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Internet Censorship and Political Debate in the Chinese Internet

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Resumen:

La introducción de las tecnologías de la información en todos los aspectos de nuestra vida no ha revolucionado únicamente las formas en las que nos comunicamos socialmente sino también en la que nos relacionamos con política y participamos de ella. Sin embargo, algunos regímenes están más abiertos a dejar a sus ciudadanos disfrutar de estos usos, mientras que en regímenes autoritarios estos se limitan. A través de este estudio de los usos de la censura en la República Popular China buscamos encontrar las maneras en las que el gobierno del Partido Comunista Chino quiere utilizar las restricciones a la libertad de expresión en internet para reprimir movimientos sociales pero al mismo tiempo permitir el suficiente discurso para dar un aire de modernidad.

Abstract:

The introduction of information technologies in all aspects of our lives has not only revolutionized the ways in which we communicate socially but also the ways in which we relate to and participate in politics. However, some regimes are more open to letting their citizens enjoy these uses, while in authoritarian regimes these are limited. Through this study of the uses of censorship in the People's Republic of China we seek to find ways in which the government of the Chinese Communist Party wants to use restrictions on freedom of expression on the Internet to repress social movements but at the same time allow enough discourse to give an air of modernity.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and motives

Through this research we will examine the main instruments, methods and techniques for internet censorship deployed in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its effects on online public debate spaces. This analysis will be centred on the 20 year period between the arrival of commercial internet in China in 1995 until today. In the dawn of the new age of information technology, the study of the censorship apparatus in the Chinese state can bring light to the ways in which the internet is policed in modern authoritarian states, specially since Chinese censorship technology is now being exported and utilised by authoritarian governments across the globe.

In order to delimit the topic of study, I have chosen to restrict the analysis to internet content filtering and censorship exclusively, without incorporating into my research wider methods of online surveillance and control, although those are all different aspects of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s ever-growing surveillance apparatus. While censorship undeniably serves a purpose in the objective to police and patrol Chinese internet users both online and in their daily lives, this research seeks to find the ways in which online political and public debates relate, adapt and are shaped under censorship. The People's Republic of China's vastness is of course translated into a wide variety of different opinions and beliefs, which are not all and assuming that all of these go unexpressed because of the omnipresent censor would be reductionist and so the objective of this research is to observe how political debates are undertaken online in authoritarian states. The time frame chosen to analyse these effects expands until today in order to separate the initial characteristics and the development of online public debate in China with the worsening of the repressive efforts undertaken since the assumption of office by Xi Jinping, and specially since the adoption of his administration's "cybersovereignty" campaign. However, as the new norms for cyberspace are put in place and the new security landscape is set, we have mostly included pre-Xi Jinping examples to illustrate our thesis, because of how fast repression is growing and the political landscape worsening.

To understand the relation between the limiting of free speech and the Chinese citizen's online public debates and political life, we will first examine the mechanisms and criteria of the CCP as the censoring authority and will proceed to analyse the ways in which Chinese netizens keep debates alive and thus participate in political life.

1.2 Objectives and research questions

With the analysis of the ways in which online censorship and discourse relate to each other, the main objective of this research is to find the extent of political debate that is present and allowed in the Chinese internet. As a communication and information technology, the internet was once greatly heralded as a tool for political transformation. While wide internet usage in China has not brought with it the democratisation process demands that it was once thought it would entail, the dynamics between the Chinese people and their government have been undeniably changed with the adoption of information technology. Our first research objective in order to understand these dynamics is to look at the ways in which the CCP has implemented the borders and restrictions in the Chinese internet. Through the study of the government's decisions on internet policy and control, we will try to understand the reasoning behind the censorship apparatus and the criteria used to determine the information that is or isn't allowed on the Chinese internet. For this we will analyse the functioning and the different aspects of the Great Firewall, as well as some examples of well-known censorship campaigns.

In the second part of our research however, we will look at the special characteristics that are unique to the Chinese internet and how these manifest in online public discourse, opinion and political debates. Through the definition of the spaces where political debate happens online in China and the study of the ways in which these discussions take place, we will look into how Chinese internet users navigate the limits imposed on them by the CCP and how these limits shape their political lives online.

To conclude our study, we will contrast the findings from the first two sections on the mechanisms of control and the existing limits for online public debate in China, in order to understand the relationship between the growing possibilities of communication and

expression that the internet brings Chinese people and the omnipresence of the CCP's control on the web. While the Chinese internet is not void of political content and discussion it is undeniable that this expression is limited and produced in a very specific setting defined by CCP's rules.

To sum up, our main research question seeks to understand whether **the internet can be seen as a positive setting where to conduct political deliberation in China, or whether there is no room for online political speech or critique inside the PRC**. Our thesis supports that both these situations apply, as political matters are allowed to be discussed online to a certain extent.

1.3 Methodology

For the completion of this research I have opted to base my analysis on a case study. This investigation fits into a wider study of both the usage of information technology by authoritarian regimes and the possibilities that these techniques also open for public debate.

For this we will resort to historical and political qualitative analysis and mainly to the usage of secondary sources, as we study both projects of empirical analysis conducted on the Chinese firewall as well as reviews of content compiled by Chinese internet scholars.

1.4 Theoretical framework

1.4.1 Consultative Leninism and the Chinese Communist Party

Formed in 1921, the Communist Party of China officially includes the adoption of Marxist-Leninist theory in its party constitution, which reads:

Marxism-Leninism reveals the laws governing the development of the history of human society. Its basic tenets are correct and have tremendous vitality. The highest ideal of communism pursued by Chinese Communists can be realized only when socialist society is fully developed and highly advanced. The development and improvement of the socialist system is a long historical process. By upholding the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism and following the path suited to China's specific conditions as chosen by the Chinese people, China's socialist cause will ultimately be victorious.

This section of the General Program of the Party Constitution does not only serve as an declaration of ideology but also states the objective of the CCP as the vanguard party that is under Marxism-Leninism, the organisation charged with the mission to take Chinese society to its ultimate form and goal: a socialist society. This is the theoretical teachings of Lenin, that advocates for the proletariat to organise into a revolutionary Party, such as the CCP, and once it has gained the struggle against the bourgeoisie, charges such Party to continue leading the change into a fully socialist society by being extremely involved in societal planning and mobilising. The period of rule by the Party is to be called “dictatorship of the proletariat”, of which Mao said the following:

During the historical period of socialism it is necessary to maintain the dictatorship of the proletariat and carry the socialist revolution through to the end if the restoration of capitalism is to be prevented, socialist construction carried forward and the conditions created for the transition to communism.

Thus, the goal of the Chinese Communist Party’s leadership has been the establishment of a prosperous communist society and it has worked to achieve this by taking an active lead and involvement in all matters of Chinese society. With the advent of social market reforms however, this future stage in Chinese society has been replaced and its new goal defined, in the words of Xi Jinping, as: “building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and in the drive to secure the success of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era.” (Xi, 2017, 19th CCP National Congress)

The policy and leadership changes that the CCP has gone through time have resulted on efforts to govern based on a framework that Steve Tsang calls consultive Leninism in his 2009 article: “Consultative Leninism: China’s new political framework” . Since Deng Xiaoping’s market reforms, Tsang argues, the foundation on class struggle and the principles of communism that were at the basis of ideology during Mao’s leadership are diluted and in order to maintain their legitimacy (2009, p.875), the CCP results to consultative Leninist rhetorics to hold on to power. This new leadership theory presents the following characteristics: it puts strategic focus on the CCP staying in power, it has to undergo governance reforms in order to quell and/or satisfy possible democratic demands, it shall try to manage and direct the changing public opinion’s sphere, it has to maintain its focus on

economic growth and development and it will promote the type of nationalism that is cultivated in socialist market economy China, that combines the country's historical narrative with present day's success story and the role of the Party in this transformation (Tsang, 2009, p.866). This theory holds that, in order to combat democratic wishes or demands that might evolve in Chinese society, some debate spaces and new governance methods have to be set in place for citizens to participate in certain aspects of public life, which is one of the conclusions that we will end up with through our research.

1.4.2 Public deliberation theories

In order to understand the spaces that consultative Leninism leaves for debate, while still maintaining an ideological and authoritarian control on public debates, we will work with He Baogang's theories that analyse public deliberation spaces in China with theory normally reserved for the study of modern Western democracies. While the translation in the use of these theories have earned him criticism, he defends how useful these public participation theories can be when applied to the Chinese context. In general, he states that the failure to analyse deliberative processes in China result in a lack of study on the political and democratic that can be brought through these public dialogues (2006), while other scholars defend that political debates in China are ways through which to reach consensus (Ogden, 2002, p.257). To better study the unique characteristics of internet public deliberation in China, He states that in China these constitute situations of "authoritarian deliberation" and that they are fundamentally different from "democratic deliberation" spaces (2011).

1.4.3 Nationalism and the Chinese Communist Party

As has been mentioned in the basis of consultative Leninism, nationalism has taken an important role in the dominating narratives that one can find in public discourse, as well as serving to increase the CCP's legitimacy. Through the historical context section of this research we will delve in some of the reasons why the narrative of national growth and the Chinese nation's role in global matters through history are main drivers of political opinion and passionate commentary by Chinese people. As we have seen, legitimacy of the CCP used to lie on its communist ideology, in order to reshape the identification of CCP from these communist ideals to adapt to social-market economy China, new nationalist narratives and

historical cultural elements have been used to redefine Chinese identity, even some that were once disregarded as counterrevolutionary such as confucianism, are rebranded in a new seal of national pride (Zhao, 1998), especially after the Tiananmen protest incident of 1989. Even though protesters in that year claimed that patriotism and the hopes in a more democratic China were what drove them to the streets in protest, the new nationalist sentiment that has been embraced since Deng Xiaoping days has not been born out of collective action or sentiment by specific groups of Chinese people, but rather has been shared and distributed from top authorities.

Nationalism started to shift the narrative with the implementation of economic reforms, and has only grown in importance since the days of Jiang Zemin, as China has only grown in strength and has been able to justify their narrative of national pride with economic development. As the CCP was able to position China in higher and more powerful positions in the global arena with the adoption of these reforms, this renewed strength became the pragmatic nationalism that identified the modern China and Chinese society ever-so-closely to the CCP, its victories and struggles (Zhao, 2005, p135). We can see this close identification in Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents Theory" that was added as guiding theoretical principles to Party ideology and that defends that the Chinese Communist Party (Mohanty, 2003): Represents China's advanced social productive forces. Represents the orientation of China's advanced culture. Represents the fundamental interests of the majority of Chinese people.

As we have described before, the CCP's use of nationalism is pragmatic, (Zhao, 2005) meaning that it can serve different purposes or fit different definitions through changes in context of ideology. Under Xi Jinping, nationalism has continued to play a central role, as we can see with these declarations taken from his speech at the 19th National Party Congress in 2017:

National rejuvenation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people since modern times began. At its founding, the Communist Party of China made realizing Communism its highest ideal and its ultimate goal, and shouldered the historic mission of national rejuvenation. In pursuing this goal, the Party has united the Chinese people and led them through arduous struggles to epic accomplishments.

In this quote we note elements of national pride such as the accomplishment of “the greatest dream of the Chinese people” realised through “national rejuvenation”. However, Xi Jinping nationalism presents specific characteristics of which the effects will be noted in this research, as nationalism shapes much of the discourse online, as we will see. These shaping characteristics of Xi Jinping thought point the “dream of the Chinese people” as only being attainable under the leadership of a “national patriarch” with Xi embodying this figure himself (Buckley, 2018). This strong-man figure is telling not only on the image that Xi wants to project of himself but consequently on the discourse that will be tolerated and allowed to be shared online in relation to these topics. For example, while at the beginning of his mandate Xi was playfully called “Xi Dada” or “Uncle Xi” in English, as he tried to strengthen his hold on authority, these terms were banned.

1.5 State of the question

1.5.1 The Great Firewall and mechanisms of surveillance

While a lot has been written on surveillance and the Great Firewall, for this essay I have chosen to base my research on Jame’s Griffith’s book “The Great Firewall of China: How to build and Control an Alternative Version of the Internet” published in 2019 by Zed Books Ltd.

On the nature and functioning of growing surveillance in China, Rogier Creemers does excellent work on cybersecurity and surveillance on the People’s Republic of China, in this research I use his article “Cyber China: Upgrading Propaganda, Public Opinion Work and Social Management for the Twenty-First Century”.

1.5.2 Authoritarian deliberation and debate

To understand the nature of political debate in China we have used, as has been mentioned in the theoretical framework, He Baogang’s theories on authoritarian deliberation. These are published in his 2011 joint research with professor Mark E. Warren entitled “Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development” and they elaborate on He’s previous works on the sphere of public debate online, that had already been discussed in

his 2006 article “Participatory and Deliberative Institutions in China”. Finally, to check on the changes and evolution undergone by these public discussions, in 2018 He has published another joint research article with King’s College researcher Hendrik Wagenaar titled “Authoritarian deliberation revisited”.

As far as the applications of this theory to the online public debate sphere, this work has been mainly translated by scholars Guobing Yang and Min Jiang, on whose work on the organisation and nature of the Chinese internet we have based part of our research. Both separately and jointly, Yang and Jiang pursue research on the nature and characteristics of debate on the Chinese government and use He’s division on authoritarian deliberation and democratic deliberation, with the former defined by close limits imposed on the content of the speeches and discourses. To understand this, both researchers try to analyse the contents and the organisation of the Chinese internet, with Min Jiang defining different levels in the Chinese net depending on the level of government censorship presence in her 2010 paper “Authoritarian deliberation on Chinese Internet”, while Yang Guobing first offers a definition of what he considers to be the main characteristics of the Chinese internet with “Chinese Internet? History, Practice, and Globalization”. Yang also researches nuance in relation to discourses about the Chinese internet, as he tries to go above the “either/or” dichotomy in liberalisation through information technology in his paper 2014 paper “Political contestation in Chinese digital spaces: Deepening the critical inquiry”. This research is included in the *Journal of China Information*, in an issue dedicated to internet technologies, which in its Volume 28th contained a special in information technology, including other articles on the topic such as “Official microblogging and social management by local governments in China” by Min Jiang and Jesper Schlæger, or Ning Zhang’s “Web-based backpacking communities and online activism in China: Movement without marching.”

2. Historical context

China is considered one of the cradles of civilisation (Murowchick, 1994) and through thousands of years even while its borders might have changed, and some people moved, have always occupied the land along the Yellow river valley and its northern and southern parts. China's history has been characterised by both these intra-state, faction wars, when one emperor had theoretical domain from which local lords might try to seek independent rule over their territory or to conquer neighbouring states, but also by inter-state conflicts with neighbouring powers, namely against the Japanese and Steppe civilisations from Mongolia or Manchuria, depending on their alignment to the central throne. While both types of conflicts have shaped China to be what it is today, it was mostly the first kind of political violence, the intra-state struggles that challenged China's centralised government from the inside, that has resulted in the greater political developments and changes historically. A study by Mark Dincecco and Yuhua Wang for the Annual Review of Political Science entitled "Violent Conflict and Political Development Over the Long Run: China Versus Europe" defends that both in Chinese and European history one could find violent conflict to be a main cause driving historical and political development and that even though conflicts occurred with the same frequency in both areas, sample European conflicts normally opposed rival states while 65% of recorded violent conflicts in China was made up of civil wars and rebellions.

The vastness and political integrity of China's current territory is obviously not easily defended, as can be seen with the Chinese Communist Party's current main goals and struggles. This was no different, and probably was just even more acutely difficult, in pre-modern, Imperial China times, as the power exerted from a far-away capital was more easily challenged. However tumultuous, the continuity and length of Chinese history is currently, after being shunned upon during for some part of the Cultural Revolution, a source of pride and an important element of Chinese national identity. The troubles mentioned in the paragraph above and the technical difficulties to unite as much of the mainland territory under one rule did not stop the last of the Imperial Dynasties, the Qing dynasty, to expand its borders to one of the biggest empires in the XVIIIth century under emperor Qianlong. After his rule, the strength of the Qing Dynasty started to diminish (Rowe, 2011). Before continuing into the analysis of the events that led the road to the more debilitated China that was the setting for the Chinese Civil War from 1927 to 1949, and thus the events that eventually led the Chinese Communist Party to rise to power, it is important to mention how

the Qing dynasty set out the road for modern China, as the Manchu dynasty worked to assimilate and incorporate all the different ethnic groups in their territory into bigger, multi-ethnic civilisation (Eberhard, 2004).

However, in a rapidly changing political reality, it was both inside-rebellions and foreign pressure that took a toll on the weakening Qing Empire until the declaration of the Republic of China in 1911 (Eberhard, 2004, p310). During the length of the XIXth century, the first Opium War opposed the British Empire against the Qing dynasty's army, while in the second Opium War, the Chinese army had to fight against both the French and the English. At the end of the first Opium War the Chinese, whose government did not wish to participate in opium trade anymore, were defeated and forced to legalise its commerce under the 1842 Nanjing Treaty, where it was included that Hong Kong would be under British administration for the next 155 years. The end of the first Opium War also inaugurated the so called “century of humiliation” which is considered to span from 1839 to 1949 and was characterised by numerous invasion campaigns by foreign imperial powers and by the defeat of the Chinese in almost all of the wars fought. The defeats undergone during this century have functioned in the collective imagination of Chinese people as a collective reminder of hardships and decadence from which to build on (Eberhard, 2004, p295). After the first Opium War, the second Opium War also functioned as another great debilitating force in the Qing Dynasty’s already weak power-hold. The second Opium War started in 1856 and lasted for four years. Eventually ending with another Chinese defeat. The destruction, still incredibly frowned upon, of the Old Summer Palace by British and French forces put an end to the conflict, and was accompanied by the signing of the Beijing Convention on October 18th, 1960, that once again legalised opium trade and also declared full civil rights such as land property or evangelisation rights for christians.

As we can see, foreign influence and conflicts have at this point of the already-weakened Qing Dynasty, a debilitating effect. Profiting off of their weak state, Japan launched attacks in Korea, a province under Chinese protection, which ended with the declaration and fighting of the first Sino-Japanese War, from 1894 to 1895. At this time Japan an imperialistic and near-fascist power, that had just recently undergone modernisation campaigns such as the Meiji Revolution, positively influencing their war efforts and capabilities. China however, coming

from previous military defeats and governed by a dynasty struggling to enforce its power, suffered six continuous months of defeats and eventually sued for peace in February 1895 and signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki on April the 17th 1895. In addition to shifting regional power even more against China's interests, the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which envisaged monetary reparations to the Japanese, also included the cession of the island of Taiwan and resulted in its occupation by Japanese forces. Previously, in 1894, the Japanese had also settled some troops in the northern region of Manchuria, an area that will become a future critical point in the battle between these two rivals. With the defeat of the Qing Dynasty in this conflict and this increase of power, it was not only Japan that started pursuing its imperialistic agenda and benefitting from the weakness of Chinese rulers, but also Russia and European states.

The growing visibility of foreign presence and control in China, not only from Japan but also from Russia, France or even Germany, was frowned upon by its citizens and a sense of desperation and national pride led to the rising of the Boxer Rebellion, the biggest civilian uprising against foreign influence seen until that day. Supported by the current Qing ruler at the time, the Empress Dowager Cixi, self-organised Boxers and parts of the Qing army battled the Eight-Nation alliance formed by the British empire, Russia, France, Japan, Germany, the US, Italy and the Austria-Hungarian empire in a war that, declared in November 1899, lasted almost two years and yet again resulted in the defeat of the Chinese forces. This defeat once again translated into more land occupation and the obligation to pay reparations by an already impoverished Qing empire in addition to worsening the national spirits and the opposition against foreign forces. In this demoralised climate and with the growing discontent of the Chinese people, more and more uprisings were organised in order to overthrow the Qing dynasty and to take power from Empress Dowager Cixi. All these collected efforts, coming from different factions that pushed for different rulers in the case of defeat of the Qing, resulted in the Xinhai Revolution of 1911. December 29th 1911 saw the election of military commander Sun Yat-sen as a provisional president for the newly declared Republic of China, functioning since January 1st 1912.

The declaration of the new state however, was not the end of the intrastate and interstate conflicts that China had been involved in since at least 1839. The century of humiliation

continued for the Chinese, as the Japanese empire got meddled in the First World War and continued increasing its military power. Thus, in 1915, the Empire of Japan released a set of requirements now referred to as the “Twenty One Demands” which included expanded powers over Manchuria and some areas of Chinese national policy such as the economy. Under the setting of World War I, Japan also declared war on Germany, in order to gain control over the parts of the Shandong province in eastern China that they had administration of, and also solidified its occupational control of areas in northern China and the east coast. These demands were of course opposed by the Chinese people, who proceeded to boycott Japanese goods. All the while, internal Republic of China politics continued to be extremely chaotic, with independent warlords and different opposed factions fighting to install the government most suitable to them. The aforementioned first president of the Republic, Sun Yat-sen, only served in this position from January 1912 to March of that same year and even after the success of his party, the Kuomintang, in the 1912 elections, had to seek exile in Japan in 1913. The infighting continued and seeing a divided China as a weak China, Sun resolved to come back in 1917 and by 1921 was forming an independent Kuomintang army in Guangzhou. From there, he formed an alliance with the newly founded Communist Party of China in order to stop the advance of foreign forces and reconquer and unify mainland China.

With this alliance starts the second half of the struggle that defines the foundation of the People’s Republic of China today. With the support from the newly formed USSR and the III Communist International, the final years of Sun Yat-sen’s life were dedicated to spreading a unifying message to the Chinese people and strengthening the Kuomintang’s military force, the National Revolutionary Army under the command of Chiang Kai-shek. Sun Yat-sen is still today regarded as one of the founding leaders of the People’s Republic of China, as the great precursor of the alliance between the CPC and the Kuomintang, after his death in 1925 however, tensions between these two factions began to rise and a Civil War started in August 1927 when Chiang Kai-shek’s forces from his Northern Expedition attacking the CPC’s organisation branches in Shanghai and other Kuomintang groups in urban areas following suit. These massacres are known as the White Terror and resulted in the beginning of the Chinese Civil War, effectively ended the collaboration between the Kuomintang and the CPC, that did not again join forces until the second Sino-Japanese War from 1937 to 1945.

The Chinese Civil War thus expands from 1927 until 1949, the more than twenty years of on and off fighting between the Kuomintang and the CPC were also more than twenty years of battling foreign influence. After their definitive separation from the Kuomintang, the CPC formed its own armed force, informally called the “Red Army” with Mao Zedong as its commanding officer and installed democratic centralism as their organisational theory. While the Kuomintang was strong in urban areas such as Guangzhou, the CPC had been mainly attacked and forced to retreat from the cities, which led them to reconsider their previous tactics and to shift more attention to the countryside. This switch to the countryside was in part led by Mao when he moved back to his home province of Hunan to start organising the rural workers, defending that if the revolution of the proletariat was to happen in China, a historically agricultural society, it had to mobilise the farmers (Eberhard, 2004, p350).

Preoccupied with the fighting against the CPC, Chiang Kai-shek did not see the National Revolutionary Army strong enough to face the Japanese, even as they advanced and took control of regions south of Manchuria. However, as their advance got as far as taking Beijing, attacking Shanghai and even occupying the basis of the Kuomintang in Nanjing, the government was forced to move to Chongqing, where the commercial routes were cut and they were basically isolated (Eberhard, 2004, p347). Left in this state, the KMT army battalions present in other provinces temporarily halted the attacks on the Red Army to try to stop the Japanese advance. This truce gave way to what is called the “Second United Front” (Kahn, 2018, p16), even though their military strategies never went as far as being coordinated in their efforts, as the CPC’s Red Army utilised guerrilla warfare tactics while the KMT’s army had to deal with the Japanese army in classic head-on clashes. The union of the two forces was also specially short-lived, as by 1940 there were clashes between both Chinese armies, while both the US and the USSR tried to intervene to stop the infighting, defending that this would only benefit the Japanese. The occupation continued and by 1941 had grown to expand over the whole of China’s eastern coast, its richest and most industrialised area. By this point, and while the Red Army obtained small victories with their guerrilla attacks, the Kuomintang’s army was making very slow progress and depended on the outcome of World War II, which had started to flip in the Western front but that still was undecided in its Eastern counterpart, until the atomic bomb attacks of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 (Eberhard, 2004, p348).

With the Japanese forces defeated inside and outside of China, there still were two opposed factions battling for control and to gain the central government power. As we have seen, the KMT's army had been progressively losing strength as the Second Sino-Japanese War unfolded. Meanwhile, the Red Army had forged itself a good reputation battling the Japanese from inside their controlled borders and supporting and aiding people in the countryside. With the end of the fight against the foreign enemy, the CCP had to secure their support and their positions and in order to do this, Mao set as the basis of the negotiation the respect of the liberated regions where the Red Army had its troops. The negotiations were conducted with the winning foreign powers, Britain, the US and the USSR, as mediators, and while they were interested in brokering peace between the Communists and the Nationalists, the negotiations were not entered with full intentions from neither of the two opposing parts. Thus, even while they entered the negotiating process, fighting erupted in China's northeastern regions, where the CCP had its strongest footing and where they started conducting a change in their military organisation from guerrilla fighters to a modern army. Uniting these efforts with the acquired experience of mobilising and organising farmers and rural workers, Mao's campaign was not only led on the battlefield but also consisted on his attention to the struggles that people underwent outside of urban areas, that slowly conquered the impoverished and war-worn Chinese people (Eberhard, 2004, p352). By January 1949, the CCP had secured the north and was no longer fighting on the retreat, their army was strong when it entered Beijing after a pact with the Kuomintang commander Fu Zuoyi. Emboldened by popular support and by the switch of ranks by some Kuomintang officials, Mao declared the People's Republic of China on October 1st, 1949.

The Kuomintang's forces however, were still present mostly in southern China, in islands such as Taiwan and Hainan and also held control over western peripheral territories that the CCP still had to choose whether to incorporate into the new state or not. Thus, the newly named People's Liberation Army (PLA) started its southern campaigns and by the end of 1949 had already conquered Guangdong, Guangxi and even Chongqing, the isolated capital where the Kuomintang had moved during the worst period of Japanese occupation, and Chiang Kai-shek was forced to retreat himself to Taiwan on December 10th, 1949. While it is true that the nationalist forces were on the retreat and that the PLA was undergoing a modernisation effort in order to ensure its victory, the vastness of the Chinese territory was a

technical obstacle that the CCP still had to overcome. Before being able to secure the islands, Mao worked on aligning the authorities of autonomous territories on his side. First, cooperation policies led to a deal with the governor of Xinjiang, later came Tibet. For both these regions, deeply characterised by their religious faith, it was established that they would enjoy religious freedom while they incorporated the state apparatus of the People's Republic of China's for economic and foreign affairs (Wasif Kahn, 2018, p64) Here we can appreciate how, in the dawn of the new China, all ethnicities were equally considered to take part in the civilisation-building process. By the mid-1950s, Mao had secured cooperation and integration of all the territories that are part of the PRC today.

In the birth of the PRC, the Chinese Communist Party was set to take the role of the vanguard party, with the objective to lead and organise the people under the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in order to ensure the full transformation into a communist society and prevent a come-back from capitalists. Thus, the Chinese Communist Party as the organisation for and by the Chinese people shall work to represent the will and desires of workers, and shall take its decisions based on democratic centralism. This is still the organisational theory applied today, Mao's wish to include Chinese workers into political matters is today solidified in the Communist Party's membership of almost 90 million people.

However, in order to make this full transition into socialism, this dictatorship of the proletariat had to plan massive economic policy changes to ensure the basis of socialism. China was still a war-ravaged country that had just gone through the “century of humiliation” and in an overtly competitive global sphere that was at that time shaped by the tensions of the Cold War, Mao believed the country still had to undergo serious reform and change in order to regain its strength. Thus, in 1955 and in an international climate where Chiang Kai-shek's and its American allies' opposition were still threatening to a non-industrialised PRC, the Great Leap Forward plan was presented as the solution in order to advance in modernising both the economy and the military. It consisted on planned economic movements of workers to communes, to take charge of either to manufacturing facilities, farmer's cooperatives or industry work, where, to maintain production, they had to meet output objectives and quotas. However, in implementation, the plan worked the opposite way instead of fixing food shortage problems, and millions died of starvation (Szczepanski, 2019).

As the plan that he had backed had to be cut two years short because of its failure, Mao's leadership resented. Still, he was somehow convinced that the failures of the Great Leap Forward had been caused by incorrect implementation and man-made mistakes, and in a 1966 speech denounced that both from inside and outside of Party membership, "bourgeois" interests had were fighting against socialism. As counterrevolutionary, they were dangerous and had to be stoped. Thus started the Cultural Revolution, a time during which through violent "class struggle", Chinese people were supposed to break with all remnants of capitalism not only in society but also in their thinking and in order to achieve this were subjected to ideological purity tests and their loyalty was put into question (Wasif Kahn, 2018, p112). Even though the government declared it over in 1969, the principles of the Cultural Revolution resonated until Mao's death in 1976.

Before this, however, and even while the Chinese people were being tested on their adoption of communist principles, Mao and his advisors, among them Deng Xiaoping, were themselves negotiating with capitalist foreign powers. Through the failed attempt at industrialisation of the Great Leap Forward and his inability to go through with correct land-ownership reform plans or other development efforts, Mao had realised the deep connection between economic growth and eventual stability in the maintenance of national security. In order to secure this economic prosperity, he allowed the opening of trade negotiations with foreign powers such as Britain or the United States. This type of grand economic planning, though, was in someways tied to the need to undergo deep reform and industrialisation efforts in the country, as Mao knew that building economic stability was as much a way as protecting national security as modernising their military.

With his death in 1976, Mao left behind a unified China under the Chinese Communist Party's control. While initially the CCP's power and legitimacy had derived from their ability to fight against the Japanese and later it was based on communism and their duty to class struggle, the slow introduction of liberal market policies and reforms that intensified under Deng's leadership pointed to new directions for the CCP. Reasoning that seeing how capitalist countries had benefited from liberal market reforms and specially from a growing foreign trade and with the goal of balancing internal and external forces in order to keep China secure, Deng was able to justify the application capitalist reforms under Mao Zedong

thought (Wasif Kahn, 2018, p134) and in 1978 he achieved the Party's majority approval in a plenum. This was the beginning of the opening reform of China's market, and the beginning of its transformation to a socialist market economy. From then on, economic growth and Chinese strength and national security were ideologically tied and economic development has been seen as the new goal through which China would regain its historical strength and status. While communist ideology had both shaped and been adopted into Chinese identity under Mao's leadership, with the rise of Deng and his instrumentalisation of liberal market policies, this narrative had to shift in order to justify deviation from traditional Marxist-Leninist practice and to transform into the logic according to which China had to grow economically to become the great nation it had been before the century of humiliation.

Deng believed that a thriving economy was to provide the basis both for national security, and for the security of the Communist Party, a belief that is still held today. It was under his leadership that some of China's most prosperous projects were established, such as the economic hub in Shenzhen, and when political negotiations and cooperation with foreign capitalist powers took a new level of importance in the country's development. Because Deng understood that it would not be until China had developed economically that the country would gain a solid and powerful position in the global arena, when negotiating or only meeting with other world leaders, he was also extremely pragmatic. While it is clear that sovereignty issues over regions such as Taiwan or Hong Kong are a matter of core national interest to China and that their vision of this shapes both their foreign and their internal policy, these topics were treated with care as Deng tried to strike out a favourable balance of power. While the topics have always been present in their agenda, Chinese leaders have tried to establish the country in a position from which to have enough power and leverage on the international arena to be able to take action on their claim of unifying the Chinese people. This is type of reasoning is mirrored in the adoption of the "one country, two systems" rhetoric (Wasif Kahn, 2018, p169)

While Beijing adopted more and more market reforms, it was seeming clearer and clearer that the "one country, two systems" phrase referred more to the political rather than the economic system, confronting the democratic systems in Taiwan and Hong Kong to the authoritarian rule of an increasingly opaque Communist Party in mainland China. Some international

political scientists and scholars defended the possibility that capitalist reforms in China could also bring about a political change in the country. However, a strong central power was seen as the crucial backbone to secure national interest according to Deng, and he saw democracy in a country of more than one billion people as a destabilising factor, which is why he decided to respond with force to the Tiananmen protests of 1989. Calls for democracy were seen not as mere calls for change and reform but as calls for the destruction of the achievements of the PRC up until that point (Wasif Kahn, 2018, p166), and so they had to be stopped. The aftermath to the response of the protests has shaped one of the basic principles according to which the PRC builds its foreign policy, which is telling international powers that its internal affairs should not be interfered with and because of the importance that China had already acquired by that point in international affairs, this condition was respected (Wasif Kahn, 2018, p167).

Deng Xiaoping's goal with the opening and reform policies was, as we have seen, to attain national security through economic development. When Jiang Zeming took office as the General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1993 these efforts were well underway. China had positioned itself as a global manufacturing hub and its GDP was more than ten times what it had been in 1976, at the time of Mao's death. It might be safe to assume then, that while the possibility of democratic reform had been discarded, the CCP needed to ensure its ideological hold through other means outside of the by then already important economic growth. Thus, Jiang decided to bring ideology back to the every day civic life. Marxism, dialectics and Maoist thought had to be brought back to the classrooms in order to make people understand the strengths and ways of the Communist Party. While watering down its applications in an ever-growingly capitalist economy, Jiang Zemin included marxist classic texts, as well as readings and texts related to Confucianism, and merged them with Deng's ideas of opening and reform, in an implicit pact that promised economic benefits for political obedience (Zhao, 1998). While this is the system that had been applied in dealing with the state's Han majority, it was also the deal that was presented to Uighurs and Tibetans, except that political obedience would also mean political meddling into their religious affairs. Gradually, and under what some see today as a situation of growing insecurity, the policing of religious minorities, even when coupled with economic growth, took its toll, growing pressure on minorities fuelled unrest, which fuelled more control, in a never-ending loop that

today has ended with the disenfranchisement of minority populations and a growing discourse of Han ethnic nationalism from the state.

As we have seen, Deng Xiaoping defended that in economic security also lied national security. However, and as China gained more and more economical power, it started to seem clear that civilian discontent and dissent could some times not be wholly contained under the promise of riches and development, specially as this development and economic growth did not benefit all Chinese people equally. After the failed predictions that undergoing capitalist reforms would also forcedly bring political and democratic reforms, the international community put its hopes on the advance of technology and the dawn of the age of the internet. Seen as a technology with immense liberating powers, as it revolutionised communications and information transfer, everywhere from the Arab World to repressive regimes in Africa or Asia, the Internet was seen as a big new tool to combat against autocratic regimes (Taubman, 1998). The first email supposed to be sent from inside China read “Across the Great Wall, we can reach every corner in the world, this is the first ELECTRONIC MAIL supposed to be sent from China into the international scientific networks via computer interconnection” (Griffiths, 2019, p25) and while the first attempt failed, six days later, September 20th 1987, China had been successfully connected to the web of scientists and scholars that used this technology at that time. It would be some time before these new tools were open for civilian use and not only reserved for academics, researchers and officials, but it was in 1995 when American company Sprint helped set up two lines dedicated for commercial use. Communications giant China Telecom also started to develop its own lines to set up by the end of that year. As these opportunities opened, new control tools were also made available for the authoritarian of the CCP.

3. Critical analysis

3.1 Internet censorship in China

In this section of the paper, we are going to analyse the mechanisms and tools that the Chinese Communist Party utilises in order to keep control over internet content and discourse and the information that it targets, in order to infer the reasons it targets concrete types of discourse or information. Control, censorship included, and surveillance have been present in the internet in China since the early days of its development, which was conducted hand in hand by commercial companies and the CCP. Not all these commercial companies were Chinese, however, as it was Silicon Valley-based company Cisco, which in the 1990s procured surveillance and filtering equipment to the Chinese government (Griffiths, 2019, p29). It should also be noted that internet usage control is not unique to China, as scandals and revelations such as the information released by Edward Snowden have hit not only the United States but a great number of its allies, such as Australia or the UK and opened worldwide debates about the surveillance possibilities that come with internet usage (Pohle & Van Audenhove, 2017). While what these revelations showed were deep and pervasive methods of internet surveillance though, in China's internet we find not only pervasive surveillance but powerful and intricate apparatus of internet censorship. In order for this apparatus to work and thus, in order for the CCP to maintain the level of control they wish, censorship in the Chinese internet works in two ways (Griffiths, 2019, p26).

The first and probably the better known of these methods is the international censorship and blocking of content, while the second works internally to filter the information and traffic that goes through national internet providers and web service companies. To refer to this first level "the Great Firewall" is the name of the project first charged to build this barrier between foreign international internet content and information allowed in China, while the system for internal filter and national control is known as "the Golden Shield". Even though these two efforts, these two software, man-work and physical equipment compilations, might have started separately, they now operate under the same dictates and follow the same objective, which is why both levels of censorship have come to be popularly referred to as the Great Firewall.

Not one of the two names gives a very accurate description of the complicated and intricate systems that have come to form China's censorship apparatus over time and through the cooperation of public authorities, Chinese commercial companies as well as foreign

companies (Griffiths, 2019, p27). Indeed, these censorship apparatus are made up of overlapping methods and tools but for one, the Great Firewall is actually a firewall, a software programmed to deny access to particular content while allowing it to other sites. This means that in order to connect to x or y address when in China, the traffic you are generating will first have to run through the permissions that incorporate this software, that will allow your access to it or not. Firewalls are not atypical in office or academic settings, where web traffic will be restricted in certain services, as they might be considered inappropriate or un-useful for work performance.

China's Great Firewall is undoubtedly more complex than these systems as in some instances it might not block a service as a whole but just certain functions or pages. This was the case for Wikipedia, whose articles in Mandarin were mostly accessible until 2015, except for a few delicate topics, later to be fully blocked in Mandarin and later to be blocked in full in May this year. As far as other foreign services being completely blocked, as we will discuss later, there are different types. On the one hand we can find social media services, namely Facebook and Twitter, but also the rest of the apps owned by Facebook, such as Instagram or Whatsapp. On the other hand, we can find an increasingly growing list of foreign newspapers, such as the New York Times, that was blocked for publishing the wealth that a CCP official's family had amassed during his time in office, but also the BBC, the Financial Times, CNN, the Wall Street Journal and as recently as June 2019, the Guardian, the Intercept and Huffington Post, to name a few. In this sense, information blocking criteria works in a similar fashion as it did more than 15 years ago, as in their project "Empirical Analysis of Internet Filtering in China" Harvard Law school researchers Jonathan Zittrain and Benjamin Edelman found that the different types and lists of sites that are blocked under the Great Firewall are very diverse, while they differentiated eight different categories of usually blocked content: Dissident or pro-democracy sites, health, education, news, government, Taiwanese and Tibetan sites, entertainment and religion.

The complexity to bypass the Firewall's censorship though, lies in the process that inspects traffic for undesired information, as it does not limit itself to the examination of the source or destination of the traffic, thus blocking undesired outcomes from Chinese IP addresses, but actually functions through the search of keywords in the content of the pages that one might

wish to visit. For internet-savvy users, the use of encryption methods, proxies or VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) might present an alternative to the restrictions of these communications but the Chinese Communist Party has been growing their censoring capabilities with great efforts and in specially sensitive moments can go as far as preventing the VPN's protocols to work entirely, and when sending encrypted messages netizens might just be drawing the attention of the censors to the content of it. The different stages of control have to be communicated and authorised through the software, that will only load the page the user is looking for after a positive response from all these commands.

This complexity translates into a relative slowness when compared to the speed of commercial internet in Europe or the US, and also needs vast infrastructure, as this does not happen “in the cloud” but through the movement of information from different physical computers, the servers. Here lies one of the contradictions of the expanse of internet censorship in China, as it slows not only communication but also innovation, because of the numerous obstacles that information has to surpass in order to be useful and used. At the same time, and while some economic development related to innovation might be lost, the censorship and surveillance apparatus has also come to represent a growing industry in the country. The external, foreign blockage apparatus might be composed of software and the physical computers running it, the internal, filtering methods are even more complex and require more man power, as we will see.

Even though the potential of the internet to mobilise and energise free speech was greatly emphasised when it entered China, Chinese internet scholar Rogier Creemers argues that:

As the internet became a publicly accessible information and communication platform, there was no debate about whether it should fall under government supervision – only about how such control would be implemented in practice. (Economy, 2018)

Only having left to decide the manners and the extent of the control that would surely be imposed, the CCP was left to follow a trial and error process and at the same time a cat and mouse game. As activists, artists or dissidents all tried different methods to surpass the information blockade, the censor would learn from their efforts and incorporate these new ways into the filters. However training was needed by both parts, some the specially sensitive

comments that have been kept out of public debates such as questioning the One China policy, questioning principles and theory included in the Constitution, destabilising national security or in any other way acting against China's interests (Sautedé, 2013).

In the early days of development of China internet, for both for the Chinese government censor and for the activists and people trying to bypass the Firewall, the best test to their capabilities was the Falun Gong movement. Falun Gong is a spiritual movement based on qigong, a traditional Chinese practice, that combines a wide array of elements from traditional medicine, meditation, physical activity, moral philosophy and spirituality, that gained popularity in the 1990s in China. Its founder, Li Hongzhi, started out as an itinerant qigong practitioner in Northeastern China and when gaining fame moved to Beijing, where he started to grow a steady base of followers and where he was able to find support for his teachings. Even though they were at first supported and even had practitioners in the CCP, when the government turned against the practice of qigong, Li was forced to move to the United States. His movement, however, persisted, and after a negative article about Falun Gong was posted in a local newspaper, hundreds and then eventually thousands of people went to the local government branch to protest. After making the protestors wait, government officials heard their petition to stop persecuting the group but did not agree to it. From that point on, Falun Gong has been a banned topic from all Chinese social media services, newspapers or other online mediums (Griffiths, 2019, p55). Not only this, but even in the censorship efforts against Falun Gong were also observed the first instances where the Chinese censor was able to restrict the messages that were sent by private people from abroad China to people in the mainland. Falun Gong presented a problem because that had to be met with new kinds of resistance because of the big amount of popular support it had obtained, but it was also one of the first instances when the international sphere was able to witness the CCP's online censoring capabilities and its censoring criteria.

While today none of the GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook and Amazon) companies that dedicate themselves to services are present in the Chinese market with their main product, Apple products are of course on sale on China but it is not a service company, this was not always so. One of the premises and effects of the internet always has been constructing a more globalised world and, as such, big US internet services had traditionally regarded China

as part of their accessible market. In the case of Yahoo, that emerged as a listing service rather than being a search-engine and that had a fierce competitor in Google in the United States, their entrance in the Chinese market has been decisive for the survival of the company. More reliance on this branch also meant less leverage against the Chinese government's pressure, and so in 2002 Yahoo subscribed the "Public Pledge of Self-Discipline for the Chinese Internet Industry" and from that point on ascribed by the same criteria, and followed the same rules as national search engines, opening the debate about whether it was ethical for information technology companies that were so keen on advocating for free speech at home were actually censoring abroad. The approval of these conditions led two years later to the collaboration between Yahoo and the CCP in the investigation of a post regarding the 14th anniversary of the Tiananmen square protests (Griffiths, 2019, p66). With the company's help, the poster, a young man named Shi Tao, was arrested and committed under charge of leaking state secrets.

The debate on whether to collaborate or not with the state censor is one that all main information technology companies that wanted to offer their services in China has had to face. Google has also had an on-again off-again relationship with the new great power. While having operated for about three years, Google had to pull out their uncensored search engine in 2003 and it wasn't until they named a new chief of strategy for China that they set on coming back to the Chinese market. Kaifu Lee, a computer scientist from Taiwan that was working for Microsoft, was the person chosen to define Google's new China strategy (Sheehan, 2018). Google executives decided that it was better to provide a service, albeit incomplete, than denying the Chinese people the possibility of accessing information they could offer at all. Thus, in 2006 Google.cn was launched in compliance with the expected censorship, albeit they had a defining characteristic in comparison with any other competitor's search engines, as a message was included when searching for censored terms, that read the following: "These search results are not complete, in accordance with Chinese laws and regulations." (Griffiths, 2019, p119) While this did little to calm the criticism against Google's decision at home, it was also struggling to get a hold of a good share of Chinese netizens, who viewed the company as a sort of American meddler. This outside perception as an apparent non-neutral player trying to push US interests and destabilise China, and the very real fact that Google is foreign company, sealed the eventual demise of search engine in that

country. Having achieved control of around a third of the China's search market by the end of 2009, in January 2010, Google China executives solicited talks with the Chinese government (Sheehan, 2018) in order to make their search engine censorship free, which resulted in their eventual shut down. With these examples of how western foreign companies have tried, without success, to both have access to the Chinese market but to expect to operate under the same terms as in European or other Western countries, I argue that this is because the Great Firewall, while being composed of a software infrastructure and other directives, its power stems from the pressure that the Chinese government can exert on not only national but also foreign information technology companies. In a way this is the international balance of power that Deng sought, as China's influence and role in today's globalised world is too sensitive for its political adversaries to gain wide-based support on opposition to their internal affairs, or even such as has happened with the issue of Taiwan.

In relation to the banning of foreign information technology companies in China, apart from posing a threat because of the aforementioned possibilities of freer of access to information and a less restricted speech, the CCP also motivated their action in the interests that it holds in national companies controlling this ever growing technological market. This serves a double purpose, as it permits Chinese citizen's data to be under quasi-direct control of the CCP, as there is close collaboration between all the main companies of information technology and the Chinese government, and it is also a way to motivate innovation and economic development in national industry. Whatever the circumstances, in order to maintain a strong grip on control over internet content in China and follow with their policies of guidance of public opinion, the CCP had to make sure that the companies that worked services infrastructure industry, national or foreign, complied and followed with their directions.

Because in so many of their actions and policies, the Chinese Communist Party relies on technicalities, in this matter it could not be different. Instead of referring to their efforts on public forums as "censorship" these are actually not censoring activities but actually consists of "public opinion guiding." In order to achieve their goals in public opinion managing though, these guiding efforts not only consist on the control of which information can and cannot be posted online, but also the type of discourse that surrounds this information. This is

done through a variety of means, but considering the transformative force that a positive or negative position on the mainstream internet might affect some political matters in the light of recent bulletin boards being closed by the central government, the University of Nanjing started hiring students that were supposed to be paid fifty cents of yuan a post in order to leave positive commentary on online forums and discussions.

These types of posts, that are exceedingly common in the Chinese web since 2005, are the starting point of what is now called the “50 Cent Party”, with its name pointing to how much pay the commenters received per post. While this started as a somehow marginal practice it has spread, as efforts of the CCP have been thrown in the practice, with estimates pointing that there might be as many as 2 million people working on posting government-planned internet commentary nowadays (King & Pan & Roberts, 2017). Through the analysis of a set of leaked emails of the Internet Propaganda Office of a district in Ganzhou, the biggest city in China’s southern Jiangxi province, that include the activity details of more than 43,000 posts identified as authored by 50 cent party posters, King, Pan and Roberts in their article “How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, not Engaged Argument” they try to find patterns and their objectives. Proportionally to the number of 50c party posts that they had found disseminated from the Ganzhou district in a year would amount to around 448 million postings a year (King & Pan & Roberts, 2017). When analysing their message and contents, however, they found the posts were not directly related to defending the government when it is question, and is rather more centred on either taking part in non-politically related public debates or contributing to a wider discourse of “support” for China, basically with current discussions on patriotism or praise over its revolutionary past and struggles, thus feeding into the nationalist narratives previously studied. With this, they argue that their postings follow two-fold logic, seeking to feed into nationalist discourse and also as a distracting tactic to channel Chinese netizens efforts at times of political debate. They argue that, as we have found through the examination of the case of Falung Gong, these distraction tactics are a way of preventing the birth of collective action and organising.

This indeed serves the goals of “guiding public opinion” and works to exert the ideological and “political guidance” expected from the CCP. As we have seen with the examples from

demands and directives that the Party makes regarding information technology, the censorship decisions taken on the internet media are taken following the authoritarian logic at the basis of the CCP. Thus, through the study of the examples and motives presented in this section, I argue that while the leadership of the CCP benefits from online discourses and debate on nationalism and patriotism, thus allowing online political debates on this fashion to happen, these opinions are permitted to stay online and be shared as long as they do not present real possibilities of forming “collective action potential” (King & Pan & Roberts, 2017), at which point they will be taken down and fought with distraction techniques.

3.2 Political debate and opposition on the Chinese internet

3.2.1 “The Chinese internet”

As has been discussed in the previous sections, information technology has been considered to facilitate very different outcomes, as normally it is either regarded to be useful as a tool in democratisation and civic processes (Ferdinand, 2000) or to serve authoritarian purposes (Rød & Weidman, 2015). Yang Guobing defends in his 2012 paper “A Chinese Internet? History, Practice, and Globalization” that taking into account the special characteristics of internet services in use in China should lead to form a unique concept for a “Chinese internet”. It is clear that the internet, and information technology as a whole, have expanded communication techniques and possibilities and thus the ways that humans create networks and form groups, affecting their political sphere. However, when it comes to the Chinese internet, these tendencies seem to be under-reported or overlooked in mainstream media coverage and sometimes also in academic studies of the Chinese internet politics.

Without going as far as affirming the internet as a future force of democratisation in China, in this section of the essay we will introduce different ways in which the unique possibilities of community-building, network-formation, assembly and political opposition that are present in the Chinese internet. Through the use of social networks, online discussion forums or commentary, mainland Chinese netizens incur in political discussions that are often overlooked and mostly dismissed because of a misconception about how censorship achieves in eliminating all political speech, opposition or critique. As political scientist scholars or academics in international relations it might sometimes seem a natural mechanism to identify

the general trends in the PRC with the Chinese Communist Party's policies as if they were completely agreed upon within and outside the Party (Jenne, 2017). This neglect is specially delicate considering the population size and cultural diversity present in the People's Republic of China, a country of at least 1.4 billion people, accounting for almost 20% of the world's population according to the World Population Review. Furthermore, in a country that takes up almost a fifth of the world population and holds the biggest percentage of internet users globally, there inevitably will be great diversity and cultural differences between people from different geographic areas, generations, socio-economic class or even downsizing when comparing alumni from different universities.

Over-reigning trends and narratives are sure to be found in most internet discourse in the Chinese internet, and these narratives are clearly not formed in a void as a lot of them are influenced by the CCP's efforts in a variety of ways. This, however, cannot be separated from deep political opinions held by Chinese people and their autonomy as political subjects. A recent example of this would be the Dolce&Gabbana scandal that occurred in November 2018. The Italian brand, that relies on the growing Chinese market for luxury goods for an important share of their sales, released an advertising depicting an Chinese model struggling to eat Italian cuisine with chopsticks (Cheng, 2018). Chinese netizens interpreted this as an indirect way to call them uncivilised, unrefined and somehow inferior. The accusations of racism that this ad provoked were very quickly followed by intense backlash in social networks and online retailer sites, going as far as forcing the cancellation of a Shanghai-planned runway show (Bloomberg, 2018).

The comments and the backlash that inspired these online protests followed a nationalist logic, and important influencers and media stars communicated in their Weibo accounts how they planned to oppose a brand that had insulted Chinese tradition. In this line, Bloomberg quotes Chinese model Estelle Chen's post on social network Instagram saying "China is rich yes but China is rich in its values, its culture and its people and they won't spend a penny on a brand that does not respect that" (Bloomberg, 2018). The Dolce & Gabbana controversy serves as an example of the strength of popular opinion and discontent that is manifested in certain situations in Chinese social media and that should not be overlooked in studies, as it also translates outside the net. Dolce&Gabbana's products have been taken off online retailer

sites such as TMall or JD and their sales have dropped significantly (Williams, 2019) and while this is a case of a controversy with a brand, online internet commentary in China has also served to criticise and demand accountability in a variety of situations.

In her 2010 paper “Authoritarian Deliberation on the Chinese internet” scholar Min Jiang defends the distinction between “democratic deliberation and autocratic deliberation”, previously defined by Baogang He (2006). In this paper, Jiang considers how an authoritarian government’s control of the internet, taking the CCP’s control as the case of analysis, works to restrict the acceptable public sphere for public deliberation, specially online. While historically, and until not long ago, public deliberation theories had excluded non-democratic regimes from their study and appliance because of the tight governmental control over the public debate, “the very practice of public deliberation can approximate the public sphere as a social space where private individuals are able to engage in rational debate to reach a consensus free from coercion” (Jiang, 2010). This is why public deliberative discussions in the PRC, even while limited by censorship and other mechanisms, should not be denied of content, protest or force. While censorship, as we have seen, has only increased and gotten better with the advance of technology, Chinese citizens have adapted and adopted new codes and ways to get around it.

As has also been mentioned before, the Chinese internet presents unique characteristics that force an individual analysis as opposed to the broader internet studies that are normally carried out in the West. This is because the Chinese internet has its own borders, players and creators. By using their own social media sites and information technology services, the PRC has not only created a booming tech industry and thus assured a new sector to drive the country’s economic growth, but has also ensured that the Chinese people’s data and internet usage is monitored mainly by Chinese companies. The boom in China’s digital economy forces a stark comparison with the European Union’s technology-versed policies, as some of the most promising European technology companies, such as Nokia or Ericsson, are now either no longer big players in the digital economy or have been bought by US companies (Kahn, 2018). Chinese rising technological capabilities have also been tied with nationalist discourses and are seen as a source of pride. Not only this, but it is also extremely varied and rich in its possible uses and applications. Chinese netizens can enjoy a great variety of social

networks, video platforms, instant messaging apps or e-commerce sites, such as Sina Weibo, Toudou Youku, Momo, Meituan, WeChat or TMall, all of them developed by Chinese companies. Some of these apps offer even more services than their Western counterparts, such as WeChat, the Chinese equivalent to WhatsApp, which offers in-app paying services and can be linked to the user's bank account.

This great variety of services might also be one of the reasons why Chinese netizens do not resent censorship constantly and overtly, even though the increase in the possibilities of services and uses of information technology in China has not increased proportionally to the limits on freedom of expression and political speech on the internet (Jiang, 2010). At the same time, however, the great number of outlets used by Chinese netizens also facilitates the creation of a greater variety of ways of surpassing the censor's filters. Videos or images are more difficult to filter and control than text, for example, and require stronger technological capabilities. In order to understand the main infrastructure of the Chinese internet usage, we will look out some discourse techniques that internet users in China rely to create political discourse inside and the public deliberation sphere online where it is created. This will be studied in two manners. First, we will analyse the four different spheres in the Chinese internet based off of their specific levels of control, their publication source and nature, and how they can be ranked as more or less subject to internet censorship, as defined by Jiang in her 2010 research on "Authoritarian deliberation on Chinese Internet". Second we will analyse the different mediums and tactics mainland Chinese people have used and use currently to maintain political discussions.

3.2.2 Spaces and Spheres in the Chinese internet

In order to censorship that all these sites go through depends on the level of government influence over the publishing source and the authorities that they might rely on. In this manner, four different types of spaces in the net can be singled out: central propaganda spaces, government-regulated commercial spaces, emerging civic spaces and international deliberative spaces. The first one is composed of government websites and state news agencies and presents the highest level of censorship because of its closeness and near total identity to the Party's politics. Because of their direct connection to the Party and to the

government specially, these outlets are normally spaces where both freedom of speech and journalistic freedom normally go after the government's control over these institutions and their infrastructure. Among the state media sources of "guidance of public opinion" (Jiang, 2010) we can find Xinhuanet (www.xinhuanet.com), China National Radio Online (www.cnr.cn), China Central Television or CCTV Online (www.cctv.cn) and People's Net (www.people.com.cn). These outlets, hand to hand with local government pages and discussion forums make up the first line of control of public opinion and to achieve this they use the methods that we have seen in the previous sections, such as downright dictating the headlines and content that the newspapers must run or the ways that information should be posted.

Regarding the two different mediums through which this state-controlled information is broadcasted to the public, on the one hand we talk about provincial or local government web pages where Chinese netizens can find information about the functioning of their local institutions and even processes of civilian consultation. These new formats to incorporate political discussion on local levels might be seen as a mean to increase Party legitimacy between ordinary citizens or even just as mechanisms to deflate social tensions (Jiang, 2010). However, it cannot be denied that they also establish ways to increase political participation and awareness between the citizenry. On the other hand, news published by state news agencies such as Xinhua or People's Daily have traditionally been used to accompany and soften public opinion and work as soft power to introduce the Party's agenda. PRC leaders such as Hu Jintao or Xi Jinping have made very clear the importance of the internet in shaping a common narrative for modern Chinese people and this should not be surprising, as many political campaigns globally now depend on their communication through the internet. While this is still true, and internet state news media is a key instrument in shaping public opinion, Jiang argues that recently these mediums had been increasingly allowing more debate (2010) and while censorship has increased since the start of Xi Jinping's first term in 2013, these are spaces of intense political participation, albeit controlled by the central government.

Next we find government regulated commercial sites where, specially used by young Chinese netizens, the reigning services are music and video platforms, search engines, news, instant

messaging or gaming. These services, provided by private companies, are nevertheless not free from governmental oversight, as collaboration and close relations between internet service providers between the CCP and companies is close, so while censorship is less automatic than in government-provided internet services, it is still present. This is why these services and sites which millions and millions of users check everyday should at least in theory present more diverse and varied opinions than those found in state-sponsored media. In fact, in these services such as microblogging sites, is where since the popularisation of internet usage in China most delicate political critique has been expressed and published (Economy, 2018). Even though the crackdown on these sites has been more serious as they gained more and more popularity and specially since since 2013, these types of platforms, as well as more recent ones such as live-streaming video sites, are still the setting for a lot of regime critiquing (Yang, 2014). In his 2008 working paper called “Political discourse in the Chinese blogosphere: A quantitative analysis”, Ashley Esarey defends that internet users in China had slowly learned to use the internet with the limits that accompany it and how they had grown accustomed to bypassing the censors on certain topics and with satire or special codes, in order to avoid strong repression. These codes and bypass methods will be analysed shortly, but from their use we can infer that even though the Chinese internet at first glance might seem flat or without criticism, this is also because while a direct mention of topics such as the Tiananmen square protests, the Falun Gong movement or Taiwanese independence will automatically be erased or never be posted, while approaching less sensitive topics with subtle satire or critique is still very much present but also much more discrete.

Jiang refers to emerging civic spaces, as the spaces online that civic organisations where civic organisations conduct coordination and deliberation activities (2010) and gather around common values, interests or problems online. Some examples of these organisations are the China Youth Development Foundation, the China Red Cross or the China International Almsdeed Institute, as well as celebrity-founded and driven charities. Drawing from a previous classification made by Yang Guobing (2007), she differentiates five types of civic organisations in China, depending on whether they work on business, women’s issues, health and community development, the environment or social services. Apart from being a place of reunion for pre-formed organisations, the Chinese internet is also a space where civic organisations and groups can be formed, as we can see with Ning Zhang’s research on online

backpacking communities (2014). Zhang defends that while communities formed outside of the internet are normally centralised and very leadership dependent, web-based communities function under different norms and are more dependent on voluntary collaboration, flexibility and action, and that instead of organising civic unrest through protests, are more centred on charity and volunteer work.

According to Zhang (2014), even if an organisation's work might not be positioned completely against the state apparatus or even as a fight against a particular discrimination, "cultural and social activities associated with the use of the Internet, no matter whether or not they have outright political agendas, are capable of being contentious and subversive." Today, ChinaDaily reports over 800,000 civilian organisations in China (Xinhua, 2019), and even though some might actually depend on government collaboration to carry out their work, this does not mean that by uniting and sharing a common goal, participants in these assemblies are not carrying out political work. The networked way in which the internet works facilitates the connection between likeminded individuals, by allowing the interlinkage of blogs or by being able to search a specific topic to see other people's opinion on it, and this facilitates offline action. Similar and chronologically prior to the backpacking communities example, Jiang recalls the organisation 1kg.org that united a community of travellers and shaped a volunteer network to donate school supplies and books to children in remote rural areas.

In the middle ground between ground-based civic organisations and collectives working with an international impact outside of mainland China, thusly participating in global debates, we can find movements with more clear political motivations that have formed and struggled to continue to operate online. A fitting example of how these movements have gained their strength through online support is contained in Leta Hong Fincher's account of the feminist movement in China in her book "Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China" (2018). Through direct accounts, interviews and research, in this book Dr. Hong Fincher reports on the efforts of a group of mainland Chinese women that, connecting between different cities and provinces through WeChat and online magazine publications, organised a series of protests, both online campaigns and off line actions, against sexual harassment, discrimination or work inequality. As we have seen, the naming of Xi Jinping as head of the CCP came with a stronger repression on civic political life, and ever since 2013,

the government was cracking down on organisations, specially NGOs, all over the country and calling some out for supposed foreign support and regime-change efforts (Denyer, 2015). However, and against this climate of high tension, Dr. Fincher defends that:

By 2016, social media had already played an important role in promoting greater feminist consciousness among Chinese women. Even as the government cracked down on feminist organizing, ordinary women were increasingly sharing information and voicing their anger about sexism on the internet. Sometimes, they even succeeded in pressuring the government to retract its sexist propaganda. In an authoritarian state where citizens do not have freedom of assembly or freedom of the press, such a critical mass is remarkable. (Hong, 2018, p29)

What started out as a group of women sharing common worries online turned into a movement that spread through various universities and cities and that continued even after the arrests of five women in 2015 (Zheng, 2015). The so-called “Feminist Five” had used a variety of tactics, before and after their arrest, to bypass the censors and get their message to reach a wider public and gain online support. Their cause also resonated internationally, and this has earned them world-wide repercussion and also helped pressure the Chinese government to free them from detention.

The international support received by the Feminist Five was not formed in a void, as it arises from the pre-existing international deliberative spaces that Jiang argues “bridge China and the outside world and mediate public opinion between them.” (2010). While, as has been presented before, the Great Firewall’s first barrier of control consists on blocking undesired foreign content, some individuals, normally bilingual in Mandarin and English and somehow connected to countries outside of the PRC, can work as “bridge-bloggers” (Jiang, 2010) and achieve in permeating the borders of the Firewall. Even though some of these bloggers conduct their work outside of mainland China, from the US or Hong Kong, others, through the use of secure communications or VPNs, can access banned information from the PRC and then communicate it back to their audience, sometimes after some degree of self-censorship or codification. The great diaspora of Chinese economic migrants all over the world also functions as reciprocal information and communication network through which to find support and access to otherwise unavailable information inside of mainland China (Taneja &

Xiao Wu, 2013). Apart from bloggers, other people that function as a link and that help bridge the “two internets” are internationally known artists or personalities such as Ai Weiwei or cartoonist Badiucao, that work in exile to shine a light on the inner works of Chinese society and the repressive tendencies of the CCP. Even from outside of mainland China though, these dissidents face threats and consequences for speaking against policies of the Chinese government and while the internet serves as a way to spread their work and to create a conversation about it, it does not provide total anonymity nor immunity (Griffiths, 2018, p212).

Through the interaction between these four spaces, Chinese internet users navigate an intricate web of control and censorship mechanisms that not only work as surveillance tools but also as repressive mechanisms that restrict their political speech and police their actions and opinions. Still, the Chinese internet is not barren of political criticism and commentary, and while they are extremely policed, academics should not negate Chinese citizens as political subjects, and should be studied as such.

3.2.3. Online resistance, codes and satire

As pervasive and undeniable censorship in the Chinese internet might be, it is also true that in a country with approximately 800 million internet users the entirety of the content that is shared and created online is impossible to police, and that not all of it will shine a positive light on the CCP. Social networks present, as we have seen, new ways to conduct manifest political opinion and discourse. In fact, in the Chinese internet social commentary, be it about situations of inequality, disasters, or corruption scandals, is normally widely shared and discussed, with a lot of socially critical stories reaching viral status and the press.

Two years ago, an essay written by a rural migrant worker that lived in Beijing relating her move to Beijing and the hardships she had gone through both in her native province of Hubei and once she had arrived to the capital became viral through Weibo and WeChat and the most read article on the Chinese internet just two days after being posted (Koetse, 2017). Even though the main response to the essay was literary praise, it also sparked a debate about the precarious conditions that migrant workers have to put up with, and how they have still to benefit from the economic growth and advantages that the urban middle class enjoys. In this

line, we can find similar stories showcasing the social problems created by the migrant worker phenomenon, such as the “left-behind children”, who are the sons and daughters of the workers forced to leave the countryside for rapid-growing urban areas. In one of the viral stories, a 9 year old boy is pictured arriving to school with frozen eyebrows and frozen hair after walking for 45 mins, only to arrive and there being no heating in the classroom either (Koetse, 2018). In 2015, the National Health and Family Planning Commission released a report in which the estimates for the number of “left-behind children” reached 61 million and while Chinese netizens cannot volunteer to send donations and clothing to all of them, as they responded to the boy in this story, in an incredibly controlled and polished public sphere viral posts like this help communicate harsh situations and shine a light to current social problems.

However critical this commentary may be, it is true that in order to tackle some more specific topics, like the Tiananmen square demonstrations of 1989 other matters relating to domestic politics, blogposts and online commentary cannot be so direct. This forces internet users to find loopholes in the censors filters and their cuts. In fact, the rich and inventive mechanisms used by netizens of the Chinese internet are also a unique characteristic of it. While some mediums are similar to the ones one might find in political commentary in the US or Europe, such as memes or videos, Mandarin also offers a wide option of homophones and proverbs that are tuned to change their message and charge them with satire or critique. With the birth of the #MeeToo movement in the United States we could see its shockwaves all over the internet, and even though it was mostly expressed through Twitter and reported on on the New York Times or other blocked newspapers, it also reached the Chinese internet.

Patriarchy is deeply engrained in Chinese society where, traditionally, unmarried women over 26 are called “leftover women” and where at least 53% of women responded positively to having been assaulted in the subway according to a survey by the state-run organisation China Youth Daily conducted in August 2017 (Hong Fincher, 2018, p52).

Thus, when the movement spread in China, albeit sort of contained in the university circles or between rich urban women, it affected different industries, from sports to entertainment, and made big news. It eventually also took force outside university activist circles with the testimony of a Foxconn factory worker in January of 2018 (Hong Fincher, 2018, p122). However, some days after a post by a former intern at a news station accused a famous

CCTV host of actions of sexual misconduct that happened in 2014, when searching for the presenter's name or phrases like “Mee too” or “Meeto” the results were filtered as the terms had been blocked (Kuo, 2018). In order to bypass the block, Chinese feminists shifted the hashtag to the characters for rice (mi) and rabbit (tu), but the Weibo account that collected the testimonies was shut down soon after (Hong Fincher, 2018, p123). Feminist discourse is still present in the Chinese internet, however, and very recently a new hashtag relating to victims of sexual assault, #NoPerfectVictim (Yuan, 2019).

The use of homophones is either used by itself, like in the case of Mi Tu, or combined into phrases or sayings in order to form jokes or idioms. These are just two of the forms of online satire that Jiang and Yang present in their research titled “The networked practice of online political satire in China: Between ritual and resistance” (2015). Even though this paper defends that satire fulfils a social function on top of its political purpose, they also declare that “practices of online political satire at their most political moments are not only critiques of power, but popular mobilizations against power.” This is why they proceed to analyse the different phrases and structure of the satirical comics, identifying five networked practices: jokes (or duanzi, in Mandarin), national sentence-making, multimedia mixes, online performance art and online news comments.

While the first category of these practices, duanzi, consists of jokes that might not always contain political commentary, a survey conducted by the People’s Tribute Survey Center in 2010 with almost 10,000 respondents found that on average, 29% of the duanzi they shared were politically related. Going back to the 2003 SARS epidemic outbreak Jiang and Yang quote a joke that played with Jiang Zeming’s “three represents theory” which was ratified at the 2002 Party Congress and talks about the objectives the CCP must meet as the organisation that (Mohanty, 2003):

Represents China’s advanced social productive forces.

Represents the orientation of China's advanced culture.

Represents the fundamental interests of the majority of Chinese people.

The duanzi, however, goes like this (Jiang & Yang, 2015):

SARS represents the demand of a special virus for development.

SARS represents the advancement of a culture of terror.

SARS represents the basic interests of the broad masses of wild animals.

As can be seen, the joke is satirical because of its comedic notes, but the content is still very much political and criticises the ways that the CCP handled the epidemic outbreak.

As for “national sentence making”, the next category distinguished by Jiang and Yang, they give the following definition for it: “online practice of remaking and circulating popular phrases and sayings. Because this phenomenon became popular only with the adoption of the Internet and social media, it is sometimes called ‘Internet sentence-making.’” (2015, p5) In order to illustrate this, they rely on two well-known examples. First, we will analyse the online commentary that arises from the events of a bullet train derailing accident that occurred in 2011. In order to speed the criticism and aftermath of the accident, in a time when bullet trains were the pride and hope of modernisation in China, officials declared that the train had been buried on site with one of them even going as far as declaring “Whether or not you believe it, I believe it.” (Jiang & Yang, 2015) After these declarations made the rounds via social media, users of Weibo and WeChat started to make the phrase ‘xxx, whether or not you believe it, I believe it’ theirs and adding their own meaning, the example quoted goes like this: “If you ride the subway, the escalator will collapse. If you ride the high-speed train, there will be a train collision. If you take the bus, the bus will catch fire... If you donate for disasters, your money will be spent on a Maserati. Whether or not you believe it, I believe it.” (Jiang & Yang, 2015).

Through the modification of well known text, that in this quoted case was part of the popular statement given by the Ministry of Railways official, Chinese netizens are able to re-appropriate and transform the meaning of these, to shape them into new expressions of discontent, criticism or just plain humor (Jiang & Yang, 2015). Another well-known phrase of this kind is “My father is Li Gang!”, which was popularised in 2010. This sentence was uttered after a hit-and-run car accident by the 22-year-old son of the deputy police chief in Baoding, Hebei Province, Li Gang. The whole saying went “Sue me if you dare. My father is Li Gang!” and we can assume that he expected to receive special treatment because of his familiar connections. This is not only a matter of beneficial treatment because of one’s relations, but it addressed the specific problem of “officiallings” or the sons and daughters of

government officials, who are normally favoured in excess, according to ordinary Chinese netizens. This “national sentence making” is normally tied to the online news comments section form of networked practice, as these remarks are normally posted and shared on comment sections, but they are also sometimes mixed with other communication mediums, such as picture memes or videos.

These types of practices have grown as internet users have also become more accustomed to the use of new technologies and the possibilities that come with mobile-phones, PCs and other devices. Through the use of Photoshop, as one of the biggest tools for the remix of multimedia, Chinese netizens can easily manipulate text and images to give them new meanings and complicate the censor’s objective of stopping them from posting about sensitive topics. In fact, a well-known example of multimedia remix, the next category of networked practices that we are examining, uses the popularity of the previously-studied “My father is Li Gang!” joke to add it in pictures or video to make comedy of the situations. Jiang and Yang include this example of the retouching of a picture of President George Bush to examine the uses of multimedia remix as satire:

A picture capturing President George Bush Jr. in a buffet queue was photoshopped with an imaginary monolog that reads: ‘Give me more food! My father is Li Gang!’ Another man in the same queue with a wretched expression lamented: ‘God damn it! How come my dad is not Li Gang?’ While the original picture had no intention to emphasize President Bush’s family privilege or the imperious behaviours of the Bush administration, the photoshopped speech bubbles clearly alluded to such widely shared perceptions in China and produced additional comedic effects by drawing similarities between President Bush and Li Gang’s son. (Jiang & Yang, 2015, p6)

These are not only instances of remix of multimedia content, but Chinese netizens are actually taking part of production of media and political content. These creations are also not only dedicated to satire and humour though, as the making of montages such as the hour long 'The War on Internet Addiction'. As a response to the marginalisation and stigma they felt they were subjected to, being referred as 'Internet addicts' and with some of them even having to go through forced electroshock therapy, over 100 gamers collaborated on the making of this documentary in order to shine a light on the reality of their personal lives (Jiang & Yang, 2015). The film won the most prized award at the Tudou Film Festival of 2010 and led to a

nation-wide discussion on the troubles but also the prejudice associated with Internet usage and specially online gaming. In its multiple forms and uses, multimedia presents endless possibilities to generate political content and discourse, in formats that are easily digestible and also more direct than its text-based counterparts. Not only is visual content an easier way to reach a wider audience and for your message to be shared, but it is also more difficult to filter and to be identified by the censorship software, even as filtering capabilities are growing more and more precise.

In a similar light, the next category of network practices through which political opinion is shared and circulated on the Chinese internet, online performance art, normally consists of multimedia remix projects used with the performance purpose (Jiang & Yang, 2015). The multiple layers present in these practices fill the visual content with different meanings and messages presenting the artist with the possibility to communicate a political message or social critique. One of the biggest precursors of this form is internationally known artist Ai Weiwei (Jiang & Yang, 2015). In some of his performance pieces, it is not only his act that is used to arouse political thought, but he combines previously mentioned methods such as the use of homophones. In another instance, an online campaign to protest against the house arrest of blind human rights activist and lawyer Chen Guangcheng, launched as supporters started to mix Kentucky Fried Chicken's logo with a picture of Chen's face and fill the internet with the image. These efforts were also picked up by a well known digital artist, who collected netizen's photos wearing the activists signature sunglasses and curated in a 2012 collective project called Dark Glasses Portrait (Jiang & Yang, 2015). However, and as we have seen, because of how this dissent expression is also made up of other techniques and public discourse methods, it is mostly only differentiated in the ways that it is given deeper messages through the artist's own presentation of the medium.

Finally, in online news commentary sections, Jiang and Yang also identify vibrant activity of posters responding critically and satirically to politicians and CCP official's comments and policies, such as in the responses solicited to announcements in 2012 related to the new hygienic conditions contained in the 'Management and Service Standards for Beijing Public Toilets' (2015).

Through the study of the topics, tone and content of the public commentary that is produced and shared in online spaces in the Chinese internet that gather the most attention, such as

social media, important newspaper comment sections or government-controlled forums we have been able to see the ways in which the commentary is organised, given political and social meaning and shared through networks of people. It is still left in question to analyse the reasons differentiated between the online political commentary that is allowed some discussion and topics that gain a more direct blockade. We have once again seen the impacts of Chinese nationalism in this section, as it aroused online outrage with the Dolce & Gabbana advertisement in 2018. In the “public opinion guidance” efforts that are core to the CCP’s interests, some discussions are actually positive to the advance of how Chinese identity is desired to be presented and defended. On the other hand, debates and news that seemingly defend values not included in the envisioned view of Chinese society, as it has been presented and compiled through Party leaders’ speeches and theory, are surveyed and their publications are taken down, such as in the case of the #MeeToo campaign. China’s changing demographic trends worry the central leadership, as we can see them taking action with the semi-recent abolition of the “One Child Policy”, and Xi Jinping thought presents diligence with the country as being similar to diligence with a family, as well as talking about the importance of the leadership of the patriarch, that he fills on the national level, and “western feminism” is seen as a destabilising force, which is why censorship has cracked down harder on discussions of this topic. The possibility of amassing the necessary following or regrouping some amount of people around the same interest that could later create community-based movements is the ground level of fear that drives censorship of determined information. Again, in the case of the feminist movement, feminist activists had amassed international support after their arrest, and when the #MeToo campaign started to gain popularity online, in an effort to stop the escalation of the movement. Once again, this goes to show how the limits to political debate in the Chinese internet are normally set when the debate might be homogenous or supportive enough of a cause or opinion to decide to take collective-action on that topic or to organise around it. Thus, we can state that the effects of authoritarian deliberation in China are seen in where these limits are set (Jiang, 2010).

4. Conclusions

In this last section of the essay we will summarise the main conclusions which have been reached. Our research question searched to find whether to value the use of internet technology either as a positive space to conduct political deliberation or merely as a channel for government-approved content and ideology.

Our thesis defended that none of the two abruptly opposite situations were completely applicable, as political debate is present and vibrant in the Chinese internet, but censorship is successful in limiting the effects and certain applications of these debates. These are the main conclusions that we have reached:

1) First I understand that this research can lead us to conclude about that online public discussions are of outmost importance to the CCP for the application of their policies and their remaining power-hold on public opinion and content from Chinese people. This is also very clearly integrated in their campaigning, as we have seen that they devote a big amount of resources into the control and surveillance of the internet. This is part of their role as the organism in charge of “guiding public opinion” and this is done through the definition of certain topics and narratives that are allowed to be shared and distributed through the internet when opposing opinions are forbidden. The choosing of which political commentary will be allowed or forbidden is made based on narratives, normally shaped by national pride and nationalist ideology in general, and discourses are dominated by CCP propaganda because they are formed from the top, down.

2) Internet public deliberative forums are present and active in the Chinese internet, presenting very distinct characteristics and alive political discourse. As we have seen and in whichever manner they are limited, the Chinese internet does present political debate, commentary and discussion, and this is a reality that should not be disregarded when analysing the way that information is communicated in China today. While this discussion is allowed in limited sets of topics, such as viral sad stories about migrant workers’ lives and struggles, this does not mean that they do not contribute to the wider political debates about social inequality or uneven economic growth even in times of positive development. These stories generate a community discourse and unite net users around one topic, thus creating communities and political subjects. However, this expressions are not only limited based on

the topic they address, but also based on the possible effects on national stability that they might produce.

3) Finally, in what relates to the limits imposed by the CCP, throughout this research we have found that censorship is used at its most extreme, withholding and blocking all online content to suppress critique and speech that could be transformed into collective action. Because of the CCP's ideological identification of the Party's organisation as general Chinese will and its goal to hold on to power, the authoritarian deliberation spaces are characterised by the shut down of any initiative that would distort their control.

In this last conclusion lies the definite borders of political speech and debates as affected by censorship of the CCP. **In relation to our research question we can state that the internet has had both a positive effect as a new medium in which to articulate social critique and expand communication possibilities in modern day China, while at the same time presenting new ways for the CCP to exert authoritarian rule over Chinese political dissidents and activists.** The future trends that might arise from online public deliberation and internet censorship and control will surely be defined by this fear of the CCP's insecurity as the governing organisation in a climate of rising surveillance, with a continuation of the cat and mouse game between critiques of the Party and the authoritarian apparatus.

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