party gained a new lease of life, and the "masses" discovered a new sense of purpose. China was re-energized and started out on its long march to prosperity. Priorities have changed, as have potential conflicts. The "us and them" mentality began shifting from politics and ideology into the economy. For many ordinary Chinese, harassment by the party and the state was becoming less of a concern than visa and import restrictions imposed by the outside world. Jumping head-on into globalization also led to a new view of the world. Countries that had previously been seen as role models have now become competitors trying to "contain" China's ascent.

While the economic and geopolitical rise of China does not benefit everybody, it still makes much of the population proud of the country's achievements. Ordinary Chinese may be cynical about the communist party, but they are quite serious about their country's standing in the world. They have achieved something, and they would like the outside world to acknowledge as much. This new pride and political ambivalence (or, in many cases, indifference) is quite unlike prevailing attitudes in pre-1989 eastern Europe. China's new freedoms would also have been unheard of during traditional communism. The Chinese travel and do business internationally, send their children to American, Japanese, Australian, and European Universities, shop for luxury items that would have been available only to the top cadres in the *ancien régime*, and so on.

Access to information has changed as well. There are many restrictions on the Chinese media, but not the blanket censorship once imposed on any printed or broadcast material in communist countries. State subsidies for papers and magazines have been cut or abolished altogether, and most publishers now have to sink or swim on the market. Many papers have created popular weekly supplements and daily tabloids with market-friendly content catering to their readers' demands. Their editors navigate carefully between pressures from propaganda departments on one side and readers on the other. Exact boundaries of the permissible are not always clear, and many journalists keep "hitting line balls" (*da cabian qiu*), or constantly testing the limits. Every once in a while, some journalist somewhere gets in trouble for going too far; unlike in the old Soviet or Maoist regimes, however, they do not disappear but resurface in some other paper elsewhere in China, their position and reputation only consolidated by the previous controversy.

It is in this environment, and because of this environment, that the Chinese Internet could gain a foothold at all, and then grow so fast. The old communist regimes would hardly have been able to cope with the Internet and would most likely have forbidden it. While the current Chinese system can live with the Internet, coexistence is not always easy. However, despite many predictions to the contrary,⁶ the Internet has not brought about abrupt political change, and is not likely to do so anytime soon. Its significance and implications for Chinese

society lie elsewhere.

That is not to say that there is no subversive potential in the Chinese Internet. The government is well aware of it and has been trying its best to pre-empt it. With the help of many renowned international IT companies, it has introduced a sophisticated system of blocking and filtering, known in China as the "Golden Shield" (*Jin Dun*)⁷ and widely described elsewhere as "The Great Firewall of China". The system has been comprehensively analyzed in several studies.⁸ It works on several levels. At the level of general infrastructure, it filters out unwanted content and blocks proscribed URLs automatically by keywords on the Internet backbone and at individual Internet Service Providers (ISPs). On the second level, it delegates censorship to the Internet Content Providers (ICPs), who are expected, much like traditional media, to engage in self-censorship or else lose their licenses. Finally, at the third level, the Internet is physically policed for offensive content by departments of the Public Security Bureau. Like in most countries, law enforcement agencies have the right to search computers for evidence in criminal cases; but of course, Chinese authorities often criminalize what would constitute political speech anywhere else. Needless to say, constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression are not of much help.

Much has been said about the complicity of foreign Internet companies in this censorship. Apart from passive involvement by companies such as Cisco Systems, which provides routers with a built-in capacity to filter content, there has been active cooperation by Internet giants such as Yahoo, MSN, or Google. There are two aspects worth considering in this issue. First, Internet companies obviously need to comply with Chinese law in their China-based operations, just like any other company based in China. However, given the peculiarities of Chinese law enforcement in handling non-violent political expression, international ISPs and ICPs should be very careful in deciding what services to host on their China-based computers. Human Rights Watch has documented at least four cases of Chinese government critics (Shi Tao, Li Zhi, Jiang Lijun, and Wang Xiaoning) who have been arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms based on evidence obtained from email accounts hosted (and disclosed) by Yahoo in China.⁹ Google, on the other hand, has decided, for this very reason, not to provide a Chinese version of its popular email service Gmail.

Second, in aiding censorship, these companies are not always following Chinese law. Search results at google.cn, for example, are filtered. While this is arguably less harmful than sending people to prison, it seems to have no basis in Chinese law as such. Naturally, no Chinese legislation proscribes expressions like "democracy" or "Tiananmen". Google.cn admits as much by adding a tagline to search results for sensitive keywords, saying that some results have been omitted "in accordance with Chinese law and *policies*". That seems to be stretching the concept of legality. It is one thing to comply with Chinese law, but something else altogether to explicitly accept the controversial policies of Chinese censorship agencies, which themselves may be seen as contradicting China's own constitution.

Thus the usual argument that foreign Internet companies only comply with local law in their China operations would seem to have at least two problematic aspects: 1) Chinese laws may be in direct contradiction with established international practices, and possibly with international legal norms guaranteeing freedom of expression; 2) in some cases, foreign companies may not be complying with Chinese law, but rather with government policies

possibly tampering with the Chinese constitution, and in this manner contributing to a state of lawlessness rather than the rule of law.

Internet censorship can in most cases be circumvented by using proxy servers, SSL (secure) connections, and other means. There exist dedicated services designed to help Chinese users get past the Great Firewall. But does the average Chinese Internet user care? For starters, beating Internet censorship is a constant struggle. Proxy servers and anti-censorship services usually get blocked after some time and need to change their IP and real-name addresses often. Anybody who has ever used a proxy server knows that it can be a frustrating experience, since it slows the connection considerably. Not everybody has the patience or motivation to spend long hours searching for functioning proxy servers and waiting for the forbidden pages to download.

In real life, very few people seem to bother. According to available surveys, the overwhelming majority (over 70%) of Internet users has never used a proxy server. Only 2.5% report frequent use of them.¹⁰ These surveys need to be taken with a grain of salt, but anecdotal evidence seems largely to confirm their conclusions. A keen observer of Chinese media writing under the pseudonym Ann Condi recently posted a piece on the danwei.org blog, describing her experience in discussing anti-censorship websites with her Chinese students.¹¹ When informed about the existence of such sites, her students offered a number of predominantly negative responses that Condi categorizes into the following attitudes: "ignorance, apathy, denial, paranoia, downplaying, nationalism, and mild interest." Her post generated intense discussion in the Chinese ex-pat blogosphere, with most writers confirming her observations.

Obviously, many Internet users in China have somewhat different feelings about censorship from their western counterparts. This is best illustrated by a celebrated hoax performed last year by one of the best-known Chinese bloggers calling himself "Massage Milk" (Anmo Nai). This curious name hides the colourful personality of journalist Wang Xiaofeng, whose day job is with one of the more interesting mainstream magazines, "Life Weekly" (*Shenghuo zhoukan*). Another of his pen-names is "Wearing three watches", or *Dai sange biao*, a pun on Jiang Zemin's (former Communist Party president) "theory" of the "Three represents", or *Sange Daibiao*. Obviously, Wang does not shy from turning his sharp wit and irony on the Chinese government. At the same time, he does not hesitate to turn it against Western media criticizing censorship of Chinese Internet.

On 8 March 2006 (International Women's Day, still celebrated in China), Wang shut down his blog, leaving a message that it was closed "for obvious reasons". The immediate, admittedly knee-jerk reaction of Western observers was that it had been closed down by the authorities, like so many before and after it. The news soon made it to major Western media outlets, including the BBC.¹² Wang then triumphantly reappeared and declared that it was a hoax meant to demonstrate the bias and "peer pressure" exerted by the Western media, which, he claimed, is always ready to jump to conclusions about China. The argument was then repeated, with much satisfaction, in the official Chinese press.

Of course, Wang had a point: the Western media *did* jump to conclusions without first establishing the facts. On the other hand, the very readiness of the Western media to see censorship everywhere in China is merely a habit born of experience: the BBC's own websites are blocked in China, and its broadcast

jammed. A number of Wang's colleagues in the Chinese blogosphere were not too happy with his prank, either, arguing that it would diminish future solidarity with websites that genuinely are closed. The same point was made by Reporters Without Borders: crying wolf in this way, they argued, will only make it more difficult to defend Wang's less fortunate colleagues whose blogs *do* get shut down "for obvious reasons". Another blogger, referring to the case of journalist Shi Tao, who was jailed for an email he sent to an overseas publication, commented wryly: "More good news — the journalist Shi Tao has admitted that the story about him being jailed for eight years [for] leaking state secrets was all just an April Fool, too!"¹³

The whole incident probably tells us more about Chinese bloggers, and Internet users in general, than about the western media. A certain attitude has developed among Chinese netizens, who are certainly not happy with official censorship, but even itchier about western criticism of it. They feel that the western focus on censorship somehow diminishes their achievements in working hard to expand, often at some personal risk, the room for free expression on the Chinese Internet.

Typical in this respect would be the stance of journalist Zhao Jing, who blogs under pseudonym Michael Anti. Zhao's site was shut down by Microsoft in December 2005, leading to an outcry in the US and eventually to congressional hearings over US companies' complicity with Chinese censorship. Not impressed by the hearings, Michael Anti posted a strongly worded comment entitled, "The freedom of Chinese netizens is not up to the Americans". Ironically, his fierce defence of Chinese sovereignty had to be posted on a foreign blogging service ¹⁴ blocked for most users in China. The post has since disappeared, so I can only quote it from translation on another blog:

I am writing to state that I believe that this has nothing to [do] with us whatsoever. This is a purely internal American affair. When we Chinese who love freedom attempt to promote freedom of expression, we never thought that the right to freedom of expression ought to be protected by the US Congress. Every single blog post of mine was written in Chinese, and every sentence was written for my compatriots. I have no interest to cater to the interests of foreign readers. [...] This is our country. [...] We must let this generation bring freedom, democracy, security and wealth to China. [...] When foreigners repeatedly use "totalitarian" to describe China, this is a deep shame for me as a Chinese person. This shame cannot ever be forgotten. These kind of sentiments cannot be understood by foreigners."¹⁵

Journalist, blogger, and researcher Rebecca McKinnon calls the difference in attitude towards censorship a classic case of "glass half empty, or half full."¹⁶ In other words, it boils down to the question: What is more important, the achievements or the misery of Chinese bloggers? Too much attention to their misery, especially from outsiders, does not go down well with the Chinese bloggers' pride.

Very often, it is professional pride too. Millions in China blog, but the few influential blogs that draw much of the attention and Internet traffic are, invariably, written by professional journalists with day jobs in official media. Blogger Roland Soong observes that, "In China, the non-mainstream media sector (related to current news and commentary) [...] is dominated by the

media elite who are continuing to build their authority and reputation, in the manner of American and Hong Kong mainstream opinion columnists."¹⁷

All of the individual bloggers we have mentioned so far are in this category. They write under elaborate pseudonyms but their identity is no mystery to their readers. Their blogs serve to enhance their professional reputations as cutting-edge journalists, and at the same time help them circumvent one of the biggest hindrances in their work: pervasive self-censorship by responsible editors in the official media. When a story gets killed by an over-cautious editor, it often ends up on the writer's blog. Sometimes, journalists post texts on their blogs right away, without even attempting to submit them for official publication. Blogging in China is, more often than not, an extension of the official press, rather than an alternative to it. It pushes the envelope one step further, rather than making a jump out of the mainstream and into the "underground".

That may be one of the starkest differences between the Internet and samizdat in China. The writers of traditional samizdat, in China or elsewhere, took a more or less conscious step out of the system. Chinese bloggers today remain inside the system, although on its cutting edge. Looked at from the other side, we could also say that blogging in China is a testimony to the capacity of the current Chinese system to co-opt potential critics and adversaries. Just like it co-opted the market economy, and later the Internet itself, the remarkably flexible Chinese system has now managed to co-opt blogging, too.¹⁸ It can live with the kind of criticism and ridicule bloggers habitually subject it to, and bloggers can live with the system and its censorship, even if the relationship is often strained and uneasy. This is indeed communism of a different type. It is communism where the party can tolerate the Internet, and the Internet can tolerate party censorship.

The medium is the message: free minds before free speech

That is why we cannot really expect the Internet in China to become a platform for radical agitation or anti-government activities. That does not mean, however, that it is not ushering in significant change. Bulletin boards and blogs may not be changing Chinese politics, but by introducing entirely new forms of self-expression and social interaction, they are gradually transforming society from within. Going back to our original questions about parallels between the Internet and samizdat in China: BBS and blogs have become new forms of self-expression that are perhaps less radical but certainly more widespread than traditional samizdat. They have created a new public space, again less politicized, but larger and more accessible than the samizdat of yesteryear.

During the heated congressional debate about American firms' complicity with online censorship in China, the buzz in the Chinese blogosphere was not about political freedom, or the lack of it, but about an online spoof played by a hitherto unknown prankster named Hu Ge. Hu re-edited one of film director Chen Kaige's less accomplished films into a 20-minute parody and posted it online. Chen then sued him for intellectual property infringement and made himself the laughing stock of the Chinese Internet.¹⁹ As Rebecca McKinnon points out, it may look as though the Chinese care more about bad movies than bad politics, but the moral of the story goes deeper. The Chinese apparatchiks may still keep a firm grip on politics, but they have all but lost their control over cultural life. Internet cannot bring down the government, but it can ruin the reputation of a famous filmmaker. Anybody who has lived through the

decline of communism in eastern Europe will appreciate what the loss of power over the cultural sphere means for the future of a one-party system.

And it is not just culture, but lifestyle in general that is gradually being transformed by online events. It should be noted that perhaps the personality to be given most credit for the growth in popularity of blogging in China is not an aspiring social or political reformer but a journalist named Li Li, writing under the pseudonym Muzi Mei. Her blog²⁰ became notorious in 2003 for describing her erotic exploits with a variety of men with "post-70s attitude to sex (direct and detached)". The propaganda ministry was not amused and Li lost her newspaper job, but was almost immediately hired by the biggest blogging portal bokee.com. A book of excerpts from her blog diaries was recalled from Chinese bookstores, but sold well in Hong Kong and Taiwan. German and French translations followed.²¹

Soon afterwards, another overnight celebrity emerged in the person of Tang Jiali, a former dancer at the State Ballet Troupe who started posting her nude photographs online at www.tangjiali.com. Some of her photos were even reprinted with flattering commentary on the website of the official CCP mouthpiece *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*);²² the only conflict she got into was with her photographer, who sued for proper credits and royalties.²³ The government may still stand firm vis-à-vis the Internet, but all around it old taboos and inhibitions are crumbling. Most people may be careful about what they say online, but there's always somebody somewhere testing the limits. Whether it is in the area of film, sexual mores, or alternative music, the old orthodoxies are eroding fast.

Issac Mao,²⁴ one of the pioneers and most influential personalities in Chinese blogosphere, and a co-founder in 2002 of the first Chinese blogging service CNblog.org, makes an interesting point.²⁵ Observing the tendency towards self-censorship in China, he concludes that free speech is difficult, if not impossible, to realize in the absence of free thinking. Freeing people's minds from taboos, layers of propaganda sediments, and other constraints therefore has to precede any serious attempt at introducing free speech. And that is exactly where the Internet, and blogs in particular, are making headway in China. Online expression in China does not exactly equal free speech, but it does work to emancipate people's minds from official ideology still propagated by much of the print and broadcast media. The Internet is not likely to lead to political change, at least not directly, but it is slowly bringing about a profound change in the way people think and communicate. It is this transformation that will render any future political changes possible, and desirable. Political freedoms are only meaningful for people adept in free thinking.

Some Chinese observers have likened the cacophony of voices on the Chinese Internet, and especially blogs, to the chaotic spectacle of "big character posters", or *Dazibao*, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. The famous writer Yu Hua (b.1960), best known in the West for his novel *To Live* (*Huo zhe*), adapted into a Golden Globe nominated movie by Zhang Yimou, recalls his childhood fascination with the "big character posters", which in the absence of real books provided his first literary education:

I believe my first real literary reading experience began with my reading big character posters during the Cultural Revolution. Big character posters were filled with lies, accusations, denunciations, and attacks. The Cultural Revolution brought out the full potential of Chinese

imaginative powers. People invented crimes for each other out of thin air. The crimes were usually made up of a series of stories. I remember carrying my book bag on my way home from school and reading each poster as I walked along. I wasn't interested in the revolutionary slogans. I was interested in the stories.²⁶

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Yu Hua summarizes this experience and claimed that in reading the *Dazibao*, he first realized the power of language: "You could read just about everything in them, even sex. They were like the blogs of today."²⁷

The Internet, just like the *Dazibao*, has provided people with a chance to express themselves free of censorship. Unless they manage to emancipate their minds from the long-term impact of relentless official rhetoric and propaganda, however, this freedom does not automatically translate into free expression, but rather into a caricature of it. This was evident in the early phases of the Cultural Revolution, when people were still under the grip of ideology and only used their new freedom to abuse each other. Yet the very process of speaking freely is self-cultivating. The medium is the message. By using the tools of free expression, people are learning to liberate their minds. That was eventually the case during the Cultural Revolution, and it is even more so now on the Chinese Internet.

That is where we can make a direct comparison between samizdat and the Internet. Neither could possibly aspire to single-handedly challenge the powers that be by itself. Few people involved in these forms of self-expression would even harbour such ambitions (though some probably do). Much of the unauthorized production in samizdat, like on the Internet, could not be bothered with politics. It was, and still is, more of a lifestyle issue. By engaging in these activities, people change their lives. They step outside of the officially sanctioned discourse into a new public space beyond the (full) control of the State. They liberate themselves, and possibly others.

The Internet enjoys much wider reach than samizdat ever had, since it is not really "underground". The safety and anonymity online does not lie in secrecy and conspiracy, but in the opposite: the sheer numbers of people involved. But the very visibility of online activity makes it more prone to at least partial self-censorship, so the discourse arguably is less blunt and radical than it was in samizdat (at least in the eastern European samizdat; much of the Chinese samizdat, as we have seen, was actually still under the spell of official ideology). But the social effect, to a certain degree, is similar. Both forms of self-expression lead, regardless of what is really being said, to the self-emancipation of the producers, and to lesser extent consumers (readers). Both create an alternative public space beyond direct reach of the State.

Both forms of independent self-expression achieve this in their own peculiar ways. Samizdat may be more outspoken and direct, but it is limited in reach and draws a strict boundary between producers and consumers. The Internet is more vulnerable to censorship and self-censorship, but has much wider reach and is a truly participatory medium with a soft line between writers and readers. Both change the way people live and think. I would argue that in the long run, a certain amount of censorship and self-censorship does not really matter much, however annoying it may be in its daily manifestations. What really matters is the change in attitude and outlook brought about by the experience of articulating one's thoughts and positions freely in a virtual

community of peers not bound by social and political hierarchies or regimented discourse.

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