Social Media in China
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This text describes the development of social media in China. It is preceded by a short description of the history of the Internet 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

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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.

1.1. Internet in China in 2013

In its most recent annual report published in January 2013, the China Internet Information Center (CNNIC) identifies the following trends and features. The growth of Internet users continued the slow-down tendency, and mobile phone Internet users kept growing vigorously. An estimated 51 million new Chinese users accessed the Internet in 2012, bringing the number of online users to 564 million (an increase of 10 percent). The country's penetration rate has reached 42.1 percent (raised by 3.8 percentage points) since the end of 2011.

![Size of Chinese Internet users and penetration (2005-2012)](image)

*CNNIC (2013)*

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* China Internet Network Information Center: Statistical Report on Internet Development in China (January 2013).
Mobile use has continued to increase: The number of those who go online via tablets, smartphones and wireless networks increased by 18.1 percent (64.4 million users), bringing the wireless mobile population to 420 million. The rural penetration is 27.6 percent (156 million).

As a result, the former popular Internet cafes have begun to lose their attractivity. Desktop computer use also fell by nearly three percentage points in 2012 and laptop use dropped to 45.9 percent of users. Mobile access has leapt from 69.3 percent to 74.5 percent.

One of the trends stressed by the report, is the increase of microblogging by six percentage points, amounting to 309 million users. Other sources say that China has at least 597 million active social media users. Of the Internet users, microblog users accounted for 54.7%, up by 6% over the end of last year. A considerable number of users accessed microblogs and published microposts via mobile phones. By the end of 2012, the mobile phone microblog users has hit 202 million, namely 65.6% of microblog users used their mobile phones to access microblogs.

Online shopping and group shopping kept growing at a high rate: By the end of December 2012, China had a total of 242 million online shoppers, and the utilization ratio of online shopping rose to 42.9%. Using mobile technology to buy items online has increased by 6.6 percentage points compared to 2011. Reacting to this trend, microblogging companies start to cater to online shoppers. In June 2012, Sina Weibo’s mobile app added support for online shopping and integrated a “nearby goods” feature into its “Discover” tab allowing to browse nearby e-commerce items and then purchase any of them from within the app.

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2. **Chinese Social Media**

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, following riots in the western province of Xinjiang), a vibrant domestic landscape of similar platforms has emerged and taken their place.
The blocking of Western social media and the political situation in China created a situation where the Internet is divided into two Internets, as Michael Anti puts it: the global Internet and
the “Chinanet”: “During the past 15 years, the Chinese government has played an unconventional cat-and-mouse game with the country’s 500 million Internet users – the biggest population of netizens in the whole world. While the global Internet is censored in China, the parallel Chinanet has boomed. The Chinese government has blocked every Web 2.0 site and at the same time allowed the creation of a series of simulacrum websites. (...) But this 'smart censorship' hasn’t stopped the Chinanet from developing into a genuine public sphere – a 'battlefield' for public opinion.”

On one hand, Chinese social media are changing the way people in China think, inform themselves, communicate and live. On the other hand, social media have enabled the Chinese government to overcome an age-old problem of poor feedback of ground problems to the center because of too many layers in between, risking explosions due to over-suppression. Social media brings such problems to the attention of China’s leaders. That's why Chinese social media, especially micro-blogging platforms, are sometimes seen as a force fostering gradual transformation of the society or as a democratizing force.

2.1. Some Characteristics of the Social Media usage in China

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. 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 and is highly fragmented. As a result, the choice of the right platform (or platforms) is crucial for the success of the presence of institutions and companies.

So far, 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.

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6 Michael Anti, The Chinanet and smart censorship, in: China 3.0 (ed Mark Leonhard), pp 100-105, 2013
The engagement of Chinese users is higher⁹, and users are ready to create and share content (40% of the users are contributing content, compared to 20% in US¹, and a unique (linguistic) culture is being created on the Internet.¹⁰ Chinese tend to live much more in the Internet than Westerners, perceiving their online 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.”¹¹ Chinese, they „play games, store files, win 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 online platform.”¹²

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.”¹³ A “Survey on Situation of Chinese College Students Choosing To Use Social Networking”¹⁴ 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.

⁹ It is difficult to find comparable figures for Europe, but http://www.b2bsocialmediaguide.com/2011/04/04/social-media-usage-statistics-##/ finds that there is 36% social network penetration in Western Europe, 69% of European social media users are classified as „spectators”, that is passive users who read other posts but don‘t post their own, and 43% of social media users have 100 friends or followers.
¹¹ Li Shanyou at the conference “L2 The Social Graph China”, October 14, 2011, CEIBS, Sinopec Auditorium, Shanghai
¹³ Credit Suisse China, Sina Corporation, May 17, 2011
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”\(^{15}\), 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“.\(^{16}\)

Some of the differences in the behavior between Western and Chinese users can at least partly 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.”\(^{17}\).

### 2.2. Different Types of Social Media popular in China

**Blogging Platforms**

personal journalism: wordpress.com, blogger.com, posterous.com / blog.sina.com.cn,

\(^{15}\) Ibid.  
\(^{16}\) Ibid.  
\(^{17}\)http://www.internationalforum.com/Articles/hidden_differences%20by%20Hall.htm.
The era of blogging in China started in 2005, by the end of 2012, there were more than 372 millions users blogging (compared to 300 millions by the end of 2011), with a level of usage of 66.1% (CNNIC).

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

In contrast to many countries, the Bulletin Board System (BBS) or online forum remains extremely popular in China. The Chinese netizens use BBS to get comments about products and services like that of clothes, cosmetics and cars. The first BBS (Shugang BBS at the National Research Center for intelligent computing) was created in 1994. This early introduction of BBS to the Chinese Internet made BBS one of the most used Internet application in China. The popularity of BBS in China was largely due to the anonymity of postings. BBS are mainly interest groups, where users try to find solutions to problems, share information (esp. about products), and share life experiences. BBS users tend to be older than the users of other social media platforms (20-40 age) and to come from various professional backgrounds

“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

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).

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 carry 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 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 (it wanted to bury the wagons without any further investigation) 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](http://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.

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Sina Weibo whose users are mostly living in China’s wealthiest cities (tier one and two areas, from Beijing to Wuhan, Shanghai to Hangzhou), 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.

Screenshot: comment function on Sina Weibo
Sina Weibo is publishing new applications and features on a regular basis. In June 2011, Enterprise Weibo has been launched, allowing companies to advertise their products and services to their followers. It has rolled out promoted feed advertisements, “Weibo Tuiguang”. The ads appear in user feeds and are differentiated from user posts by a grey line and a notice indicating that it’s a sponsored post. (University accounts are also part of this section.) Sina Weibo has also developed a special section for public interest and charity groups: the Gongyi platform. Visitors can donate money or specific items, volunteer, participate in charity auctions or retweet messages from NGOs and other nonprofits to help generate attention and potentially more donations in the process. The registration is available only to verified users. Sina Weibo has developed a gaming platform Wei-Game in July 2011, and is testing a virtual currency payment system. In November 2102, it started its own professional network for Weibo Users that is set to challenge LinkedIn in China (Wei Renmai).

Sina Weibo is also starting to roll out an English version of the interface, a fact that had been widely reported in the Western press, as it is perceived as a potential threat to Twitter, given its richer functionalities. (By March 2013, this functionality is not yet available in Europe.) Sina Weibo has developed mobile applications for iPhone / iPad, Android, Blackberry.

As revealed in its financial report for the fourth quarter of 2012, Sina Weibo has now 500 million registered users. Out of those 500 million, 46.3 million are daily active users. 75 percent of its daily active users use Weibo through their mobile devices at some point in time. Over the course of a year, nine to ten percent of users are active.20 This low rate of active users raises the the question about the authenticity of the registered accounts: There are speculations that a very big proportion of the registered accounts are actually “zombie” accounts, run by individuals who take money in exchange for these new “fans”.

To get a feeling for the concrete dimensions of usage: 729,571 messages per minute have been sent out on December 31, 2012 (By comparison, Twitter recently witnessed a record of 327,000 tweets per minute when US President Barack Obama was re-elected. New Year celebrations on

Twitter hit a peak of 33,388 tweets per second when the clock turned over in the Tokyo/Seoul time zone.\textsuperscript{21}

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.”\textsuperscript{22} It will be interesting to see if and how the real-name registration system passed by the Chinese legislation in December 2012 will affect the usage of micro-blogging platforms.

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.\textsuperscript{23}

Tencent Weibo (launched 2009)

Tencent Weibo is the biggest micro-blogging service in China, with 540 million users by the end of 2012 and 277 million 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.

\textsuperscript{23}Credit Suisse (2011) Sina Corporation. Equity Research, New Media (Internet). 17 May.

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This landscape of the Chinese social media ecosystem shows that China is leading the international social media scene in several ways: in user numbers, 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.

2.3. The Chinese government and social media

Social media and their “we media” character are challenging Chinese government and its officials as the government has lost its monopoly on news, as official channels are slower in publishing news than Internet users are (see the Wenzhou train crash). Micro-blogging platforms are also used to expose illegal conducts by officials and to criticize the government’s way of handling affairs, calling for more accountability, protecting an individual's rights, such creating a huge impact, leading to a new conception of “governance” at different levels.

The 2012 Sina Government Weibo Report, released by the People Online Public Monitoring Office is reflecting the dimensions of the influence of micro-blogging platforms: Until October 2012, all provincial governments have opened a Sina Weibo account, the mass of weibos has also reached a new peak: The official account of the Jiangsu government has published 6,222 weibos and ranks no. 1. The number of governmental accounts on Weibo has skyrocketed to 60,064. 20 government ministries, for example, have so far opened a total of 46 microblog accounts. The overall top ten government micro-blog accounts in China in 2012 are thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Username</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Followers</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>@上海发布</td>
<td>Information Office of Shanghai city government</td>
<td>2,267,435</td>
<td>96.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>@平安北京</td>
<td>Beijing Public Security Bureau</td>
<td>3,958,537</td>
<td>95.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>@成都发布</td>
<td>Information Office of Chengdu city government</td>
<td>4,639,063</td>
<td>94.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>@平安中原</td>
<td>Henan province Public Security Bureau</td>
<td>2,314,164</td>
<td>94.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>@公安部打四黑除四害</td>
<td>Ministry of Public Security, Office for “Fighting Four Blacks and Four Pests”</td>
<td>4,321,733</td>
<td>93.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>@南京发布</td>
<td>Information Office of Shanghai city government</td>
<td>1,894,744</td>
<td>92.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>@广州公安</td>
<td>Guangzhou Public Security Bureau</td>
<td>2,487,330</td>
<td>92.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>@警民直通车-上海</td>
<td>Shanghai Public Security Bureau</td>
<td>1,831,820</td>
<td>91.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>@上海铁警</td>
<td>Shanghai Railway Public Security Bureau</td>
<td>1,787,660</td>
<td>91.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>@外交小灵通</td>
<td>Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Office of Public Diplomacy</td>
<td>3,149,816</td>
<td>91.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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An important aspect of microblogging is the grassroots and emergency government microblogging. There are examples of individual officials using Sina Weibo in very creative ways. @王于京 for example is the Weibo account (now approaching a million followers) of a police officer in Zhejiang province who uses Weibo to provide useful information as a service to local people. Or as another example there is @罗崇敏, which is the account (with around 780,000 followers) of Luo Chongmin, a member of the College Work Committee of the Yunnan Provincial Party Committee and holder of an Economics doctorate degree. Luo uses his Weibo account to discuss all kinds of grassroots educational issues related to his work, also touching on various debates such a college entrance exams and education reform in China. Another new trend is the use of Weibo by government agencies to deal with emergency situations. The Beijing floods that occurred in July this year was a very notable case in point.

The director of the information office at the Beijing government; Wang Hui, who has been instrumental in building a platform sur Sina Weibo distributing municipal information, says that during this crisis, the cadres communicated directly via Weibo with the citizens. During the heavy rains, a number of government accounts in Beijing such as @北京发布, @北京消防 and @平安北京 posted the latest information on Weibo such as dangerous areas in the city, traffic updates and weather forecasts. Although they have been critized and insulted, the Weibo account of Beijing has allowed the city to show its „public service“ image and prevent social troubles.

@平安北京 is the second most popular governmental account on Sina Weibo. The communication is following more than 30 regulations defining the diffusion of messages in terms of content, format, timing, usage of emoticons etc. In the morning the team decides on the messages to be published, mostly 10 to 15 per day. They have to be approved by higher institutional level, according to their importance. The account is activ 24 hours.

In 2012, the Weibo platform developed from a unidirectional tool, where netizens are discussing current events and display their life to a an communication platform where interaction between officials and citizens takes place and public service is delivered. There was a trend towards a

24 http://www.infzm.com/content/83649
“clustered development”: Governmental institutions in different areas clustered to open "administrative kiosks", so that originally separated official accounts were coordinated, controlled each other and create synergies.

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.\(^{25}\) 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 creativeness of Chinese Internet language).\(^{26}\)

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


\(^{26}\) http://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/Introduction_to_the_Grass-Mud_Horse_Lexicon.
name system is being implemented 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 Times, he joined Jan 29, first question by western media representative in China on Twitter was: „which VPN do you use?“

3.1. 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 which essentially are driven by the overall goal of “preserving social stability” (and the Party). By monitoring the postings on microblogging platforms, the Chinese government can block and de-block sensitive words as it feels necessary, use the netizens voice for its own purposes, and, with the help of paid posters, “guide the public opinion”. These regulations are “evolving” and updated on a regular basis, especially after major “mass incidents” or similar events take place.

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

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27 A social Revolution – China’s answer to social networking.
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. “29 These regulations went into effect on March 16, 2012 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.

In December 2012, the National People's Congress Standing Committee passed a “Decision regarding Strengthening Network Information Protection”. The new rules mean to “enhance protection of personal info online and safeguard public interests”. It requires users to show government-issued identification when registering for a fixed-line or a wireless at a Internet service provider, and it might affect all Internet services and not just ISPs. The legislation comes with provisions that require network operators to safeguard the privacy of account information collected during the process. Users would still be allowed to use pseudonyms online. The decision also legitimates the deletion of posts and requires that ISPs take down information which is identified as illegal.

Censorship is not only enforced by the Chinese government: An important aspect is self-censorship and the implementation of “social control” measures, as the “User Contract” and “User Credit Point System” implemented by Sina Weibo in May 2012. The “User Contract” regulates the behavior the users must respect and details what kind of information may not be published. The “User Credit Point System” encourages users to report activities ranging from “spreading untrue information”, harassment of others etc. Each negative report results in a lower credit score and ultimately in a “low credit user” badge or a deleted account. Deductions of points for false information are calculated based on the amount of reposting.

It is important to keep in mind, that this kind of self-censorship is not limited to social media: It

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30 http://english.caijing.com.cn/2012-05-09/111842544.html
is prevalent in all kind of expression, from personal communication to literature, press, website and social media, as it is the only means of survival in an environment where unspoken rules determine what can be said and what cannot be said.

Another measure is the implementation of a “community committee”. There are two sorts of committees, a “normal committee” (nearly 5000 members by January 2013), which deals with user disputes, and an “expert committee” (nearly 500 members by January 2013) to handle issues relating to false information. Members for both committees are selected amongst volunteer Weibo members, for a term of one year. The requirements for the normal committee are low: being an adult real-name verified Weibo member for half a year, with one hundred posts and fifty fans. Requirement to become an expert committee are more stringent: members must openly publish their real name, and be recognized scholars or media professionals.\footnote{http://service.account.weibo.com/committee/index}

**Real Name Verification Process**

The verification process involves the checking of the personal ID card with a governmental database. Additionally, the mobile phone number is associated 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 enterprises 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). With a delay of some months, Sina Weibo has implemented a workflow for individual users who do not have a Chinese ID card, they can register with their foreign passport number.

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 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.)

The verification measures did not have the desired effect and scope, as Sina states in a report released in April 2012\(^2\), for reasons including existing user behavior, the nature of the microblogging product and the lack of clarity on specific implementation procedures, but the implementation of user identity verification has deterred new users from completing their registration on Weibo.

### 3.2. 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-tweets\(^3\) 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

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\(^3\) 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.
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.\(^34\)

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.

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, ethic 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.

4. 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.

## Chinese Universities - Ranking of followers on Sina Weibo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Followers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai International Studies University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East China Normal University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tongji University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nankai University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhejiang University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanjing University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing Huaxia University</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Shandong University</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sun Yat-sen University</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hong Kong University</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tianjin University</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Shanghai Jiaotong University</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chongqing University</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Huazhong University of Science and Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wuhan University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sichuan Art Academy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tsinghua University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from Weibo (2013).

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4.1. Foreign Academic Institutions on Sina Weibo

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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>21-Feb-13</th>
<th>5-Feb-12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia (LimKokwing)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>INSEARCH</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kokusho, Tokyo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYU, Chinese Scholars and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Leicester</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thompson Rivers University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>TAFE NSW Goverment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universidad Complutense (Madrid)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berkeley</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Michigan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Essex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumption University of Thailand</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saints Martins</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westminster China</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of the Arts, London</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EM Lyon Business School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Film Academy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Sheffield</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>CQUniversity CQ University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEG Suisse Education Group / Waseda</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monash University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMIT university</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing International Studies</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from Weibo – Foreign Universities TOP20 (February 20, 2013). Note: A number of « educational » accounts have been removed from the statistics due to doubts regarding their authenticity. The ranking is limited to the top 20 accounts in February 2012 and 2013.

These accounts – both the Chinese as well as the non-Chinese ones – publish mostly announcements of events, project related information, information about scholarships, student

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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.

5. 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 564 million by the end of 2012, and 309 million micro-blog users (54.7% of all Internet users).

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. At the same time, the dynamism of the social media scene presents a considerable challenge to the user: Existing services add new functionalities on a regular basis, but, more importantly, new services like WeiXin (WeChat) are starting to change the game.

function and exploit the advantages of Weibo.