

Digital control in China and new possibilities for agency: an analytical and methodological approach

Friday, October 18, 2024

IFRAE, salon de Sacy

As access to the Chinese field has become much more restricted, the Internet is now the privileged place for observing the political balance of power between state and society, and among social actors. This requires new skills from researchers. This workshop will have two objectives. On the one hand, it will take stoke of the characteristics of AI and internet control in China over the past few years while showing that the new forms of Internet regulation imposed by the Chinese government, far from establishing total control, offer new possibilities of resistance to social actors (morning session). On the other hand, it will introduce new OSINT (Open Source Intelligence) research methods making it possible to collect and scientifically exploit the data available online (afternoon session).

This workshop for doctoral students, master's students and researchers has received the support of Inalco Doctoral School, l'Institut Français de Recherche sur l'Asie de l'Est (IFRAE), and D2IA (Universities of Bordeaux-Montaigne and La Rochelle). It is offered as part of the IFRAE project Power, Counter-power, Influence coordinated by Guibourg Delamotte and Chloé Froissart, and Chloé Froissart's master's seminar Politics in Contemporary China, actors and institutions.



9:00 - 9:15 : Workshop introduction, Chloé Froissart

9:15 - 10:00: Kai Von Carnap, (independent researcher, former analyst at Merics),
Cyber sovereignty in China: the Internet as an enabler and a challenger

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The drive of the Xi administration to reform internet governance in China has brought a lot of changes regarding the accessibility of digital information and data. This has led to new dialectics and even contradictions that offer exciting new research questions. For example, the party state enforces more transparency in some parts of China's internet while increasing securitisation in other parts; 'Big Tech' internet companies are declared as important growth drivers for the Chinese economy, yet their business models are being heavily regulated and their autonomy truncated. In this session, I will first delve into the contemporary theory of internet control and censorship in China and explore concepts such as *preventive repression*, the *authoritarian's dilemma*, and the *chilling effect*. In addition, I will discuss common strategies by civil society actors to adapt, engage, or counter the control and censorship apparatus.

10:00-10:45: Christian Goebel (University of Vienna), *The Paradox of Control: How state dominance on Weibo facilitates online dissent*

The 2022 Ürümqi fire ignited an unprecedented outpouring of dissent on the heavily monitored Sina Weibo platform. Amidst strict digital control in China, this talk explores the counterintuitive rise of such a widespread critical discourse. Based on a collection of 274,721 Weibo entries, it highlights the "paradox of control": while the state aims to dominate online narratives via influential media accounts, these very channels inadvertently facilitate the amplification of dissent. Netizens strategically engage with and co-opt official content, initiating rapid "information cascades" that outpace censors. This highlights a dilemma: in attempting to exert comprehensive digital control, the state inadvertently creates avenues for unexpected and amplified public responses. The talk sheds light on the nuanced interplay between centralised control and emergent digital dissent in a constrained cyberspace.

10:45-11h15: coffee break

11:15-11:45: Chloé Froissart (Inalco) and Huang Ke (Paris-Cité), *Recreating a social media-based network society: the resistance of Chinese couriers and the regulation of platform capitalism*

Platform capitalism is a new global phenomenon. What are the features of the labour regime created by Chinese food delivery platforms and the characteristics of couriers' resistance under this regime? While the power asymmetry between platforms and couriers creates a new form of capitalist exploitation that results in discontent, the multiple outsourcing control system adopted by Chinese platforms has resulted in the extreme atomisation of delivery workers. Despite increased social control and online censorship, social media remains a space for tactical innovations allowing couriers to overcome atomisation and defend their rights. This presentation will investigate how couriers use the Internet to act collectively, recreate a collective and appeal to the public of consumers to build broader solidarity in an attempt to change the power asymmetry with the platform. We argue that although courier protests do not bring about changes in national law, they may change company rules.

11:45-12:15: Rémi Castets (University of Bordeaux-Montaigne), *Identify, sort, reeducate/sanction: the algorithms of the IJOP platform as a means of integrating digital and human monitoring in Xinjiang*

Following the Urumchi inter-ethnic riots in 2009, Xinjiang saw an upsurge in tensions and acts of defiance and even violence. As these peaked in 2013-2014, Xi Jinping declared a war aimed at eradicating the three forces - in other words, any expression of Turkish-speaking Muslim anti-colonialism. Since then, a merciless battle has been waged against any form of defiance of the Party's doxa and, more broadly, against any form of alternative thought, whether in the social sphere or in digital or family intimacy. This policy of coercive homogenization of representations is based on algorithms assessing the degree of loyalty of citizens. It is fed by a complex surveillance system combining advanced digital devices and "more classic" ones. We will attempt to see how these often highly intrusive devices are integrated, making Xinjiang a laboratory for experimentation, particularly in the field of algorithmic surveillance for a Chinese state whose ambition is to combine the mobilization of its



relays and a vast range of technologies to achieve an increasingly advanced degree of control over the representations of its population.

14:00-18:00: Methodological workshop on OSINT.

14:00-14:45: Kai von Carnap will present three common types of OSINT tools that have been very useful in his work: the key search engines to yield Chinese language sources, online-archiving platforms, and web-scrapers. He will show how researchers, even without a technical background or computer science education, can build web scrapers to collect online sources through automated and scalable methods that provide aggregated database for further research.

14:45-15:30: Christian Goebel will provide insights into how researchers can study state-society relations using open-source data from government websites and social media, including key websites relevant to studying citizens' grievances, government-citizen interactions, as well as policy updates. He will then present case studies that demonstrate how to analyze and interpret data from these sources using a variety of research techniques, including computational methods and close reading. Finally, he will explore the challenges and limitations inherent in using open-source data, particularly in the context of China where censorship is prevalent.

15:30-16:00: Huang Ke: *Studying delivery workers' interactions on Wechat and Douyin: contributions, challenges and limitations in capturing social (vs online) dynamics*. Based on the research he conducted for his PhD, Huang Ke will explain how to conduct online ethnography to document delivery workers' interactions on the two main social media platforms they use. He will also present the challenges he faced and how he tried to overcome them. Finally, he will discuss some bias and limits of online methods and how it can be complemented by interviews and in-site ethnographic observation.

16:00-16:30: Coffee break

16:30- 17:15: Remi Castets will review the contributions of an integrated information-gathering methodology that combines scientific and activist literature, work on leaks made available to the scientific community, new technological tools and the prospects opened up by the emergence in France of platforms for harvesting the net and making new sets of data available. Given the importance of cross-checking these data with the testimonies of the populations concerned, we will propose an exchange on the means of conducting remote ethnographic fieldwork.

17:15-18:00: Wai Yip Ho, Trinity Western University, British Columbia, will analyse the emergence and closure of the Chinese language Muslim websites. Adopting Gary R. Bunt's umbrella notion of 'Cyber-Islamic Environments' (CIEs), which refers to the wide variety of online activities, ranging from official statements from state-approved Islamic clerics to creative works of young Chinese-speaking Muslim netizens, this presentation attempts to make sense of the social world of Chinese CIEs and review some recent studies on the rise of Islamophobia.

Bios:

Kai von Carnap is an independent researcher based in Brussels, focusing on digital sovereignty, global internet governance, and the interactions between digital technologies and state power. He is also an Associate Fellow at the Center for Geopolitics, Geo-economics, and Technology of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP). In this role, von Carnap conducts research and publishes on the nexus between private actors and state-directed technology development in China. He is also active as a BLOCS Lab Fellow at the U.S. based Aletheia Research Institution. Previously, von Carnap worked as a research associate at the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) in Berlin, where he led several research projects focusing on internet fragmentation, among other topics.

Christian Göbel is Chair Professor of the Politics of Contemporary China at the University of Vienna, Austria. His current research is concerned with understanding how citizens use the Internet to assert demands and occasionally oppose the party-state. He leads the work package on China's domestic politics in the Horizon2020 project ReConnect China, and has been awarded an ERC Starting Grant for the research project "The Microfoundations of Authoritarian Responsiveness", which investigated the intended and unintended



consequences of enhanced e-participation in China. By leveraging advanced data analytics and machine learning techniques, his work provides insights into the relationship between state control, digital technology and popular protest.

Chloe Froissart is Professor of Political science at the department of Chinese studies, Inalco, a researcher at IFRAE and an associate researcher at the French Center for Research on Contemporary China, Hong Kong. Specializing in State-society relations, her research interests include state control and governance, the trajectory of the Chinese regime, authoritarian citizenship, popular protests and forms of resistance, which she namely investigates in the field of labor.

Huang Ke is a teaching assistant (ATER) at the University of Paris-Cité. He obtained a joint-PhD in sociology entitled Sociology of the Meituan delivery platform and its couriers. Redeployment of Chinese capitalism, actors and regulation from Paris-Cité and Inalco (IFRAE) in 2024.

Rémi Castets is Assistant Professor of Political science at the Department of Chinese studies, Bordeaux Montaigne University and codirector of D2IA (Bordeaux Montaigne University, La Rochelle University). Mobilizing the analytical frameworks of political science, cultural anthropology and fields related to psychology, his research focuses in particular on ideological representations, anticolonial opposition, political islam, State control over turkic muslim minorities, the ecosystem of surveillance and state control in today's China.

Wai-Yip Ho is currently the Sessional Associate Professor of Sociology at Trinity Western University in British Columbia, Canada. His publications include an edited volume Islam [Religious Studies in Contemporary China Collection] (Brill, 2017) and a monograph Islam and China's Hong Kong: Ethnic Identity, Muslim Network and New Silk Road. (Routledge, 2013).

