'CENSORING PORNOGRAPHY': THE ROLE OF SEXUAL MEDIA IN THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the use of nudity and sexually explicit language and images as a form of resistance against state censorship on the Chinese internet. Although the constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC) grants its citizens freedom of expression, those forms of expression that are not deemed acceptable or 'healthy' by the Communist Party are liable to be censored. This paper looks at the issue of freedom of expression in the PRC from a perspective commonly neglected by scholars. Considering the role of censorship in the legitimising of the Chinese state, and after an introductory exploration of the PRC censorship system, this paper shows that the targeting of pornography by political discourse is less a sign of a puritan attitudes towards sexuality and more a placeholder strategy to justify the silencing of alternative political voices. It uses a qualitative analysis of multiple case studies to show how Chinese internet users, bloggers, and artists use nudity or sexually explicit themes as a form of activism against an over-paternalistic state. It analyses how the two spaces of political and sexual discourse merge and how sexually explicit words and images are used as a form of political resistance and dissidence. It also explores the recent development of Chinese 'Netspeak' and the role humour and satire in these dynamics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Whilst many in the West have heard about the 'great firewall' and the lack of freedom of expression on the Chinese internet, these narratives often over-simplify the issue of censorship and its critical importance for our understanding of Chinese society. Since the People's Republic of China (PRC) first opened up to the internet, Chinese internet users, bloggers, and artists have developed many ways of circumventing online censorship and expressing their voices (Hockx, 2015; Jacobs, 2012; Link & Qiang, 2013). This paper looks at the issue of freedom of expression in the PRC from a perspective commonly neglected by scholars, and asks how Chinese internet users make use of sexual media as a form of resistance to state control. Considering the role of censorship in the legitimacy of the Chinese state, this paper shows that the targeting of pornography in political discourse is less a sign of a puritan attitude towards sexuality, and more a placeholder strategy to justify the silencing of alternative voices (Link & Qiang, 2013). It then explores the use of nudity and expressions of sexuality as a form of political activism and resistance.

The first part of this paper outlines the socio-political background to the evolution of the internet in the PRC, as well as its role in state legitimacy. It then gives some insights into the process of censorship and the nature of censored media, proposing that the term 'pornography'[1] has been used as a justification for censoring non-sexual topics and as a placeholder for the censorship of political issues, thus triggering the responses of internet users presented in part two. The second part of this paper presents empirical evidence of the response of Chinese internet users to censorship, in which expressions and representations of sexuality are not only used as a discourse against censorship but are also often equated with identity and individuality. This paper uses a qualitative analysis to show how nudity and sexually explicit themes are used by internet users, bloggers (such as Mu Zimei and Hooligan Swallow), and artists (Ai Weiwei, Yu Na, and Deng Shangdong) as a form of activism against state control. It analyses how the two spaces of political and sexual discourse merge and how sexually explicit words and images are used as a form of political resistance and dissidence.

2. THE INTERNET AND CENSORSHIP IN THE PRC

Whilst China opened itself up to the internet later than most Western countries did, the Chinese government considered the internet, from the start, to be a powerful tool which needed to be harnessed and controlled primarily by the state (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 1994). In the parallel evolution of industrialisation and informatisation that followed the more liberal reforms of the eighties, the potential of the internet for creating and sharing information gained importance as a factor of economic growth. It represented a possible shortcut to China achieving front-runner status in the information and communication market. It was not only seen as tool for economic growth but also for boosting nationalism and increasing national pride by becoming a leader in the information technology and high-tech sectors, thus bringing more legitimacy to the rule of the Communist Party of China (CPC). At the same time,

the CPC was confronted with the dilemma of promoting a technology which had been invented primarily to prevent the possibility of a central control mechanism, whilst justifying and maintaining a singular hold on power. For this reason, control of the internet was always crucial for the regime's survival, since enabling accessibility of information for Chinese citizens, might lead to challenges to the Chinese government's grip on power (Tai, 2006).

2.1. AUTHORITARIANISM AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

To understand why the CPC deems internet control to be essential, it is necessary to consider the political structure of the PRC, and most importantly the relationship between state, media, and society. Following the reforms of the eighties, China shifted from a monolithic totalitarian regime to 'fragmented authoritarianism' (Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988). To facilitate governance after China's transition to a market-oriented economic system, decision-making processes such as policy-making were delegated to local governments and various ministries, which must follow the broad guidelines given by the central authorities. This fragmentation of power is particularly important in the case of the media industry and also applies to the censorship system.

The economic changes of the reform era, beginning in 1978, had a profound impact on the role of the media in the PRC, which began as a propaganda tool and became increasingly commercialised, having to respond to market forces rather than party directives (Zhao, 1998). The fragmentation of state authority, as well as the commercialisation and privatisation of media by policies requiring media companies to compete in the marketplace, have allowed for the development of a new and more independent media. This, in turn, has given rise to practices such as investigative journalism which often exposes local issues, including official corruption, as well as non-political issues that directly affect people's everyday lives (Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988: pp. 110–112).

Under the system of 'fragmented authoritarianism', the media not only have to serve the interests of central government but can also respond to market demands. However, the degree of freedom a particular media outlet enjoys depends on its position in relation to centres of power: whether at the local or central level, the closer a media outlet is to a centre of power, the less freedom it has to supervise and criticise it (Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988). The internet is differentiated from traditional mass media in that it is an interactive social space in which everyone can be a consumer as well as a creator, and information often comes from sources independent of the state (Rheingold, 2000). For this reason, it has led to developments in Chinese civil society by serving as a forum on which Chinese citizens can voice their issues and concerns, as well as form groups without the need for physical meetings. These cyber-meetings have made control by the authorities much more difficult, since few of the strategies commonly used by the Chinese police against physical assemblies can be practically transferred to cyberspace (Link & Qiang, 2013). Although the power of the internet as a democratising force in China remains under debate,[2] it is undeniable that the

multiplicity of sources of information on the internet has the potential to create new discourses independent of state ideology and to stir public opinion (Tai, 2006).

Since access to information leads to the formulation of independent views and opinions, the Chinese state made clear from the outset that it would be keeping a leash on the internet. As early as 1994, one year before the internet was commercially available in China, the state issued a policy paper on the supervision of computer information systems, followed by another set of regulations in 1996 concerning the nature of the content deemed acceptable on the internet (Tai, 2006). Whilst the internet is home to an increasing amount of self-produced content not directly regulated by official guidelines, the guidelines show 'a strong residue of a mentality that holds that cultural producers should be guided by political ideology and serve the nation' (Hockx, 2015: p. 3), especially when internet content reaches the limit (*dixian* 底线) of what is deemed ideologically acceptable by the CPC. This tendency has even increased since president Xi Jinping took office in 2012, when he made it clear that internet control and surveillance was to be a priority (Yang, 2014), introducing projects such as the social credit system to increase the range of online behaviours surveilled by the state (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2014).

Despite new developments and article 35 of the Chinese constitution providing 'freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration' for all citizens of the PRC (National People's Congress, 2016a), these rights come with a conditional clause. To maintain a tight grip on the information available on the internet, the Chinese state enforces a very strong and comprehensive system of censorship. Although levels of censorship vary over time, in 2013, approximately 13% of all social media posts were censored (King et al., 2013). As mentioned above, this control structure is fragmented, with most of the censorship running through individual internet content providers, rather than being centralised. Since insufficient results could lead to being fined or shut down, some providers employ up to 1,000 censors per individual site to ensure compliance with official guidelines. They all follow official guidelines, such as the 'Interim Provisions on the Administration of Internet Publishing', which establishes categories of content which cannot be published or shared, going from 'opposing the basic principles confirmed in the Constitution' to more open-ended clauses, such as 'spreading rumours, disturbing social order, disrupting social stability' and 'having any other content prohibited by law, administrative rules and national regulations' (Ministry of Information Industry, 2006). The intentionally vague nature of these guidelines, combined with the scope of the censorship system described below, allows the state to maintain a tight grip.

Methods of censorship

This paper considers the five major aspects of internet censorship, as proposed by Link and Qiang (2013): (1) regulations, surveillance, and social pressure; (2) self-censorship; (3) word filters; (4) a firewall; and (5) guiding. Rather than the complete suppression of information, the main objective of the censorship system is to create an environment where topics considered 'unhealthy' are invisible and to 'create a psychological wall

along with the physical wall' (Link & Qiang, 2013: p. 90). Although the more tech-savvy and creative users can relatively easily circumvent the word filters and the firewall, most Chinese internet users chose not to go to the trouble of jumping the wall.

The next most obvious barrier to the propagation of 'unhealthy' information on the Chinese internet is word filters, which can be very efficient in that they prevent a variety of topics from being mentioned at all. The current word list contains 'freedom' (*ziyou* 自由), 'democratic movement' (*minyun* 民运), and 'revolution' (*geming* 革命). Again, netizens have found ways to work around censorship by creating a completely new field of internet language, for instance using the term '35 May' instead of '4 June' to refer to the events of Tiananmen Square in June 1989 (Qiang, 2004).[3]

Whilst regulations such as the prohibition of pseudonyms are almost impossible to enforce, word filters can be cleverly dodged using wordplay, and the firewall can be jumped using a proxy or VPN, less obvious and more efficient methods of controlling the content available include online social pressure, self-censorship, and guiding. The visibility and omnipresence of the internet police (*wangluo jingcha*网络警察), a major part of the Ministry of Public Security, is meant to intimidate users rather than help them to navigate the rules of the internet. Additionally, in a dynamic reminiscent of the communist period, the government openly holds groups responsible for individuals' actions and motivates citizens to denounce one another if they become aware of any transgression of the rules (Link & Qiang, 2013). The fear of repression produced by this leads to self-censorship, which further decreases the visibility of alternative content and holds the censorship system together.

In such systems, self-censorship becomes a symptom of the environment of uncertainty and fear surrounding certain forms of expression, although the imagined consequences may not always be likely. Because it consists, by nature, of the absence of content or action, self-censorship is very elusive and generally negatively connoted, leaving individuals and media organisations unlikely to admit to self-censorship or, even less, the reasons behind it (Cheung, 2003).

Self-censorship in the PRC is predicated on a wider social environment in which the individual is constantly under scrutiny. Historically, the state has meddled in the private affairs of the people, or 'guided the masses', which makes self-censorship a collective cultural feature of the contemporary PRC, rather than a collection of individual experiences. The advantages brought by neoliberal policies depend on a low-conflict political atmosphere, leading most Chinese citizens to steer away from political topics and find their individuality in other areas of social life.

In most authoritarian models, the press rests under the total control of the state and serves only state interests and objectives, leading to violent repression with no legal means of evading sanctions when state guidelines are not followed (Zhao, 1998). Although freedom of expression is recognised in the constitution of the PRC and the press is increasingly left to obey market forces rather than state interest alone, self-

censorship remains very present. Stemming from fear rather than palpable active repression, it is elusive insofar as individuals 'chose' not to express possibly reprehensible views; thus, the responsibility for non-action can always be given to the individual, rather than social or legal pressures. Wacker compares internet surveillance in China with the idea of the Panopticon, a prison in which prisoners may be under surveillance at all time, and must act as if they are, thus generating self-censorship (Wacker, 2003). Self-censorship can always be denied, however, because self-censorship is predicated on an environment of explicit censorship in which 'public control successfully merges with private control'. As in the proposed social credit system, these should not be considered separately (Cheung, 2003: p. 34).

The atmosphere of social pressure leading to self-censorship is consolidated by a phenomenon termed 'guiding' (*yindao* 引导) by Link and Qiang (2013). Guiding is closer to propaganda than to censorship, and consists mostly of creating a pro-CPC, pro-policy discourse inside online communities. First practised exclusively by members of the internet police under the guise of being ordinary citizens, the task of publishing pro-government posts has been carried out by ordinary citizens as volunteer or paid work since 2004. The goal of these 'internet commentators' is not to promote critical debate, but to influence online public opinion, steering it in the direction given by the guidelines of the propaganda department (Yang, 2009). Those writing these posts were quickly given the nickname 'fifty-cent party' (*wumao dang* 五毛党) because of the general belief that they are paid fifty cents per post. However, the repetitive and sometimes mechanical nature of these pro-government postings have made them easy to spot, and often have a counter-effect, undermining genuine pro-state voices. Commenting on how prevalent the phenomenon has become in recent years, it has been said, 'Satire of *wumao* has spread so much that it [...] has come to mean any regime apologist of any kind' (Link & Qiang, 2013: pp. 91–92). However, word filters and the omnipresence of the internet police and other forms of censorship have been the targets of parody and other humorous responses, showing the limits of the censorship apparatus in the PRC.

The goal of censorship
Whilst most scholarship suggests that the goal of censorship in China is to stifle criticism of the state, a 2013 study by King, Pan, and Roberts (2013) shows that whilst criticism of the state is sometimes tolerated, it is posts with collective action potential that are most often the target of censorship. According to King et al., when China opened itself up to social media and online discussion, it also opened itself up to criticism of its leadership. However, criticism alone is no threat to the power of the Chinese leadership as long as no other nexus of power emerges, thus censorship primarily targets posts that might control or influence the behaviour of larger groups. As the study concludes, 'The Chinese people are individually free but collectively in chains' (King et al., 2013: p. 331).

However, the study mentions two more categories of content that do not directly correlate with collective action and yet are systematically censored, namely critique of the censors themselves and pornography (King et al., 2013). The consistent and

systematic censorship of these two categories shows that they must be posing some form of threat to state legitimacy. Whilst censoring critiques of the censors themselves is essential to maintain the system, considering the critical importance and the scale of the censorship system, it is not apparent why the Chinese state would invest so much of its resources in censoring pornography over other 'unhealthy' or political material. The study does not offer any explanation as to why pornography, which 'includes advertisements and news about movies, Web sites, and other media containing pornographic or sexually explicit content' would be systematically censored. It only briefly mentions the official line of the party on the issue of pornography as 'violating public morality and damaging the health of young people, as well as promoting disorder and chaos' (King et al., 2013: p. 335). Further investigation shows that sex and pornography are often the official reason given for censoring or closing a website, masking the actual reasons – such as comments on politically sensitive subjects, including the Dalai Lama or the Falun Gong (Link & Qiang, 2013). Pornography is thus made a placeholder for almost anything the Chinese leadership wishes to censor, covering the real issue and making the censorship more palatable to the wider public.

2.2. THE CENSORSHIP OF PORNOGRAPHY

Some aspects of the censorship of pornography are not unique to the PRC, with the argument that it is harmful to society and especially to young people is common all over the world.[4] In the PRC, however, laws concerning the censorship of pornographic content seem to be abused by the authorities with the goal of justifying censorship of non-sexual topics, such as sensitive political issues. Although the previously mentioned internet regulation guidelines only very vaguely mention pornography, under the heading of 'propagating obscenity' (Ministry of Information Industry, 2006), the criminal law of the PRC defines what constitutes pornography in more concrete terms as 'obscene books, periodicals, movies, video-and audio-tapes, pictures, etc., that explicitly portray sexual behaviour or undisguisedly publicise pornographic materials' (National People's Congress, 2016b). Whilst the clause also stipulates that 'literary and art works of artistic value which contain erotic contents shall not be regarded as pornographic materials', these definitions are vague enough to be left to the interpretation of the censors.[5] For literature published through the official system of editing and publishing, erotic content and depictions of sexuality seem to have been less and less of an issue since the 1980s, but works self-published online are more commonly subject to censorship (Hockx, 2015).

Aside from other previously mentioned motivations, public morality remains an obvious concern in official discourse, and the fact that pornography is systematically censored in the PRC also shows that control of sexuality is a priority for the Chinese government. This not only includes family planning policies, such as the one-child (now two-children) policy, but also the 'parental control' on the Chinese internet, which reflects the need for the post-socialist state to dictate 'healthy' media content. The justification for this form of control is most often public opinion. In fact, in a 2005 survey conducted as part of the UCLA World Internet Project (Tai, 2006), Chinese

citizens were asked about the level of control they would like to see on the internet. From different categories of content, 85 percent of respondents agreed that regulating online pornography was 'very necessary to somewhat necessary', giving it first place in terms of importance, before violence (73 percent), junk e-mail (62 percent), advertising (33 percent), and internet games (16 percent). This public distaste of online pornography allows the government to justify the censorship of many non-sexual issues by labelling them with the term 'pornography'.

In turn, as the government labels activism 'pornography', activists thus use nudity and sexual themes as powerful media for social and political commentary. Like in Europe, where sexuality has historically been considered a transgressive subject and pornography has been used for political, cultural, and social commentary long before it developed as an inherently sexual medium, it is now used in China as a means of challenging the authority of the state.

Later termed 'political pornography', early obscene and erotic writings in the sixteenth-century were designed for limited distribution to an educated elite, often meant to parody and criticise the established political and religious order.

> Pornography was [...] defined over time by the conflicts between writers, artists and engravers on the one side and spies, policemen, clergymen and state officials on the other. Its political and cultural meanings cannot be separated from its emergence as a category of thinking, representation and regulation. (Hunt, 1996: p. 11)

In the eighteenth-century, pornography was associated with the Enlightenment, criticism of clerical rigidity, police censorship, and issues related to the notion of public morality. It focused on 'the value of nature and the senses as a source of authority' (Hunt, 1996: p. 42) and was thus closely tied to materialist thinking. It was only towards the end of the 1970s that 'pornography began to lose its political connotations and became instead commercial, "hard-core" business' (Hunt, 1996: p. 42).

Unlike the West, where democratisation and an overflow of pornographic media has produced a field of porn studies focused on the content of porn, rather than its potential as a medium of expression, in a context like that of the PRC, where freedom of expression is limited, pornography has found a role back into political discourse similar to that of eighteenth-century political pornography. As the Chinese government has politicised pornography by linking it to the censorship of sensitive topics, Chinese internet users have begun to use nudity and sexual images as a form of political protest.[6]

3. USING SEX AS RESISTANCE

3.1. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Given the breadth of the phenomenon described above and the scope of this paper, a quantitative analysis is not a realistic option here. Rather, I will conduct a qualitative analysis by choosing single examples along the spectrum and analysing them individually. As such, the empirical evidence proposed in this paper is twofold: first, examples of a larger dynamic within society in terms of attitude and use of language, and second, examples of artists using nudes and sexual themes to express a specific message. With the exception of Deng Shangdong, whose work was recommended to me directly by another scholar, the bloggers and artists mentioned are all discussed in English language scholarship and/or well known internationally. I chose examples of their work that are most representative of the contemporary use of nudity for the purpose of social commentary, whilst ensuring a certain diversity. The individual images are analysed within the broader context of the artist's work, taking into account their intent, when known, and the reactions to the artwork from the intended audience, which in some cases include the censors and the Chinese government. From grassroot dynamics to individual voices, the examples provided in this chapter illustrate the breadth of use of obscenity and sexuality by Chinese internet users, as well as their interplay with censorship. Although the words and images chosen do not always have the intent to provoke, every one of the examples is made transgressive in one form or another by the context of an authoritarian state and its attitude towards sexuality.

3.2. INTERNET LANGUAGE AND BLOGGING

At the grassroots level, the change in Chinese internet users' attitudes to authority is most evident in online interactions. Some aspects of resistance to state control are very pervasive and illustrate a broad shift in the attitudes of internet users as well as the Chinese culture as a whole. Humour is a very important part of Chinese internet users' reactions to censorship, and genres associated with parody are some of the most often used for political contention. In an atmosphere of strict state control, every pretension to authority is liable to become a target of humour and satire, with nothing held sacred in Chinese cyberspace. As Yang Guobin, one of the foremost researchers on digital media in China, puts it, 'Play has a spirit of irreverence. It always sits uncomfortably with power' (Yang, 2009: p. 224).

The omnipresence of censorship and word filters has forced Chinese internet users to make very creative and intelligent use of language to circumvent them. This phenomenon has given rise to a unique culture of internet language in China, with netizens using codes to discuss sensitive topics. The nature of Chinese being a not only phonetic but also visual language has allowed for this new and innovative 'netspeak slang' to emerge, forming a complex ecosystem unique to the PRC today (China Digital Times, 2018). Since these forms of wordplay have evolved out of an effort to evade

censorship and promote freedom of expression, and in response to state attitudes to obscenities, they are often quite vulgar. More importantly, rather than active dissidence, the use of internet slang has become a daily code used by most internet users in some form or another, and thus represents a deeper cultural shift happening within Chinese society.

Lewd netspeak

There are four major constructions of wordplay meant to circumvent word filters: double meaning, sound, shortening and lengthening characters, and borrowing words from foreign languages (Link & Qiang, 2013). Since the word *zhengfu* 政府 [government] is automatically censored by most word filters, some Chinese internet users refer to the government using the words *tianchao* 天朝 [heavenly dynasty] or *xi chaoxian* 西朝鲜 [West Korea], both of which bear a more implicit meaning of the PRC being akin to an old feudal monarchy or comparable to the contemporary North Korea. As the censors catch up with these codes, new codes emerge that are increasingly obscure and sometimes need much interpretation to be understood. The 'grass mud horse' (*caonima* 草泥马) and the 'river crab' (*hexie* 河蟹) are two of the best-known plays on sound, transforming into 肏你妈 *cao ni ma* [fuck your mother] and 和谐 *hexie* [harmony], thus poking fun at Hu Jintao's doctrine of the 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehu,* 和谐社会). Alternatively, some slang deconstructs or reconstructs completely new characters. For instance, the character for 'good' (*hao* 好) can be deconstructed as 女子 (*nü zi* [woman and child]), and *wumao* 五毛 [50 cent] has become *wao*, a new character used to refer to the 'fifty-cent army' (Figure 6). Finally, some words are borrowed from other languages, such as English or Japanese, either by sound, as in *fensi* 粉丝, meaning 'fans' or 'supporters', or by direct translation of the meaning, as in *chugui* 出柜 [coming out of the closet].

Figure 1: Characters created from the contractions of 五毛 wumao ['fifty-cent', referring to the fifty-cent party] and 草泥马 caonima [grass mud horse].

In reaction to a crackdown on profanities on the Chinese internet, followed by a strengthening of word filters, users on the website Baidu Baike created a list of ten mythical beasts, based on homophones of Chinese curse words and phrases. The set of ten, each with its own defined nature, forms an obvious parody of traditional Chinese mythology and the Chinese zodiac. The list no longer exists on Baidu, and the censors

have since added the names of the ten mythical animals to lists of banned words. However, the list can still be found on English language websites (Martinsen, 2009).

As with the use of wordplay to circumvent word filters, some have criticised and ridiculed the censorship system by using images which can be interpreted as 'obscene', but which only hint at sexual themes and make innuendos. Such images are almost impossible to ban or justifiably censor and are a very powerful way of mocking internet censorship in general. For instance, an image of ketchup being poured onto a sausage, with clear connotations of oral sex, was created in response to the censoring of 40 erotic novels in 2007 and was meant to mock the censors (Wusan, 2007). By copying the official ban announcement from the General Administration of Press and Publishing and adding this picture as an image file, along with the forty titles, the author of the post openly ridiculed official policy and the futility of the censorship efforts (Hockx, 2015). Whilst this may be offensive to some, there is no legal way of preventing the sharing of such an image.

These examples illustrate the range of obscenities used playfully by Chinese internet users to protest censorship. In the same way that early European political pornography defied the authority of the church and puritan morality, modern Chinese internet slang defies the CPC's moral discourse and control over private lives. It is very significant that the grass mud horse is not a single instance of this form of resistance, but rather a part of a whole ecosystem of internet slang, poking fun at censorship. It shows how deeply rooted is the resistance to the control and surveillance state, as well as the tendencies towards transgressive behaviour in the attitudes of Chinese internet users.

Blogging

The broader cultural shift in Chinese society is also exemplified by the pervasiveness of personal blogs, and for the purpose of this paper, sex blogging. Whilst sex blogging is not as broad a phenomenon as the use of slang, the bar to entry is very low, and it is thus accessible to almost everyone. In the past two decades, China has seen the rise of a pronounced 'me culture' (*ziwowenhua* 自我文化) focused on individualism. The phenomenon is particularly evident among the generation that grew up after the eighties and nineties and for whom computers and the internet are a given. Generation Y's sense of self is deeply anchored in consumerism and mass entertainment, as well as in a strong desire to show one's individuality. With the low barrier to entry of blogging, the number of young Chinese participating in this new culture of online exhibitionism has been increasing since the early 2000s. Whilst many use blogs to connect with other users and create networks, some use online platforms as ways to express personal and sometimes political views. However, although this online space is, for many, one of self-exploration and expression, most Chinese internet users are urban, educated millennials, rich in 'cultural capital', and representing only a small segment of Chinese society (Sima & Pugsley, 2010).

The phenomenon of sex blogging has arisen in China, as well as in the West, and can

be considered both parallel and a counter-movement to the rise of pornography, with the line between them sometimes blurred. On the one hand, sex blogging stems from a culture of exhibitionism on the web which has emerged with the spread of personal blogs and websites (Sima & Pugsley, 2010). On the other hand, sex blogging can be a form of resistance against public discourses of 'normality' or public morality, especially for repressed and underrepresented groups. In the West, this is especially true of queer and LGBT sex blogging, which is often an effort to include lesser known narratives in more mainstream discourse. Similarly, sex blogging in the PRC is very female-dominated, reflecting women's ambivalent status in Chinese society.

On the spectrum of sex blogging in the PRC, one sees a variety of genres and intentions. Some Chinese women seek to expose themselves simply to reclaim their sexuality and autonomy, whilst others use their blogs as a platform for outspoken activism. For instance, the blogger Mu Zimei uses her blog as a diary to recount her sexual life and publish semi-nude photographs of herself. Whilst she openly draws traditional notions of gender and love into question, she does not actively publicise this as a form of activism. Another well-known blogger, writing under the pseudonym 'Hooligan Swallow', explores topics related to sexuality, gender, motherhood, and sex work. She is especially vocal about the latter, and vehemently defends the rights of sex workers and condemns violence against them (Jacobs, 2012). Most of these bloggers publish nude pictures of themselves, using their naked bodies to make sociocultural statements and criticise public morality. Although activism is not necessarily the intent, the transgressive status of sexuality makes it a powerful medium in the quest for individual liberties.

3.3. ART AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY

As well as these more fundamental dynamics of modern Chinese society, some choose to use prohibited themes to criticise society or government. Akin to the political pornography of eighteenth-century Europe, deliberately offensive images are created by artists as a way of provoking and questioning social norms. Here, I present three examples of artwork using nudity to illustrate different aspects of this second dynamic. First, Yu Na and Siu Ding both use nude photography to reaffirm their control of their bodies and to comment on the role and place of women in Chinese society, in a similar manner to that of many sex bloggers. However, their status as artists gives their work further visibility and the transgressive nature of their work is more deliberate and elaborate. Secondly, I choose Deng Shangdong because of the very strong imagery in his work, as well as the fact that he uses a mixture of text and images on his blog to comment on different aspects of Chinese society. Furthermore, his experience illustrates the dynamic of censorship in the PRC, as a number of his posts have been censored due to his continually testing the limits of the acceptable. Finally, Ai Weiwei is used to represent the other end of the spectrum. As an internationally famous artist living outside of China, his voice is the strongest, and he has become famous for his controversial images and vehement critiques of the Chinese government.

Nude photography: the works of Siu Ding and Yu Na
In the sea of content on the Chinese internet, some choose the naked human body as their means of expression. Despite works of 'artistic value' being officially exempted from the definition of pornography (National People's Congress, 2016b), artists creating imagery using the naked human body remain vulnerable to censorship as assessments are often made at the censors' discretion.

For Siu Ding, Hong Kong artist and internet celebrity, using the naked body is 'an issue of personal freedom and choice' (Ding, 2017a). As she writes on her blog, being a nude model is as much an issue of personal identity as it is of artistic aesthetic. In one article, she explains her perspective of nude modelling:

> 'Before becoming a life model, one must have a clear concept regarding the autonomy of the body [...] Can you deal with other people's judgments and criticisms as a nude life model? Would you be able to balance your other identities and roles in society? Are you "rebelling" or simply "following" society's common values?
> Body autonomy is a kind of self-affirmation. Only through a continual process of self-examination and re-establishment of who "I" am, can I embark on the road of nude life modelling.' (Ding, 2017b)

By exposing her naked body online, Siu Ding is making a statement about herself and her place in society. She is defying the established order and re-establishing control over her own life. She is reclaiming not only ownership of her body, but also her autonomy as an individual, against a public and political discourse that seeks to dictate the boundaries of the role of women in society. For a woman to reclaim her naked body in a society where female bodies are increasingly objectified, sexualised, and commercialised is a political statement.

Some artists go even further and use particularly telling imagery. In *Jiejue Fangan*解决方案[Solution Scheme], artist Xu Yong collaborated with mainland artist and former sex worker, Yu Na, to create a series of photographs in which she appears naked and seemingly bored, surrounded by men in suits, all apparently uninterested by her presence (Xu & Yu, 2009). In the photographs, the cable controlling the camera in her hand makes her an active subject, rather than an object, in the process of creating the artwork.

Some of the scenes have strong political undertones; for instance, Yu Na appears in one image holding a pink flag and leading the men in suits, in a pose strongly reminiscent of posters of the communist era, or of the famous painting *La Liberté guidant le peuple*, in which Marianne is holding the flag and guiding the French revolutionaries. In this picture, the nakedness of Yu Na is not in any sense sexualised, but rather she appears strong and undisturbed by the men touching her. The colour of the flag can be interpreted as a symbol of femininity and the liberation of women, or as a throwback to communist red, and the men could be following her on her quest or attempting to

hold her back.

A critique of the commercialised body: Deng Shangdong
Use of the naked human body is not always a direct form of defiance against the state, but may be a confrontation of the ambivalent relationship with sexuality and the human body prevalent in Chinese society. Despite the tendency to prudishness in official public discourse, the body is also increasingly sexualised and commercialised. In a 2017 interview, the artist Deng Shangdong affirmed that his nude photographs seek to distance themselves from the sexualised nude photography that has become increasingly commonplace (Huo, 2017[7]). Although he did not clearly formulate his intent in the interview, the choice of words and images on his blog trigger a profound sense of angst and discomfort. Aside from its very graphic images and somewhat disturbing themes (Deng, 2017d, 2017g), the most remarkable aspect of the blog is that approximately a third of the pictures on it have been censored. Rather than complaining directly about this, the artist responds with a touch of cynicism. In one post, the use of the phrase 'receiving a little red flower (*xiaohonghua* 小红花) every day' in combination with a screenshot of the automated messages sent by Weibo, the blog platform, when it takes pictures offline, can be interpreted as an indication of his subversive view of internet surveillance and censorship (Deng, 2017c). Whilst schoolchildren strive for acknowledgment of their efforts and good behaviour through a little red flower, Deng receives acknowledgment of his subversiveness and 'bad' behaviour through automated notifications of censorship. Deng's online publication of his work can be seen as a direct attempt to provoke censorship, with his persisting in posting pictures, whilst at the same time acknowledging that they are deemed unacceptable, becoming a statement of resistance against the state.

Deng plays with the taboo in his art, and in other short posts, does not shy away from making more obvious social commentary. 'Deng Shandong's little pornographic illustrations (*Deng Shangdong seqinxiao chahua*邓上东色情小插画)' is a series of somewhat naive and colourful depictions of people in cryptic, sexual scenes (2017f). Considering the aversion of the artist to sexualised imagery, and the amount of censored content on his blog, the use of the term 'pornographic' [*seqing* 色情] not only denotes a form of self-loathing, but is also a criticism of the censors and Chinese society at large, hinting at their prudishness and own self-loathing. Deng addresses other issues by sharing strong imagery in parallel with short, innocuous, candid statements, leaving the interpretation of the message to the reader. Recurring themes of these short posts are the degeneration of social values and norms in modern society, such as those of the education system (Deng, 2017e), self-harm, and unrealistic notions of happiness (Deng, 2017b).

Deng also comments on social issues in a more direct way; for instance, in the case of the legalisation of gay marriage in Taiwan (Deng, 2017a). In this example, it is particularly interesting to note that only one of the two pictures used in his post has been taken down. Censored pictures are still present on the blog, albeit replaced by a grey symbol of an exclamation point on a stack of printed blank images, and do not just

disappear. This is an important feature of the censorship system. Whilst some things cannot be shown, the process of censorship must be visible for it to be efficient: censored images cannot just vanish, they should be made an example of 'wrong' behaviour. Whilst these constant reminders of surveillance create an online environment conducive to self-censorship, they also lead to an increasing tendency towards cynicism on the part of Chinese internet users.

Nudity as protest: Ai Weiwei
Ai Weiwei's work is internationally recognised. It reflects the issues and contradictions inherent to modern China, and is deeply rooted in the artist's experiences growing up during the Cultural Revolution. In a 2014 article entitled 'China's Last Communist: Ai Weiwei', Christian Sorace suggests that Ai's artistic and aesthetic expression stems directly from the communist traditions of the PRC's past and that its political statement lies in the discrepancy between the communist discourse of the Chinese state and its actual practices. He argues that Ai's art goes beyond satirising the communist party and is rooted in the ideal that the party stood for in the first place.[8] Ai is confronting the Chinese state with its failure to live up to its own ideals. By making himself vulnerable to censorship, he is intentionally exposing the insecurities and fears of the CCP. Without active repression on the part of the state, Ai's work loses its meaning. His use of nudity in his work can be read as a 'come and get me' statement, by which provoking censorship becomes a commentary on censorship itself (Sorace, 2014).

Nudity has become a staple of Ai's work over the years, starting with a picture of his then-future wife holding up her skirt in front of Tiananmen Square in June 1994, the fifth anniversary of the Tiananmen protest. More recently, the now infamous picture titled *caonima dang zhongyang* 草泥马挡中央 [grass mud horse blocking the middle], depicting him holding a stuffed 'grass mud horse' in front of his genitals, which, by changing the characters of the title, becomes *cao ni ma dang zhongyang* []你妈党中央 [fuck your mother Party Central Committee], is an obvious critique of the state and the censorship system.

In 2011, Ai was fined again on charges of 'spreading pornography', in response to his work *One Tiger, Eight Breasts*, which depicts the artist in the nude, flanked by four, shyly giggling women (Coonan, 2011; Watts, 2011). Ai Weiwei is not the only Chinese contemporary artist to use nudes in his work. Furthermore, not only are the subjects in this piece not sexualised, but, as mentioned previously, artworks are promised protection against censorship as 'pornography' by the criminal law of the PRC. Rather than a sign of extreme prudishness on the part of the Chinese state, this suggests that Ai's work is not censored because of the nudity or the subject matter, but because of the artist as an individual and his explicit opposition to the Chinese government.

The use of nudity in Ai's work has strong political implications, and the ensuing censorship has also led to a strengthening of the symbolic value of naked bodies as a form of resistance. Following the charges of 'spreading pornography' due to *One Tiger,*

Eight Breasts, some of Ai's fans and followers published non-sexual nude pictures of themselves as a form of protest (Branigan, 2011). This form of activism leaves very little space for the state to act, since suppressing it reinforces the position of the artist against censorship, whilst not doing so could be interpreted as accepting the critique.

Strong political and social statements can be made through visual media, relying on artwork being theoretically protected against censorship. The use of nudity might be an act of defiance against state control, but the de-sexualisation of the naked body in most artworks makes it difficult to justify censoring these images as 'pornographic'. By working right up to the line in terms of what is considered acceptable, artists are undoubtedly being provocative of state and censors. The mere existence of such images, and the possibility of sharing them online, gives them more symbolic power than might even have been the original intent. However, for artists such as Ai Weiwei, the provocation and intention to strengthen the political symbolism of nudity is evident.

4. CONCLUSION

As shown throughout this paper, censorship and control of online spaces is critical for the stability of the political system in the PRC. Although the constitution of the PRC grants its citizens freedom of expression, this comes always with a conditional clause. Many forms of expression that are deemed unacceptable or 'unhealthy' by the CPC are liable to be censored. This not only includes forms of political dissent or movements with the potential of rallying larger groups, but also pornography and 'obscene' media. Whilst the paternalistic role of a socialist state explains why pornography would be considered 'unhealthy', it is not clear why the Chinese government would invest so much of its resources in censoring material which, at first glance, seems apolitical. Looking back to the early days of European pornography, pornographic writing was often used in educated circles as transgressive media with which to criticise power and authority. Whilst this practice has mostly disappeared from Western democracies, the PRC is seeing the rise of a similar form of 'political pornography' – albeit less graphic than the European variant – which aims to provoke and challenge authority, rather than only to be sexual in nature. It is not clear how sexual media took up this role historically in the PRC, and tackling this issue would warrant more research. However, given the stance of the state against pornography, it is not surprising that material falling into this vaguely defined category would constitute a breach of the rules of public morality prescribed by the state.

Whilst the scope of this paper's empirical research allows only for a focus on a few examples of nudity or obscene language used as political or social commentary, rather than a thorough analysis of the background of mainstream pornography, it would be worth considering these dynamics in a broader context. The omnipresence of censorship has led to a general climate of fear, leading in turn to self-censorship in China, but it has also given rise to a wide range of creative expression indicative of a wider culture of resistance against the tightening grip of the Chinese state. The rise of

internet slang of a sexual nature on the Chinese internet is a very telling phenomenon, representative of a broader shift in Chinese culture as a whole. Just like nudes or images hinting at sexual themes, the language which evolved from the climate of repression in the PRC is reflective of the transgressive potential of sexual themes against an established moral authority. Beyond these more fundamental dynamics of resistance pervasive in modern Chinese society, some artists also intentionally use nudity in non-sexual contexts to provoke the censors, shedding light on the ambivalence of official discourse around sexuality. In some cases, such as that of Ai Weiwei, the interplay between art and censorship highlights that the term 'pornography' is often used to justify the silencing of critical voices, further reinforcing its political symbolism.

NOTES

1. The term 'pornography', is this paper, is to be differentiated from nudity and sexual themes. It is rather referring to the Chinese government's use of the term 'pornography' to facilitate censorship of non-sexual sensitive issues.

2. Although the internet has undoubtedly shifted power dynamics, given the level of media literacy among internet users, the amount of censorship, and the still very important role played by official state media, it is not realistic to expect the internet alone to change the nature of the Chinese political system. The expectation that opening to the internet would necessarily lead to democracy has been termed 'digital Orientalism' by Herold and Seta (2015). See also Tai (2006) and Hockx (2015).

3. Some more examples of this emerging Chinese internet language will be explored in the second part of this paper.

4. This paper does no argue for or against censorship of actual pornographic content, rather it argues that the PRC is using the term 'pornography' as a justification for censorship of non-sexual content, in particular sensitive political topics, making it significantly different from pornography censorship in other countries.

5. The meaning of the term *yinhui* 淫秽 used for 'pornography' is subject to discussion, and the necessity of a more detailed definition and for the law to catch up with social realities have been pointed out by scholars in recent years, see Hockx (2015).

6. This paper focuses on a few examples of the use of nudity or obscene language as political or social commentary, and ignores the pervasive background of mainstream pornography. For a socio-political interpretation of the consumption of pornography in the PRC, see Jacobs (2012).

7. The interview of Huo Gou with Deng Shangdong on Weixin from 13 October 2017 is not available online since 20 October 2017. For a transcript of the original interview kindly contact info@mappingchina.org.

8. Whether or not Ai Weiwei's actions can be considered 'communist' is irrelevant to the argumentation of this paper; rather, it is stated that his activism cannot be separated from the political and historical context of the PRC today.

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08

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