RESISTANCE IN DISGUISE: UNDERSTANDING THE EFFECT OF CHINESE

SERIALIZED INTERNET FICTION ON DEMOCRATIZATION AND

DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

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Introduction

A major stream of study of the internet involves explorations of its potential for facilitating the development of democratic society. Several sub-streams exist within this topic. First, a body of literature examines how the rise of internet technology led to the democratization of certain nations (Park, 2010; Tunnard, 2003). Second, scholars examine how the internet is currently affecting the potential for democratization in non-democratic nations (Lagerkvist, 2010). Third, scholars have also explored the potential for the internet to facilitate the further development of democracy in Western society. Research in this stream is less cohesive, ranging from studies directly concerned with development of democracy and the public sphere, such as Benkler's research on "Commons-based peer production" (Benkler, 2013; Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006) or studies on the impact of the internet on elections and political participation (Johnson and Kaye, 2014; Coleman and Shane, 2012; Hess, 2009), to studies that are concerned with the social implications of the internet that nevertheless are relevant in a broad sense to the development of democratic society (Sinnreich and Latonero, 2014; Hutchings, 2011; Kim, Kavanaugh and Hult, 2011; Shen and Williams, 2011; Mesch and Talmud, 2010; Richardson et. Al, 2010; Pasquale, 2007; Eugenia, 2006; Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Zimmerman and Meyer, 2005). A final and relatively recent development in research on the internet and democracy arises from whistleblower insights about government access to metadata and the threat of state infringement on private information (Deibert 2013).

It is interesting to note, however, that although these streams are all concerned to some degree with the impact of the internet on democratic society (its current or future

development), they often remain disconnected and lack a coherent framework that demonstrate possible links and relevance between these topics. Yet these links do exist and can be beneficial. For instance, literature that explores the impact of the internet and censorship can be united with literature on metadata surveillance through a framework of control of information. Indeed, the goal of this paper is to explore the various layers of the control of information and how these layers interact with processes of democratization. In particular, this paper examines a rarely explored internet medium, Chinese Serialized Internet Fiction (henceforth SIF), as a case study to demonstrate the necessity of applying a broader framework to understand how the internet facilitates projects of democratization. SIF refers to fiction that are serialized daily on specific publishing platforms on the internet, where anyone with access to the internet can read (early parts free, later parts through micro-credit) and write fiction. The serialization process and the internet platform provides a rapid feedback cycle, which, combined with the media's focus on narrative, produces interesting effects that are useful for not only topics of democratizing non-democratic nations, but also for topics related to the development of civil community and a critical discursive community that are relevant to societies that already have a democratic political system.

Indeed, in developing a control of information framework, the case study seeks to bridge the divide that separates literature on the internet regarding democratic and non-democratic societies. Specifically, this paper examines the various layers of control of people's thought and behaviour through controlling information to reveal the inadequacy of fixating on censorship as the primary obstacle to achieving a free public sphere. In

China specifically, more subtle strategies like strategic construction and invoking of framing effects arguably exert a stronger effect in controlling the thoughts and beliefs of its people, especially in light of extensive effort on the part of its "netizens" in by-passing censorship efforts. Processes of democratization cannot be tied exclusively to the development of or into a democratic political system. This is not to say that a democratic political system is not necessary, but that it is not a sufficient condition for democratic society.

Indeed, the subconscious logic of representative democracy as the teleological end-goal of social development (found for example in Lagerkvist, 2010) can obscure not only significant advances in societies currently moving towards democratization, but also stymie research on democratic development in Western countries through producing the illusion that democratization is complete. In the case of nations moving towards democracy, the privileging of a political democratization can obscure important changes on social and cultural levels by framing the criteria for assessing what is effective: changes that facilitate the emergence of local communities of interest may be significant for the development of democracy on a social and cultural level yet may not directly contribute to the establishment of a democratic government. Chinese Serialized Internet Fiction is not only a site where young netizens contest the control over information, but also a significant bedrock for social and cultural democratization by harnessing a collective social imagination.

Review of Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

A brief review of literature can help illuminate some of the gaps in research that justify the use of a broader framework of information control. Perhaps one of the recurring cognitive tropes in literature on the democratizing potential of the internet is its role as providing a platform where communities of interest can be organized, events planned, and members connected. Indeed, early reports on the Arab Spring focus on the role of social media in helping concerned individuals gather into collective protest groups and in coalescing international interests in support of the movement (Kassim, 2012). However, the apparent success of the internet in serving to unite individuals of interest into politically potent groups can obscure the importance of other social and cultural factors that contributed equally (if not more) to the final result of democratization.

Tunnard (2003) serves as a good example of a case where the apparent success of the internet in serving as a platform for uniting individuals into a political force needs to be attenuated by consideration of other factors. Tunnard (2003) explores "the unprecedented use and impact of the Internet" by non-violent resistance groups like Otpor in "the downfall of Slobadan Milosevic" (p. 97). Specifically, the article examines how the internet was used not only to form resistance communities (p. 112-3), but also to break through the government's control of channels of information by posting and distributing information on the internet (p. 112-3). However, in his conclusion, Tunnard acknowledges the limitations of fixating on a climatic political event as the privileged route to democratization by noting that the success of Otpor was precisely that "it was not a political party but a 'community', where different peoples and opinions could be heard and tolerated" (p. 116). The negative reaction to Otpor announcing its intention to

become a political party (p. 116) lends support to the idea that democratization should not merely focus on achieving certain political structures at the expense of substantive benefits like the maintenance of a community where difference can be tolerated and articulated.

Tunnard's analysis of the internet's role in Milosevic's overthrow also needs to be attenuated by consideration of the technological environment of Serbia. Tunnard examines three factors that contributed to the internet's role in facilitating the overthrowing of the Milosevic government: interactive communication creating "a much greater level of intimacy and feeling of belonging", anonymity of authorship, and the use of "powerful, visual images" (p. 114-5). Yet Tunnard's Serbia of the 1990s represents an information poor environment with a relatively underdeveloped information infrastructure (p. 113). The critical functions of the internet as found by Tunnard may not necessarily be as useful in an information rich environment: characterized by not only high immersion in information technology but also more sophisticated technologies of controlling information. For example, the anonymity of identity on the internet so significant in Tunnard's analysis is questionable in an information rich environment where governments have abundant access to IP address and geographic location information through metadata surveillance (Deibert, 2013). Indeed, even an internet user's real identity could be accessed by certain governments. China's continuous project to push for real name registration on the internet is one such example of the limitations of applying research on information poor environments to information rich environments. Whether images and two-way communications can have the same degree of impact in an

information rich environment is also questionable. As information technology continues to develop, it is important to maintain awareness of how the changing information environment complicates and alters the critical points of engagement in the contestation of information control.

Many of the problems associated with literature on the internet and democratization of non-democratic nations can also be seen in literature on the political impact of the internet in Western, democratic countries. Hess (2009), for example, examines the effectiveness of YouTube as providing a space of deliberation and resisting state control. While Hess acknowledges the potential power of user response to issue videos in the form of comments, response videos, or parody videos (p. 415-6), his conclusion forecloses further analysis by declaring that the entertainment focus of the medium combined with the casual nature of the environment fails to provide a space for serious and sustained democratic deliberation (p. 427). Hess goes on to suggest that YouTube provides a false sense of democratic participation that could threaten to diminish participation in traditional forms of democratic practice like petitions or protests (p. 429). Interestingly, although Hess frames YouTube responses in terms of vernacular discourse theory (e.g. Sloop and Ono, 1997), his critique of YouTube fails to recognize the importance of minority voices that the theory focuses on. Indeed, Hess' persistent privileging of traditional democratic processes like "town hall debate" (p. 426) and "letter writing, petitions, or protest" (p. 429) demonstrates a system of evaluating democratic impact that is still bound up with a fixed political system. Hess approaches the evaluation of YouTube with a fixed sense of what constitutes political agency: "[YouTube users']

response is not heard by government officials or YouTube's parent company, Google" (p. 426).

In these articles, several routine cognitive lens emerge that restrict the authors' evaluation of the internet's impact on projects of democratization. Most significantly, the tendency to assess impact with respect to political effect often lead to oversight in important aspects of the internet's function, such as its role in establishing community or disseminating culture. Authors also tend to reinforce the absolute divide between democratic and non-democratic nations, leading to analyses that fixate on stereotypically democratic concepts like censorship, freedom of speech and protest. While it is understandable that examinations of democratization tend to elicit understanding based on the scope of nations and structures of oppositional social groups, these rigid group and interest definitions may no longer be tenable. Not only is the distinction between democratic and non-democratic nations obstructive to the exploration of internet's effect on democracy and civil society, positioning citizens in opposition against dominating governments or businesses also assume a binary structure that is too rigid. Indeed, the crisp distinction between "traditional" and "new media" or "internet" in these articles could also no longer be tenable in today's information rich environment.

This paper seeks to broaden the scope of current research by proposing and working within three foundational contexts relevant to the current, information rich environment. First, censorship and surveillance form only a part of a broader framework of information control that is practiced by not only government and business entities, but by all users of information technology to different degrees. As such, it is not sufficient to

merely examine access to information. Attention should also be given to how information is manipulated and presented to users, as well as its specific movement. Second, a rigid model of binary opposition between the people and some dominating structure (whether it is the government or the corporation) is no longer tenable. These entities engage in fluid interactions that shift between resistance, cooperation, cooptation, adaptation, and negotiation. Indeed, it is important to recognize that the "online community" is not a cohesive and coherent entity, but rather comprises fluid communities and subjectivities; the assumption of a "people" that behaves in expected and fixed ways is untenable in today's environment. Finally, it is important to recognize that advancements in information technology have affected not only our online behaviour, but also our offline behaviours. Advancements in information technology have changed not only how people connect, but also how information connects. As such, media scholars should be aware not only that offline media are impacted by internet technologies, but also that specific internet technologies cannot be examined in isolation. For example, Hess (2009) restricts his examination of the political potency of YouTube to the comments and responses on the platform and omits exploration of interactions across different platforms made possible through video embedding.

Park (2010) provides a useful middle ground to bridging some of these problematic assumptions and the associated enclosing of subject areas. Park's (2010) exploration of the post-revolution democratic development in South Korea straddles the gap between literature on political democratization and literature on development of democratic participation and processes in already politically democratic nations.

Significantly, Park positions the article against "a dominant state-centered model in current critical discourse, which portrays civil society and the public domain as mere operative components of state and/or corporate power" (p. 199). Rather than looking at democratization as predominantly a political project, Park is interested in democracy as ultimately grounded in a kind of community – Jean-Luc Nancy's "inoperative community". For Park, inoperative community is the spontaneous convergence of social forces and groups because of a sense of "'being-together'" or "'being-in-common'" (p. 199) rather than a society that is held together through rigid structures and rules.

To illustrate inoperative community in practice, Park draws on South Korean society and the Red Devil movement during the 2002 world cup and the 2004 protest against the impeachment of President Roh Mu Hyun as examples where citizens spontaneously formed into collectives that acted to promote and defend democratic and civil values. Critically, what is particularly valuable for inoperative community for Park is a shared culture of mutual care that transcends national boundaries (p. 209) and a shared schema of peaceful and civil protest based on recent memories of South Korea's democratization in the 1980s and 90s (p. 216). Interestingly, even though Park explores democracy as based in qualities of community and recognizes the important role of culture in creating inoperative communities, her analysis of the role of the internet's role in the Red Devil movement and the 2004 anti-impeachment protest is limited to acknowledging its role in organizing gatherings and distributing media. Indeed, a major gap in Park's research is the role of the internet is transmitting culture between

generations and during events like the Red Devil movement and the anti-impeachment protests.

What is SIF and why is it important to examine?

Chinese Serialized Internet Fiction refers to both a series of online platforms (or media) where users can write and read fiction, and the novels (the predominant form on the platform) that are produced on these platforms. The most significant difference between SIF and other forms of novels, whether released in print or online, is that novels are serialized on the internet in very small chunks on a daily basis. Compared with chapters in traditional novels, which generally tend to have some kind of thematic unity, the small unit of serialization (the current trend is on average two 2000-3000 Chinese character[1] updates[2] per day) means that content are organized almost arbitrarily by time and word count. While authors generally tend to have a broad outline for what happens in the novels, this small interval of serialization means that on a local and specific level, content is often open to improvisation and change. Indeed, it is not infrequent that authors have altered their outlines in response to their own creative inspirations or to reader pressure[3].

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[1] Depending on the nature of the writing, the conversion rate from Chinese to English ranges anywhere from 1.5 to 4 characters per English word.

[2] 更新, refers to both the act of releasing new content and the actual new content. Due to the inconsistency between different authors in numbering and organizing their content with respect to books, volumes, and chapters, and the lack of pages in online texts, I will be using the concept of update to reference specific SIF content. Thus, a (01-01-2015 update 2) citation refers to the second content update released on January 1, 2015 for the cited novel.

[3] For example author zhttty notoriously gave in to audience pressure on his second novel *Unlimited Future* ("Wuxian Weilai", 无限未来, *Qidian* January 2009).

These novel platforms provide a partial attention-meritocracy system similar to video blogging on YouTube: anyone can begin serializing a novel on the platform, and, after achieving enough audience attention, even sign a profit-sharing contract with the website. Contract writers receive payment through a mixture of profit-sharing from microcredit purchase of their novel updates (initially free, but becoming pay-per-update after a certain amount of updates) and advertising revenue assessed based on attention-economy (views, subscribers, favourites, votes etc.). In addition to the attention meritocracy, websites also hire editors, who not only communicate with contract writers, but also sample new writing and have the authority to promote novels through front page and sidebar advertisements.

Very little literature exists on SIF. This is not only because the medium is in Chinese, but also because few scholars treat the medium seriously, even within the Chinese literary community[4]. Because most authors are amateur writers, writing on the side in addition to their regular occupations, SIF novels can feature poor writing techniques, often with little literary merit. Indeed, the viewer demand for rapid updating of materials and the short "chapter" structure of updates means that SIF novels often feature linear plots, little character development, and are predominantly action-oriented. Authors often do not dare write extended set ups for a major plot moment or provide much detail on less immediately relevant settings or characters for fear of losing audience

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[4] Due to this scarcity of academic literature and interest on SIF, I have drawn on more popular sources to outline the nature of the medium. An additional difficulty is that the lack of academic interest also means that little statistical data is present regarding the rise of the genre and longitudinal data on popularity levels and consumer demographics. I therefore can only rely on personal observation as an extensive consumer of the medium to make extrapolations.

attention and interest. Indeed, it is not uncommon for an initially successful novel to suddenly fade in popularity due to a particularly slow or painful narrative arc. However, to dismiss SIF based on the quality of writing and content of novels would be overlooking the true value of the medium: its role in the construction, negotiation, and dissemination of information and culture.

To say that SIF possesses unique qualities unseen in other media is inaccurate. The qualities that make SIF a valuable medium to study, its peer production, fast feedback cycles, and mass, multi-way information transmission, can be found in other media forms on the internet, most significantly YouTube. What makes SIF particularly interesting is that quantitative changes have produced qualitative effects not seen elsewhere. Perhaps the closest parallel to SIF in Western internet is video blogs on YouTube. Video bloggers (vloggers) also produce content in small, independent chunks on a frequent basis, and often pay attention to viewer feedback. However, several differences exist between SIF and YouTube vloggers. First, vloggers on YouTube often do not achieve the same speed of production and audience attention to produce qualitative changes. Whereas the former may be due to lifestyle and production cost factors that could be altered, the latter is a socio-cultural situation that is difficult to replicate. Specifically, audiences on YouTube are fragmented by interest, and thus it is difficult to achieve a kind of coherent interest and participation that could be found on SIF (a situation which I will get into in the section on SIF's historical and cultural background).

More significantly, the nature of content, video blogs versus novels, lead to different audience consumption styles and interactions. Although video blogs appear to

present more explicit engagement with issues, I argue that the nature of blogs as personal opinion thwarts discussion and collective processes of cultural imagination and negotiation. Narratives in novels on the other hand, though seemingly more entertainment focused and driven by a fictional plot, can facilitate processes of social imagination and culture formation. In addition, the narrative content of SIF combined with the large quantity of novels that have been written and are simultaneously being written, enmeshes writers and authors in an inter-textual discussion that outsiders to the medium have difficulty accessing. This inter-text also helps authors achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the community's feedback and concerns. Finally, the narrative structure of SIF imposes a temporal continuity that links fragmented writings that emerge daily. In comparison to similar fragmentations on other internet media[5] like YouTube, Reddit, Twitter, and Instagram, the temporal continuity significantly improves the ability of irony in preserving its political and social edge (this will be dealt with in more detail in a later section).

Finally, before moving on to explore the historical and cultural factors that led to the popularity of SIF in China, it is worth noting that though this paper will mainly refer to specific novels and genres serialized on SIF platforms (websites like Qidian (Start Point), Chuangshi (Genesis), 17k (Read Together)), I do not operate under the presumption that the effects of these platforms are exclusively contained in their particular websites. Rather, these platforms are very much intersectional with other

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[5] A similar platform to SIF appears to be emerging on the internet called Novkey. However, since the platform is relatively new and very little has been written about it, this paper does not deal with it as a comparison. Indeed, much of the significance of SIF is due to its large quantity of viewers, and before Novkey acquires enough attention capital, YouTube presents a better parallel for the purposes of this study.

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internet media: not only do authors take inspiration from and reuse materials from other media sources, SIF novels' content re-enter the interest culture and community through various forms of commenting and allusion in other forms. In particular, it is worth noting that although serialization platforms like Qidian have integrated comment sections, user feedback usually occur through social media (QQ group chats) and Baidu Tieba (a Chinese communication platform that provides forum-like "bars" characterized by its highly specific topics and shifting audience and interests). The reason for this is likely the widespread practice of piracy, usually occurring after novels enter the pay-to-view period, fragmenting the specific websites on which readers consume the novels. In this study of SIF, I conceptualize SIF websites like Qidian as simultaneously an attractor and a catalyst. As an attractor, these websites draw in both prominent issues and cultural texts from the internet, and audience attention. As a catalyst, the content of SIF novels open up discussion, negotiation, and dissemination of information.

Historical development of SIF

Tracing the history of SIF is made difficult not only by the scarcity of academic literature on the medium, but also by its multi-sourced origins and problems of definition. According to the Chinese online encyclopedia Baidu Baike (the more popular version of Wikipedia in mainland China) page on "Internet Novels" ("网络小说")[6], the internet novel's development occurred in stages, with different characteristics for different geo-political regions (mainly distinguishing between Taiwan and mainland China). For

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[6] I use the Baidu Baike entry because it contains all of the information found on the Chinese Wikipedia page but with additional content.

example, in Taiwan, many early internet novels were posted on online bulletin boards and forums, and were mainly pornographic in content (Baike "Internet novels[7]"). In mainland China, many online publishing platforms existed in fragmented forms before the rise of large scale publishing platforms that specialized in commercial serialization of fiction such as Qidian. These precursor platforms included government funded or affiliated websites like "Chinese Writers' Web", non-government organization websites like the "Chinese Magic and Fantasy Union" (precursor to Qidian), and personally funded websites like "Rong Shu Xia" (Baike "Original Literature"[8])

In its early forms, internet fiction, though serialized, can be viewed more as the internet platform allowing talented writers to publish on a different medium. Indeed, the first online literature websites gained popularity through piracy of offline serialized fiction, notably Huang Yi's Wuxia (martial arts/history) novels (Baike, "Qidian Chinese web"[9]). This is followed by a period from approximately 1998 to 2002 where websites competed with each other through their contracts to publish certain popular novels that were serialized online (Baike, "Qidian Chinese web"). This period marks a transition from traditional literature to SIF in that some of these popular novels were being written by amateur writers. However, the momentum of traditional literature still persists not only in the style and length of writing but also in the monopoly of these celebrity authors over audience attention: literature is still dominated by big name authors, though the specific names have changed. While the "Qidian Chinese web" Baike page provides a detailed

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[7] 网络小说
[8] 原创文学
[9] 起点中文网

history of the period from 1998 to 2004 and the economic and structural developments in online fiction publishing platforms that led to Qidian's dominance in the field[10], this paper is more interested in the development of the Chinese online fiction field following Qidian's rise, when the number of writers increased drastically following the stabilization of these economic and structural changes.

Indeed, I argue that SIF only truly became a distinct platform separate from traditional publishing due to this explosion in writers. This change is not only a quantitative increase in writers, but also a qualitative shift in writing patterns, consumption styles, and attention investments. In the Qidian era (for which I refer to from 2004 to the present), though celebrity writers still exert a major influence, they no longer command reader's exclusive attention. Because novels are serialized in small chunks on a daily basis, novels serialized by celebrity authors are often consumed alongside less famous ones. If the print literature market is characterized by elimination of lower quality texts by higher quality texts and where celebrity authors have an inherent advantage due to their ability to draw fan attention and sales, the SIF market is characterized by a ranking system where lesser texts still acquire readers (after a reader finishes with the daily updates of famous texts). Indeed, because of the pace of serialization, texts are assessed on a daily basis and even texts with celebrity authors can fluctuate in and out of popularity. Thus, compared to a relatively serial stream of consumption of traditional

[10] From 2004 onwards, when Qidian was acquired by Shanda Interactive Entertainment Limited, one of China's biggest media conglomerates, Qidian faced little competition for several years. More recently, websites like Chuangshi, 17k, Jingjiang have risen to challenge some of Qidian's hold over the online literature market, but many of these websites only do so by catering to a specified type of reader (for example Jingjiang caters mainly to female readers). Qidian remains the most popular website.

novels, where the reader makes a selection and reads the text to completion (due to the text ending or other interrupting factors), SIF prompts a parallel stream of consumption where multiple texts are simultaneously being followed and the readers' selection process reoccurs daily.

In addition to development history of the medium, the development history of genres in SIF is also important, since it serves to outline a landscape of emerging and shifting interests in the online fiction community in China. Not surprisingly, early novels had roots in more traditional genres of fiction but as the number of writers on SIF platforms increased and shifted away from professional writers towards reader-writers, the genres and generic conventions also shifted. An interesting interaction between the medium history and genre history is that early celebrity writers and genre pioneers tend to define certain tropes and forms that retain their importance as the genre pass into the hands of more amateur writers. Inter-texts thus emerge within genres as earlier and more well-known conventions are reproduced, negotiated, or challenged by a wide range of amateur writers. As the amount of texts of a particular genre increases, these repeated tropes and plot structures becomes abstracted and acquire an additional layer of meaning with respect to its development in previous and contemporary texts. Over time and across multiple texts, readers tend to forget specific details of novels but retain information on structures, tropes, and main concerns.

For instance, the two most popular (almost ubiquitous) forms of novel opening are rebirth ("重生"), where the protagonist is reborn to an earlier time or different identity, and world-shift ("穿越"), where the protagonist travels to a different world (often due to

an accident and often involving rebirth). By later stages of a novel, readers may have forgotten the specific details of how the novel opened, due to contesting demands on memory from following several novels on a fragmented basis, but the reader retains an understanding of the protagonist based on his or her qualities relative to a set of evolving definitions of "rebirth" type or "world-shift" type person. As such, the reader's understanding of narrative events are often based not only on the text but also on a history of interrelated texts that the reader have read about or became aware off vicariously in the past (more on this later). This insight becomes particularly useful when considering how SIF texts are sensitive to and become an outlet for a wide range of personal and prevailing concerns of Chinese society.

To return to the development of genres, I also want to note that in this brief survey, I privilege genre popularizers over genre founders. This is partly because origins of genres are difficult to establish and defend. For instance, it is difficult to identify where the Wuxia (martial-arts/history) genre originated from in SIF because this project is complicated by the role of 20th century Wuxia authors like Jin Yong and Huang Yi who serialized their print works. Indeed, as noted earlier, the piracy of Huang Yi's works online were part of the early development of internet fiction in China. At the same time, however, SIF texts are quite different in style and content in comparison to their offline precursor genres, perhaps due to different historical and social backgrounds. Twentieth century Wuxia for example tends to be historically situated in the past in China[11] and generally tends to deal with some aspects of national wellbeing and vigilante justice.

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[11] Jin Yong is notorious for this

Though some SIF Wuxia novels retain this interest, there is also an aspect of personal development (in terms of becoming stronger as an end onto itself) that traditional Wuxia novels tends to steer away from. Similarly, while Xiuzhen[12] (transcendence-seeking, a kind of Chinese fantasy genre that draws on traditional, Daoist, and Buddhist myths) novels can trace their origins in Chinese mythology (like *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*[13]) and myth-based novels (like *The Journey to the West*, *Canonization of the Gods*, and *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*[14]), the former is extensively influenced by a rising individualism, noted in Lagerkvist (2010), and video game culture. Thus, in comparison to questionable genre founders, genre popularizers present useful landmarks for identifying the structures that emerge from them as well as serve as base point from which developments in the inter-text can be judged.

Of the many landmarks in SIF development, perhaps the most important one would be the development of the concept of "yy", Chinese acronym for "意淫" or fantasizing. "Yy" refers to a kind of novel where unlikely events occur on a frequent basis in an unbelievable way that benefits the protagonist. An early popularizer of this concept is *I am an Archmage*[15]. The novel is also an early representative of the world-shift genre: its protagonist is transported from Earth to a fantasy world with magic by chance. The "yy" component of the novel can be seen in the protagonist having extraordinary magic

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[12] 修真

[13] 山海经, author and date undetermined.

[14] 西游记 (Wu Chengen, 16th century), 封神演义 (Xu Zhonglin, 16th century), 聊斋志异 (Pu Songling, 1740)

[15] "Woshi dafashi", 我是大法师, author: Wangluoqishi (网络骑士), serialized on Qidian beginning April 2003; for the purposes of identifying entire novels, I will provide a translated title followed by information in a footnote including transcription of title, original Chinese name, author name transcription and original, serialization platform and approximate date when novel began serialization.

power because of the amount of sweet potatoes he ate while on Earth. The unlikely and often unexplained benefits a protagonist receives is a core component of this type of novel. To varying degrees, all SIF novels are characterized by "yy", and this is possibly the most obvious difference between fiction published online and Serialized Online Fiction today. Though the phenomena has reduced in intensity as time passed, the core concept still governs most SIF novels in the form of concepts like "main character status" and "golden finger" (referring to a protagonist's main "cheat" feature).

The concepts of "yy" and world-shift openings are interesting for exploring the kind of interests and identifications in readers that popularized these concepts. The most obvious critique of the concept would be escapism, but this judgment needs to be questioned further given the complexities of "yy" being a collectively negotiated phenomena. Developmentally, not only has the degree of "yy" been toned down in terms of more explanations of situations and powers, and having more likely events occur, many "yy" elements like the "main character status" has been subject to both playful and serious satire in subsequent novels (though ironically "yy" elements still occur in these novels despite the irony). The prevalence of world-shift and rebirth openings combined with "yy" style presents a form of reader-character identification that is based on "I can be him/her" as opposed to traditional identifications based on "I can be *like* him/her". A reader of Jin Yong's Wuxia novels cannot become his heroic protagonists who were born into Song dynasty China and one of the biggest crises for the ethnic majority in China – the successive invasion of several nomadic tribes ending with the Mongols (the plot of Jin Yong's Condor Heroes trilogy). A reader of "yy" novels, however, can identify with the

everyday protagonist who is thrust into a strange world or crises and with the tools to solve every situation already given to him or her.

Where "yy" is a ubiquitous style to a greater or lesser degree in SIF, various genres that have emerged in SIF tend towards being able to deal with more specific questions. The alternative history genre is popularized by *Ming*[16]. The novel tells the story of a 20th century male protagonist who by chance is transported back in time to early Ming dynasty China and the struggles and adventures that occur because of his advanced awareness and knowledge. Compared with western alternative history genres, the SIF alternative history almost always comprise the protagonist personally going to the past and thriving based on his knowledge of history, and advanced technological and social developments. In *Ming*, the protagonist struggles against a feudalistic political regime and powerful merchant-bureaucrat families to try to steering China into capitalism and democracy and away from its historical development, only to become a martyr. The alternative history genre in SIF that emerged following this novel retains *Ming's* contemplation of social structure and historical development. Indeed, the genre's temporal displacement provides a rich ground for contemplations of contemporary social and political concerns which is made more relevant compared to similar contemplations in other genres by the possibility of tracing historical continuity to the (future) present moment.

Eastern fantasy, a genre characterized by a quasi-historical Chinese setting with supernatural powers higher than martial arts novels but lower than myths, is popularized

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[16] "Ming", 明, author: Jiutu (酒徒), serialized on Qidian beginning May 2004

by *Immortal Slaughter*[17]. The novel is well known for its protagonist's intense and personal struggle with concepts of good and evil. Not only does this concern with morality become picked up by other eastern fantasy novels and related genres like martial arts-history, Chinese myth, and western fantasy, the complication of absolute and binary moral positions is prominent in the SIF medium generally. The contemporary genre is set in China in a time contemporary to the time of serialization. A significant popularizer of this genre is *Bad Overwhelming*[18]. Though certainly not the first SIF novel set in contemporary China, this novel marked a shift in aesthetics and reader interest. Whereas the contemporary setting was predominantly consumed by female readers in early internet fiction days and dominated by stories of ordinary girls being wooed by young CEOs (Baike, "网络小说"), *Bad Overwhelming* catered to male audiences by appealing to a gritty, shady aesthetic of the ruthless but somehow still pure boy's ascension to high society. This contemporary setting novel tackles the complex mix of desires and obstacles faced by the everyday reader, including but not limited to marriage pressures, employment concerns, food safety anxiety, relationship issues, as well as social and economic barriers in China.

The year 2007 marked the rise of the science fiction genre in SIF. Though science fiction novels existed prior to 2007, they lacked the popularity and cohesiveness to make

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[17] "Zhu xian", 诛仙, author: Xiaoding (萧鼎), serialized on Qidian beginning July 2003, earlier on Huanjianshumeng.

[18] "Xiqi Linran", 邪气凛然, author: Tiaowu (跳舞), serialized on Qidian beginning January 2007. The title literally means evil force overwhelming, a perversion of the description 正气凛然, which is used to describe a sense of overwhelming righteousness coming from a person. "Evil force" in this novel refers more to a "bad boy" aesthetic and style than actual evilness.

it a specialized genre in SIF. The rise of science fiction was propelled by the development of the "Wuxian"[19] subgenre (literally meaning "unlimited"), originating from *Unlimited Horror*, and the apocalypse subgenre ("Mori"[20]) which became popular roughly in 2009/2010 with *Supreme Descent*[21] and *Dark Blood Era*[22]. Neither of these subgenres are science fiction in the traditional sense. The unlimited novel tells the story of a protagonist and (usually) his teammates being trapped in a system where they struggle to survive in in a seemingly endless cycle of fleshed out story worlds (from film, novels, television shows, comics, and games) where they are pitted against a hostile world, other teams, and a demanding system that enforces restrictions and objectives.

Though similar to fanfiction in reusing settings, plot and characters from existing fiction and capitalizing on nostalgic feeling in readers, the Wuxian genre became an independent form in SIF because of genre structures both set up in the originating novel and developed in the ensuing inter-textual conversations that emerge in subsequent novels. One structure set up in the original novel is an overarching philosophical struggle with topics like the nature of evolution and human development, transcendence of systemic rules versus the connections and constraints that bind a team together, and the nature of good and bad and success and failure. In the ensuing slew of Wuxian novels that feature different kinds of protagonists, systems, and story worlds, not only does this philosophical aspect of the subgenre become a critical factor for a story's success and

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[19] 无限

[20] 末日

[21] "Wushang Jianglin", 无上降临, author: Wuwaijiangshan (雾外江山), serialized on Qidian beginning June 2009

[22] "Heian Xue Shidai", 黑暗血时代， author: Tianxiapiaohuo(天下飘火), serialized on Qidian beginning July 2010

popularity, competition and conversations with other similar novels produce an approach to expanding and fleshing out story worlds that is critical and skeptical, often leading to the overturning or challenging of certain original setups and value systems that are often disguised in the original texts.

The apocalypse subgenre certainly draws inspiration from various apocalyptic movies and games like *I am Legend* (2007), the *Resident Evil* movies and games, and the *Fallout* games. Though the subgenre's popularity may have initially been propelled by rumours of the Mayan prophecy for the end of the world in 2012, the continued popularity of the subgenre in recent years attests to the complexity of the subgenre. One possible reason for the popularity of the subgenre is that it provides a structure that allows authors and readers to imagine and navigate not only the consequences of the breakdown of social structure, but also alternative forms of social organization. The apocalypse genre is as much about breaking constrictive social structures as it is about building new ones. Indeed, the prevalence of "rebirth" openings in apocalypse novels, where the protagonist experiences part of the apocalypse before being reborn to its beginning period, allows for a comparative look at two possible "new social structures": one built by the old surviving elites and the other built by a more grassroots movement. An interesting recent development in the apocalypse genre is the shift from novels that feature a sudden catastrophe to ones that feature gradual, unseen, but inevitable disaster. Representative novels include *Death Fishing*, *Parasite Empire* and *Gate of Apocalypse*[23]. This

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[23] "Sishen Chuidiao", 死神垂钓, author: Sishendiaozhe (死神钓者), serialized on Qidian beginning April 2015; "Jisheng Wangchao", 寄生王朝, author: Yaogou (咬狗), serialized on Qidian beginning May 2015; "Mieshi Zhimen", 灭世之门, author: Heianlizhi(黑暗荔枝), serialized on Qidian beginning July 2015

development is interesting because it contemplates social structural change in the face of gradual, inevitable and potentially unrecognized threats. This shift from radical to gradual change potentially mirrors a move away not only from 2012-esque apocalypse to more gradual environmental and climate disasters, but also from violent revolutionary change in China to the possibility of gradual, internal change[24].

While the displacement of real world concerns into fiction has been a common practice in traditional literature, the processes of publishing have often limited this practice to a relatively small group of people. SIF is significant in that internet technology has allowed a much larger portion of the population to engage in the process of writing fiction, both as authors and as powerful and responsive readers. A caveat to this apparent democratic deliberation of important social issues in SIF is the same one mentioned by Hess (2009) in his study of YouTube responses: the entertainment function of a medium overpowering its democratic potential as a public space of deliberation. SIF novels are not only sensitive to current issues and concerns, but also sensitive to popular trends. As such, novels are just as, if not more, receptive to viral humour, recent developments in entertainment, and political and celebrity scandals. Indeed, SIF novels draw on a wide range of influences including Japanese anime, North American television shows, games both Chinese and Western (i.e. World of Warcraft), and movies[25]. Narratives also possess a certain plot momentum that further complicates authors' ability to respond to issues in a timely fashion. Nevertheless, SIF presents an important aspect of the Chinese information

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[24] The former predicted by Western scholars and politicians while the latter being the Chinese government's response to Western demands for democratization.

[25] For example recent explosion in fan-fiction stories set in the Marvel Universe coinciding with explosion of Marvel Universe movies.

sphere, providing users with a space of deliberation that is not only sensitive to shifts in social situations and needs, but is also disguised from explicit efforts of information control.

Socio-Cultural context of SIF

An important aspect of SIF that needs to be contextualized is its ability to attract not only a large quantity of users (especially in its peak years following Qidian's acquisition in 2004) but also the nature of attention on the platform as focused rather than fragmented. It is not uncommon for a platform to attract a large number of users. For example, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook can all lay claim to this feat. However, attention on these platforms is usually fragmented. That is to say that users using YouTube often have different interests, patterns of usage, and their YouTube usage usually do not affect their self-definition or group affiliation. SIF is peculiar in that, though subgenres exist and readers have different interests, most readers do often consume in similar patterns, their use of the platform do affect their group identifications, usually to distinguish between online and offline readers, and between readers and gamers, and they often share an understanding of not only genre conventions but also "canonical" works. As such, the large quantity of SIF consumers not only consume similar materials, but are also aware of their belonging to a coherent and continuously evolving community of discourses[26]. The ability of SIF to become both an attractor for attention and the basis of a community of imagination and discourses is based both in its

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[26] Individual readers' understanding of the nature of this community differs, possibly with many readers not recognizing the significance of this community beyond its entertainment value.

concurrent development with information and communications technologies in China, and in the sociocultural background that led to reading being not only one of the most popular and privileged pastimes, but also being one of the few legitimate pastimes for children.

SIF's development is concurrent with an acceleration in China's development in computer and internet technologies. As a platform that developed mainly between the 2000 and 2004, SIF should be viewed as filling the gap that spans instant messaging and group chat program QQ (Tencent Holdings Limited) and dedicated social media programs in China like Ren Ren Web (2005, China's Facebook), Sina Weibo (2009, China's Twitter), and WeChat (2011, a conglomeration of Twitter, Instagram, and QQ on the mobile platform). Though certainly featuring a different set of communication methods and certainly not in direct competition with these communication technologies, SIF's development should be viewed as also contributing to a trajectory of not only an increase in information sharing on the internet, but also an increase in need for social connection. Indeed, the narrative content of SIF novels provides non-personal but relevant subject matter through which users can communicate with an unknown audience on the internet. As such, SIF could be filling a gap between the predominantly targeted communications provided by QQ, and the more open communications provided by social media and blogging programs that became popular later. The popularity of SIF could thus be attributed to an increasing demand for connection within an online community in the Chinese population from the early to mid-2000s before specialized social media platforms were developed.

It is also likely that SIF is popular because of specific social and cultural contexts that limit the number of available and acceptable means of entertainment. Historically, reading has been a privileged means to social advancement due to China's Confucian-meritocratic system, which has been in place since the Song dynasty. In the history of the People's Republic of China, entertainment has also undergone various stages of censorship and limitation. Indeed, dedicated video game consoles have been banned in China until recently (Riley, 8 January 2014). Combined with economic and space limitations in urban settings, Chinese youth often faced more limited options in terms of developing interests when compared with Western youth. This is a likely cause for reading being a much more popular pastime in China compared with Western countries. Indeed, the popularity of SIF could be viewed as developing from a longstanding interest in reading fiction in Chinese society adapted to technologies of the internet, at least for users who have more access to computer and internet technologies. As SIF developed and the quality of writing started to drop due to the influx of amateur writers, the main audience became urban youth (mainly high school and college students). Similar factors are responsible for making reading a privileged form of entertainment for students. In addition, as Lagerkvist notes, Chinese parents and teachers enforce strict social norms that limit the hobbies that are acceptable for their children (p. 52-54). Not only are video games often banned, the viewing of television programs is also often considered a distraction from school work. SIF novels are entertainment focused and their narratives tend to be closer to television drama and games than to literary works, yet often do not provoke as much of a control effort on the part of parents. The result is a narrative writing

and reading platform that is not only popular and possesses a significant user base, but also one that interacts with a social media environment and a budding online sphere of discussion.

Although actual statistics of the popularity of SIF platforms like Qidian are difficult to obtain, due to both the lack of academic interest and unreliable website traffic data, it is still possible to determine that there is a degree of attrition in consumers of SIF in recent years. This attrition can be seen in page-view statistics provided on SIF websites like Qidian. For example, Wochixihongshi's 2008 novel *Coiled Dragon*[27] achieved 94 million total views over 3.4 million words. In comparison, his more recent novels *Consume the Stars*[28] and *Tale of the Reckless Wastes*[29] achieved 84 million total views over 4.8 million words and 61 million total views over 4.2 million words respectively. Another renowned author Tangjiasanshao's novel demonstrates a similar attrition: from 62 million views over 3 million words in *The World of Douluo* to 30 million views over 5.3 million words in its sequel *The World of Douluo 2: Supreme Order of Tang*[30]. These two authors have been chosen for their general consistency in update speed and popularity.

This attrition could only be partially accounted for by possible increase in number of people consuming pirated content (which the original platform cannot track) due to

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[27] "Panlong", 盘龙, author: Wochixihongshi(我吃西红柿), serialized on Qidian beginning May 2008
[28] "Tunshixingkong", 吞噬星空, author: Wochixihongshi(我吃西红柿), serialized on Qidian beginning July 2010
[29] "Manghuangji", 莽荒纪, author: Wochixihongshi(我吃西红柿), serialized on Qidian beginning December 2012
[30] "Douluo Dalu", 斗罗大陆, author: Tangjiasanshao(唐家三少), serialized on Qidian beginning December 2008; "Douluo Dalu 2: Jueshitangmen", 斗罗大陆 2 绝世唐门, author:Tangjiasanshao(唐家三少), serialized on Qidian beginning November 2012

increasing consumption of SIF updates on mobile platforms using third party software

and the rise of competing SIF websites. Another possible reason for attrition, is the

"stressful life" and the need to "devote a lot of time bringing up children and taking care

of their retired parents" leading to middle aged Chinese people leaving the internet in

general (Lagerkvist, 2010, p. 71). Though the decrease in time available for leisure is

indeed one factor for the decrease in consumers of SIF, the phenomenon of

predominantly mature readers leaving SIF should also be nuanced by consideration of the

expansion of possible sources of entertainment for mature users in recent years due to

improved economic situations and reduction in regulations, an example of which is

China's loosening of restrictions on video games in recent years. For a SIF consumer

leaving university and entering the work place then, not only is there less time to spend

reading SIF novels, but their financial and personal independence also means that

previously restricted entertainment like television and video games become viable

alternatives. China's improving economy, policies and development agendas have also

opened up offline entertainment opportunities like tourism and sports.

Finally, the perspective and subject matter of SIF novels, as engaging

predominantly in projects of changing a mundane and unsatisfactory life into a more

exciting and meaningful one, could also mean that SIF novels lose their relevance and

appeal for users as they advance socially and economically. If SIF is viewed as

predominantly a medium that caters to the frustrated and dissatisfied segments of Chinese

society, then China's improving social and economic situation certainly explains the

gradual attrition of readers over the years. This could explain why the main demographic

of SIF users are high school and university students[31].

This overview of Serialized Internet Fiction serves to highlight some of the

qualities and limitations of the medium. It is important to note that despite the attrition

among users in recent years, the medium remains significant for two reasons. First,

though some users have "checked out" from being regular users of the medium, the rise

of mobile apps for reading combined with a general preference for reading in China

means that many of these former users still follow a small number of SIF novels on an

intermittent basis. The highly specific language and culture of SIF may have persistent

effects in terms of community and culture formation and membership (more on this later).

Second, to attenuate the outflow of older users moving forward in life is a similar inflow

of younger users who are being introduced to both the internet and SIF by older peers.

SIF remains a popular medium of entertainment for students in China, at least while the

culture of strict restriction on leisure activities persists in China. With this flow of users,

SIF remains a medium that is consumed predominantly by the dissatisfied and those

experiencing more rigorous parental control. SIF users then, match both with Lagerkvist's

(2010) conception of a "youth/subaltern" group and Hess' (2009) analysis of "outlaw

discourse." In both cases, the authors argue for the significance of norms and discourses

of minority and disempowered groups[32]. In the case of SIF, it is important to note that the

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[31] From both online general conceptions and Alexa demographic data on "Qidian.com" which shows above average users having "no college" and "some college" education and a greatly overrepresentation of users browsing from school.
[32] This definition has to be caveated by the fact that access to the internet is itself a technological precondition that screens out the true subaltern/outlaw. This caveat applies to SIF users as well.

young and internet-versed users are the people who will populate tomorrow's Chinese society. As such, though SIF may not have much influence on people who are currently in power and thus may have little impact on projects of democratization, its influence on the population of tomorrow means that it exerts a significant impact on the nature of Chinese society and community in the next few decades.

Censorship, Information Control, and SIF

This paper is interested in how the unique medium of SIF affects projects of developing a democratic and civil society in China, with focuses on not only its role in the contestation over control of information, but also on its broader influences in building communities and cultures that contribute towards building such a society. This section focuses on how SIF interacts with the control of information in the Chinese mediasphere, including explicit and implicit forms of censorship, as well as more subtle means of information manipulation, such as framing.

Censorship and the "great firewall" of China are prominent issues that often appear in Western news stories of China. Major stories in recent years include the detainment of Ai Weiwei (Larmer, 2011), Google's censorship in China preceding the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Incident (Mozur, 2014; Woollacott, 2014), the banning of puns in China (Branigan, 2014), and the censoring of Chai Jing's *Under the Dome* (2015) (Wong, 2015). The understanding of censorship in China presented in news stories, however, is often rudimentary, focusing on the explicit blocking and removal of content without providing much insight into the specific processes and strategies behind the censorship (Cendrowski, 2015; Woollacott, 2014). In a similar vein, news stories

demonstrate awareness of the use of technological and verbal strategies by Chinese netizens to elude censorship (e.g. gateways and satire) without demonstrating in depth awareness of the factors that complicate the effectiveness of these strategies, in particular of the use of irony as a means of resistance. In rare cases, non-academic articles that are biographical in nature reveal glimpses of the complex censorship regime in China. One example is Larmer's (2011) article, "The Dangerous Politics of Internet Humor in China", on internet censorship which explores the topic through the lens of the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's arrest and the reactions of Ai's fellow satirist friends Pi San and Wen Yunchao. Even while demonstrating the effectiveness of humour and satire in bypassing censorship to rally social energy and resistance, Larmer's (2011) account caveats this effectiveness by documenting the intense pressures for self-censorship that result from targeted threats and a pervasive atmosphere of fear over punishment.

Peter Hessler's (2015) article "Travels with my Censor: A Chinese book tour" presents a more nuanced picture of censorship as a process of negotiation with multiple agents working in different ways rather than a black and white binary opposition between the state's henchmen and the oppressed netizens. From Hessler's autobiographical account of his interaction with censorship in China, it could be seen that the at least three levels of censorship exist. First, there is the automatic censorship of sensitive words such as "Falun Gong". Then there is targeted censorship which occurs when specific government officials become dissatisfied with something they see. These two levels tend to match more closely with the common understanding of censorship as a government-based, repressive endeavour. The final kind of censorship, which occurs on a person to

person level between editors and authors, is a more nuanced negotiation of the boundaries of acceptability with the purpose of not so much censoring for the purpose of exclusion but rather censoring for the purpose of inclusion. As Hessler (2015) notes, the interests of editors, especially those working for commercial publishers, is on how to get more content to the Chinese readers. As such, the process is not so much explicit removal as skilled rearrangement of texts so that a maximum of content passes through the censorship network (Hessler, 2015). Hessler's insights into these three types of censorship that editors are tasked with is significant for the study of SIF, since censorship on SIF also consists of these three levels: banned wordlist, official mandate, and editor's discretion.

Academic literature on the censorship regime in China reveals a system that is adapting to developments in internet technology and people's use of these technologies. Johan Lagerkvist's (2010) book *After the Internet, Before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society* provides an in-depth exploration of China's shifting strategies of information control on the internet, from its early project to regulate internet cafes, to the ongoing battle to enforce real name registration online, to the control and guidance of popular opinion on the internet. Even while Lagerkvist (2010) acknowledges the significance of citizen journalists and ironic bloggers' use of the internet to speak out against social injustices and political corruption, he caveats the effectiveness of these strategic use of the internet by noting the limitations in action and scope of action of these strategies. Not only does Lagerkvist (2010) note the possible paradox of activism online versus "slacktivism" offline and a failure to engage in real action (p. 51; 91), he also notes

that issues that are permitted for debate and exposure are mostly limited to local and provincial levels (Lagerkvist, 2010, p. 92), and that investigative journalism is only permitted to "tackle single-issue social problems only as long as the structural and political roots are not focused upon" (Lagerkvist, 2010, p. 99). In a similar vein, King, Pan and Roberts (2013) show that the censorship apparatus of China is focused on "curtailing collective action by silencing comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization, regardless of content" as opposed to censoring "posts with negative, even vitriolic, criticism of the state, its leaders, and its policies" (p. 326).

These two sources speak to a censorship regime that is aimed at stopping social mobilization rather than social commentary. Both articles hint at the possibility that online resistance without corresponding offline action can serve the Chinese regime's interests by presenting steam valves that diffuses rather than engages action potential. Indeed, Lagerkvist's subsequent articles (Lagerkvist, 2012; Lagerkvist and Sundqvist, 2013) show that even when engaging in acts of resistance on the internet, Chinese netizens occupy a perspective that could be characterized as "loyal dissent": challenging policy and structural problems without challenging the government's legitimacy to power. This "loyal dissent" hints at a complex negotiation of information and values that cannot be merely attributed to success of the state's nationalistic propaganda. Rather, the widespread nature of this "loyal dissent" suggests a complex interaction between the government's efforts to harness and redirect values and concepts like ethnic pride and family traditions already inherent in Chinese culture to support their political legitimacy, and the people's cautious efforts to develop substantive improvements in personal life and

community while maintaining an independent spirit. China's long history with foreign invasion due to a weak government and its recent history with deep, political fervour are also significant contexts for understanding this "loyal dissent".

The SIF platform is resistant to explicit censorship of materials in the form of banned wordlists due to its narrative format. Although the platform is like most Chinese online media platforms in being subject to censorship of sensitive words, the fact that content on the platform occurs in the form of fictional narratives provides a buffer against censorship because censored words can be inferred through the context of the narrative. More importantly, rather than living with censorship as an unavoidable part of Chinese internet, SIF authors often utilize strategies that not only bypass censorship, but also subjects censorship practices to ridicule. Some of these techniques are relatively simple and are used in other online media as well. For example, an author can avoid the censoring of a sensitive combination of two Chinese characters by simply inserting a symbol (like a period or dash) between the two characters.

The form of the Chinese character also allows for the substitution of different words for censored ones either through similarity in pronunciation or similarly in appearance. For example, single characters could be broken down into several constituent characters, as in the case of "枪" (gun) being written as "木仓", or multi-character words being combined into a single word, as in "土共" (literally "earth common", a derogatory reference to the Chinese Communist Party) being written as "坓". Sensitive words could also be replaced by plausible similar sounding words, as in "民主" ("minzhu" meaning democracy) being written as "皿煮" ("minzhu" meaning cooked in pottery). In some

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cases, common phrases will be shortened into acronyms, which subsequently could be expanded into a different series of words to avoid censorship, as in the case of a common swear line in Chinese being shortened to "WQNMLGB" which becomes rewritten as "I bought a watch last year" ("WoQuNianMaiLeGeBiao"). This last strategy demonstrates the ingenuity of Chinese internet-users in staying one step ahead of censorship strategies, as the recent government ban on pun, presumably targeting the substitution of words to avoid censorship, cannot deal keep up with the evolving counter-censorship strategies.

As seen in some of these examples, the replacement of words often serves not merely to bypass censorship, but also conveys an additional layer of attitudinal information based on the connotations of the replacement words. For instance, in the case of democracy and democratic freedom ("民主自由"), more positive conceptions of democracy often only change the second character to form "民煮" (cooked by the people), whereas more satirical uses often use "皿煮滋油" (pot cooked oil) sometimes even forcefully changing the sound of the third character to form "皿煮神油" ("pot cooked god oil") to form a satirical connection with believers in the all-purpose curative power of "Indian god oil" ("印度神油"; Wikipedia "中国大陆网络语言列表"[33]). Indeed, the ironic potential of this kind of word replacement is often utilized even in situations where censorship is not an issue. For example, netizen's deep suspicion of (presumably) state-sponsored spokespeople can be seen in the frequent substitution of "专家" ("zhuanjia", expert), "教授" ("jiaoshou", professor), and "记者" ("jizhe", reporter) with

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[33] Mainland China internet language list

homonyms "砖家" ("brick-professional"), "叫兽" ("shouting-beast"), and "妓者" ("prostitute-person") respectively. From these examples, however, it could also be seen that these strategies are not inherently politically subversive, but rather are subject to a variety of uses and interests, as could be seen in the case where the acronym technique is used to bypass censorship of derogatory language.

Not only does SIF subsume the myriad of strategies of avoiding censorship used in the Chinese online environment generally, it also contains anti-censorship strategies and structures unique to its platform. These unique aspects sometimes arise by chance, sometimes through authorial intent, and sometimes due to the structural quality of the medium. The fact that anti-censorship practices are embedded in a narrative can sometimes present ironic revelations due to chance arrangements of censored versus uncensored content. This could be seen, for example, in an update of *Sky Dragon Rider*[34]: "none of the four girls the dragon rider brought from earth is simple. [They] can form a match of mah-jong, no, a rebel team, still not right, a *revolution* team, complete with muscle, intel, management, and command"[35] ("revolution", is separated by a "|" to avoid censorship, as in "革|命"; 17-01-2015 update 1). What makes this line ironic is that even while the narrator changes his description successively to be more politically correct, moving from "rebellion" to "revolution", it is actually the presumably correct word that is censored. Accidents like this provides insights into the often obscure and hidden logic behind the Chinese censorship regime. In the case of "rebellion" versus "revolution",

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[34] "Cangqionglongqi", 苍穹龙骑, author: Huabiao (华表), serialized on Qidian beginning December 2013
[35] "龙骑士从地球上带过来的四个妹子没有一个是简单的，恰好能够凑成一桌麻将，不对，造反团队，也不对，应该是革|命团队，打手，情报，管理和统帅都齐活儿了。"

there is clearly more than a project a censorship going on. Rather than censoring the inappropriate concept of rebellion, the logic of this particular case of censorship is to deny netizens the appropriation of the more culturally powerful and legitimate form in the word "revolution".

The narrative format of SIF also provides opportunities for engagement with social and political issues with less fear of detection and penalty by virtue of the stories being set in fictional worlds. Writers of the "contemporary" genre take advantage of the fictional medium by setting their stories in barely veiled parallel universes with different but recognizable alternative names for countries and cities. For example, popular alternative names include "Heaven's dynasty" for China, "Imperial Capital" for Beijing, "Imperial Court" for the Chinese government, "Country of the Rising Sun" for Japan, and "Rice Country" for the United States of America[36]. Once again, the substitution of names serves not only to avoid censorship, but also provides an additional layer of meaning, such as the substitution of more ancient political terminology for modern ones in China providing a comment on the superficiality of China's "modern state".

Other genres often also use techniques that allow for the establishment of parallels with the real world. For example, the alternative history genre, where the protagonist travels back in time from contemporary China to its historical past utilizes a temporal continuity wherein the protagonist's advanced knowledge of history allows him to make connections between social structural problems in the past and subsequent historical

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[36] 天朝,帝都,朝廷,日出之国,米国 (a perversion of the way America is pronounced in Chinese, "mei guo" into "mi guo")

events, often cumulating with thoughts on China's contemporary situation in the world. Even in fantasy novels, where the countries and sometimes even races are completely fictional, national and racial qualities are often designed in such a way as to make parallels with the contemporary political configuration. For example, the trope of the nation with a powerful historical past currently underpowered and bullied by other nations due to both treacherous aristocrats and the loss of traditional knowledge, is often applied to fictional races and nations that are intended to parallel China (as could be seen in the setup for the beast people in *Beast Blood Boiling[37]*).

Finally, the structural quality of SIF as an attractor for popular sayings and issues as well as its own quality of forming and popularizing narrative structures and tropes produce a narrative style that is extremely relational and difficult to penetrate for non-users. Different genres and writers feature a different mix of jargon from the internet, other media forms, and the SIF platform itself. These types of jargon are integrated into the narrative, and their invocation may or may not be signaled or explained. The result is that meaning is often only fully derived if the user understands particular allusions. In the bustle of information exchange occurring daily, the codes that survive are precisely those that are most successful in avoiding censorship while maximizing the successful transfer of meaning. Probing by non-users (government censors) becomes complicated by both the difficulty of identifying possible moments of allusion, and the difficulty of completely accessing all of the information contained in an allusion, especially the emotional valences as well as possible negotiations of original allusion in SIF novels. The

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[37] "Shouxuefeiteng", 兽血沸腾, author: Jingguan (静官), serialized on Qidian beginning November 2005.

contingency of meaning making on knowledge of the SIF medium structures and

linguistic techniques as well as on successful identification and negotiation of relational

meaning, creates a community that is specifically gated by a passcode that is based on

knowledge of the SIF culture and language. Furthermore, as shown in some of the

previous examples, and as will be further explored in subsequent sections, this

community is explicitly resistant to mandates of the Chinese government, and offers a

hope of challenging aspects of dominant commercial as well as political culture.

Tracking self-censorship effects on SIF is difficult due to the lack of previous

literature and the size of the SIF medium. To properly understand SIF's interaction with

self-censorship would require a longitudinal study of a large sample of SIF novels with

respect to sensitive dates and events (for example anniversary of the Tiananmen Square

incident and the National Congress meetings). Such a study would reveal possible

shifting levels of self-censorship on SIF in comparison with other expressive media.

Though such a study is beyond the scope of this paper, this paper will attempt to provide

a more general sense of SIF's relationship with self-censorship. In exploring self-

censorship, I am mindful of the potential limitations imposed by focusing on self-

censorship with respect to political topics. As such, this paper not only addresses self-

censorship as ideas and feelings that are not expressed openly because of fear of political

punishment, but also those not expressed because of social expectation or other forms of

pressures and power differences. Once again, the fictional nature of SIF novels provides a good disguise for authors to be more daring in articulating controversial ideas[38].

One topic that is particularly sensitive in China is discussion of the nation's political structure. As Lagerkvist (2010) notes, local and isolated social and political scandals are permitted materials for discussion but the more overarching structural issues are not. Yet discussions of nationhood and social and political structure occur frequently in SIF novels in general, and are indeed often unavoidable in certain genres like alternative history and fantasy. In some cases, the discussions are incidental to the genre or plot. For example, discussions of social and political structure occur frequently in SIF's fantasy genres because the genre often focuses on individual attainment of supernatural powers, which inevitably conflicts with interests of national security. In SIF fantasy novels, protagonists are often faced with decisions involving loyalty, responsibility, and attachment versus personal freedom. In alternative history novels, explorations of social and political structure often arise due to conflict between political ideals and the conceptions of the protagonist, usually due to their advanced knowledge from contemporary society, and those of the earlier historical period being spoken about. In these novels, the focus is often not so much on the relationship between individual and nation, but on issues of resource distribution and fairness. Issues of fairness and equal access to resources and opportunities is also a major topic found in SIF's contemporary

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[38] Although in this case government backlash can be less influential compared to netizen backlash, which could be quite punishing and not necessarily always in opposition to government agendas.

setting novels, where a common narrative structure is the protagonist meeting unfair treatment at the hands of the "rich second generation"[39].

Though explorations of social and political concerns are sometimes part of the plot, there are certainly opportunities in the narrative format to engage with these topics, and sometimes authors do take advantage of these opportunities to speak on sensitive issues that are latent in society but not spoken about openly. For example, one narrative-arc of the novel *Supernatural Games*[40] (20-05-2015 update 1 to 28-05-2015 update 1) deals with the protagonist encountering an illegal network of organ traffickers who abduct people for the purpose of harvesting their organs for sale to the rich. Using the fictional narrative, the author explores and extrapolates on a general anxiety and frustration in society with respect to the rich having access to better medical care. Significantly, this section directly implicates the socially and political powerful segment of Chinese society as the interest group that are not only possible consumers of organ trafficking, but also the reason why the market exists and persists. This is directly articulated in "Chapter 313 Dark Reaction" (*Supernatural Games*, 22-05-2015 update 2):

> What is most expensive in the world? It is life. Life to everyone is fair…this of course is a lie, is written on brochures, written in textbooks, pretty lies used to indoctrinate the people.
> Having money and authority, means being able to eat the best, wear the best, enjoy the best medical care […] but for the really powerful and well connected, this is not enough, not enough by far.
> More than anything else, they are concerned about how to extend life. Old Emperors like Qin's founding Emperor or Han's Wu Emperor, even

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[39] "富二代", "fuerdai", refers to not just people who are rich by virtue of the success of their parents, but also carries a sense of resentment and lack of respect towards this group. The concept parallels closely with "trust-fund babies".

[40] "Chaofanzhe Youxi", 超凡者游戏, author: Qichijushi0 (七尺居士 0), serialized on Qidian beginning December 2014.

they cannot escape the allure of endless life, and the same is true of the modern rich and powerful.

[…] On the surface, all organs are based on donation, who gets the organs is based on a lineup, regardless of value of estates, regardless of social stature, but in reality…..all of this is of course nonsense.

Let the rich and the normal people wait in line together for organ donations? That is just a day dream.

Where there is demand, there is of course supply.

This passage not only implicates a larger network of interests, the politically and socially powerful, as responsible for wrongdoings rather than fixating on the narrow and directly responsible people (i.e. the organ traffickers), but also questions the layers of education, propaganda and ideology, such as "supply and demand" and historical precedence, that are used to cover up the unfairness in society. The willingness of the author to articulate sensitive ideas and point to structural problems is evident.

Self-censorship does not just occur with respect to politically sensitive issues. Evidence from SIF novels seem to suggest also an articulation of topics that are difficult to speak of or lacking an appropriate audience. As Lagerkvist (2010) briefly traces in his section on the regulation of internet cafes, one other major source of control and censorship, particularly for Chinese youth, is parental. China's strong tradition of filial respect has led to the strong authority of parents in the home, often at the cost of parent-child communications. Not surprisingly then, given the strong culture of family ties and connections, a protagonist's family features prominently in the initial setting design of SIF novels. This is especially true for novels that feature a world-shift opening, since protagonists would presumably be separated from their parents. General trends in novel openings and their development across time seem to support the idea that writers express some of their thoughts, conscious or otherwise, through their protagonists. Earlier novels

tended to feature protagonists orphaned through abandonment, accidental separation, or premature death. Sentiments exhibited in these openings often included resentment, isolation, or a sense of self-sufficiency. From a narrative perspective, this kind of opening was popular because kinship ties are often viewed as a hindrance to the advancement of the protagonist, particularly in novels that feature supernatural powers and a quest for transcendence. In this kind of opening, parents are obstacles to freedom, which may represent a struggle against a similar sense of containment felt by the generally younger readers.

Though the trope of the orphaned protagonist is still a popular one, recent trends suggest a more moderate perspective developing on parent-child relationships. For example, one variant of the orphaned protagonist setup is the "surrogate parent" structure. This is often featured in world-shift openings where an orphaned protagonist from Earth is reborn into a complete family. The experience of being orphaned leads protagonists to have an increased appreciation for the parental warmth in the new family. In other cases, the expression of this yearning for parental warmth is less explicitly articulated, but is instead often enacted directed in scenes of actual parental warmth in the new surrogate family. For example, very early in the novel *Fantasy Version Zhushen Development Diaries*[41], the author spends an entire update describing the warm family interactions over dinner following immediately on the heels of introducing the major setting elements like new world geography, politics, and supernatural power dynamics. In describing the

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[41] "Mohuanban Zhushen Chengzhang Rizhi", 魔幻版主神成长日志, author: Mimangdeshe (迷茫的蛇), serialized on Qidian beginning April 2015

mother's particular care in arranging for the protagonist his favourite "water rabbit soup" (17-04-2015 update 2), the author is not merely filling up narrative space, but instead is performing through his characters a desirable family interaction. Though this may be dismissed as merely fleshing out the characters or plot in regular fiction, in the fast-paced, action and plot oriented SIF novel, the prevalence of this kind of "useless" scene suggest that they appeal to a particular emotional need in the reader audience.

Another aspect of this hard to articulate desire for family intimacy can be seen in recent surges in novels that feature protagonists with siblings. Once again, the presence of siblings is not merely a backdrop but provides opportunity for writers and readers to fulfill some measure of their desire for an intimate sibling relationship through identification with the protagonist. This process is affirmed by the relatively significant amount of time devoted to descriptions of mundane sibling interactions in novels which predominantly feature supernatural themes. For example, in the novel *Heaven's Court Cleaner*[42], not only does the protagonist's elder brother and younger sister feature prominently in the narrative with standalone chapters devoted to sibling interactions with them (13-05-2015 update 2, 14-05-2015 update 1, and 10-06-2015 update 2 to name a few), the protagonist even formed secular god-sister relationship[43] (27-05-2015 update 1). Similarly, in world-shift fiction, protagonists often enter a family with siblings, and

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[42] "Tianting Qingjiegong", 天庭清洁工, author: Lijialaodian (李家老店), serialized on Qidian beginning May 2015

[43] The practice of expressing intimacy with non-relative by calling them "gan-mother", "gan-father", "gan-sister" ("gan" = "干"). This practice was common especially with children growing up in the 80s and 90s between families that are close friends, fulfilling both a desire of the parents to have more children and also for the children to have intimate sibling like relationships.

usually express fondness of these siblings (for example *Three Kingdoms Beastmaster*[44] and *Fantasy Version Zhushen Development Diaries*). Indeed, the longing for a sibling is doubly inarticulable for both political and social reasons. Not only is the topic sensitive due to the controversial single child policy, there are also various personal tragedies and social expectations behind the issue that make it difficult to articulate, especially between children and parents (although this may be changing in more recent years, with the loosening of the one child policy).

An important discussion is required now in order to justify the use of narrative content in SIF novels to suggest that the medium presents opportunities to *articulate* the unspeakable. Two points serve to justify this claim. First, some users write in addition to read on the platform, using the writing of fiction as an imaginative diary. This form of writing does not always become read and have a high chance of prematurely ending, but is nevertheless an important means of working through and expressing personal ideas and feelings. Second, the simultaneous serialization of many novels, some in contest with similar novels, along with the rapid feedback cycle of reader responses, situates the production of the novel within a highly reflexive and discursive environment. As such, the experience of consuming a novel across time cannot be understood as merely reading, but needs to be seen as more interactive. With such a framework, patterns such as the popularity of certain tropes and content structures represents more than a single author's preferences and writing style, but rather reflects the desires of the novel's fan-base.

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[44] "sanguo daxunshoushi", 三国大驯兽师, author: Hubaoqi (虎豹骑), serialized on Qidian beginning April 2015.

With the second point in mind, across time and multiple novels then, certain persistent tropes and topics form a discourse. This becomes significant for the inarticulable issues, because the articulation of these issues and concerns in fictional form becomes not just separate and isolated instances of self-expression, but has the potential to form meaningful discursive communities. For example, across numerous novels and time, SIF users are collectively negotiating and re-imagining relationships with parents and, in more recent years as older readers mature and advance in life, with children. With the maturation of one SIF demographic group and the introduction of new, young SIF users, an interesting dynamic is developing due to the interaction between users of different age and maturity levels. Indeed, in a few years' time, it is possible that parents and children will be consuming the same medium, not so much in reading the exact same novels, but in that they share a code and culture that is continuous across the SIF medium[45]. This presents not only points of possible conflict but also points of communication and negotiation.

Alternative Frameworks of Information Control

Though the survey of SIF's interaction with both explicit and implicit censorship has shown that the medium is quite resistant to censorship efforts, a full assessment of the medium in terms of information control is not yet complete. As suggested with the brief literature review at the beginning of this section, a more subtle guidance of information

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[45] In comparison with traditional literature, in which a target group is defined prior to commencement of the writing process, the relatively large quantity of SIF users and the constant influx of new SIF users means a continuous development in the genres with a gradient of all ages presenting input into the inter-textual conversations.

and perspectives is likely at play that needs to be explored. In particular, framing is concerned with the idea that the way content is presented to audiences is just as important as the content itself. Scholars have found that the framing of political contests and issues are often linked with the distribution and reinforcement of power (Entman, 2007; Bystrom, Robertson, and Banwart, 2001). Indeed, as Porter and Hellsten (2014) shows, the same content could be framed and understood in very different terms depending on which master frame is activated in the viewer. Porter and Hellsten (2014) examines YouTube reactions to the Climategate incident and argues for an interactive model where existing social and political situations, user intention and agency, and technological affordances combine to affect how issues are perceived in media. Specifically, Porter and Hellsten (2014) note that existing master frames in society as well as instrumental behaviour on the part of media users both contribute to how issues are understood, while technological affordances of particular media affects the kind of interaction that can occur on it (p. 1028). In the case of YouTube and Climategate, Porter and Hellsten (2014) found that existing master frames of 'political scam.', 'media hype.' and 'scientific fraud' were activated based on different initial instrumental framings from the YouTube video, while subsequent calls to action in the comments section reinforced this framing (p. 1032-4). The authors also found that the chain comments format of YouTube served to reinforce existing opinions and frameworks rather than posing opportunities for valid challenges (p. 1035).

Porter and Hellsten's (2014) multi-determinant framework is useful for exploring the more subtle aspects of information control on the internet. A key component of

information control that tends to be overlooked in literature on democratization and the

internet is the relative power of dominant culture in establishing and manipulating master

frames through which people's perspectives are often guided. Here, I refer to dominant

culture rather than the government because dominant culture does not necessarily have to

originate from the government. To fixate on the government, especially a presumably

authoritarian government, is to risk losing sight of possible negative framing effects that

arise from other sources of dominant culture such as commercial media and a majority

ethnicity. The use of the term dominant culture as a replacement points to the fact that

dominant cultures always, to a greater or lesser degree, operate through the exclusion of

certain minority and local discourses and culture, regardless of the nature and origin of

dominant culture.

In the case of China's online environment, dominant culture is often the result of a

complex mixture of government, commercial, and the Han-ethnic majority social forces.

By Han-ethnic majority social forces, I do not mean to suggest that people of the majority

ethnicity is involved in a collaborative effort towards some goal, but that this concept of

the "Han" culture has been developed, both by government and non-government forces,

such that it has acquired a momentum of its own[46]. It operates like a social norm that

influences people's behaviour unless it is challenged by other schemas or cognitive

frameworks. In exploring information control in the Chinese internet, it is important then

to also consider what kind of master frames already exist as a result of the current

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[46] This is quite similar to concepts like "white, masculine, heteronormativity" in critical theory, and should
be viewed as such, considering China's long history as a hegemonic power in the region.

dominant culture, what kinds of agency do netizens, in particular SIF users, have in terms of invoking and negotiating these master frames, and in what ways does the SIF platform afford or encourage particular kinds of interactions with framing.

To explore the instrumental and technological interactions of the SIF platform with framing, three potent master frames will be examined: the 'corrupt individual,' the 'hostile foreign powers,' and the 'resurgence of China.' The 'corrupt individual' frame is set up through successive political and commercial scandals in mainstream media. The regular Chinese viewer goes through cycles of news items involving corrupt politicians being caught, food safety alerts, fraudulent products busted, and tragic events that result from commercial greed and personal negligence. However, the structural problems behind these issues are rarely explored. Instead, these news reports often isolate the origin of problems to corrupt individuals: politicians and businessmen who cause tragedies because of personal greedy and lack of moral integrity. For example, in a recent food safety scandal, "the poison watermelon" issue, reporting effort regarding the causes tend to focus on finding the particular individuals responsible for the use of poisonous pesticides as well as the particular regulatory checkpoints that failed to block the watermelons from entering the market (Ma, Gao and Li, 2015). Similarly, the infamous "my father is Li Gang" incident[47], was originally framed in terms of the son of a government official abusing the privilege of his father (Wang 2010).

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[47] A drunk driving incident in which one pedestrian was killed and another injured. The incident became infamous after the mainstream reporting of the incident fixated on the line "my father is Li Gang", which netizens took as emblematic of the degree of corruption and abuse of politically granted privileges to the degree that even children of government officials are disregarding laws and human life. Though the actual context of this truncated line was later put to question and remains unresolved, the statement "my father is

The 'hostile foreign powers' frame is one which presents China as under siege by foreign powers looking to subvert the security of the nation. Though this frame is mainly invoked during international incidents, such as the various sovereignty related issues surrounding the Diaoyudao/Diaoyutai/Senkaku islands dispute, there are also online aspects of this frame, with certain netizens supporting the idea of the existence of online propaganda efforts funded by foreign countries against the Chinese nation.[48] This frame often co-occurs with the 'resurgence of China' frame, which is not only a frame born from China's economic developments, but also involves aspects of revival of traditional Chinese culture. The latter component of the Chinese resurgence frame can be seen in the current Chinese president Xi Jinping's concept of "the China Dream". The China Dream refers to a broad concept proposed by president Xi Jinping for the development trajectory of China. Significantly, the concept is relatively open with local and more specific "dreams" being proposed which aggregate to form the China Dream (Baike, "China Dream"[49]). The concept of the China Dream demonstrates why dominant culture is a more useful concept than merely focusing on the government: local iterations of the dream often incorporate the wishes and aims of the local population. Indeed, though the original concept seeks to benefit equally from its "socialist political system", "international economics", and "'[Chinese] ethnic qualities" (Baike, "China Dream"), the third point often sees more support from the dominant culture. The Baike page on the

Li Gang" has been perpetuated as a synecdoche by netizens for all incidents in which people commit atrocities because of an inflated sense of self due to their relationship to someone in power.

[48] For example in a Sina blog post by Luguopingxiansheng (鲁国平先生), he claims that "as everyone knows, China's rise has led to panic in some international forces. Countries like America and Japan are striving to contain and suppress China" (http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_441b6f800102vmpq.html)

[49] 中国梦

China Dream cites three main drives for the concept: economic development and the associated life improvements; justice, democracy, culture, education, and technological improvements; and "strong country and army, [defending] ethnic dignity, completeness of sovereignty, national unity, [and] world peace". The third aspect of the China Dream's drive is featured most prominently in the resurgence frame, while the second point is often viewed as empty and ironic.

Debating the actual validity of these frames is less useful than considering the impact of adopting these frames on the perspectives of netizens. For example, when the 'corrupt individual' frame is invoked, attention is diverted from systemic factors to personal factors, thus leading to less contemplation of how systemic factors contributing to problems should be addressed and more thoughts on how to find or guard against the "bad people". Whereas the former involves perspective that favours collective action and structural change, the latter tends to produce anxiety and suspicion, which impedes collective communication and action. Similarly, the 'foreign hostility' and 'China resurgence' frames produces a perspective that favours narrow nationalistic sentiments and moves away from more cosmopolitan sentiments and tolerance for difference, both internationally and within China's own rich ethnically diverse society. Thus, uncritical invocation of these frames could be just as problematic in terms of its effect on information control as forms of censorship.

Unlike censorship however, framing effects are much more difficult to resist on the SIF platform. Indeed, the three master frames being explored are all invoked frequently in a broad variety of SIF novels without much critical thought. The corrupt

individual frame is particularly strong, as the majority of conflicts that drive the plot in SIF novels originate from some injustice or unfairness inflicted on the protagonist by the rich and powerful. Indeed, the "my father is Li Gang" situation, where the son of a government official disregards social, legal, and normative rules because of the position of his or her parent, is one of the most frequently used impetuses for plot advancements in the contemporary and the fantasy genres. With the invocation of this frame comes the associated shift in responsibility away from systemic causes to personal causes. To match this frame, SIF novels often portray a government organization that is benevolent and good at its top but corrupt and self-interest driven at its middle and local levels. The impact of this frame could be seen in how this logic of the benevolent upper polity versus corrupt local levels is even applied to fantasy settings where nations are often still ruled by a monarch (for example in *Civilizing Confucian-Immortals*)[50].

When the 'corrupt individual' frame is invoked, issues of political and social structure become overlooked and responsibility defaults to the misdeeds of a few individuals. Even in the alternative history genre, which frequently engages with the issue of an unfair social and political structure that enforces and perpetuates the power of the nobility, the logic being applied is one in which corrupt individuals lead to unfair structures rather than the reverse. Thus, many alternative history novels that pick the Three Kingdoms period focus on the internal fighting between power families as the cause of the Han dynasty's deterioration and subsequent invasions of the nomadic tribes,

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[50] "Jiaohua Ruxian", 教化儒仙, author: Woshidalaoying (我是大老鹰), serialized on Qidian beginning July 2015.

without interrogating the role of monarchy and a feudal social structure in leading to this

phenomenon. Indeed, the danger of the 'corrupt individual' frame is that it generates the

illusion that improvement is possible if only the ruling class were morally strong people.

This logical development can be seen in many alternative history novels, where, after

extensive critique of the corrupt powerful families, the protagonist proceeds to replace

these families with other powerful, though presumably not corrupt, forces without change

to the social structure (for example in *Ming Dynasty's Foremost Jester*[51] and *Mythical*

Three Kingdoms[52]).

The foreign hostility and Chinese resurgence frames often go hand-in-hand. The

co-occurrence of these frames can be seen, for example, in contemporary/science fiction

novel *Half-Immortal Civilization[53]*, when the protagonist proclaims that his project will

be a hundred percent Chinese: "between the conflict between profit and national security

and ethnic future, the Goushou company and the newly formed Eastern Corporation gave

up on profit, and chose national security and future of our ethnicity without hesitation

[…] national security is higher than everything! The future of our ethnicity should be kept

in mind at all times!"[54] (24-05-2014 update 1). These frames are problematic not only

because of their tendency to generate narrow nationalistic sentiments, but also because

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[51] "Mingchao diyi nongchen", 明朝第一弄臣, author: Luzhouyu (鲈州鱼), serialized on Qidian beginning October 2011; jester here referring to a government official close to the king who is perceived as sabotaging the interests of the nation by luring the king towards leisure.
[52] "Shenhuaban Sanguo", 神话版三国, author: Fentuhuangcao (坟土荒草), serialized on Qidian beginning July 2014.
[53] "Banxian Wenming", 半仙文明, author: Shijiantianya (试剑天涯), serialized on Qidian beginning March 2014.
[54] "国家安全!还有民族的未来!在与利益的考校中，高手公司还有新成立的东方集团，舍弃了利益，而毫不犹豫的选择了国家安全以及民族未来。[...] 国家安全，高于一切！民族未来，当铭刻心头！"

they tend to produce an isolationist and defensive perspective on the part of characters, and readers who potentially internalize this perspective through identification with the characters. In contemporary and science fiction SIF novels, foreign powers are frequently portrayed as ruthlessly seeking to suppress the Chinese nation or ethnic group and often are involved in projects of sabotage and espionage. For example, in *Half-Immortal Civilization*, the protagonist's high-tech company frequently faces threats, infiltration, and embargos by foreign powers (e.g. 17-04-2014 update 2). The result is that the protagonist's company perpetuates and strengthens already existing unequal pricing and access to products for Chinese versus non-Chinese people.

The invocation of such a frame tends to reinforce itself, and lead to a defensive suspicion of the foreign. For instance, after the invocation of the hostile foreign powers frame early in *Half-Immortal Civilization*, it becomes difficult for the narrative to break through this frame in the story that follows. This can be seen in a narrative-arc that occurred between June 15 and June 20, 2014, which began with suggestions of international collaboration and the putting aside of differences but is quickly shut down with the reinstatement of the 'hostile foreign powers' frame. The arc begins with an update titled "Space Traffic Accident" (15-06-2014 update 1) featuring a collision in space that threatens the lives of foreign scientists on the international space station. The Gaoshou Company, owned and controlled by the protagonist, puts aside previous animosity towards foreign powers and rescues the scientists in an update titled "Space without National Borders" (15-06-2014 update 3). The suggestion of a possible negotiation of the 'foreign hostility' frame reaches a climax in "Peace Declaration 2" (17-

06-2014 update 2), with the protagonist declaring "I have a dream that Earth is a big family, where everyone shares their technology and form a collaborative organization aimed at developing technology together to bring humanity a better future"[55] thus ending his previous technological embargo on foreign powers. Despite the potential for a negotiation of the 'hostile foreign powers' frame, several days later, the isolationist and defensive framework returns in the update "The Shutting Door to Peace" (20-06-2014 update 1), which his triggered by the protagonist realization of the continued hostility of foreign powers, who took the offered technology from the protagonist but failed to contribute their own share of technology and scientists. With the rapid feedback cycle of SIF, it is difficult to isolate this abrupt reinforcement of master frames to either authorial intention or audience response. Rather, it may be more useful to view this narrative shift as a result of the influence of the dominant culture, which could involve readers, the author, and intangible elements like cognitive frames, reinforcing the strength of the hostile foreign powers frame.

Unlike the situation with explicit censorship, very little instrumental effort on the part of SIF users exist to challenge dominant frames. This is partly because framing effects are not solely originating from the government. Thus, compared to the more explicitly resistant attitudes towards government messages, certain master frames face fewer challenges because many SIF users accept them as valid and often are invested in these frames. For example, the 'foreign hostility' frame is not invented by the Chinese

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[55] "我的梦想是地球就是一个大家庭，大家互相拿出自己的技术，共同成立一个太空组织，我们一起开发，为人类开拓一个美好的未来。"

government; rather, it already exists in Chinese culture due to historical experiences with nomadic invasions. In the early People's Republic of China years, in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Japanese invasion, martial-arts novelists like Jin Yong capitalized on concepts of national security and ethnic pride by situating their novels in historical conflicts between the agricultural Chinese dynasties and the nomadic foreign invaders. Often, in Jin Yong novels, the government is shown as incompetent in these struggles and the burden is shifted onto vigilante heroes. Thus, when the Chinese government picked up this frame, the Chinese people were already well acquainted with it and did not assume that the frame originated from the government. Ming dynasty vernacular novels also contributed to the development of the 'corrupt individuals' frames, with famous novels like "The Water Margins" and "Romance of the Three Kingdoms" focusing on struggles between outlaw heroes and political villains. This frame is perpetuated more recently in mainstream historical dramas that focus the rise and fall of historical dynasties on the personal struggle between virtuous generals or officials and some ultimate villain (foreign invader or corrupt official)[56].

Though the instrumental efforts of SIF users usually tend towards the reinforcement of master frames, exceptions exist. For example, in *Unlimited Dawn*[57] the protagonist takes a distinctively post-humanist perspective when he comments on the prophesied events of Lord of the Rings: "I am here to stop all of this, I am here to save the elves and the dwarves. This world should not let them depart. They too are citizens of

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[56] For example 1996 historical drama "Prime minister Liu Luoguo" (宰相刘罗锅) or 2001 historical drama "The Bronze Teethed Ji Xiaolan" (铁齿铜牙纪晓岚).

[57] "Wuxian Shuguang", 无限曙光, author: zhttty, serialized on multiple platforms beginning in May 2013.

this world. The age of the humans may be fated to arrive, but, this does not mean the sacrifice of the right to survival of other races. We can co-exist"[58] (05-11-2013 update 1). This statement is framed directly against a project of making humans central in all universes and worlds (17-11-2013 update 1). I am wary of reading too much into the apparent post-humanist perspective without evidence supporting the existence of such a discourse in China. Instead, taking the racial politics in Lord of the Rings as a metaphor for national and ethnic politics in real life, this passage offers a clear challenge to narrow and defensive nationalism. The 'corrupt individuals' frame is occasionally challenged as well, but few novels manage to successfully completely re-negotiate a master frame or even sustain a counter-frame for extended periods. For example, in *Heaven Slaughter Picture*[59] the protagonist is able to catch glimpses of structural roots to certain problems from time to time, such as becoming aware that enforcing religious worship of the Emperor is destroying creativity in the people of the nation (a clear jab at the Chinese education system) in "Seeing the Emperor" (11-07-2015 update 2). Yet over the course of the entire novel, the perspective cannot help but return to one that focuses on misdeeds of specific individuals, mostly driven from greed or pride, that lead to conflict and tragedy.

In some senses, the apparent success of the SIF medium in resisting censorship and its apparent failure in negotiating master frames are both the result of the technological qualities of the medium. The narrative nature of SIF provides protection

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[58] "我是来阻止这一切，我是来拯救精灵与矮人们，这个世界不应该让他们退出，他们也是这个世界的子民，人类的时代或许必须到来，但是，这不能够以牺牲别的种族的生存权力来决定，我们，其实是可以一起共处的。"

[59] "Zhutiantu", 诛天图, author: Lingxiajiushidu (零下九十度), serialized on Qidian beginning April 2015.

from censorship detection, thus leading to more open discussions of certain topics, especially in the form of a spilling of unconscious and repressed thought. This sense of safety and orientation towards resistance is what distinguishes reasons for approaching SIF for entertainment versus other entertainment mediums. However, the strong resistance to censorship and other means of control also means that SIF users can become less critical towards more subtle forms of information control like framing. On the other hand, competition within SIF genres and with earlier work presents a continuous demand for new content and perspectives on the part of the writer, which can lead to critical examination of dominant cultural assumptions and values. For example in the *Unlimited Dawn* passage quoted earlier, the author views the Lord of the Rings narrative as not one of good versus evil but one of the rise of humans at the expense of other races. Perhaps with time, continued maturation of SIF users, and the influx of critical perspectives and information from more knowledgeable and mature SIF users, the medium can begin to challenge even the more subtle information control effects like framing. For the present moment, however, framing effects are often too subtle and integrated with the interests of the dominant culture to face much challenge.

Temporal Framing

A major question set up in the literature review that remains unexplored is the question of how SIF interacts with collective mobilization. As King, Pan and Roberts (2013) note, the Chinese government's censors are more concerned with shutting down social mobilization rather than discourse that is critical of the government. With this in mind, success in bypassing censorship efforts needs to be matched by success in social

mobilization for a platform to be considered truly resistant. On a first look, the SIF

platform appears to be lacking with respect to social mobilization due to its entertainment

function. Yet I argue that this conclusion is valid if the only criteria for judging action is

social mobilization with the goal of altering the political structure. In fact, I argue that the

SIF platform serves an important and often overlooked role in today's society, especially

with shifts in attention capacity and style – the mobilization of affect and the preservation

of action potential in the long term. To understand how SIF serves to preserve the

potential for action in the long term, a brief review of the concepts of the New Chronic

and affect deterioration is necessary.

The New Chronic is an idea proposed by Eric Cazdyn (2012). Cazdyn notes that

"[c]hanging medical practices have shifted standard notions of the chronic and the

terminal, thus shifting how we manage the present and the future, and, indeed, how we

think about and *feel* time. Likewise, within political and cultural theory (and practice) a

targeted approach to the present…is becoming dominant" (p. 14). The problem of this

new medical, political and cultural approach to time is that it alters people's ability to

think about and engage with change. As Cazdyn argues, the chronic mode of temporality

replaces the goal of "cure" with processes of "management of symptoms" (p. 7).

However, with the loss of "cure" as a goal, we also give up on possibilities of radical

change and revolution (Cazdyn, 2012, p. 15). Management of symptoms is a present

focused temporality that is severed from concepts of radical change in the future and

operates via the reinforcement of the status quo (Cazdyn, 2012, p. 5). As a political and

cultural perspective then, the New Chronic temporality is problematic in that the

fragmented, moment-to-moment temporal style of living focuses too much on immediate

gratification and neutralizes the potential for long term sustained effort and change.

Another useful concept for understanding the importance of how conceptions of

time is framed is the idea of affect deterioration. Brian Massumi (2011) notes that with

the serial reporting of disasters in news, audience interest begins to taper as their

emotional intensity diminishes: "horror transmutes into a different affective element, its

intensity halved, then halved again, eventually reducing to trace levels". Thomas L.

Dumm (1993) notes a similar desensitization of fear associated with the serial format of

television news (p. 308-10). At stake here is not merely an issue of emotions but affect,

which is defined as not just emotion but a bodily capacity for being affected and affecting

others (Massumi, 2002, p. 212). The use of affect instead of emotions points to the central

role of affect in motivating action[60], and it is this mobilization aspect of affect that makes

it significant for exploration.

Though both Massumi (2011) and Dumm (1993) speak of affective deterioration

due to serial presentation of content, what they are referring to is a style of temporality

that is similar to Cazdyn's New Chronic: a fragmented, present-focused temporality that

does not connect with either the past or the future in meaningful ways. This fragmented,

present-focused, and flittering attention style is associated with internet use in general.

Indeed, critiques of YouTube as limited in potential in terms of being an online public

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[60] The definition of affect versus emotions range widely between scholars and fields. Here, I am interested in distinguishing between affect as a motivational force that drives bodily action as opposed to emotion as a response after cognitive evaluation (Zajonc, 1980). For the purposes of this paper, I refer to critical theory applications of the term affect, which relates more with motivational psychology concepts like approach and avoidance.

sphere (Hess, 2009) and as serving to disseminate views of ethnic minorities (Guo and Lee, 2013) can be further nuanced with respect to YouTube's fragmented temporal framing. Both Hess (2009) and Guo and Lee (2013) acknowledge the existence of some democratic potential in YouTube as a space for deliberating and expressing ideas, but ultimately both articles finds that the YouTube platform diminishes the political edge of the videos. Guo and Lee (2013) in particular, found that while Asian YouTube vloggers often portrayed Asian stereotypes ironically on their videos, the format of their videos as predominantly for entertainment value removed much of the political edge of their irony, paradoxically leading to reinforcement of the stereotypes being resisted (p. 401-4).

Where Guo and Lee (2013) and Hess (2009) focus mainly on the entertainment function of YouTube as responsible for neutralizing the political impact latent in some YouTube videos, I argue that the main reason for the neutralization of political effect in YouTube videos is because of the fragmented temporal dimensions of these videos. Though the entertainment focus of YouTube certainly is a significant factor to critical messages not being taken seriously, the short length, standalone format, and lack of temporal and contextual connection with larger issues and frameworks contribute to the users' decision to overlook more serious dimensions of YouTube videos in favour of mere humour. Put another way, YouTube's short and fragmented format encourages a style of consumption that focus on immediate and shallow interpretations of humour while bypassing more demanding synthesis required for understanding the critical edge in irony. In comparison, although SIF is also serialized and occur in fragmented updates, the presence of an overarching narrative presents a continuous timeline that demands a

temporality that is continuous with past updates and encourages anticipation and prediction of future updates. In addition, the narrative format situates the plot and humour points within a specific social context. These qualities are helpful in preserving the political edge to irony by retaining the contextual and relational cues that make the political and social critiques meaningful and relevant.

A brief comparison between a YouTube satire of the movie *Jurassic World* (2015) and a SIF fan-fiction novel of the Harry Potter series serves to illustrate the impact of temporal format of texts on political effect. The YouTube video "How Jurassic World Should Have Ended" by user How It Should have Ended[61] presents a satirical cartoon remake of certain illogical scenes in the movie *Jurassic World* (2015). The video satirizes some of the illogical parts of the film that serve only plot or cosmetic purposes, such as having a dinosaur sized gate in the holding and not shooting the I-Rex on sight. The fact that the video is created primarily for entertainment value does not necessarily prevent it from having a critical edge. In particular, the video's satire of the ending, where the female lead baits out a T-Rex but trips and falls because of her high-heels (2:48) could potentially be linked with a critique of portrayal and fetishization of women in mainstream media. Similarly, the satirical remake of the Pterodactyl approach scene, with shock collars being activated to knock out the entire flock, could be linked with a critique of ruthless commercialization and profit making as the guard's subsequent statement, "we really *do* put safety first here" (1:40), satirizes the dinosaur theme park's presumed safety with the disregard for human lives in the interest of protecting "assets" (dinosaurs)

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[61] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXGCyjJh48I

featured in the film's plot. However, the short and fragmented format of the video provides little opportunity to expand on these ideas, and the self-contained format of the video provides no connections that explore or develop these hints of a critical edge. The critique of commercialization of the dinosaur theme park, for example, remains specific to the film and fail to become critical because no external relevance is afforded by the video. Indeed, the playlist on YouTube links to other similar videos, which contribute to a fragmented consumption style where users jump from one self-contained video to an unrelated other.

Though a fan-fiction novel of *Harry Potter* and a satirical video of "Jurassic World" (2015) do not form perfect parallels, the comparison is useful because both pieces present imaginative negotiations of ideas presented in mainstream produced worlds. *Harry Potter's Defense Spell Professor*[62] is a SIF fan-fiction novel where the protagonist world-shifted into the Harry Potter world and became a defense against dark arts instructor at Hogwarts. Similar to the "Jurassic World" satire, the novel operates through a combination of invoking shared knowledge of a text and exploring alternative aspects of the film through imagining a realized version of the film world. One interesting negotiation of the *Harry Potter* world in this novel is an extrapolation on the wand registration process. The narrator recounts an expanded version of *Harry Potter* in which wands are registered and tightly controlled as critical weapons, and comments that the strict control of magic arms is a part of a humanistic project in keeping other magical

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[62] "Halibote de Fangyushuke Jiaoshou", 哈利波特的防御术课教授, author: Zhangdaye01 (张大爷 01), serialized on Qidian beginning June 2015.

creatures subservient to human beings (13-06-2015 update 1). This expansion of a side-arc of the original story, Hermione's fight to liberate the house-elves, points out not only the exploitation and suppression of other races inherent in *Harry Potter*, but also at the various strategies and regulations for preserving the status quo. Not only does the narrative mode provide more the space to explore and develop more critical ideas, the temporal continuity provided by the plot also allows ideas developed earlier to retain some effect as the story progresses. For instance, an additional layer of irony is present later in the novel when Hermione's effort to help the house-elves gain support after listening to the protagonist's suggestion to reframe the effort from liberating elves to improving their treatment (13-06-2015 update 12). The irony is produced in relation to the earlier chapter recounting the history between the humans and the other magical creatures, when the reader realizes that Hermione's apparent "success" in her efforts is premised on a liberation mission being reframed into a mission that serves to make humans feel good about enslaving the elves. Resonances in plot with real life events and situations can further highlight the critical edge developed in SIF stories.

Though SIF novels are serialized, their temporal consumption style is one that could be described as present continuous in comparison to the present discontinuous styles of many internet media. SIF's temporal style is present continuous not in the grammatical sense, but in the sense that when following a SIF novel, the reader experiences a continuous stream of the present moment that is understood in terms of the events that preceded every update and triggers anticipation of the events that will follow. The daily serialization pace makes SIF novels almost like a parallel life that the reader

experiences alongside their own – an illusion that is strengthened by the resonances between story structure and real world situations. The temporal continuity of the consumption of SIF novels contributes uniquely to the preservation of political edge in irony on the Chinese internet by providing a buffer against deterioration and fragmentation. One problem of ironic memes and viral content is that as it spreads, there is the risk that these fragmented short pieces of messages lose their critical context and deteriorate into mere humour. For example, a popular Chinese meme "have money, just stubborn"[63] originally developed as an ironic reaction against the illogical thought patterns and behaviours of rich people (Baike, "有钱就是任性"). As the meme spread however, it became truncated, with the "have money" part being replaced by a variety of other preconditions, such as "having good grades" or "being handsome", or being omitted altogether. The result is the casual attachment of "just stubborn" or "stubborn" to almost any behaviour. The satirical tone and criticism against wasteful spending in the original message thus loses its critical edge and deteriorates into mindless imitation and humour. In SIF novels, however, the meme generally retains its original function because every use of the meme is embedded within the context of the plot, and careless use of the meme by characters has consequences on character development. The temporal continuity of SIF thus serves to buffer some internet irony from deterioration.

The present-continuous narrative style of SIF also contrasts greatly with the style of narration used in a lot of mainstream news and investigative journalism, especially of scandals and tragedies, found in China. I characterize this kind of news narration as past-

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[63] 有钱就是任性

complete: the perspective is one that recounts events that has already come to pass, action already taken, and situation resolved. Though the nature of news means that it will often necessarily be recounted in past tense, the interaction between this temporal framing and the specifically Chinese context serves to neutralize action potential in audiences. This is because Chinese news reporting often focus on the behaviour of reporters, regulatory agencies, and law enforcement, and presents these agents as operating successfully. Viewing cycles of scandals and tragedies presented this way, the viewer is left with little agency except to trust and rely on the correct operations of these agencies. To illustrate, consider how a local news report a fake product scandal, "Changde Supermarket Sells Fake Toilet Paper, '清风' became '清凤'"[64] (Hunan Public Channel, 19-05-2015). The choice of a local news scandal reveal is useful because local events are often directly relevant to viewers and also present more possibility for collective action.

The story recounts the process in which a fake toilet paper product became uncovered and punished. Significantly, portrayal of the agency of the common people contrasts greatly with that of professionals (reporters, regulators, and police). The story features very little mention of the role of regular citizens in the uncovering of the scandal, only briefly mentioning that a "Mr. Liu told reporters that a toilet paper roll he purchased, believing it to be Qingfeng1 brand, turned out to be a fake Qingfeng2 brand"[65] (0:30). Indeed, footage and interviews with consumers present them as frustrated but helpless,

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[64] 常德超市售卖山寨纸巾"清风"变"清凤". http://hn.qq.com/a/20150519/045460.htm
[65] Numbers used to designate different pronunciation. Although the transcription of the two words are the same, the actual words are different, with the second character not only appearing very similar but also sounding very similar.

doing very little except to ask questions, which are answered by reporters and other experts (0:35-1:25); supermarket workers are portrayed as lacking the awareness that the product is fake (2:50-3:15); and contrast is formed between consumers noticing only the superficial details in products in contrast with the news narrator providing all of the professional assessments like product code searches and product tests (0:55-0:59; 1:14-1:48; 2:00-2:20). Subsequent agency in uncovering details of the fake product operation and its termination is attributed solely to the reporters and local law enforcements.

The way the story is told leaves viewers with little agency for action. Since the story is told mostly from the perspective of what has already been done, and the incident is pronounced complete at the end of the story, the viewer is left with little potential for action. The buildup of dissatisfaction from the beginning of the new story with the revealing of the fake product incident is sapped away through the succession of things that already happened. Combined with the focus on the reporters and law enforcement as the primary agents of action, the viewer cannot imagine action since nothing is left for the viewer to do except to trust the inspection and regulatory system. However, the irony of this news story is that even while the story implicitly claims that the inspection and regulatory system is functional, the existence of the fake products in the first place puts this claim to question.

In contrast, scandals and similar conflicts unfold in SIF narratives differently. Though events in SIF are fiction, they often parallel events and social concerns in real life. As noted earlier, SIF's narrative style combines with its pace of serialization to present a present-continuous experience. A similar event in a SIF novel would situate

readers as progressing through the various stages of conflict, discovery, and resolution along with the protagonist across several days due to the serialization process. The brief delay between chapters opens up room for discussion, imagination, and anticipation of future events and possible action. These openings provide moments of imaginative and possibly collaborative intervention on the part of readers. The latter is achieved through collective responses that sometimes affect how writers choose to complete their plot. Rather than having affect invoked and then neutralized within the frame of a few minutes, SIF users experience the buildup of affect in the initial conflict, have the opening to contemplate possible courses of action, and "acts" in response through discussion, imagination, or identification with the protagonist. Though this "action" is imaginative and usually fail to have real life equivalents, I argue that this process of mentally constructing possible scenarios of conflict, contemplating possible courses of action, and carrying out and seeing the consequences of action in narrative form is significant in a society where the explicit goal of the government's information control project is to neutralize and shutdown social mobilization.

Collective Imagination and Building Culture and Community

To revisit one of the main arguments of this paper, democratization as a process with the goal of changing a nation's political structure limits the understanding of other possible beneficial changes ushered in by the internet that contribute to the building of a civil society. The application of a democratization framework to the study of the internet in China is problematized by the assumption that democratization is something that is desired by the Chinese people and something that the Chinese people are ready to work

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towards. Both of these assumptions require backup. Indeed, as shown by the ironic substitutions found on the internet for the word "democracy" and "democratic freedom", the concept of democracy may not be so much desired by the Chinese public as scholars may assume. This is partly because the extensive use of the term "democracy" without associated actual change by the Chinese government has desensitized people to this term and concept. In addition, Chinese reporting of western scandals and events has also weakened the appeal of democracy for the Chinese public. As such, using political and social mobilization towards a change in political structure may not provide an accurate and useful assessment of China's developments towards civil society. Rather, the Chinese people seem to be more interested in more substantive changes like fewer limits to free speech, more rigorous law and regulation enforcement, and building a culture of trust and openness. Indeed, this perspective parallels quite closely with what Singapore's former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew describes as a particularly East Asian perspective: "in the East the main object is to have a well-ordered society so that everybody can have maximum enjoyment of freedoms" (as cited in Zakaria, 1994).

Indeed, a major milestone in China's development of a more civil society is in its reframing of culture. Although president Xi Jinping's slogan "talk civilized, establish new culture"[66] can be interpreted as shifting the burden of responsibility for change onto the people and reinforcing the corrupt individuals frame, this idea of establishing a new culture may also be valid for China's own notion of the development of civil society. It might be argued that two significant changes are necessary in China's development of a

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[66] "讲文明, 树新风"

new culture: the development of a more politically and socially interested population and the development of a culture of trust. These two conditions have the same root. Factors like censorship campaigns, lack of transparency in governance, and successive greed-driven political and consumer product scandals have exacerbated political and social apathy inherited from a history of political control. These factors have also heightened an environment of mistrust and guarded self-interest that originate from China's rapid but unbalanced economic spur since the turn of the millennia. Collective deliberation and action on social, political, and cultural issues in China require not only the development of a more active and politically engaged population, but also a culture of trust that opens people up to discussion and collaboration.

Though a human rights activism movement has been developing in China since the 2000s, the movement mainly comprises select reporters, lawyers, and law scholars. Actual support for the human rights activism movement in China, in action rather than in voice, is limited by not only the general political and social wariness of the Chinese people, but also successive government crackdowns against the movement. Indeed, such a cohesive crackdown occurred recently, leading to the detainment of over 100 lawyers, focusing around the Beijing law firm Fengrui (Jenkins, 2015)[67]. While western media tends to frame the event in terms of an arrest of human rights lawyers, the Chinese reporting of this event reveals much more details of a subtle neutralization of popular support for human rights activism. The mainstream media present the crackdown of the Beijing lawyers in terms of a crackdown on a criminal organization that operates through

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[67] http://time.com/3954935/china-arrests-lawyers-human-rights/

the manipulation of popular interest and creating media hype (Huang and Zou, July 18, 2015)[68]. The article presented on mainstream news source Xinhua net cites extensive confessions and accounts from arrested and related lawyers and paints a picture of a legal organization that engineers protests and media hype around incidents they are involved in, to profit from and sway the outcome of the cases (Huang and Zou, July 18, 2015).

Setting aside the true motivations and developments of the incident, which is complicated by media control on the Chinese side and the lack of details on the Western side, what this case does reveal is not only latent issues of (dis)trust which threatens to emerge and can radically alter people's perception of groups, but also the ease in which certain master frames can be invoked to shut down social mobilization and sympathy. In particular, an examination of the comments that follow the Xinhua Net news article shows that not only are the comments predominantly in praise of the law enforcement and against the lawyers, they also demonstrate the activation of the 'corrupt individual' frame, "why does [sic] punk-lawyers love to hype things up – because they only have money in their eyes"[69], and the activation of the 'hostile foreign powers' frame, "these indicted lawyers collude with outsiders, forget their own group, and dare to even sell their ancestors and country to please hostile foreign forces"[70]. Though the authenticity of these comments themselves may be subject to question, they nevertheless show the ease with

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[68] http://news.xinhuanet.com/2015-07/18/c_1115967431.htm
[69] "律痞缘何爱炒作-只因为眼里只有钱", comment by user "Shuipinrujing2644407" (水平如镜 2644407) on July 18, 2015
[70] "这些涉案律师里外勾结,数典忘组,吃里扒外,连祖宗、国家都出卖,讨好境外敌对势力", comment by user "Renshanrenhai2647550 (人山人海 2647550) on July 19, 2015

which certain frames and rhetoric could be invoked to not just neutralize social unrest, but also to remove trust.

Indeed, the issue of trust is a major problem not just between the common Chinese people and those in positions of influence and power, but also between strangers in general. The infamous Nanjing Pengyu incident began a course of events that aggravated sentiments of distrust in Chinese society. The incident occurred in 2006 in Nanjing, when an old lady who fell on the ground accused the young man who helped her up, Pengyu, of knocking her down, presumably only after reaching the hospital and finding out that she needed extensive medical care (Wikipedia, "Nanjing Pengyu case"[71]). The case set a problematic precedent involving subsequent accident cases where either helpful bystanders were accused of instigating the accident, and where bystanders failed to help those in trouble, often leading to fatality (the Chinese Wikipedia page to the "Nanjing Pengyu case" provides a summary list of subsequent incidents, with the most recent case occurring in August 12, 2015). Though netizens bemoan this deterioration of trust, similar events continue to occur and are reported with vigour, contributing to the continued strength of this trend.

Within this context of a reality of distrust, SIF serves a particularly useful function: the experience of a collective imaginative realm where users relive certain real life scenarios and imagine and negotiate alternative courses of action. The present continuous experience of social situations offered by SIF novels is particularly important because it offers the opening for thought, discussion, and alternative action in comparison

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[71] 南京彭宇案

to the already closed news reporting. Thus, in comparison to mainstream media coverage of actual events, in which mistrust has already been produced by the actions of the participants, the open, yet-to-be-complete re-enactment of social situations in SIF novels gives users the agency to make changes and imagine not only better results but also a better society. Significantly, this experience of imagination occurs in a community of users in comparison to private reactions of disappointment and outrage that follow mainstream news reports. There is also a difference between vocalizing opinions after an event has already happened and experiencing action through immersion with a fictional character.

Indeed, I argue that the serial experience of immersion in the actions of a character in SIF novels is even more potent in developing a beneficial culture than the opportunities for discussion of alternative actions and values opened up by SIF narratives. The experience of following a protagonist's thoughts, judgments, and actions on a daily, continuous basis is also a process of "living" alternative values systems, cognitive patterns, and cultures. As could be seen with the re-interpretation of the Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter worlds in the Unlimited and fan-fiction novels *Unlimited Dawn* and *Harry Potter's Defense Spell Professor* analyzed earlier, SIF novels generally feature a justice orientation in comparison to a predominantly defensive, self-interest orientation in real life Chinese society. Indeed, this justice orientation in SIF is also coupled with a drive towards acting out against injustice. What SIF users tend to characterize as "face-hitting" in SIF novels, referring to physical, verbal, and situational counters to insults and injustices perpetrated by the protagonist's enemies, describes precisely the tendency to

act out against injustices. As responses to a Baidu Tieba discussion questioning the "face-hitting" tendency[72] reveals, people frame their enjoyment of face-hitting in novels explicitly in relation to their negative experiences of being exploited in real life by the more powerful (post #4 by user lxhyf866). Indeed, part of SIF's popularity is precisely in the contrast between inhibition from acting against injustice in the real life and the freedom to do so in the online fictional world. Furthermore, as the medium developed, there appears to be a shift away from "Unrestrained-arrogant"[73] style of protagonist to protagonists characterized as "pretend to be a pig to eat a tiger"[74], which refers to someone who appears to be unassertive but strikes back decisively against anyone who dares to harm him. Behind this apparently innocent shift in protagonist style is a public judgment in which a more aggressive and antagonistic style of social interaction is rejected in favour of one that does not provoke conflict but is firm in self-defence.

Sloop and Ono's (1997) idea of outlaw discourses provides a theoretical framework that matches with SIF's culture building function quite well. According to Sloop and Ono (1997), "Out-laws are discourses of phrases in dispute, not individual actors" (p. 61). Outlaw discourses are important because they "provoke the social imaginary": that they "[encourage] others to construct judgment as a tactic, an imaginary space in which one plays with time by futuring justice, rendering the justice of a particular out-law discourse a possible model for a community's practice of litigations"

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[72] "Always hit face hit face hit face, political career novels always written this way, isn't this too immature" (老是打脸打脸打脸，官场小说写成这样有点太幼稚了), http://tieba.baidu.com/p/2788842731
[73] "Kuangzhuai" 狂拽
[74] "Banzhuchilaohu" 扮猪吃老虎

(Sloop and Ono, 1997, p. 63-4). Furthermore, Sloop and Ono (1997) acknowledges the limitation of any single outlaw discourse in accounting for all possible communities and interest groups, but notes that the function of outlaw discourses is ultimately to provoke thought and action: "the out-law always lurks in the distance and in the forefront, challenging us to rethink our ways of operating, our forms of judgments, our logics. It is our task to meet the challenge of the out-law, to investigate the reasons for our discomfort with the out-law's judgment, and to enact different ways of thinking and living" (Sloop and Ono, 1997, p. 66).

In China's tightly controlled information sphere, the SIF platform provides precisely a platform in which outlaw discourses could be expressed. SIF presents layers of different degrees of outlaw discourses: from the more popularly accepted ones that nevertheless position itself against forms of restriction imposed by the government, to more advanced discourses that challenge deeper level conceptions like the corrupt individual and hostile foreign powers master frames. What makes SIF novels a particularly good example of outlaw discourses is that it is not merely discussion of alternative values, judgments and behaviours, but present an imaginative enactment of these alternatives that is positioned in between discourse and real life changes to ways of thinking and living. So when a protagonist deliberately chooses to help a fallen elder in spite of the possibility of being framed for the incident, for example in *Personal Other-world Browser*[75] (02-05-2015 update 2), it is serving more than to present an argument

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[75] "Suishen Yijie Liulanqi", 随身异界浏览器, author: Nianqianling (念千灵), serialized on Qidian beginning April 2015

for the need to have trust in society and sympathy towards those in need – it is an imaginative enactment of an alternative thinking process and behaviour. When SIF users repeatedly encounter, immerse in, and identify with protagonists in situations where they behave in a way that builds trust and are rewarded for it, SIF users can begin to internalize this alternative as desirable and possible. Though social contexts may prevent immediate behavioural change in real life, the alternative value system and cognitive framework remains potent and ready to be invoked by a catalyst.

The SIF platform is ever-evolving and ready to take up emerging questions and respond to new social and cultural demands. Though my current analysis focuses on the need to build a culture and community of trust in Chinese society, there are other outlaw discourses present or developing on the SIF platform that may contribute to other aspects of China's development of civil society. For example, certain novels are filling in the relatively sparse popular discourse on issues of racial equality (*Unlimited Dawn*, *Harry Potter's Defense Spell Professor*, and *Thriller Paradise*[76]). Another significant component of building culture and negotiating values that this paper does not have space for is the collective re-imagination of history and myth that is occurring through inter-textual conversations that emerge between novels of the alternative-history genre and some "Honghuang"[77] novels. This project of re-imagination of history and myth is significant because the process of re-imagination is one in which national values are

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[76] "Jingsong Leyuan" , 惊悚乐园, author: Santianliangjiao (三天两觉), serialized on Qidian beginning January 2013

[77] 洪荒, which literally translates to prehistoric, refers to a subgenre of eastern fantasy that deals with or are situated in various Chinese creation myths and legends.

negotiated, with consequences for the kind of community that originate from these re-imaginations. Indeed, what makes *Unlimited Dawn* an interesting novel to follow is that its framework of racial co-existence and collaboration is set explicitly in a larger struggle to set the dominant tone and values (competitive and exclusionary versus collaborative and inclusive) of a multiverse system originating from prehistoric times.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to nuance current understanding of the projects of democratization and building of a civil society in China by broadening concepts of censorship and democratization. Specifically, it is argued that scholarly focus on censorship and the lack of political structural change limits studies' sensitivity to other means of information control and developments towards civil society. From the exploration of the various levels of control of information in Chinese Serialized Internet Fiction, framing effects are by far the most insidious and effective form of guiding the perspectives of the Chinese citizens and neutralizing social mobilization. Indeed, I argue that the Chinese government has already shifted their strategic focus from various explicit means of censorship to incorporate more subtle ways of neutralizing social mobilization and collective action – namely by the production and reinforcement of strategic master frames and through the utilization of more neutralizing temporal frameworks.

Within this more advanced regime of information control, the SIF media serves a unique role in comparison to other media that serve a more explicit expressive and communicative function. The SIF medium not only participates in the Chinese online community through absorption, negotiation, and production of discourse on the internet,

but also serves to disguise critical intention from censors and preserve the critical edge of ironic internet content through its narrative framework. The daily pace of serialization combined with inter-textual conversations that emerge in user comments and the comparative experience of reading similar narrative structures in different novels produces an experience of not only engaging in an evolving community of discourse but also of an imaginative experimentation with alternative cognitive frameworks and value systems. The ongoing immersive experience of following a protagonist through his or her moment-to-moment thoughts and behaviours presents an in-between state that is more than verbal protest but not yet action, allowing for the long term preservation of "action potential" in a society where collective action is neutralized both explicitly, through punishment and clampdowns, and implicitly through the activation of defensive and mistrustful affective states. Furthermore, these processes of value negotiation and action potentiation occur in a clear online discursive community rather than in solitary consumption, thus, possibly contributing substantially to the development of a civil culture and community in China. This hypothesis needs further exploration.

Though the analyses of the SIF medium has been predominantly positive with respect to its potential for facilitating democratization and the development of a civil society, caution should be applied when applying this result to sweeping generalizations regarding the effect of SIF on these projects, as analyses has also shown that the SIF community can just as readily be guided towards reinforcement of narrow-nationalistic sentiments and a defensive and mistrustful perspective. Indeed, the prevalence of

homophobia, gender stereotypes and division[78], racism, and ableism in SIF novels, as

seen in uncritical application of jokes like "our African brothers", "pick-up soap", and

"second degree handicap", speaks to not only a general deficiency of social justice

discourse in China's public sphere, but also the importance of realizing that dominant

culture on SIF also operates to reinforce and normalize certain existing imbalances. The

critical function of SIF is further complicated by the influx of less mature readers and the

departure of more mature readers.

Despite these caveats, SIF provides possibly one of the few platforms in

mainstream Chinese internet that is open to the influence of outlaw discourses. Novels of

different critical strength co-exist and have the potential to shift values and judgments

over time. Indeed, the simultaneous existence of young and developing users with more

mature and critical users presents an opportunity for communication between generations

that may be difficult in real life due to cultures of parental authority. Ultimately, the

predominantly young user-base of SIF is valuable because the young proponents of China

tend also to be those less invested in the status quo and possess more action potential.

Though the SIF platform is distinctively Chinese, with a development history

tightly linked with Chinese history and culture, and may not be replicable in western

society, several of the findings of this study may be significant in explorations of the

internet in western literature. Specifically, the concept of information control breaks

down rigid distinctions of democratic versus non-democratic nations and questions the

immunity of democratic nations to strategies of information control. While framing has

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[78] For instance the existence of novels catering predominantly to readers of a particular gender.

been explored extensively in western literature, it has rarely been associated with literature on democratization and civil society in China. In addition, the concept of temporal framing combines critical theory and communications theory to provide an additional layer to consider when studying the impacts of internet media to collective action. This paper hopes to not only provide a more in depth understanding to a little studied aspect of Chinese internet, but also to provoke thought about the possible blind spots in western literature on the internet.

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