Social Media in China
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This text describes the development of the Internet and the social media in China.

1 History of the Chinese Internet

In order to understand the development and relevance of social media platforms in China, it is useful to have a look at the development of the Chinese Internet as a whole.

The history of the Internet in China can be divided into 4 phases:

The first phase was between 1986 until 1992, when Internet applications were limited to the use of emails among a handful of computer research labs in China. The first use of Internet in China was made in September 1987, when the first email was exchanged between a team of researchers at the Beijing Institute of Technology) and Karlsruhe University in Germany. On April 20 1994 a pilot network to serve education and scientific research was linked to the Internet via the 64K special line in Beijing’s Zhongguancun district. This full-function connection marked China’s formal access to the Internet.

The second phase was between 1992 and 1995, the Chinese government proposed several large-scale network projects and built up a national information network infrastructure.

The third phase was between 1995 and 1997. The Chinese government stepped up its effort in building the information network infrastructure, hoping that the IT industry would yield significant benefits to the Chinese nation’s economy. Meanwhile, the government started to implement a variety of technological and policy control mechanisms to regulate the safe of the information on the Internet.

The fourth phase started 1998 and continues to the present, during which time the Internet has become a powerful medium in the Chinese society. The main drivers of this expansion are affordable broadband Internet; a generation of digital natives without siblings; separation of families (rural/city; China/overseas); control and censorship of print media and TV.

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In its report on Internet development in 2010, CNNIC characterizes the recent developments as follows: “Since 2010, network media has tended to be popular in the social spreading; the advantages of Internet applications such as micro-blog has appeared to be obvious and attracted all kinds of social groups to get involved; the penetration of Internet towards circles of society has been speeded. Meanwhile, after the international financial crisis, traditional enterprises have paid more attention to network marketing, speeded the pace of Internet utilization for sales, negotiation and cooperation, gradually intensified the Internet applications of enterprises and raised the constantly increased demand on the Internet. […] The policy speeds up the step for applications of other relevant technologies. In January 2009, the government issued 3G license for mobile communication of the third generation. At present, 3G network has basically covered the whole nation and the mobile Internet has taken on a trend of flourish development. In January 2010, the State Council decided to speed up the integration of telecommunications networks, cable TV networks and the Internet. With the determination of such integration methods and pilot cities, it will be helpful to the popularization of rural Internet in the future. The issuing of relevant policies has quicken the application pace of new technologies in China, gradually lowered the threshold for using Internet and promote the Internet to penetrate towards different groups.4

According to CNNIC, by the end of 2011, the Chinese Internet counts 513 million users (56 millions more than by the end of 2010). 136 million users are living in rural areas. The overall Internet penetration is

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38.3%. (In Beijing more than 70% of the inhabitants have access to the Internet, in the poorest province of China, in Guizhou, only 24.2 percent). 69.3% of the users are accessing the Internet via mobile devices, which is particularly true of people living in the rural areas where access to the Internet is much easier via mobile devices. Half of the users are registered on a micro-blogging platform, which means that a quarter of all social network users in the world are Chinese. Users spend an average of 18.7 hours on-line per week. The percentage of users that use the Internet for news decreased from 77.2% to 71.5%. There are now 194 million on-line shoppers in China. There are now 407 million search engine users in China.

2 Chinese Social Media

Source: Social Media Landscape 2012, CIC

While the major Western social media platforms are blocked in China (Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, vimeo, Google Docs – most of them shut down in July 2009, the 20th anniversary of the Tian'anmen massacre), a vibrant domestic landscape of similar platforms has emerged.

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The social media scene in China in many ways resembles the one of other countries, but it also has its unique features, due to Chinese culture and the characteristics of the Chinese society. On one hand, this landscape provides the Chinese user with a much greater variety and choice of platforms (see the diagram „Social Media Landscape“ above), geared to specific user groups and needs. On the other hand, the choice of the right platform (or platforms) is crucial for the success of the presence of institutions and companies.

Chinese social media, and especially micro-blogging platforms, are sometimes seen as a force fostering gradual transformation of the society\(^7\) or as a democratizing force.

**Some Characteristics of the Social Media usage in China**

There are only few accessible studies of the usage of social media services in China, and reliable empirical material is still difficult to obtain, and some findings seem to contradict each other.

Nevertheless, there seem to be some differences in the behavior between Western and Chinese users which at least partly can be explained by the fact that China is a „high-context culture“. “A high context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. Twins who have grown up together can and do communicate more economically (HC) than two lawyers in a courtroom during a trial (LC), a mathematician programming a computer, two politicians drafting legislation, two administrators writing a regulation [...] As a result, for the most normal transactions in daily life they do not require, nor do they expect, much in-depth background information. This is because it is their nature to keep themselves informed about everything having to do with people who important in their lives. Low-context people include the Americans and the Germans, Swiss, Scandinavians, and other northern Europeans.”\(^8\).

The engagement of Chinese users is higher, and users are ready to create and share content (40% of the users are contributing content, compared to 20% in US), and a unique (linguistic) culture is being created on the Internet.\(^9\) Chinese tend to live much more in the Internet then Westerners, perceiving their on-line life as more real than the real life, as Li Shanyou, the CEO of ku6.com (one of the leading Internet television companies) puts it: “For Westerners, the Internet is a library, it is for information retrieval. For Chinese, the Internet is a playground, it is for communication. For Westerners, the Internet is about a better life. For Chinese, the Internet is for escaping life - it stands for freedom.” Chinese, they „play games, store files, win...

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\(^8\) http://www.internationalforum.com/Articles/hidden_differences%20by%20Hall.htm.

badges, socialize with friends, and sell stuff through using SNS. They manage to use SNS to fulfill their multiple demands, even move all of their life and relationship from the offline to the on-line platform.*10

Credit Suisse China has conducted a survey on social media usage in 2011 and finds: (1) the average active SNS accounts for each user per day is 4.18 in China, as SNS users need different SNS to connect with different friend circles and gather more information; (2) 26% of the users prefer registering SNS with real names, whereas 45% opt for pseudonyms; and (3) SNS users on average share content 2.12 times. But, 50.4% of the respondents have not shared any information and content in the past month ... The age group above 55 has shared content 5.8 times in the last month. ... 51% have not shared any information and content." A “Survey on Situation of Chinese College Students Choosing To Use Social Networking”11 shows that “students preferred to unilaterally ‘enjoy’ social networking services, but not want to take the initiative to create, participate, construct and share.” The main usage is entertainment, making friends and multimedia leisure.

Research on the cultivation of relationships between companies and users show, that in such a culture, the public “is very much relying on extended social networks for emotional exchange, and they value trust and the relationship with the company more than explicit product information”12, and Chinese companies are in engaging in conversations that were not product related, behaving like a friend, which means that there is more product-related educational information, entertainment stuff or information not related at all to the product (greetings, jokes, general interest stories etc). Chinese companies ‘respond to users’ posts more frequently than American companies”. Complaints and criticism seem to be relatively infrequent, “reflecting a cultural emphasis on group harmony”. 13

**Different Types of Social Media popular in China**

Blogging Platforms
personal journalism: wordpress.com, blogger.com, posterous.com / blog.sina.com.cn, blog.sohu.com, hi.baidu.com

The era of blogging in China started in 2005, by the end of 2011, there were more than 300 millions users blogging, with a level of usage of 62.1% (CNNIC).

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
swissnex China
Bloggers come from various areas, hierarchies, social status (e.g., celebrities, students, writers, critics, researchers, business, average user). Some blogs have a huge fan-base and can have enormous impact on the discussions on social developments. A recent example is famous young writer’s Han Han who in December 2011 published three articles on democracy, freedom and revolution on his blog (http://blog.sina.com.cn/twocold) which were widely discussed in mainstream media and by academics.

BBS - Bulletin Board System
Interest groups: fido.net, web rings / mop.com, bbs.sina.com.cn, tianya.cn, bbs.qq.com, club.sohu.com

The first BBS (Shugang BBS at the National Research Center for intelligent computing) was created in 1994. BBS are mainly interest groups, where users try to find solutions to problems, share information (esp. about products), and share life experiences.

“BBS sites and others make comments, with which BBS users share and exchange their thoughts. A BBS provides a space for public discussion or chatting, while the Blog works more as a personal publisher.” … “The BBS is a highly dense virtual community that could contain thousands of discussion boards (also called sub-forums). Users usually do not stick to one particular board but surf around to many popular sub-forums.”

Social Networks
Friends, family: Facebook, LinkedIn / kaixin001.com, renren.com; douban.com

Social networks are characterized by a two-way relationship between users, based on a mutual agreement on friendship and communication; whereas microblogs represent one-way relationships where one follows a person who does not follow you back.

RenRen (launched 2005) has started as a social networking platform for university students. Although it is now open to the public, the users are mainly university students. 137 million users by the end of 2011.

Kaixin (launched 2008), open to the general public, targeting urban young people. It allows to upload photos, write blogs and integrates apps. 116 million users by the end of 2011.

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Douban.com

Douban (launched in 2005) is a social network dedicated to cultural topics, which has attracted some of the top Chinese intellectuals, geeks, and urban hipsters. It has a focus on critiques for books, music and films, interest groups, a radio station, a virtual city, an ebook reader and starting March 2012 an on-line bookshop for user generated content. Organizers and institutions in the cultural field use douban to announce their events via its platform. In November 2011, Douban had 46,850,000 users (Alexa, global ranking: 119).

Micro-blogging Services
news channels, friends: Twitter / weibo.com, digu.com, t.sohu.com, t.qq.com

One of the most powerful social media format is “Weibo”. Weibo is the Chinese term for “micro-blogging”. Users can share 140 Chinese characters in one weibo, which due to the characteristics of the Chinese language can transport much more information than can 140 characters in a Western language (140 characters in Chinese are roughly 500 letters in English or 650 in German). It is for example perfectly possible to conduct “Weibo interviews” or to engage in a more profound conversation than on Twitter. Sina Weibo for example has a special column - “Weibo Interviews” (http://talk.weibo.com) -, started in 2010, where personalities from fields ranking from sports to literature are invited to engage in an interview with the users. Via a special form, institutions and users can apply to conduct an interview.
(http://talk.weibo.com/open/apply_talk). An archive of such interviews is accessible as well. A similar functionality is available on Tencent Weibo.

The history of micro-blogging can be traced back to May 2007, when the site Fanfou.com (“have you already eaten?”) was founded by Wang Xing (he was the first to use the term “weibo”), as a copy of Twitter. Other platforms were Jiwai.de, Zuosa.com and Tencent's Tao Tao. Fanfou.com, Jiwai.de and Digu.com were closed in July 2009 (most probably due to their role in spreading information about riots in Xinjiang in the Northwest of China). While Fanfou.com was closed, the microblogging service of Sina Corp. (the leading on-line media company in China, see below) filled the void, being able to capture the well-educated urban audience and celebrities (as well as the domain "weibo.com"), with Tencent as its rival. There are a dozen of Weibo providers, with Sina Weibo (www.weibo.com) as the leader, with roughly 250 millions registered user as by the end of 2011. Fanfou.com reopened on November 11, 2011, but is no longer a key player in the field.

Currently the microblogging market is divided between roughly 20 established players. Since late 2009, micro-blog sites have seen explosive growth in China in terms of total users, unique visitors and effective access time, and they have been taking share against traditional on-line networking products such as blog sites, forum/BBS (e.g. mop.com and Tianya.cn), SNS sites (e.g. Renren.com and Kaixin001.com).

The earthquake in Sichuan in 2008 is believed to be the year when micro-blogging gained social impact, as millions of user used this format to get information about what was happening. Another milestone was the high-speed train accident in 2011: The news about the incident first spread on Sina Weibo (and not on the state-owned news agency!). The handling of the accident by the government caused a huge upstir amongst the Chinese Internet users putting pressure on the government.

These and uncounted “social incidents” which cannot longer be hidden to the bigger public thanks to Weibo platforms, forced the government to use micro-blogging itself: a lot of individual politicians, city governments and other official institutions etc have their own Weibo accounts, engaging in a dialogue with the citizens, knowing that the power of Weibo platforms cannot be stopped. Some 50,000 government agencies, Communist party departments and individual officials have even opened their own accounts, according to the Chinese Academy of Governance. But the government tries to regulate the use of Weibo through new regulations like real-name registration, fighting against rumors and enhancing a more “responsible” attitude (see below). The major micro-blogging providers have so far managed to handle the tension between allowing users to express their opinions on-line while complying with the rules of the Government by implementing mechanisms to fight rumors, by deleting posts containing sensitive words, by self-censorship mechanisms.

Sina Weibo (launched 2009)

Sina Weibo is the micro-blogging platform of Sina Corp., the leading on-line media company in China, providing content through www.sina.com, mobile content through Sina Mobile, and social networking through Sina Weibo.

Sina Weibo is the most popular and most influential micro-blogging platform, launched after the first Chinese micro-blogging service, Fanfou, as well as Twitter have been shut down by the government (though Tencent Weibo has double as much users).

Screenshot: comment function on Sina Weibo

Sina Weibo has managed to engage some of the most famous stars from film to sports, as well as intellectuals, and breaking news (for example the high speed train accident in 2011) have been first published on Sina Weibo. It is an individual on-line broadcasting station where users can produce and redistribute content, follow celebrities and friends, and express their opinion. Sina Weibo is a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook: On Twitter users can post tweets consisting of text and links, Sina Weibo users can post messages containing text, pictures, videos, voice, music and links, forming and posting to groups, and by providing a „comment“ function, it is possible to follow the hierarchical development of a conversation around a topic. Sina Weibo has developed a gaming platform Wei-Game in July 2011, and is testing a
virtual currency payment system. In June 2011, Enterprise Weibo has been launched, allowing companies to advertise their products and services to their followers. Sina Weibo has developed mobile applications for iPhone / iPad, Android, Blackberry. Sina Weibo has 25 million daily active users, and each day, 25 million messages are sent (compared to Twitter: 910,000 visits / month.).

Chinese users use Sina Weibo to keep in touch with close friends as well as to handle their more general social life, following celebrities, media etc. In contrast to Twitter, trend-setters on Sina Weibo are not media organizations, but „unverified accounts acting as discussion forums and a platform for users to share funny pictures, jokes, and stories. This represents an important contrast in the use of these media, with Chinese users being more inclined to share and propagate trivial content than the Twitter users." It will be interesting to see if the newly implemented real-name registration system allowing only verified accounts to actively use a micro-blogging platform will change these usage patterns.

In contrast to Tencent Weibo, Sina Weibo is more popular with well-educated Chinese in the first tier cities (Beijing, Shanghai; Guangzhou, Shenzhen) and white-collar workers. Sina micro-blog is ranked in the top three in all three younger age groups, i.e. under 18, 18-25 and 26-35, but has a relatively lower penetration among older groups (except for a dominant market share in the age group above 55). Regarding educational background, Sina micro-blog is among the top-three players in the “high school”, “university” and “master” categories, and is relatively evenly distributed among all categories compared with other players. The university category, except for masters and PhD categories, is the most competitive segment as the gap among the top-four players is narrow.

Tencent Weibo (launched 2009)

Tencent Weibo is the biggest micro-blogging service in China, with 310 million Users (we are social) and 50 million daily active users. But despite the impressive figures, Tencent Weibo did not manage to become socially influential, as it could not attract (as Sina Weibo did) celebrities, big brands and the intellectual elite.

This landscape of the Chinese social media ecosystem shows that China is leading the international social media scene in several ways: in user numbers (a quarter of all social media worldwide are Chinese), in diversity (no other country has a equally diversified social media scene), offering the possibility of choice to the user, and in societal impact: Social media in China are a strong force driving social change.

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3 Internet Censorship – The Great Firewall of China

In 2003, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security started the “Golden Shield project”, completed in 2008. It attempts to prevent the sharing of information which could threaten the national security of the country (disclosure of state secrets, incitement to subversion, damage the reputation of the government, etc.).

Censoring the Internet is done on different levels the government blocks website and monitors the use of the individual user using cutting-edge filtering algorithms and software that detects “sensitive words”; the fact that Chinese Internet users know that they are watched, leads them to self-censor the content they are publishing on the Web; using the Internet providers which employ internal staff to remove content which is seen as politically sensitive, which partially is done by relying on lists with banned words. But Chinese netizens are very in circumventing certain restrictions by “inventing” new words or using homophonous characters instead of the banned original character. (A project by China Digital Times, “The Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon”, allows a glimpse into the creative ways of Chinese Internet language).

Additionally, there is the so called „50 cent party“ or on-line commentators, hired by official institutions to influence public opinion on social networks, BBS, chat rooms etc. in a way that is favorable for the Party. The estimated number differs widely (30.000 to 250.000).

The government is blocking foreign (news) websites, social networks (the most important ones are Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, vimeo, Google Docs), bulletin boards (widely used by Chinese netizens), search engines (filtering the search results of certain terms on Chinese and foreign search engines), social media websites (postings containing sensitive words are removed, real name system is being implemented in the main cities to curb the number of „rumors“ spread via SNS).

In 2010, about 1 million articles were censored each day in China, in 2010 there were 40% websites less than the previous year.

In March 2011, Google accused the Chinese government of disrupting its Gmail service in the country and making it appear as if technical problems at Google — not government intervention — were to blame. At the same time, several popular virtual private-network services, or V.P.N.’s, designed to evade the government’s computerized censors, have been crippled. V.P.N.’s are popular with China’s huge expatriate community and Chinese entrepreneurs, researchers and scholars who expect to use the Internet freely.

There is also a growing number of journalists and researchers on Twitter (like the chief editor of Global

19 For the technical implementation see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_censorship_in_the_People%27s_Republic_of_China#cite_ref-12 (accessed March 25, 2012).
20 http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Introduction_to_the_Grass-Mud_Horse_Lexicon.
21 “A social Revolution – China’s answer to social networking”.
Times, he joined Jan 29, first question by western media representative in China on Twitter was: „which VPN do you use?“

**Government Regulations for Weibo Platforms**

Additionally to the fact that the Chinese Internet as a whole is heavily censored, there are special regulations for Weibo.

**Real Name Registration**

In December 2011, the Beijing government announced a set of new regulations imposing technical and content control to the service providers. The most controversial regulation is the “real name registration”: “Any organization or individual that registers a micro-blog account and produces, reproduces, publishes, or disseminates information content shall use real identity information, and shall not carry out registration by falsifying or replicating a resident’s identity information, business registration information, or organization code information.” These regulations will be effective from March 16, 2012 on with seven websites registered in Beijing, including Sina Weibo, Tencent Weibo Sohu, NetEase before expanding across the country, according to the Beijing Internet authority. From this day on, users who do not have a verified account will not be able to actively contribute (no posting, re-tweeting, commenting), they will only be allowed to passively read.

**Real Name Verification Process**

The verification process involves the checking of the personal ID card with the government which creates huge costs for the service providers (2 RMB per account). This verification can be done by binding the mobile phone number to an account (mobile phone SIM cards officially can be bought only by disclosing one’s ID number – but in reality, it is still possible to buy SIM cards without registration). Institutions or businesses must provide their corporate registration information in order to get verified. A verified account holder has his “personal” assistant with whom one can communicate via private message or mobile phone (a feature much appreciated by Chinese users as it gives the feeling of being cared for and guided).

The government hopes that through these measures, the amount of false information and „rumors“ on the Internet will be reduced. The government can count on the majority of the Internet users to support its policy, although there are some voices criticizing the new regulations (also in the academia, as Yu Guoming, a professor at the School of Journalism and Communication with Renmin University of China, who

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says, „the rule will negatively affect the development of the micro-blogging service, since some users will be afraid of speaking out if their identities are disclosed.)

It is unclear to date how these regulations will affect accounts held by foreigners living in respectively outside China where a verification of the ID card is not possible: Beijing’s Internet Information Office has not published a directive how to deal with these cases (by March 30, 2012).

General Regulations
Other regulations are explicitly targeting the spread of rumors and harmful information, as well as fake accounts. Article 10 is defining the content which it is not allowed to transmit via Weibo: amongst others, violating the basic principles of the Constitution; jeopardizing national security, leaking state secrets, subverting the government, undermining national unity; harming national honor and interests; inciting ethnic hatred or ethnic discrimination, undermining national unity; violating the state religion policies or propagating cults and feudal superstitions; spreading rumors, disturbing social order, or undermining social stability; content prohibited under other laws and administrative regulations.

It is unclear how these regulations will impact the future usage of social media and the development of these services in China. One side effect of the measures might be that the number of active accounts will decrease considerably, as a great portion of the existing accounts on all the major services seem to be fake or “zombie accounts”. Researchers from HP Social Computing Lab found “that 49% of the re-tweets24 in Sina Weibo containing trending keywords were actually associated with fraudulent accounts. We observed that these accounts comprised of a small amount (1.08% of the total users) of users but were responsible for a large percentage of the total retweets for the trending keywords. These fake accounts are responsible for artificially inflating certain posts, thus creating fake trends in Sina Weibo.”25

Foreign institutions using Chinese SNS must take into account the fact that such changes in regulations might occur at any time as a reaction to events threatening the stability of the country (social problems, uprising like Wukan, ethnic clashes like Tibet or Xinjiang etc) or other developments which are difficult to foresee and might undermine the attractiveness of a given service for users and investors.

The Chinese social media scene is confronted with the special challenge of balancing the desire for free expression of the Internet users and for free flow of information on one hand and the efforts of the Chinese government to maintain harmony and stability in the society, forcing social media companies to comply with a constantly changing legal framework and new technical challenges to ensure the “purity” of the published content.

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24 A “retweet” is the forwarding of a tweet to one’s followers. Originally used for the action on Twitter, but now the term is used also to describe this functionality on other services.

Academic Institutions and Their Presence on Social Media

In China, all major company and institutional websites incorporate social media in their websites. Some extremely successful and famous campaigns have taken place in social media – they were not planned: the most famous examples are the number one apparel online shop VANCL which hired Han Han, a young superstar writer and rally race car driver, or the soft drink company Wanglaoji which became famous because of donating 110 million RMB to the victims of the Sichuan earthquake.

Educational institutions – from primary schools to universities to professors, students – are present on social media. On Sina Weibo alone, the campus section of verified accounts (http://verified.weibo.com/campus/) includes a huge variety of departments, scholars, institutes, students clubs, information offices of Chinese universities and academic institutions.

Ranking of followers on Sina Weibo:
Top 20

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<th>Academy Institution Name</th>
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<td>East China Normal University</td>
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http://verified.weibo.com/campus/881/?t=0&srt=11, 2012. 2. 5.
Foreign Institutions

Following the impact of social media on the Chinese society, many foreign institutions (embassies, consulates, culture departments, universities, companies, brands, individuals...) are present on Chinese social media.

On Sina Weibo the top foreign academic institutions are the following:

Foreign Universities TOP20 (February 5, 2012)

These accounts – both the Chinese as well as the non-Chinese ones – publish mostly announcements of events, project related information, information about scholarships, student life abroad, campus life, language learning related messages, general information about the country, campus gossip.

Given the fact that the students of today are “digital natives” and that they are more and more shifting their social life to social media platforms, these accounts are an essential channel for the universities to relate to their students and strengthen their identification with their school.
Conclusion

The Chinese social media landscape is far more developed, diversified and socially as well politically relevant than the average Western Internet user might imagine. This is partly due to the sheer number of Internet users in China: there were 513 million by the end of 2011, and 49% of these users are using micro-blogging platforms. But more importantly, social media opened up a former unknown realm of freedom of expression for the average Chinese citizen: Although the Chinese government is steadily tightening the control of these virtual spaces – the latest effort to tighten the grip is the real name registration system for micro-blogging platforms –, social media since their beginning in the mid 90s, have developed into a transformative force in the development of the Chinese society. The potential of these platforms is not only used by individuals who for the first time find a channel for personal expression, but also by Chinese as well as non-Chinese institutions, companies and brands for advertisement, campaigning and keeping in touch with their clients.