

Censorship in Cyberspace: Accommodation and Resistance Among Chinese Netizens

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In January, 2010, the biggest internet search engine, Google, announced its potential exodus from the Chinese market due to China's practice of censorship. Many foreign commentators have criticized China's practice of censorship. But what are the views of Chinese citizens? Most have overlooked the problem since the situation has already been a part of their taken-for-granted daily lives. But there is a group of people who are well aware of internet censorship. They are the Chinese returnees who have experienced both the domestic and overseas cyber-worlds. They are used as informants in this ethnographic research to provide a fresh view on the issue of censorship in cyberspace. The research seeks to understand how those who have lived outside China understand internet censorship within China in order to provide a useful glimpse into how nationalism and internationalism interact within a globalizing China.

To answer these questions, a three-month fieldwork had been conducted from June through August of 2010 in Beijing, during which 45 people had been interviewed by me. The majority of them are returnees came back from the U.S., Europe and Hong Kong. Few of them are local Beijingers. They are aged from 20 to 40. All of them are internet heavy users who at least surf online more than three hours per day. All of them have at least university education. Their years of being overseas are varied. Although my informants that chosen base on contacts in the city and thus do not represent a random sample, the themes I worked with involves more data from a cultural level but less individual. As such, while the results presented in my thesis certainly do not represent everyone in China, they are still a fair representation of how Chinese people would

perceive the contradictions between the traditional paternalistic and totalitarian governmentality and idea of neoliberalism after they were influenced by different cultures that available in today's global culture supermarket.

Some informants view internet censorship as a negative intrusion and a representation of an untruthful government while others consider it as a necessity in managing China's cyberspace due to the special cultural context of Chinese society. Though their perceptions vary, my informants expressed a paradoxical nationalism, defending a government they felt ashamed of; this was expressed repeatedly during interviews. In this research, I analyze in depth this paradoxical nationalism among my informants, to better understand Chinese censorship and how it may be justified as well as contributed to the Chinese nationalism.

In those interviews I did not immediately attempt to elicit the conception of censorship, for the fear of being sidetracked in abstractions. I focused on their own internet using experiences and the discussion on particular social events related to the issue of freedom of information and speech, such like Google China Affair, Anti-pornography movement, the case of Liu Xiaobo, etc. In the following part, I divided my informants into three groups. The first group contains of those who justified the government's action on controlling online information/speech and believe the censorship is China is necessary. The second group consists of those who found the censorship is annoying and disproved the extension of authoritarian governance into the cyberspace. The third group consists of those who decided to choose no side in the confrontation between Google and China. Some of them simply don't consider the censorship issue as a real problem in China right now. And it is uncalled-for to make a fuse out of it. There are

also others belong to this group that do care about the censorship issue while believes neither Google nor China is doing “no evil”. They were the cynical ones who were being pessimistic when talking about the freedom in the internet. I examine how among people in these three groups, their experiences of living and studied overseas has had a real influence on how they review on the status in quo in China’s disciplined cyberspace.

Of course, not all of my informants clearly fit into one of three groups; many may fit in the grey zone between them. This categorization also put the other differences might be found among my informants away, for example, their overseas living places and their ages as well as their durations of living abroad. While, I am going to use these categorization to demonstrate the extent to which my informants percept the issue of censorship differently, I also paid attention to those who did not fit neatly to show oscillations and contradictions among these groups.

The most popular responses I’ve got from asking the question “is there any reason for the Chinese authority to imply the censorship in China’s cyberspace to control the information flow because they obsess with their own power and see the internet as a potential threat that may manipulated by foreign government to infortrend the mind of our youths?”, was “the governance way might be wrong if you see it alone, however censorship making sense in China society”. Not a small portion of my informants agree that “Chinese government has a point of applying censorship online”. People in this group are generally satisfied with the situation in China’s cyberspace and believe the western media somehow demonized China’s governance.

These who defend for the government certainly don’t like the censorship either. Almost every one of them knows how to get around the GFW (Great Firewall) by using

special software or pay for a third party service (VPN), and they are practicing it on a regular base when they were inside China. Although, it is obvious that they are well aware the inconvenience and feel frustrated about the censorship to different degrees, they are still not much interested in criticizing it. The “culture relativism” was one of the reasons they give out for explaining their sympathy toward the censorship policy. They said the experiences of living abroad make them think more about Chinese culture. They claimed that the core value of Chinese society is mutual harmony and stability rather than a result orientated improvement that westerners admired. And Chinese society is regulated not by laws in a western sense but by rules in a Chinese sense. The rules here are not referring to different kinds of regulations and limitations on individuals’ behaviors but rules of relationship. A male informant in his early twenties and has lived in Australia for five years said to me:

The essential of Chinese culture has been epitomized in the Chinese character *yuan* 圆 (circle). You can see this character structured by making a person “员” standing inside a circle “口”. “从心所欲而不逾矩¹” is what we are seeking for. Instead of changing the rules that may get on our way, we self-cultivated to adopt them and play with them.

In this discourse, the Confucianism agenda is easy to be observed. Many of my informants who don’t find censorship as a great problem are sharing this type of thinking. They shifted the focus from “censorship as a means of governmentality” to “how individual should cultivate themselves to adopt the situation”. More than that, some of them also used the discourse of Chinese culture to Western culture is as collectivism to individualism. Ergo, as Chinese, it is reasonable to give up certain individual rights for the sake of collective interests. For those who object to censorship found this way of thinking is wrong. A male informant said:

¹ From the Analects of Confucius: “I would follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right.”

Freedom of information/speech is a basic human right that should be enjoyed by everyone. On this issue, cultural relativism should not be applied. It is just wrong for one to say freedom of information/speech could only be enjoyed by Americans and it is not suitable for Chinese people. Indeed, the information control is not that horrible in China's cyberspace. However, the idea of some people in our society could be sacrificed is more terrifying. No one should be superior to the others. No one should be sacrificed for making others' life easier. [Hai, 24 years old male informant who has studied in the U.S. for two year]

People like Hai agree that raising the news transparency is crucial for contemporary Chinese society and it is the prerequisite for increasing "rationality" among Chinese citizens. However, the cynical ones hold a suspicious attitude toward this statement. The doubt on "freedom of information and speech can make people more rational" is found among them. On the one hand, they believe the westerners as well as some *fenqing* (radical youths) inside China are exaggerating the dark side of censorship since they overlooked the creative net culture in China's cyberspace that represent an informal resistance such as the creation of *Caonima*(Grass Mud Horse)². On the other hand, they argued that Americans and monopoly cooperation like Google constructed the myth of "more=better"; however, there are certain circumstances that it is better off if the mass know less and there is no correlation between more information and more rational citizens. The latter point has been mentioned in Susnstein's *Infotopia*.

Of course, there are also others defended the government's practice of censorship in cyberspace more directly without avoiding to talk about the semi-authoritarian regime in China. A male informant said to me:

Living in a nation-state is like you've signed a tacit-consent even before you realize you've signed it. You give up certain rights for exchanging of other rights. Every regime has its own mechanism. Even the one upholds the idea of neoliberalism can't ensure its citizens to have total freedom. There are boundaries for neoliberalism too. They are called nation boundaries. America is almost the most neoliberal country in the world. But as a non-American can't go there as willingly no matter how many times you claimed yourself as a global citizen. Boundaries and restrictions are everywhere. They are not going to disappear and they don't have to be evil in nature.

² "Grass Mud Horse is a Chinese internet meme widely used as symbolic defiance of the widespread internet censorship in China", from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grass_Mud_Horse

Globalization and neoliberalism make people become fuzzy and unrealistic. [Wei, 25 years old, male]

Though tacit-consent argument makes sense, there still are people who found censorship to a considerable degree violated their personal interests and privacy. A female identified herself as *shunmin* (obedient citizen) found the censorship as a negative intrusion.

I like TANBI. However, our government thinks it is a degrade taste. They label people like me as pervert. Reading TANBI (male homosexual) novels is my hobby. Some time I even write them. There are certain websites and online communities I would go regularly. In there, I could find those who share the same interests with me. We share our works and discuss others'. We didn't do anything against law or provoke any social problems. However, the online communities I used to go to has been shut down for many times during the past few years. Novels posted there were deleted. Our posts were censored by the internet policy. It was frustrated. It's none of the government's business. I was just reading and writing. I harmed no one. [Ba, 27 years old female postgraduate students who have lived in German for 2 years]

She used a popular sarcastic discourse to criticize censorship on marginalized culture like TANBI, which goes like "it is not enough for you [the government] to rape [censored information] me but you have to criticize me not being a virgin". Through Ba's discourse, another theme emerged. One reason makes my informants think *sansu*³ shouldn't be blocked or officially criticized is that they believe culture is something could be marketed. Individuals could and also should have rights to choose any type of culture they like. The standardized good/bad value system that guided people's cultural tastes is out of date. Though they may not know the concept of "culture supermarket", they certainly are buying it.

At the first, these answers concerned the censorship issues looks diversified. It seems very hard to drag out a pattern from them. However, every time at the end of my interview, despite their attitude toward censorship my informants would stress that they are nationalistic and their discourses are nationalistic ones too. For those who find

³ *Sansu* means vulgar, philistine, and low-class. *Sansu* culture refers to "immoral" or "vulgar" cultures like pornography, etc.

censorship is justifiable, it is easier for us to understand why they claimed themselves as patriots. They pointed out though western observers might right that the censorship could be an obstacle in developing democracy, with the current situation and the historical factors, China would be better off with than without a centralization of state power to control certain information. For those who object to censorship, it doesn't matter how much they have been influenced by neoliberalism, they are always nationalists first. They use neoliberalism as a mean to obtain the goal of making China a better place, which is totally a nationalistic wish. More than that, those social events related to censorship helped constructed new social memories among the generation grow up with the internet. The censorship to some extent stimulated patriotic enthusiasm and those resistances to the censorship are more like "rituals of rebellions".

Through studying their internet using behavior, it is apparently though these returnees claimed that they are highly educated rational people who read news from different sources, their original opinion toward certain issues are hardly altered. Instead of changing minds, different information just provide new chances for them to rationalize their own opinions. After understood the merits of neoliberalism, my informants did see it as a destination of how Chinese society should become to. As one of my informant said, "neoliberalism is just a means; we are accepting it and promoting it with a view to use it to serve our nationalistic agenda".