

## Article

# The Lexicon of Fear: Chinese Internet Control Practice in Sina Weibo Microblog Censorship

**Juha Antero Vuori**

University of Helsinki, Finland.  
[juhvuo@utu.fi](mailto:juhvuo@utu.fi)

**Lauri Paltmaa**

University of Turku, Finland.  
[laupalt@utu.fi](mailto:laupalt@utu.fi)

## Abstract

This article examines how Chinese practices of security governmentality are enacted in everyday online censorship and surveillance/dataveillance of word flows in the Chinese internet. Our analysis of crowdsourced lists of filtered words on the Sina Weibo microblog shows that search engine filtering is based on a two-layer system where short-lived political incidents tend to be filtered for brief periods of time, while words that are conducive to building oppositional awareness tend to be censored more continuously. This indicates a distinction between 'bad' and 'dangerous' circulations of information from the viewpoint of Chinese internet censorship. Our findings also point out, perhaps counterintuitively, that the ruling Chinese Communist Party is much more inclined to filter words associated with itself than the opposition, or protests, which are usually regarded as the foci of Chinese internet censorship efforts. Our explanation for this is that through surveillance and censorship, the post-totalitarian party-state protects its political hard core against dangerous circulation by trying to prevent public discourse on its leaders and key opponents from going viral. The Chinese online politics of insecurity makes this feasible in a post-totalitarian political order.

## Introduction

By the mid second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the continuous growth in the use of the internet has produced a highly paradoxical situation in the People's Republic of China (PRC). By June 2014, China had 632 million internet users (China Internet Network Information Center 2014), and their number was still growing at a steady pace. What seems to be paradoxical in this development is that it has taken place under a *de facto* one-party system, which has remained virtually unchanged since 1949. That the Communist Party has managed to retain its leading position even in the era of such vast and expanding internet use is perplexing from the viewpoint of digital libertarians, and those who consider the internet a liberalizing political medium. It also calls our attention to control practices in the Chinese internet, which, despite a growing body of research on the Chinese internet in general,<sup>1</sup> is still an understudied aspect. This is particularly so for security and surveillance governmentality.

In order to enhance our understanding of Chinese internet surveillance/dataveillance based censorship practices, the present article explores three research questions: Why and how are certain words censored in Chinese social media? How can we explain the changes over time that we see in censorship on the word-level? What kind of guiding logic, or underlying structure can we induce from the censorship practises we see? As we argue below, and as the answers to the above questions show, studying Chinese

---

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Sautedé (2013); MacKinnon (2011); He and Warren (2011); Yang (2003, 2006, 2014); Lagerkvist (2005); Zhou (2007); Zheng (2008).

internet censorship on the level of words is enlightening in both empirical and theoretical terms for both surveillance and security studies.

In terms of theory, the present study shows how the discussion of Chinese internet control can be taken to a more sophisticated level of analysis by connecting it to the discussion of freedom and security as techniques of government and governmentality.<sup>2</sup> Here, techniques refer to particular methods of engaging in activities that involve practical skills developed through training and practice, to modes of procedures in activities, and the disposition of things according to a regular plan or design (Huysmans 2006: 9). The use of such techniques modulates and enacts limits of freedom (Huysmans 2014). By studying these kinds of techniques and practices it is possible to examine the rationalities involved in them, and thereby gain access to broader visions of the political and the politics entailed in security practice. From such a viewpoint, the ‘state’ or the ‘party’ can be located in the acts of individual people, as well as the practices and technologies employed in everyday life. In other words, the state and the party reside in the technologies of government, in the techniques and technologies of governing the internet in China. This approach to the modulation of insecurity and the framing of the relationship between freedom and security is a move towards the political and sociological analysis of the technocratic and discursive politics of insecurity (Huysmans 2006).

Such an approach is timely, as from the viewpoint of security and surveillance governance, security knowledge is a political technique that frames politics in the logic of survival. Concomitantly, both surveillance and security as political techniques have the capacity to mobilize the politics of fear (Huysmans 2006: xi-xii). Here, what is considered as insecure fluctuates along with claimed threats and referent objects. Yet, insecurities can also emerge from the embedded contexts of ‘domains of insecurity’ (Huysmans 2006: 3-4). Such domains represent areas of activity and interest where insecurity is generally ‘known’ to exist. The everyday enactment of technological artefacts (e.g. CCTV cameras) and knowledge (e.g. data on communication) are more than merely implementation of spectacular political calls for mobilization. Indeed, such practices may be in place before exceptional security frames are activated in the political domain (Huysmans 2006: 8). Surveillance technologies and techniques are a prime example of how democratic limits become enacted in the everyday (Huysmans 2014).

Overall, and beyond the issue of internet control, much of the literature on Foucauldian techniques of government has focused on European or Western developments as a modern art of government (e.g. Hindess 1996; Dean 1999; Huysmans 2006). Yet, a body of research on governmentalities in China has formed since the turn of the millennium. Major examples here include the collection of essays on governmentality in China (Jeffreys 2009), Greenhalgh and Winckler’s (2005) biopolitical analysis of population control, and Dutton’s (2005, 2009) studies of policing in China. As these studies have shown, with the Chinese economic reforms since the late 1970s, market rationalities have become more important for the conduct of government, even while China still adheres to five-year guidelines in its economy. In this situation, the Chinese official system of ‘socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics’ combines the rationale of authoritarianism with that of governing (some) subjects through their own autonomy (Sigley 2004). The present study provides contributions to the study of how this hybrid system appears in surveillance, and particularly in the enactment of online security practices. These are relevant aspects of how limits of freedom in terms of speech, communication, and thereby social mobilization are modulated.

In terms of empirical research, the present study demonstrates how Chinese search filtering can be analysed through a logic of ‘flow-control’. From this viewpoint, censors follow the rationale of controlling the circulation of what we term ‘bad’ and ‘dangerous’ flows of information and communication. We have drawn this distinction between types of circulation from the governmentality literature (Foucault 2007: 18-

---

<sup>2</sup> Foucault (1979/1975, 2007/2004); Hindess (1996); Rose (1999); Dean (1999).

19), but we did not have a pre-determined hypothesis on which kinds of contents are considered to be ‘bad’ or ‘dangerous’. We based the operational distinction of bad and dangerous flows of information on the duration a word remains censored. Indeed, the degree of danger security and surveillance experts assign to single filtered words cannot be assessed as such; our argument here is that the words that remain filtered when other words are allowed to flow after being filtered for a while are considered to be more threatening by security experts. Therefore, in our analysis, ‘bad’ circulation stands for temporary, and ‘dangerous’ stands for more constant filtering.

To gain insights into the content of such flow-control, we analysed filtered words on a popular Chinese social media site, the Sina Weibo, which was at the time the largest Twitter-type online service in China. For our analysis, we combined two extensive lists of filtered words on Sina Weibo. The first is the Chinese language version of China Digital Times’ crowdsourced List of Sensitive Words on Sina Weibo. The second is Jason Ng’s Blocked on Weibo –list.<sup>3</sup> Both of these lists represent counter surveillance of censorship content and practice in China. We combined them into what we call the Combined Filtered Word List (CFWL), with 2,387 unique words or phrases verified as having been filtered on Sina Weibo at the time of the study.

After we had produced our data in this way, we sampled the CFWL several times over longer periods, which allowed us to do both synchronic and diachronic analysis of the blocked words, and changes therein. Our methodology consisted of first creating a matrix of associative socio-political attributes of the filtered words. The basic question for this classification concerned the politically significant feature/s of each word/phrase that would warrant it to become blocked in the political context of the moment it was reported as blocked. This involved relating the blocked words to the Chinese political system, and to current events in Chinese politics and society. This provided for the synchronic division of the censored words into categories.

We then conducted diachronic statistical testing of the differences between groups of words subjected to short- and long-term censorship. The sizes of both groups, and their subcategories, allowed us to perform the Fisher’s exact test (two-sided) to find out whether the differences in word associations and the duration of blocking were statistically significant or not. This was made in order to find out whether the censorship of words was random in regard to our categorization and the times they were censored, or whether statistically significant patterns would appear. As statistically significant patterns did emerge, it was possible to probe the overall logic of search engine filtering in China by finding the differences between ‘dangerous’ and ‘bad’ circulations of words.

We begin the article with a discussion of security and surveillance practices as techniques of government. The discussion provides the theoretical background and justification that our approach to investigating the control of word circulation is based on. We follow this with a brief introduction of Chinese internet control beyond Sina Weibo. The explication of our research design and the analysis of our case together with our findings is divided into sections that examine the filtered words according to the categories of name, phrase, and the CCP. After we have presented these, we then discuss the division of bad and dangerous circulation of such words. Our conclusions on Chinese internet control practice draw the article to a close.

### **Techniques of Government and Online ‘Flow-Control’**

As Kevin Haggerty (2006: 4) has noted, studies of ‘governmentality’ have all too often foregone the study of the actual experiences of being subjected to different political orders. To study

---

<sup>3</sup> The lists are available at: <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/新浪微博搜索敏感词列表/> and <http://sn.im/caonima439>, and <http://blockedonweibo.tumblr.com/about> and <http://blockedonweibo.tumblr.com/tagged/list>.

surveillance/dataveillance as well as resistance to it is indeed pertinent, as the politics of technology and type of political order are intertwined (Paltemaa and Vuori 2009). In the present article, we answer Haggerty's call to investigate actual everyday practices of governmentality by applying Jef Huysmans's (2006) concept of the 'politics of insecurity' to study Chinese practices of internet control. Huysmans's notion is partly based on Michel Foucault's (2007) concepts of the techniques of government. In the present study, we focus on the technique of governmentality, which, as Haggerty's above observation also suggests, has not been widely used in the examination of Chinese internet control.<sup>4</sup>

Foucault's notions have become prominent in the examination of the modern art of Western government (e.g. Dean 1999; Rose 1999). Such studies have focused on the mentalities, rationalities, and techniques that form the practical operation of what is considered to be a state. The conclusion has been that the problematics involved in political rule have shifted from sovereigns that say 'no' to their subjects, into forms of governing where the conduct of conduct is an important focus. As governments have begun to optimize economic, cultural, and biological flows within societies, it has become possible to examine the rationalities and techniques of government by studying the practices of government (Dean 1999: 19). Accordingly, governmentality studies are concerned with how both authorities and individuals view and act upon the government of human conduct (Dean 1999: 1-2). Our focus in the present article is on how the governing of online flows, and thereby online conduct, is enacted in the Chinese everyday.

In modern societies, the conduct of conduct is often achieved through the production of knowledge, the deployment of means and resources, and apparent choices or freedom. Yet, freedom still tends to be juxtaposed against security in a competitive way: freedoms are understood as creating insecurity, while security is seen to encroach on freedom. In the case of the internet, particularly in the liberal tradition, the internet is often portrayed as an arena of the free movement of ideas, transference of cultural artefacts, and, above all, communication; the internet is sometimes understood as a space of almost anarchical freedom beyond governmental control.<sup>5</sup> However, as has been shown by scholars who draw on the works of Hobbes and Foucault, the relationship between freedom and security is not as clear-cut as it may appear at first glance. Freedom requires a degree of security, and vice versa; security can even be viewed as the result of liberty (Bigo 2011: 107).

From the viewpoint of the politics of insecurity, security practices appear as the modulation of excesses of freedom (Huysmans 2006). Such modulations allow for authoritarian politics within liberal democracy (Hindess 2001; Dean 2002). The same seems to apply to non-democratic political orders too, but from a different angle: modulation of what is considered to be an excess of freedom is applied to allow for liberal policies within general authoritarianism (Vuori 2014). Indeed, from the viewpoint of an autocratic political leadership, a trade-off between tolerable levels of insecurity and other goals of the regime may be possible (Egorov et al. 2009). On a systemic level, security concerns become the concerns of defining and maintaining acceptable levels of insecurity that freedoms may create for the regime.

Security professionals and the technologies and techniques they use are essential for how such systemic viewpoints are enacted in everyday life. Foucault has shown how discourses appear in technologies of government. Didier Bigo (1994, 2000, 2002) has applied Foucault's ideas to the study of security. According to Bigo, the 'security expert', such as the police, military, and in this case the authorities who undertake internet censorship, in combination with technologies of security create fields of insecurity. Such fields legitimate the existence of security experts and professionals, and define threats and domains

---

<sup>4</sup> For example, Christopher Hughes (2003) has noted the lack of applying Foucault to the study of Chinese internet control in his review essay of China and the internet. Lokman Tsui's (2003) study of the Panopticon in Chinese internet control is an exception here.

<sup>5</sup> A classical example of this is John Perry Barlow's (1996) *The Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*.

of insecurity. Here, security is not only the result of an exceptional logic of emergency (Buzan et al. 1998), but brought about either through statistical calculations or the enactment of everyday practices.

For Huysmans (2006, 2014), the development of technological and bureaucratic procedures is part of the process of framing dangerous excesses of freedom. The everyday routines of security professionals are enabled, and thereby connected to, discourses of unease and danger within high politics. At the same time, everyday routines and practices are also semi- or fully institutionalized sites where freedom is regulated in terms of appropriate freedom, and excessive freedom. On the level of practice, it is the security and surveillance professional who makes the final choice of designating a certain domain or action, including single words, as illegitimate. This enacts social sorting into hierarchical categories that may have been considered in more general terms elsewhere. In our case, censorship is a security practice that defines the actual boundary between what is deemed to be appropriate freedom and excessive freedom in online China. In line with the Chinese overall ‘delegate to the lowest possible level’ policy of internet control, the blocking and censorship is realized by Sina Weibo itself.<sup>6</sup> As a result, what is blocked and how is a trade-off between the needs of the authorities and the smooth service of online customers.

Surveillance and security technologies and techniques are essential in the operation of autocratic political orders. In the ‘everyday’ of autocratic security practice, security professionals (e.g. the secret police), who make up the ‘protective belt’ of the means of action around the core of a totalitarian political order, define and target people and activities for security measures (Vuori 2008; Paltemaa and Vuori 2009). Yet, in the case of new phenomena, or activities on a mass-scale, political authorities beyond security experts must engage in security speech in order to mobilize the system and label the specific targets of the security measures (Paltemaa and Vuori 2006). Yet, the use of the internet, for example, does not necessarily have to be explicitly defined as a major threat to society to become a domain of security politics. ‘Security’ is a modality (Hansen 2000: 296) or a rationale (Huysmans 2006: 147) that can operate in the absence of ‘security words’. Indeed, in the case of online China, security experts do not explain their choice of censored words in public. Technology can be used to govern in a more succinct way than sovereign commands: users may usually accept technological artefacts as the way things just are, while their political origins are concealed and alternatives hard to imagine (Boyle 1998: 205). The analysis of techniques of government reveals this kind of disciplinary power, which resides beneath the surface of technologies.

Foucault’s triangle of the techniques of government is vital for this kind of analysis. According to it, the decisionist understanding of law and sovereignty is only one of the types of techniques. Sovereignty governs by means of rule of/by law and the coercive capacities that political, administrative and judicial institutions provide. Discipline governs through the identification and control of individuals’ location and movement by the imposition of grids ‘in an empty, artificial space’ (Foucault 2007: 19). Discipline is operated so that people do things without being told to, and often without knowing the influences on their behaviour (Foucault 1979, 2007: 39). This technique is framed through surveillance and correction (Foucault 2007: 5): while disciplinary power also draws lines that limit and exclude, it goes beyond the power of the sovereign and manifests itself in a variety of practices. Discipline can also be detected in how the location and movement of information is monitored, and how conduits of communication are brought about on the internet.

While both sovereignty and discipline are vital aspects of Chinese internet control (Tsui 2003), our focus is on the technique of governmentality. Governmentality governs the statistical category of a population instead of a territory, a people as a totality or single individuals. Such samples are examined as statistical distributions and the differential risks and dangers of each category normalized within them (Bigo 2011).

---

<sup>6</sup> Much of what is known about how Chinese microblog censorship works is based on the results the practices produce. For the case of Sina Weibo, see e.g. Elmer (2012).

Populations can be managed through the freedom of circulation, irrespective of whether that which circulates is biological, economic, or cultural. The function of prevention in terms of statistical probabilities, as in the practice of inoculation, is vital in the production of emergent effects on the level of a population. Security produces statistical categories within populations with concomitant risk evaluations of the potential for realization of their estimated danger. With governmentality, Foucault (2007: 108) referred to

the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument.

When a sovereign territory is set up in a way that allows for governance, the sovereign can begin to rely on security practices in governing its population, thus reducing the need for conspicuous sovereign commands saying ‘no’, and for the reliance on brute discipline to implement such denials (as in Mao’s China; Paltemaa and Vuori 2009). By leaving things to chance, by not strictly controlling everything, good circulation is facilitated and cost-benefit calculations provide better results for authorities (as in post-Mao China; Paltemaa and Vuori 2009). Instead of always saying ‘no’ to the population, details can be adjusted and controlled in order to have an aggregate effect on the population, and circulations within it. The thresholds of allowed/tolerated and prohibited flows are modulated by authorities. Rather than an enclosure, however, security and governmentality operate through an openness or freedom: ‘the apparatuses [dispositif] of security work, fabricate, organize, and plan a milieu (...) [which] appears as a field of intervention in which, instead of affecting individuals as a set of legal subjects (...) and instead of affecting them as a multiplicity of (...) bodies (...) one tries to affect, precisely, a population’ (Foucault 2007: 21). This is how security can be considered a technique of power that conjoins freedom and discipline.

Indeed, the sovereign has to police its territory, even online territory, in terms of obedience to the sovereign and the spatial layout of the territory (Foucault 2007: 14). An efficient sovereign constructs its territory so as to organize circulation in a way that allows good circulation, diminishes bad circulation, and eliminates dangerous circulation; while promoting the flow of positive things, like goods, sovereigns want to limit risky and inconvenient things, like theft and disease (Foucault 2007: 18-19). In the case of the internet, such circulations contain information, representations, commerce, and communication. In online China, the sovereign desire translates as regulations on ‘safe’ or allowed internet use and the manipulation of internet technology, infrastructure, and contents in order to guide users to ‘safe usage’. The Sina Weibo search filtering provides a prime example of how these are enacted in the everyday.

### **Internet Censorship in China**

The present study is premised on the assumption that internet censorship is a politically motivated activity. We base this premise on existing research on Chinese internet control and the Chinese government’s own announcements. Indeed, Chinese censorship tactics, structures, and actors therein have been extensively studied by a number of authors,<sup>7</sup> who have shown that these are based on directives from central level security and propaganda authorities. These authorities maintain special agencies for the sole purpose of internet censorship and surveillance. Internet service and content providers, including the Sina Weibo, then implement their daily orders through everyday routines. The actualization of censorship is delegated to the lowest level, and the service provider bears responsibility for content that is deemed illegal. This

---

<sup>7</sup> Xiao (2011); Goldsmith and Wu (2006); OpenNet Initiative (2005); Mr. X (2008); MacKinnon (2008, 2009); Bandurski (2007); Chase and Mulvenon (2002); Tao (2007).

diagram of power produces self-censorship and deterrence effects for media actors beyond online service providers too (Sæther 2008).

A number of studies have also focused on censorship practices at the level of substance. These studies point almost unanimously to the fact that censorship targets politically sensitive issues, in practical terms IP-addresses, words, and other contents. For example, Clayton et al. (2007) have analysed the blocking practices of the ‘Great Firewall of China’ and noted the strong presence of addresses with politically sensitive contents in the lists of blocked IP-addresses they found. Antonio M. Espinoza and Crandall (2011) have used the Named Entity Extraction data mining method to analyse which names of persons, places, and organizations have been blocked by internet search engines in China. Their conclusion was that such blacklists are relatively static and contain current, sensitive political content. In their turn, Jeffrey Knockel et al. (2011) have analysed the censored wordlist they were able to extract from Chinese TOM-Skype<sup>8</sup> servers, with the discovery that politically sensitive content was a dominant category in Chinese Skype censorship too. A number of lists on censored or blocked words have also been presented in various other studies. These include a 122-word blacklist from the Great Fire Wall of China, discovered by Crandall et al. (2007), and a 197-word list by Jason Ng (2013) on words filtered on Sina Weibo. Using the Wukan Incident<sup>9</sup> in 2012 as his case, Elmer (2012) has shown how, on the single word level, Sina Weibo search filtering follows changes in day-to-day politics closely. With changing circumstances, words can get blocked and released in quick succession.

Some recent studies have also tried to address the structure and logic of Chinese internet censorship as such. Bamman et al. (2012) have analysed how microblog entries get erased by censors on Sina Weibo. This study concluded that almost 16.25 per cent of messages are deleted over time in this largest microblog service in China, and that messages containing what were termed ‘politically sensitive’ words were deleted much more frequently. Recently, King et al. (2013, 2014) data-mined all mainland Chinese blogging services and found that the blogs which contained information with ‘collective action potential’ were the main target of censorship activities. The authors therefore concluded that, unlike how the usual assumption goes (e.g. Xiao 2011: 52), Chinese content censorship does not emphasize anti-regime topics, but largely aims to demobilize unrest and protests.

Beyond academic research, the Chinese government has also explained some of its reasons for internet censorship. The government announced in its *White Paper on the Internet* that it pursues the establishment of a ‘healthy and harmonious Internet environment’ (Information Office 2012: 229), and that censorship is conducted to ‘curb dissemination of illegal information online’. Such illegal dissemination falls into the following categories:

[information] being against the cardinal principles<sup>10</sup> set forth in the Constitution, endangering state security, divulging state secrets, subverting state power and jeopardizing national unification, damaging state honor and interests, instigating ethnic hatred or discrimination, and jeopardizing ethnic unity; jeopardizing state religious policy, propagating heretical or superstitious ideas; spreading rumours, disrupting social order and stability; disseminating obscenity, pornography, gambling, violence, brutality and

---

<sup>8</sup> TOM-Skype is a joint venture between Skype and TOM Group Limited, a Chinese language media group operating in Mainland China.

<sup>9</sup> The Wukan Incident was about a series of popular protests in the Wukan village in Guangdong province during the latter part of 2011. The protest concerned a land dispute between city residents and officials, and ended with provincial government intervention in favour of protesters. Such disputes have recently become common in China.

<sup>10</sup> These are upholding the socialist path, people’s democratic dictatorship, Marxist-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, and the Leadership of the CCP.

terror or abetting crime; humiliating or slandering others, trespassing on lawful rights and interests of others.

(Information Office 2012: 243-244)

As can be seen in the Sina Weibo microblog analysis below, many of these categories of illegal circulation also appear in the results.

### The Case: Search Filtering on Sina Weibo

We now turn to present the data and findings of our statistical analysis of Sina Weibo microblog search filtering. The source material used in the study consists of two lists of filtered words on Sina Weibo. The first list is the Chinese version of China Digital Times' (CDT) List of Sensitive Words on Sina Weibo,<sup>11</sup> as collected April 16, 2011 – July 27, 2013. During this time, the list contained 1,858 unique<sup>12</sup> words/phrases that were filtered at the Sina Weibo search engine<sup>13</sup> for at least some period of time. The CDT list is produced through crowdsourcing, i.e. individual Sina Weibo users can report filtered words and the time of observation to the CDT editors, who then place the words on the online list.<sup>14</sup> In this way, the publication of the lists is a form of counter surveillance activism that collects and disseminates information on authorities' and companies' surveillance practices. The list is highly accurate as the research team verified the listed words as being censored by re-checking their statuses on the Sina Weibo search engine when the study was conducted.

The present study has also taken advantage of the fact that similar lists based on different methods of finding censored words are available online. Combining such lists helps to avoid the biases any single method of sampling might produce. In the present study, we combined the CDT List of Sensitive Words on Sina Weibo with Jason Ng's three lists of censored words, which are publicly available at 'Blocked on Weibo'.<sup>15</sup> His method can be called 'the dictionary method', as the three lists have been produced using software that tests about 700,000 Chinese Wikipedia titles on the Sina Weibo search engine and lists the ones that are blocked. Altogether, the three 'Blocked on Weibo' lists contained 861 filtered words. We verified these lists as highly accurate too.

Combining the CDT and 'Blocked on Weibo' lists is arguably unproblematic, as they measure the same thing by analysing search filtering in exactly the same way: by counting the times the Sina Weibo search engine rejects word searches and informs the user that it is unable to display search results because they contain 'illegal words'.<sup>16</sup> The combined list of these two sources contained 2,387 unique words or phrases,<sup>17</sup> and we term it here as the Combined Filtered Word List (CFWL).

For the analysis, we categorized words on the list in accordance with their grammatical type and socio-political attributes associated with the words. The first step in the creation of the analytical framework was explorative. For this, the research team read the words on the lists and, based on this empirical familiarity with the subject, abstracted a 71-category list of common attributes of blocked words (see Table 1). The

<sup>11</sup> 中国数字时代敏感词开源研究项目, 新浪微博搜索敏感词列表, available at

<http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/新浪微博搜索敏感词列表/> and at <http://sn.im/caonima439>.

<sup>12</sup> The raw number of blocked terms was 2,036, but about 8.7 per cent of entries were duplicates, i.e. terms with same characters that triggered filtering. We removed such words from the sample while retaining the oldest entry.

<sup>13</sup> The search engine can be accessed at <http://s.weibo.com/>.

<sup>14</sup> Instructions can be found at

<http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2011/10/欢迎网友参与“中国数字时代敏感词开源研究项目/>

<sup>15</sup> The lists can be found at <http://blockedonweibo.tumblr.com/about> and <http://blockedonweibo.tumblr.com/tagged/list>.

<sup>16</sup> In Chinese this message reads as follows: 根据相关法律法规和政策, “[SEARCH TERM]” 搜索结果未予显示.

<sup>17</sup> We removed duplicates from the final list. The overlap between the lists was 34.7 per cent.



framework of common attributes has some clear commonalities with the categories of the *White Paper* discussed above, but the *White Paper* data was not used in the creation of the framework. The classification work relied partly on the background explanations provided by the CDT and Jason Q. Ng, but the research team and native speakers double-checked each word from the Chinese Language Internet. The basic question that guided the classification work, apart from analyzing some grammatical features of blocked words, was: What is the politically significant feature/s of each word/phrase, which would warrant it to become blocked on Sina Weibo in the political context of the moment it was reported as blocked? This involved relating the blocked words to the Chinese political system, and to current events in Chinese politics and society.

An example of a blocked word, and how we classified its associations, helps to clarify the procedure. A single word could be associated with many attributes at the same time. Therefore, a term like 习禁评 = Xi Jinping (Xi 'Cannot be Criticized' [Jinping]) was classified in the categories of Proper Name, Person, Leader, CCP, Standing Committee Member, Derogatory, Euphemism, and Homonym. This is because Xi Jinping was a member of the Politburo Standing Committee of the CCP, at the time, and the blocked term was a slightly derogatory homonymic euphemism of his real name (习近平, Xi Jinping). Contextuality was used by paying attention to the time when this version (there were many other filtered euphemisms or homonyms of his name during the study period as well) was reported as filtered. Taking place before the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in November 2012, it was also included in the category of 'Party Succession', as Xi was generally regarded as the leading contender for the position of the Party General Secretary. Once he was nominated to the position, this category was no longer used for words referring to Xi. The rule was not to stretch the chain of associations, but to keep the classification of single words as few as possible. Therefore, to continue with the example, although the decision to make Xi Jinping the new General Secretary was rumoured to have involved heavy factional infighting at the highest level of the CCP, Xi Jinping was not regarded as associated with the category of 'Factionalism' unless his name was clearly presented in such a context (for example in the combination of Hu-Xi [胡习, Hú-Xi], which denotes his relation with the former Party General Secretary Hu Jintao).

In order to be able to evaluate the results better, the method for producing our data should also be addressed here. The strengths of crowdsourcing lie in its superior ability to constantly monitor the evolution of daily political debates and events on all levels in China, something single researchers simply are not able to do. Indeed, it can be regarded as a form of counter surveillance by ordinary internet users in the Sinophone internet that seeks to make censorship and surveillance visible for common users. Furthermore, because of the relatively high number of homonyms and euphemisms, as well as names of persons, places, and combinations of phrases that are censored on Sina Weibo, the method is in some respects superior to the 'dictionary method'. Yet, crowdsourcing also has some evident weaknesses. First, it produces a lot of duplicated effort. Second, the method may produce an 'activist bias' in so far as the people who report new entries to the list are likely to be politically more aware and active than the general population. This may produce an over-representation of 'high politics' in the list and under-representation of, for example, vulgarisms. This could be seen when the two lists were compared with each other. Notable differences could be detected in the categories of Obscene/Sexual content and Illegal Substances (such as names of narcotics), both being more prominent in the Blocked on Weibo lists than in the CDT list. However, beyond this discrepancy, there were no large systematic differences between the lists.

At this point, it is also useful to emphasize the scope conditions of the study, which is focused solely on search filtering on the biggest microblogging site in China during the time of research. There are other microblogging sites such as the rivalling, and as heavily filtered, Tencent Weibo, and there are many other kinds of platforms in Chinese Social Media as well (e.g. WeChat, Skype, QQ, and BBS forums). Furthermore, other types of internet censorship also take place from *post facto* deletion of contents to blocking access to specified web addresses. Indeed, the findings of this study speak only about filtering on Sina Weibo and our study is not necessarily representative of all the internet control security and

surveillance methods deployed by the Chinese authorities. The filtering of searches is also a more explicitly disciplinary practice than, for example, Deep Packet Inspection and the subtle alteration of content that also take place in Chinese internet censorship. Indeed, to search with certain terms already requires potentially subversive information, which makes explicit disciplining more effective: to alter content without knowledge of this taking place works better in cases where there is no previous knowledge of what is censored. Nevertheless, we argue that the study still allows for gaining insight into the logic of short- and long-term internet censorship in China.

Now that we have laid out the overall premises for conducting the type of analysis we have done, and introduced some of the overall features of Chinese online censorship, we can present our findings of which kinds of words, and thereby issues, have been censored on Sina Weibo.

### Findings

Table 1 shows how many CFWL words were associated with the given attributes. These associations reveal one of the basic features of search filtering on Sina Weibo: it has a notably strong emphasis on names (64.4 per cent), which censors target more often than phrases (48.8 per cent). Other frequent associations were with the CCP (41.6 per cent), Persons (40.2 per cent), Incidents (34.7 per cent), and Leaders (31.4 per cent). Words associated with the Party numbered almost 3.5 times more than words related to Opposition (12 per cent), or Mass Protests (10.5 per cent), and only 2.8 per cent of words were associated with directly Subversive content (i.e. calling explicitly for the overthrow of the one-party system or names of persons or organizations known to have such aims).

The general description of censored words therefore suggests that controlling the circulation of directly anti-party words and words related to protests is not the main task of search engine filtering, even though it plays a role too. Our analysis suggests that Sina Weibo search filtering is geared more toward controlling public debates on the Party and its leading personages than anything else. This conclusion is strengthened, and gains more nuance when we sort the CFWL words into selected major categories (Table 1) and analyse their other associations from three subsamples (Figures 1 to 3).

**Table 1:** *The Number of Words Associated with Different Attributes on Sina Weibo April 16, 2011 – July 27, 2013 (by category type and share, in descending order of share size).*

Categories	Number	Share (%) <sup>18</sup>
All	2387	
<i>By Grammatical Type</i>		
Proper Name	1537	64.39
Phrase	1165	48.80
Euphemism	448	18.77
Derogatory	162	6.79
Pinyin	140	5.87
Homonym	127	5.32
Date	106	4.44
English	70	2.93
Other Name	31	2.00
<i>By Category of Association</i>		
The CCP <sup>19</sup>	993	41.06

<sup>18</sup> Portion of all the censored words associated with this attribute-category. The categories of words are not mutually exclusive and a single word could be associated with several attributes at the same time. Words in indented sub-categories are also counted in the non-indented category above them. For example, all words associated with Scandals were also as associated with Incidents, but not vice-versa.

Politburo Standing Committee (SC)	319	13.36
Politburo	170	7.12
Person	961	40.25
Incident <sup>20</sup>	829	34.73
Scandal <sup>21</sup>	283	11.86
Leader <sup>22</sup>	750	31.42
Disharmony/Unrest <sup>23</sup>	390	16.34
Mass Protest <sup>24</sup>	251	10.51
Opposition <sup>25</sup>	287	12.02
Factionalism <sup>26</sup>	267	11.86
Party Succession <sup>27</sup>	278	11.64
High cadre <sup>28</sup>	272	11.39
Place name	257	10.77
Corruption / Crime / Misbehaviour	257	10.76
Tiananmen Incident 1989 <sup>29</sup>	252	10.55
Rumour <sup>30</sup>	242	10.14
Obscene / Sexual Content	232	9.71
Activist/Dissident <sup>31</sup>	231	9.59
Oppression/Oppressed	229	9.59
Foreign <sup>32</sup>	224	9.38
Taiwan	30	1.25
Hong Kong	66	2.76
Veteran <sup>33</sup>	204	8.55
History <sup>34</sup>	159	6.66
Political System	156	6.53
Human Rights <sup>35</sup>	154	6.45

<sup>19</sup> Including Party members' names, names of Party organizations and positions, phrases containing the character for 'party' (dǎng, 党) when referring to the CCP.

<sup>20</sup> Politically negatively charged sudden event; includes references to mass protest incidents.

<sup>21</sup> Politically negatively charged sudden event revealing embarrassing, and often criminal, misbehaviour by individuals or organizations.

<sup>22</sup> Party leaders in the Standing Committee and Politburo, Opposition organization leaders.

<sup>23</sup> Incidents, names, and organizations associated with occurrences of social instability, terrorism, or public criticism of the political system or some of its aspect. Also words generally referring to protest, such as 'demonstration'.

<sup>24</sup> Words associated with actual collective protest activities, e.g. demonstrations, strikes, etc. All Mass Protests also associated with Disharmony/Unrest and Incident.

<sup>25</sup> Organization or person or phrases associated with anti-one-party activities or statements or standing for political reform.

<sup>26</sup> Words containing reference to factions or combinations of leading cadre names (e.g. Hu-Wen).

<sup>27</sup> Words associated with nouns or sentences, persons, factions, and matters referring to the 18th Party Congress in 2012 and/or the NPC conference in March 2013 in the context of news and rumours on the possible outcomes of the event.

<sup>28</sup> Cadres at the level of Central Committee, provincial leaders, ministers, mayors, and governors or their vice-level equivalents. In theory at least, some of these may be not CCP members, therefore the category is not a CCP sub-category.

<sup>29</sup> The Tiananmen Incident 1989 was treated as a *sui generis* case, i.e. apart from their grammatical attributes, all words directly referring to the Incident were associated only with this one category, although arguably it can be associated with a number of other categories, such as Protest, as well, but this was to avoid one very sensitive historical incident dominating analysis of censorship on current incidents and oppositional activities.

<sup>30</sup> Words associated with unsubstantiated news on incidents, such as a rumoured attempt on *coup d'etat* in Beijing in early 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Persons known for their social activism, not all necessary anti-party in nature, e.g. many *weiquan*, or legal rights lawyers.

<sup>32</sup> Including word associated with Taiwanese and Hongkongese matters.

<sup>33</sup> Former party leaders.

<sup>34</sup> Excluding the Tiananmen Incident 1989; including all events that had taken place two years or longer before being blocked and historical personages such as Mao Zedong.

Organization		151	6.26
Democracy <sup>36</sup>		149	6.24
Censorship		130	5.44
Relative		115	4.81
Police/Security Authorities		115	4.81
Army		115	4.81
Event <sup>37</sup>		100	4.18
Military Cadre		85	3.56
Political System Change <sup>38</sup>		85	3.56
Academic/Artist/Writer		78	3.27
Newspaper		74	3.1
Independent Media		72	3.01
Propaganda		72	3.01
Princeling		68	2.80
Subversive <sup>39</sup>		67	2.80
Company		66	2.76
Minority <sup>40</sup>		63	2.69
	Tibet <sup>41</sup>	32	1.34
Ideology		63	2.63
Web Address		53	2.22
Religion <sup>42</sup>		52	2.17
Book		50	2.09
Political Slogan / Policy name		49	2.05
Address		46	1.92
Falun Gong		46	1.92
Illegal Substance		43	1.80
Unknown/Miscellanea		43	1.80
Foreign Policy		40	1.67
Separatism <sup>43</sup>		38	1.59
Article <sup>44</sup>		32	1.34
Celebrity		28	1.17
Reporter		27	1.13
Art Work		13	0.54
Computer Programme		13	0.54
Movie/TV		9	0.04

*Sorted by Name*

The CFWL allows us to analyse which other categories the filtered words are also associated with. For example, what other associations do words associated with the CCP have? Arguably, such cross-tabulation is much more fruitful than only analyzing the general distribution of filtered words, which in principle could just reflect the frequencies of words in everyday language. Below, we present a more detailed analysis of what the other associations of words in the three largest categories in the CFWL were: Proper Names, Phrases, and the Party. Figure 1 presents the other associations of blocked words associated with Proper Names.

<sup>35</sup> Phrases containing the characters for human rights and names of persons and organizations advocating these.

<sup>36</sup> Same as above, but with ‘democracy’.

<sup>37</sup> Politically important happening (also historical ones), such as the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Conference.

<sup>38</sup> Words associated to changing the existing political system, including subversive ones, e.g. ‘constitution’.

<sup>39</sup> Content against the present political system, e.g. ‘Throw down the Communist Party’.

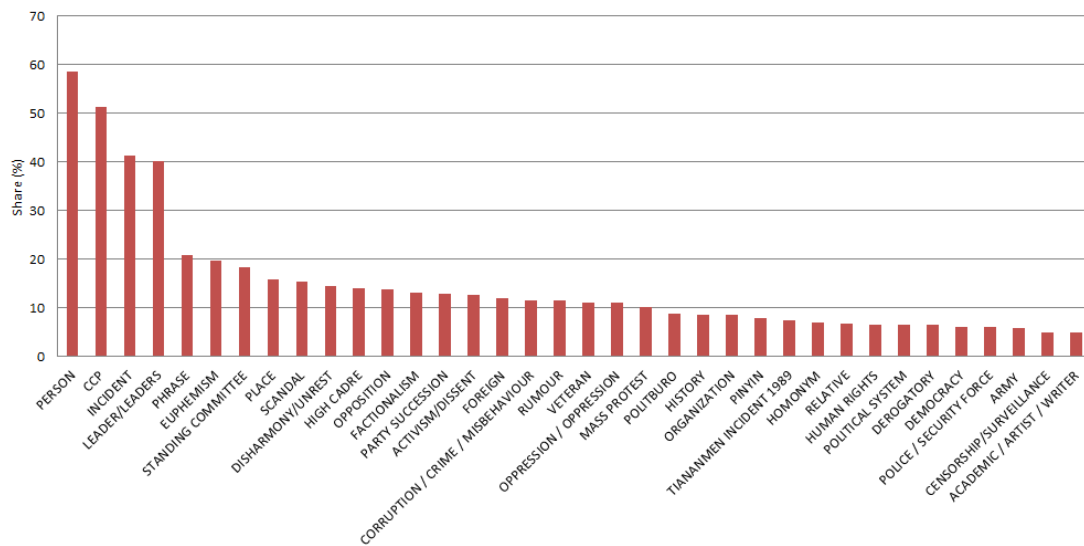
<sup>40</sup> Ethnic minorities and geographical names related to them (Tibet, Xinjiang, and so on).

<sup>41</sup> All words associated with Tibet were also classified as associated with Minority.

<sup>42</sup> Excluding words only associated with the Falun Gong.

<sup>43</sup> Persons, organizations, and slogans associated with separatism, e.g. *Tai-du*, or Taiwanese independence.

<sup>44</sup> Newspaper articles, laws, announcements by political leaders or dissidents, and so on.



**Figure 1.** Other associations of blocked words associated with Proper Name ( $n = 1537$ , < 5 per cent omitted for clarity)

The largest category of filtered proper names was that of Person, which referred predominantly to proper names of individuals (59.3 per cent). There are a number of ways to explain the prevalence of names as a dominant type of filtered words. One possible explanation is that this follows the natural frequency of word-types in Chinese language-use, and may therefore not reflect conscious choices by security experts as such. China has over 1.3 billion personal names, which is a far larger number than the words in the Chinese dictionary (about 50,000 to 160,000 depending on the dictionary). Second, the prevalence of names as a dominant type of filtered words could be a result of Sina Weibo wanting to minimize censorship through deploying the filtering as precisely as possible in order to ensure customer satisfaction by minimizing disruptions to internet traffic, while still satisfying security authorities' demands at the same time. If this were so, names would be the largest filtered type of words because of the commercial logic of Sina Weibo, not security concerns.

However, both of these explanations fail to explain the other associations of filtered names. Indeed, 52.7 per cent of the Names (also as Euphemisms) censored on Sina Weibo were associated with the CCP. This means that about 1/3 of all words censored on Sina Weibo in total were related to CCP members' names. Since only about six per cent of the Chinese are CCP members, the frequency of their names in natural speech cannot explain their share on the list. This conclusion is strengthened by the fact that the fourth largest category in this subsample, namely Leader/s, refers predominantly to the highest echelons of the CCP. It is difficult to think of any business-related reason why Sina Weibo would voluntarily filter names of leading cadres from its microblog searches. Indeed, having them circulating freely would probably increase user traffic at Sina Weibo and thus company revenues. The logical conclusion is that the choice of these names reflects security rather than commercial logic, although using names instead of some other keywords as the main word-type for filtering is probably the least disruptive method for data flows as a whole.

Concerning other names, Chinese security experts also filter searches for leading oppositional figures (Activists/Dissidents). This is done almost solely by their real proper names, and only a few blacklisted euphemisms concern oppositional figures. Academics and/or Artists also have a small presence in this category. Party propaganda authorities have repeatedly voiced their concern about the increased influence

of ‘public intellectuals’ (Volland 2013). In actuality, only a few academics seem to be so prominent that they warrant censorship on Sina Weibo.

It is relatively easy to understand the logic for why security experts block the names of leading oppositional figures: the Party cannot allow the formation of peer-competitors. It is however not as apparent why the names of the leading Party cadres are censored, especially when the official media keeps repeating these names *ad nauseam*. Yet, this censorship conduct reveals one of the basic censorship practices in online China: making it more difficult for netizens to communicate freely about the leading personalities by their names hinders their ability to form shared critical opinions on them and their policies. This practice can be seen as the deliberate creation of coordination problems (Egorov et al. 2009) for collective action, both on- and offline. In effect, such coordination problems work to arrest the potential for the ‘revolutionary bandwagon effect’ (Kuran 1991) in Weibo microblog discussions. Indeed, Nathan (2013) suggests that the partially free internet in China has created an information overload that may work against ‘information cascades’. At the same time though, the difficulty of envisioning alternatives to the ruling party is a major obstacle for demanding change. Our results qualify Nathan’s argument, as it is clear that preventing debates on leaders prevents debates on their alternatives too.

Obviously, the creation of coordination problems through search filtering is not a fool proof form of suppression: Chinese homophones and euphemisms are too numerous and versatile to prevent all online communication on leading figures in the Party. Indeed, search filtering lets certain words through. Yet, the most successful euphemisms tend to become victims of their success, which, as elsewhere (Leistert 2012), displays how Chinese surveillance and resistance to it have an adaptive relationship. Despite its limits though, search filtering still fractures public discourse and thereby makes political mobilization more difficult. Such hindrance practice covers a much larger volume of censorship than does the suppression of explicit resistance or opposition.

#### *Sorted by Phrase*

The second most frequent category of censored words was Phrases. We categorized any noun or sentence, which was not a proper name, as a Phrase. Figure 2 presents a breakdown of censored words that contain such associations.

As Figure 2 indicates, blocked phrases are also often combined with names (meaning entries that contain both names and phrases, such as ‘bring down the CCP’). This makes censorship targeting a rather precise combination of words. Associations to Incidents, Mass Protest, and Disharmony/Unrest are, relatively speaking, more common in this category than in the general distribution. This indicates that when censors are not censoring names, they are often interested in phrases that refer to social instability.

‘Obscene/sexual content’ is another notable category under phrases (17 per cent). Although no amount of vulgarisms on Sina Weibo will bring the one-party system down as such, the concern with vulgarisms indicates how Chinese censors also have a paternalistic role to keep public discourse civil, as also laid down in the *White Paper*. Almost everything else in the censored word list has a ‘political’ meaning in the sense that they can be directly associated with some aspects of the political system. The result may also show how the 2009 campaign to ‘clean the Internet from vulgarisms’ (China Daily 5 Jan 2009) is still visible in Sina Weibo search filtering.

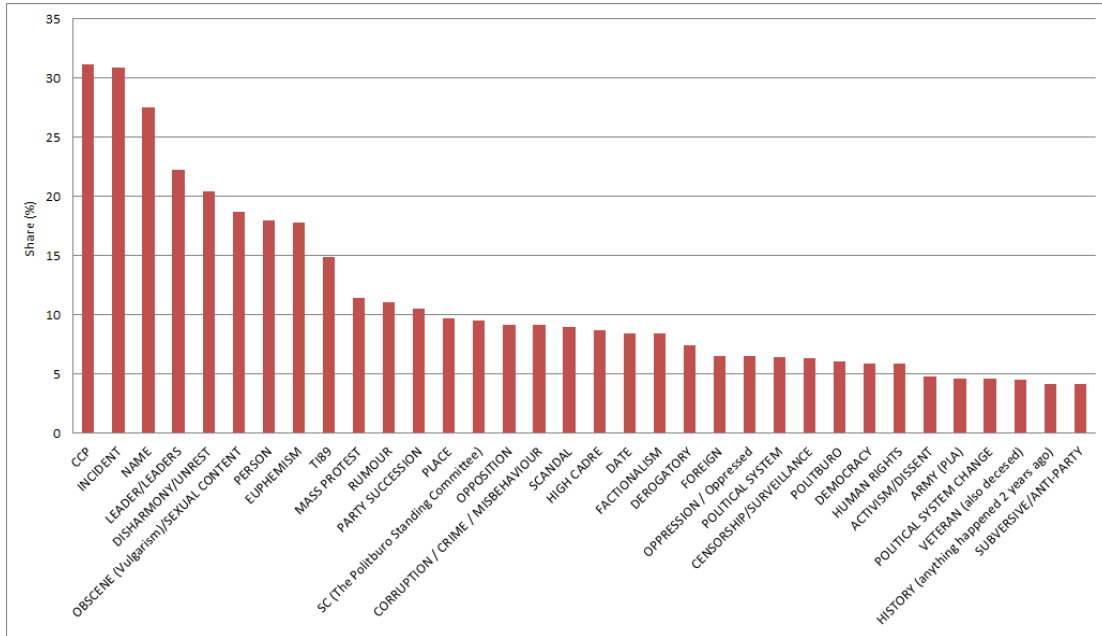


Figure 2. Other associations of blocked words associated with Phrase (n = 1165, selected categories.)

Among the mid-range categories (5–15 per cent) of censored phrases were words/sentences associated with Leadership Succession (10.5 per cent) and intra-party Factionalism (8.4 per cent). Their relative high number was likely due to the proximity of the 18<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, and then the first assembly of the 18<sup>th</sup> National People’s Congress to the study period. This indicates how free communication on the most important political events in the political life of China was deemed as bad circulation in public discourse. Security experts seemed to want to make the Party, not citizens on Sina Weibo, the only source of information on these events.

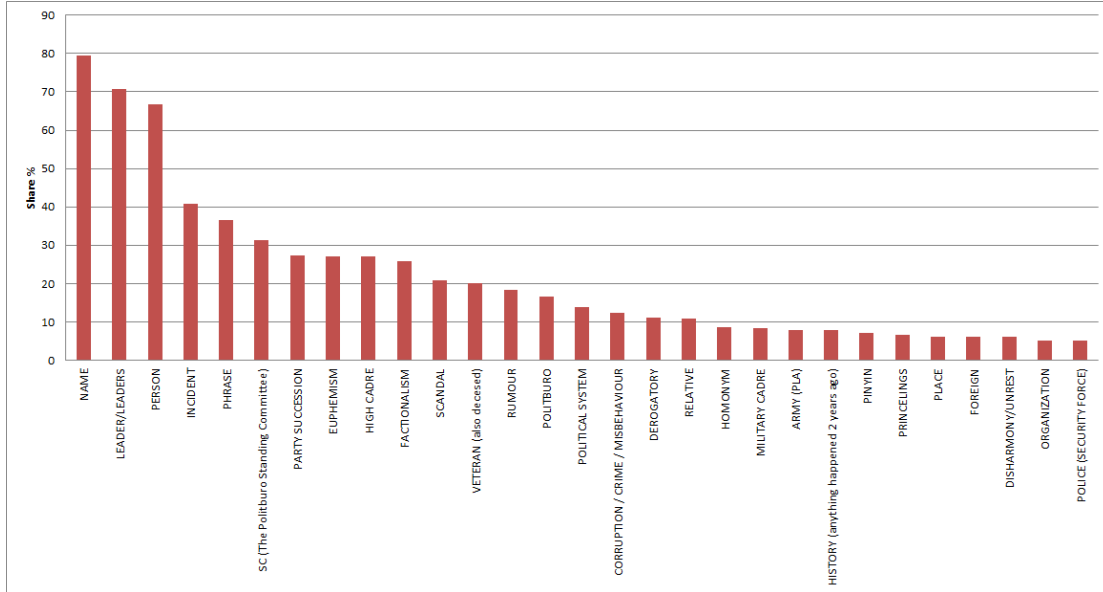
It is also notable how phrases associated with the Opposition, the Political System, or commenting on it in general (such as calling it a ‘tyranny’) were notably fewer in number than phrases associated with the CCP, or Incidents and Mass Protests. Furthermore, and quite interestingly, words with direct anti-one-party content, i.e. those associated with Activism/Dissent, Subversion, or Political System Change were all at the low end of shares (< 5 per cent). This indicates that censors are, relatively speaking, less concerned about words in these categories than may be commonly assumed. The results of King et al. (2013) point to the same conclusion. However, as our analysis of dangerous circulation below reveals, words associated to these attributes tend to receive more long-term censorship than most of the others, and therefore they play an important role as categories of words targeted by filtering.

*Sorted by the CCP*

Figure 3 presents a breakdown of words associated with the CCP according to their other associations. To begin with, and not surprisingly in light of earlier findings, a large part of search filtering about the Party was about Party leaders (70.8 per cent), and their names, often under euphemisms. Most of these names were not connected to phrases, but were blocked as such. This indicates how the security experts regarded public discourse where the names of Party leaders appeared as bad or dangerous circulation *per se*, which they needed to curb regardless of its nature.

Of interest is also that references to the Party as an organization were among the censored terms. On the level of single words, even the CCP (共产党, *Gòngchǎndǎng*) and its common abbreviations (such as 中共, *Zhōng-Gòng*) and many (often derogatory) euphemisms that referred to the Party (such as 共贪党, *Gòngtāndǎng*, the ‘Party of Common Corruption’) were censored. Censors thereby seem to deem that the

logic of no talk is better than any talk when it comes to the Party and its leaders. Some of such talk might actually be supportive, even without the contributions of the paid-for, pro-party commentators—the so-called Fifty Cent Party. Yet, clearly, censors regarded such collateral damage as less significant than the possible damage the free circulation of comments on the Party and its leaders might have.



**Figure 3.** Other associations of blocked words associated with the CCP (n = 993, categories < 5 per cent omitted)

Compared to the general distribution of filtered words, censors were also more concerned about Incidents that involved the CCP in one form or another (40.9 per cent). Usually, this meant filtering the names of party members who were involved in Scandals (20.8 per cent), targeted by various Rumours (18.4 per cent), or that were under Criminal investigation for Corruption or other Misbehaviours in office (12.4 per cent). Censors were also keen to suppress the free circulation of references to Party Factionalism (25.9 per cent). Closely related to this, the censors were intent on filtering communication on the ongoing Party Leadership Succession (27.9 per cent). Furthermore, the names of Veteran Party leaders (especially the former party general secretary Jiang Zemin) also received a significant amount of censorship (20.1 per cent), even to a greater degree than the offices or organizations within the CCP structure itself (5.2 per cent).

### Bad and Dangerous Circulation

Above, we have outlined the findings of the general distribution of filtered words, and of the three most commonly filtered types of words on Sina Weibo. Such a descriptive analysis alone cannot reveal which of these words were regarded more dangerous than others. In order to get a bearing on the overall logic of filtering, we analysed how long words associated with the different categories stayed filtered for. The combination of diachronic and synchronic examination allowed us to tell dangerous and bad circulation apart. The starting point in this part of analysis was to view filtered keywords as potential ‘access points’ for information conducive to forming oppositional opinions. Such words open access to information on politically sensitive matters and, as importantly, inform people on the existence of like-minded people, which is an essential feature of social media. Notably, both are necessary conditions for social mobilization. Denying access to such points increases the coordination problem, and thus makes social mobilization less likely to occur. Such access points do not need to be about open declarations to join protest. Instead, as the descriptive part has already demonstrated above, they can be anything that offers



entrance to exchanges of potentially oppositional communication such as opinions on Party leaders. These kinds of access points are essential for the modulation of Chinese limits of freedom to mobilize socially. As other studies have shown (e.g. Sæther 2008), such modulation of allowed and denied topics fluctuates in traditional media too. Practices such as these are quintessential for how the Chinese post-totalitarian system (Paltemaa and Vuori 2006, 2009) produces a sense of deterrence, and thereby self-censorship for media professionals and users.

For the present study, we based the operational distinction of bad and dangerous flows of information on the length of censorship. As such, we cannot tell the degree of danger security experts assign to any single filtered word on the list where all words appear as equally dangerous *prima facie*. However, we argue that the length of time a word remains filtered tells us how constant security experts deem the threat of associated with the word to be. Therefore, the longer a word remains filtered, the more lasting danger it constitutes for the political system from the security expert's viewpoint. Therefore, in our analysis, 'bad' circulation stands for temporary, and 'dangerous' stands for more constant filtering.

For this kind of analysis, we could only use the CDT list as it was the only list that we could test at least twice, i.e. within a year and after one year of a word first appearing on it. Moreover, we had to clear the CDT list of words that we could not test in accordance with these criteria, i.e. words that had been on the list for less than a year when we conducted the test. As a result, a sample of  $n = 1,303$  was created. We then divided the sample into Group 1 for words not blocked after one year after they first appeared on the list ( $n = 905$ ), and Group 2 for words being also blocked at least a year after they first appeared on the list ( $n = 398$ ).

We tested all words twice, once within the year (normally within 6-8 months after its listing) and once after a year had passed from when the word was first listed (usually within 14-16 months). We categorized a word into Group 1 (blocked for less than one year) if the Sina Weibo search engine did not reject the search results in the first and second test. If a search was rejected in both tests, or if the results were shown in the first test, but the second inquiry was rejected, the word was classified as belonging to Group 2. The test was somewhat crude, as it allowed a possibility of doubt for words that tested positive (i.e. blocked) in the first test and negative in the second test. This was because it was usually not possible to pinpoint the exact date the word became a filtered one. In practice, though, only 94 words fell into this 'limbo-category', and we subsequently omitted them from the sample. Two other minor categories were 'no information found' and 'interruption of service'. In these cases, we tested the word again soon, and, if the same results continued, we omitted it from the analysis.

The sizes of both groups, and categories therein, allowed us to perform the Fisher's exact test (two-sided) on the differences of the shares of blocked words between the two sub-samples by each category of association, and find out whether the differences were statistically significant or not. Figure 4 shows the results for the categories whose differences we found to be statistically significant at the significance level of  $p \leq .05$ . The Figure presents the difference between shares of each category in two groups (share Group 1 – share Group 2). Positive scores on the x-axis indicate that words in these categories were more strongly associated with the group of words censored for shorter periods, while the words in categories with negative scores were more strongly associated with the group of words filtered on more than one occasion. For clarity, we omitted the categories where the difference was not statistically significant from the figure.

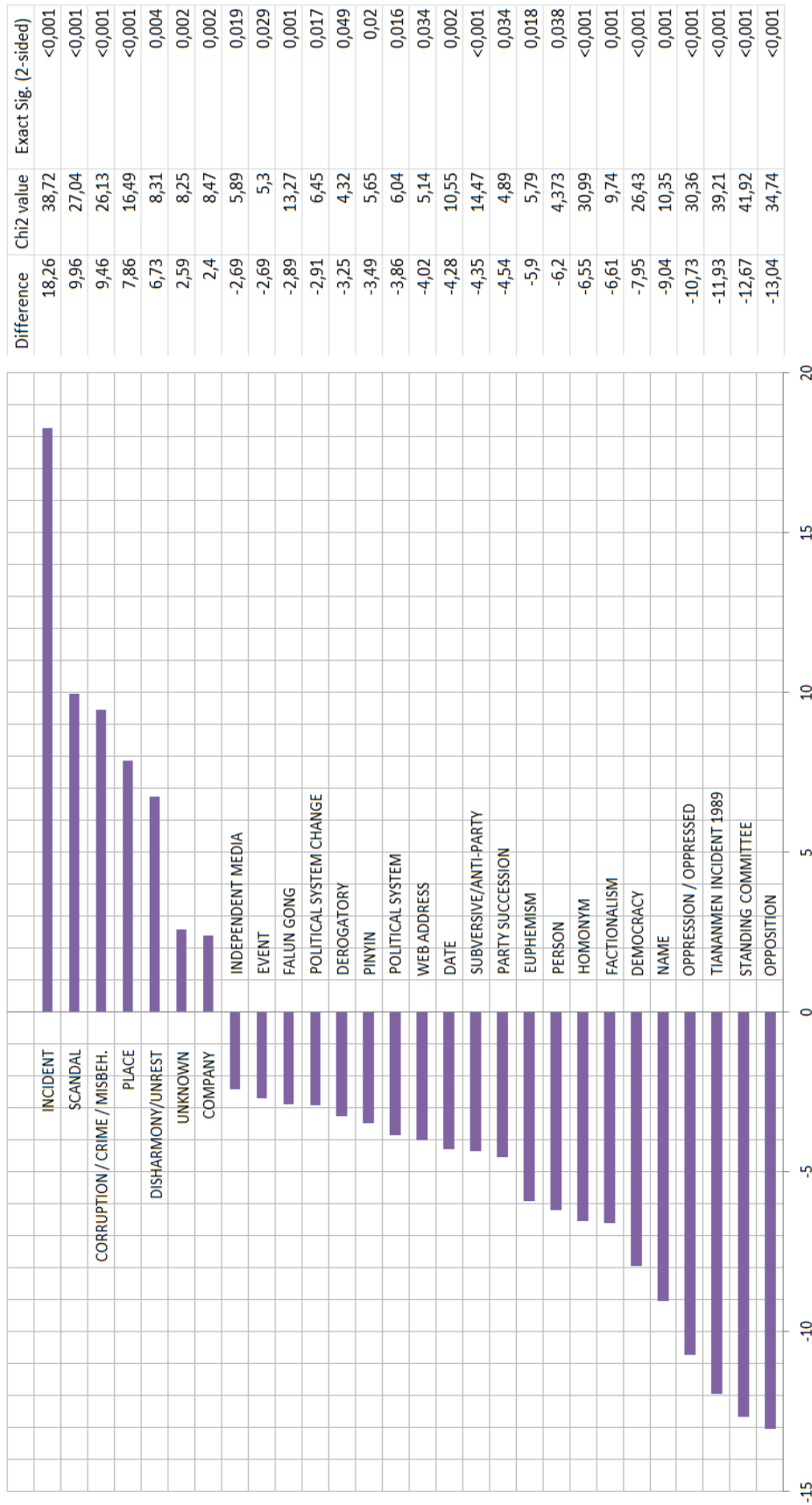
In performing the two-sided Fisher's exact test, we did not have any pre-set hypothesis on the possible direction of differences between the groups, i.e. we had no expectation on which types of words would be censored for short or long periods, or that there would be significantly strong associations between the word categories and their duration of censorship. Yet, as the results show, the associations between words in certain categories and the times they were censored are not random, but display a clear and theoretically

interesting pattern instead. Indeed, words placed in certain categories have, statistically speaking, a higher likelihood to be associated with the group of words censored only once, while words in other categories have a higher statistical likelihood to be censored more than once. In general, this finding supports the argument that Sina Weibo search filtering follows the logic of controlling the circulation of bad and dangerous communication flows. The result also shows how censors regard many words in the smaller categories of the general distribution table significant enough to warrant long-term filtering.

Looking first at the categories that were, statistically speaking, significantly more likely to receive shorter-term filtering, reveals an interesting pattern concerning what is regarded as bad circulation. These categories were Incidents, Scandals, Corruption, Crime/Misbehaviour, Place Names, Disharmony/Unrest, and Company. Censors seem to rely on the fact that words associated with these categories tend to be salient in public opinion only for a relatively short period of time, after which they are usually dealt with, forgotten, buried with other topics in the media, or even become allowed topics (such as the Wukan incident in late 2011 and early 2012). Furthermore, most incidents are local and / or limited in their scope, which explains the fact that Place names fall under this category.

Regarding the categories, which were statistically more strongly associated with the group of words censored also at least one year after they first appeared on the list, two clear censorship criteria seem to apply. These words either dealt with the 'hard core' of the political system and its functioning, or opposition to it. Thus, we find that security experts found words referring to the Politburo Standing Committee, Party Leadership Factionalism, and Party Succession as dangerous in public discourse. As was already discussed in the descriptive analysis above, Sina Weibo search filtering pays great attention to words related to the names of the highest Party leaders. This result indicates that the closer one gets to the core of the leadership, the more continuous or frequent this censorship also becomes.

The second dangerous type of words is those associated with opposition to one-party rule. The categories of Opposition, Tiananmen Incident 1989, Oppression, Democracy, Subversive/Anti-Party, Political System and Political System Change, Falun Gong, and Separatism all present aspects of such opposition, and are all regarded as dangerous circulation. In addition, the categories of Web Address and Independent Media consist mostly of names of opposition-related webpages and newspapers as well as Western media, which often contain critical views and sensitive news on Chinese political leaders and the Party. Furthermore, the words associated with the category of Names (or Euphemism, Homonyms, Derogatory and Pinyin versions of them) often refer to members of the Politburo Standing Committee, or oppositional leaders and their organizations. Arguably then, the effort made to censor words associated with these categories can be regarded as a sign of security experts protecting the hard core of the political system, i.e. one-party rule, by trying to prevent public discourses on the party leaders, opposition, and oppositional ideas.



**Figure 4.** Statistically significant differences between Group 1 (for words not blocked after one year after they first appeared on the list, n = 905), and Group 2 (for words being also blocked at least a year after they first appeared on the list, n = 398),. chi-square values and significance levels (Fisher's Exact test, two-sided).

## Conclusions

The empirical aim of this article has been to deepen the examinations of Chinese surveillance/dataveillance-based censorship practices by moving beyond simple classification of censored content as ‘politically sensitive’ to show how censorship has nuance. As we have shown, the variation in the way the Chinese security experts treat filtered words derives from the underlying logic of censorship practice that serves to protect the hard core of the Chinese political system: one-party rule. This is achieved by filtering netizens’ access to potential rallying points for oppositional political awareness building in general, not only direct protest activities.

In more theoretical terms, the article has sought to contribute to the debate on freedom as a technique of government, by examining the operation of freedom and the control of communication flows in a non-democratic contemporary political order. The study shows what kinds of logics are in operation in a post-totalitarian system: with the possibility of flow-control, a non-democratic order like China can allow things to happen and rely on security and surveillance practices in its online environments. The practice of flow-control allows a post-totalitarian order to preserve itself even in a diagram of power that is characterized more by open networks than tight enclosures. Such a diagram makes it possible to use freedom as a technique of autocratic government. Indeed, beyond the limit of liberal democracy, the roles of freedom and authoritarianism are reversed in the operation of the politics of insecurity.

We hope that our study is able to inspire more research on the politics of insecurity in political orders that are not within the liberal tradition. Indeed, our example shows how such analytical frames developed in Europe can be deployed to study China and other non-democratic political orders (see also Vuori 2014). This kind of investigation is pertinent for post-totalitarian and other forms of autocratic politics in the epoch of networked media. In the Chinese case, security and surveillance experts use the method of classifying certain words as dangerous to combat known threats, such as the Democracy Movement, separatist movements, and religious sects. However, not all words can be classified as dangerous, or the Chinese internet could not function properly. Complete discipline would be too costly, and impossible in practice. Therefore, the dynamic elements of temporary controls on bad circulations are necessary, too. It is also impossible to know beforehand, which words could become troublesome for the security experts. Therefore, these must be controlled after the fact, but in a timely fashion so as not to lose the control of circulation.

Freedom is the most elaborate method of internet control when it is applied as a technique of government on the level of the netizen-population. However, the security professionals monitoring and patrolling online grids remain the ones who modulate the spaces of allowed and disallowed freedom. This post-totalitarian politics of insecurity has provided the Party with a modicum of success in maintaining its autocratic politics even in the era of wide access to the internet and other networked media. This is indicated by the already decades-long stability of the Chinese political order even in the era of wide online access, and the lack of an effective organized opposition.

## Acknowledgements

Previous versions of this paper have been presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> *Surveillance & Society* Conference: Surveillance Ambiguities & Assymetries in Barcelona, 24-26 April 2014 and the XIX EACS Conference in Paris, 5-8 September 2012. We would like to thank the participants of those conferences, Philippe Bourbeau, Jiang Junxin, Martin Schmetz, Lonneke van der Velden, Cynthia Wang, and the anonymous referees for their insightful comments, and Iris Chan, Timothy Glogan, and Jouko Katajisto for their aid in our research. All remaining errors and fallacies remain our own. The research has received funding from the Joel Toivola Foundation.

## References

- Bamman, David, Brendan O'Connor, and Noah A. Smith. 2012. "Censorship and deletion practices in Chinese social media." *First Media* 17: 3-5. Available at: <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3943/3169>. (Accessed January 21, 2013)
- Bandurski, David. 2007. "Pulling the Strings of China's Internet." *Far Eastern Economic Review* 170(10): 18-21.
- Barlow, John Perry. 1996. *The Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. Available at <http://homes.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html>. (Accessed June 23, 2007)
- Bigo, Didier. 1994. "The European Internal Security Field: Stakes and Rivalries in a Newly Developing Area of Political Intervention." In *Policing Across National Boundaries*, edited by Malcolm Anderson and Monica den Boer. London: Pinter.
- Bigo, Didier. 2000. "When Two Become One: Internal and External Securitisations in Europe." In *International Relations Theory and the Politics of European Integration, Power, Security and Community*, edited by Morten Kelstrup and Michael C. Williams. London: Routledge.
- Bigo, Didier. 2002. "Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease." *Alternatives* 27: 63-92.
- Bigo, Didier. 2011. "Security: a Field Left Fallow." In *Foucault on Politics, Security and War*, edited by Mick Dillon and Andrew W. Neal. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boyle, James. 1998. "Foucault in Cyberspace: Surveillance, Sovereignty, and Hardwired Censors." *University of Cincinnati Law Review* 66: 177-205.
- Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde. 1998. *Security – A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Chase, Michael, and Michael Mulvenon. 2002. *You've Got Dissent: Chinese Dissent Use of the Internet and Beijing's Counter-Strategies*. Santa Monica: RAND.
- China Daily. January 5, 2009. "China campaigns to clean up vulgar websites." Available at [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-01/05/content\\_7367249.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-01/05/content_7367249.htm). (Accessed January 21, 2013)
- China Internet Network Information Center. 2014. *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, July 2014*. Available at <http://www1.cnnic.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201411/P020141102574314897888.pdf>. (Accessed June 16, 2015)
- Clayton, Richard, Steven J. Murdoch, and Robert N. M. Watson. 2007. "Ignoring the Great Firewall of China." *I/S: A Journal of Law and Policy for the Information Society* 3(2): 70-77.
- Crandall, Jedidiah R., Daniel Zinn, Michael Byrd, Earl Barr, and Rich East. 2007. "ConceptDoppler: A weather tracker for Internet censorship." *CCS '07: Proceedings of the 14th ACM Conference on Computer and Communications Security*. Available at <http://earlbarr.com/publications/conceptDoppler.pdf>. (Accessed January 21, 2013)
- Dean, Mitchell. 1999. *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*. London: Sage.
- Dean, Mitchell. 2002. "Liberal Government and Authoritarianism." *Economy and Society* 31(1): 37-61.
- Dutton, Michael. 2005. *Policing Chinese Politics: A History*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Dutton, Michael. 2009. "Passionately Governmental: Maoism and the Structured Intensities of Revolutionary Governmentality." In *China's Governmentalities: Governing Change, Changing Government*, edited by Elaine Jeffreys. Routledge: New York.
- Egorov, Georgy, Sergei Guriev, and Konstantin Sonin. 2009. "Why Resource-Poor Dictators Allow Freer Media: Theory and Evidence from Panel Data." *American Political Science Review* 103(4): 645-668.
- Elmer, Keegan. 2012. "Battle lines in the Chinese Blogosphere - Keyword Control as a Tactic in Managing Mass Incidents." *FIIA Working Paper* 76. Helsinki: FIIA.
- Espinoza, Antonio M., and Jedidiah R. Crandall. 2011. "Work-in-progress: Automated named entity extraction for tracking censorship of current events." *FOCI '11: USENIX Workshop on Free and Open Communications on the Internet*. Available at [http://www.usenix.org/event/foci11/tech/final\\_files/Espinoza.pdf](http://www.usenix.org/event/foci11/tech/final_files/Espinoza.pdf). (Accessed January 21, 2013)
- Foucault, Michel. 1979/1975. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated from the French by Allan Sheridan. London: Penguin Books.
- Foucault, Michel. 2007/2004. *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the College De France 1977-1978*, edited by Michel Senellart. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Goldsmith, Jack L., and Tim Wu. 2006. *Who Controls the Internet?: Illusions of Borderless World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Greenhalgh, Susan, and Edwin A. Winckler. 2005. *Governing China's Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Haggerty, Kevin D. 2006. "Tear Down the Walls: On Demolishing the Panopticon." In *Theorizing Surveillance – The Panopticon and Beyond*, edited by David Lyon. Devon: Willan Publishing.
- Hansen, Lene. 2000. "The Little Mermaid's silent security dilemma and the absence of gender in the Copenhagen school." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 29(2): 285-306.
- He, Baogang, and Mark E. Warren. 2011. "Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development." *Perspectives on Politics* 9(2): 269-289.
- Hindess, Barry. 1996. *Discourses of Power: From Hobbes to Foucault*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hindess, Barry. 2001. "The Liberal Government of Unfreedom." *Alternatives* 26(2): 93-108.
- Hughes, Christopher R. 2003. "Review Essay: China and the Internet: A Question of Politics or Management?" *The China Quarterly* 173: 819-824.
- Huysmans, Jef. 2006. *The Politics of Insecurity – Fear, Migration and Asylum in the EU*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Huysmans, Jef. 2014. *Security Unbound. Enacting Democratic Limits*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Information Office of the People's Republic of China. 2012. "The Internet in China (June 2010)." In *White Papers of the Chinese Government (2009-2011)*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.
- Jeffreys, Elaine (ed.). 2009. *China's Governmentalities: Governing Change, Changing Government*. Routledge: New York.
- King, Gary, Jennifer Pan, and Margarete E. Roberts. 2013. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review* May 2013: 1-18.
- King, G., Jennifer Pan and Margerete E. Roberts. 2014. "Reverse-engineering censorship in China: randomized experimentation and participant observation." *Science*, 345 (6199): 1-10.
- Knockel, Jeffrey, Jedidiah R. Crandall, and Jared Saia. 2011. "Three researchers, five conjectures: An empirical analysis of TOM-Skype censorship and surveillance." *FOCI '11: USENIX Workshop on Free and Open Communications on the Internet*. Available at <http://www.cs.unm.edu/~crandall/foci11knockel.pdf>. (Accessed January 21, 2013)
- Kuran, Timur. 1991. "Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989". *World Politics* 44 (1, October), 7-48.
- Lagerkvist, Johan. 2005. "The Rise of Online Public Opinion in the People's Republic of China." *China: An International Journal* 3(1): 119-130.
- Leistert, Oliver. 2012. "Resistance against Cyber-Surveillance within Social Movements and how Surveillance Adapts." *Surveillance & Society* 9(4): 441-456.
- MacKinnon, Rebecca. 2008. "Asia's Fight for Web Rights." *Far Eastern Economic Review* 171(3): 36-40.
- MacKinnon, Rebecca. 2009. "China's censorship 2.0: How companies censor bloggers." *First Monday* 14:2. Available at <http://firstmonday.org/article/view/2378/2089>. (Accessed January 21, 2013)
- MacKinnon, Rebecca. 2011. "China's 'Networked Authoritarianism'". *Journal of Democracy* 22(2): 32-46.
- Mr. X. 2008. "China's Holistic Censorship Regime." *Far Eastern Economic Review* 170(4): 21-23.
- Nathan, Andrew. 2013. "Foreseeing the Unforeseeable." *Journal of Democracy* 24(1): 20-25.
- Ng, Jason Q. 2013. *Blocked on Weibo: What Gets Suppressed on China's Version of Twitter (and Why)*. New York: The New Press.
- OpenNet Initiative. 2005. *Internet Filtering in China in 2004-2005: A Country Study*. Available at <http://www.opennetinitiative.net/studies/china/>. (Accessed January 21, 2013)
- Paltemaa, Lauri, and Juha A. Vuori. 2006. "How Cheap is Identity Talk? A Framework of Identity Frames and Security Discourse for the Analysis of Repression and Legitimization of Social Movements in Mainland China." *Issues & Studies* 42(3): 47-86.
- Paltemaa, Lauri, and Juha A. Vuori. 2009. "Regime Transition and the Chinese Politics of Technology – From Mass Science to the Controlled Internet." *Asian Journal of Political Science* 17(1): 1-23.
- Rose, Nikolas. 1999. *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sæther, Elin. 2008. *The Conditional Autonomy of the Critical Press in China*. Oslo: University of Oslo.
- Sautedé, Eric. 2013. "The Internet in China's State-Society Relations: Will Goliath Prevail in the Chiaroscuro?" *China Information* 27(3): 327-346.
- Sigley, Gary. 2004. "Liberal Despotism: Population Planning, Subjectivity, and Government in Contemporary China." *Alternatives* 29(5): 557-575.
- Tao, Xizhi. 2007. "揭开中国网络监控机制的内幕" (Revealing the Inside Story of the Chinese Internet Control Mechanisms). *Reporters Without Borders and Chinese Human Rights Defenders*.
- Tsui, Lokman. 2003. "The Panopticon as the Antithesis of a space Freedom: Control and Regulation of the Internet in China." *China Information* 17(2): 65-81.
- Vuori, Juha A. 2008. "Illocutionary Logic and Strands of Securitisation – Applying the Theory of Securitisation to the Study of Non-Democratic Political Orders." *European Journal of International Relations* 14(1): 65-99.
- Vuori, Juha A. 2014. *Critical Security and Chinese Politics: The Anti-Falungong Campaign*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Volland, Nicolai. 2013. "Fifty Influential Public Intellectuals." Available at [http://www.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/sinologie/digital\\_resources/dachs/special\\_collections/fipi\\_en.html](http://www.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/sinologie/digital_resources/dachs/special_collections/fipi_en.html). (Accessed September 28, 2013)
- Xiao, Qiang. 2011. "The Battle for the Chinese Internet." *Journal of Democracy* 22(2): 47-61.
- Yang, Guobin. 2003. "The Internet and Civil Society in China: a Preliminary Assessment." *Journal of Contemporary China* 12(36): 453-475.
- Yang, Guobin. 2006. "The Internet and Civil Society in China – Coevolutionary Dynamics and Digital Transformations." In *China's Deep Reform – Domestic Politics in Transition*, edited by Lowell Dittmer and Guoli Liu. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Yang, Goubin. 2014. "Political contestation in Chinese digital spaces: Deepening the critical inquiry." *China Information* 28 (2): 135-144.
- Zhou, Yongming. 2007. *Historizing Online Politics – Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Zheng, Yongnian. 2008. *Technological Empowerment - The Internet, State, and Society in China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.