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Feeling the nudge: political communication and governance in digital China

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Prof.dr. Florian A. Schneider

Feeling the Nudge: Political Communication and Governance in Digital China

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Feeling the Nudge: Political Communication and Governance in Digital China

Inaugural Lecture by

Prof.dr. Florian A. Schneider

on the acceptance of his position as professor
Modern China
at Leiden University
on Monday 6 May 2024

**Universiteit
Leiden**

I have brought some show-and-tell. This here is Haibao, the official mascot of the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. Haibao is an example of political communication: the mascot is shaped like the Chinese character for person (*ren* 人), suggesting a humanist, cosmopolitan take on this mega event. But Haibao does not just communicate; the mascot also became the topic of political communication and a catalyst for wider controversies in China.

As the city of Shanghai was gearing up for the spectacle, it plastered posters and erected Haibao statues all over town (Figure 1). One Shanghaier who commented on these statues was the influential blogger Han Han.[1] Han, who is a famous pop author, race-car drive, and frequent *enfant terrible* of the Chinese literary world, took issue with little Haibao here, on the grounds that the mascot is not anatomically correct. If you look at Haibao from behind, you'll notice that the figure is missing a butt crack. Han felt this was a problem, and he communicated this to his sizeable blog audience at a time when the popularity of blogs was at its peak in China. Han's posts frequently had in the vicinity of 200 million views.

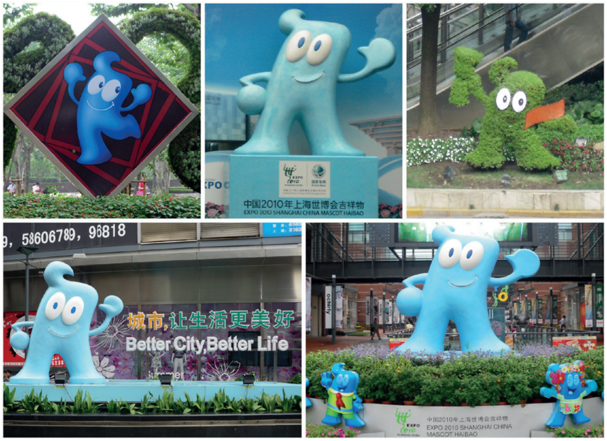

中国2010年上海世博会吉祥物
EXPO 2010 SHANGHAI CHINA MASCOT HAIBAO
城市,让生活更美好
Better City,Better Life

Figure 1: Haibao statues in Shanghai, 2010. Image: © F. Schneider 2010.

Now, if you don't speak Chinese, you'd be forgiven for scratching your head at this point, wondering what is going on here. So let me give you a bit more context. There's really two things you need to know. The first is that China has a long tradition of using analogies to make political statements, and to play with words in order to offer veiled, often very humorous criticism. That is also the case here, as we'll see. The second bit of context that is important, is that while the city of Shanghai was planning its cosmopolitan mega event, the search-engine giant Google decided to leave the Chinese market, ostensibly because of censorship concerns, but likely also because it was getting very hard to compete with domestic firms. Google, in Chinese, is pronounced '*Guge*' (谷歌). And butt crack, in Chinese, is pronounced '*gugou*' (股沟). You can hear the resemblance. So the tongue-in-cheek point that Han was making, was that Haibao without a butt crack was the same as China without Google: each had to process its excrement internally.

I am telling you the story because China's Google moment was a watershed step in a protracted but ultimately successful process of building the PRC internet (or some might say: intra-net): a domestic digital space, cordoned off against foreign (especially US) platform giants, in which the nation-state nurtures local start-ups, builds 'national champions', and disciplines any remaining foreign actors – for instance Apple – to conform to PRC rules. This has then also become a digital space that has its own infrastructures, its own platforms, and that carefully manages what users on those platforms can access and how they can interact.

Equally important is that this example illustrates how influencers and regular users debate diverse political topics on China's internet, including what it is like to live with, and behind, 'The Great Firewall of China'. Those debates remain just as heated today as they were when Han was joking about Haibao. For instance, when American Olympic athlete Eileen Gu switched citizenship to compete for China in the

Beijing Winter Olympics, a Chinese internet user asked her to comment on her privileged ability to use international apps like Instagram. When she responded, somewhat naively, that anyone could simply download a virtual private network through the app store and access foreign platforms that way, Chinese online responses were as humorous as they were scathing.[2]

These are the sort of political communication and media issues that I have explored over the past two decades. That is because I've always been intrigued by how people communicate about politics, how their communications shape politics, and what role media technologies play in these processes. To explore this question, I've been on a bit of a quest: to expand my toolbox for studying communication and media, to better get a handle on diverse empirical materials, and to be able to speak to interdisciplinary theories and debates. Some of you may be familiar with those efforts. I started out with a question that was not at all contemporary but related to politics from two millennia ago: how the various scholars represented in a famous compendium of speeches and essays about diplomacy talked about the politics that ultimately drove China's first emperor to take over the Chinese world.[3]

But text is of course not the only place where we might find political communication; I had the immense privilege of studying under the German political communications scholar Marion Müller, whose work focuses on visual politics, and who was a major inspiration for my next project, which moved to contemporary affairs. There, I tried to tease out how seemingly trivial and frivolous television content reflects, but also shapes, politics in China.[4] And this then led to follow-up studies on what happens when all sorts of media formats and genres get deployed around large-scale events like the Olympics, or military parades, or – and this is where the Haibao example comes from – world fairs.[5] Now we're in the realm of truly complex social and discursive practices, as officials, companies, creatives, intellectuals, fans, and all sorts of folks pursue their various, often highly political projects. And these processes can today no longer be divorced from transformative digital information and communication technologies (or: ICT), which is how I arrived at my interest in 'digital China', specifically the question of what happens to community sentiments like nationalism when they become communicated, accelerated, augmented, filtered, and transformed by digital tech.[6]

This lecture is about that very question. It is about China's media ecology and what happens in it. It is about the processes that unfold when people and technologies interact in complex and often unpredictable ways. And it is about how a state inserts itself into these processes to regulate them, but also to use them in order to regulate.

I will take you on a brief journey through the politics of the digital, by way of three examples from China. Through these examples, I hope to illustrate for you how digital designs and the economies to which they connect conspire to create subtle but powerful incentive for political action. Some of those incentives become leveraged by states or corporations to achieve their ends. Some are used by users and user groups as they pursue their agendas. But none of these actors can fully control what happens when digital complexity is unleashed as a societal force. Throughout, I will ask how different actors and technologies build incentives structures – in other words, how they 'nudge' each other into action – and, ultimately, who really nudges whom in digital China and beyond.

Studying Global China

Much of this is about China, but it is also about the politics of the digital. In fact, aside from discussing China with you, I have another agenda. I hope to persuade you of a simple truth: that, as illustrative as examples from China may be, they are also nothing particularly special. I hope to convince you by the end of this lecture that the social, political, and economic processes we'll encounter are in many ways near global, and studying China (or, for that matter, other places and areas in, for example, Asia) can help us understand, critique, and intervene in precisely those processes.

Our area-studies community is of course eminently familiar with the tension between our often-localized studies and their interactions with the global. And yet, it can be difficult to get the message out there that this tension matters. Those of us who work on China, or Japan, or Southeast Asia, tend to then publish in journals for China Studies, and Japan Studies, and South Asian Studies, and our books end up on library shelves full of wonderful studies on those places. But if we want to publish in a 'proper' discipline like political science or international relations or media studies or political economy, we have to explain to our largely American and European editors, reviewers, and readers why this ostensibly special setting matters. Much to the frustration of many of us here in this room today, people who study very similar issues in contexts like the UK or the US or France or Germany don't have to justify their cases in the same way, even though those places are no less peculiar.

But this is then also where area studies scholars have an opportunity, and I would argue a responsibility, to speak back to larger debates to show that what we are studying aren't just 'cases' from seemingly peculiar places on the margins of 'proper' social science and humanities scholarship. What we study is the human condition, in all its diversity, and that must serve as a corrective to Euro-centric and America-centric assumptions about the world, and as a source for meaningful theorizing about what our human existence is like, at the start of the 21st century.

China is then not important as some fancy outlier but, to paraphrase my colleague Jack Qiu from Singapore, because it is a fascinating real-world laboratory in which powerful state and corporate actors shape what a hypermodern society might look like.[7] And, as my colleagues Ivan Franceschini and Nick Loubere have masterfully argued, the processes we see unfold in China are already global; they plug into global circuits of capital, they reflect, expand, and adapt near-global governance strategies, and they speak back to these processes and shape them through Chinese ideas, finances, peoples, and goods that circulate through regions and places near and far. Treating China as global needs to be part of our methods.[8] And this, I hope, will also become clear from today's talk.

But let me get off my soap box and tell you a few stories. I have three. The first is about transnational affairs. The second is about how an app is changing how people think about urban environments. And, to conclude, we'll turn to the Chinese Communist Party – the CCP – and how it tries to manage its cadres.

How Transnational Fandom Played into an Election: The Story of Chou Tzu-yu

Now, the first story is about a pop starlet from Taiwan. This is Chou Tzu-yu (周子瑜) from the multi-national girl band Twice. In 2016, the 16-year-old singer was caught up in a scandal that led her to release a short video to her fans in mainland China. In the video, the young performer looks haggard and pale as she reads out a statement: 'There is only one China, the two sides of the strait are one, and I have always felt proud to be Chinese. I feel extremely apologetic to my company and to Internet friends on both sides of the strait for the hurt that I have caused'. The South-Korean media enterprise behind the band, JYP Entertainment Corporation, flanked this video announcement with press statements and tweets on social media in China to apologise for having 'hurt the feelings of the Chinese people'.[9]

So what had happened? Two months earlier, the members of Twice had appeared in a South Korean TV show, curled up in bunk beds and holding cutesy stuffed animals. They had also been holding miniature flags of their home countries, and this is where Chou caused offence: introducing herself as Taiwanese, she had been holding the flag of the Republic of China (ROC), the state that effectively governs Taiwan, but which the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland insists is an illegitimate, renegade administration. When a vocal Taiwanese pro-unification singer later spotted Chou's TV appearance, he accused her of activism in support of Taiwan's independence. Then, Chinese social media erupted in furious vitriol against Chou. The band Twice was banned from Chinese television and Chou lost her sponsorship with Chinese IT giant Huawei.

That explains the apology video. But this was not the end of the story. Chou's awkward apology convinced many in Taiwan that she had been coerced by Twice's mother company. The fact that Chao released the video the day before the presidential elections in Taiwan didn't help matters: the pressure that mainland fans had exerted then struck many as a heavy-handed attempt to intervene in the elections, in which the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and its pro-independence candidate Tsai Ing-wen had been leading in the polls. Tsai reacted to the scandal by stating that 'this incident has angered many Taiwanese people, regardless of their political affiliation'. She would later go on to be elected Taiwan's first female president, and while this outcome had been a foregone conclusion at that point, political analysts later concluded that the flag scandal drove additional voters to the poles and may have contributed several percentage points to Tsai's victory.[10]

I am telling you this story because even if you don't know Chou, the general issue is bound to be familiar: Chinese online nationalism is a force to be reconned with in international commerce and politics. Fashion companies like Versace or Dolce & Gabbana, sports franchises like the NBA, Hollywood stars like Sharon Stone or John Cena, but also foreign governments like Norway or Sweden, and particularly Japan, have attracted the ire of nationalist activism. Anyone can become a target of this nationalist anger, but it is particularly common for such vitriol and its often very serious real-world consequences to focus on women. Chinese woman living, working, or studying abroad know all too well that they must be careful about what they reveal online, lest they be attacked as traitors to the nation; and woe to any who might be found to have a non-Chinese partner.[11]

Here, I want to complicate a bit the common understanding of such cases, which are often presented as the outcome of official state and party agitation. That interpretation goes something like this: the authorities are powerfully able to manipulate and control public opinion in China, and online nationalism is a force that they foster and unleash when it is opportune. Local officials do this to signal their patriotic credentials to higher-ups, but the central authorities also manipulate nationalist sentiments this way to gain a bargaining chip in international relations, so they can claim to be constrained at home by domestic pressures.

Now, I am not saying that this interpretation is entirely wrong: politicians in China frequently claim to be constrained by public opinion and they do make statements that are aimed at garnering favour with their superiors.[12] Importantly, propagandists unapologetically aim to 'guide public opinion' on the PRC internet through a range of often sophisticated techniques. Through news and popular culture, but also by outsourcing the mechanisms of online content moderation to companies and individual users, the authorities try to 'nudge' the public in certain directions. They are, in the words of Thaler and Sunstein, 'choice architects': actors who actively structure the environments in which others act.[13] And while the CCP does not use the relatively recent language of 'choice architecture' and 'nudging', its long-standing Leninist imperative to engineer society into a wealthy and spiritually healthy civilization has much in common with principles championed in modern behavioural economics. I'll come back to that.

Here, I would like to impress on you a few issues that Chou's case illustrates. First, nationalist sentiments are not fully under the control of China's state. They can blow up over odd, at times surprising issues, and they can spiral in directions that do not serve the authorities. The way that online anger over pop-starlet Chou Tzu-yu shifted public opinion in Taiwan was hardly an outcome that served the interest of the CCP, which later had the People's Daily (so: its main mouthpiece newspaper) clarify that a teenage girl waving the ROC flag did not, in fact, violate the 'one China' principle. More recently, nationalists have started to target domestic elites, like star author and noble-prize laureate Mo Yan or the company that sells Nongfu water. Apparently, in all such cases, the views of Chinese nationalists sit awkwardly with the party line, which emphasises social stability and domestic economic growth.

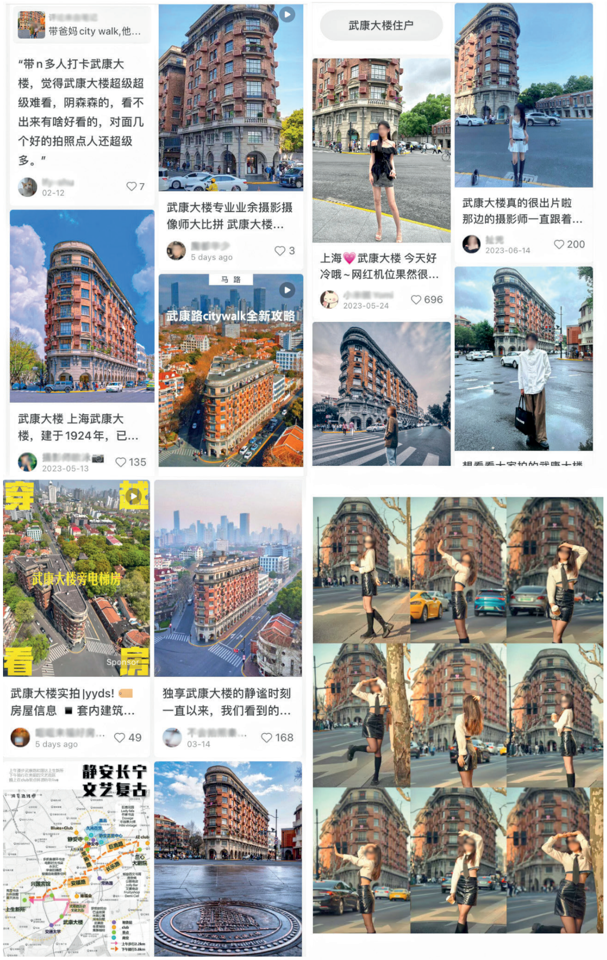
Second, this kind of nationalism is the outcome of interactions in complex communication networks that combine three major factors: the state with its propaganda and censorship, companies like platform providers who aim to make a profit off viral online discussions, and digital designs (interfaces and algorithms) that privilege certain kinds of interactions. Think of what a 'thumbs up' button on social media does compared to an angry emoji, or how social media algorithms curate and pre-structures the contents we see online. In Chou's story, as much as in many others, these factors conspire to encourage polarisation, feelings of angry indignation and even hate, and ultimately viral nationalist vitriol. And while users are 'nudged' into such directions by these overlapping and sometimes conflicting incentive structures, the discussions they then create in turn 'nudge' others in complicated ways – companies and diplomats; K-pop stars and their fans; voters in Taiwan; but also political actors in China itself. The fallout from these processes can, at times, be severe.

How a University Responds to a Selfie Craze: The Story of RED

Let's turn from the serious matters of cross-straits relations and nationalist agitation to something much more frivolous: tourists who are obsessed with finding photogenic places for their social-media selfies.

When I was in Shanghai in March, I returned to the neighbourhood where I lived some twenty years ago, to see how it had changed. This is the area just north of Jiaotong University, where the commercial high-rises of Xujiahui make way to residential areas that lead into the old French Concession. I still remember this area as populated primarily by local residents who would go about their business along streets like Wukang Road, and even after a Starbucks opened just across from the architecturally impressive 'flat iron' building, and the side-streets became slowly more gentrified, the areas there were generally quite calm. Now, the intersection outside the flat iron is so packed with Chinese tourists, it's hard to get through. Security officers stand at every corner, trying to prevent people from walking into oncoming traffic with their selfie-sticks. What had happened?

Well, a social-media app called RED, or *Xiaohongshu* (小红书), had happened. The app, which combines the kinds of functionalities familiar from Trip Advisor with the networking and photo-curating elements of apps like Instagram, is a huge hit with youthful upwardly mobile middle-classes, who crowdsource their leisure activities and their travels.[14] This has led certain places around China, and around the world, to become 'hotspots' for digital photography, in turn leading to pages upon pages of images like these (Figure 2). If you want to see the flat iron building from every conceivable angle, fret not, *Xiaohongshu* has you covered.



[redacted]
带爸妈 city walk, 他…

“带 n 多人打卡武康大楼，觉得武康大楼超级超级难看，阴森森的，看不出来有啥好看的，对面几个好的拍照点人还超级多。”

[redacted] 02-12 ♡ 7

武康大楼专业业余摄影摄像师大比拼 武康大楼…

[redacted] 5 days ago ♡ 3

上海💗武康大楼 今天好冷哦～网红机位果然很…

[redacted] 2023-05-24 ♡ 696

武康大楼真的很出片啦 那边的摄影师一直跟着…

[redacted] 2023-06-14 ♡ 200

武康大楼 上海武康大楼，建于1924年，已…

[redacted] 2023-05-13 ♡ 135

武康大楼实拍 |yyds! 房屋信息 ◾ 套内建筑…

[redacted] 5 days ago ♡ 49

独享武康大楼的静谧时刻 一直以来，我们看到的…

[redacted] 03-14 ♡ 168

Figure 2: Shanghai’s Wukang Building on social media app *Xiaohongshu*, 2024. Image: screenshot F. Schneider 2024.

Now, I can already hear you ask: how is this different from Instagram? After all, famous sites like the Eiffel Tower or Big Ben have also been Instagrammed past any measure of saturation; people even kill themselves in attempts to take evermore impressive selfies as they dangle off bridges and balance along canyons and waterfalls. There is an entire genre of memes mocking how such Instagrammers are taking themselves out of humanity’s gene-pool. Memes within memes within memes – one can only wonder what Jean Baudrillard or Guy Debord would have thought of such spectacle.[15]

So: no, this is not that different, but then that has been precisely my point. It is, if anything, an example of what happens when social technologies and commercial incentives create status-obsessed attention economies, but scaled and accelerated in China to degrees we only rarely see for instance in Europe.[16] And commercially-driven platforms like *Xiaohongshu* are helping restructure what people do with their smartphone cameras, where they go, where they travel, and what experiences they seek out. As my colleague Carwyn Morris here in Leiden is powerfully showing, they also restructure the very spaces in which we live, turning cities and places into ‘influencers’ (or *wanghong* 网红).[17] In Shanghai, the result is that Wukang Road in the French concession is now effectively Disneyland.

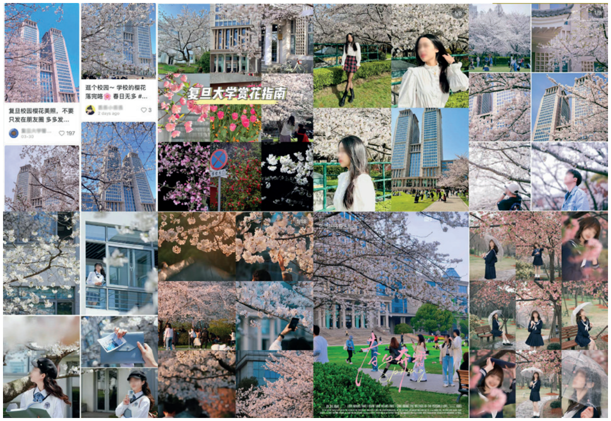
But there is more.

During that trip to Shanghai, I had the pleasure of meeting with some friends and colleagues at Fudan University. I had been warned that university campuses in China had changed significantly since the pandemic, and indeed: getting onto campus was no longer a matter of simply walking through the gates. Instead, I had to cue at a security checkpoint, show my passport, and get registered for my visit. I am told Fudan is actually fairly relaxed in how it handles access to the campus; other universities feature turn-stalls and keycards and facial recognition.

All of this was rolled out as part of the effort to restrict movement during the pandemic, but it has stuck around. Much like with airport security measures after 911, securitization is sticky. Entire economies are attached to things as silly as

100ml plastic bottles and zip-lock bags, and to things less silly, such as facial recognition systems and full-body scanners. And administrators, especially those of a more authoritarian persuasion, have strong incentives to keep control measures in place once they are established, in the service of their own diverse political projects, even if the actual measures started out as mere 'security theatre'.[18]

Knowing all this, I asked my colleagues whether they and their students weren't annoyed by what I assumed was 'mission creep' – the sneaking expansion of an objective past its original mandate. But they weren't. As my colleagues assured me, the university had been *reducing* movement restrictions, but had then been prompted by contentious students to bring them back. Because, as it turns out, Fudan's campus is also a *Xiaohongshu* hotspot (Figure 3). Thousands of people mill through its lush grounds to photograph themselves in front of its iconic buildings. Indeed, while I was there, the uni was so packed with people documenting every aspect of the cherry blossom, it was hard to get through some parts of the campus. And students had been complaining that their school no longer had room for them. I think anyone joining us today from the eminently Instagrammable Amsterdam will know the feeling.



复旦校园樱花美照，不要只发在朋友圈 多多发…

逛个校园~ 学校的樱花落完咯🌸 春日无多 #…

Figure 3: Fudan University on social media app *Xiaohongshu*, 2024. Image: screenshot F. Schneider 2024.

Now, I am emphatically not saying that such measures of control are justified. Neither am I saying that they are driven solely by popular demand, or that authorities then implement restrictions reluctantly. I am sure there are plenty of administrators who are grateful for the excuse to expand their securitization projects. But what is minimally worth noting is how the complex interactions between people, commercial platforms, and public spaces create at times bizarre side-effects, which in turn feed back into processes of legitimation and governance. Whatever we may think of the outcome, it would be too simple to portray China's urban governance, with all its security cameras and facial recognition systems and social credit elements, purely as dystopian attempt by an ostensibly flailing state to desperately cling to power. These are collaborative projects to govern, and make liveable, hypermodern environments.

How the Party Rolls Back an Ambitious App: The Story of 'Study Xi'

I have one final story to tell, and this one is about an app that China's propaganda authorities launched in 2019. The app has the clever Chinese name *Xue Xi Qiang Guo* (学习强国), which can be translated to something like 'study to strengthen the country', but also to 'study *from Xi* and strengthen the country'. The app is meant to provide a one-stop information and media hub for official Chinese politics, and especially for what has become known as 'Xi Jinping Thought', that is: the ideology that the Xi administration has rolled out and tweaked over the past decade, and which – as the app's title already suggests – is meant to make China great again.[19]

Downloading and using the app was initially mandatory for many civil servants; it later became voluntary but highly encouraged and – to some extent – expected within state-owned enterprises, government departments, and party units. In fact, the push to download the app was so high that it became the most downloaded app in China's Apple store during the month of its release.[20]

The app was commissioned by the CCP and designed by a development team from e-commerce giant Alibaba. This is in itself interesting, as it again illustrates the degree to which state and commercial actors collaborate in the digital governance of China. My colleague Rogier Creemers has called this the 'strategic nexus' of China's governance.[21] Collaboration at this strategic nexus certainly explains the app's elegant and effective design: the creators at Alibaba know their choice architectures. On this platform, users can engage with multi-media content such as official news articles and videos, officially-approved 'main melody' entertainment content like TV series, and online quizzes. And a major focus is Xi Jinping Thought. Observers abroad then also came to call the application China's 'little red app', referencing the famous little red book with Mao Zedong quotes that was a staple of the revolutionary era.[22] While catchy, this title is somewhat misleading: the app also has organizational functionalities like chat and online conferencing mechanics, and it features e-learning elements that empower users to acquire new skills. It's a bit like taking Microsoft Teams, mashing it together with Skillshare, adding Youtube videos and Wordle puzzles, and then infusing the whole thing with state reports and party ideology.[23] Maybe we can agree that this is not quite what Mao's little red book did.

Importantly, the app is an example of what has become known as 'gamification'. Gamification means taking the techniques and design elements known from games – especially table-top and digital roleplaying games like Dungeons & Dragons or Final Fantasy – and using them in non-game contexts such as office work or consumption or politics. This usually includes some form of 'experience point' system (XP) that allows players to gain 'levels', but it can also include leaderboards, badges, and more.

Proponents of gamification have high hopes for this approach. Here is game designer Jane McGonigal promoting the design philosophy – I don't normally read out long quotes, but this one is so illustrative of the gamification hype, it's worth quoting in full:

> ...if we take everything game developers have learned about optimizing human experience and organizing collaborative communities and apply it to real life, I foresee games that make us wake up in the morning and feel thrilled to start our day. I foresee games that reduce our stress at work and dramatically increase our career satisfaction. I foresee games that fix our educational systems. I foresee games that treat depression, obesity, anxiety, and attention deficit disorder. I foresee games that help the elderly feel engaged and socially connected. I foresee games that raise rates of democratic participation. I foresee games that tackle global-scale problems like climate change and poverty. In short, I foresee games that augment our most essential human capabilities—to be happy, resilient, creative—and empower us to change the world in meaningful ways.[24]

That is a powerful forecast, and it has been attractive to many who hope to 'optimise' human experiences and organisations.[25] In the US, the department store Target has employees at the checkout counters gain points for processing items efficiently; a practice that cashiers reportedly found quite motivating.[26] Employees at Disneyland were less positive about their system, which had workers in the laundry compete for ranks – they found the system so oppressive, they christened in the 'electric whip'.[27] Meanwhile, gamification has taken many platforms and systems in Asia by storm. Ride-sharing apps like the Indonesian Gojek, video-sharing platforms like China's Bilibili or Japan's Niconico, and e-commerce platforms like Singaporean Lazada and Shopee all entice users with points, levels, badges, and casual games.

In China, Alibaba has certainly taken notice, and it has designed gamified elements into the Study Xi app. There, users collect so-called study points through their activities, which improves their ranking vis-a-vis other users on the app's leaderboards and allows them to earn rewards like tickets to popular attractions or free mobile data. Some organisations also used employee scores in their annual performance assessments or tied them to potential salary deductions in the case of sub-optimal scores. Not too surprisingly, cadres at all levels ended up using the app, for collaborative work, to demonstrate their commitment to party ideology, and to assure positive work assessments.

So how did all of this work, and how did it play out? Much like with the other examples I've given you today, it helps to think of the Study Xi app as a case of socio-technological interactions, so: processes in which people and things interact with each other. People here means the users. It means the authorities who commissioned the platform and who then go on to assess user behaviour. It means the designers at Alibaba, but also the state media workers who create content for the platform. As for the 'things' that act, this certainly includes 'the platform'. I've drawn this up as what the late sociologist Bruno Latour called an 'actor network', a visual representation of people and things that aims to tease apart visually who or what 'acts' on whom.[28] What I am showing you here is a very simple representation (Figure 4); it does not yet have much fidelity and leaves much of the interaction to the imagination. But, using insights from multiple disciplines, like interface and platform studies, political economy, ethnography, and more, we can break apart a few of these actors to complicate matters.

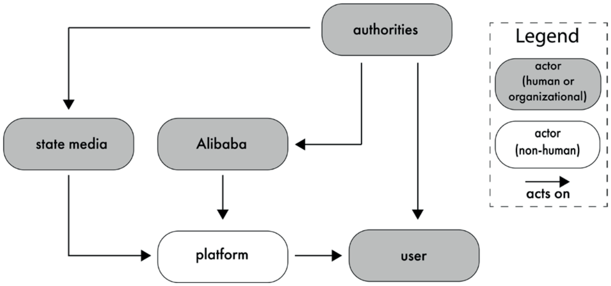


Figure 4: Basic actor network for the Study Xi platform. Image: © F. Schneider 2024.

This next figure expands on what the 'platform' is, how users interact, but also how the authorities act through additional managerial artefacts like work assessments and bonuses (Figure 5). My goal here has been to highlight how an individual user affects their pool of study points, which in turn shapes what happens on the leaderboards of their work unit, which then affects their peers, who then exert pressure (or offer praise) that in turn affects the individual users. We already get a sense here of how pressures are relayed from one actor to another, and how non-human actors get inserted into that chain of interactions.

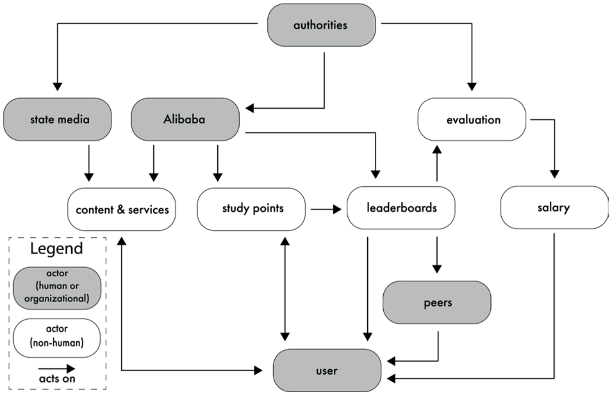


Figure 5: Expanded actor network for the Study Xi platform. Image: © F. Schneider 2024.

Too fully appreciate these chains of interactions, it is useful to move from the actors to processes. To briefly illustrate how processes are interlinked, I'm reappropriating another visualisation technique, this time from the Scandinavian psychologist Erik Hollnagel, who studied how complex processes generate unexpected outcomes.[29] Now, what follows may look intimidating for a moment, but no need to panic: it's not as complicated as it seems, and it is worthwhile.

So, Hollnagel would take a process, let's say 'platform usage', and draw it as a hexagon, like this one here (Figure 6).

Each corner represents an aspect of that process. Like in traditional process-tracing models, the process has an 'input' (here, on the left) and leads to some kind of 'output' on the right. However, Hollnagel points out that processes can be moderated by all sorts of other processes, so his model also considers how an activity might be time sensitive, how it might be subject to certain controls, how it can have preconditions, and how it might require resources. So far so good, but the truly intriguing part of all this is that we can now map how processes link up with one another in interactive chains.[30] In our example, platform usage generates outputs that become the inputs of the scoring calculation, which in turns acts as a control on what users do on the platform.

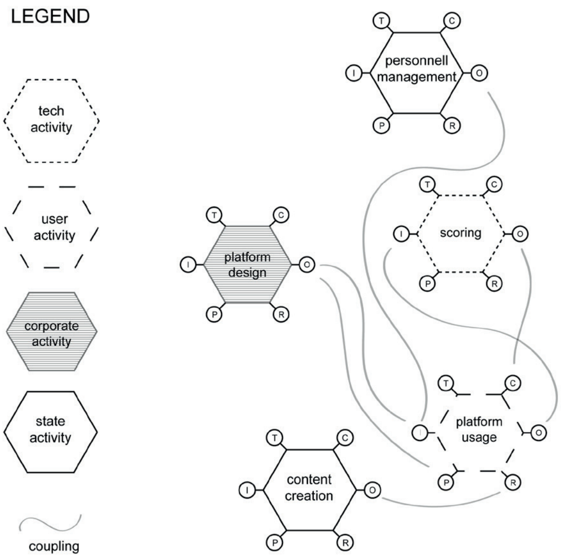

LEGEND
tech activity
user activity
corporate activity
state activity
coupling
personnell management
platform design
scoring
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Figure 6: A simple process model of app usage and scoring on the 'Study Xi' platform. Image: © F. Schneider 2024.

Here, too, we can expand by breaking up processes into further chains of interactions. Here's one such model (Figure 7). I won't bore you will all the details, but do note how we now have a whole string of activities, coupled together through looping streams of outputs and inputs and moderators. I've highlighted several of the links. These are the dynamics of the scoring system and its immediate neighbouring functions, specifically links that double back on themselves. They are couplings that potentially create what scholars of networks and complexity call 'resonance'.

What does that mean? Well, I already mentioned how the scores feed back into user behaviour, which creates new scores, which again affects behaviour, and so on. And this is just one loop. The scores are also evaluated by peers, which creates another control on user behaviour. And then there is the way the party's personnel management serves as an input for user behaviour, but then also uses the scores as a resource to assess cadres. So just between these processes we already have three feedback loops. Each creates dynamics that have their own variance, or 'amplitude', which potentially causes activities downstream to fluctuate in unexpected ways.

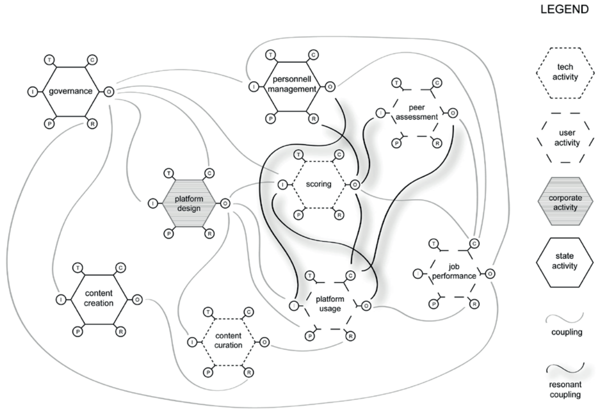
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Figure 7: Loops and resonance in a FRAM model of the 'Study Xi' platform. Image: © F. Schneider 2024.

All of this may look quite conceptual, but it is eminently practical. We then also see in practice how the system came apart. The competitive use of the scoring and leaderboard mechanics, as well as its utility to personnel managers, caused the system to create unintended side-effects, or 'externalities'.

It did not take long for users to figure out what would generate the highest scores. And so they started gaming the system.[31] Reportedly, many then simply had the app's video contents running in the background to improve their rankings. Others hired people to do the quizzes for them. And aside from the people who headed their respective leaderboards, many started to feel alienated because of the combination of seemingly arbitrary reward mechanisms and the extrinsic pressures the system put on them. The result was poorer rather than better job performance.[32]

Much like with the example of digital nationalism and the selfie-obsessed tourists, we have here a system of nudges that has gone haywire. The complex processes and their looping connections generate what scholars of complexity call 'emergent properties': outcomes that are more than the mere sum of their parts.[33] These are unintended consequences, in this case of what happens when human behaviours are governed by complex, interlocking social and technical systems.

The authorities must not have been pleased by the outcomes the system generated. After only a few months, the rules for the platform changed. Scores were no longer visible to peers, removing the peer reviewing function from the picture. Likewise, the scores were no longer used in personnel management, and use of the platform became voluntary. It is a bit as if the authorities had identified the three loops I showed earlier and had then plucked those functions out of the system. Users then also reported changing their behaviour: scholars who have interviewed and observed such users found that they started becoming more interested in the content.[34] Many also used the learning activities to improve various skills – an activity from which the scoring system and the priorities of work assessments had pushed them away.

We are then seeing the authorities in China live up to their reputation as highly adaptive managers who tweak governance processes on the fly, to adjust them to the ever-evolving and highly feedback-prone processes of bureaucratic politics. Contrary to common understandings of party politics, not everything the party does is about staying in power or legitimating itself. Much is about managing a complex bureaucracy. To this end, the party has expanded its own Leninist governance toolbox to include techniques from modern management theory. That includes gamification, as in this example, but it also includes the realisation and active embrace of the fact that power, in contemporary governance, means being a choice architect: someone who creates the incentive structures within which others act, guiding those actions towards preferred outcomes. And much of that process relies on non-human elements.

Again, I am not claiming that CCP cadres have read the book 'Nudge'[35], or that they use the language of behavioural economics, but I do think that their journey through diverse governance ideas and experiments has led them to broadly similar conclusions. This is why concepts like 'soft power' (*ruanshili*软实力) or 'social governance' (*shehui zhili*社会治理) are so popular in PRC politics.[36] If you can pre-structure someone's socio-technical environment, you can entice them to behave in certain ways rather than having to force them. That, in turn, saves a great deal of potential effort, time, and money.

Conclusion: What Is at Stake in the Study of Digital China and Digital Asia

What can we learn from the way that complex digital systems have become integrated into Chinese culture, society, and politics? I have a couple of take-aways for you, all of which hark back to the idea that we should think of China as 'global'. And I want to conclude with a call to action.

The first take-away is a reminder of what science-and-technology scholars have been pointing out for decades, but which has not always properly sunk in, in popular discussions of digital tech: that technology, while neither inherently good or bad, is never truly 'neutral'.[37] It is built on beliefs and assumptions, it reproduces ideologies, and it serves specific interests. It is designed to afford particular uses, and that makes it political.

The second take-away is that technology is entangled with wider political economies, and that means: with near-global capitalism, often in its neoliberal form. This is also true in China, even if that may seem like a contradiction. The party is an ardent critic of neoliberalism and certainly no proponent of free markets and small government. In practice, however, the party's journey along the road to socialism leads through media and technology ecosystems that merge Leninist and capitalist principles. The neoliberal (some might say: libertarian) idea that complex societies should be managed indirectly through systems of carefully design incentive structures is then already firmly integrated into the PRC's constantly evolving governance strategy. The result is an almost religious faith in the power of socio-technical systems that eerily resembles the arguments of American industrialists like Ford or Taylor. Here is what the efficiency-obsessed Taylor, the father of the infamous 'Taylorism', had to say about systems:

> In the past, the man [sic] was first. In the future, the system must be first. (…) the first object of any good system must be that of developing first-class men [sic].[38]

This could just as well be a description of what the CCP has in mind when it speaks of cultivating a spiritual civilization.

But there is a third take-away, and that is that complexity breeds radical uncertainty.[39] And that uncertainty is not a fluke. It is not a bug in the system, it is a feature. In contrast to what technocrats in China or elsewhere might think, the elements of complex systems are not easily 'nudged' in strategic directions. Too many different actors are doing the nudging. And many of those actors are today non-human. As scholars of automated systems have pointed out, we need to be mindful of the power of the loop. And we need to ask: are humans still 'in the loop', or at least 'on' the loop, meaning that algorithms are still subject to human oversight, or are parts of our society already outsourced to systems that no-one, including the designers, properly understands?[40] If that is the case, our societies risk suffering from severe algorithmic biases and signalling problems,[41] for instance when automated systems are charged with hiring and firing people based on the dubious outcomes of shoddy big-data analytics – this is not a hypothetical worry; the number of Fortune 500 companies that today use algorithms in HR is already a rounding error from 100%.[42]

There is then much to learn from China. From the way various actors are trying to tweak and calibrate their highly complex, looping socio-technical systems. Studying these processes is not limited to China: we must ask what developments outside the much-trodden paths of Silicon Valley can teach us about digitality, for instance as automated systems get expanded to offer elderly care in Japan, as the gig-economy transforms South Korea, as smart-city projects take off in India. All of this is a multi-area, multi-disciplinary endeavour. It is an endeavour that requires detail-oriented policy analysis as well as wide-reaching political economy research. It requires the insights of anthropologists and psychologists as we tease apart what people do with tech, and what tech does with people. It requires software engineers and computer scientists who can explore the inner workings of algorithmic politics. And it requires media and communications scholarship that unpacks how people create meanings around their rapidly changing digital worlds.

We already have much of the expertise in Leiden for pursuing such projects, and certainly once we consider our wide-ranging networks of research allies, for instance those embodied in the Leiden Asia Centre or the journal I run for Brill: *Asiascape: Digital Asia*. And the next generation of students is learning how to come to grips with digital politics in our dedicated courses on digitality, including our minors on disinformation or game studies. As educators, we have a responsibility to prepare the next generation for the scholarly and practical challenges ahead. Which is precisely why I have a textbook in the works that aims to empower students to conduct their own media and political communications research.[43] This is some of the artwork I have commissioned for that project, curtesy of the Vietnamese manga artist Lan Vu. It is no accident that I propose a playful, 'gamified' way for teaching these topics – not to indoctrinate students into gamified systems, but to hone their skills to recognise the architectures other have designed for them, but without them.

There is much at stake, especially as advanced machine-learning approaches become integrated into existing technocratic systems under the unfortunately hyped but largely misrepresented concept of 'artificial intelligence'.[44] While science-fiction-obsessed public discussions either cheer for the supposedly immanent 'singularity' or fret over the attack of the machines,[45] powerful corporate and political actors are investing unthinkable amounts of resources to quietly restructure our lifeworlds: how we work, how we learn, how we date, how we deal with – or fail to deal with – the climate catastrophe. To those ends, they vacuum up data and steal intellectual property. AI is already one of the largest efforts at wealth redistribution ever conceived – a wealth redistribution that works in the wrong direction: from precarious workers and vulnerable creators upwards to billionaire shareholders.

No single research project can piece together all of the moving pieces that make up these rapidly evolving processes. But we can each chip away at the big questions: what do our digital systems do? How do they work? How do they link up with systems of power? Who benefits, who is 'switched off'? Who, if anyone, is still in the loop? And: what should we do about all this?

These are not arcane issues but rather the foundational questions that lie at the heart of the human condition today. I feel honoured to be given the privilege of pursuing those questions here in Leiden, with so many talented and wonderful colleagues, and I hope that many more will join us in our explorations of digital China, of digital Asia, and of the digital politics that today make up our world.

Thank you.

Ik heb gezegt.

Notes

1. I have covered Han's take on Haibao in detail in Schneider (2019, 37-41).
2. See Bremner (2022) for an account of this episode. Li (2023) and Zhang & Shi (2024) have analysed the complex identity politics surrounding Eileen Gu in detail.
3. This study of the Zhanguo Ce (战国策) is only available in German (Schneider 2005).
4. Schneider (2012).
5. Schneider (2019).
6. Schneider (2018).
7. Qiu (2003: 1).
8. Franceschini & Loubere (2022).
9. For a journalistic account of this incident, see Buckley & Ramzy (2016). Li (2018) discusses the incident in a scholarly context.
10. The quote and the assessment of the election result are from BBC (2016).
11. See Huang (2023) for a study of such misogynist online vigilantism.
12. Chen Weiss (2013).
13. Thaler & Sunstein (2020).
14. For in-depth studies of the app and of what users do with it, see Fan & Zhang (2023), Guo (2022), Ju (2022), Wang et al. (2022), and Zhong & Wu (2023). And for an example of how the app is specifically recommended as a data-gathering tool for urban planning, see Wang (2023).
15. I have in mind here Baudrillard's (1983) discussion of the simulacrum and Debord's (1967/2010) influential work on spectacles.
16. For an unapologetic primer on how to capitalise on the attention economy, see Davenport & Beck (2001). Shen et al. (2023) explore the attention economy of the app Xiaohongshu.
17. Morris discusses this new 'Wanghong Urbanism' with his colleagues in Zhang et al. (2022).
18. A seminal author on these issues is Bruce Schneier (2003).
19. For a full account of Xi Jinping Thought, see Tsang & Cheung (2024).
20. For accounts of the app's roll-out, see Sun (2019) and Keane & Su (2019).
21. Creemers (2018).
22. For an example see Zhong (2019).
23. For a detailed analysis of the app's functionalities and its interface features, see Liang et al. (2021).
24. McGonigal (2011).
25. For thorough critiques of the practice, see Bogost (2011) and Woodcock & Johnson (2018).
26. Zicherman & Linder (2013).
27. Lopez (2011).
28. Latour (2005).
29. Hollnagel (2012).
30. For a micro-sociology of such chained interactions, see Collins (2004).
31. For an account, see Spence (2019).
32. For a full study, based on interviews with users, see Lu & Xu (2020).
33. Mitchell (2009) provides a useful introduction. I myself have explored how nationalism 'emerges' from complex networked interactions between people and tech (Schneider 2022).
34. See Lu & Xu (2020).
35. Thaler & Sunstein (2020).
36. Specifically on soft power discourses in China, see the contributions in Li (2009).
37. Kranzberg (1995).
38. Taylor (1919: 7).
39. On radical uncertainty, see Kay & King (2020).
40. The idea of humans in the loop, on the loop, and out of the loop comes from Docherty (2012) and is further developed by Rob Kitchin (in Ash et al. 2018). I would like to thank Carwyn Morris for pointing me to this literature.
41. Christian (2020).
42. Schellmann (2023).

43. Schneider (forthcoming).
44. As Kate Crawford (2021) rightly points out, artificial intelligence is neither ‘artificial’ nor particularly ‘intelligent’.
45. See Mitchell (2019) on the hype and doom scenarios surrounding AI, as well as a reality check.

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