

## Re-thinking Virtual/Physical Boundaries

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### Abstract

If there were clear conceptual borders between the virtual and the physical, then our material lives would not include virtual realities and virtuality would have nothing to do with our emplaced everyday lives. Yet our cyber-urban everyday spaces include manifestations in both the social practices of their proponents and an essential nature. To label one as virtual and the other as physical dismisses and ignores both the reality of our imagination and the imaginations of reality. Drawing on China and its cyberspaces, this paper argues that understanding how hybrid aspirational spaces that provide alternatives to imposed hegemonic visions are imagined and created requires us to transcend the four traditional realms of virtual, physical, public, and private. The paper proposes Spaces of Dissent and Autonomy (SoDA) as the key component of a framework that makes conceptual space for the less visible aspects of an emancipatory 'cyburbanity.'

Keywords : China, Virtual/Physical, Cyber-urban, Boundaries, Hybrid Space

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## Introduction

We live in an age where the places people inhabit have come to include the Internet, or ‘cyberspace’. Many young people live significant parts of their lives online, and urbanites in particular embody the constant interdependent and reciprocate interplay between the physical and the ‘virtual’.<sup>1</sup> The concepts of trans-locality and boundary as discussed in this conference<sup>2</sup> would therefore benefit from including these new virtual spheres. In spite of an imagined dialectic divide between ‘the online’ and ‘the offline’, or between virtual and physical space, both aspects can be feasibly re-conceived as the ‘lived spaces’ (Lefebvre, 1991) of late modernity city dwellers, that is, as representational space “which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39), through concrete action based on intentional behavior, appropriated against any imposed or

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1) NB: In spite of their different meanings and connotations in different languages, ‘virtual’ and ‘cyber’ are used interchangeably in this paper.

2) The 5th International Conference on “The Rethinking of (Trans)locality as a Boundary Perspective”, organized by the Korean Studies Institute, Busan, Korea, February 21-22, 2013.

intended meanings. In this context, physical or 'offline' space refers to the particular geographic manifestations in which socio-cultural and political phenomena and processes become visible and through which socio-cultural and political actors operate.

The paper's working assumption is that all online activities by urban 'netizens' (网民 *wangmin*) are *inherently* urban, and constantly augment traditional understandings of urban space in the sense that the bodies and minds of the people involved inhabit and perform urban space, breathing city air. After all, an autonomous, active, self-assertive, situated, sensible, bodied self "is the only aspect of our being – individual or collective – capable of performing place, that is to say, making place a living reality" (Casey, 2001, p. 718). At the same time, our capacity to envision depends on our ability to develop a phenomenal consciousness based on phenomenal experiences, i.e. on making things known to our senses (ibid). While the 'network' has (accurately, I think) been identified as dominant organizing principle for society (see for example Manuel Castells' work, esp. Castells, 2004, 2007, 2012), the ever-shifting realities of place-based experience are too varied to be consistent with any meta-narrative. Individuals continuously craft who they are, standing with one foot in their physical and the other in their virtual everyday lives. When adopting this way of seeing, China's cities are inhabited by people filled with the desire to explore and re-create heterogeneous and exciting places 'of their own'.

Furthermore, it is their living in cities – including access to the Internet and other social media – that provides them with the cultural images and imaginaries that underlie and spark their desires and activities, both on- and offline.

In this context, the inability of cyber-scholars to imagine and deal with actual geographical space seems to match the inability of scholars of actual geographical space to imagine and deal with cyberspace. Attempts to bring the cyber into space are as few and far between as attempts to bring space into the cyber (notable exceptions are Lim, 2006; and Kidder, 2012, 2009). Clearly, there are Internet infrastructures and services such as routers and Cyber-Cafes that may be declared to be ‘inherently urban’ – but what about less tangible components? Are they a-spatial or non-urban, by design or decree? What if cyberspace is like an iceberg, ten percent of its volume visible through the (metaphorical) fog, but the fascinating 90 percent that sank the Titanic are not? Hard to grasp, at times deliberately hidden, scholars seem hesitant to map out or even imagine the shape of the whole iceberg. This paper, after providing a succinct introduction to the Chinese Internet, makes a perhaps overly bold attempt toward conceptualizing the spatial dynamics that constitute (China’s) contemporary cyber-urbanity.

## The Chinese Internet

China's 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress that ended with the party-state presenting its new seven-headed leadership was a big event in national and international media alike. State security measures to ensure an uninterrupted spectacle were extraordinary: Beijing's taxi drivers were told to remove window handles from their doors and avoid 'sensitive parts' of the city as much as possible; kitchen knives and pencil sharpeners were pulled from store shelves; the 'usual suspects' (activists and petitioners) were rounded up ahead of the event; web searches for non-approved information pertaining to the Congress were blocked. However, circumstantial evidence has it that on 15 November 2012, when the new line-up of leaders was at last publicly announced, people riding on Beijing's buses in which the news were transmitted live via state-of-the-art mobile television systems could not have cared less. And neither did the vast majority of China's 500 million netizens. Remaining 'the same' while the world around it is changing at breakneck speed, party-state politics no longer seems to capture the attention of the masses. Many Chinese no longer see themselves as subjects of or in opposition to a state; after the political turbulences of the 1960s and 70s, they have begun to reinvent themselves as people in their own right, by and large staying away from lofty political spectacles.

Largely based on far-reaching economic reforms, China rides on the wave of an unprecedented boom, but without corresponding social or political renewal. As is evidenced by ever-growing harassment and ‘disappearances’ of outspoken critics and activists, China appears to drift into the tyranny of an increasingly technology-savvy authoritarianism. Disenfranchised and outraged masses are losing trust in their leaders and institutions and in the political system they embody. Recognizing present cultural values as increasingly empty and meaningless, Chinese society is becoming deeply fractioned, and the Chinese state and its media platforms increasingly lose their ability to influence the younger generations’ minds. In the quest for new values, the Chinese-language Internet has become a contested space for information and interaction, allowing for a proliferation of value systems based on an emerging polyphony of voices that express and negotiate viewpoints different from the official stories (Herold and Marolt, 2011; Marolt and Herold, forthcoming).

For the first few years after the Internet was opened to the general public back in 1997, cyberspace was all but neglected by the state. Authorities with insufficient surveillance capacities and knowledge, not knowing where to look, understaffed and inexperienced, were facing equally naive users who largely had no clue about even the idea of deliberately remaining under the (virtual) radar of observation. With Mao’s and Deng’s passing, the realization hit that widely shared belief systems can no

longer be evoked or maintained through China's state-sanctioned mouthpiece media alone. Now discourse is censored or self-censored (i.e., not articulated) and manipulated, by a regime that deploys subtle and highly flexible multi-pronged forms of control and censorship to prevent the spread of undesirable content (Marolt, 2011). Even not censoring has become a political tool, with data-mining surveillance geared at controlling and actively 'guiding' online conversations of what has happened and what might be possible. Over the past few years, regulators have stepped up their efforts to control cyberspace, increase censorship, 'guide' public opinion, and install measures to manipulate online discourse and co-opt leadership. In the process it has become apparent that virtuality is by no means 'liberated space', but is structured by norms and practices that often mirror those of the material world. Insiders describe state-netizen interactions as high-stake cat-and-mouse game, and state authorities (or their corporate or academic collaborators) render Internet activity as meaningless entertainment and play with addictive potential.

Yet over a period of only 15 years, regardless of multi-pronged attempts to reign it in, the Chinese internet has become a huge and poly-vocal space. The cacophonies of online voices and information young Chinese minds are exposed to tell a story of a quasi-existential commitment to stateless spontaneity, free expression and social learning. These are the bases for the Chinese internet's success story, with now more than 500 million

netizens, of which almost 75 percent are equipped with computers, 70 percent with mobile devices, and for almost half of whom 'Weibo' (Chinese microblogging services) channels have become the or one of the major news source (CNNIC, 2012). Growth rates still exceed 10 percent annually (ibid).

Arguably it is no coincidence that it was in China where the well-known phrase was coined: The mountains are high, the emperor far away (山高皇帝远 *shan gao huangdi yuan*). I would like to suggest the notion that, metaphorically speaking, present-day Chinese netizens are heading for the mountains, and that the vast expanses of the Internet contain spaces of refuge where disparate groups find that freedom of expression is less inhibited and where there is a diversity of thoughts and ideas and a participatory capacity to share (and learn from) one's views that was previously unknown. It is in these virtual 'highlands' where Chinese netizens create ever more imaginative ways to bypass – rather than engage – the hegemonic state narratives they came to question. For Chinese netizens are not so much interested in contesting the control of the Chinese state over Chinese society, but rather in avoiding, ignoring or bypassing the surveillance and control mechanisms of the state in their own everyday lives, thus dodging unwanted influences on their thoughts, practices, and actions (cf. Marolt, 2011, 2008). A state aims to force people to play the game by its rules just as the public continually seeks to find or create their own places (de Certeau, 1984). Resistance thus emerges not from specific places with overpowering

practices of domination, but rather from the state's exertion of power on everyday life and its practices of survival, enjoyment, etc. These practices are constantly "refashioned by this combination of manipulation and enjoyment" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 18).

In an urban China that is short on free or unsupervised public spaces such as urban green spaces, pedestrian zones, schools, government offices, corporate or citizen media institutions, etc, the Chinese Internet has become a vast and highly complex public space inhabited by myriad individuals and groups, permeated with particular places of playful and serious consent and dissent, with thoughts and ideas that are continuously produced, remixed, and reproduced across space and time (Marolt, 2011). This is significant because such free public spaces are where people talk to each other, learn to define a situation on their own terms, and ultimately develop a capacity for independent thought and concerted action (Goldfarb, 2006). The Internet creates for Chinese people a 'lived space' around places where they can compensate for what they are lacking in their material lives and express what cannot be expressed elsewhere.

In such a setting, are the powers of individual and shared agency indeed reduced to dissident criminals (who can be co-opted, 'invited to tea', 'disappeared' and tortured, or convicted of subversion) and otherwise diluted by creating ever more docile and powerless victims to the omnipresent possibilities of

entertainment and play (as is suggested by the party-state and corroborated by much academic research). Or does cyberspace make space for 'free subjects' to act as the heroes of their own stories, winning over what Bey calls "the ludicrous minions of a despised & irrelevant Order" (Bey, 2003, p. 64)? In this paper I argue for the possibility that a deeper truth may lie somewhere else entirely. Not in *grand finales*, but in small-scale beginnings and often transient and happenstance incremental processes. More often than not, the process of creating social change works best when its inceptions go unnoticed. Changing ideas is less noticeable than changing societal structures. Forming groups and shared meanings online is less visible than organizing mass protests. The clandestine nature of inspiration and aspiration can, at least temporarily, enhance the organic, grassroots capacities of autonomous self-organization. Of course, what matters in the end will be whether decentralized efforts will scale up and whether emerging social movements will be able to create broader commons and change current dominant political practices and institutions (Harvey, 2012), or create inherently new practices and institutions. The political priority afforded to surveilling and controlling physical bodies on streets or squares is due to the fact that demonstrations are the only palpable power the masses have left. Yet in China, where open confrontations are often violently suppressed and the Internet is strictly controlled, stealthy and subversive projects and tactics emerge in the perennial conflict around a convivial urban life. A

conceptual framework that allows and makes space for such projects is direly needed.

Capturing the serendipity and the deeply transformative potential that lie in all our virtual worlds, Hakim Bey wrote: "Pick someone at random & convince them they're the heir to an enormous, useless & amazing fortune – say 5000 square miles of Antarctica, or an aging circus elephant, or an orphanage in Bombay, or a collection of alchemical mss [manuscripts]. Later they will come to realize that for a few moments they believed in something extraordinary, & will perhaps be driven as a result to seek out some more intense mode of existence" (Bey, 2003, p.2). Pinning down those 'few moments' of believing in something important will be contingent on access to activist leaders' memories of revolutions and social movements that, at least in China, are yet to come. But there is the distinct possibility that the transformative potential of cyberspace does not express itself through key moments of revolutionary zeal, but rather through immersive practices and gradually less conformist information and networking that, in tandem with processes of learning and social learning, create an altered mental state. As field research I conducted in recent years suggests, a variety of efforts indicative of a fleeing from and ignoring the state and of an active seeking and fighting for a 'more intense mode of existence' have long become a Chinese reality. Many early adopters and practitioners corroborate that actively engaging (with) the Internet has become their "exit" from a closet of

conformity. The question then becomes: What happens when 500 million people exit a closet of conformity? Both in terms of the Internet's disruptive and generative potential, this question leads to two key components: people (agency) and space. The remainder of this paper is an attempt at a boundary-transcending new interpretation of these components.

### **Life in Cyber-Urban China**

Virtual and physical urban spaces have indeed become interdependent dimensions of political insurgencies and control (Lim, 2006). Insurgencies are often referred to in the context of – often violent – uprisings against military or religious dictatorships or rendered and retold as clashes between activists and police (e.g., Northern Africa, Middle East, Occupy). Yet insurgencies could perhaps be better understood by putting them in a broader context and by including peaceful grassroots practices around the formation of alternative economic cultures or the emergence of urban spaces of hope, i.e. around local projects through which new ways of seeing and forms of community emerge beneath the radar of state and corporate omnipresence (Douglass, forthcoming).

Moving the discourse beyond rendering urban space in terms of a dialectic of the physical and the virtual (both being equally 'real!'), Chinese cyberspace emerges as the locus where China's

'80 *hou*' and '90 *hou*' generations (i.e. those born after 1980 and 1990, respectively) 'hang out' these days, before their bodies crave food or sleep. Indeed much of contemporary urban cosmopolitanism is lived while transcending online and offline spheres, by people who maneuver multiple identities as they move with one foot in virtual and the other in physical space. In this context, parts of 'cyberbia' provides and constitutes public spaces that lie outside traditional forms of state control and where action and 'social action' is mostly free of immediate oversight and control. In China and elsewhere, it is urbanites who dominate the Internet both in terms of usage statistics and ideas. Even if they hail from a rural background, many netizens and practitioners have moved to cities, and urban and global cultures and processes comprise and dominate the topics discussed online.

There is no survey data to corroborate their reasons for 'going online' (上网 *shang wang*), but half a billion Chinese netizens inhabiting a virtual augmenting superimposed space (rather than an physical underground subversive one) can hardly be incidental. The numbers also indicate that in a quest to escape state tyranny it is beneficial that it suffices to simply add a virtual extension to their urban spaces and identities; there is no need to set off on a prolonged and arduous trek to a 'new world' and leave everything behind.

Language and communication are to be seen as tools of state control and subversion. In a sense, almost the whole Internet is

based on written language. And there are many subversive linguistic strategies, including satire, neologisms and redefined meanings that can be interpreted as consciousness-raising and subversive practices. To give just one brief recent example, the 18th Party Congress (十八大 *shibada*), a phrase that was blocked during the event, has been mockingly referred to online as similar-sounding 'Sparta' (斯巴达 *sibada*), sometimes with allusions to similarities with the strict and slave-based military-dominated social system of that prominent city-state in ancient Greece.

In the Internet Age, communication has rightly been identified as the dominant ideology (cf. Castells, Habermas, and others), in the sense that communicative supervision and surveillance are executed in the name of making sure that everything goes smoothly. In contemporary urban China, owners and managers of Internet platforms, alongside state agencies in charge of propaganda take on this role. Keeping an eye on the communications of charismatic leaders, the state's goal is to keep things simple and prevent alternative and complex meanings from spreading. To achieve this, the state maintains a general narrative of Internet activities as potentially addictive, and thus legitimizes its requiring of (often corporate) informants to notify them if boundaries of 'harmony' are breached. This may be a process intrinsic to life in urban China, but it is also aided by state intrusion and censorship practices. Furthermore, if someone is doing something that is deemed or portrayed as

politically or morally wrong, a Human Flesh search (人肉搜索 *renrousousuo*) identifies and punishes the culprit. This search for hitherto anonymous people's name and address details (then used to shame and blame and demand explanations or justice) is an online collaboration between many people to find out as much information as possible about a certain topic. It is often initiated in a grassroots fashion, and can be directed at a variety of issues, linked to videos of a woman who kills cats with her high heels, or pictures of officials wearing wristwatches that cost many times more than they could feasibly afford on their salaries. Consequently, a (nameless) state equivalent to Human Flesh search also leads to identification and harassment of the person involved. Related to this, there are state campaigns geared at assimilating conflicting narratives. There is an army of so-called 'Web commentators' (网络评论员 *wangluo pinglunyuan*) — better known as 'Fifty-Cent-Party' or 'Five-Mao-Party' (五毛党 *wumao dang*), referring to the money they are allegedly paid for each pro-government comment they post online — that actively manipulates the Internet discourse on public opinion.

This said, the scale of the nation-state seems less than helpful when it comes to analyzing and assessing the meanings of activities in Chinese-language cyberspace, as it would encourage a dichotomous perspective of state control vs. civic resistance, rather than help us transcend it. Oftentimes reality is more complex than it appears, and a state-centric view of looking at

China and its people is not the only way of seeing. Underneath the visible censorship vs. dissident resistance to censorship, many confusing things are transpiring on a various spatial scales, from individual to global.

Cyberspace is still seen and rendered as area of political (and academic) marginality — due to the ‘virtual’ not being accepted as being quite as real and significant as the physical. Yet through the placeless place of cyberspace, netizens are rewritten (or rather, re-writing themselves) into conscious agents of change. ‘Isolated’ online communities may be less isolated and marginal than we assume. I would thus argue that we can only understand where China and its people are headed if we grasp the central role of cyberspace in the development of Chinese society as a whole (or its urban sub-segment). Doing so would mean dealing with uncertain and often contradictory circumstances and trajectories, and what emerges is certainly no linear narrative from less to more progress, less to more ‘civilized’ or ‘harmonious’ (the preferred narrative of the Chinese party-state), or from less to more ‘democracy’ (the preferred narrative adopted by many ‘Western’ observers). Yet adopting this way of seeing might provide a useful hedging against technologically or otherwise deterministic trajectories. In the following two sections I will suggest a framework that I hope may be useful for this endeavor.

## Towards Conceptualizing Cyber-Urban Spaces of Dissent and Autonomy (SoDA)

The parts of urban society engaged in online activities have begun shifting their focus from a 'social existence' to a 'spatial existence,' i.e. away from changing themselves to fit their surroundings and toward actively changing their everyday surroundings to build an alternative world (Lefebvre, 1991). In this context, what Castells (2012) calls 'spaces of outrage' are spaces inhabited by people who are discontented with the present, while his 'spaces of hope' are inhabited by people who believe in the possibility of change. With Castells, I believe that "[t]he transition from outrage to hope is accomplished by deliberation in the space of autonomy" (Castells, 2012, p. 224, emphasis in original). Castells conceptualizes this new space as a "hybrid of cyberspace and urban spaces" (ibid, p. 222), as a 'third space' where grassroots forms of deliberation take place, and where movements begin before "*they become a movement by occupying the urban space*, be it the standing occupation of public squares or the persistence of street demonstrations. The space of the movement is always made of an interaction between the space of flows on the Internet and wireless communication networks, and the space of places of the occupied sites and of symbolic buildings targeted by protest actions" (ibid, emphasis in original). Castells, et al. also distinguish between anger/outrage and hope: "The culture of fear rises alongside the

embryos of cultures of hope” (Castells, et al., 2012, p. 4). When “[f]ear is overcome by sharing and identifying with others in a process of communicative action, [t]hen anger takes over” (ibid).

Yet what do we gain (and what do we lose) by so radically restricting the intersection between cyberspace and urban space to what is observable and measurable, to a network society paradigm, and to a Habermasian-style communicative rationality that (arguably) has outlived its usefulness (or at least its applicability to non-European contexts)? Do not insurgencies happen at all kinds of spatial scales? Is not action more than ‘social action’? Are not individual identities and ideas as important as shared ones? Clearly, “[n]ew avenues of political change, through autonomous capacity to communicate and organize, have been discovered by a young generation of activists, beyond the reach of the usual methods of corporate and political control” (Castells, 2012, p. 21). While we follow the ‘seeds of social change’ being ‘spread by the wind of hope,’ I wonder whether the Internet is indeed merely one tool of many for spreading and coordinating revolts and social movements (Castells, 2012; Lim, 2006)? What happens to us as netizens-citizens before these social movements become visible and ‘take place’?

If there were clear conceptual boundaries between the virtual and the physical, then our material lives would not include virtual realities and virtuality would have nothing to do with our emplaced everyday lives. Yet our cyber-urban everyday

spaces include manifestations in both the social practices of their proponents and an essential nature. To label one as virtual and the other as physical (or even, 'real') dismisses and ignores both the reality of our imagination and the imaginations of reality. Boundary is best interpreted as a fluid concept with a relational dynamic, and even if physical boundaries exist, their transgression across virtual boundaries makes change possible. Also, our bodies are a private space in public, just as we view most of our online activities. The activity of intentionally creating or engaging in online conversations ties authors to a public space, while the activities of reading and thinking remain more private. All these four realms of virtual, physical, public, and private can only be appropriately mapped if we recognize and acknowledge the conflation of material and mental sensations and perceptions.

In an effort to bridge pervasive dualisms that arguably are to blame for our ignoring of all that lies beyond observable and measurable, I now introduce a conceptual framework that allows us to uncover the ongoing yet more hidden aspects of the production of (mental-ideational and material) emancipatory spaces in urban China. This bridging requires no less than a re-wiring of our mental practices, around a focus on the production of space and place as well as the interactive processes of agency-altering social learning that happen within. Such a model also requires the reassertion of critical social theory into a space that is constantly under construction, constituted through

interactions, and can be seen as what Doreen Massey calls a 'sphere of coexisting heterogeneity' (Massey, 2005). Acts of online production are real in the sense that the resulting sphere of coexisting heterogeneity and its discursive structure opens up narrative imaginaries and possibilities for action. These actions become a part of lived reality for individual subjects, regardless of whether those imaginaries result in visible 'social action' or not.

Keeping in view the shifting geographies of thoughts and ideas in urban China, I suggest considering how the virtual-physical and public-private creates various interconnected 'Spaces of Dissent and Autonomy' (SoDA) and how these spaces are used to counter the colonization of 'concrete' everyday life in urban China. Augmented by the lack of clear borders as well as their constant transcendence – between private and public, virtual and physical urban space (or between the peripheral and the central, in Lefebvre's terms) – SoDA allow people to better understand and problematize issues. Yet as they are based on individual intentionalities and resulting local rationalities, these localized spaces are eclectic and ephemeral and are thus less open to well-established methods of analysis.

This framework is the result of my empirical as well as theoretical engagement with the Chinese Internet, and represents embedded spatial practices as Lefebvrian lived, representational space. The framework suggests a significance of lived SoDA for both China's ongoing cultural and political

transformation and for scholarly analyses of these social changes. The Cyber-Urban has four components: place of production; production of narrative; place of presentation; and reception (consumption) in place (see Figure 1 for illustration). I now provide an overview of the implications that come with the conceptual model and then represent its four components in turn.

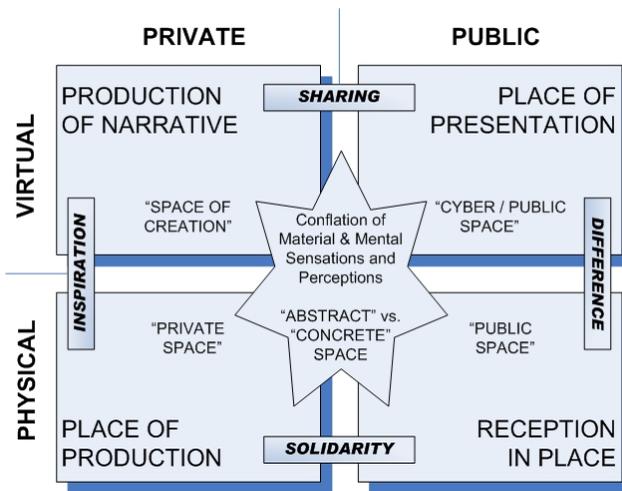


Figure 1: Cyburban Spaces of Dissent and Autonomy (SoDA)

Let me circumscribe the core argument by drawing on writer Henry Miller’s insight that “[w]e are always in two worlds at once, and neither of them is the world of reality. One is the world we think we are in, the other is the world we would like to be in” (Miller, 1957, p. 144). I argue that these two worlds come in

pairs; the former produces and reproduces the latter, and the latter anticipates and produces new variations of the former. Cyburban China's SoDA contains and allows insights into both of these worlds, and into the free and creative agency that imagines and ultimately brings about a new way of everyday life in a new form of a cyber-urban civil sphere.

To an extent, SoDA are an attempt to re-construct Habermas's "public sphere" for an era of postmodern cyber politics. These spaces take over some of the functions of a 'public sphere' but without intentionally (or even actually) being one. Rejecting the construction of a similar kind of new meta-narrative, cyber-urban SoDA are not confined to the limitingly modern imaginings often associated with a 'public sphere.' For example, they are experienced and constructed differently by different actors (cf. Haraway, 1991); they are also multiply differentiated in relation to one another, and possessed of numerous overlapping and partly incommensurable attributes (Gregory, 1993). At the same time, SoDA, arising "on the margins of the homogenized realm" (Lefebvre 1991, p. 373), and rooted in the informal spaces of everyday life, are at the center of social struggle. Such struggle over and within these spaces creates difference, defines the autonomous and counter-hegemonic narratives that keep these struggles alive, gives oppositional political activities a place for representation, and keeps differences from being absorbed. SoDA are therefore spaces that create a sense of wonder and possibility, and, at the same time,

spaces where people acquire (some of) the tools to deal with (some of) the uncertainties in their lives. In this sense, SoDA with their in-built diversity are the Ur-sprung (etymologically the 'originary source—or leap') of thought: they are the source that gives birth to thought.

Positioning SoDA within the larger realm of China's civil sphere, they can be conceived as dialogical spaces which – through the conduits of consciousness and conscious thought – shape individual personal, cultural, and political identities, and increasingly influence the formatting of 'news' and public participation. These spaces supplement and unbalance conventional public space by creating new shared meanings and processes that unsettle and perturb hegemonic narratives. This geography is central to understanding the spatial implications of online activities and allows us to interpret them as a catalyst of change, rather than as mere virtual entertainment without any apparent purpose. To unmask practices that have been overlooked or silenced (often through analytical foci on dialectical, instead of dialogical, frameworks), it is conducive to identify the key (individual and institutional) bodies and agencies that operate in them. It is equally important to consider the processes by which the power relations between these people and groups continually transform. One difficulty that emerges is that SoDA tend to be antiestablishment and occasionally subversive. They are often kept underground, hidden in the sea of words that is the Chinese-language

cyberspace, and are thus hard to study with conventional methods. A related difficulty is that it is not easy to determine what exactly to look for, and that even if we knew what to look for, there remain ethical considerations regarding whether we should publish our findings.

## **Spaces of Dissent and Autonomy: four components**

To better understand the way in which Internet activity as spatial practice manifests itself in contemporary China, it is helpful to distinguish four components. I now briefly delineate these components in turn.

### **1) Place of Production (and our physical private existence)**

“The goal of individual action in and on any language system is twofold: to find those areas of free play that suggest self-creation and freedom, and to disrupt if not change the totalizing impetus of the system as a whole” (Russell, 1985, p. 269).

“It is very important to have space in the mind. If the mind is not overcrowded, not ceaselessly occupied, then it can listen to that dog barking, to the sound of the train crossing the distant bridge, and also be fully aware of what is being said by a person talking here. Then the mind is a living thing, it is not dead” (Krishnamurty, 1964/1989, not paginated).

Humans enjoy self-determined activities. As many writers

and Internet practitioners corroborate, slowing down to the speed of reading, the speed of thought, and the speed of writing can be a deeply fulfilling experience. French novelist and critic Marcel Proust wrote that to read is “to receive a communication with another way of thinking, all the while remaining alone, that is, while continuing to enjoy the intellectual power that one has in solitude and that conversation dissipates immediately” (cited from Crain, 2007). To write is to utilize one’s intellectual power, engage other ways of thinking, and negotiate differences of opinion. Writing also keeps track of differing levels of authority behind different pieces of information as well as of the self-doubts this creates, and eventually develops enough boldness to follow our desire to produce and contribute our own voice to the cacophony ‘out there’. If “[d]efined in terms of the system of discourse, the individual can find freedom only by submitting to the code, even as he or she tries to subvert it” (Russell, 1985, p. 269). Rooted in and defined in terms of the physical and deeply private space in which a writer sits and contemplates her individual and idiosyncratic response to this code, empowers herself to see each action as not only being a part of a collective discourse, but also as being a part of the body/self, rooted in a conscious and conscientious, intentional and autonomous core.

In this context, the *Place of Production* becomes the location not only of the body and its head and hands, but also the locus where conscious awareness unfolds, where the netizen imagines the self as place, object, and agent, all at once (the reminder of

the inescapable “conflation of material & mental sensations and perceptions in Figure 1). At the same time – and we often need to remind ourselves of this – (the production of) writing is an immensely physical act. Experiencing immersion within a solidaristic structure that is in continual flux, a flow of text, images, sounds, and sensations, “the direct relationship of the lived, the dematerialized, and the re-presented body calls attention to being in one’s own body — reifying the body as the foundation of consciousness staged within geo-political, technological, and poetic space” (Lukkas, 2000, p. 19). The continual flux and temporality the body/mind is exposed to accentuate the ephemerality of the body and the elusiveness of the mind. They allow the practitioner to expose the self to the digital narratives that – intentionally or not – question the perception of authentic experience. In this sense, the continual flux and flow of information frees us from the inherent human desire to constantly fixate and keep a grip on our thoughts and experiences. The emerging playful mode and mood washes away or loosens up preordained thought patterns, and allows for multiple points of entry and ways of seeing, for a freer flow of thoughts and ideas, thus facilitating creative engagement with those thoughts and ideas that draw their attention, and eventually, to stop observing and start excogitating and eventually – through the physical act of writing an online contribution – come to terms with opinions deemed worthy of sharing with others, and the world.

## 2) Production of Narratives (in private virtuality)

“At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer”  
(Benjamin, 1969, p. 262).

While an online practitioner’s body, of course, continues to live in the offline/physical world, the actual production of a narrative by a private individual takes place in the mental space of creation. The private, physical space of production reasserts the reality and authenticity of the experiences of browsing and net-surfing. Yet as the practitioner’s actual thoughts and ideas are being stimulated and influenced by those she finds online, she is inspired and eventually moves on to imagine and then *produce her own narrative*. Freeing themselves from alienation, from being “passive spectators” or “passive consumers of the spectacle” (Debord, 1967/1994), myriad netizens develop a grassroots agency that empowers them to act, i.e. to become creators of their own narrative, or what Debord calls “active producers of life” (ibid). Netizens remain in the physical world, but concomitantly the virtual world offers a sense of belonging, a fertilizer to creativity, and radically new forms of organizing thoughts and actions.

Private virtual space is an ontological construction that shares some characteristics of material/embodied space, in having a “geography, physics, a nature and a rule of human law” (Benedikt, 1991, p. 123). Similar to material space, the virtual provides lived experience, as it acts as a “repository for cultural

meaning — it is popular culture, its narratives created by its inhabitants that remind us who we are, it is life as lived and reproduced in pixels and virtual texts” (Fernbeck, 1997, p. 37). Virtual space, like material space, is interactive, and allows for imaginaries that create within them new resources for the articulation of meaning and identity (cf. Anderson, 1983).

Fusing private and public space, actions (such as writing a blog post or comment, or ‘tweeting’ on weibo), once imagined and executed, have a direct and immediate consequence on the virtual world. If and in what ways a now-public post then creates a virtual dynamic of links and comments that reflects back on the writer’s and readers’ private, or even physical spaces, depends upon the reception of the narrative in cyberspace, the authority and trust a certain practitioner has established, and on readers’ interest in the topics explored. As Walter Benjamin (1969) recognized in the context of film, discourse on political issues has long been mediated by electronic machines. Yet I have no doubt that the Internet holds potential for authorial power concerning the production of dissenting narratives that goes far beyond film or television.

### **3) Place of Presentation (making space for shared meanings)**

“Our representational apparatus has been radically transformed by the computer revolution, while our global culture is perceived predominantly through lens and screen; our perceptions are simultaneously real and virtual” (Dear, 2004, p. 30).

In contemporary society, slowly reaching more advanced stages of the Internet Age, the diversity of mediated expression and interaction increasingly mirrors and rivals the fluidity and subtleness of unmediated culture. What began once as a small and tractable cyberspace has long expanded to the point where it comes into conflict with, helps to change, and is changed by, mainstream culture. In this sense, cyberspace has become “simultaneously real and virtual” (ibid). In this context, cyberspace is best understood as a new kind of social space where the private is narrated for the public, and interaction is initiated and controlled by the one who narrates. What is different to other social spaces is that at a time when anyone can publish anything, any text available in the public, virtual space becomes truly ‘public’ not when you press the ‘post’ or ‘publish’ button, but when others choose to read what you have written. Correspondingly, in this kind of setting it is also likely that those who have nothing to say will be saying it to no-one. Therefore, virtual places become real for a specific netizen to the extent that they become ‘populated’ with the people whose thoughts and opinions they value and put in relation to their own or those of other people. Cyberspace also becomes physical in the sense that it becomes the (embodied) place to ‘go’ to in order to ‘meet’ these people (again) and catch up on their latest thoughts.

The larger cyberspace is a *Place of Presentation* of multiple narratives that connect thoughts, actions, and interactions, thus creating shared consciousness and meanings from myriad

distinctly private spaces, and making space for shared meanings. It is the place where narratives are presented to the public, where action that was once hidden in individual consciousness and private writing emerges, and where the potential for larger social action becomes manifest. As most online writing takes place in private spaces, cyber-public space becomes the public arena in which activity 'takes place', in effect the place to be seen and noticed. These virtual public spaces are often filled with individual people who are absorbed in their own concerns and who are not sharing or truly meeting (in person). Yet as long as one can 'hear' the other voices, cyber-public spaces are nonetheless sites where shared experiences are happening and interactions take place. These shared experiences spur imagination and thought, and provoke an individual's 'right to difference.' Following Adams (1998), virtual places can hence be mapped onto physical places and processes and vice versa, and this makes possible conclusions about current transformations of cyburban social life. Nonetheless, how to convey such an individual's experience of a shared event remains deeply artistic. All we can do as scholars is to attune ourselves to and convey its unfinished fluidity, the flowing edges of individual identities, and the half-lights of shared experiences.

#### **4) Reception in Place (making space for shared agency)**

Public (social) space is essential for the understanding and

expression of life. Humans that are cut off from seeing and comprehending the external world are deprived of the possibility of meaningful and fulfilling activity. According to Guy Debord (1967/1994), they are nothing but submissive children. Yet while (what we traditionally perceive as) public space is dissolving due to pressures of privatization and globalization (or in Castells's terms, the "space of flows"), examples of old, new, and renewed public spaces dot the whole planet, in attempts to "create the city as a meaningful place" (Castells, 2004, p. 92). Castells' and others' empirical observation of urban renewal of public spaces at a global scale points to the notion that cyber-public space has the civic potential to influence the *Reception in Place*, by creating thoughts and ideas that have the power to bring about shared meanings, solidarity, and resulting emplaced social change. Such actions can then create new place-based norms and disciplines and thereby recreate cyburban public space as 'thick place' — thus offering a civil sphere in which the ideal of solidarity no longer remains abstract, but becomes a concrete, lived part of cyburban everyday life.

According to Castells, what matters when thinking of public space is "the spontaneity of uses, the density of the interaction, the freedom of expression, the multifunctionality of space, and the multiculturalism of the street life" (Castells, 2004, p. 91). As traditional public space is shrinking and increasingly deprived of these characteristics (particularly in China), alternative counter-spaces are imagined and constructed in cyberspace. The

processes underlying this shift towards the resulting new forms of communication and social interaction bring about a historical shift of the public space from the traditional institutional realm to the new communication space (Castells, 2007). These new media have hence become the social space where power struggles are fought and decided (ibid). It seems that the conflation of material and mental sensations and perceptions that permeate private and public, virtual and physical, abstract and concrete space is conducive to creating a new kind of city—a city that puts into question these conceptual crutches, and along with them, the dominance of a “space of flows” that is responsible for a homogenized public space deprived of life. The local, emplaced reception of the thoughts and ideas immanent in online posts and comments are creating a new urban public space, with new possibilities for individual and collective civic renewal and solidaristic action.

The core function of all these four spaces is that they challenge the imposed silence and normalized quiet of hegemonic power, through creating and presenting narratives and perspectives that differ from those provided to legitimize the hegemonic/official story and its main protagonists. Research efforts intent on catching a glimpse of the changing operations of these power relations hinge on the accuracy of our mental map of these bodies and agencies. These projects are geographical in that these power relations are produced, reproduced, modified, and resisted by urban bodies (i.e. individual agents, groups and

institutions) that are always in relation to one another and acted upon in cyburban space.

## Concluding Remarks

In contemporary urban China the virtual has become a space of relative freedom and autonomy in which people can develop their faculties to think and express themselves. Inhabiting an environment with countless professional limitations, Chinese people compensate by going online, to an everyday space where they can find themselves and others, vent or express their own views. Cyberspace hence augments and expands, rather than replaces, China's pre-Information Age physical public space. Discussions of the potentialities of bounded translocal networks (regarding for example, South/North Korea, China, Asia, or beyond), where boundary-crossing is often tied to various spatial scales (local, regional, global), should also incorporate these new virtual spaces.

As observers, changing our way of seeing, zooming in on netizens' agency and spaces allows us to catch a fleeting glimpse of the convivial and autonomous spaces of hope, the spaces in which living together actually takes place, where individuals gather around a public space of untrammelled expression, where through expressing their views and exposure to other differing views, cultivate an enhanced consciousness, and learn about the

manipulation of symbols and of people, a manipulation they are both exposed to and capable of themselves.

Despite often violent clashes of opinion, I suggest that SoDA are best conceived as fields of peaceful coexistence rather than fields of battle, i.e. an often uncritical amplification of ambivalent or opposing opinions. The emerging counter-discourses in China's cyberspace balance simplistic and trivializing official narratives in ways that create irreconcilable controversy. By doing so, this counter-discourse concomitantly creates the platform for a civilized engagement that does not insult people's intelligence by assimilating them into the sole and dominant official narrative. In Amartya Sen's formulation: the freedom that comes with an increased range of choices leads to a broader desire for articulation. People exposed to a diversity of thoughts and ideas then gradually feel less compelled to follow along meekly, and instead develop their own critical apparatuses and skills of expression, and eventually the shared imaginations, meanings, and networks of social relations that underlie all collaborative civic engagement.

Chinese cyberspace is permeated with expressions of both the dissatisfaction with existing values and the willingness for a search for new values. Theoretically, what starts out as escapist pirate utopias has the capacity to result in a more solidaristic society living in a convivial cosmopolis. So (how) is this happening? Through 'spaces of individuation' (Giddens, 1991) where individual projects form that might eventually become

shared, networking themselves into shared spaces of hope? We can perhaps (and should certainly try to) track down those insurgencies that through peaceful action lead to alternative economic cultures or spaces of hope. However, although the Internet provides opportunities for expanding the space for political participation in China, the actual realization of such a public civil sphere depends on intentional human actions that move from a virtual 'e-sphere' into everyday urban realities. Instead of speculating on whether SoDA will overcome (imagined) nation-state hegemony, further research should focus on how specific urban spaces and environments are re-imagined and re-created through and in tandem with our virtual worlds.

This paper evolved after a decade-long observation of the fast growing and ever-changing Chinese-language Internet, and is arguably not a derivative application of Western theories to a Chinese case. The applicability and worth of the presented conceptual framework to China and beyond will have to be assessed by research and case studies. In particular, as one referee pointed out, we need more studies on the specific mechanisms and actors that control the interactional (third) spaces that lie between but extend well into the virtual and physical realms.

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