POLITICAL EXPRESSION IN THE CHINESE BLOGOSPHERE

Below the Radar

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Abstract
This study examines subtle forms of political expression, including political satire and criticism of the state, in the writings of popular Chinese bloggers. It finds that the advent of blogging has provided citizens of the People's Republic with a medium for making sophisticated critiques of the regime without encountering harsh repression.

Keywords: China, blogging, media, propaganda, satire

Introduction
In post-Mao China, two types of discourse emerged—public discourse that had the approval of the state and private discourse that took place beyond the observation of the state. These two discourses were related in the sense that the latter responded to, and in many ways, supplemented the former. However, private discourse about politics typically was intended only for an audience of trusted friends or confidants. With the onset of blogging, these two discourses have begun to merge: Conversations once held only in private or in “hidden transcripts” have entered the public domain through skillfully written blog postings whose coded meaning is understood by readers who are aware of stringent restrictions
on political pluralism. In the words of Elizabeth Perry, China has “witnessed the development of the ‘hidden transcript’ of unobtrusive dissent.”

Increasingly (albeit cautiously), Chinese are speaking truth to each other, and by doing so in a widely accessible manner, are speaking truth to power.

While the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been largely successful in controlling the state-owned commercial mass media, managing online content has proven far more difficult. Since the arrival of the Internet in China in the late 1980s, the number of China’s Net users or netizens has exploded to over 253 million, surpassing users in the United States. In recent years, self-expression on the Internet has become more convenient because of the advent of specialized services to create weblogs or “blogs”—webpages with content consisting of reverse chronologically ordered posts by private individuals or “bloggers.”

In January 2005, there were an estimated 500,000 Chinese bloggers. By the end of the year, one source estimated the number at 16 million, nearly equal to the number of bloggers in the United States and Japan combined. In 2006, there were more than 75 million blog readers, nearly 58 million of whom read blogs frequently. A 2007 study suggests that 46,982,000 bloggers maintained 72,822,000 Chinese blogs; there were nearly 17 million “active” bloggers updating their sites at least once per month.

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3. For analysis of how state-owned mass media have commercialized while remaining under tight party control, see Ashley Esarey, “Cornering the Market: State Strategies for Controlling China’s Commercial Media,” Asian Perspective 29:4 (Winter 2005).
Blogging has very low costs for entry—all that is required is online access. Blogs are accessible to any netizen via search engines and “blog rolls” or lists of hyperlinks connecting blogs. Inter-linkage via blog rolls means that readers often proceed from one blog site to others with similar content or perspectives. Although blog content, with its many “horizontal linkages” to the work of other bloggers written at different times in different geographic areas, is considered a virtual community or “blogosphere,” blog content reflects the views of a vocal and interconnected cross section of Chinese netizens.

Blog content ranges widely from diary-like commentary (often referred to as a blog post) to photos, music, video links, and news reports. The speed with which information is disseminated via blogs is another reason for their popularity with readers and also the primary reason they are feared by the Chinese Communist Party leadership. Further, once information is widely available on the Internet, it is very difficult even for blog service providers to erase all references to a controversial subject.

Incentives for bloggers are largely personal and thus differ from those of journalists working in China’s official mass media. Almost no bloggers depend upon blogging for their livelihood and, therefore, they are less affected by pressures to comply with regime priorities for media content. Unlike mainstream media products, which are subject to extensive editorial review and external political monitoring, blog content is entirely up to bloggers. It is immediately available to readers, who can post their own reactions, which remain in the blog or can be removed subsequently at the discretion of the blogger.

Blogging Politics in the People’s Republic

A growing number of Chinese blogs now consider political subjects, but rarely exclusively. Most popular bloggers vary their content and only occasionally criticize the action (or inaction) of Chinese political leaders and government policy. In China, where the mass media has traditionally been part of the state structure, bloggers addressing politically sensitive subjects exercise caution and carefully choose words likely to slip by government filters of online content. It is well known that numerous government agencies
such as the Ministry of Public Security participate in management of the Internet; the state employs tens of thousands of vigilant “Internet police” to track online content deemed inappropriate, harmful to social stability, or critical of the state in a manner that challenges the CCP’s monopoly on political power. Blogs addressing controversial topics in a direct manner can be swiftly shut down by blogging service providers, often at government order.\(^9\)

While China operates the “most extensive, technologically sophisticated, and broad-reaching system of Internet filtering in the world,”\(^10\) savvy bloggers find ways to critique political events with satire and vague or coded phrases. Others occasionally give voice to criticism of Chinese politics and society that pushes the limits of political acceptability, as defined by the CCP. Indeed, the increase in the number of bloggers writing about politics represents a major breakthrough toward the formation of a Chinese public sphere, albeit a virtual one.\(^11\) Moreover, because of recent crackdowns on bulletin board system (BBS) chat forums— websites allowing the posting of online content with greater anonymity—blogs have become China’s freest media.\(^12\)

In China’s post-totalitarian society, there is considerable risk to voicing dissent as an individual. As one Chinese proverb notes, “The gun shoots the

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\(^9\) One blog shut down that received considerable media attention was the closure on December 30, 2005, by Windows Live Spaces (also known by users as MSN Spaces) of a blog by Zhao Jing, who wrote under the pseudonym of Michael Anti. Zhao’s blog disappeared soon after he wrote about the firing of three editors at Xinjingbao [Beijing News] and called upon subscribers to the paper to cancel subscriptions. See Roland Soong on EastSouthWestNorth, at <http://www.zonaeuropa.com/200512brief.htm#100>, accessed December 22, 2006.


\(^11\) A public sphere, according to political theorist Jean Cohen, refers to a “juridically private space where individuals without official status seek to persuade one another through rational argumentation and criticism about matters of general concern. . . . [T]he public sphere is universally accessible, inclusive, and freed from deformations due to economic or political power, and social status.” Jean L. Cohen, “The Public Sphere, the Media, and Civil Society,” in András Sajó, ed., Rights of Access to the Media (The Hague: Springer, 1995), p. 31. As of yet in China a public sphere does not yet fully exist because criticism of the state or other matters in blogs or elsewhere is not protected by law; nor is debate free from “deformations” caused by the fear of repression.

\(^12\) How long blogs will remain China’s freest media remains to be seen. Recent reports by the Chinese official government mouthpiece, Xinhua News, indicate the government may favor regulations requiring bloggers to use their real names when registering for blogging services. See, for example, Liu Jing and Zou Dapeng, “Hulianwang xiehui: Shangwei chutai ‘buoke shiming’ zhi guanli guiding” [Chinese Internet association: The unreleased ’blogger name use’ management regulation], Xinhuawang, October 23, 2006.
bird with its head up” (qiang da chutou niao). The first bloggers to broach a sensitive topic take a higher risk than those who wait while others test the water, so to speak, before plunging in. As a result, there is greater security in voicing dissent that is analogous to criticism articulated by numerous other bloggers. If many birds are flying, as it were, they are less likely to be targeted by the regime for repression.

With digital technology, it has become common for Chinese to find out what sort of political speech is prevalent in the blogosphere by using search engines. For example, if an Internet search in the fall of 2006 were to have revealed that many bloggers were debating the party’s sacking of Shanghai Party Secretary Chen Liangyu for alleged acts of corruption, a blogger who wished to weigh in on the topic might have assumed that commenting on Chen’s removal would not result in repression. However, if few bloggers chose to comment on Chen’s case, a blogger might have assumed the subject was better left unmentioned.13

Case Selection

To consider the transformation in political discourse occurring in the Chinese blogosphere, this article examines the new genre of political speech appearing in blogs and analyzes the subtle strategies of popular bloggers who communicate political critiques to curious and often supportive readers. Our study finds that political expression is often the result of a compromise between what bloggers want to express and what the regime allows them to write. The blogs discussed in subsequent sections feature satirical, implicit, or otherwise guarded critiques of the party-state that are comprehensible to readers who understand the meaning behind bloggers’ facades of ignorance or of loyalty to the state. The blogs examined are popular precisely because they employ such tactics and survive for a sufficient period of time to develop a popular following. Censors are not blind to the true meaning of coded speech, which can be characterized loosely as zhenghua fanshuo (speaking truth the opposite way), a term applicable to satire or sarcasm. Thus far, repression has been reserved largely for three types of blogs: those criticizing the state or state policy directly, those advocating mass political action, or those airing views that openly conflict with party ideology.14

13. Interestingly, state monitors of online content are said to use the same tactic to track dissent.
14. For example, blogger Pu Zhiqiang, a well-known lawyer, had three blogs shut down after he posted writings about freedom of speech and the press. The only explanation he received was a message from a website administrator that the closure “was ordered by authorities from above.” Pu Zhiqiang subsequently started new blogs. Vivian Wu, “Internet Police Keep Tight Grip on Blogs,” South China Morning Post, March 8, 2007.
Each blogger has a distinct worldview. Their comments typically vary a great deal over time in terms of the subject matter considered. It is, therefore, difficult to generalize about blog content without conducting content analysis of a random or representative sample. In this article, we focus on blog postings of the following types: political satire, humorous adaptation of official media products (egao), implicit criticism of the party or state structure, and explicit but guarded criticism. This typology is designed to facilitate analysis of multiple blog content of a similar nature in order to examine the strategies used to express political dissent. Our typology was developed after a broad survey of political blogs through assiduous web surfing. We followed the interconnecting hyperlinks of numerous mainland Chinese blog sites with political content that were popular among fellow bloggers. It should be pointed out, however, that seldom does the entirety of a blog post fit perfectly into any of these four categories.

As Han Woo Park and Mike Thelwall have pointed out in a review of hyperlink analysis, website administrators often elect to link their sites to others that are seen as credible, similar in content (with the exception of satirical posts), and as desirable affiliates. As the principal administrators of blog sites, bloggers have full autonomy to choose which sites, if any, their blog will be linked to. The motivations for linkage to another site vary. Some links reflect the desire to gain prestige by association with a popular site. Others stem from the obligation to credit the source of a blogger’s information or the wish to illustrate a rhetorical point.

A list of the blog sites examined below is in Table 1, with statistics on the number of sites linking to each blog. That these blog sites, especially that of star popular culture blogger Wang Xiaofeng, are perceived by bloggers as highly credible and popular can be seen in the large number of linkages by other blog sites and/or high rates of traffic. Based on an average calculated by dividing the number of Chinese bloggers posting content at least once per month (7.7 million) by the total number of blog readers (75 million), it appears that most bloggers write for a relatively small readership—just under 10 readers. By comparison, the blogs analyzed here have a much wider reach than the average—a fact reflected by the ability of

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16. The hyperlink counts should be treated as estimates. Search engines tracking hyperlinks between websites operated by companies such as Google and AltaVista are unable to index the entire Web. For related analysis, see Mike Thelwall, “Web Log File Analysis: Backlinks and Queries,” *Aslib Proceedings* 53:6 (June 2001).

17. In general, sites with higher numbers of incoming hyperlinks have more visitors or “traffic.” Park and Thelwall, “Hyperlink Analyses of the World Wide Web,” p. 14.
Bloggers like Wang Xiaofeng, Zhong Xiaoyong, and Huang Laoxie to sell
advertisements.

Bloggers in China who write about politics represent a small subset of
all bloggers, the majority of whom blog to record their thoughts or emo-
tions or to express their views.\textsuperscript{18} According to a 2006 survey conducted by
the CNNIC, bloggers reported that 85\% of their content pertained to per-
sonal matters—the modal content category. Only 6.2\% of bloggers said
day write about current affairs or news (politics was not a category in the
survey questionnaire).\textsuperscript{19} Although the small sample of blogs examined
here lends itself to careful analysis of individual blog postings, our find-
ings should be seen as preliminary pending a systematic study of a larger
sample of blogs of a political nature.\textsuperscript{20}

**Blogger Power?**

Among American pundits, estimations of the effects of China’s new online
discourse vary. Nicholas D. Kristof, a columnist for the \textit{New York Times},

\textit{Table 1 Blog Interconnectivity}

\begin{tabular}{|l|c|}
\hline
Blogger & \textit{Number of Linkages to Blog by Other Blog Sites*} \\
\hline
Wang Xiaofeng** & 1,252 \\
Bingfeng & 338 \\
Lian Yue (Zhong Xiaoyong) & 218 \\
Luo Yonghao & 170 \\
Gouzi & 73 \\
Huang Laoxie & 15 \\
Li Weiguang*** & 0 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

SOURCE: By the author.

*These statistics were generated by Google searches for web links to each blogger’s main
page on October 19, 2006, and should be interpreted as indicating the popularity of blogs,
especially among other bloggers, rather than as a statistic reflecting blog readership directly.
** By comparison, the blog of China’s top blogger, the movie star Xu Jinglei, has been linked
to 35,723 other sites.
***The Google search indicates no other blogs linking to Li Weiguang’s. However, the statis-
tics on Li Weiguang’s blog on October 25, 2006, indicated his 100 blog postings have at-
tracted 22,158 visitors for an average of just over 221 visits per posting.

19. Ibid.
20. For quantitative analysis of political discourse in a larger sample of Chinese blogs, see
Ashley Esarey, “Bloggers vs. the Propaganda State: Political Discourse in Official Media and
Web Logs in China” (working paper).
has hailed freedom in the blogosphere as evidence that the CCP’s “monopoly on information is crumbling” and asserted that the party’s “monopoly on power will follow,” when a “single blog can start a prairie fire.”

21. This plays upon the famous quotation by Mao Zedong, “A single spark can start a prairie fire.” In his column, Kristof wrote about how he started two blogs in China to test the limits of discourse by making controversial statements about such topics as the imprisonment of New York Times researcher Zhao Yan, the Tiananmen Square Massacre, religious freedom, and the Falun Gong. His blogs were subsequently removed. Nicholas D. Kristof, “In China It’s ******** vs. Netizens,” New York Times, June 20, 2006, p. 17.


the demonstrations, Zhong continued to post excerpts from numerous Chinese and international media reports about popular resistance to the chemical factory. While Chinese reporters with national media were reportedly warned against running stories on the controversy, Zhong observed that he was under less pressure to be silent. “They [i.e., the authorities] were afraid,” he said. “As for me, I don’t rely on any work unit, so I had less to worry about. If I had been working a regular job, I couldn’t have done it.”

It is difficult to identify a direct causal link between Zhong’s blog posts, heightened awareness of the risks the chemical factory posed to Xiamen residents, the circulation of cell phone text messages, or even increased attention by the official media. To do so would require interviews with journalists, activists, and authors of the text messages—a task beyond the scope of this article. At this point, a more tenable position is to posit the possibility that blog posts written by Zhong and others played an important agenda-setting role, raising questions about paraxylene and stimulating the public to think critically about the matter. Zhong’s role was especially important because prior to the large demonstrations, the official media generally supported the local government’s backing for construction of the factory.

The sections below do not consider the likelihood that blogs will lead to widening activism that culminates in democratic transition or political revolution in China. This would necessarily involve many factors in addition to freedom of speech. We hold the view, however, that understanding how blogging has expanded political discourse is a preliminary step in determining how the medium may change political views or patterns of political participation in the future.

**Political Satire**

The use of political satire and Aesopian analogy to mask social critiques is far from a new phenomenon in China. Written in the mid-18th century, Wu Jingzi’s ironic portrayal of the decline of Confucian literati in *Rulin Waishi* (The unofficial history of scholars) is seen as one of the classics of modern Chinese literature. In *Rulin Waishi*, Wu criticizes a highly arbitrary...
examination system that rewarded candidates who devoted their life to rote memorization of knowledge with little practical value for governing, as well as cheaters. The characters in the novel with the least aptitude are often the most successful. In the late Qing dynasty, authors like Wu Jianren (also known as Wu Woyao) followed in the tradition of Wu Jingzi by criticizing corruption by greedy officials, the practice of buying official titles, Chinese cowardice and lack of patriotism, the defects of the examination system, and poor social mores among public servants.

From the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949 through the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and the Democracy Wall Movement (1978–79), the medium of choice for expressing dissent was the dazibao (big character poster). This consisted of large sheets of paper bearing political critiques that were displayed in public places. Most popular during the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956–57) and the early years of the Cultural Revolution, dazibao were often stern denunciations of specific individuals perceived as acting improperly. Also targeted were undesirable political phenomena such as “bureaucratism” among cadres or party leaders, including Deng Xiaoping, who were accused of “taking the capitalist road.”

Occasionally, dazibao took the form of creative, often negative, satire. People’s Republic of China (PRC) President and CCP Vice Chairman Liu Shaoqi was denounced in his official Beijing compound in Zhongnanhai by a poster reading, “Down with China’s Khrushchev Liu Shaoqi.” One of the characters in Liu’s name (qi) was distorted to resemble the character for “dog.” Although the use of dazibao largely ceased with their banning in 1980, it is worth noting that blogs are much faster to write than posters laboriously made by hand. Blogs are easily updated, readily disseminated to a broad national (or international) readership, and contain

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29. Wu Wo-yao, *Vignettes from the Late Ch’ing: Bizarre Happenings Eyewitnessed over Two Decades* [Ershinian muji zhi guai xian zhuang] (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1975).

30. In the 1940s, dazibao were sometimes referred to as bibao (wall newspapers). For an account of the emergence of and use of dazibao in political campaigns, see Göran Leijonhufvud, *Going against the Tide: On Dissent and Big-character Posters in China* (London: Curzon, 1990).

multimedia content that appeals to a diverse audience. *Dazibao* expressed discourse to facilitate political mobilization. Blogs express alternative views while remaining disconnected from mobilization.

Bloggers have helped carry the torch of political satire into the digital age. Consider the following comments by Huang Laoxie in his *Ah Q Weekly Blog* (*Ah Q zhoukan*). In his posting dated March 7, 2006, Huang ruminated at length about why he would not talk about the National People’s Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which were both in session at the time. Huang voiced a number of disclaimers, including the fact that he was not a member of the NPC or CPPCC: “If idiotic people like me comment and criticize, am I trying to prove that those representatives only have pig brains? Those representatives do not have pig brains, therefore I can only shut-up.” However, Huang then discussed the very opinions he “had wanted to say but could not say,” the first of which was that national representatives are overly inclined to talk about future plans, when they should be considering past governmental performance:

Representatives all like to talk about work in the future, but do not pay enough attention to how things were implemented from last year’s meetings. Therefore, old problems drag out year after year, while new policies change their face every year. If you don’t believe me, you can dig up the press reports about last year’s meetings, is there a big difference? I attended these meetings [as a journalist] 10 years ago: the education budget, science and technology budget, and the issue of peasants were hot problems representatives were concerned with. Ten years later, they are still talking about these problems. What’s up with this? Therefore, small and uneducated people like me think annual NPC and CPPCC meetings every year and every session should carefully review the work of the past year in detail, one item after another, and find out where the problems are and who is responsible. For example, the jerk who covered up chemical pollution in the Songhua River last year, shouldn’t he give a brief explanation to all representatives? So the NPC and the CPPCC should have a new rule: If you cannot clear up the previous year’s work and cannot find the roots of problems, you should not start to plan next year’s work.32

Huang’s boldness in criticizing the ineffectiveness and rubber-stamp tendencies of China’s largest representative bodies is masked by self-effacing statements and the confidential-seeming nature of his remarks. In addition, the following disclaimer appearing at the top of Huang Laoxie’s blog

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32. For more of Huang Laoxie’s commentary on the NPC and the CPPCC, including translation and links to the original in Chinese, see <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2006/03/i_am_not_going_talk_about_the_npc_and_cppcc_i_am_really.php>, accessed December 22, 2006.
homepage seemed to be a defensive mechanism in the event his comments provoked the ire of Internet monitors: “This site has a lot of content that is not factually reliable. My intention is to tease you and trick you into clicking on a few hidden advertisements. Readers, please hold your breath and seal your pockets to avoid being ripped off by savvy companies.” As with many of China’s popular bloggers, Huang Laoxie’s blog features advertisements, a fact that may tempt him to push the limits of acceptable discourse to gain readers while avoiding going too far, because to do so would jeopardize the survival of Ah Q Weekly. However, by comparison to mainstream media, which is state-owned and subject to much tighter restrictions, Huang Laoxie’s commentary is truly provocative.

Another vivid example of the use of satire appeared in Zhong Xiaoyong’s blog entitled Lian Yue’s Eighth Continent (lianyue de di ba da zhou). Zhong alluded to the 2006 accident at the Sago mine in West Virginia that killed 12 American coal miners. Blogging under the pseudonym Lian Yue, Zhong seized upon this tragic accident to point out that vastly greater coal mining hazards exist in China, where deaths related to coal mining accidents number in the thousands each year, and media coverage of them is often restricted. Unlike the fluid and lugubrious prose of Huang Laoxie, Zhong’s post came in the form of a simple list:

1. It has been said this (mining accident) is a New Year’s gift to the Chinese government from the American government.
2. This gift has a status equal to “Ping Pong Diplomacy” in the history of U.S.-China relations.33
3. In return, China will give two pandas to the U.S. at an appropriate time.
4. One will be called Kuangkuang (mining mining). Another will be called Nannan (accident accident).
5. (Foreign Minister) Tang Jiaxuan will publish a new book titled China’s Mining Safety Conditions Are the Best in the World.34
6. China will build a monument to dead American miners in the appropriate place.
7. Mr. He Zuoxiu will use calligraphy to write on the monument, “They were unfortunately born in America.”35

33. “Ping Pong diplomacy” refers to a series of exchange matches by ping pong players that was seen as the beginning of a warming of relations between China and the U.S. during the Nixon presidency.
34. This barb refers to a statement made by Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan on Phoenix Television in which he claimed, “China’s human rights are the best in the world, human rights in the United States are not comparable.” Tang’s comment was criticized by Chinese bloggers and ridiculed in Chinese BBS forums.
35. He Zuoxiu, a physicist, is a member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, with a reputation for making highly nationalistic comments.
8. Xinhua News Agency will receive the Pulitzer Prize for the world’s most comprehensive and in-depth reporting about the mining accident.

9. China, North Korea, and Iran held an emergency meeting on the American mining accident.

10. The three parties at this meeting reached the following unanimous conclusion: There are no mining accidents in China. There is no starvation in North Korea. And Iran does not have nuclear ambitions.36

By using the tragic death of 12 American miners to poke fun at the extreme sensitivity with which mining accidents are seen by Chinese leaders, Zhong steps entirely into the realm of black humor. His jest, however, reflects the cynicism felt by Chinese who believe the CCP whitewashes its own checkered policies in the interest of shoring up regime legitimacy. The assumption behind the joke is that if fatal mining accidents occur in a country as wealthy and powerful as the United States, and if Beijing claims that mining accidents do not occur in China, the People’s Republic will have vastly improved its reputation. And if the U.S. actually “arranged” for a mining disaster on China’s behalf, the result would be pandas, a monument, and olive branches, so to speak. The scenario is so ridiculous that Zhong Xiaoyong could possibly defend his posting as “just a joke” rather than truly subversive.

Egao as Political Satire

Another form of online political satire involves the deliberate adaptation of official news broadcasts, films, or print news stories. The Chinese expression for the practice is egao, meaning to “mess with” media content in a harmful way. Egao is a phenomenon made possible only with digital technology, which makes editing media products fast and easy. Typically egao is practiced on works that are popular or well-known, so as to make the act of cultural “vandalism” humorous to a broader audience. People who practice egao keep portions of the original format of a film, television news program, or wire story, while radically changing the meaning. One prominent example of egao was the conversion of a People’s Liberation Army (PLA) propaganda film known as a “red classic” (hongse jingdian pianzi) into a short film about a boy’s gambit to win a singing contest. In a news article published by Xinhua News Agency, the deputy director of the Bayi Film Production Department of the PLA said he was reserving the

right to take legal action against the perpetrator.\textsuperscript{37} Another act of \textit{egao} involved replacing the faces of cartoon characters used to promote the 2008 Beijing Olympics with the faces of prominent Chinese comedians or stars from the talent-search television show “Supergirl” (Chaojinûsheng).\textsuperscript{38}

\textit{Egao} was considered to be a problem of such great concern that the central-level newspaper \textit{Guangming Ribao} (Enlightenment Daily) held a conference on August 10, 2006, calling for government action to halt the practice.\textsuperscript{39} At the conference, the director of China’s Internet Association, Hu Qiheng, described the situation as “extremely serious” and noted that young people had begun to disseminate information that inclines toward “extreme” and unacceptable perspectives. In October, the city of Chongqing announced new regulations imposing fines on those “who spread information or remarks defaming others, launch personal attacks, or damage others’ reputations online.”\textsuperscript{40}

Despite widely publicized official condemnations, the practice of \textit{egao} has proliferated in the blogosphere. In a posting on September 14, 2006, the Chinese blogger “Bingfeng” suggested that the popularity of \textit{egao} reflects the fact that youth anywhere enjoy spoofs and Chinese youth confront more frustrations than their peers in other countries; they express their cynicism through satire because China’s media is so controlled.\textsuperscript{41}

\textbf{Implicit Criticism}

In China, bloggers use a number of strategies to criticize undesirable state conduct or policies perceived as counterproductive. Implicit criticism in blog entries often comments on negative events or problems under the purview of the Party committee or governmental organization, without indicating which organization or individual should shoulder responsibility for the problem. Consider two postings by Wang Xiaofeng, an exceedingly popular blogger who used the pseudonym Dai Sange Biao (Wears Three Watches)

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{37} See <http://news.xinhuanet.com/photo/2006-08/13/content_4955198.htm> article, accessed December 22, 2006. The short film clip called \textit{Pan Dongzi cansai ji} [Story of Pan Dongzi’s participation in the contest] was produced by a Chinese netizen named in the Xinhua article as Hu Daoge. To make matters worse from the perspective of the PLA, the short film was shown at an officially sanctioned press conference promoting a China Central Television singing contest.
  \item \textsuperscript{39} See <http://sh.qihoo.com/article/n52473,ff96ac,3009_20701.html>, accessed December 22, 2006.
  \item \textsuperscript{40} Associated Press, “Chinese City to Fine Web Satirists,” October 16, 2006.
  \item \textsuperscript{41} See <http://blog.bccensitive.net/bingfeng/archive/2006/09/14/88915.aspx>, accessed September 18, 2006.
\end{itemize}
for his blog called *Massage Cream*. In his entry of May 15, 2006, Wang commented on the construction of exceedingly opulent office buildings by the Huiji district government in Zhengzhou City and pasted in a series of photos he took during a weekend trip there. The title of Wang’s post was “The Glory Resulting from Hard Work—The World’s Number One Local Government” (*Yijianku fendou wei rongzhi—shijie diyi quzhengfu*). The photos showed a shining government building amid a series of channels in a manmade lake full of hungry carp, gaudy neo-Roman statues, winding footpaths, and the PRC flag waving over an empty plaza—in short, unnecessary extravagance. “Speaking from the bottom of my heart,” Wang wrote, “The place is really beautiful. On the whole the feeling is that this is not a local government office. Rather the local government has made use of a natural park for its office.”

In comments that follow, nearly all of Wang’s readers demonstrated they understood his implicit criticism by mentioning, tongue in cheek, how much they envied the officials in Henan Province or by suggesting that only corruption could have prompted such construction. One reader wrote, “I can only sigh. It appears the road ahead in the anti-corruption campaign is still a long one.” Another reader’s criticism was more blunt: “We should take guns and execute those dog officials!”

In his entry on November 11, 2006, Wears Three Watches took on the profession of journalism by making a clever pun on the name of Journalists’ Day, which is a homonym of “journalists’ disaster” (*jizhejie*). A senior journalist at *Life Weekly Magazine* (Shenghuo Zhoukan), Wang had experienced the frustrations of Chinese journalists working in a tightly controlled and highly politicized environment:

Yesterday early in the morning, someone sent me an SMS text message wishing me a happy holiday. I thought for a long time but I couldn’t figure out what holiday it was. Then someone told me: It was Journalists’ Day. Then I asked myself: “Am I a journalist?” I have always been ashamed of the word “journalist.” When I had just graduated, I wanted to be a journalist covering social issues, but later discovered that my personality was unsuitable to be a journalist covering social issues.

Once I was chatting with a boss of mine. He had a large sum of money and no place to invest it. I asked him: How come you don’t invest in media? He said...
one time he had gone to the XXXX Evening News. On the senior editor’s desk
he saw a huge pile of documents, which he discovered were notices ordering the
newspaper not to report on this and on that. Then he said investing in media is
risky! A businessman’s way of thinking is to minimize risk to the lowest possible
level and to avoid investments where the risk cannot be controlled.

A few days before Journalists’ Day, the slogan of the Beijing News (Xinjing-
bao), “responsibly report everything,” disappeared. I have thought of another
slogan: “Responsibly report certain things.” In the end, is it “responsibly report-
ing everything” or “responsibly reporting certain things” that will make society
harmonious? Bright people will understand.44

While Wang’s posting did not explain why he was unfit to work as a jour-
nalist covering social affairs, a savvy reader could imagine the reason might
have been his tendency to be too frank about such issues as crime, eco-
nomic development, and politics—subjects that might be seen as standard
fare for a journalist covering social issues. Further, Wang did not elaborate
about why his boss thought a desktop full of propaganda circulars made
investments in the media risky.45 However, the commentary allowed read-
ers to fill in the blanks. Most people know that the Chinese media environ-
ment is highly political; one mistake can lead to the dismissal of an editor
or the closure of a media organization. Most importantly, however, Wang
did not point a finger at who or what is responsible for the dismal state of
journalism in China. To do so, might have pushed his blog into the realm
of unacceptable, even dangerous, speech from the perspective of state mon-
itors of online content.

Explicit but Guarded Criticism

Most bloggers do not “walk on the wild side” very often. Only a small per-
centage of bloggers directly criticize China’s political system. Their blog
entries are abstract rather than highly specific critiques of Chinese politics.
When bloggers write direct criticism of the state, they often avoid men-
tioning the names of individuals or organizations. Explicitly critical blog
entries can seem more like the expression of a desire for positive change or
passive rumination than a call to arms. An example is a “New Year’s wish
list” by Luo Yonghao, a teacher in Beijing, posted in late January 2006.
The entry is deeply critical of the status quo in China. Excerpts follow:

44. For more translation of this blog entry, see <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2005/11/
massage_milk_and_the_disaster_of_journalism_in_china_da.php>, accessed December 22,
2006.

45. For an explanation of the origin and function of propaganda circulars, see Ashley Es-
arey, “Speak No Evil: Mass Media Control in Contemporary China,” pp. 4–5, Freedom
• I hope all good people have a happy new year, I hope all bad people have a miserable new year; I hope all people who are not so good and not so bad can arrange their new year as they wish. . . .
• I hope all corrupt officials will live in greater fear; I hope those officials who are not corrupt can hold on.
• I hope Chinese peasants can migrate freely in their own country; I hope city residents who oppose peasants migrating into cities one day can realize that they had no conscience.
• I hope those migrant workers who cannot get their wages can find a good lawyer to help them. I hope those who intentionally withhold overdue wages of migrant workers are hit by lightning, no matter how watchful they are.
• I hope all websites will not have key words filtering, and I hope all websites which set up this filtering do not do so voluntarily. 46

The comments above do not indicate by name who is “bad” or upon whose head the “lightning” should strike. In addition, Luo protected himself to some extent by standing on the side of the peasants (a group traditionally championed, at least in rhetoric, by the CCP) and migrant workers as he lashes out against those who restrict peasants’ chances of profiting from China’s booming economy. In Luo’s wish for greater Internet freedom, a more controversial subject than migrant rights, his language was less direct. Luo did not explicitly say why he disapproves of the use of Internet filters, nor did he criticize the party leaders responsible for their use. Rather, Luo wrote of his hope that filters would not exist in the future, without specifying how their removal might take place or mentioning how website operators might resist their imposition.

Another example of guarded criticism can be found in a posting by Li Weiguang, a blogger (and former journalist) of academic bent. On March 17, 2006, Li wrote a critique of the Chinese media that comes off like a note of resignation about the futility of gleaning reliable information from official news sources because of excessive propaganda:

A long time ago I stopped watching television news because the people who play with programming take a normal person and make him into an idiot. The program gives you “edited” information, while educating you in a million ways how to see this information so that you have a “high degree of unanimity” with it. For this, no country in the world is as creative as we Chinese are.

46. Luo Yonghao’s list also contained items less critical than the ones selected here, which pertain more directly to Chinese politics. Translation by China Digital Times. Additional sections of this entry available at <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2006/01/old_luos_new_year_wish_list_luo_yonghao.php>, accessed December 22, 2006. Luo Yonghao maintains a blog accessible to members only (chengyuan), who must log in to read his entries, as well as the following publicly accessible blog: <http://luoyonghao.blog.sohu.com/>, accessed December 22, 2006.
image [of China] in media reports has been “great” for several decades already. In the end the effect is to make you feel as if everywhere in the motherland has “owls singing and swallows dancing” (yingge yanwu) and a “beautiful stream of water. . . .” (liushui chanchan). Media reports on a model person seem as if the person is a mystical god; media reports on some other country’s presidential election, in the end, make you look down on that country’s political system: That is democracy, rule of law, freedom, and human rights? Aren’t the two political parties struggling for power like biting dogs? What’s so special about cheap political midgets using the party to profit personally and using public power to settle personal scores? This sort of unreasonable use of partial truths, naked bias, and hegemonic instruction sweeps away the objectivity of news. What kind of value can you talk about for this sort of television program?

Li Weiguang’s entry continued to eloquently explain why he does not read newspapers, magazines, or books in China either. His only praise was reserved for the Internet, which gives him near total freedom of choice to consume precisely the sort of unvarnished information he desires.

Li Weiguang’s gripes about the Chinese media were guarded, in the sense that the language he used was carefully selected to avoid truly biting criticism while articulating a message that undermined the credibility of propaganda produced by official media. Rather than labeling television news as censored and biased, Li says it is “edited” by producers who “play with programming.” Li wrote that news reports on China for too long have been “great,” rather than negligent: they fail to mention the country’s problems. Further, he suggested, the negative light in which democracies were portrayed by the media reflects an effort to convince Chinese they are better off in the People’s Republic under CCP rule.

**Evaluating Freedom of Speech in the Chinese Blogosphere**

Preliminary evidence from popular blogs indicates that blog content differs greatly from that of the mainstream news media. Recent research shows that the scope of freedom in mainstream media content has declined since the early years of the Reform Era (1978-present). Unlike mainstream journalists, bloggers do not receive propaganda circulars from the CCP’s Propaganda Department regarding taboo topics to avoid or


desirable content to stress in their postings, nor do bloggers receive financial incentives to engage in self-censorship. By comparison, most journalists receive payment for their work only if it avoids political controversy, a situation that provides journalists with a direct incentive for self-censorship.49 The livelihood of bloggers is almost never solely dependent upon income from their blogs; their true identities are typically concealed by the use of pseudonyms. Thus, bloggers are relatively free from financial and political pressure to toe the party line.

Unleashed in a personalized and inexpensive medium, bloggers have made fun of the Chinese state and its leaders and criticized Chinese politics in a nuanced manner. This requires readers’ understanding that what bloggers would like to write is often different from what they can write. Blog readers know the risks faced by bloggers and learn how to “fill in the blanks.” Indeed, readers’ comments (visible on the blog page) are often shielded by “protective” sarcasm.

In the case of blogs, technology has provided the Chinese with the means to adapt political communication to bring “hidden transcripts,” once suppressed, into the light of public consideration. It is easy to see why Chinese political activists or intellectual bloggers have been delighted with the freedom the Internet allows them to enjoy. Unlike Westerners, who commonly compare freedom of speech in China to freedom of speech in democracies, Chinese bloggers compare their present freedom to the more restricted environment they encountered in the past. Bloggers such as Li Weiguang see vast improvements in the freedom with which they can access uncensored information. By publishing their blogs, they have found considerable support for their anti-establishment views.

The political blog content considered here was written by individuals with widely different interests and perspectives. Blog posts can be mutually supporting, however, if they echo similar sentiments or provide links to blogs voicing similar concerns via a blog roll, a list of hyperlinks to other blogs or webpages. For example, Li Weiguang’s direct criticism of the lack of objectivity in official media reports was similar to Wang Xiaofeng’s indirect criticism of excessive restrictions imposed on journalists. If thousands of bloggers have a similar gripe, criticism once seen as controversial can seem to be politically acceptable, even commonplace.

Freer political expression in blogs has several noteworthy effects. First, dissent that enters the mainstream public discourse about politics gradually undermines popular belief in the more-censored official media. The power of the CCP’s “propaganda state” to shape the beliefs of Chinese weakens

as more Chinese turn to the blogosphere for news and political commentary. Second, citizens are gradually developing strategies for challenging regime positions, albeit with caution, without being subjected to harsh forms of repression. Third, because online content is extensively monitored—especially that of highly popular blogs—the specter of repression remains for those who directly criticize the state or encourage netizens to mobilize to achieve a political objective. This has made the Chinese blogosphere an arena where self-expression is contested and has resulted in the “watering down” of online content. Blog content, therefore, reflects a compromise between what people want to say and what the regime is willing to permit them to say. Neither bloggers nor top CCP leaders are comfortable with the uncertain status quo.

Is it possible that freedom in the blogosphere represents a kind of safety valve that benefits the CCP regime by allowing dissenters to blow off steam? A blogger who goes by the name Doggie (gouzi) groused in a posting on August 15, 2003: “I want to bite this society, but the society is a Taiji master. I thought I had a good bite, at least I could bark. But in fact it seems very likely I just bit the places where society itches, not where it hurts. My barking was not only as piercing as I expected; it obviously became a variation of the melody this symphony of society needs!”

A frequent writer of political critiques, Doggie implied that his blogging was harmless and ineffectual self-expression. This perspective might be accurate in a society free from government efforts to impose ideological orthodoxy. In the PRC, tremendous resources have been expended to impose limits on acceptable speech. If the CCP leadership was truly unafraid that blogging could erode party dominance over ideology and, consequently, the regime’s ability to influence public opinion, it would not have erected such an elaborate system of online content controls.

It is difficult to predict developments in the Chinese blogosphere with certainty. In the future, it seems likely that the government will require bloggers to use their real names when registering for blogging services, although according to Wang Xiaofeng, present technology already makes it possible for the state to identify bloggers. A similar restriction was imposed upon

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51. Doggie’s sentiment was expressed in the context of commentary on food and politics at <http://cul.sina.com.cn/s/2003-08-15/40518.html>. The link is no longer active.

52. Jean Pyun, interview with Wang Xiaofeng, January 2007, Beijing. Interview transcript available upon request.
BBS Internet chatrooms in 2003–04; freedom of expression in the medium subsequently declined. More important than the actual reduction of dissent under a “real-name system” would be the psychological effect stemming from the knowledge that bloggers could more easily be made to pay a price for pushing the limits of ideological orthodoxy.

The number of bloggers will probably continue to rise even as government attempts to monitor political content increase, perhaps resulting in more-frequent elimination of blogs with politically controversial content. Efforts to impose restrictions on self-expression may inspire pushback from a large, interconnected “society” of bloggers that could serve as a catalyst for liberalization or political reform. Controlling the information available to Chinese citizens will become more difficult as new communication technology, such as blogging, empowers people to broadcast their views to an unprecedented degree.