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MARIA CLAUDIA MENEZES LEAL NUNES

LINKS AND CLICKS

EXPORTING CHINA'S INFLUENCE THROUGH THE WEB

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LINKS AND CLICKS: Exporting China's Influence Through the Web

Versão Corrigida

Trabalho de conclusão de curso apresentado como requisito para obtenção de título de Mestre em Relações Internacionais pelo Instituto de Relações Internacionais – IRI-USP

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"The fear of appearances is the first symptom of impotence." Fyodor Dostoevsky

RESUMO

Desde a Revolução Digital, os meios de comunicação têm avançado a passos largos levando a abundância de informações no cotidiano. Essa alteração de um regime de escassez de informação a abundância de informação foi vista como um impulso a libertação de muitas populações vivendo sob de regimes autoritários como o da China.

No entanto, a libertação democrática do povo chinês nunca se materializou. Um maior controle informacional se manifestou e sintomas de tais técnicas de controle informacional tem começado a infeccionar partes da Internet global tem começado a aparecer. Este estudo procura investigar como que a China ideologicamente protege a sua população enquanto procura exportar sua propaganda e métodos de censura por meios digitais para ideologicamente infiltrar seus oponentes. Baseando-se em cima da teoria de securitização e de uma inédita conceituação teórica de soft power e informação polítca, o estudo apresenta contribuições para discussão na área de segurança ideológica em métodos, mas também evidencia uma falta de base filosófica no assunto.

Palavras-Chave: Securitização, Ideologias, Soft Power, Informação, Noosfera

ABSTRACT

Since the Digital Revolution, the communication networks have become very advanced and sophisticated, leading to a contemporary abundance of information. This shift from a regime of information scarcity to information abundance was seen by many scholars as an inevitable liberation impulse for many nations living under oppressive regimes such as China. However, the democratic liberation never materialized. Instead, a regime of greater control manifested itself and symptoms of information control techniques have started to infect other parts of the global Internet. This study seeks to investigate how China ideologically protects its population while exporting its propaganda and methods of censorship through digital means in order to ideologically subvert their opponents. Utilizing securitization theory along with a new conceptualization of soft power and political information, the study presents contributions to the discussion of ideological security in terms of methods used, however also presents evidence of a general philosophical base to tackle these challenges.

KEYWORDS: Securitization, Ideology, Soft Power, Information, Noosphere

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List of Abbreviations

CCAC - Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission

ISP - Internet Service Provider

ICP - Internet Content Provider

LSG - leading study group

CAC - Cyberspace Administration of China

GAPP - General Administration of Press and Publication

CYL - Communist Youth League

VPN - Virtual Private Network

JYP - JYP Entertainment

VTuber - Virtual YouTuber

CN - China Brach of HoloLive

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Introduction

Communication has always been a key part of societal life. Whether it was from the civilian or the military spheres, the art of transmitting information had always underpinned the functions of the state. Values, beliefs, and ideology permeated and established themselves in society through transmission of information, while in the military, strategic communication was important to secure resources or to plan political plays in the international theater. The development of digital communication systems in the latter half of the 20th century engendered a veritable revolution that has shaken the foundational core to how society functions around the very concept of information itself (Floridi, 2010, p.5; Cavelty and Wegner, 2019, p.3).

Yet, with every seismic technological change comes challenges bundled with benefits. This would be the same for the interconnected cybernetic space, commonly known as cyberspace. As it continues to expand, it influences all spheres of society and life, which inevitably increases the scope of items that the state needs to secure in order to defend its autonomy and self-interest; while the field of cybersecurity at first did step-up to task to safeguard digital systems, it narrowly focused on cyberattacks and cyberespionage (Cavelty and Wegner, 2019, p.11). With the growing importance of information itself, the research on the subject started to shift from the tangibly destructive hard power to a softer and pliable type of power; one that could be wielded by many actors that was once excluded from the political sphere (Nye and Goldsmith, 2011).

To address the perceptible shift from hard to soft power as well as the addition of many actors to the space, innumerable studies have been launched, conducted, and published on the matter. However, most focus on a narrative dichotomy of information and disinformation/misinformation without addressing deeply existing dynamics that influence the shape online culture, which trickles into long-term values change in an individual. This gap is especially egregious in the context of international ideological warfare. Sterile isolation from various political factors lead to an underdeveloped understanding of the how an individual develops their ever-evolving perception of the world through the interaction of social, economic, and political factors within the digital spaces (Guo, 2020, p.2-4). The evolution that cyberspace had undergone, particularly the development of the Internet, is often overlooked in how it influences values systems,

culture, and political discourses themselves. After all, the privatization of the Internet and the lowered costs for new actors to have access to the Internet (Abbate, 2001, p.170-176; Nye and Goldsmith, 2011) broke the traditional communication model that existed from one-to-many system to a many-to-many one (Lévy, 1998, p. 81-85; Kalathil, 2020, p.35) with consumers now having the option to engage with many other individuals as content creators (Abbate, 2001, p.176). This broke the mediatic monopoly that political and media elites held onto around the world (Nye and Goldsmith 2011; Schroeder, 2018, p. 28-31; Kalathil, 2020, p.35).

It is within this existing scholarly gap that this study seeks to understand if an individual can be influenced by the Internet culture. To be precise on the topic, would it be possible for a state to weaponize the informational *flow* as to create a destabilizing ideological influence within against another country?

While assumptions may place it in line within the traditional study dichotomy of misinformation/disinformation warfare, the proposed topic delves beyond the typical threat assessment classification. After all, the current zeitgeist has led to a more pessimistic view due to mistrust of media in the West (Gallup, 2020; Kalathil, 2020, p.35-36), and with it a systematic weakening of political knowledge (Schroeder, 2018, p. 30). To study if it is the weaponization of culture through the Internet is possible, it becomes objectively necessary to engage in ontological investigation of what is information in politics. The nature of the subject matter has put researcher in a position of presumed ideological bias when studying the topic under this binary. However, in order to bypass this presumed bias, it is necessary to study the ontological reason why these processes have occurred and produced such politically polarizing results in many parts of the world. Dwelling upon this subject matter, the author had found that in order to understand the ontological origin of this phenomenon, a technical review was needed to identify an undergoing attempt or process of destabilization via the use of information as a weapon through the Internet.

To this end, the author has created the hypothesis that China undertakes this type of warfare via the export of censorship and propaganda beyond its digital borders. China was the country chosen as the object of the hypothesis due to the existing ideological tensions that have become salient between the United States and China over the last decade. Neither party wishes to fall into a Cold War gridlock, yet as both powers seek to

expand their influence, the ideological competition is inevitable (Weiss, 2019; Jie, 2020, p.191-192). As it seeks to legitimize its position abroad, the state exports information controls through the digital medium in order to silence dissenters abroad or bully companies to fall in line with their own values; utilizing the dark function of soft power to do so.

The intersection of culture, news and political discourse within cyberspace has become tightly bound, the inevitable politicization of everyday aspect of modern life (Schroeder, 2018, p.43-44) denotes the area of action from which soft power may act within in the form of multimedia propaganda. This is not a recent phenomenon. Western cultural institutions have been utilized by China (Bechard and Filho, 2019, p.4-8). These heavy investment into vectors of soft power have always sought to shape institutions and foster a more positive image towards the Party ruling the state. However, little attention has been given to the theoretical underpinnings of these strategic actions in a practical manner; rendering any utilization of Nye's concept as extremely ambiguous.

By testing the aforementioned hypothesis, the study's main objective is to create a normative definition of information for the field of political science, particularly, international relations. The extensive technological developments within cyberspace have rendered this epistemological gap as a major hinderance in the general field. Technical studies, focused on the communication within cyberspace, have received much scrutiny under presumed ideological bias. In order to bypass, this scrutiny, the mentioned epistemological gap needs to be filled. Thus, by pursuing this main objective, it becomes necessary to examine the origins of the philosophy of information among another importation investigation to fulfill the stated goal of the study.

The other important investigation needed in order to the expressed goal is the re-examination the concept of soft power in order to rescue the Theory of Noopolitik, an information warfare paradigm, that largely flourished in Russia under different names[1] (Nikonov et. al., 2015, p.123). This is to engage with Western theoretic traditions as a key tool to understand the ideological competition between the United States and China.

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[1] Some of the research focuses on specific characteristics that are part of social and informational processes to be applied in information warfare. These research utilized various nomenclature such as "information warfare," "psychological warfare," "cold war," "moral and psychological warfare", however, they all had in common the psychological impact to change the systemic moral values of a population (Nikonov et. al., 2015, p. 123).

Hereby, introducing to a wider audience a foreign concept that better explains actions taken in a grand strategy power competition between countries.

The design of the following thesis is geared towards the exploration of the theory through a heuristic-type case study (Pal, 2005, p.234); it is an intensive study to of a single to understand a large class of similar units whilst generating insights regarding the practicality of the theory (Gerring, 2004, p341.; Pal, 2005, p.234). China was consciously chosen as the single unit in this thesis as it provides rich context to the strategic actions taken by the Party in regard to information within each observation contained in the different cases that compose our studied unit in the case study (Gerring, 2004, p.342). The country serves as the link between theory and operational reality (Pal, 2005, p.236-240). Therefore, the study is divided into three separate chapters.

The first chapter lays the theoretical groundwork that will serve as the framework for the cases within the unit to be evaluated against (Crasnow, 2012, p.664). It provides a normative definition to abstractions such as information, soft power, and security via epistemics along with leveraging of the stratagem of Noopolitik as the theory base from where the analysis will be done. The second chapter explores the historical process surrounding market, law, and rhetoric since the completion of the Great Firewall[2] that precede the observed cases. This is to establish the operational links as a cause-of-effects (Crasnow, 2012, p.657); which in turn serves as a distinctive illustration of public policies that deliberately seek the outcome of the hypothesis (Pal, 2005, p.236-240), the exportation of both censorship and propaganda. The last chapter evaluates the cases chosen to compose the studied unit (Gerring, 2004, p.342). These various incidents that occurred over the course of the last decade are categorized in four different groups to bring into salience specific aspects of the securitization theory adjusted to noopolitikal outputs (Nye, 2002, p.66-68; Nikonov et. al., 2015, p.124; Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 2020, p.1-5); all concepts that are elucidated in chapter one.

There are a few limitations that hinders the study from its fullest potential. Firstly, there is information that a Westerner will not be fully privy to despite the availability of official statements from the Chinese Communist Party in terms of policy. Linguistic

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[2] Despite the Great Firewall's official completion in 2006, the following decade produced the most interesting results as it would reflect the attitudes of a generation that grew up with the fully functional censorship of the Internet within China.

nuance that are important to an analysis of rhetoric for anyone who examines securitization processes are lost by a lack of fluency of the language, Mandarin in this case. Translations, though be a great tool, do not capture the full extent of the cultural and ideological subtleties that often accompanies official statements and, therefore, some of the informational content that influences an individual's political cognitive process may not be scrutinized fully in this work.

Secondly, direct access to the Chinese Internet presents some difficulty in acquiring greater contextual clues to some of the observational events. Part of it is due to the linguistic barrier as evidenced by the first item, whilst other is the general hard to access websites as well as overall data collection risk that exists in partaking in such investigation. Thirdly, as most of the events contained within the study are very recent or technically ongoing, a few do not have an in-depth analysis by other academic papers. Said cases are still included in order to buttress the main argument, but also to provide insight for future studies into the field in order to produce a larger body of literature concerning these cases. These on-going cases are understood to be a direct result of policies first implemented during the construction of The Great Firewall and the subsequent tightening of informational control in the Xi Jinping era. Despite these limitations of the study, the author finds that the information yielded are a robust proof for the central thesis presented: the Party utilizes asymmetrical informational warfare as to export censorship and propaganda in a bid for ideological security.

Lastly, in some of the observational events, part of the evidence procured come from news sources. While the author has striven to acquire the raw data in order for there to be robust verification of the facts, the obscure nature, and tactics of informational warfare, such as the use of bots, complete data may not be available, thusly limiting the robustness of results. This obfuscating nature of informational warfare. Nevertheless, through its qualitative nature, much of what is presented should elicit curious discussions about informational warfare, among other topics to the research agenda.

Chapter 1 – Information and its Influence

Information has become a field for philosophical discussions about its very nature and the influence that it has over our cognitive functions. In fact, the abstract idea of what is information requires a great amount of discussion and a clear definition before one can even elaborate on the strategic uses of information in order to mold the behavior of a population in order to achieve political means. In this whole chapter, the author elucidates on the conceptual definition utilized for her thesis before discoursing on the Securitization Theory and how theory and information interact in order to create a perception of reality of what is a threat and what is not. From this point the author delineates the concept of soft power and how it is applied to national populations in order to destabilize or even change the values system within a nation in order to facilitate the changing of their institutions to better fit a power's political aims.

1.1 – Information: Conceptions and Developments

The concept of information is a poorly defined and ambiguous one despite its important position in our society. This ambiguity stems from the flexible and interdisciplinary nature that information has within the academic sphere, spanning from

the social sciences, such as linguistics and sociology, to the hard sciences, such as physics and computer-science. Logistically, due to this interdisciplinarian nature, there is no single way to define information, but only an attempt at an approximation to bring the abstraction of information is to a defined task as each theory has a form and function prescribed in detailed nuance of what information can and cannot do. This was equally acknowledged during the development of the field by Shannon:

> "The word "information" has been given many different meanings by various writers in the general field of information theory. It is likely that at least a number of these will prove sufficiently useful in certain applications to deserve further study and permanent recognition. It is hardly to be expected that a single concept of information would satisfactorily account for the numerous possible applications of this general field." (Shannon, 1953, p. 1)

Yet, attempting to disambiguate the concept of information becomes an even more arduous task when this concept is closely tied to the digital realm in both the political process and in the network systems themselves. After all, the words, such as *information systems*, *information technology*, *network systems*, and *cyberspace*, have become ambiguous in their own right due to their interchangeable use or the academic community's struggle to properly define them across different discipline. Therefore, to work with a digital communication medium while evaluating an inherently *political process* that is used to attain an expressed *political goal*, such as ideological security, it becomes difficult to evaluate without precisely defining what is information within this political process. It becomes imperative to define what is information while delineating the cognitive processes that occur from the receival of said information, whether it be explicit in statements and words or implicit in the action of agents.

In order then to define what is information, we must first delve into a philosophical understanding of how our cognitive processes work and how it may affect our understanding of what is truth overall. The field of theory of information has evolved since the late 19th century, with one of its first contributors being the philosopher and logician, Charles S. Peirce, whose initial thoughts eventually also led to the field of semiotics (Nöth, 2013, p.137). From that point in time, in the 20th century, the study of the theory of information grew and changed, in large part, to the creation of radio communication, to which, Claude Shannon then created the basis of the probabilistic occurrence of signs under a mathematical lens (Shannon, 1948, p.1-3; Nöth, 2013, p.138-140; Lombardi et. al., 2015, p.1248-1249). It is from this basis that the field evolved and created two more theoretical schools, which, in the end, left a grand total of three schools

of thought regarding information: syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic (Nöth, 2013, p.138). The field of philosophy of information developed alongside information theory, however, the relevance of this innovative field of research had only been acknowledged, with much difficulty, to some degree in the 1980s. This difficulty in communication between the fields have been remedied in some manner with the wealth of research now dedicated in understanding the nature of information and how it is processed (Scaratino and Piccini, 2010, p.314-315; Floridi, 2010, p.81-82; Demir, 2014, p.117-120; Fresco and Michael, 2016, p.131-135; Skyrms, 2015, p.155; Fresco, McGivern, and Ghose, 2017, p.61-63), however, none of the investigations on theory have concerned themselves with political processes. Nevertheless, the philosophical investigation on the nature of information and its function for the cognitive process may provide insight on how the distortion of information itself may lead to large shifts, not only in public opinion, but also value systems as a whole when applied to a population.

The syntactic information theory was the first one to be developed, and it was first discussed by Claude Shannon (1948) in his seminal paper discussing information transmission between radio waves. This foundational paper brought to the front the concept that the transmission of information was probabilistic in the sense that the sign that conveyed the information through a communication system is one from a set of possible varied signs (Shannon, 1948, p.3-4; Shannon, 1953, p. 105; Nöth, 2013, p. 138; Lombardi et. al., 2015, p.1249-1251). In other words, information itself was not the content of the message, but rather, it is the likelihood of the delivery of the message through signs in an encoded manner (Shannon, 1948, p.4-7; Shannon, 1953, p.106-107) through a communication system (Shannon, 1948, p.1-2; Shannon, 1953, p.105-107; Lombardi et. al., 2015, p.1249-1251). The mathematical codification of information then became functional component of any dissertation on the topic of information theory, and inevitably, on philosophy of information, as it ties the information to the physical realm through end points (Shannon, 1948, p.1-3; Lombardi et. al., 2015, p.24-27), be them recordings and engravings of any kind, or through interactions (Lombardi et. al., 2015, p.1249-1251).

While this first information theory placed heavy emphasis on the transmission of information and how it functioned, the second major theory, semantic theory, started putting emphasis on the content of the transmitted information. Semantic theory utilizes

a fixed language system to provide the user with a set of symbols to be used to describe a set of reality with symbols representing a noun or a qualifying agents). The agents are then combined together to form an atomic statement, or its negation, which are called content-element (Bar-Hillel and Carnap, 1953, p.148). Similar to the syntactic theory, information transmission is probability, henceforth, the amount of information, along with the content elements, are statistically calculated and tested against a set of possible worlds (Bar-Hillel and Carnap, 1953, p.148-151; Fresco and Michael, 2016, p.135-137; Nöth, 2015, p.138-139). When compared to the set of possible worlds, the transmitted statement is then considered a tautology, a contradiction or logically indeterminate (Fresco and Michael, 2016, p.135-137) by the following examination: when tested against the set of possible worlds, if the probability (either inductive or statistical) is equal to 1 (one), then the statement does not exclude any possible worlds and, therefore, is a tautology and not informative (Bar-Hillel and Carnap, 1953, p.149-150; Fresco and Michael, 2016, p.135-137). However, when a statement is tested and is found to have a probability that is less than 1 (one), it then will have more information by various degrees until a contradiction is achieved; where not only the most worlds are excluded from the statement, but a contradiction is achieved[3]. (Bar-Hillel and Carnap, 1953, p.150; Nöth, 2015, p.138; Fresco and Michael, 2016, p.135-137; Skyrms, 2015, 156-159; Fresco, McGivern, and Ghose, 2017, p.63-64).

In the simplest terms, in semantic information theory, a tautology, while wholly true, has the least amount of information while a contradiction, or a negation, has the most amount of information. This paradox, called the Bar-Hillel/Carnap Paradox, is famously known as it has no conceivable way of being solved. The conundrum presented by the paradox encouraged philosophers to debate on the subject, to which eventually led to the third major theory of information, the pragmatic information theory.

While built upon the basis of the semantic information theory, pragmatic information theory focuses on how information influences the receiver (Nöth, 2015, p.139-140). The theory covers a vast expanse of literature (Demir, 2014, p. 117-120;

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[3] Tautologies are the greatest tool that a propagandist can have as it excludes any possible nuance or divergence in the interpretation of information. According to Jacques Ellul (1973), contradictions are targeted and excluded as to not create any discussions in a population in order to create the appearance of quasi-unanimity. This ultimately ends with the politicization of all spheres of society by which then are susceptible to propaganda.

Nöth, 2015, p.139-140), notably, it this school of thought produced the veridicality thesis, where the criterion of truth was added to the definition of information. In other words, information could be only be identified as such if there was a component of truth to it otherwise it was not information (Drestke, 1983, p.57; Floridi, 2005, p.364-366; ; Scaratino and Piccini, 2010, p. 313; Nöth, 2015, p.139-140; Demir, 2014, p.120-121); whereas if it is false, it is not information (Floridi, 2005, p.365-366; Scaratino and Piccini, 2010, p.313-314; Demir, 2014, p. p.120-121; Fresco and Michael, 2016, p.131). This criteria was done as it was interpreted by various philosophers, most notably Drestke and Floridi, that information was an epistemological commodity that bridged human cognitive process towards knowledge (Drestke, 1983, p.57-60; Floridi, 2005, p.363-364; Demir, 2014, p. 117-120; Fresco and Michael, 2016, p.133), thusly, by adding truth as a necessary component, the Bar-Hillel/Carnap Paradox would be solved as any statement that contains contradictory information would be false and therefore not be information as it cannot provide anything that can be converted into knowledge (Floridi, 2005, p.363-364; Demir, 2014, p.132-134; Fresco and Michael, 2016, p.133). However, such assertion, while very influential, has created a rather large scope of literature that does not agree with the postulation that truth is a necessary criterion in order to determine what is information (Scaratino and Piccini, 2010, p. 316-319; Demir, 2014, p.132-134; Fresco and Michael, 2016, 131-134; Fresco, McGivern, and Ghose, 2017, p.64-67). Instead, what is affirmed by those that reject the veridicality thesis is that our brain evolved cognitive processes that do not identify truth-values, but instead function in two ways: identifying opportunities and threats (Scaratino and Piccini, 2010, p.318-319) and creating binding belief systems for the receiver (Fresco and Michael, 2016, p.140-141).

Nevertheless, it is due to the pragmatic theory, partly in response to the semantic theory, that the field of philosophy of information, with its research program and methodologies, has become established and become influential thanks, almost exclusively, to the seminal work *Philosophy of Information* (Demir, 2014, p.117-120). However, the concept of information that is provided and defended by Floridi, the veridicality thesis, would not fit with the political process, even less so with the researched topic at hand. The criteria of truth for the definition of information, as defended by the veridicality thesis, would severely limit the analysis of the cognitive process within political processes for various conceptual reasons itself. As a result, the study has created its own specific definition of information that utilizes ideas from both

semantic information theory and pragmatic information theory while rejecting the veridicality thesis. The definition is as follows:

> Information is a statement or piece of data about the state of the world that is transmitted through a channel. The statement that reaches the receiving agent has its content-element translated, which then forms the representation of the world, or the reality, that is known by the receiver. The amount of information that is conveyed in the process depends on the previous known world dataset held by the receiving agent before the process; the less content-elements that match with the known world dataset, the more information is conveyed until there is a contradiction. The receiving agent will then take action in the world according to the reality that the information presented to them. Additional informational content may be acquired by the statement through the transmission process and the circumstances that it found in, further guiding the receiving agent's actions in their perceived reality.

The reason for utilizing this definition of information for the political process rests on two main arguments that will be delineated. Firstly, the rejection of the veridicality thesis rests on an alternative solution to the Bar-Hillel/Carnap Paradox. One of the main reasons that the thesis had been created was to solve for the paradox while bridging the gap between information transmission and the cognitive process in order to create knowledge (Floridi, 2010, p.106; Demir, 2014, p.132-134; Fresco and Michael, 2016, p.149-150), however, the full rejection of the thesis does not make the paradox unsolvable, in fact, there exists strong logical foundation as to think that the paradox is not true, but instead, only resemble a paradox (Fresco and Michael, 2016, p.149-150). Semantically speaking, there is an ambiguous difference between 'information' and 'informativeness', which leads to both words being used interchangeably (Fresco and Michael, 2016, p138-141; Fresco, McGivern, and Ghose, 2017, p.61-62), implicating that 'informativeness' is the same as the 'amount of information'. It is this lack of a general difference between the two terms that allows the existence of the Bar-Hillel/Carnap Paradox itself, and by disambiguating the difference between these two terms would lead not only to the solution of the paradox (Fresco and Michael, 2016, p138-141); but it would allow for a better understanding on how cognitively information is processed under a political lens in order to create a representation of the world.

Secondly, as related to the first argument for the definition used for the concept of information is how information creates a representation of reality (Drestke, 1983, p.60-

61; Rosenberg and Anderson, 2008, p.56-59; Scaratino and Piccini, 2010, p.323-326), which may be processed by the receiver of information that in turns takes action based on the representation of reality (Rosenberg and Anderson, 2008, p.67-71; Scaratino and Piccini, 2010, p.323-326). Expanding upon this argument, information gives logical support to the reason an action was ultimately taken as the representation of reality, that is constructed by information, supports the intentionality of an action (Rosenberg and Anderson, 2008, p.67-71). Henceforth, if we take this to the political sphere, a constructed reality that is created by available information will inevitably influence the intentional actions that are taken by leaders or citizens of a state, which in turn means that information that is placed in the political sphere has intent behind the content or the source. Additionally, informational content may be acquired during the continual transmission process of the information itself whether by the circumstances that surround the process, which create an assumption about the informational content (Rosenberg and Anderson, 2008, p.65-66); or the evolution of the transmission process, which may influence the subjective probability of degrees-of-belief between sender and receiver (Skyrms, 2015, p.162-163). This means that the full processing of information may be prone to error from various situations: a) the information is false and therefore created an erroneous representation of reality, b) the circumstance that surrounds the information transmission is dubious, or c) there is a breakdown of trust between the sender and the receiver leading to disbelief in the information received.

1.2 – The Securitization Theory

During the 20th century, the concept of security had become dominated by analysis of security threats pertaining simply to the realm of military threats to a state's continued existence due to the Cold War (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.9), however, with the fall of the Soviet Union, a debate was formed within the academy during the euphoric times brought upon by the perceived victory of the United States (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.2-5; Baysal, 2020, p.4). This debate circled around whether the security studies agenda could be expanded to include several topics such as economics and society (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.1-5; Roe, 2008; Stritzel, 2014, p.11; Balzacq et. al., 2016, p.2; Baysal, 2020, p.4) and new different actors (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.5-7; Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009,) while retaining a coherent quality to the analytical framework (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.1-5). As a result of this agenda debate, the securitization theory was formed, and while it is the most cited, it is also one of the most plural spectrum of analysis that exist with more traditional

minded scholars (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.1-5) and critical theorists (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.1-5; Baysal, 2020, p.6) utilizing the framework for their analysis. Originally composed of six distinct sectors (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.7), the securitization theory expanded the agenda of security studies horizontally and vertically (Balzacq et. al., 2016, p.3-4; Baysal, 2020, p.13-14) while also permitting the participation of different actors in the process while maintaining the state with a somewhat privileged position (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.7).

Securitization Theory, also originally known as Copenhagen School, takes security as a constructed phenomenon in which actors will frame an issue as an existential security threat (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.23-24; Roe, 2008, p.251; Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1158; Floyd, 2011, p.428; Stritzel, 2014, p.15; Balzacq et. al., 2016, p.2-5; Baysal, 2020, p.14-15) as an attempt to legitimize the use of extraordinary powers outside in order to expedite decisions outside of the normal political procedures in order to overcome the threat (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.24-26; Stritzel, 2014, p.15; Balzacq et. al., 2016, p.2; Baysal, 2020, p.15). Much of this process is contained in what is called the speech act (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.27-29; Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1158-1160; Floyd, 2011, p.428-429; Stritzel, 2014, p.31-32; Baysal, 2020, p.14-17), and while originally it has been an essential part of the securitization theory, second generation scholars have criticized the overemphasis on this single act, which has therefore made the whole theory it rather undertheorized (Floyd, 2011, p.428; Stritzel, 2014, p.12; Balzacq et. al., 2016, p.5-6; Baysal, 2020, p.4). As a result, many studies came forth with various debates in order to either reconstruct the theory (Stritzel, 2014, p.12; Balzacq et. al., 2016, p.5-6) or remain as faithful as possible to the original construction of the securitization theory (Stritzel, 2014, p.12). Nevertheless, the base framework of the securitization theory has undergone much change through its twenty years of existence, which has led to a plethora of different nuanced modifications and interpretations to the framework in various different contextual applications; creating a rich field of study for international relations, be it normative or analytical.

Building upon the tradition of the second-generation scholars, an examination of the original securitization framework presents a few issues that may need some modifications in order to examine China's securitization of the informational content beyond its borders. Firstly, ontologically speaking, the original securitization theory focuses on the securitizing move in the context that it occurs, in other words, securitizing

moves are constructed differently with different securitizing actors and referent objects depending on the sector that the securitizing move takes place (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.36-39), yet the move is more likely to be successful or not depending on the conditions therein; be it linguistic-grammatical rules, the social capital of the actor or historical features associated with the threat (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.33; Stritzel, 2014, p.20-24; Balzacq et. al., 2016, p.9-11). Despite its strong basis, Buzan never goes into details about the conditions that maybe explain whether a securitizing move is successful or not, or how strongly the context may affect the securitizing move; leaving ambiguous which of the two conditions, the internal linguistic, or external socio-political, take precedence. This particular point is solved when the original speech act is transformed to be understood as a process in itself which starts as a speech act; but that can only then be interpreted as sincere, and not as merely a warning, after a security practice is put into place (Floyd, 2011, p.432-433). Another point is that much of the securitization theory, in its original form, interpret the context as mostly coming from a Western democratic liberal tradition, where extraordinary measures are explicitly understood as bypassing the normal legislative process, to which imbues the argument with an interpretation of universality to the practice of securitization (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.24-26; Balzacqe, 2005, p.172; Floyd, 2011, p.434; Stritzel, 2014, p.19; Balzacqe et. al., 2016, p.9-11; Baysal, 2020, p.8-9). Henceforth, in order to contextually study China, the socio-political context, the condition where its government's legitimacy rests upon must take precedence over the internal linguistic structure of a speech act as only when a security practice has been implemented can it be ascertained that securitization has taken place.

Secondly, despite much of its emphasis on the audience, the original securitization theory does not extensively define what an audience is, leaving studies to become rather particularistic and even rather challenging for a research to perform a comparative political study (Balzacqe, 2005, p.173; Roe, 2008, p.251-252; Balzacqe et. al., 2016, p.6-8). The ambiguous nature of the audience partially stems from the overemphasis on the speech act as a singular event instead of a process, which makes it hard to determine if a securitization move has been successful or not (Balzacqe, 2005, p.172-173 ; Stritzel, 2014, p.35-36; Baysal, 2020, p.8); while it contradictorily describes the securitizing move as an intersubjective negotiation between the securitizing actor and the audience, of which implies it to be a process (Balzacqe, 2005, p.179; Stritzel, 2014, p.13-14; Balzacqe et. al., 2016, p.6-7). This has led to a few scholars, of particularly the second generation, to focus

some attention on the audience, and how perhaps, they could influence process from providing moral support to providing formal support (Balzacqe, 2005, p.184-186; Roe, 2008, p.255; Balzacqe et. al., 2016, p.6-8; Baysal, 2020, p.8). It is from these two supports that we can identify a twin set of audiences that, within the process of securitization, provide distinct interactive functions: the moral audience, whose support provides a legitimization of the securitization, and the formal audience, whose support provides the necessary institutional tools to adopt specific policies (Balzacqe, 2005, p.184-186; Roe, 2008, p.255-256; Baysal, 2020, p.18). Bracketing from the formal audience, however, we reach the Paris School, whose focus on the dynamics of high-level decision makers (alternative name to securitizing actor) and security professionals/practitioners, provides insight between the bridging of the formal audience and the moral audience during a normalization period of the application of securitization.

Specifically speaking, the Paris School postulates that the social capital that empowers a decision maker comes from a distinct field that the decision maker may be inserted within (Balzacqe et. al., 2016, p.13), which then is utilized to create a definition to a most likely formal audience. The acceptance of such a security definition by a formal audience translates into the adoption of various policies within the state (Roe, 2008, p.255-256; Baysal, 2020, p.18) that are then practiced, institutionalized, and eventually normalized by the security practitioners (Balzacqe et. al., 2016, p.11-12; Baysal, 2020, p.18-19). Despite the limited impact on the definition of security, the practitioners still take to the moral audience, a formalized understanding of the application of the security policies adopted, which the audiences then may or may not support the securitization after its application and adopt resistance positions (Bigo, 2002, 64-65; Baysal, 2020, p.11). While this distinction between the two types of audiences bring to light an important nuance to the securitization theory, it does not bring to light a phenomena that is generally more prevalent within the context of digital spaces, which is the mobilization of the moral audience that accepts the security discourse from the decision makers and the applied policies therein: the creation of groups by the moral audience, which serve as quasi-enforcers of the policies within digital social spheres (Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1167; Lobato and Kenkel, 2015, p.31). Nevertheless, the Paris School challenged the distinction between internal and external threats by noting that security professionals (decision makers and practitioners) have become thinned due to the globalized infrastructure that communication, surveillance, and control technologies has created

(Bigo, 2002, p.63-64), which becomes of great importance when we exam the effects of China's attempts of censorship exportation.

Thirdly, the original securitization theory had five distinct analytical sectors: military, economic, societal, environmental, and political[4] (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.7; Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1156-1157), and while at the time cyberspace was a still developing conceptual field, it became clear almost a whole decade later that the combination of the societal and political field would not be apt to deal with the host of issues that cyberspace would bring (Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1160-1163), which would then necessitate the creation of the cybersecurity sector. Originally understood broadly a societal-political issue (Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1161-1163), a few of the inherent characteristics from cyberspace have caused it to move further away from this conceptualization of security into one that understands the wider implications of a globalized networked system that encompasses all sectors (Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1161-1163; Deibert and Crete-Nishihata, 2012, p. 339-341; Cavelty and Wegner, 2019, p.3). Hansen and Nisenbaum define the cybersecurity sector in having three main characteristics: *hypersecuritization*, *everyday security practices* and *technifications* (2009)*, of which can be ascertained to be built upon three conceptual premises (*deterritoriality, multiplicity of actors and uncertainty*) that define cyberspace[5] as a fluid domain (Medeiros and Goldoni, 2020, p.35-37).

The first characteristic of the cybersecurity sector, hypersecuritization, was originally delineated by Buzan as the construction of the exaggeration of a threat as a means to employ radical countermeasures in order to eliminate or control the threat; however, in Hansen and Nissebaum's work (2009), hypersecuritization was redefined as a particular characteristic of the sector. By dropping the 'exaggeration' of a threat from the original Buzan definition, the inter-locking, and instantaneous features of a network (Cavelty and Wegner, 2019, p.11; Medeiros and Goldoni, 2020, p.35-36), and the inevitable cascading effect of threats associated with networks (Lobato and Kenkel, 2015,

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[4] It is important to note that while the political sector is considered a distinct sector by Buzan et. al., they do admit that it functions more as a residual sector that is usually combined with one of the two other sectors. However, as discussed further, the importance of the political sector cannot be understated as the underlying threat that this sector deals with are the legitimacy of the government itself, which as we shall see in the next section, is of supreme importance to the Chinese government.

[5] A deeper delve into the definitional issues of cyberspace along with the conceptual definition utilized in the study will be discoursed in the next section of this chapter along with the strategic conceptualization of Noopolitik.

p.29) become salient in the definition. Similar to the residual nature of the political sector (Buzan et. al., 1998, p.141-142), the cybersecurity sector is very wide and affects almost all spheres of society due to the pervasive nature of the cyberspace network (Cavelty and Wegner, 2019, p.3), and as a result, the sector itself has inevitably a wealth of different referent objects that are all interconnected (Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1164; Lobato and Kenkel, 2015, p.26). Therefore, the network itself tends to be securitized, however, securitized in the context of cyberattacks, software and hardware breaches; in other words, direct threats to interconnected critical infrastructure (Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1160-1161; Lobato and Kenkel, 2015, p.29-31), and not necessarily the soft informational power that travels through these same networks. Therefore, while there are other referent objects that may be affected by network systems, there is an implicit bias towards a more technical and military look into the networks as they connect with critical infrastructure, over the informational social connection that they may provide.

The second characteristic of the cybersecurity sector is the everyday practice, which works in conjunction with the hypersecuritization. Daily life in the virtual realm is one that is discursively set to be dangerous due to the interconnection that is observed thanks to hypersecuritization, however, this discourse is made by securitizing actors, which include the private sector (Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1166), in order to add validity to the devastating scenarios as framed in the sector (Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1166; Lobato and Kenkel, 2015, p.31). Correlating with the Paris School, while the decision makers are mainly who construct the definition of security, the security practitioners are the ones that both enforce and influence the discourse in a limited matter to the population at large (Bigo, 2002, p.74-75) working to incentivize a compliance of an individual to help maintain the network's security (Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1166; Lobato and Kenkel, 2015, p.31). This encouragement for compliance for the safety in the networks, be them securing the network from external attacks or from what is considered false information, is felt with the creation of the online groups that seek to enforce the security in an unofficial and decentralized manner.

The third characteristic of the cybersecurity sector is the technification of cyberspace itself, which creates a discursive ambience for technical players within the field (Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1166-1167; Lobato and Kenkel, 2015, p.31). The

discursive measures that give legitimacy to both the decisionmakers and security professionals that have the specific knowledge that the common populace does not have about the systems (Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1167; Lobato and Kenkel, 2015, p.31). This ambience gives an air of secrecy within the technical processes that take place within the network systems of which only the security professionals would understand, thusly giving them a privileged position to: a) not give out precise data on what is a risk; and b) discredit any actor that comes outside of the technical circles (Bigo, 2002, p.75; Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1167). The consequences of which are quite widespread as it sustains the previous two points (Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1168), hypersecurization and everyday security practices, and allows for the implementation of greater risk management and profiling without much push back from the general population due to the secrecy involved in the process (Bigo, 2002, p.74; Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1168). Additionally, the technification imposes a tenuous line on what is considered 'good' and 'bad' knowledge within cyberspace, where the security professional is the one that wields the 'good' knowledge in service of society while the amateur poses a risk by utilizing bad knowledge (Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1167); it implicitly leaves the assumption that those that utilizing the knowledge and that are not 'good' actors need more to justify their actions and prove their claims (Bigo, 2002, p.74-76).

While the cybersecurity sector provides much of the basis for the securitization of information, much of it is implicitly based on the securitization of networks themselves, rather than the information that circulates within it. This is not to say that there is not a direct translation from these specific characteristics of the cybersecurity sector to the securitization of information within cyberspace, but rather, there needs to be a salience towards the information itself. The discourse that is utilized in order to securitize information and networks have different overall effects, particularly in democracies, where this discourse type may have contributed directly to the polarization now experienced in much of the Western world due to the securitization of information itself. Nevertheless, the study's focus on China calls for the modification of the original securitization theory.

When drawing upon the formulation of the securitization theory, the contextual definition affects mainly the legislative process of Western liberal democracies, which

would not work well in the study of authoritarian regimes. Buzan et. al. (1998) recognizes this short coming by stating that in contrast to what is called 'well-developed states', weak states and states prepared for war have much of their politics pushed into the security realm. In a way, this is true for China, but only if the lens of analysis falls under the scope of the legitimacy of the government, which is the case for the Party instead of a weak state[6] in itself. Henceforth, contextually speaking, the Chinese model of governance does not allow for the precise deployment of the securitizing theory as a process to bypass the normal legislative process as it would be in democratic systems; but instead, it provides a possible backdrop to the justification of tightening policies without eroding the legitimacy the government has through utilizing the values system ingrained within the Chinese culture.

The process of securitizing information within China comes through a process that calls upon the formal and the moral audience in order to inform and justify the future tightening of policies that are already in place. These performative acts place the Chinese society and way of life as the reference object for the moral audience, while for the decision makers and upper echelons of the government, it communicates the referent object as the state itself. It is during these performative acts, those that specifically target the moral audience, are meant to stoke a nationalist sentiment by framing that foreign forces are to destabilize the Chinese society or bring down China, while utilizing historic evidence as a proof for the speech act. Not only this informs the moral audience, the general mainland Chinese population, about the coming tightened policies regarding information within cyberspace, it is also a method to which co-opt, and even radicalize, part of the population so they start engaging in policing each other to keep others in line. Henceforth, while the Chinese government, through the securitization process, may enact technical means to which they may securitize information, mainly through the use of censors or the famous *wumaos*[7], they gain a parastatal arm that seek to enforce the policies extra-officially through harassment campaigns and encouragement of self-censorship.

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[6] The author understands that a weak state might also implicitly mean one that does not have internal legitimacy to justify its rules, however, due to the ambiguous nature of widened agenda that the securitization theory originally brought along with imprecise nature of simply referring to a state as 'weak', the author will not refer to China as a weakened state due to its advanced development in many sectors including economic and military.

[7] Wumaos are largely known as the 50-cent army, citizens paid by the Chinese government that post online in order to either distract, deflect or silence the conversation on online platforms.

Most importantly, the securitization process of information by the Chinese government is able to engage both domestic and international moral audiences. Rhetorically, utilizing history as its main source of legitimacy in its discourse, it is able to frame reality to a wide audience any criticism towards its policies as an attack against its citizens while downplaying any significant issues that may arise from its policies. Additionally, it would be these same co-opted individuals that spread the messages and information of the Party abroad throughout cyberspace outside of China.

1.3 – Noopolitik

The development and subsequent dependency on digital technologies has spurred a new body of literature that sought to acknowledge the opportunities and threats that exist within this domain, and like mentioned before, most of the first emerging studies examined the technical aspects within cyberspace (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1999, p.1-3; Cavelty and Wegner, 2019, p.11-12). However, much like security studies, the explicit focus upon the state and military might made most of the research be focused on the technological aspects whereas few studies had the effects of informational flow and content on politics as a salient point (Arquilla and Rondfeldt, 1999, p.4-6; Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p.2-5). Within this smaller body of literature, at the turn of the 20th century, two researchers sought to started to examine the relationship between the technological aspect of the new domain and the informational flow contained within it. Both Rondfeldt and Aquilla () took away from this examination that a new type of grand strategy paradigm had to be created in order to adapt to the new era that had been inaugurated by the digital revolution and the creation of the Internet; one that they denominated as Noopolitik.

While the initial study did not gain much traction in the Western democracies, the grand strategy paradigm gained a significant following in states such as China and Russia with the latter having Professor Sergey Nikonov as the foremost authority on the subject. Now Noopolitik, while not a mainstream paradigm, has started to be developed in earnest by a new generation of scholars that seek to understand the relationship of informational flows and the leveraging of political power in what is best described as a *battle for the minds*. Nevertheless, in order to understand the paradigmic concept of Noopolitik and its inevitable connection to the securitization of information, one must understand the nestling nature of the domain of the Noosphere.

1.3.1 – The Noosphere

The origin of the concept of Noosphere dates back to the early 20th century with French theologian-paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Russian Geochemist Vladimir Vernadsky (Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 2020, p.7). An abstract thought experiment, the Noosphere was conceived as a direct evolution of the Geosphere and the Biosphere with communication technology serving as the primer the creation of a single nervous system where the minds of all are connected within an immaterial shared space akin to a collective consciousness (Arquilla and Rondfeldt, 1999, p.12-25; Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 2020, p. 7-12). It is within this interconnected sphere that we may conceive that a person's values and ideological beliefs, which then crystallize in the form of organizational networks of civic culture. In other words, it is from this complex and abstract sphere that we may extract that is where the ideology of each individual is kept, and that the construction of a Noosphere indicates the end of the ideological conflicts much like how Francis Fukuyama wrote in the End of History and the Last Man (1992). A teleological end point would be the emergence of a single Noosphere of core values such as: justice, freedom, and democracy, without an individual losing their humanity, in other words, their individualism (Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 2020, p.8). Despite the utopian telos portrayed by the concept of the Noosphere, both Teilhard and Vernadsky understood that conflict would be inevitable, and perhaps even apocalyptic in the creation of the single Noosphere (Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 2020, p.7-12).

Yet, the abstract concept of the noosphere does not lend itself to any analytical or normative study if one does not define the infosphere and cyberspace, smaller and more technical sphere where information flows through. Both the infosphere and cyberspace, spheres that are nestled within the noosphere (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1999, p.15-20), are where information is securitized overall. Nevertheless, due to the very intertwined nature of both the infosphere and cyberspace as informational spheres, the securitization process differ greatly between Western democracies and authoritarian states, and therefore does bring to salience the difficulty of cybersecurity as a unique sector within the securitization theory. While all three spheres are able to be securitized, as mentioned before, cyberspace, while the smallest and most technical, necessitated the creation of its own sector, in the form of cybersecurity, as proposed by Hansen and Nissenbaum (2009). Technical aspects of cyberspace make salient its fluid nature, and as a result, the most disputed sphere between states.

The inherent difficulty that exists in defining cybersecurity as a sector for securitization is lined in the peculiar characteristics that cyberspace itself carries, which permeates various spheres of society as a whole because of its partially immaterial nature (Cavelty and Wegner, 2019, p.3; Medeiros and Goldoni, 2020, p.38-39). This partially immaterial nature creates a plethora of definitions unto a spectrum that may range from a more technical definition to theoretical definitions (Giles and Hagestad II, 2012, p.2-4; Medeiros and Goldoni, 2020, p.39-41); the definition utilized for cyberspace, while implicitly deals with all basic conceptual premises, may actually focus on a specific aspect of cyberspace, and bring salience to a distinct set of study problems. Another point, as mentioned before, is how closely it is intertwined with the infosphere that comes from the partially immaterial nature, which plays into the spectrum of definitions for cyberspace. This inevitably brings to disagreements on what to securitize within the sector, which in turn, brings nuance to how a state may securitize cyberspace differently than the other. Most famously is the case brought by Giles and Hagestad II, who discussed the semantic differences between the definitions of the United States and of China:

> "By contrast, Russian and Chinese official references to "cyberspace" occur primarily in translations of foreign texts or references to foreign approaches. According to a US military definition, "Cyberspace...is the Domain characterized by the use of electronics and the electromagnetic spectrum to store, modify, and exchange data via networked systems and associated physical infrastructures"; and consequently, "Cyberspace Operations [is the] employment of cyber capabilities where the primary purpose is to achieve objectives in or through cyberspace. Such operations include computer network operations and activities to operate and defend the Global Information Grid." (US DoD, 2010) But the Russian rendering киберпространство, kiberprostranstvo, and the Chinese 網絡空間, Wǎngluò kōngjiān, are merely subsets of "information space" and inseparable from it, unlike in Western treatment where "cyberspace" continues in some writing to be treated almost as a separate domain." (Giles and Hagestad II, 2013, p.8).

As seen above, the contrast in the conceptual understanding of cyberspace by China is closer to the nestled model of the noosphere concept as pictured by figure 1; and as a result, the implication is that the securitization framework as discussed in the previous section, is decidedly different than the one usually applied in Western studies. The threats constructed within are much different than the threats that are examined and securitized in Western systems, as they are greater in number due to cyberspace's subsummation to

the infosphere[8]. Henceforth, as implied by the definition of cyberspace above, the securitization of cyberspace process that happens in China would necessarily be different from the one that occurs within the United States and utilize a different policy set as application. Despite this, while the definition utilized by China for cyberspace aligned itself to the noosphereic model, it is still built upon three basic conceptual premises of cyberspace.

Figure 1 – Noosphere Model
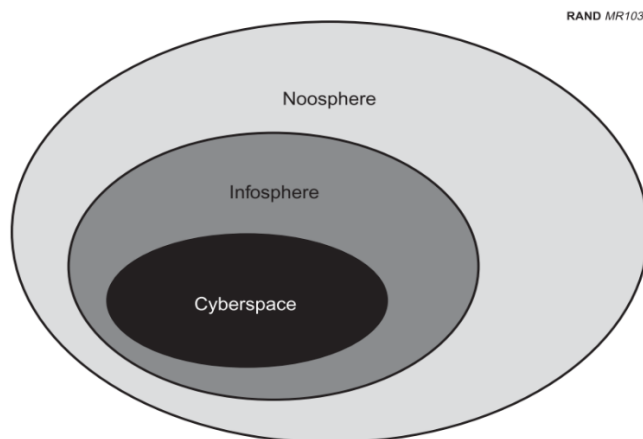
Source: Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1999

Firstly, cyberspace is a combination of the physical and immaterial, resulting in a transborder flow of information that affects many spheres of society, be them economic, political, or even military (Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1162-1163; Deibert and Crete-Nishihata, 2012, p. 339-341; Lobato and Kenkel, 2015, p.25-26; Cavelty and Wegner, 2019, p.3; Medeiros and Goldoni, 2020, p.41). The nature of cyberspace has disrupted, to a certain degree, the relationship between the state and its territory due to the partial immaterial nature that it has. There are points of access to the global network that exist in specific territories, yet it is the informational flow that occurs between the points of access that drains part of the state power (Lobato and Kenkel, 2015, p.25; Medeiros and Goldoni, 2020, p.39) to enforce their own laws, exert their cultural values upon their citizens, and protect their critical infrastructure, because of the globalized connection that cyberspace provides. However, despite this particular characteristic of

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[8] The definition pointed by Giles and Hagestad II as the one utilized by both Russia and China is remarkably similar to the definition of infosphere by Ronfeldt and Arquilla that point to the infosphere not only containing information within cyberspace, but also information coming from analog media (print, radio, and television) as well as institutions such as universities and libraries that have not been digitized or transmit their information through digital means.

cyberspace, many states have started to implement controls as part of their governance in order to retain some power over access points (computers and IPs) that are found within their physical borders (Deibert and Crete-Nishihata, 2012, p.341-345). China, in particular, has become famous for the defense of their use of the doctrine of Internet sovereignty in order to apply many of the controls that Chinese citizens and businesses face every day (Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p.24-25; Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1156; Deibert and Crete-Nishihata, 2012, p.346-348), however, this does not mean that every country that utilizes digital controls to enforce their own laws are securitizing the networks or the information of the networks themselves as the control that are applied still go through the legislative process that are common in Western democracies.

Secondly, cyberspace has given rise to a multiplicity of actors, other than the states, that interact with each other on a daily basis whilst producing a copious amount of information (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1999, p.7-9; Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1157; Lobato and Kenkel, 2015, p.26; Medeiros and Goldoni, 2020, p.41). This multiplicity of actors has led to what is understood as a diffusion of power within the networks (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1999, p.36-39; Nye, 2002, p.66-68; Medeiros and Goldoni, 2020, p.41-42) as many individuals and groups enter cyberspace because of the low barrier to entry, effectively breaking any possibility of a monopoly over power that a state may have over its population at large; and creating the well-known attributional issues that exist in the cases of cyberattacks and so forth (Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1170-1171; Lobato and Kenkel, 2015, p.26). This existing diffusion of power, from the multiplicity of actors, is the most keenly felt within the infosphere as the traditional model of communication has been broken; in other words, there is not a one-to-many communication line (Lévy, 1998, 81-85; Kalathil, 2020, p.35), but a many-to-many line, where the content consumer can now both interact with the content and create content themselves (Lévy, 1998, 81-85; Abbate, 2001, p.170-171). This multiplicity of mediatic actors becomes a major issue in authoritarian regimes, where the effect of the diffusion of power may erode their grip on power due to the democratizing of the access to information; henceforth, the imperative for the curtailing of civil liberties enjoyed by content creators by the enforcement of strict guidelines and encouragement of self-censorship.

Thirdly, due to the internal functions of cyberspace, the question of uncertainty remains at large with many implications within the system. The partly immaterial nature

of cyberspace, coupled with the computational execution speed, makes object permanence to be absent within cyberspace due to the extremely liquid nature of the domain (Medeiros and Goldoni, 2020, p.43-44). This fluidity is applicable not only to military tactics, but also to informational tactics as the computational speed causes information, true or false, to be spread quickly by interactive users in a short amounts of time, which has led to the adage "Nothing is ever deleted from the Internet". Henceforth, control over informational flows is not an easy task to undertake, especially when taking into account the interactive nature of the information in cyberspace that can be replicated and archived several times over. This leads to the necessity of securitizing information itself since, or in other words, the utilization of methods for the encouragement of self-censorship or the discrediting of information that may not come from an approved mediatic source. Issues such as anonymity along with the previous point of multiplicity of actors (Medeiros and Goldoni, 2020, p.44) creates an added layer to the transmission of uncertain information where the confirmation of the veracity of a piece of information are normally too high to be confirmed.

In the case of the noosphere, in particular, as it is taken as a sphere of shared ideology, the information that runs through cyberspace becomes increasingly important for authoritarian regimes. When looking at the definition provided above, cyberspace is a mere subset of what is called the infosphere that encompasses not only information and media that goes through the digital realm, but also in analog materials and institutions; however, unlike with cyberspace, the replication of information within the infosphere but outside of the digital realm, is harder because of the higher cost of entry. Therefore, cyberspace has the democratizing effect on power that is contained within informational flows due to the low cost of entry and the interactive nature of information (Lévy, 1998, , 81-85; Nye and Goldsmith, 2011; Kalathil, 2020, p.35-36); and as a result, one may interpret the securitization of cyberspace in regimes that are information sensitive as a trickling down of securitization of the noosphere, or in other words, the national ideology. The net result of the securitization of the networks and actors contained within (Hansen and Nissenbaum, 2009, p.1163; Lobato and Kenkel, 2015, p.26) is the securitization of all the information contained within these networks.

1.3.2 – Soft Power

When it comes to the practical application of the concept of the noosphere, we are left with what is essentially an ideological battle. While ideological competition has

always existed through the course of history (Jie, 2020, p.191); within the confined interconnected digital realm, the friction between beliefs and values have gained a combative edge to them. Colloquially, these embattlements have been dubbed 'Culture Wars', though they are more accurately defined to be social netwars[9] as predicted by Arquilla and Ronfeldt in their first book about noopolitik (1999). More than a traditional cyberwarfare[10] where the objectives are precedented on disruption and damaging network infrastructure, netwars are more societal-type conflicts of generally low intensity and engage in non-military type action, usually applied by non-state actors (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1997, p.279-280).

The basis of these netwars is naturally horizontal in nature, with actors in the form of organizations of small groups or individuals that communicate and coordinate themselves throughout and outside of cyberspace (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1997, p.280-281). Though the embattlements may also blend aspects of hacktivism, cyberterrorism and even spill over to demonstrations within the physical plane (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1997, p.277; Denning, 2002), the main objective of these networked associations is for the most part the use of the digital space to spread their messaging, recruit followers and, ultimately, attempt to bring a policy change be it domestic or foreign. The use of discursive elements in speech and in actions are reminiscent to that of soft power, yet these same elements are present in what has been described as Neocortical Warfare[11], where the ability to influence the other occupies the opposite end of conflict compared to war. Quite like the famous Clausewitz's quote "War is politics by other mean", the use of soft power in such a purposeful manner to deny the free will of the other is a form of

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[9] Coined by Ronfeldt and Arquilla (1993), netwars are defined as a mode of conflict that utilize networked forms of organizations, related doctrines, and similar strategies by decentralized actors. These types of netwars encourage a decentralized social movement as a mass for political maneuvering while not having a clear hierarchal structure where a leader is atop as they utilize shared ideology that keep these groups together.

[10] The United States Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms has never official designated a term for what is cyberwarfare and/or cyberwar. Instead, what is referred to be Arquilla and Ronfeldt's conception of cyberwar is most closely associated to what the DoD defines as Cyberspace Attack: "Actions taken in cyberspace that create noticeable denial effects (i.e., degradation, disruption, or destruction) in cyberspace or manipulation that leads to denial that appears in a physical domain and is considered a form of fires."

[11] Neocortical Warfare as described by Richard Szfranski consists in bending the will of the target in order to guide their actions to fit the interests of the user. The connection between Neocortical Warfare and soft power becomes clear when the societal factor of the State comes to the forefront with the population's ability to influence governments, particularly of those of democratic inclinations.

covert warfare politics. As a result, to examine the practical application of the noospheric concept rightfully encompasses the study of soft power through a normative lens.

However, despite its longstanding existence and popularity in the current sphere of political research, soft power has been criticized in regard to its rather vague and imprecise definition (Kearn, 2011, p.66; Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 2020, p.1-5), which has spawned a plethora of similar terminology that in essence the same base concept with salience given to one particular aspect of soft power. Take in part the term *cultural power*, loosely understood as production of culture by various actors of a particular nation-state that influences the values of a population or cultural outlook (Swidler, 2000; Tortelli and Shavitt, 2010), or the newly popular terminology of *sharp power*, championed by Joseph Nye himself, as a 'darker' version of soft power that seeks to use aggressive and manipulative tactics (Walker, 2018, p.11-13; Wu, 2019, p.134). This is not unlike other terms that spring to the fore mind such as *psychological warfare* and *informational warfare* which also profess similar conceptual definitions (Nikonov et. al., 2015, p.122-123). Nevertheless, these plethora of definitions dilute the baseline concept that permeates all these definitions that fit under the wide umbrella that is soft power, the power of information itself.

Harkening back to the first section of this first chapter, information briefs the cognitive mind to its environment, allowing for decisions to be made in order to maximize the opportunities while mitigating any threats to the individual. This cognitive process is then reigned by absorption of information, which is then translated to guided action. Henceforth, if soft power is the power to persuade and to attract the other though diplomacy, cultural exchange, rhetoric, and foreign policy while sharp power is an aggressive form of this same soft power, would it not be logical to normatively define soft power as the utilization of information as a means to influence the other by either presenting new information or restricting the flow of information? This question comes from an examination of not only the original soft power as presented by Nye the 1980s and expanded upon later in 2002, but also from its evolution from an ancillary factor for the potentiality of political, economic, and military dimension to a grand strategy dimension of its own (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1997, p.417-419). Nevertheless, in order to ascertain a robust understanding of soft power under this theoretical normative lens, the author shall engage with Nye's original proposition for soft power with the normative

toolkit provided by the concept of information as delineated by the first section of this first chapter.

Firstly, Nye describes soft power as a tool of seduction and attraction where one is able to shape the preferences of others; and it is from this delineation of what a country might want to emulate – prosperity and openness – that the action of the target is guided to that direction (Nye, 2004, p.5-7). Its strength is based on an indirect form of power that is largely derived from information. Thinking in terms of resource, soft power takes its stock from information that is generated from cultural pulses, commercial ties, domestic and foreign policies, and institutional values. It is a form of influence that goes deeper than persuasion, as Nye attempts to explain, it is an attraction of values (Nye, 2004, p.11-15; Wu, 2019, p.131). Nevertheless, the lack of a clear formalization has led to much frustration from critics (Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 2020, p.40-42) and Nye himself as the concept of soft power is reduced to simple cultural phenomena such as "Coca-Cola, Hollywood, blue jeans and money" (Nye, 2004, p.XI). While the frustration is well-founded, it ignores the fundamental aspects that make soft power so intrinsically connected with cultural expressions of a state's values, and consequently, also appears interconnected with various policies. Yet later he acknowledges the very connection that culture, and soft power has while also attempting to differentiate hard power from soft power by placing them upon a spectrum with different tactics being applied. Nevertheless, such attempted explanation muddles the water even further as the intangible nature of soft power still has ancillary characteristics that empower aspects of both military and economic power, which Nye himself describes as being part of hard power. It is perhaps because of this poor attempt in differentiating soft power from hard power that others have criticized the formulation of soft power as lacking a clear distinction between itself and hard power (Kearn, 2011, p.74-75).

> "Is that distinction between mainly about military vs. non-military power? If so then trade and investments are aspects of soft power. Or should the distinction be about the materials vs. the immaterial (e.g. ideational) modes of power? Physical trade and investment then pertain to hard power, and the ideas and images behind them to soft power." (Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 2007).

Despite the postulation above of a better distinction between soft and hard power, such concept when undetected within the greater scope of literature, with only in Russia such ideas taking hold in research. Though little explored, Nikonov (2015) correctly

identifies the foundational nature of informational stocks within the infosphere in regard to the dissemination of soft power. With the expansion of information technology, there has been a downward pressure in terms of power resulting in its democratization (Nye, 2004, p.90-93); though to be more specific, there has been a mediatization of the political process and therefore power itself (Nikonov et. al., 2018, p.298-299). This is then the underdeveloped core of Nye's thesis, which inevitably leads to two criticisms: the creation of a dichotomy of good and evil between soft and hard power (Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 2007); and the biased framing around an institutionalized world implied to be an American world order (Kearn, 2011, p.75-76).

Both these criticisms are largely addressed if one looks as soft power as informational stocks that then influence the ideology other states. For example, Nikonov, in his various works on noopolitik, explores the relation between mass media manipulation and its subsequent effects on populations and on domestic and foreign policies of states. In other words, while the soft power conceptual core is woefully underdeveloped (Kearn, 2011, p.67; Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 2007), it's practical use is not. All communication, political or not, creates informational stocks, which are then interpreted by those that receive it. This information is interpreted within the relational context that it is inserted in, and it is only then that said information may guide actions to change or not the will of the target. Whether the information has been distorted in order to give an alternate reality to the receiver is ultimately irrelevant when it comes to the use of soft power.

Over a long period of time, informational flow can result in institutional, or values change of a state or population over the course of a long period of time. This is acknowledged by Nye (2004) and corroborated later when looking at the fall of the Soviet Union under an informational light. Even when providing ancillary support to political, economic, and military resources, the surge in the demand for information resulted in a collapse of the institutional framework of the Soviet Union (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1997, p.421-424). Therefore, even in the criticism of that soft power can only be evident within a global institutional context (Kearn, 2011, p.72), the interpretation of soft power as the use of information to achieve certain goals still rings as coherent. While the global institutions have been built upon a set of values and act as ideological transmission belts (Kearn, 2011, p.76), the end goal for soft power in that sense is not the destruction of the

institution itself, but the substitution of the ideological content that the institution itself represents and transmits. It stands then to reason that sharp power as conceptually different from soft power is mistaken and plays into the dichotomy of how soft power can only be used by 'good' actors, or in other words, those that benefit from the hegemonic institutional arrange that exists.

Secondly, the Information Revolution had a curious effect on the concept of power around the world. It can be considered the largest diffusion of power that humanity has ever gone through due to the fact of how far the costs of computing and telecommunications have fallen (Nye and Goldsmith, 2011). Media has changed from a single top-down pipeline of information, but fully transformed from one-to-many structure into a many-to-many structure (Lévy, 1998, 81-85; Nye, 2002, p.64; Kalathil, 2020, p.35-36), which has inevitably democratized power relations (Nye and Goldsmith, 2011) as information became the most important resource stock (Nye, 2002, p.68-69). The creation of this resource is possible by its transmission along the various telecommunication lines that exist, which with the interlinking of various actors along that line, has started to change the power competition struggle from state-centered into network-centered (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1999, p.36-39; Nye, 2002, p.66-68). In other words, state may not rely on only themselves to project their power, but also on transnational companies, non-governmental organizations, institutions, and even individuals to spread their information in order to accrue soft power and influence the other.

Therefore, the analysis of the use of soft power should be context sensitive with the actor's ideological inclination analyzed at the forefront. As posited before, the network format of soft power conflicts has permitted various types of societal conflicts between groups, all of them under the context of ideology. The format of the conflicts takes swarming shape, with no apparent central leadership, due to its informational nature (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1997, p.281-282). Yet, when delimiting a scope for a soft power case study, one inevitably launches a tracing process that organizes the network into a central figure from which most of the information contained in the attack benefits and its various different soft power nodes acting as multiplication agents. For example, when constructing a case study for China, while delimiting the state as an actors, its network connections with transnational corporations, non-governmental organizations and even

individuals, provide added benefits from either credibility or reach to its soft power messaging[12].

Taking then these two components of soft power into account, one can then craft a more formalized definition of soft power that can be used in normative analysis. It is then that soft power can be idealized as:

> "Soft power is the use of information by an actor, or network of actors, to create a perception of reality that supports its own ideology. Such use of soft power can come in an offensive variant with information being released challenges or subverts a dominate ideology; or defensive variant with a censorship apparatus or intimidation tactics in order to create a chilling effect on discussions. The ultimate use of soft power works in favor of the actor's own ideological values and morals, whether to substitute an enemy ideology that is carried by another actor or to safeguard the legitimacy of the actor's own ideological institutions."

With this formalized definition of soft power, it is possible to understand how the securitization of information becomes important for the preservation of ideology. When information is securitized, it is not the information itself that is the referent object, but it is the ideology itself. Information is the resource stock by which soft power is directly applied that may lead to the erosion of the dominant ideology that is beheld by an actor. Henceforth, when we observe a de facto securitization of the noosphere, actions are taken in both the infosphere and cyberspace in order to restrict the flow of information in order to galvanize the legitimacy of an ideology that gives power to an actor, whether it be a state or a non-state actor.

1.4 – Securitizing Soft Power as a Noopolitik Stratagem

The stability of a regime is predicated on a socio-political stability, which in the case of authoritarian regimes, requires a homogenous identarian framework that knits tightly the existing government with the ideology of the population that is ruled over. When investigating the collapse of the Soviet Union under an informational lens, one can observe that the need for information led to the erosion, and eventual substitution, of the

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[12] Though not a focus of the paper, the same analysis could be done with a non-state actor such as activist organizations co-opting transnational companies or media outlets to showcase their message and values to a larger audience. A more extreme level of this co-option can be observed when activist organizations affect government institutions. An example can be seen with Black Lives Matter (BLM) with the most egregious show of co-option could be seen in 2021 when the Biden administration permitted the use BLM flags instead of the American flag.

dominant political ideology (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1997, p.421-424; Nye, 2004, p.10-15), which inevitably collapsed the legitimacy that sustained the regime. The historical precedence of the Soviet Union shows that information has an intrinsic integrative property that binds values in a system together (Ellul, 1973, p.70-72; Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1997, p.421), such property is highlighted when information is understood as key to shape the representation of reality to an individual. As a result, authoritarian regimes are very information sensitive, and as such, necessitate control over informational flows, as they affect the abstract noosphere.

Within the noospheric model, information is the key strategic resource in the ideological conflict. Nevertheless, due to the advent of contemporary telecommunication technologies, securing such intangible resource is a challenge due to reduction of costs for producing and disseminating information to a large audience; implicitly democratizing the power that was once held by few actors (Lévy, 1998, p.; Nye and Goldsmith, 2011; Kalathil, 2020, p.35-36), both in democratic and authoritarian regimes. Unlike the 20th century mass media creation and consumption, the mass media of the 21st century is centered around cyberspace, a digital marketplace of information, which means that all unique aspects of propaganda mediums[13], has become rolled into one all-encompassing informational conduit. The existence of this interconnected realm has given a natural proclivity towards societal conflicts over hard power conflicts as it permits what is the bending of the will of a target towards actions favorable to the user's goals. It is soft power in its purest form.

Yet, as sociable creatures, one is not able to secure all sources of information creation that exists as individuals are still able to create their content and post it on wide-range digital platforms. However, when user attention scarcity is understood as the currency that gives information stock their influential value then it becomes feasible to control information stocks. It is not the semantic information in itself that gives soft power its capabilities, but the diverted attention to it. By diverting attention to specific information points, one is able to shape reality in a target's mind; and as the cognitive mind is briefed to all opportunities and threats, their actions become guided as to benefit itself. To deny the will of the other is not to dominate via physical threats, but to shape

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[13] Jacques Ellul (1973) describes in his work how various mediums (movies, human contact, public meetings, posters, news media and radio all have a specific target. However, due to the multimedia nature of cyberspace, it allows for the targeting of all demographics in their public and private life.

the reality so the other perceives threats as benign opportunities and opportunities as fatal threats to their well-being.

As parsed, diverting attention to informational points is not an easy task as the messaging method and social capital influences belief in the message. It is there that securitization comes into play. By securitizing and constructing certain information from certain groups as particularly dangerous for society, one may be able to create an airgap between the 'threatening' information and the ideology contained within the noosphere. In China's specific case, the social capital that the Party enjoys as the stabilizer of Chinese society as well as economic uplifter of the masses empowers the central government to apply securitization to information overall. The method that the speech act securitizes plays upon the social capital, which is then legitimized by the moral audience, the Chinese netizens, and leads to the creation of groups within cyberspace that act as quasi-enforcers of the policies (Wu, 2019, p.136) within the digital social spheres. In other words, by securitizing information, the central government makes censorship appear palatable to the general population and therefore sanctions the policies; and while there are enclaves of resistance positions, such political minorities may be then either discredited or silenced.

Nevertheless, such tactics that are effective domestically may also be exported through various tactics that takes advantage of the implicit interconnected effects of networks that are present in the securitization of information within the said networks. Particularly, economic pressure within cyberspace, from the government or the co-opted population[14], has a large cascading effect that instantaneously replicate the damage caused by either a sanction or ban in the space (Lobato and Kenkel, 2015, p.29; Cavelty and Wegner, 2019, p. 11-12; Medeiros and Goldoni, 2020, p.38), which then causes the company to obey the policies in order to have access to the large Chinese domestic market. Conversely, exportation through the Chinese diaspora has come from Chinese made and managed apps such as WeChat[15] that are popular among the diaspora, which censors and surveils *all* accounts regardless of origin while also curating Party controlled

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[14] The author also notes that the numbers of what is assumed to be a co-opted population can be artificially inflated by the use of bots of which the CCP has been commonly known to use.

[15] Alternatively, WeChat is also massively popular in many other countries, particularly in Southeast Asia. As of 2019, it was estimated that 200-300 million users of the app came from outside of China (Cave et. al., 2019, p.14).

news among its users (Cave et. al., 2019, p.14-15; Atlantic Council, 2020, p.19-20; Ryan et. al., 2020, p.25). All of these tactics have a spillover effect in the physical realm as it provides a chilling effect on conversations.

Effectively speaking, despite the optimism concerning the Internet of its democratizing power (Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p.2-5; Kalathil, 2020, p.44-46), it has become a double-edged sword in many aspects. Its intrinsic properties of deterritoriality and multiplicity of actors provide fertile ground for the exploration of amplified soft power; tailored to and directed at specific demographic groups, that replicate the propaganda and silence dissent across borders. The effective securitization of ideology remains as a centerpiece to the entire apparatus and stratagem that seeks to silence dissent while promoting Party-curated values. By studying the process that the state censorship apparatus has come into play while highlighting the need of the Party to maintain its dominant ideology with China in order to maintain legitimacy. These outward projections of soft power, therefore, can be classified as attempts to shape the ideological environment in the current world order to suit China's interests.

Chapter 2 – Chinese Strategic Apparatus and Its Guiding Principles

The development of the telecommunications network in China has been often asserted as the assured way of democratic ideas to infiltrate the general public, which would invariably lead to a democratic China. However, such assertions have been misguided as predicted by more skeptical scholars. The growth of the telecommunications networks would provide China with a vibrant digital economy at the cost of a growing anticipation towards improved governance and accountability; therefore, the innovative infusion of the private sector was inevitably tempered by governmental expectation (Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p.23-25; Inkster, 2016, p.23-25; Guo, 2020, p. 23-26). As a result, digital norms are natural outgrowths from informational regulations that have been imposed during the pre-reform years adjusted for the incoming reality; and thusly greatly influenced the physical network and the content that operates within the Chinese digital space in uneven manners (Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p.21-22).

As any dynamic process, however, changes in leadership influenced how Chinese cyberspace have grown and molded throughout the decades, and in particular, the decade that most changes have occurred in China would be the current Xi Jinping rule. Under the directive repression via informational controls, Xi Jinping has attempted to engender a

cult of personality around his figure, much similar to Mao Zedong, despite the constitutional prohibition surrounding the creation of such (McGregor and Blanchette, 2021, p.4). It is unsurprising that during Xi Jinping's rise to power, censorial control has tightened with many directives coming into play, which whether by intent or accident, has led to spillover effects in Western digital spaces.

This chapter's examination of the evolution of the censorship apparatus inside of China attempts to trace the processual causation between a fragile internal legitimacy and a defensive need to consolidate external legitimacy in face of a global order dominated by an opposite ideological standpoint. After establishing the points of legitimacy, an assessment will be done of the policies discoursed and later enacted during the Xi Jinping years in office before later delineating the changes in the organization of various government departments along with technical development of the information environment inside of China. The evolution of the culture within the Chinese Internet is also investigated before covering the current knowledge of how censorship and propaganda spillover into the international sphere while foreign influence in the domestic markets are tightly controlled.

2.1 – A Fragile Legacy

The ascension of Xi Jinping to the leadership of the Chinese government in 2013 was received by the majority of the world with much celebration. With the success of China's reforms from Deng Xiaoping's era leading to economic prosperity and the gradual opening of the markets to foreign investments, it was anticipated that a combination of economic growth along with the consolidation of the Internet would provide basis for the continued opening and democratization of China (White, 1994, p.73-74; Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p.21-22; He and Feng, 2008, p.143). Yet, the despite the timid and steps towards a veritable and unique democratic form of governance (He and Feng, 2008, p.167) with the issuance of term limits post-Deng Xiaoping (McGregor and Blanchette, 2021, p. 6) and intra-party democracy under Hu Jintao (He and Feng, 2008, p.160-161; McGregor and Blanchette, 2021, p.6), Xi's ascension into power effectively reverted political reforms while starting to mold itself around his personality (Blanchette, 2019; McGregor and Blanchette, 2021, p.7-8). This trend reversal, nevertheless, belies the fragile legacy from the communist ideology that the Party derived its legitimacy from.

At its core, the legitimacy that sustains the party's rule came from the ideological foundation that the modern Chinese state had been built upon, the communist ideal, had been weakened by economic reform (White, 1994, p.75-76; He and Feng, 2008, p.143; Walder, 2009, p.262). This led to a slow, yet noticeable trend of decline of the primacy of the Party within China itself as more administrative functions being institutionalized in the State Council (ie: government) rather than be captured by the party apparatus (Zhao, 2016, p.1169; Blanchette, 2019). With the waning memory of the cultural legacy left by the Communist Revolution and as the last princeling from that generation (Zhao, 2016, p.1172; Blanchette, 2019), Xi's position as a leader was fragile as the slowdown of economic growth threatened to erode the precarious base of the party itself (He and Feng, 2008, p.160; Zhao, 2016, p.1170; Odell, 2019, p.124). Thusly, it became imperative to address this waning power by revitalizing the ideological foundation of the Party through various political maneuvers that stripped the institutional power of the State Council (Blanchette, 2019) while drawing upon a conflation of stable modernization with the existence of the Party hereby silencing dissent through a nationalist legitimacy framework applied to its citizens (He and Feng, 2008, p.149; Zhao, 2016, p.1169). Much of the criticism then could be easily dismissed as unpatriotic behavior by other citizens compared instead of invoking direct government censorship towards individual comments (Inkster, 2016, p.36-37; Zhao, 2016, p.1169).

The structure of this new legitimacy project had already existed much before the ascension of Xi Jinping. Built within the cultural legacy left from the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the pursuit of a strong state was strongly felt within the collective thought of the Chinese citizenry that sought within Western traditions various remedies to the fragile position that they had found themselves in, which ultimately led to the mystique of democracy to be distorted into a synonym of a strong state (He and Feng, 2008, p.142). Therefore, it is by the modelling China's modernization efforts along the lines of the need for social stability only provided by an autocratic state (He and Feng, 2008, p.142; Walder, 2009, p.260; Inkster, 2016, p.30-31; Zhao, 2016, p.1169) that Xi started his project of revitalizing Party legitimacy. In his speech in the 18th National Congress in 2012, Xi brings to the forefront the necessity of the communist ideology as the guiding principle that has brought stability and modernization to China as evidenced below:

> Why have I emphasized this? Because only socialism can save China, and only Chinese socialism can lead our country to development – a fact that

has been fully proved through the long-term practice of the Party and the state. Only by upholding socialism with Chinese characteristics can we bring together and lead the whole Party, the whole nation and the **people of all ethnic groups**[16] in realizing a moderately prosperous society by the centenary of the CPC in 2021 and in turning China into a prosperous, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious modern socialist country by the centenary of the People's Republic of China in 2049, so as to ensure the people greater happiness and the nation a brighter future. […] It goes without saying that socialism with Chinese characteristics encapsulates the ideals and explorations of generations of Chinese Communists, embodies the aspirations of countless patriots and revolutionary martyrs, and crystallizes the struggles and sacrifices of the myriads of the Chinese people. It is a natural choice for the development of Chinese society in modern times, and it is the only way to bring about the country's development and stability. […] The path of Chinese socialism is the only way to achieve China's socialist modernization and create a better life. This path takes economic development as the central task, and brings along economic, political, cultural, social, ecological and other forms of progress." (Xi, p. 33-34, 2014).

The form that Xi Jinping shapes the modernization effort, however, separates the majority Han-Chinese from the other ethnic groups that exist within the territory of China. It is not a mistake, but a feature of Xi's discourse. It subtly plays upon the racial component of Sinocentrism as originally created by Mao Zedong. This racial component historically derives from Mao's vision of the Han as the ethnicity that best defined all of Chinese civilization and culture; and has in modernity transfigured into a vision of other racial groups (including westerners) as backwards and unenlightened barbarians that require the guidance of the Han to create a proletariat revolution towards a harmonious global society (Zhang, 2011, p.8; Inkster, 2016, p.19; Friend and Thayer, 2017, p.94). As a result of building legitimacy as a fusion of with for social stability along with racial superiority into the core basis of the modernization project, Xi Jinping has effectively started the process of information securitization for almost a whole decade in a slow and processual manner.

The implementation of this ideological logic utilized Chinese history as the main vector by first introducing the official narrative through the educational system in order to foment since an early age a moldable form of nationalism in order to enhance the

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[16] Author's own emphasis.

Party's legitimacy. By using the critical pedagogy framework created by Marxist educator Paulo Freire (Phoutrides, 2005, p.153), the curriculum follows a cultural identarian lens in order to foment a dichotomy between "oppressors" and "oppressed" (Schalin, 2019). This allowed the Party to interlace the original victor narrative (as created by Mao Zedong) with a newer and a newer victim narrative (Zhang, 2013, p.5; Inkster, 2016, p.34; Zhao, 2016, p.1189; Friend and Thayer, 2017, p.95). The new educational model followed the trend of infusing historical narratives with pride and anger that had been initiated in the 1990s (Friend and Thayer, 2017, p.96); however, since its full implementation in 2005 (Phoutrides, 2005, p.155; Cantoni et. al., 2017, p.350), significant ideological shifts had been recorded (Cantoni et. al., 2017, p.366-370). Chinese netizens demonstrated a higher trust in government along with greater skepticism towards free markets and a flattened political aptitude (Cantoni et. al., 2017, p.362) as it perpetuated the skewed ideal of democracy as a strong state system sustained by a single party (He and Feng, 2008, p.142; Cantoni et. al., 2017, p.369). In other words, the curriculum that had been introduced had been created under the same guiding indoctrinating mindset as the philosopher Jacques Ellul (1973) had explained "One must utilize the education of young to condition them to what comes later." This historical narrative that had been constructed within the collective memory of China became the basis of the nationalistic campaign later utilized by Xi Jinping as demonstrated by his speech at Peking University in 2014, Xi demonstrates the legitimacy narrative, especially directed at the youth of China:

> "Since the Opium War of the 1840s the Chinese people have long cherished a dream of realizing a great national rejuvenation and building China into a strong, democratic and harmonious modern socialist country – the highest and most fundamental interests of the nation. And that's what our 1.3 billion people are striving for. China used to be a world economic power. However, it missed its chance in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and the consequent dramatic changes, and thus was left behind and suffered humiliation under foreign invasion. Things got worse especially after the Opium War, when the nation was plagued by poverty and weakness, allowing others to trample upon and manipulate us. We must not let this tragic history repeat itself. China has stood up. It will never again tolerate being bullied by any nation. Yet it will never follow in the footsteps of the big powers, which seek hegemony once they grow strong. Our country is following a path of peaceful development. Why are we so confident? Because we have developed and become stronger. China

has won worldwide respect with its century-long efforts. Its prestige keeps rising, and its influence keeps expanding. Today's China forms a sharp contrast to China in the 19th century when the country was humiliated, its sovereignty was infringed upon, and its people were bullied by foreigners." (Xi, p. 201-202, 2014).

In order to reinforce the nationalistic tones of Xi Jinping's campaign, the educational system had become tightened and subsequently purged of any academic critique to the official party narrative compared to Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao[17] (Zhao, 2016, p.1183-1184). This lack of any opposing ideological view in regard to Chinese history allowed the party to more easily connect and mold emerging nationalistic populist movements, particularly in foreign affairs, to its side in order to retain legitimacy (Inkster, 2016, p.34; Friend and Thayer, 2017, p.96) as the fundamental truth cannot deviate from the official party narrative of modernization, and any criticism or opposition to it is dismissed officially as unpatriotic. Such historical narrative infusion is evidenced again in Xi's speech in celebration of Mao Zedong's 120th birthday in 2013, where he upholds the conclusion that Marxism, championed by Mao and the Party, was necessary for China's modernization:

> "As a fundamental tenet of Marxism, seeking truth from facts is a basic requirement for Chinese Communists to understand and transform the world. It is also our Party's basic thinking, working and leading approach. We have upheld and should continue to uphold the principle of proceeding from reality in everything we do, integrating theory with practice, and testing and developing truth in practice. Mao Zedong once said, "'Facts' are all the things that exist objectively, 'truth' means their internal relations, that is, the laws governing them, and 'to seek' means to study." He also used the metaphor "shooting the arrow at the target," that is, we should shoot the "arrow" of Marxism at the "target" of China's revolution, modernization drive and reform. […] While seeking truth from facts, we should always uphold the truth and correct mistakes for the sake of the people's interest. We should be frank, selfless and fearless, courageously speak out truth based on facts, discover and **correct ideological deviations**[18] and mistakes in decision-making and work as soon as they arise, and discover and solve all kinds of conflicts and problems

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[17] Perhaps the most egregious moments of Xi's ideological campaign in education came in 2017 where both Cambridge University Press and Springer Nature were censored. In total, at least 1,300 articles were fully removed from the Chinese database. While Cambridge University Press later restored the articles after much public outrage, Springer Nature maintained the censorship. (Reuters, 2017; Associated Press, 2017).
[18] Author's own emphasis.

when they come up so as to make our thoughts and acts conform to objective laws, the requirement of the times and the wishes of the people." (Xi, p. 49-50, 2014).

At its base, the modern legitimacy of the Party provides securitization in it of itself. For it was not simply the traditional Han-Chinese values that permitted China to modernize, but rather, it was the adoption of said values within a Marxist framework that allowed the development and modernization of the country. Such framework is embodied in the existence of the Party, which cannot be separated from the fabric of Chinese society. The dynamic and thriving nature of its society, therefore, cannot be separated from the existence of the Party. In no part is this most explicit than in Xi's speech at the National Conference on Party Schools in 2015:

> "It is a great blessing for China, the Chinese people and the Chinese nation to have the CPC as the ruling party. As long as we read and understand the history of modern China and that of its revolution, it is readily apparent that without the leadership of the CPC, our country and our nation would not have made such great progress, nor would we have achieved such high international standing. In maintaining the fundamental principle of upholding the Party's leadership, we should be particularly sober-minded and keen-sighted and take a firm stand, allowing no ambiguity or wavering." (Xi, 2018).

It becomes imperative to both the moral audience, the general population, and the formal audience, the upper echelons of the party that this ideological culture, *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*, is be preserved as it is the way of life in China. The threat of the dismantlement of the ideology is not only a societal threat to all, but more specifically, it is a political threat to the Party itself. In a memo from senior officials to party members, Document 9, outlines the directive that should be followed within the infosphere in order to safeguard the state ideology, and therefore the Party, from any competition against Western ideas.

> "In an effort to improve the people's livelihood, we are putting forth new measures to benefit the people so they may look forward to a better future: **disseminating thought on the cultural front as the most important political task**[19]; studying, implementing, and advancing the spirit of the Eighteenth Party Congress; rapidly arousing mass fervor, proclaiming that socialism with Chinese characteristics and the Chinese dream are the main theme of our age;

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[19] Author's own emphasis.

expanding and strengthening positive propaganda; strengthening guidance on deep-seated problems; strengthening the management of ideological fronts; promoting unification of thought; concentrating our strength and implementing the development of a positive atmosphere and providing spiritual strength to the party and nation.

Defining the media as "society's public instrument" and as the "Fourth Estate;" attacking the Marxist view of news and promote the "free flow of information on the Internet;" slandering our country's efforts to improve Internet management by calling them a crackdown on the Internet; claiming that the media is not governed by the rule of law but by the arbitrary will of the leadership; and calling for China to promulgate a Media Law based on Western principles. [Some people] also claim that China restricts freedom of the press and bang on about abolishing propaganda departments. The ultimate goal of advocating the West's view of the media is to hawk the principle of abstract and absolute freedom of press, oppose the Party's leadership in the media, and gouge an opening through which to infiltrate our ideology." (Document 9, 2013).

Though Document 9 is an internal document that was leaked to the Western world, evidence of Xi Jinping's Document 9 is not the only piece of media that confirms that control over information is imperative to the party's survival, but various addresses from Xi Jinping himself. Prominently featured in the same National Conference on Party Schools previously mentioned, Xi emphasizes the need for informational security inside of China while emphasizing the cultural divide under the historical lens of the Cold War:

"Hostile forces at home and abroad constantly try to undermine our Party, attempting to make us abandon our belief in Marxism, communism and socialism. A number of people, even including some Party members, cannot see the underlying dangers of accepting the "universal values" that have developed in the West over hundreds of years, along with certain Western political dogma. They argue we need not reject them since we would not suffer any significant harm by accepting them. Some even regard Western theories and discourse as the gold standard and thus unconsciously become trumpeters of Western capitalist ideology.

"When it is uncertain whether something is right or wrong, we may make a judgment through past experiences and measure it against things of late." Since the end of the Cold War, some countries, affected by Western values, have

been torn apart by war or afflicted with chaos. If we tailor our practices to Western capitalist values, measure our national development by means of the Western capitalist evaluation system, and regard Western standards as the sole standards for development, the consequences will be devastating – we will have to follow others slavishly at every step, or we subject ourselves to their abuse." [20] (Xi, 2018).

In essence, the construction pattern of securitization that Xi Jinping utilizes in his speeches places the free marketplace of ideas as a destabilizing force to the society that has been established under the direct rule of the Party. It is an existential threat to society; as not only has the present culture flourished, but it also managed to rise up against the West in defiance of the humiliation that China had suffered over the course of a century. The risks of a free society are too great to justify a debate on Western values inside of the Chinese sphere of influence, therefore it becomes justified to enact various censorious measures in order to conform to the social stability as granted by the rule of the Party.

Yet, in contrast to the central thesis of the paper, there is no explicit call for the *exportation* of censorship and propaganda. All that this process has constructed so far is a defensive need for the primacy of communist ideology within China (Inkster, 2016, p.40-42). It portends to the ideal of a digitally sovereign environment where China's own rules and applications involve their own citizens that are subject to the propagandization and chilling effect of both nationalistic youth and official censors. However, due to the development of cyberspace and the world's digital economy, full control of the informational flows become near impossible despite advances in surveillance technology and censor tools. As discussed previously, cyberspace has fused information within various other spheres, from the economic to the military; and with interconnected networked that structures much of the observable noosphere, it becomes imperative to seize the resource stock, information that influences the said sphere. Control of informational flows and information producers becomes a priority.

The holistic nature of China's ideological security campaign has not been lost on experts (Weiss, 2019; Blanchette, 2020; Jie, 2020, p.192-193) as the subtle shift from merely defensive control to an expansionist ideological campaign coincides with the rise of China's influence and competition with the United States in a classic great power struggle. Similar to the struggle between two information systems in the Cold War

[20] Excerpt from the speech at National Conference on Party Schools in 2015.

(Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1997, p.421-424), today's struggle is between a closed information system and an open information system, and which ever one prevails will create a downward pressure from the global governance to domestic governance (Jie, 2020, p.191-192) into affecting the various other spheres that are interconnected within cyberspace (Hansen and Nissebaum, 2009, p.1164; Lobato and Kenkel, 2015, p.26; Cavelty and Wegner, 2019, p.3; Medeiros and Goldoni, 2020, p.32).

As he was purported to have intensely researched the fall of the Soviet Union, Xi Jinping understand that the dissipation of the country was a loss of ideological control (Inkster, 2016, p.40; Zhao, 2016, p.1170-1171) due to the overwhelming informational demand that broke down the Soviet system through dissent (Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 1997, p.422-424; Zhao, 2016, p.1170-1171). Heeding to the historical lesson, Xi outlines in his speech at the foundation of the National Security Commission in 2014 the need for a holistic approach to national security, though in truth, is an ideological security.

> "At present, the national security issues facing China encompass far more subjects, extend over a greater range, and cover a longer time scale than at any time in the country's history. Internally and externally, the factors at play are more complex than ever before. Therefore, we must maintain a holistic view of national security, take the people's security as our ultimate goal, achieve political security as our fundamental task, regard economic security as our foundation, with military, cultural and public security as means of guarantee, and promote international security so as to establish a national security system **with Chinese characteristics**[21]." (Xi, p. 231-232, 2014).

Though Xi Jinping had inherited a fragile legacy from his predecessors, in the course of a decade he had effectively reformed the internal perceptions surrounding the ideological control of the Party over China. By reinforcing China's rise and intertwining it with the Party's existence and control, Xi managed to initiate and guide the securitization of information that both preserves and bolsters the legitimacy of the Party's over the population. It is during this period that we start to encounter an aggressive securitization of information. Though modern critics find the evolution of the securitization (and recent acceleration of the process) of information to be eerily similar

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[21] Author's own emphasis.

to Mao's Cultural Revolution, it is clear that Xi Jinping may have taken some inspiration from him.

2.2 – The Digital Security and Cultural Apparatus

After the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping, there were effectively two forces that threatened to erode the legitimacy of the Party: the free market and the digital sphere. The dual assertion from experts around the world were keenly felt (White, 1994, p.78-79; Katathil and Boas, 2003, p.2; He and Feng, 2008, p.143; MacKinnon, 2008, p.32) as the mounting contradiction between the existence of an authoritarian regime and the opening of a closed economic system would inevitably create a surge of informational demand that would collapse the Party's control much like the collapse of the Soviet Union (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1997, p.421-424; Katathil and Boas, 2003, p.2). Yet, such tide never came. In fact, observations demonstrate that despite the market forces, the Party's censorious control has remained robust due to the development of the digital networks within China from a patchwork regulatory constellation to a refined censorship architecture.

The structure that sustains the control of the Party is not a merely repressive system as understood by some analysts (Katathil and Boas, 2003, p.13-14; MacKinnon, 2008, p.32; Guo, 2020, p. 1-3), but an interplay of social engineering policies that take advantage of the flexibility and growth provided by the digital economy. Abundance of the information resource stock meant not that the system itself would be overwhelmed, but the cognitive process of the individual as there is a physical limitation to the human psyche of how more information can be processed. With attention as a scarce commodity, information that attracted, or even commanded, the attention of the individual becomes invaluable for the Party, which then has worked to temper the expectations of a free information market with the repressive measures of the information security that has been adopted. The tense competition that is derived from this balancing has permitted the government to adapt to changing socioeconomic context, but also mold narrative responses to the context that better align with the dominant ideology (Guo, 2020, p. 14-18).

Therefore, when exploring the modern censorship apparatus, one must look into the development of the Chinese cyberspace in itself. The history of its development gives credence to a dynamic process that has fostered a rich cyberspace culture that is both

useful and detrimental to the country as a natural outgrowth from the fragmented competency of informational control (Miller, 2018, p.1-2) and the enforcement of social norms socially engineered (Guo, 2020, p. 6-8). Tracing the initial interventions in the creation and molding of the Chinese Internet is no easy task. Much like the conception and history of the Western Internet, providing an annal of the development would require an extensive amount of research that often provides contradictory statements from various sources and impedes the creation of a cohesive narrative overall. Yet, the information provided should start to delineate how the censorious tools have come about and crossed paths with the cultural engineering that is conducted within the closed-off Internet; and how the culture itself molded around the limits contained within the tensions between the regulatory laws and free market principles.

2.2.1 – From Wires to Letters: Technical and Regulatory Development of the Chinese Cyberspace

Historically, the modernization of China is often regarded to have its start with the economic reforms enacted by Deng Xiaoping starting in the 1980s. Adoption of four precepts for modernization allowed China to open towards free market tenets of entrepreneurship and competition; and by doing so, had allowed interest in foreign technologies to build within the country. By attracting foreign investment as well as accruing technological capital from students returning from overseas studies, the nascent field of computer science started to bloom (Inkster, 2016, p.26). Inevitably, this new emerging field caught the interest of Party leaders who understood the economic impact that the networking technology would have on Chinese society, which then started to adjust their plans accordingly in order to steer the emerging popular culture into the direction most conductive to the maintenance of the Party's power (Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p.25-29; MacKinnon, 2008, p.36; Inkster, 2016, p.31-39; Guo, 2020, p. 8). The early pro-active guidance on the mediatic landscape engineered the form of society that we encounter inside of social media in China (Guo, 2020, p. 8).

Much like in the West, the first digital networks were set up within universities (Abbate, 2001, p.150; Guo, 2020, p. 24-25) through various joint partnerships that inlaid the first technical structures and achieved the first milestone, a sent e-mail, in 1987. Connection with the global Internet only occurred seven years later with the collaboration between the National Computing Facilities of China and the American National Science

Foundation Network in 1994 before opening the Internet service to the public in 1996 (Guo, 2020, p. 25). Meanwhile, in the backdrop of this development, two different processes were occurring: the first, a rearrangement of the regulatory bodies to deal with the technological convergence of the networks (Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p. 19-20), and second, the commercialization of media as the government cut back on financial subsidies (Guo, 2020, p.9). Both processes were of great importance to the growth and the adaptable of the censorship apparatus in the coming two decades.

When it came to the regulatory bodies, the institutional rearrangements that came about established the classic censorship model that has been studied by various researchers. The period of regulatory competition that has surged in the 1980s had given way to the establishment of two major Chinese telecommunication companies[22] and a superministry known as the Ministry of Information Industry (Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p.20). This enormous ministry at the time was the most powerful institution in regard to the emerging cyberspace as it had the dual responsibility of Internet development and regulation before the eventual creation, in 2014, of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission[23] (CCAC) currently headed by Xi Jinping (Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p.20; Miller, 2018, p.30; Tai and Fu, 2020, p.3). Along with the institutional rearrangement, the government came to a centralized decision on the backbone layout of the very Internet structure. The whole structure of the Internet in China is composed of two interconnected layers: the first is composed of the national backbones that are controlled by governmental institutions or commissions, which then connects to the worldwide Internet; the second is the national network that is handled by various Internet service providers (ISP) and Internet content providers (ICP) (Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p.21; Guo, 2020, p.25). This structural arrangement then permits the full surveillance of the data as all of national and international traffic travels through the four backbones (Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p.21-

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[22] Both Unicom and China Telecom were founded by the government and are effectively state-owned. However, up to 1998, Unicom was backed by three ministries (Ministry of Railroads, Ministry of Electronic Industry and Ministry of Power) before the Ministry of Electronic Industry and Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications were subsumed to create the Ministry of Information Industry (Boas and Kalathil, 2003).

[23] The Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (CCAC) sets the parameters for Internet regulation and management. The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) is the committee that implements the control measures. Xi Jinping indirectly controls the CAC through the mere fact that the CCAC presides over the CAC and also through the leading study group for Cybersecurity and Informatization that integral part of the CAC.

22; Guo, 2020, p.25), and due to the limited number of gateways in this two-layer structure, filtering systems like the Great Firewall are easily feasible (Guo, 2020, p.25).

By the early 2000s, much of the regulatory overlap had been resolved at a national level with around nine departments issuing general censorship guidelines (Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p. 19-21; Tai, 2014, p.189), while local governments act as intermediary enforcers (King et. al., 2013, p.2; Lorentzen, 2014, p.403; Tai, 2014, p.189; Kuang, 2018, p.157; Miller, 2018, p.20-23) as they delegate censorship enforcement to private companies as shown by figure 2 (Miller, 2018, p.20-23). While this system has been largely changed and tightened after Xi Jinping's rise to power with him helming much of the groups with direct policy influence (Inkster, 2016, p.40; Miller, 2018, p.20; Tai and Fu, 2020, p.3), this fragmented structure gives evidence that censorship within the Chinese Internet was never absolute and brittle. Instead, it reveals that the adopted structure balanced the tensions between the free market demands of the cultural industry and the demand for ideological control of the Party; and as a by-product it revealed two important features of this system in place.

The first feature is the surveillance-predictive model that allows the government to identify dissent and engage with revolts before they occur (MacKinnon, 2008, p.36; Qin et. al., 2017, p.118). Within this model, censorship observes various posts and identifies what events are likely to generate collective action, or in other words, revolts, and protests (MacKinnon, 2008, p.36; King et. al., 2013, p.2; Lorentzen, 2014, p.403; Tai, 2014, p.200; Qin et. al., 2017, p.122; Kuang, 2018, p.161; Miller, 2018, p.3; Tai and Fu, 2020, p.18). The technical cost of wide-spread information surveillance has decreased over time with the continued development of digital technologies such as AI and Big Data (Qin et. al., 2017, p.118); and compounding with the technical gateways described before permits authoritarian regimes to catalogue and restrict informational flows with ease in order to avoid collective action. A complete censorship model has proven itself to be inefficient compared to a partial censorship model due the market cost of the full censorship. The continual evolution of censorious parameters as given by the partial censorship model allows the government to adapt to periods of high levels of discontent, by enforcing stricter censorship, and low levels of discontent, by enforcing lax censorship (Lorentzen, 2014, p.404).

Figure 2 - Agencies and Individuals Influencing Censorship in Private Companies (Sina Case)

Source: Miller, 2019

The second feature of this model is the increased surveillance over local officials (Lorentzen, 2014, p.404; Tai, 2014, p.190; Kuang, 2018, p.158; Qin et. al., 2017, p.119). Due to the market reforms, much of the power that had been centralized within the national government had been broken down, allowing local governments to have much higher autonomy then previously (Kuang, 2018, p.159). However, this brought on the principal-agent problem. How would the Party guarantee that the local officials were governing efficiently and not indulging in rampant if they controlled the censorship of local media? The solution would be to give official permit a cohort of independent journalists to investigate local governments (Lorentzen, 2014, p.411; Tai, 2014, p.190; Kuang, 2018, p.158). In fact, due to the very market reforms that effectively decentralized and created the modern media industry, there was a great commercial incentive for media organizations to run investigative pieces on local governments (Lorentzen, 2014, p.403; Kuang, 2018, p.155; Guo, 2020, p.14-15), which then allowed the central government to utilize this market demand as a way to surveil local officials. Consequently, censorship programs at the central level are bound by powerful converging and diverging interests. Both local and central officials seek to maintain the legitimacy of the government, therefore both have a great incentive to censor negative news that impact the image of the central government; however, censorship goals diverge when it comes to the image of the local government. While preservation of the image of the central government is imperative since local officials aspire to higher ranks within the Party, the central government views the local officials are merely a tool of dissent management; as the

discrepancies of social capital between central and local governments become salient due to how negative news are often transmitted in the national news while the topic may be censored locally (Tai, 2014, p.204; Kuang, 2018, p.156). This local bias is also reflected in the delegation of censorship to ICPs such as Sina Weibo[24], who up until the creation of the CCAC was known to utilize local biases to ease off censorship as other local officials would have to petition Beijing to issue censorship directives to Sina Weibo (Miller, 2018, p.8).

Yet, such flexible censorship has started to change after the rise to Xi Jinping into power in 2013. Sensitive to the frailty of the legitimacy of the Party, Xi immediately started enacting various institutional and regulatory reforms in order to start concentrating power not around the Party, but around himself. The start of the project came from the marginalization of the State Council in the institutional arrangements through an absorption of its various functions by the Party[25] (Blanchette, 2019). Much of it is reflected by Xi's actions with the subsuming of various functions of Internet governance into the CCAC, the creation of prominent leading study groups (LSG) that are fully subservient to the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), and becoming the chair of the most important LSG, the leading study group on Internet Security and Informatization (Inkster, 2016, p.40; Miller, 2018, p. 20; Tai and Fu, 2020, p.21). This concentration of power into the Party, and particularly Xi, resulted in a great reduction on agency loss as the bureaucratic process on censorship and propaganda had become streamlined. Exercise of this centralized power is evidenced after the PRC Company Law[26], originally created in 1993, was started to be enforced much more strictly with around 73% of companies inside of China having a Party cell inside the organization (Livingston, 2021, p.2). Concurrently, a law that switches the payroll of ICP web editors from private payrolls to government payrolls was signed into law, further subsuming the censorship firmly under Party control (Miller, 2018, p.22-23).

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[24] Sina Weibo is the equivalent of Twitter within mainland China.

[25] Though the Party and the State Council are often conflated due to the complex institutional arrangements, the two are in fact separate entities. The Party controls the State Council in its entirety as a one-party system, yet there are administrative functions that are outside the direct purview of the Party. It is this complicated relationship that often gives rise to a factional infighting within China over control and power, mainly between the Princelings and the Technocrats.

[26] The PRC Company law created in 1993, required that companies with three or more Party members needed to create a Party cell.

Entrenchment of the government's access to data come through the promulgation the Cybersecurity Law in 2016, which standardized the data gathering operations (Jia and Ruan, 2019, p.3) while also placing indicating the continued burden of censorship upon the corporations as shown by Article 47 (China, 2016). Conversely, provision from Article 50 of the same law indicates oversight of corporations by relevant State departments in order to guarantee the full application of laws over information (China, 2016, Article 37). Yet, in order to instrumentalize such oversight, it would mean that the data would need to be stored within servers that the State would have unique and preferential access to. Henceforth, in Article 37 of the same law, stipulation over the location of the servers delineated that all companies operating within mainland China would need to place their physical servers within Chinese territory (China, 2016, Article 37; Jia and Ruan, 2019, p.3). Close examination of the article reveals a caveat in the law in regard to data sharing, which reveals the Party's stance on Internet governance:

> "Personal information and other important data gathered or produced by critical information infrastructure operators during operations within the mainland territory of the People's Republic of China, shall store it within mainland China. Where due to business requirements it is truly necessary to provide it outside the mainland, they shall follow the measures jointly formulated by the State network information departments and the relevant departments of the State Council to conduct a security assessment; but where laws and administrative regulations provide otherwise, follow those provisions." (Cybersecurity Law, Article 37, China, 2016).

The wording of Article 37 demonstrates the general reluctance in data sharing with foreign entities, be them corporations or governments. When analyzed under the data security framework as established by Xi Jinping earlier, the caveat in the law demonstrates the commitment maintain a sovereignty over digital information that is created by its citizen as a form of protection and surveillance. It is why that this article becomes important as multinational corporations came under the purview of the article, and those that did not have either data servers within China had to create servers or partner with a local company in order to comply with the law (Jia and Ruan, 2019, p.3-4). As a result, the Party had secured access to all data produced in mainland China regardless of whether a company was domestic of foreign.

With the formal incorporation of corporate surveillance and censorship capabilities into the hands of government, the Party gained direct access to individuals especially after the implementation of the comprehensive real name registry system in 2015 (Jia and Ruan, 2019, p.8-9; Diresta et. al. 2020, p.8; Guo, 2020, p.183). The registry system has further reduced the costs of censorship enforcement as it effectively eliminated the last barrier between the public and private lives of the citizens within China. While digital identification does generally correlate with better digital governance systems (Wong and Chu, 2020, p.63), the cross-implementation with private company databases create a chilling effect across dissident speech and allowing the prominent rise of state-aligned actors to effectively dominate online discourse (Guo, 2020, p.183-184). This chilling effect gives the appearance of more civilized discussions on social media platforms with less vitriolic language and abuse (Wong and Chu, 2020, p.50); however, due to infamously vague laws such as the Computer Information Network and Security, Protection and Management Regulations[27] (Inkster, 2016, p.31) along with a new judicial precedent[28] set in 2013 (Guo, 2020, p.183), this perceived civility may be likely due to an enforced self-censorship for self-preservation. This appears to be the case only for dissidents as nationalistic groups such as "Little Pinks" have gained some notoriety for aggressive discourse online.

These various regulatory practices, up until this point, did not receive a designation as a manner of national security. Despite previous rhetoric that the development of the dominant state ideology should be regarded as a national security issue (Xi, 2014, p.232), it was only in 2017 with the signing of the controversial National Intelligence Law that elevated speech as a manner of national security, which would then require the use of intelligence work. According to Article 2 of the National Intelligence Law, intelligence work is defined by the national security concept that by which is meant

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[27] The Computer Information Network and Security, Protection and Management Regulations was enacted in 1997 by Jiang Zemin. These sets of regulation prohibit any speech that incite resistance or violation of the constitution, laws or administrative legislation; incite a revolution against the government or socialist system; incite division in the country or efforts to obstruct national reunification; incite hate or discrimination against national minorities; disseminate of falsehoods, distortions of the truth, rumors or messages that disrupt social order; promote feudal superstitions, sexually suggestive materials, gambling, violence or murder; promote terrorism or any other criminal activity not restricted to insulting and slandering people; attack reputation of state organizations; and promote any other activities which ran counter to the constitution, laws or administrative regulations (Inkster, 2016, p.31-32).

[28] The judicial interpretation stipulated a new rule on the 1997 law. Any individual that posts misinformation online may face three years in prison if the post is viewed more than 5,000 times or shared over 500 times (Guo, 2020, p.183).

to safeguard not only state power and sovereignty; but also seeks to support protection to people's well-being as well as social and economic developments (China, 2017). This adoption of the holistic interpretation of national security as espoused by Xi Jinping years prior, allows the law to be flexible in its acting purview; lending the state competency and attributes to prosecute anyone that espouses any opposing ideology.

The National Intelligence Law drew much controversy due to Article 7 that states: "Any organization or citizen shall support, assist, and cooperate with the state intelligence work in accordance with the law, and keep the secrets of the national intelligence work known to the public." (China, 2017, Art. 7). Much like previous legislatives implemented by the Party, Article 7 of the National Intelligence Laws broadens the authority of the state considerably over various companies, in particular, information technology companies. However, sweeping jurisdiction is what made this law particularly controversial as there was no geographical clause that usually accompany various laws that have the potential to be applied internationally; therefore, depending on the context, the National Intelligence Law would be applied to citizens or companies outside of China's territory (Dackö and Jonsson, 2019, p.3). Simply put, the Party had created a law that gave itself global jurisdiction over data that both Chinese citizens and companies headquartered in China would have to surrender data if the government requested it. While the serious implications to the safety of trade secrets were widely discussed; another equally important discussion came to place over how this law could be utilized to crackdown on dissidents abroad.

The evolution of the Chinese cyberspace is one that is both meandering and linear. Much of the first sets of regulations on the infrastructure and the circulating media were natural outgrowths from analog censorship models that had existed; hence why at first there was much agency loss due to the fragmented structure that had originally emerged. Though partially by design, the conflicting jurisdiction and lax law application allowed the digital economy to grow tremendously inside of China even if it was inside of specific political parameters that eventually became restricted. The brief period of slight liberalization served two main purposes for the Party: fostering of economic growth and monitoring of local governments for both better governance and as a dissent valve.

2.2.2 – The (Illusory) Ephemeral Freedom

Perhaps the most famous cultural engineering project was Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), however, the ambition for instilling a homogenous culture was started long before the campaign. Literature and art, media in general, had been envisioned as a method of control where the media had to serve a political purpose instead of entertaining or informing the masses. This educational quality had been emphasized by Mao during what is known as the "Talks at the Conference on Literature and Art", which was later used as basis to imitate the Soviet cultural ecosystem and have the state control the funding for the production of the arts (Chi, 1969, p.570; Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p.18; Guo, 2020, p.5). The system utilized to produce propaganda art and media was largely inefficient (Guo, 2020, p.5); however, it built upon various model forms of media that had come before (Mittler, 2008, p.478). While the reinvention of the culture did work in purging much of the traditional culture and history through Mao's political campaign against the "four olds" with the Red Guard acting as enforcers (Chi, 1969, p.568-569; Fengyuan, 2004, p.3), it also created a paradoxical situation where the old arts were disseminated into the countryside at a large scale (Mittler, 2008, p.476-477).

The diffusion of the propaganda merely strengthened the education reforms that had penetrated the countryside nearly a decade before (Mittler, 2008, p.475; Thornton, 2019, p.56); and yet, it allowed for a new interpretation of the old arts through the education provided by the propagandist teachers that would educate the rural workers (Mittler, 2008, p.475-476). Education was a pre-requisite for the interpretation of the propaganda media as it allowed the interactions with the media in full under certain pretenses (Ellul, 1973), this is further emphasized by the linguistic engineering that took place during that period in order to mold the thoughts into a politically correct paradigm (Fengyuan, 2004, p.99). The reason why the Cultural Revolution succeeded in such an extensive manner was due to how there was informational scarcity that existed in the countryside that was soon supplanted by what was essentially an abundance of ideological media messaging. This media could be interpreted and enjoyed by the individual in their private minds, but their outward enjoyment and analysis could only be expressed in a homogenous manner. The propagandist media had become the popular media at the time by virtue of being the only media that was most readily available (Mittler, 2008, p.476), while fear of reprisal for expressing a differing interpretation of the model propagandas resulted in a self-censor due to the presence of the Red Guards (Fengyuan, 2004, p.100-

101). And despite the end of the Cultural Revolution with Mao's death in 1976; the process of continued cultural engineering did not stop. Instead, the cultural engineering continued under discursive terms such as 'cultural development', 'cultural creation', and 'cultural' construction' (Thornton, 2019, p.56).

The switch between a destructive cultural revolution to a managed cultural construction aligns with the start of the economic reforms and the start of the construction of the Chinese cyberspace. With media decoupling from its ideological roots, state subsidy of media organization was ceased and many of them required to engage in popular media creation in order to maintain financial stability (Guo, 2020, p.6). This adaptation of culture into a commercial enterprise meant that monopolistic departments like the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA)[29] and the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP), became largely censors instead of funders and distributors. As a result, the market forces naturally compelled various newspapers and channels to react to the surging media market that required both a greater efficiency in delivering their products, and quick reaction to the popular demands of the public (Shao et. al., 2016, p.34-36; Guo, 2020, p.8). That said, due to the policies surrounding safeguarding the ideological narrative (Thornton, 2019, p.59-60), the traditional media such as newspapers, radio and television never received funding from private investors and remained fully under the control of the government (Shao et. al., 2016, p.31). This commercialization of the media would later imply in the rise of a symbiotic relationship between citizen journalism and mainstream media in the Chinese Internet that would strengthen the Party's control in the digital sphere.

With China officially transitioning from a regime of information scarcity to information abundance, it adapted to the emerging business model of attention monetization as data capture from user's navigation inside a website could be sold to advertisers; and thusly land profits for the ICP (Guo, 2020, p.11-14). This posed a fundamental issue to the traditional media as much of the Chinese Internet started to transform much like the West. From originally a university-based forum system, it grew to a grand network offering many different services like chat rooms, blogs, online games, and search engines (Guo, 2020, p.27-28). Of course, this meant that users were able to start various discussions on many topics, along with creating their own content on the

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[29] Formerly known as the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT).

web. Though in the near future user create content would become monetized and generate a substantial amount of revenue for ICPs, it did essentially break the state monopoly on information as it allowed users to communicate with little interference.

One of the most substantial examples of this piece of Internet history, between the university-based forum system to the consolidation of multimedia platforms of the current Chinese Internet, is the website Yita Hutu. This university-based forum connected thousands of netizens from around the country, as access to the university systems were not restricted to only students; and was an important hallmark in social activism until 2004 when it was shut down (Guo, 2020, p.28-29). Lamentations around the closure of Yita Hutu, due to political rumors charges (Guo, 2020, p.29), were soon supplemented by a call to action by various prominent intellectuals such as He Weidong, a law professor at Beijing University among others (Xiaobo and Béja, 2006, p.130). This was the signal to the end of the forum era as many different university-based forums were soon shutdown or had access severely restricted; despite tragic effects in terms of reduction in free online discourse, another tool had arisen, blogging (Guo, 2020, p.30-34).

The advent of weblogs in China came at around the same time that blogs in the West had started to gain prominence (Guo, 2020, p.30). Despite the growth in popularity of blogs from the period of 2002 and beyond (MacKinnon, 2008, p.35-36; Guo, 2020, p.31), the culture that surrounds the blogging culture in China is markedly different than the one exhibited in Western platforms. While blogging culture in the West had devolved into political punditry, blogging within the China had become more of an entertainment sphere due to the censorship requirements that exist within the regulatory framework of hosting companies (MacKinnon, 2008, p.35). That said, it did mean that the cultural stranglehold of the Party started to wane despite the ideological framework that had been created and enforced by the Cultural Revolution decades prior. The case of Mu Zimei exemplifies this cultural paradigm shift with the publications of her 'sex diary' in 2003 (MacKinnon, 2008, p.35; Guo, 2020, p.32). The salacious posts and critical commentary on marriage made her an overnight sensation (MacKinnon, 2008, p.36; Guo, 2020, p.32), whose popularity was not destroyed, nor did it wane with the removal of published books and subsequent firing (MacKinnon, 2008, p.36). Politically, the various discussions were still heavily censored and damped, but culturally, the State controlled media programming was not able to keep the general population from generating their own

entertainment media. This emerging zeitgeist was soon captured by web service providers such as Sina, which sought to capture the attention market that was quickly growing in the blogosphere by contracting and professionalizing web editors that had become prominent in the forum era (Guo, 2020, p.36-38).

The emerging attention market allowed various types of bloggers that gained prominence to become part of a marketable ecosystem that fluctuated between consumer products and citizen journalism with each ecosystem creating a unique cascading effect on the information sphere (Guo, 2020, p.49-51). Each of these microcosms generate complex niches of information and interests, which in turn have created a paradoxical effect in the burgeoning civil society within China. On one hand, it created much of the same informational niches that are guided by user interests that have made diminished the trust of information circulated online and enforced an emotional collectivist rule (Leibold, 2011, p.1032-1033). However, on the other, it has also diversified economic and cultural interests by the very existence of these niches, which have eroded the ideological dominance as originally experienced by the Party in the digital sphere (Xiaobo and Béja, 2006, p.123; MacKinnon, 2008, p.33; Guo, 2020, p.17). A political opinion leader may not rise up due to the effective censorship (MacKinnon, 2008, p.34), but the cultural discussions abound show the gradual distancing of official ideological preference (Xiaobo and Béja, 2006, p.123-124; MacKinnon, 2008, p.36; Guo, 2020, p.124-127).

Erosion of the ideological preference can be seen in the prominence of citizen journalism that had arisen as part of the attention market along with its symbiotic relationship with the official media (Guo, 2020, p.14-18). The monopoly over traditional media in China had never been broken despite the economic reforms that forced newspapers, radios, and channels to adopt a commercial stance in order to survive; however, the integration of the Internet within society at large created attrition between ICPs and traditional media that in some part led to the rise of citizen journalism. Much like in the West, the popularity of online media had started to gnaw at the universal control of traditional media due to the unique properties that online media provided such as reduced reporting latency and interaction with the news (Rajendran and Thesinghraja, 2014, p.610-611; Guo, 2020, p.40-42). This inevitably pressed newspapers to establish an online presence with a convention that expressly prohibited news websites unaffiliated with traditional media to repost stories on their webpages without prior authorization as

well as government regulation that enforced strict guidelines for reporting (Guo, 2020, p.14-15). Nevertheless, this development caused a curious relationship to form between traditional news media and Internet news media that resembles a symbiotic coupling where traditional media is lends authority and credibility to online media sources while expanding the influence of traditional media into the Internet spaces (Yu, 2011, p.380; Rajendran and Thesinghraja, 2014, p.615; Guo, 2020, p.14-16).

In China, both professional journalists as well as amateurs join together within the online news media circle, creating a new ecology that transforms the online world by invoking alternative perspectives for news (Yu, 2011, p.381). This new ecology that appeared attracted much attention and helped to continue erode the singular perspective that was available to Chinese netizens compared to the traditional media. It was also this ecology that saw the increase in investigative journalism that became very useful for the Party to monitor local officials for corruption as well as utilize it as a valve for societal pressure (Lorentzen, 2014, p.412; Tai, 2014, p.204; Kuang, 2018, p.158). The poignant case of Sun Chunlong is the very example of that as he exposed the cover-up of local officials of the real death toll of the Loufan in 2008, which garnered him accolades both online and from the central government for his investigative piece posted in his blog (Yu, 2011, p.383). While bloggers, journalists, or amateurs, are not the authoritative voices as is the case with the traditional media, they provide a larger scope of perspectives compared to the censored media through either investigative reporting or commentary (Yu, 2011; Guo, 2020, p.14-16), which may then resonate or not with the audiences. The digital public sphere is then proliferated with a large number of individual voices that evade censors through creative uses of puns and playfulness (Yu, 2011, p.386; Guo, 2020, p. 165).

However, even with the invocation of alternative perspective for news and discussions, the collective nature of the Chinese Internet is still dominant overall. This collective nature arises specifically from the networking effect of blogs, and most importantly, microblogs like Sina Weibo. As explained previously, the abundance of existing information within the Internet makes attention a scarce commodity that amplifies the power of the resource stock; therefore, even if there is not an active engagement in the form of comments, the potential of viralization of scandals may amplify pressure upon public figures and authorities (Guo, 2020, p.178-182). Such

viralizing pressure is only possible due to the aggregating nature that many of these companies, both in China and in the West, in order to drive traffic to their websites (Lanier, 2006). This in turn, spins around the idea that clusters of niche interests generate information cocoons (Leibold, 2011, p.1030; Coppa, 2022, p.177-178); instead, these clusters of information link together thanks to individuals creating a spillover effect that may amplify cultural control or cultural change. It all depends on the modulation of the message. A simple tautological explanation is easier for a collective to absorb instead of a contradiction due to the sheer amount of information briefed to a collective.

As a result, the mobilization of the Internet masses has become a double-edged sword to aid in citizen activism as well as in government repression. "Human-Flesh Search Engines"[30] have become emblematic of this phenomena of mass mobilization in order to actively punish those that have been in violation of the collective's morality (Leibold, 2011, p.1031-1032; Gorman, 2016, p.326). While originally harmless, Human-flesh search engines were morphed into a mass-line surveillance tool (Gorman, 2016, p.333) that contributed to the rise of citizen journalism as a method of controlling corruption at a local level (Lorentzen, 2014, p.404; Tai, 2014, p.190; Kuang, 2018, p.158) by mobilizing netizens in a similar manner as the Red Guard from the time of the Cultural Revolution (Gorman, 2016, p.334). This populist engagement between the government and the people in regard to human flesh searching was refined. Despite enacting a regulation on the act in 2014, the Party added various clauses that permitted the posting of results from human flesh searching if it served "social and public benefits" (Gorman, 2016, p.335), thereby legally binding the tool under the indirect purview of the Party. This meant that along with utilizing it to target local corruption or target opposing political leaders, it gave the Party the tools to brandish the public sphere against public intellectuals or opponents in an effort to maintain the appearance of social harmony (Gorman, 2016, p.335-336).

The combination of this mass surveillance and targeted mobilization allowed the Party to reinvent online nationalism and reinvigorate the propaganda apparatus online. The conflation between nationalistic sentiments and ideological purity turned consumption of information products to be political, which allowed Party branches like the Communist Youth League (CYL) of China to foment groups such as "Little Pinks" to

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[30] Known in Mandarin as "Renrou Sousuo".

act as cultural enforcers along with playfully spread ideological works through essays and memes (Guo, 2020, p.183-192). Consequences of this co-option includes harassment of the cultural figures inside of mainland China, but also outside of the Chinese Internet. This is due to both the access to the outside via VPN tools (Virtual Private Networks) and economic spillover effects of the interconnection of large media companies tapping into the Chinese domestic market.

2.2.3 – The Great Firewall and a New Story

Though the growth in the digital economy preconceived a gradual opening to Western platforms, the very technical structure of the Chinese Internet demonstrated that there was no desire by the Party to open their ideological sphere to Western influence. Nothing best exemplifies this search for ideological security than the Golden Shield Project, or rather, the most famous sub-system of the project, the Great Firewall. Initiated in 1996[31], the Great Firewall is part of the two-layer filtering system (Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p.21; Lee, 2018, p.408; Guo, 2020, p. 25; Hoang et. al., 2021, p. 3381) as described earlier that is embedded within the national network backbones in as both as software and a hardware (Chandel et. al., 2019, p.112). The construction of its whole system ecosystem was done in various phases with the first phase ending in 2006 while the second phase ended in 2008 (Chandel et. al., 2019, p.112). However, despite its nominal completion in 2008, the Great Firewall has been subject to continual upgrades and improvements in order to keep a tight control over the getaways and content that enter China[32] (Enfasi, et. al., 2015, p.446; Lee, 2018, p. 408; Chandel et. al., 2019, p.112-113).

Upon its initial release, the Great Firewall resembled more an add on program to the existing network structure. While it did block specific domains and websites, it was not a native gateway portal inside of the network system and instead functioned as a program to be installed into the computers (Chandel et. al., 2019, p.112). However, this did not cause much issue to the Party as at the time, there was not a proliferation of many personal computers or mobile internet access via phones and other products. Instead, much of the Chinese population accessed the Internet and its various services through two means: a) Internet cafés (Chandel et. al., 2019, p.112) and the university campus (Guo,

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[31] Sources diverge on the year of the start of the construction of the Great Firewall with some considering the construction to have initiated in 1996 or in 1998.
[32] One of the most impressive feats that the Great Firewall has been able to do is block TOR bridges through their active probing method. The method is detailed in Enfasi et. al., 2015 experiment where it is revealed that it is also by this method that the Great Firewall discovers functioning VPNs to block.

2020, p. 27-28). Twinned with this development, the "Interim Provisions Governing Management of Computer Information Networks in the People's Republic of China connecting to the International Network" was put into place in 1996, which implemented not only a registry for ISPs but also listed of the data types that private entities had to collect for the government about its users (Chandel et. al., 2019, p.113). The access to the Internet through Internet cafés or universities became predicated on a real name registry (Chandel et. al., 2019, p.112; Guo, 2020, p.29), which were geographically limited to the physical access points compared to the 2015 registry that encompassed much of the population.

Yet despite the wide coverage that this policy gave, it was still precarious due to the inevitable expansion of the Chinese economy and the technological development. Soon netizens would have their own Internet access points at home or even on their phones, which meant that the Great Firewall would need to have a more comprehensive filtering system beyond the installation of the software or the preloading of said software inside of various equipment. In 2004, the Great Firewall introduced an advanced keyword filtering that scanned the content of the webpage for any sensitive words (Chandel et. al., 2019, p.112). The method that both URL and keyword filters work is through the poisoning of packets to the DNS server; in other words, when a netizen sends a request to the DNS server to access a certain IP, the Great Firewall sends a false packet to netizen that opens or not the webpage instead of the true DNS server (Chandel et. al., 2019, p.114; Hoang et. al., 2021, p. 3382). The effect is essentially creating a mirror version of the permitted website that exists outside of the Chinese Internet, which allows then for the Great Firewall to scan the webpage for sensitive keywords before deciding if the netizen is able to access it or not (Chandel et. al., 2019, p.112-113). This system slows down the connection speed due to the traffic heavy process that it creates. However, it is extremely effective in blocking most of sensitive information that may come out of China, even if the use of forged IP injection has caused DNS poisoning of international public DNS solvers (Hoang et. al., 2021, p. 3388). It also permits the mass surveillance of information within China, blocking websites that instant message texts, e-mails, and websites (Guo, p. 25); though this is also applicable to China-owned platforms that operate outside of the

mainland. Two China-owned companies, Tencent and miHoYo[33] have evidenced shown that this practice is widespread and accepted.

As one of the world's largest social media platforms, WeChat is a premier product from Tencent that serves as a multifunctional app with classic features such as messaging and group chats along with aggregating features such as payments, booking and sales for both casual users and businesses to utilize (Guo, 2020, p.54-55). It has a large community both inside of mainland China and abroad boasting of over 800 million users (Ruan et. al., 2016,), which makes it a fertile ground for censorship research all around. Great interest comes from the *One-App, Two-Systems* principle that is applied on the app where phones registered on the Chinese version of WeChat, Weixin, are subject to strict censorship (Jia and Ruan, 2019, p.12-13; Atlantic Council, 2020, p.18-21; Ruan et. al. 2016, p.26-27; Ryan et. al. 2020, 25). One may understand the app as a microcosm of how content filtering works within the Great Firewall in regard to surveillance and blacklisting of messages, files, and images scan.

Despite the presence of existence of the *One-App, Two Systems* principle that delineated how WeChat would apply censorship between the international and Chinese version of the app; a symbiotic relationship was discovered between the two systems. It was reported that while sensitive images and files were not censored in messages sent between WeChat international accounts, the images that were sent from an international account to a Chinese account were (Atlantic Council, 2020, p.21; Knockel et. al. 2020, p.8-10; Ryan et. al. 2020, p.25-26). All files and images have a unique hash[34] that is assigned to them at creation; each one of them is unique. Copies of images and files have identical hashes, which then can be scanned and compared. This allows the existence for the real time filtering of sensitive content that may be blacklisted within mainland China. Therefore, deriving from the results of the report, a deeper investigation was launched, and it was discovered the novel sensitive images that were first sent between international accounts were censored with a staggeringly 100% accuracy while novel sensitive images

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[33] MiHoYo's case will be further discussed in Chapter 3 as the censorship is applicable to game accounts that are hosted in servers outside of Mainland China and between non-China registered accounts. This thusly indicates a censorship spillover effect that occurs. Other media censorship such as in-game outfit changes are not applicable per say, but the Western general reactions to the sudden outfit change denote a unwillingness to acknowledge censorship due to One-Game, Two-Systems approach to visual in-game media.

[34] Hashes are an algorithmic representation of the data contained within the file or image.

that were sent from international accounts to Chinese accounts had a lower accuracy rate (Knockel et. al. 2020, p.8-10). It was confirmed that the surveillance of international accounts was real (Knockel et. al. 2020, p.8-10; Ryan et. al. 2020, p.25-26); and despite servers of the international accounts being located in Canada and Hong Kong data surveillance is a spillover due to Chinese laws (Jia and Ruan, 2019, p.13-14), particularly, the National Intelligence Law.

Escape from the surveillance and censorship is a daunting task, requiring the of various tools in order to create a private network connection to the outside world. There are various methods to bypass the Great Firewall such as: host file modification, proxies[35], direct LAN connection or private tools like virtual private networks also known as VPNs (; Chandel et. al., 2019, p.112). Among these various circumvention method, the most popular are the VPNs due to their ease of use, and wide-range accessibility. Businesses that have been impacted by the Great Firewall necessarily utilize VPNs in order to maintain unrestricted contact with clients or business partners from outside of China (Chandel et. al., 2019, p.115). The existence and usage of VPNs within China had been tolerated for a number of years while the capabilities of the Great Firewall were being enhanced. Yet, despite years of tolerance, the use of VPNs without official permission from the Party was deemed to be illegal in 2017 with punishments varying from fines and arrests (Chandel et. al., 2019, p.115; Ryan et. al., 2021, p.8). The punishment for utilizing a VPN is not uniform among all ethnic groups inside of China; Uyghurs that utilize a VPN are charged with engaging in "online terrorist activities" with reports of individuals being incarcerated and punished for utilizing these tools (Long and Mudie, 2016; Ryan et. al., 2021, p.8).

Despite the criminalization of VPNs and their subsequent removal from most of the Chinese Internet (Chandel et. al., 2019, p.113; Ryan et. al, 2021, p.8), a parcel of the population still illegally utilizes the tools. Whether it be to obtain outside information for personal or academic reasons or entertainment (Chandel et. al., 2019, p.111), this is an evidence that there is still an allure to the act of visiting a foreign website in a small

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[35] Proxies refer to softwares that create proxy servers. The most famous of these proxies is the Tor software, which creates a multi-layered encrypted connection to websites. While Tor is well-known to be one of the best proxy software around, part of its utility has been reduced by the Great Firewall as one of the connection bridges, obfs2, is blocked. However, obfs3 bridges are still known to be functional (Enfasi et. al., 2015, p.447).

section of the population despite the existence of many Chinese equivalent platforms and applications that are accessible normally. Yet, this does not mean that there is the consumption of politically relevant information as there is very little incentive in China to do so (Chen and Yang, 2019, p.2295); though this is not simply a restricted phenomenon, but rather a known effect for the increased media choice overall (Schroeder, 2018, p.33). As a result, while there does exist a parcel of the population that utilizes VPNs to engage with media from outside of the Great Firewall most of it tends to be entertainment, which in the context of ideological security, purports only a limited area of effect. Part of the reason is the low effectiveness of spillover effect of politically sensitive information among peers (Chen and Yang, 2019, p.2296), meaning that even if sensitive information is absorbed by a small parcel of the population the effective nature of the censorship limits effects. Much of that can be traced to the lack of the ability to create focal points in Internet discussions (Tai and Fu, 2020, p.17-18), thusly depriving a large population of cognitive shortcuts to a greater discussion and therefore bereaving netizens to a broader suite of information. In essence, the inability to create a significant spillover or network effect, due to the careful censorship of possible focal points, reinforce the tautological information among the general population.

Figure 3 – Leaked Official Police Report on a Uyghur Caught Utilizing a VPN

Source: Reddit, 2019

The censorship capabilities of the Great Firewall, along with its continual upgrades, provides the baseline tools that the Party utilize in order to control the information within its borders. Private companies such as Sina and Tencent act as capillaries to the internal legal structure that is in place even when that structure is still subsumed by the government as mentioned earlier. It is a pernicious fusion of state and corporate power that ultimately subverts the very concept of freedom of expression and thought through the rhetoric of conservation of social stability as a legitimizing argument. Nevertheless, even such capabilities would not work in present circumstances if there was a large market demand for *foreign* sensitive political information as in general terms even with technological advances and fear of government reprisal does would not deter one from seeking this type of information (Chen and Yang, 2019, p.2295). The artificially low interest in politically sensitive information from foreign sources comes from the low value that these outlets are given by the Chinese population (Chen and Yang, 2019, p.2296), which can be attributed to the nationalistic curriculum update implemented

around 2005 by Hu Jintao (Cantoni et. al., 2017, p.341). The marked increase in the trust in government due to the curriculum update (Cantoni et. al., 2017, p.369) along with the crackdown in public spaces (Guo, 2020, p.52) severely restricted the domestic ideological diversity, which in turn reinforced tautological information that was circulated within the Chinese Internet. This contributed significantly to the rise of the "Little Pinks" as mentioned earlier while also aiding in keeping the demand for foreign information artificially low. All of this is result of a shifting culture that outlined the necessity of securitizing information to the public before enacting state controls over the supply of diversified information through corporate control. In other words, by combining state and corporate capabilities China has the unique ability to influence speech in the digital sphere through various manners at little to no risk of breaching informational demands within their borders.

At its core, this type of strategy is asymmetrical with a greater emphasis towards the defense of the dominant ideology within China. However, the emergence of the "Telling China's Story Well" as introduced by Xi Jinping in 2013 (China Media Project, 2021) has modified the traditionally defensive framework into an offensive type of ideological capture. Though the plans for a strategic propaganda exportation campaign had existed since 2007 with the Grand External Propaganda Campaign (Diresta et. al., 2020, p.9), Xi Jinping reformed the propagandist directives that had existed and experimented the co-optation of the cultural zeitgeist to silence competition from cultural opinion leaders on the Internet through the targeting of collective sentiments (Guo, 2020, p.184). This was a major success as it managed to mobilize the youth as an active mass against perceived enemies of China for either being critical of the central government or espousing any doctrine that may be contrary to it. Naturally, the domestic success would need to be replicated abroad in order to reach both foreigners and the Chinese diaspora as to create an ideological shift in these populations. The spillover from this shift is expected to engender sympathy for the Party's governance model abroad and capture the sympathy into scathing criticism of the Western model. However, to create such a shift, the Party had74cess them through various means and the digital sphere was the best pathway for the informational exports.

The international strategy then rests in modulating an overarching narrative that permeates in all corners of digital society and that centers around China's rise while

interlacing it with the existence of the Party through the use of both overt and covert means (Diresta et. al., 2020, p.5-6). Key aspect of the strategy includes emphasis on China's achievements and practices under the Party rule while downplaying any problematic content that may damage the projected image through appropriate communication channels. In other words, the semantic content necessarily is in line with the political needs of the Party (Xiong, 2015, p.27; Diresta et. al., 2020, p.7; China Media Project, 2021; Ryan et. al., 2021, p.8), but the shape that the message takes along with the source of the message needs to be adapted and modulated in order to engender trust among various different audiences (Diresta et. al., 2020, p.13). Therefore, the Party adapts the signal game through the various interactions with both the channel and the audience with feedback from the audience to calibrate its signals to deliver information as intended (Skyrims, 2010, p.162) to cause a shift in ideological perception. The adaptation of delivering propaganda through the international digital space takes two major forms: overt and covert (Diresta et. al., 2020, p.7) with the most prominent of the two being the latter.

Within both paradigms of influence capabilities, Western social media is heavily utilized by the Party for its own ends. In the overt propaganda campaigns, Party officials and state-run media news outlets, such as Xinhua News and CGTN, create official social media accounts in order to interact with various users and post media that falls in line with Party interests varying (Diresta et. al. 2020, p.12-13). By engaging in a posture similar to the one cultivated domestically thanks to innovations in combative propaganda, official accounts interact with many actors an reproduce memetic moments that are looked upon fondly by small segments of the international sphere. An example of such is the case of senior journalist Chen Weihua, who fired back against American Senator Marsha Blackburn for a xenophobic tweet with a simple reply of "Bitch". The incident became emblematic of the tensions between the United States and China, shifting the narrative to the racialized narrative dichotomy that the Party had cultivated in its messaging years prior. Thanks to the inflamed racial division inside of the United States caused by an internal populist ideological struggle, the exchange gained a large traction and even praise from a section of American citizens.

The use of this type of language along with expert analysis of domestic tension points inside of countries such as the United States allows the Party to better resonate and

reach a section of the Western youth that sympathizes with the ideology[36] of the Party. Nevertheless, despite some success in this type of action, the use of combative rhetoric, now colloquially understood as "wolf warrior diplomacy" has shown to degrade public opinion in regard to China for a majority of the population in the West which has become even more stressed with the COVID-19 pandemic (Jerdén et. al., 2021, p.22-26).

Figure 4 - Senior Journalist Chen Weihua fires back against Senator Marsha Blackburn

Source – Twitter

Nevertheless, not all of China's overt digital propaganda is combative and aggressive as news agencies such as Xinhua and CGTN also actively participate in social media platforms, notably YouTube and Facebook, without such combative rhetoric. Instead, these channels appear to mostly attempt promote a positive view of China elevating and focusing on achievements while deflecting or downplaying criticism that the government may be receiving at the time from the international community at large (Diresta et. al., 2020, p.12). However, traffic that are arrive to individual videos in the channels are rather low compared to more popular content that it competes with such as podcasts, vlogs and commentary channels centered around China.

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[36] This point may be due to the school curriculum inside in the West that has generated controversy in the past few years. It has been alleged that in many institutions of learning there has been an increasingly Marxist bent and incentive to educate the youth through Paulo Freire's methodology. While it is beyond the scope of analysis of the paper, it may be a factor in some of the success from the overt propaganda.

For example, the podcast ADV Podcast run by a South African and American that formerly resided in China has received on average over 75,000 views with the most popular episode reaching over 500,000 views compared to CGTN's official channel that receives views that fluctuate between 500 to 3,000 views with the most popular video receiving 75,000 views. This is not the sole example as the news and political satire channel China Uncensored receives on average over 100,000 views per video with its most popular episode receiving over 10,000,000 views.

Figure 5 - Subsidiary of XinhuaNews, New China TV, posts a video discussing how China follows a democratic model of its own. It has reached a total of 539 views on March 10th, 2022.
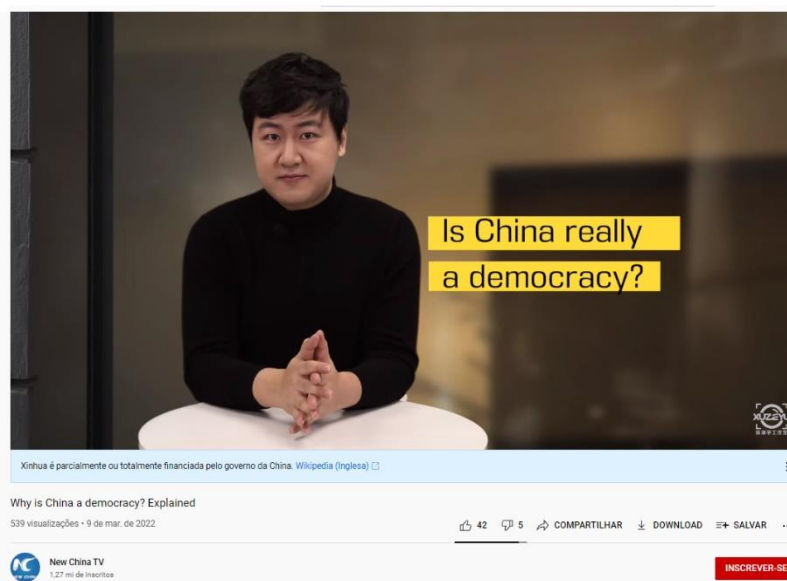
Source – YouTube

The disparity between the reach between official propaganda channels and commentary channels demonstrates that the source of the content has great impact on the perception of veracity of the information. Within the presented model of information, signals may imbue the semantic content with extra information that may not have been intended by the sender, therefore affecting the believe of the receiver in the message (Skyrims, 2010). Hence why the named source of the presented information is very important reflects viewers trust in the number of video views between state-run Chinese official media and independent China commentators and vloggers. As Western social media platform's function, in large part, as a free market of ideas, the demand for independent voices on China exceeds the demand for the propaganda that is posted by official state-run social media accounts. This presents an issue to the goals of the external

propaganda to project a more sympathetic image of China and ideologically influence foreign nationals.

Figure 6 - Independent news company China Uncensored posts a view on YouTube discussing abuse scandal in one of China's top high schools. It has reached a total of 117,916 views on March 10th, 2022.
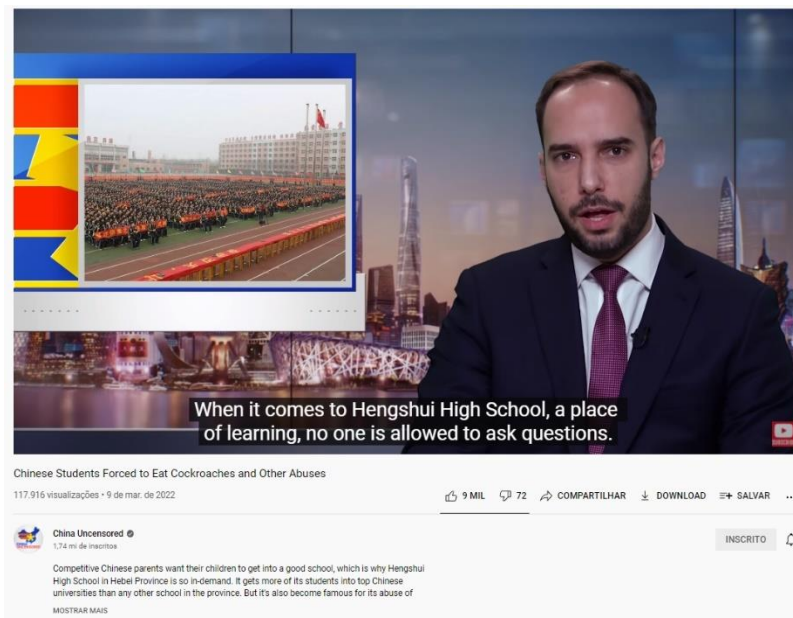
Source – YouTube

To address the uneven field, the Party's strategy is adapted to various platform's algorithm in order to perform one of three actions: a) pay for advertisements in order to increase pro-Party content interest (Diresta et al., 2020, p.35-36), b) create bot farms in order to increase trust in content through falsified positive ratings while negatively rating (Goldfarb and Tucker, 2017, p.26) content criticizing China, or c) pressure the content creator to stop by reporting content as violating the platform's terms and serves to demonetize the content or pressure possible sponsors from engaging with the content creator (Coppa, 2022, p.180). These types of operations, among others, should be considered to be covert tactics (Diresta et al., 2020, p.15-16), however, they are more of an ancillary operation to the main narrative drive compared to overt operations. They do not produce new information as is with the overt propaganda; these tactics seek to amplify the narrative that the Party attempts to export by simulating in certain terms the same information environment. As is inside of the Chinese Internet. In order to do so, they abuse the rules and mechanisms created in various social media platforms and businesses to moderate and curate the space whilst utilizing anonymity to eliminate formal attribution to the Party.

Nevertheless, while some of the covert tactics are ancillary, there are other capabilities that are leveraged in an active manner. Among them is the financing of Western content creators or financing *and* permitting certain domestic content creators to utilize VPNs in order to publish their content on Western social media platforms (Ryan et. al, 2021, p.8). This form of covert propaganda has only been recently discovered; therefore, the true extent of the co-opted network is unknown. However, the scant evidence that is known through is that a few of these content creators tend to be contracted by large Chinese news media such as CGTN[37] to work directly with the Party (Ryan et. al. 2021, p.8-9). This dual approach allows a larger audience to capture while masking the true origin of some of the content produced. By hiding the source of the content, the information is modulated through the veneer of an independent voice that imbues the message transmitted with a signal of veracity towards the target audience. As a result, the degree-of-belief in the information is greater due to the lack disclosed connection to the Party (Ryan et. al. 2021, p.34) as well as a general lack of knowledge about VPN laws within China.

Other methods of censorship exportation come from the attempts of large Western companies seeking footing within the large market. Various companies, from various industries, have many times have come under pressure from the Party to follow official guidelines and naming conventions, which have spillover into international websites and affairs. One such example is Marriot Hotel chain that does not acknowledge Taiwan's sovereignty in order to continue operations within mainland China, its international website lists Taiwan as a province of China. However, between industries, the two most notable that have been affected by this process were the film and gaming industries where there as been much economic incentive for industry players to engage in self-censorship before applying to have their products released to the Chinese markets (Zhang, 2012, p.342). In fact, stipulations contained within the various laws encourages media productions to promote the "essence of national culture" (Zhang, 2012, p.343-344), which in turn may make seemingly innocuous details an article for political scrutiny for the authorities. As a result, companies may seek to initiate products with the censorship as an

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[37] The most overt recruitment of foreigners as content creators for the Party has come from the Media Challengers program as made by CGTN where many foreign nationals from many countries around the world were selected to join CGTN in order to challenge the narrative as presented by the West so China could be better understood (https://www.cgtn.com/mediachallengers.html).

industry standard process to reduce costs associated with changing many points of the content for a release within China. There are many economic incentives for this to occur in the search for profit.

A similar phenomena occurs within Chinese companies that seek to expand beyond mainland China through either app creation, media content creation or acquisition of foreign brands. Varying standards of both data protection and of censorship between China and other countries encourage Chinese companies to create different versions of the apps to serve a domestic and international audience (Jia and Ruan, 2019, p.2). Nevertheless, targeted censorship has been evidenced in a few applications and competitive games that certain topics have been censored even in servers and clients that are hosted outside of China's territory. Even if there are two different versions of an app and server hosting is based in a different territory, Chinese companies are still bound by censorious guidelines, which also leads into an export of censorship into the Western Internet through globalized apps and popular videogames. These apps such as WeChat and TikTok have been noted to carry from subtle to blunt forms of censorship in their platforms with human rights activist, Zhou Fengsuo, explaining to American news outlets that certain words in his international WeChat account are censored (Ryan et. al., 2020, p.25). Similar censorship has been noticed in videogame marketplaces that are fully or have a significant share owned by Chinese companies with the most significant instances of censorship is full removal of videogames that do not align with the values of the Party.

The entanglement of market financial impulses coupled with strident laws create incentive levers that the Party can manipulate so a censorship standard is adopted through various companies that either create informational content or transmit them. As a result of this broad informational capture, the media entertainment industries are targeted strongly not only as a source of income growth but also as an influence paradigm to express the Chinese culture in a vibrant manner. Yet, the effect of the Cultural Revolution still lingers as the traditional culture has become reinterpreted under the ideological communist lens, thusly intrinsically connecting the two. The promotion of *Han*-Chinese culture through media becomes a tacit promotion of the Party's ideology in order to engender sympathy towards the system of government while allowing it to dismiss criticism as a racial attack from foreigners or unpatriotic sentiment from the whole Chinese population, irrespective if from mainland China or Diaspora. It transforms the

cultural exchange into a politically ideological tool that the Party is able to take advantage of and create mobilizing masses to shut down critical discussions.

One of the key features of the mobilization of masses is the component of nationalism that has been fostered to an extreme degree in some individuals as a result of the school curriculum along with the insular ideological space. The emergence of groups such as Little Pinks are the result of this phenomenon and have become an ideal mass for the defense of the Party as well as its ideals. They not only become enforcers inside of the Great Firewall but have been known to utilize VPNs to circumvent the firewalls in order to defend the Party (Diresta et. al., 2020, p.19-20), out of pure patriotism, as well as harass content creators and companies that do not comply with doctrines or narratives set in place by the Party. While there are few instances that can be assigned to bots or to the infamous *wumaos*, the attribution of such campaigns as state-sponsored becomes muddled due to the existence of such groups that conduct these campaigns (Diresta et. al., 2020, p.14-15). Most importantly, these types of campaigns imply that there is a tacit approval of the Party.

This chapter explored in whole the convergence of many processes from the technical to cultural that has crafted the dynamic that we now observe in cyberspace coming out of China. While much emphasis is given towards Xi Jinping's time in power, it is clear that the root of such vast securitization begins much earlier before converging to this point in time. After all, by taking the ideological base of the Party as a large portion of its existing legitimacy, it becomes an existential necessity to control information through the tying ideology with culture. Which from there, the ethnonationalist ideal can arise from a grand narrative that portrays China's form of government as unique and enlightened; a form of democracy that fully serves the people and the only reason for the rapid development of the country. It is the cultivation of a cultural wedge to divide the citizens from the rest of the world ideologically before imposing a digital divide to control information as to eliminate any other influence that may disturb the fragile position of the Party.

The censorship apparatus is vast; however, it is not inflexible. Since the inception of the Internet in China, it has adapted with the changing culture negotiating between the free market and the government a middle ground for growth whilst satisfying the security needs of the Party. This continued adaptation has resulted in the creation of a societal

function on the Internet that aids in the maintenance of the authoritarian government; a pressure valve that redirects discontent to low-ranked positions and improves governance overall. Even at its most lax, the censorship guided the creation of the culture despite the market pressures; and during the reforms under Xi Jinping, managed to carefully modulate official language to resonate with the youngest digital generation. It replicated the cultural wedge and mostly successfully alienated different generations of Internet users from each other. Thusly, it created the circumstances for the emergence of patriotic enforcers such as the Little Pinks, which then aid in the reproduction of propaganda and enforcement of censorship. Success of this informational control model alleviated greatly the domestic pressure on the Party, who now seeks to expand its censorship and narrative beyond its borders as a measure to increase the area of its sphere of influence. It would mean deflecting any shortcoming levied by foreign actors through the modification of the very informational sphere by employing similar methods beyond its territory on a very large scale.

The success of this ambitious endeavor is varied and cannot be covered extensively by this study as it is beyond its scope and would require empirical data. Nevertheless, the case studies presented in the next chapter underscore the various tactics utilized along with the general response of the West to them. It shows that despite the endeavors to influence global opinion through propaganda, the most effective tool is still censorship.

Chapter 3 – Cases and Methods: Navigating the Incidents

As the dense communication network encompassed the globe, the informational environment that has arisen over the past decades had provided both a threat and an opportunity for China. Strategic control over the informational flows became imperative as they would allow the continued maintenance of the Cultural Revolution, the Communist ideological infusion within the fabric of Chinese culture, while gaining access to a larger international audience to create an artificial representation of China to engender sympathy towards the Party. However, this strategic control had to be balanced against the economic potential that a media geared towards market demands would have. The result of this balancing act was the creation of a dynamic censorship and propaganda apparatus that was sensitive to the swiftly changing domestic information environment in order to create and mold a specific reality to guide the actions and thoughts of its citizens

under the existing values system in order to maintain the legitimacy of the Party, whilst internationally was the adaptation of these domestic tools for an environment vulnerable to exploitation.

After all, with China's rise to power in the last, an ideological conflict has taken shape. Contextually speaking, the current competition is one that oversees the world order; it seeks to see if the America-centric world order shall be maintained or if there will be a natural axial return to a Sinocentric world order . Ideology, as a result, is an inevitable component of such competition. Domestic ideological-cultural differences have transcended national border due to the heavily globalized world (Jie, 2020, p.191-192) with cyberspace as one of the most governance contested spaces due to the deterritorial nature of the sphere (Jie, 2020, p.191-192; Medeiros and Goldoni, 2020, p.38-41). The existing competitive structure not only demands China to counterbalance American influence targeting its population and sphere of influence, but also demands an expansion of its own influence, consequently creating even more friction between the two rivals.

In order to avoid a possible direct military confrontation, the traditional subtlety of Chinese statecraft is favored (Kissinger, 2011, p.20-22) as it seeks to create a strategic unified front to influence the values system of various states by targeting their netizens through protracted informational campaigns that utilize the digital sphere as a messaging vector. In theory, this would then allow them to use soft power to guide large swarths of a target population into actions that are beneficial to the regime, even if only to expand the reach of ideological messaging. The methodology of the application of soft power falls into the process of shaping the perceived reality of individuals through cognitive processes, which seeks to conflate the existence of China with the existence of the Party itself. Therefore, it would replicate the domestic victim narrative associated with criticism towards the Party to an international audience.

The specific requirements for these cognitive wiring effects to take place rest on the preparation of the information environment to favor the modulation of the preferred message of the Party through specific channels. This is accomplished by various mechanisms that are going to be discussed at length in different incidents that have gained a measure of notoriety. The mechanics explored accomplish either creating a chilling effect on large platforms or disseminate propaganda inside of popular media. This chapter

as a result is divided into four distinctive sections that explore cases that showcase the use of a particular strategy.

3.1 – Economic Coercion: Blitzchung and the Houston Rockets

Since the implementation of Deng Xiaoping's market reforms in 1978, China experienced a prodigious amount of growth. Institutional changes subjected various industries, including information technology and media, under market pressure instead of being solely sustained by the government as it had been before (Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p.18-19; Inkster, 2015, p.25; Guo, 2020, p.7-10). While the Party closely guided the development of the information technology sector (Kalathil and Boas, 2003, p. 21-23; Inkster, 2015, p.23), the media industry had been afforded a greater flexibility as it was noted that it would deepen the economic reforms that had been implemented (Guo, 2020, p.7-10). The results of the policy were undeniably positive as in 2019, according to an International Monetary Fund (IMF) working paper, the digital economy[38] of China stands at around 6% of the total GDP (Zhang and Chen, 2019, p.4) or around $12.85 billion[39]. Entertainment and media industries have also benefited well from these flexible policies as in 2021, in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic, the cultural industry flourished with a total size of $358.6 billion (PwC, 2021).

Companies enticed by the rapid transformations that the Chinese economy was undertaking sought to enter the markets to take advantage of the potential it held. One of the first digital companies to do so was American videogame developer Blizzard Entertainment, who entered a joint venture with Chinese company NetEase in 2006 to release games, particularly online games, in the domestic market (So, 2006). At the time the online gaming market had been evaluated to have a 120 million users playing online video games with a great growth expectation in the particular market (Kshteri, 2010). The high costs of entering the Chinese market as a foreign company, while mitigated by acting as a joint venture, still produced much trouble for Blizzard as it had to register its products to both the GAPP and the Ministry of Culture in order to have a cultural product license (Zhang, 2012, p.341-342). With the appropriate license in hand, Blizzard could then

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[38] According to the working paper, there are two competing definitions of what is a digital economy. The narrow definition, and the one utilized by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), characterize a digital economy as the ICT sector only such as telecommunications, internet, IT services, hardware, and software while the board definition as utilized by the G20 also include traditional sectors converging with digital technology (Zhang and Chen, 2019, p.3). The author utilizes the narrow definition of digital technology.

[39] Based on estimates taken from 2019 GDP as provided by the World Bank statistics.

undergo the full process of censorship for its products, which inevitably delayed many title launches within mainland China (Zhang, 2012, p.340-341), however the company marginally benefited from the arrangement with slight increases in its publishing revenues until the year of 2016 with the launch of the popular videogame Overwatch. In the same year, Chinese technology, and entertainment conglomerate, Tencent acquired a 5% stake in Blizzard (SEC, 2015).

Figure 7 – Blizzard Entertainment Publishing Net Revenue

Blizzard Entertainment Publishing Net Revenue by year
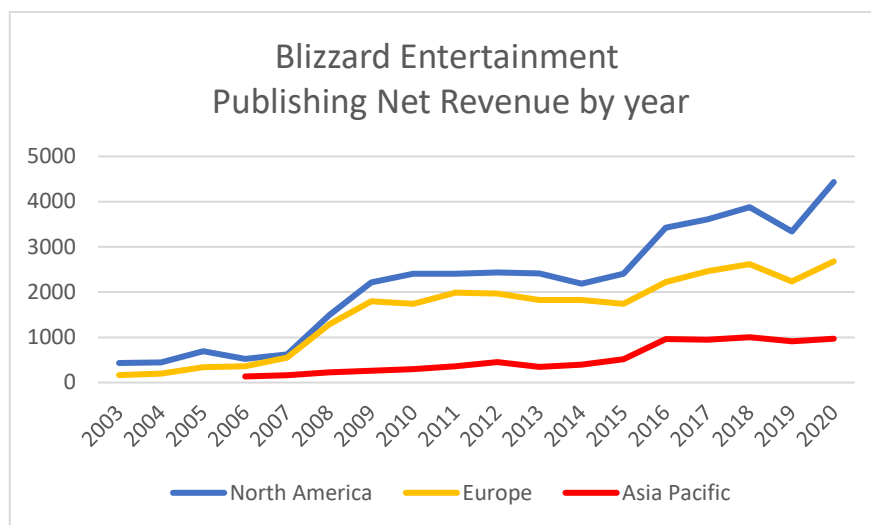
Source – Data compiled from Blizzard's annual financial report 2003-2020.

Despite the low benefits compared to the cost, Blizzard continued investing in China due to the lucrative esports market that had taken hold. As an offshoot of the video game industry, the esports scene in 2016 had a total global size of around $463 million in 2016 with China capturing 15% of the global revenue (Newzoo, 2016). This same scene would later be reported in 2021 a global market of $1.3 billion with China generating one third of the global revenue for esports; audience growth estimates were similar with an expected capture of 267 million audience in China alone (Newzoo, 2021). In terms of revenue streams, granular analysis demonstrates that in large part the profits in esports comes from advertising with sponsorships generating $837 million whilst streaming generated $46 million (Newzoo, 2021); however, despite the disparity in revenue margins the two are very interconnected.

Unlike traditional sports such as basketball and soccer, whose media rights are settled via broadcast and cable, esports media rights contracts are typically settled with ISPs (SheppardMullin, 2021, p.5); however, unlike with traditional sports, esports have

the potential of audience growth despite dense competition due to contemporary Internet consumption. According to 2018 statistics, when compared to 2014, the consumption of digital media had a steady increase across all online activities with the highest increase in the 25-34 age bracket (Globalwebindex, 2019). In other words, with a young population that had seen a steady increase in online media consumption, typically online videogames, China has provided a great opportunity for videogame publishing companies to invest into esports in order to attract advertising revenue and sponsorship to teams created to play the esports games. Additionally, much attention has been given to esports by the central government via official policies and subsidies that expand and bolster the industry (Yue et. al., 2020, p.6-7), therefore proving the venture to be very rewarding if videogame companies are able to enter the market like Blizzard, usually through a joint venture.

Nevertheless, despite esports being a derivative of the video game industry, it is still understood as a piece of media, a cultural product, that may carry various messages that seek to subvert the ideological control that the Party has, whether it be consciously or not (Zhang, 2012, p.339; Thornton, 2019, p.60-61). Therefore, it became imperative for the Party to have the same control over the esports scene as a cultural enterprise in order to maintain the cultural and ideological engineering that had reinforced the Party's legitimacy for so long even if it meant leveraging the economic clout that the Chinese market had in these niche industries. It is under these circumstances that the Blitzchung Incident became viralized in the West and has brought into light how much influence that China's economy would have on digital Western companies.

In the summer of 2019, the city of Hong Kong erupted into a protracted anti-authoritarian movement triggered by the Extradition Law Amendment Bill proposed by the Beijing-controlled Hong Kong government (Lee et. al., 2019, p.16-17). It quickly became one of the largest movements to take a hold of the city since the handover of the city in 1997 along with an intensive radicalization of the youth within the protests (Lee et. al, 2019, p.10-12; Ku, 2020, p.2-3). Often considered an extension of the Umbrella Movement in 2014, the Hong Kong protests of 2019 featured prominent symbols of protects, among them were facial masks which were utilized in order to protect the dissenter from arrest and tear gas from the police. The use of masks was soon banned, eliciting much reaction from Hong Kongers that have come to understand the use of the mask as a symbol for dissent. Politically, the ban of the masks in Hong Kong had a larger

effect in mainland China as it bolstered the global propaganda campaign against the Hong Kong protestors (Dong, 2019) as it created the cognitive focal shortcut association of violence hidden behind a veil of anonymity (Spiegel, 2012, p.790-791; Mohammed, 2019).

It was in this informational context that the actions of Chung Ng Wai, known online by his professional name "Blitzchung" became so emblematic and controversial due to the Hong Kong 2019 protests. As a Hong Kong based esports professional player, he was signed onto the Kyoto eSports (Chung, 2018), an American based esports team, for the Grandmaster's 2019 Season 2 – Asia-Pacific, a Hearthstone tournament, a turn-based online card game, hosted by Blizzard, the developers of said game. During a post-match interview in Taiwan on the western game livestreaming platform, Twitch, Blitzchung appeared donning a mask similar to the ones of the Hong Kong protests before shouting in Mandarin "光復香港 時代革命" or in English, "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our time." At the moment of the incident, the two interview hosts, hid behind the desk as if they did not want to associate with Blitzchung and in mere moments later, the whole stream was cut into an ad break (Matthiesen, 2019).

The incident earned a swift reaction from Blizzard, who announced the next day that Blitzchung, along with the two casters, had been officially removed from the tournament, ineligible to receive the prize money and banned from participating in any Hearthstone tournament for a whole years; the two casters also were banned (Blizzard, 2019; Ruiz-Bravo et. al., 2022, p.3172-3173). Breach of tournament rules were cited as the reason for the termination. Blitzchung's ban brought the American videogame company under much scrutiny along with its ties to China as much of its access to the Chinese markets were reliant on maintaining a good rapport with the government as so to continue with its joint partnership with NetEase, which had occurred earlier in the year (PRNewswire, 2019). Much of the controversy came about not simply about Blitzchung's banning, but rather, the official statement released by NetEase on behalf of Blizzard in Sina Weibo, who took a biased approach against the offending player (Kim, 2019). Whilst invoking similar condemnation for the political action during the post-game interview, the statement expanded on a nationalistic rhetoric infusing the incident as an affront to the national integrity and social order values due to the voiced support of the Hong Kong protests.

"We express our strong indignation [or resentment] and condemnation of the events that occurred in the Hearthstone Asia Pacific competition last weekend and absolutely oppose the dissemination of personal political ideas during any events [or games]. The players involved will be banned, and the commentators involved will be immediately terminated from any official business. Also, we will protect [or safeguard] our national dignity [or honor]." (Kim, 2019).

Discussions on Western social media platforms soon became abound inside of videogame circles over the incident, debating whether or not Blitzchung had acted within his right or not. Many cited that due to Blizzard acting as an American company, it should seek to promote American values and stay true to the amendments that had protect free speech; however, others argued how Blizzard was a private company that was hosting the event and it was within its rights to keep the tournament apolitical as possible (Ruiz-Bravo et. al., 2019, p.3174-3175). Reactions to the incident grew in magnitude resulting in several actions taken by Western fans and employees against the company itself through the use of walkouts and boycotts. Traffic for the uninstallation of Battlenet, Blizzard's dedicated launcher for its games, had been so large that the servers of the company had become overloaded with error messages (Hernandez, 2019).

The large magnitude of the incident forced Blizzard's president, J. Allen Brack, to release a statement about the incident. Amending the position originally taken, Brack sought to rationalize the decision by placing political states as inappropriate for the venue as it would not create a space that has a shared commonality and that does no seek to alienate any fan by messages imparted by the participants. In his message, the extrapolation over why Blitzchung had received such a harsh penalty was addressed by explicitly stating that the contents of his declaration did not lead to the ban; nor did the close relationship with China bear influence on the decision either. The announcement further explained that if the opposing viewpoint had been shared in the same manner, the punishment would have been similar (Brack, 2019). As a demonstration of reflection over the incident, Blizzard reinstated Blitzchung prize money and shorted the time of his tournament ban for six months (Brack, 2019; Wood, 2019).

This statement attempted to distance Blizzard from the controversy created by its own decision to ban the player by attempting to modulate the language underneath to appeal to the universal quality of videogame entertainment while suppressing the implications of said decision in the wider context through an ideological lens. Nevertheless, the original signal that had been sent by the announcement of the ban had already been sent to various consumers and even other esports athletes. The subsequent

attempt in re-engineering the information environment to include an official tautological interpretation of the incident had the opposite effect of introducing contradictions to the semantic content of the statements; thusly, it introduced a larger amount of information to the incident. In other words, their second signal had become imbued with information that had not been originally contained in the message itself; raising two significant consequences.

The first was a chilling effect on the speech of professional esports players. Since the start of the incident, despite Blizzard's statement of defending freedom of expression for it has been revealed that it had instructed at least one of its employees to delete a tweet criticizing the decision as censorship (Magelssen and Associated Press, 2019). Additionally, in later interviews, Blitzchung himself acknowledged publicly that what he understood what the penalty was but would refrain to state such opinions again if he ever went to play Hearthstone competitively (Wood, 2019). This grew to garner the attention of American lawmakers who crafted a bipartisan letter to Blizzard requesting a review of the ban and its code of ethics, citing a similar incident in the National Basketball Association (NBA) (Congress, 2019). It expounded on the importance of Blizzard to the video game industry, stressing on how it might reflect on gamers in general, and not just professional esports athletes. This was the highest point of media notoriety that the incident had received with widescale popular protests still occurring for weeks on end, including the yearly convention hosted by the company, Blizzcon.

The second consequence was an increased scrutiny over the implications of China's economic influence over various media or streaming companies. Similar incidents since then have been played out, particularly with the NBA. As mentioned in the bipartisan letter, the general manager for the Houston Rockets, Daryl Morey, tweeted out in support of the Hong Kong demonstrations. This promptly led to another large political crisis that resulted in Morey walking back his statements and the boycott of NBA games by China[40]. These series of various incidents have brought to light that despite the media and entertainment products that the United States may export through its products to China, the interconnection of the various live streaming platforms may lead to politicized events due to the inevitable informational spillover that occurs.

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[40] Tencent restored livestreaming broadcast of the games after a single week (He and Xiong, 2019).

Companies that may have athletes or personnel that advocate for human rights and Wester sensibilities are a liability for companies that seek to enter into the Chinese markets. This creates a chilling effect over many employees that may feel insecure in voicing an opinion or create a product that might put in jeopardy important partnerships with Chinese companies that allows the Western companies to enter the market. However, this type of exported censorship does not always come from enterprises or the government itself. Some of the censorship comes from the Chinese netizens themselves through the melding entertainment and politics, often with great harassment towards the entertainer.

3.2 – Dogmatic Kowtow: TWICE and HoloLive

Whilst the economic clout of Chinese markets allows the Party to assert, to some degree, ideological control over the cultural products that are imported; it is not the sole mechanism that imposes a soft control over brands and foreign companies that seek to enter the market. The careful transition from the Cultural Revolution's destruction into a 'cultural development' policy (Thornton, 2019, p.61), allowed the consumable popular media to flourish in a largely, even if limited, market economy under lax ideological management. This allowed the digital media industry to grow with netizens consuming entertainment and clustering around specific niches as informational cocoons (Leibold, 2011, p.1035; Fang and Repnikova, 2017, p.3). The manner that Internet culture has evolved in China at first may have eroded much of the initial ideological control as the existence of these various entertainment niches diversified economic and cultural interests crystallizing them into subcultures that initiated a distancing themselves from the official ideological line (Xiaobo and Béja, 2006, p.121-122; MacKinnon, 2008, p.36).

However, due to the networking effects of the Internet, the collective nature of the space still prevails with emotional reactions enforcing a dogmatic rule (Leibold, 2011, p.1033; Shan and Chen, 2021, p.28-29). In conjunction with crackdowns against public intellectuals, the Party was able to reinvent its propaganda on a massive digital scale upon Xi Jinping's reforms when he ascended to the leadership (Guo, 2020, p.183-184); naturally fomenting groups like the infamous "Little Pinks" to act like a modern Red Guard. The social environment that these netizens grew up in had been both fortunate and specially modulated to permit the emergence of these groups (Shan and Chen, 2021, p.28-30). At the forefront of the modernization and economic growth of China, the rhetoric built around the rapid growth and development of the country came with two principal pillars: the autocratic state administered by the Party brought social stability and

modernization (He and Feng, 2008, p.141-142; Walder, 2009, p.263; Inkster, 2016, p.22-23; Zhao, 2016, p.1169), and education based on the identarian lens in a victor and victim dichotomy framework (Zhang, 2013, p.5; Inkster, 2016, p.34; Zhao, 2016, p.1189; Friend and Thayer, 2017, p.95-96; Schalin, 2019). The information environment had been fully modulated to suit the Party's needs for a group of staunch supporters to emerge and uphold the Party narrative online (Shan and Chen, 2021, p.29-30) against any cultural opinion leaders be them domestic or foreign (Guo, 2020, p.184-192).

As a group, the Little Pinks are unstructured and are rather very fluid in terms of their membership (Shan and Chen, 2021, p.30). They are not part of an official Party branch, nor are they paid like the *wumaos*, rather they are citizens that occasionally engage in political discussions (Guo, 2020, p.184; Shan and Chen, 2021, p.30). In fact, most of their online engagement centers around various entertainment subcultures[41] from videogames to shopping with the mythological origin of the Little Pinks deriving from a literature website, Jinjiang Literature City, that prominently discussed yaoi[42] fiction (Fang and Repnikova, 2017, p.9-10; Guo, 2020, p.184; Shan and Chen, 2021, p.28). The capture of these various netizens engaged in subculture spaces demonstrated the reinvention of state propaganda through the use of the fluid internet rhetorical discourse, including memes, in order to resonate with the young population and enter within the popular zeitgeist to guide actions along (Guo, 2020, p.184). With Little Pinks origins centered around digital hobbyist spaces, it demonstrates the potential politicization of typically apolitical spaces that could be utilized as a mobilization mass in geopolitical disputes that sparked in the media industry. The netizens themselves would become a proxy by which the Party could attempt to intimidate or subdue foreign actors.

The most prominent incident of the convergence of politics and entertainment occurred in Taiwan's 2016 presidential elections in conjunction with a geopolitical spat arising from the Chou Tzu-yu controversy. Initiated back in November of the previous year with Taiwanese singer, Chou Tzu-yu, the incident surrounded the teenager's use of the Taiwanese flag in her introduction and the affirmation of her Taiwanese nationality in a South Korean variety show called *My Little Television* (Fang and Repnikova, 2017, p.8; Ahn and Lin, 2018, p.2). Though it originally did not create any controversy, the

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[41] These various subcultures around entertainment media are also colloquially known as fandoms.
[42] Yaoi refers to an Eastern literature subgenre associated with male homosexual love.

incident only gained notoriety after fellow China-based Taiwanese singer, Huang An, from the same South Korean idol agency, JYP Entertainment (JYP), posted about the moment in Sina Weibo prompting the company to quickly create an apology video for the incident (Fang and Repnikova, 2017, p.8; Ahn and Lin, 2018, p.2; Guo, 2020, p.185). Nevertheless, the Chinese public perceived the actions of JYP to be condescension (Guo, 2020, p.185) as the apology video only was revealed to the netizens after public outcry became viral and boycotts of JYP were organized, including Chou's performance at the Spring Festival Gala (Fang and Repnikova, 2017, p.8; Ahn and Lin, 2018, p.10). The apology video was posted online by JYP on the day prior to Taiwan's elections and its effects were largely felt among the young population as the apology video had implied in the denial of their identity as a sovereign nation distinct from China at an international stage with South Korea complicit in the said act (Ahn and Lin, 2018, p.13). As a result, the then presidential candidate, Tsai Ing-wen was able to capitalize on the controversy as the youth found that the pro-Beijing party in power did not respond accordingly to the incident. Tsai Ing-wen was elected as Taiwan's president due to her salient pro-independence positions.

What followed from the incident was one of the largest online mobilizations to date that resulted in a cross-strait memetic war; one that would only be surpassed by the Coco Kiryu incident of 2020. Many Chinese netizens flooded Tsai Ing-Wen, Chou Tzu-yu and various pro-Independence Facebook groups with many messages about China and its greatness, creating various memes with rational arguments in order to charm and convince Taiwanese users about unification (Fang and Repnikova, 2017, p.8; Shan and Chen, 2021, p.25). The memetic war lasted for only two days (Fang and Repnikova, 2017, p.8), but the coordination of the netizens was notable due to the large scale of the various attacks sustained by Taiwanese personalities and outlets during this period. As an example, managers of another Little Pink associated forum, Emperor Forum, had managers have a collective meeting to decide on the rules before presenting said expedition behavior regulations in the subforum before observing the expedition member's actions in order to ensure compliance (Shan and Chen, 2021, p.31). Chinese netizens used, were given were taught in deep details how to utilize VPNs to jump the Great Firewall in order to enter Facebook to post the messages (Fang and Repnikova, 2017, p.8-9) along with specific times for when the action was to occur (Shan and Chen, 2021, p.30-31). Though unofficial VPN usage were not criminalized in 2016, the Great

Firewall still had capabilities of tracking such large outflows of data as its technical marvels had been expanding since its initial inceptions; nevertheless, the expedition had been a success over the course of two days, demonstrating a tacit approval of the netizen's actions by the Party. Heavily publicized, the expedition was divulged to Mainland netizens and the diaspora through various livestreams in order to keep all groups informed and actively participating (Shan and Chen, 2021, p.31-32).

These expedition groups, which some are still active to this day, largely grew out from the many Internet entertainment subcultures that exist, explaining their high level of organization and the rhetorical similarities seen (Shan and Chen, 2021, p.34). Many entertainment subcultures share many similarities with each other (Shan and Chen, 2021, p.34), some even fusing with each other in a process similarly described in noospheric conceptualization (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2020, p.10-11). The tactics utilized by these groups also heavily resemble the all-channel organizational form of a netwar (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2002, p.8-9) as the managers of the participating subforums originally gathered in closed meetings before spreading the initiative out to its various forums (Shan and Chen, 2021, p.30). The longevity of these groups are sustained by the shared patriotic ideology that had been deeply instilled in each of the subforum managers and each participant (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2002, p.9); all which shared a similar subculture language and common identity (Shan and Chen, 2021, p.34) that was only reinforced when the label of Little Pinks was raised as a symbolic status by the Communist Youth League (Fang and Repnikova, 2017, p.13-15; Guo, 2020, p.190-191; Shan and Chen, 2021, p.37).

But perhaps what is the most revealing about this incident is the mediatization of geopolitical struggles as one group seeks to impose its will on the other through sheer rhetorical force (Nikonov et. al., 2018, p.299). Mainlanders attempted to impose the dogma of the "One China" principle onto Taiwanese through a media process by attempting to set a limit of positions that could be adopted by a person to one. It attempted to shape the existing reality through a geopolitical imaginary construct. Entertainment and politics become increasingly intertwined in cyberspace as media increasingly becomes entertainment due to how the digital market has been spaced by market pressures. This process has allowed the formation of political opinion leaders that with a casual discursive style is able to mobilize the mass for short-term political gain; such was

the case for the CYL, which co-opted the Little Pinks[43] in various incidents (Guo, 2020, p.184-192; Shan and Chen, 2021, p.35-36).

The rhetorical turn of the CYL is evident in several incidents after the Chou Tzu-yu instance. Another high-profile case, of actor Leon Dai, who was beset by the Little Pinks after CYL accused the actor of being pro-independence and setting the netizens against the director of the movie, Zhao Wei, until Leon was removed from the film (Guo, 2020, p.184-192; Shan and Chen, 2021, p.36). By entrenching itself within the various entertainment subcultures, the CYL was able to explore and reinvigorate its propaganda, fully resonating with young netizens (Guo, 2020, p.184). It heavily invested in media projects to engage with popular culture such as collaborating with young rappers and idols (Shan and Chen, 2021, p.36) to attempting to enter the rapidly expanding Virtual YouTuber market with their own models (James, 2020). It had fully embraced the process of mediatization of politics; creating various spectacles that transform the dull arena into an exciting venture that involves and transforms the passive population into an active force even if the reality presented to them is false (Nikonov et. al., 2018, p.298-299). With a narrative enforced through a strict informational control in the digital space and reinforced by factors in the physical plane, a contradictory representation of reality is cognitively assessed to be a threat as it goes against pre-established conceptions. Even if the assumed threats are in the virtual plane, such as is the case with the Virtual YouTuber (Vtuber) Coco Kiryu and her fellow star Akai Haato (Hachaama), the implicit attacks come from a denial of narrative reality that had been explicit. This causes an incident in the digital space to create a negative feedback loop that makes the controversy grow to international attention.

It is this process that makes the Coco Kiryu incident to be an interesting case. After all, Vtubers are streamers that utilize a digital avatar and create a character for digital entertainment purposes. Typically, the stories that accompany these virtual characters are fantastical with the character of Coco Kiryu portrayed as a child dragon of around 3,500 years old that has come to earth to study the human culture (HoloLive, 2019). Yet despite the playful and detached nature of these virtual character, they still elicit a cognitive response from consumers of the content, creating a form of an illusory

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[43] Little Pinks are also known as Wolf Warriors, named after the Wolf Warrior diplomacy, that is practiced by China.

relationship, also known as parasocial relations, with the character (Zhou, 2020, p.22-23). As a result, the dynamic that results from the consumption of such product does not simply influence the consumer in a traditional parasocial relation, but instead influences the producer and the reality that the producer is inserted in as well (Nikonov et. al., 2018, p.297-298; Zhou, 2020, p.24). The influence connection is further amplified as the case for Vtubers, unlike normal celebrities, includes a real-time element with live streaming as the producers, despite playing a persona, give unedited performances to the audiences in real time (Zhou, 2020, p.70) as well as reading and replying to chats sent by the audience members. In other words, the relationship between fans and Vtubers may be more intense compared to a normal internet celebrity due to the proximity the audience capture conducted by the hope of having the one-sided interaction become a reciprocal one (Zhou, 2020, p.22-23; Zheng, 2020).

Such intense feelings of familiarity are good vehicle to transmit information in a personalized manner. It is not only celebrities that take advantage in the creation of parasocial relationships, but politicians may take advantage of this connection as well through mass media in order to be in the center of events and spread their own message (Nikonov et. al., 2018, p.298-299). This explains the success of the populist turn that was done by CYL and their passing interest[44] in investing in Vtubers in early 2020 (Guo, 2020, p.182-184; James, 2020; Zheng, 2020). Unfortunately, it is also this psychological connection that created the large controversy that was the Coco Kiryu incident in 2020.

The incident Began on September 27th when the two Vtubers, Hachaama and Coco were suspended for three weeks by their agency HoloLive in an official statement (Tanigo, 2020; St. Michel, 2020; Zheng, 2020). The described offense was that the two Vtubers had "divulged confidential YouTube analytics information on their stream, used the data for their own purposes, and made statements that were insensitive to residents of certain regions"[45] (Tanigo, 2020). The two offending livestreams were taken down from both BiliBili and YouTube; nevertheless, Western fans clipped the incident and kept an archive video of it. An inspection of the clipped videos shows that both Vtubers did

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[44] Unlike the affection that many consumers had towards VTubers in general, the announcement of state sponsored VTubers drew sharp criticism and relentless mockery. The project was discontinued, and its existence scrubbed from the Chinese Internet. Officially, it has become a piece of lost media.

[45] A second statement had been released to the Chinese fans of HoloLive apologizing for the incident and declaring firm support of the "One China" policy.

indeed show their analytics while commenting that Taiwan was the country where their third largest fanbase was concentrated in (Zheng, 2020; Charisse, 2021).

This suspension elicited a large reaction from fans of the Vtuber subculture as Coco Kiryu, at the time of suspension, had earned around $1.5 million dollars from the Superchat donation feature on YouTube (Zheng, 2020; Playboard, 2022). It resulted in an intense debate in the community with very few praising the decision from Cover Corp, HoloLive's parent company, while others derided the company's decision for kowtowing to Chinese audience or had decided that the punishment had not been harsh enough. One vitriolic group of fan translators, HoloLive Moments, was one of the harshest critics of the decisIon. After the official statement, HoloLive Moments removed all translated videos that were related to HoloLive content and issued a length statement decrying how Hachaama received too harsh of a punishment whilst Coco had received too light of a punishment (Reddit, 2020). In the long statement, the fan group delineated how HoloLive's position in China was threatened due to BiliBili's official policy, how it affected other HoloLive associated stars, including the China-based branch of the company, and lastly how it hurt the fan translation group (Reddit, 2020). HoloLive Moments channel had been created in Canada (YouTube, 2022). The statement drew sharp criticism from other fans of HoloLive for their statements before soon after the YouTube channel was renamed and abandoned (YouTube, 2022).

Despite the three weeks suspension to after the initial conflagration, the China-based (CN) branch of HoloLive distanced itself from the parent company Cover Corp, before two members, Artia and Civia, announced the official disbanding of the project (Zheng, 2020; Hololive Reply, 2021). In November, Cover Corp released an official statement with the dates of the final streams of each of their CN branch talents (HoloLive, 2020). The decision to leave China was met with much surprise considering that in terms of cultural affinity, the Chinese market is much more developed to Japanese pop-culture aesthetics compared to the international market overall; however, two factors likely influenced heavily in Cover Corp's decision. The first factor was the cross-platform integration as the Chinese audience was only able to access the live streams via proxy streams set up on BiliBili (Reddit, 2020; Zheng, 2020).

The second factor is the involvement of CN HoloLive branch in the incitement and harassment of Coco Kiryu and other members. Out of the six members of the CN

branch, four members[46] (Civia, Doris, Rosalyn, and Artia) were implicated in the harassment campaign with Artia considered to be a key instigator. Despite originally presenting herself as a neutral character in the incident; a dossier[47] was leaked onto Western internet that demonstrated that Artia had encouraged her fanbase to harass Coco as well as revealing that she had been a participant in the Chou Tzu-yu incident four years prior (Anonymous, 2022). Even with the leaked dossier, public opinion did not shift against CN branch as the dossier itself was either considered misinformation promoted by Chinese netizens or did not have a larger network effect as intended. In large part, the general reception of the international fans was of support for the CN branch as some expressed worry about a plan of driving a wedge between Taiwanese and western audiences by posing as Taiwanese fans and harassing Artia during her final stream (Reddit, 2020) even if such plan was later suspected to be a feign.

Officially, the incident had been solved by the exit of Cover Corp. from the Chinese market in order to protect its own business interests; the closure of the CN branch after the final stream of the last member would have confirmed as such. However, the protracted harassment campaign against HoloLive and Coco, in particular, had not ceased. Constant targeted harassment towards Coco continued with Chinese netizens attempting to isolate her from colleagues by marking and harassing any other HoloLive vTuber that interacted with her or even so much as imitated her in streams (Anonymous, 2020; Pamomi Ch., 2021,) One standout case of this type is with Shirakami Fubuki,who had a recognized Chinese translation group suspend all of her content due to her announced visit to Coco. Such pressuring instances were not limited to isolating the offending streamer, but also attempting to isolate the company at large. In the most well-known instance of this case, the electronic company, ASUS, had a collaboration scheduled with HoloLive, but a targeted harassment campaign from the Chinese ASUS branch against the Japanese ASUS branch made the collaboration stream be canceled (Xiaoan, 2020). ASUS is a Taiwanese brand based in Taipei.

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[46] The two members not implicated in the incident, Yogiri and Spade Echo, are assumed to be of Taiwanese origin.

[47] While the identity of the person who formulated the original dossier is unknown, it is inferred to be either a Taiwanese or a Hong Kong fan. This has been derived from how parts of the Taiwanese and Hong Kong community attempted to inform the international fans about what was occurring withing China; however, it was dismissed as misinformation.

The cancellation of the collaboration between ASUS and HoloLive was the height of the whole case as in the months passed the cancelled stream, the amount of targeted harrassment decreased steadily. Whilst there is speculation whether YouTube finally stepped in to aid HoloLive with livestream moderation programs is unknown, it was clear that the amount of vitriol from Chinese netizens had become noticeably lesser. However, despite improved situation, Coco Kiryu announced her retirement from HoloLive on June 9th before performing her last livestream on July 1st of the same year (Coco Kiryu, 2021; Cover Corp., 2021). It is not officially known why Coco decided to retire from HoloLive, but much speculation has arisen that the many months of harrassment from the incident were the motivating factor behind the decision.

Under an analytical light, both cases underwent a heavy mediatization process through cyberspace; encountering virality within China before the focus of attack were narrowed to one target actor. This type of conflict illustrates the mass mobilization that information has on a parcel of society if it does not correspond to their perceived reality. As delineated earlier, the clustering of both politics and entertainment has allowed the mediatization of political struggle (Nikonov et. al., 2018, p.298-299); a spectacle that anyone can participate in and feel like a heavy contributor to a historical moment. As a result, people who are participants in typically apolitical subcultures may become agitated if there are opinion leaders within it that engage in heavily political subject manner. The politicization of these subcultures, particularly those that may be infamous for infighting, such as the K-Pop scene, during a poignant event may yield a potent soft power cudgel that may serve in favor of the State. The primary function of these co-opted groups is to create a perception of high cost to an actor, typically a company or an individual, to hold or express a belief. A discourse is created in a manner that seeks to isolate the target so they may publicaly adopt the new reality or suffer either monetary loss, as with Chou Tzu-yu, or face digital ostracization, as with the case of Coco Kiryu.

Even only a small parcel of the subculture population participated in these netwars, the multiplicity of individual actors involved along with the utilization of bots amplified the voice of the minority to the extent that the belief or base reality that both artists expressed were registered as a threat. In other words, the use of an aggressive type of voice worked in favor of the Party as it created two effects: domestically reinforced the "One China" policy and bolstered its legitimacy whilst communicating to companies

that it would not be the government that would seek to punish them, but it would be the consumers. The effectiveness of the CYL experimental measures demonstrate that the Party can capitalize on collective sentiments for political gain through the use of accessible langauge thereby modifying the information enviroment for its own advantage (Nikonov et. al., 2018, p.299; Guo, 2020, p.182-192).

Yet, there is a demonstrable fragility in the use of this type of groups as a mobilization mass as they are not a structured organization; rather a fragmented group, whose fervent nationalism may turn against the government in the form of demands to be met (Shan and Chen, 2021, p.37). As a result, while the use of such groups offers an effective use of soft power against various actors, they may only be used for short-term political gain. If these groups are left unchecked they may become internal disruptors, thus decreasing the area of action that the Party may have in regards to safeguarding its legitimacy.

3.3 – Borrowing Speaking Lips: Foreign Vloggers and Rural Princess Liziqi

In the context of information flows within the digital sphere, applied censorship, through either official censors or co-opted netizens, provide only part of the construction of a robust ideological sphere. It creates a gap in the perception of the world that needs to be supplemented. General prohibitive laws on product consumption and social behavior have been known to cause certain 'Forbidden Fruits' type of effects if there is not a broad moral condemnation of such actions in a society (Filley, 1999, p.449); information functions in the same fashion as access to certain types of information may change a society as a whole (Johnson, 1996, p.211-213) if allowed to reach a critical network mass. Therefore, in order to safeguard the ideological sphere, propaganda must then be dynamic as much as censorship is fluid so to fulfill the demand for missing information. The result is not merely overt propaganda as would be the case with many official state-affiliated media, but also covert methods of influence that reach larger audience thanks to how the message is modulated.

The reinvention of the CYL's internal propaganda models to result the youth's culture was reinvigorating as it modulated its message to resonate with the values and beliefs that they had been inoculated with through their education along with the moment of strong economic growth. It did not change the minds of the netizens, but rather sought to entrench them in social trends that had been already present almost a decade before

(Ellul, 1973, p.VI). Internally, the propaganda is effective as the information environment is conductive for further entrenchment into the existing beliefs; a circumstance that has not been effectively replicated in a digital international space. There are many channels that produce content that is critical of the Party therefore placing official state-affiliated media at a greater disadvantage as it is perceived and understood to be propaganda. Due to the signal of untrustworthiness that the source of the information transmits to the audiences, the Party has updated an old tactics and introduced a new one in order to engender sympathy towards China while projecting to a larger audience denial of human rights abuses, particularly towards the Uyghurs. Therein comes the use of proxy creators.

The use of proxies is not a recent tactic utilized by the Party to push out its propaganda, it has been utilized before as a strategy (Lovell, 2015, p.138-139; Aukia, 2021, p.23-29; Ryan et. al., 2021, p.7; Brandt et. al., 2022, p.27-32). Typically, foreigners are utilized as proxies for the conveyance of unofficial positive messaging from the Party (Lovell, 2015, p.150-152; Aukia, 2021, p.27-28; Ryan et. al., 2021, p.7) as they are courted through not simply direct monetary transactions, but also through carefully guided tours in order to manicure a pristine image of the country with all expenses paid (Lovell, 2015, p.142-144). With the rise of the Internet, the carefully crafted message could be spread to a much wider audience and faster compared to the pre-digital days where one's own interest in China would have guided or compelled those to study the country. The decreased cost for information search thanks to search engines along with recommendation algorithms permit the discovery of propaganda without the explicit need of the Party needing to pay for promotions on platforms (Goldfarb and Tucker, 2019, p.4). This amplification of messaging comes as a benefit to the Party to sway an audience into a more sympathetic view of China despite heavily documented human rights abuses.

Utilizing a foreigners to produce variety content like travel vlogs and posts generate produces two distinct effects: first, it creates a feedback loop on the nationalistic impulse that had been engendered domestically; and second, it attempts to disrupt the homogenic discourse surrounding China's policies through an 'unbiased' source (Ryan et. al, 2021, p.6-7). Both of these effects are achieved only through a perceived detachment from the institution of the state or any large corporation in order to create an air of authenticity to the content created by foreigners (Goodwin et. al., 2020, p.5-6; Ryan et. al., 2021, p.8). Its success predicates upon the audience's assumption that the content

creator has no direct ties to a political organization; ignorance of the subject may also sway audience members to be sympathetic towards China or entrench those who are already hold similar ideological views (Neagli, 2021, p.6; Zhang, 2022). Mechanically speaking, it is possible to have individuals not to disclose their association with political institutions, especially if an influence has a small following (Goodwin et. al., 2020, p.7; Neagli, 2021, p.4; Ryan et. al., 2021, p.10-12), and the discrepancy between platforms in identifying those affiliated with state-sponsored media allows propaganda to slip by unawares with results often amplifying the official narrative by 27% on websites such as YouTube (Ryan et. al., 2021, p.29-31; Brandt et. al., 2022, p.31). Additionally, the strategy is complimented by astroturfing[48], which may artificially inflate the numbers of select propaganda videos and accounts in order to create a feedback loop to spread the message to more people (Goodwin et. al., 2020, p.10-11; Ryan et. al., 2021, p.32-33).

Despite the practice, however, there are foreign nationals, or even nationals, that reside in China and independently produce videos about the country and its culture. Among such creators are Matthew Tye (Laowhy86), Winston Sertzel (Serpentza) and Mikey[49] (China Uncle Mikey), who originally started producing their content from within China before relocating abroad. The three content creators produced many videos discussing China[50] and the local culture; however, unlike most co-opted channels, they also posted critical videos of China. Due to the critical nature of some of the videos along with a changing zeitgeist of the Party towards hostile rhetoric towards foreigners, both Tye and Sertzel left the country after the arrest of Michael Spavor[51], a Canadian citizen and friend of the duo (Laowhy86, 2021; Serpentza, 2021).

The existence of China vloggers that are critical of the Party and its policies reduces the effectiveness of the propaganda in the global Internet as more information is now accessible. Foreign netizens, therefore, are able to access a larger catalogue of information compared to Chinese netizens, which leads to their worldview to be much

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[48] Astroturfing is the coordination of fake and/or genuine accounts in order to artificially create a discourse (Goodwin et. al., 2020, p.12).

[49] Mikey is in actuality a Chinese native that emigrated to Sweden. Much of his content is dedicated to the differences between living in China and living in a Western country from a Chinese perspective.

[50] Tye and Sertzel, in particular, independently produced two feature documentaries titled 'Conquering Nothern China' and 'Conquering Southern' China where both explored much of the country on their motorcycles. In 2022, Sertzel released a documentary entitled 'Stay Awesome China' that explores five major cities participation and interviews from locals. The documentary was filmed in 2019 while he still lived in China.

[51] Michael Spavor was detained after the arrest of Meng Wanzhou by the Canadian government.

more critical of China. Nevertheless, there are tools and mechanisms that affect video performances and can be easily manipulated by the Party in order to mount pressure on these vloggers to remove their videos to exit of the platform. Whilst these three content creators in particular have not left the platform of YouTube, their content have been subject to the existing pressures. Existing mechanisms that are present on YouTube such as demonization[52] (Lopez and Burch, 2019; Coppa, 2022, p.183-185), copyright strike[53] (Coppa, 2022, p.183-185; YouTube, 2022) or mass reporting[54] (Coppa, 2022, 183-185; YouTube, 2022) are some of the tools that are present to pressure creators off the platform. Though originally a tool for measuring reputation for advertisement firms seeking to consume a service provided by YouTube, these mechanisms have been co-opted for their ability to force competitors out of the information market on a large platform such as YouTube (Goldfarb and Tucker, 2019, p.24; Coppa, 2022, p.184). Even with the limited effects from the use of such tools and mechanisms, their utilization demonstrates how systems in place in digital platforms can be abused to remove contrary ideological positions even on platforms not controlled by the state. The question that brings to mind is, however, the possible consequences of a commercial media platform becoming ideologically captured as these mechanisms that provide a content creator with reputation may be corrupted in their use. A platform, therefore, may become co-opted and utilized to shape the information environment through the very reputation mechanics that exist to moderate it.

Nevertheless, not all media discussing China in a positive light is made with propaganda in mind; especially those that are posted by Chinese netizens. Citing YouTube as an example again, there are channels that are dedicated to apolitical content that are positively received by the community. These channels were created with commercial purposes in mind and serve to sell a brand made by the creator, which merely happens to produce a spectacle to appeal to an audience (Liang, 2022, p.9). However, an

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[52] Demonetization is the act of disallowing the video to be qualified to play advertisements on them paid by third parties. Its use is to bring monetary incentives to have the creator change their behavior, however the mechanism has limited success as many content creators utilize the platform as a hobby or have merchandising in order to account for lost revenue (Lopez and Burch, 2019).

[53] A copy right strike occurs when a company claims that a video infringed on its copyrighted material. Such claims lead to a video removal and a strike against the channel, which cannot be removed easily. If a channel accumulates three strikes, they are terminated. (YouTube, 2022).

[54] Reporting is the mechanism from which users of the platform may alert the company of content that goes against the terms and services (YouTube, 2022). Mass reporting is therefore the practice of many users reporting a piece of content in order to pressure the platform into removing it.

unintended effect is the presentation of a false reality that engenders sympathy and admiration towards China whilst distracting from any criticisms. One such channel is Liziqi, who currently holds the Chinese channel with the highest number of subscribers at 17 million and videos averaging around 15 million visualizations each, with the most watched video reaching 111 million views. Liziqi's channel depicts a rural lifestyle in China with many of her videos depicting her either preparing traditional meals and crafts. The videos are produced in a style to capture a distinctive romantic feeling of the bucolic life, capturing the usually urban audiences, and involving them in an ever-progressing narrative. It gives the impression to viewers that Liziqi makes her videos on her own, while this may have been true at the start of her career as she claims (Gold Threat, 2020), it is not the case as in 2017 Liziqi officially partnered with Weinian Brand Management, which has allowed her videos to gain a professional quality to them (Liang, 2022, p.11). Despite the YouTube being officially blocked in China, Liziqi is able to post her videos to the Western platform. Her partnership with Weinian likely had allowed her to legally utilize VPN tools as a media business; this indicates that the Party would have seen not only the commercial success behind her brand, but the opportunity to project a new image onto China.

Similar to the foreigner vloggers, Liziqi is able to recreate an image of authenticity by distancing herself from the Party completely. By divorcing herself from the urban landscape, the audience is not able to conjure the image of the Party in any semblance as it is not a praise towards China itself, but a voyeuristic observation of the countryside meant to evoke emotions (Wang, 2020, p.19-20; Liang, 2022, p.25-27). The construction of the bucolic rural China through the mediatic lens as provided by Liziqi allows a new form of parasocial relationship to be created; instead of a person, the audience is captured by the artificial reality imbuing it with an Edenlike quality to it (Wang, 2020, p.41). This ethereal nature that is intrinsic to her videos is then co-opted by the State for a nationalistic appeal to traditional rural values to revitalize the countryside (Liang, 2022, p.35-36) while also exporting an image that allows China to elevate itself internationally due to the high cultural load in each video. This becomes readily apparently when Liziqi is recruited to various different Party initiatives to promotes many national projects and international events, one of them a visit to the Malaysian Royal Family under a "One Belt, One Road" meeting (Liang, 2022, p.35). The success of this type of cultural branding is readily recognized by both market forces that propel the content across platforms along with all

the implicit information, but also by the state, who then co-opts it into propaganda measures to bolster its legitimacy in the eyes of viewers.

At her height, Liziqi was formally under Bytedance, TikTok's parent company, as it had bought a stake Weinian in order to secure her image and further promote her brand (Feng, 2021). As any other large Chinese enterprise, Bytedance has an official Party branch within its internal structure in compliance to the law (Livingston, 2021, p.2). Yet, despite the immense popularity inside of China and abroad with sales of her products reaching over 12 million dollars[55] (Liang, 2022, p.24), in late 2021, Liziqi entered a lawsuit with her managing company Weinian with reluctance to monetize her content as a factor (Feng, 2021). Her last video was posted on July 14th of that year (Feng, 2021), yet the impact that she had in the industry was undeniable as she was not the only Chinese influencer to choose this type of aesthetic for their own content and be promoted on Western platforms such as YouTube. Dianxi Xiaoge and Xiao Xi are also examples of Chinese influencers based in China with lifestyle centered around traditional culinary recipes and crafts with a rural background. The two channels are also quite successful with the former having almost 9 million subscribers with the most watched video reaching 46 million views whilst the latter has 329 thousand subscribers with the most watch video reaching almost 4 million views. Yet, despite replicating the genre of rural lifestyle content, their success has been very small compared to Liziqi's own popularity, likely due to the fact that she was the first one to play in the market gap that existed.

Whether it is through direct commissioning of Western influencers or the co-optation of nationals, the Party is able to contest the criticism against its policies online through the use of a veneer of authenticity. The effectiveness of such tactic is dependent on the reputation of the public figures which can engender a more positive reaction from the audience as these figures are the source of information. In turn, it is a form of information laundering as the detachment from the marking of a state-affiliated media lends to a higher level of trust between the producer and the viewer. It is a form of parasocial relationship with the content creator, or in Liziqi's particular case, the setting, which distorts the representative reality to provoke a cognitive response to guide public opinion to a beneficial direction. The mediation of information is dependent on the

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[55] Or also over 80 million yuan in 2019 figures. This statistic does not account for yearlong sales, but rather in a single days (Liang, 2022, p.24). Actual sales figures are likely much higher than reported.

structure utilized as commissioned foreigners mediate the propaganda passed from the state to the digital audience; whilst the state becomes the mediator when co-optation of Chinese stars is present (Liang, 2022, p.33-35). Nevertheless, the information laundering that takes place allows a wider spread of information that is beneficial to the Party even if it competes for attention with videos that are critical of it.

3.4 – Gaming the Apps: Search Engines and TikTok

Within the dynamic sphere that is cyberspace, its rapid expansion was predicated on the privatization of the Internet (Abbate, 2001, p.170-176; Deibert and Crete-Nishihata, 2012, p.339-341) which allowed the space to be subjected to existing market pressures for companies to provide services to consumers. Inevitably, these pressures largely led to the creation of the digital media industry that allows users to disseminate their own content to a wide audience; all on specialized platforms hosted by ICPs (MacKinnon, 2008, p.33; Deibert and Crete-Nishihata, 2012, p.340-341; Guo, 2020, p.11-14). The informational ecosystem that grew out of this development is paradoxical since while the Internet had been constructed under technical terms to serve as a decentralized network and idealized as a space of equality among users (Abbate, 2001, p.170-176; Guo, 2020, p.27-32) much of the access to information itself is centralized on platforms that are private businesses. Access to the bulk of information is then predicated on access to these central hubs that either publish or aggregate the information itself, which then are subject to two layers of constraint. The first comes from regulations, laws, policies, and the such that are created by governments while the second comes from policies chosen by the company itself (Deibert and Crete-Nishihata, 2012, p.340-341). In terms of congruency, the ideological values of the government and the private sector may not converge as market forces do enforce soft limitations on enforcement of state regulations if a company seeks to maximize profits as is the case with Sina Weibo that had been discovered to disregard almost 20% of censorship directives from the Party in order to maximize engagement that its profit model (Miller, 2018, p.22-23).

Nevertheless, the centralization of information into specific platforms are very attractive for ideological control. The value of these platforms is measured in number of active users as once a critical mass is reached then more users naturally seek to join the platform (Shapiro and Varian, 1999); invariably the information that is then produced and diffused on these platforms. This empowers the company that owns the platform in terms of informational control as their terms and services, often influenced by laws and

regulations (Deibert and Creta-Nishihata, 2012, p.343-345), constrain the content that users may post, and subsequently view, on the platform itself. The private sector creates a structure that governments and security agencies may co-opt, or subsume, for their own strategic gains, whether it is to safeguard a particular ideology for legitimacy (Miller, 2018, p.21-23) or attempt to alter its image through the manipulation of the platforms inherent algorithms (Brandt et. al., 2022, p.33).

Therefore, two strategic courses of action for a state, such as China, exist that benefit the promotion of their own ideological values and narratives: the direct and the indirect control. The former relies on the state having a direct line of influence within companies, often times, this comes in the form of a public-private partnership investments or laws implicating direct state offices within the company (Miller, 2018, p.21-23; Livingston, 2022, p.2); whilst the latter relies on the manipulation of algorithms through indirect means such as mass publications on strategic topics or news publication agreement with foreign companies (Kumar, 2021; Brandt et. al, 2022, p.27-28). The Party utilizes both strategies when it exports its propaganda and censorship in attempts to create an informational loop outside of its borders to spread its influence.

In the endless digital sea, search engines are the tool that permits users to retrieve information in the form of links to pages that correspond to the search query (Edelman and Lai, 2016, p.2; Tripodi, 2018, p.6). They are conceptualized to users as neutral entities that merely display organic search results (Edelman and Lai, 2016, p.2; Tripodi, 2018, p.27; Brandt et. al., 2022, p.4). Therefore, links to news and information that are displayed to the search engine users lead users to believe that the results of the search engine has not been manipulated in anyway, however that could not be further from the truth. Search engines are created by technology companies and are subject to market incentives as well in order to ensure the continual survival of the company and the services it provides. Much of the profit that these companies make are derived from paid placement advertising on their platforms (Chen and He, 2011, p.309) with search integration on listings starting to become a common sight (Edelman and Lai, 2016, p.2). These types of mechanisms, originally created for only business advertisements, influence the destination of users of the search engine (Edelman and Lai, 2016, p.3; Dawson, 2021, p.64), this significantly affects informational flows that may lead users to consume a preferred narrative without knowledge of the source (Brandt et. al., 2022, p.4).

Unsurprisingly, the words utilized by the user affect influence the results that are given by the various search engines (Tripodi, 2018, p.6; Brandt et. al., 2022, p.15), which sometimes lock readers outside of a vast informational universe that could be available if other words were utilized in the query. Heavy influence of words in the search query permits various actors to exploit the algorithm that retrieves query results for the user by exposing them to alternative media or reinforcing their beliefs (Tripodi, 2018, p.6). The tools that are then available to manipulate the algorithm lie greatly in what is called Search Engine Optimization, generally used by business marketing (Edelman and Lai, 2016, p.31-32; Dawson, 2021, p.67; Brandt et. al., 2022, p.34). Even the most basic application of these principles greatly increases the discoverability of the content produced (Tripodi, 2018, p.47; Brandt et. al., 2022, p.34) across all search engines that utilize a different algorithm (Brandt et. al, 2022, p.14-15). The natural aggregating essence of the search engines create the base conditions to spin an enclave of information, allowing people to stay in their personalized ideological niches (Lannier, 2006; Leibold, 2011, p.1035), contact to an opposing viewpoint is rare (Tripodi, 2018, p.33).

Nevertheless, by utilizing the search algorithm mechanisms, China is able to seed preferred narratives through popular search engines and websites (Brandt et. al, 2022, p.7). Various methods are utilized in order to achieve the goal of seeding the narratives online ranging from foreign vloggers (Aukia, 2021, p.27-28; Ryan et. al., 2021, p.15-16; Brandt et. al., 2022, p.31) to online news outlet publications (Kumar, 2021; Brandt et. al, 2022, p.27-28). Now, unlike the use of foreign vloggers, the method of news outlet infiltration presents itself as a more direct confrontation in the attempt to shape international discourse around novelty topics. The concentration of investment in traditional media is reflective of the strategy; China signs cooperation agreements with various news outlets around the world, conducts reporter exchange programs and even offers content for the publications for free (Kumar, 2021). With this strategy, numerous articles created by state-affiliated media has been posted on various online news publications and news aggregating websites, often times, without the proper labeling (Kumar, 2021; Brandt et. al., 2022, p.27-29). Notably, the words utilized in the publications exported by state-affiliated media does not always coincide with the main narrative terrain; words that are related to the embattlement site are more heavily utilized compared to the main reporting words (Brandt et. al., 2022, p.11-12). By coalescing implicating narratives around the main geopolitical discussion point, the Party attempts

to create an informational encirclement in order to isolate the damaging narrative from a politically uninitiated audience.

The constant flux of information in the digital sphere creates informational voids which actors then fill for their own ends (Brandt et. al., 2022, p.34), hence the focus on search engine manipulation for that end. Perceived neutrality of search engines (Edelman and Lai, 2016, p.2; Tripodi, 2018, p.28-29; Brandt et. al., 2022, p.4) and opacity of the inner mechanism working of the tools allows users to remain ignorant of the source and intention of the information that they were exposed to (Tripodi, 2018, p.27; Brandt et. al., 2022, p.27-30). Effectiveness of this tactic would be predicated on the observed principle of self-selection into niche interests (Lannier, 2006; Leibold, 2011, p.1030), thus rendering a multiplication factor to the narrative encirclement. Once a user chooses to interact with certain media or piece of information, they alert the algorithm for their habits and content preference which then gives suggestions that can further entrench users into an informational niche (Dawson, 2021, p.67-68; Coppa, 2022, p.186-187). The more a user interacts with media, the more the algorithm can learn about the user; generating a psychological profile and keeping an accurate gauge on user interaction and reception to the information and media being presented (Dawson, 2021, p.68). It is an eternal feedback loop that is able to politically capture an individual; a tool to be exploited by autocratic governments and organizations to create information encirclement.

Effectiveness of this tool is only limited by the amount of direct control that the government has on a platform. When it comes to Western search engines, China does not have any major control over the tools, be it through regulation or through direct stakes in the companies. However, they do have a large platform that has heavily penetrated the Western market that is TikTok. Created by the Chinese company Bytedance, TikTok was originally launched as Douyin in 2016 before expanding into West as TikTok after purchasing the app Musical.ly in 2017 (Iqbal, 2022). It is currently the 6th largest social media platform in the world boasting of around one billion active users (Iqbal, 2022). In terms of demographics, it is a young platform with 81% percent of the platform being composed of the ages between 10-39; gender demographics on the platform has a skewed favorability towards women as they compose 57% of the platform (Iqbal, 2022). The success of the platform compounds the network effect as the large number of users creates a gravitational pull towards more people utilizing the platform, thusly generating more

content that attracts more users that sustains the longevity of the app. Its immense popularity is also the cause for much controversy surrounding the platform itself mainly surrounding data collection and usage by the app (Ryan et. al., 2020, p.36).

As a Chinese company, Bytedance is subject to the various laws enacted by the government among which includes the Cybersecurity Law of 2016 and the National Intelligence Law of 2017, this also includes all of its international subsidiaries as well (Dackö and Jonsson, 2019, p.3; Jia and Ruan, 2019, p.2). Both of these laws place special pressure upon Bytedance to act in cooperation with the Party in terms of data collection and storage. With the absence of territorial delimitations, the global jurisdiction creates a legal loophole for all of the data generated by international users to be stored within Chinese databases. However, the application of these specific precepts of the law is ambiguous with TikTok as the original app, Douyin, is the only version of the product that is available inside of China (Jia and Ruan, 2019, p.2; Frier, 2022; Iqbal, 2022), therefore subject to all of the legal prescriptions (Jia and Ruan, 2019, p.3; Frier, 2022). In a public interview, Shouzi Chew, the CEO of TikTok and CFO of Bytedance assured that all international user data was stored in servers located inside of the United States with back-up servers in Singapore, therefore outside of the governmental purview of Chinese regulators (Baker-White, 2022; Frier, 2022). While such assertions appeared to demonstrate that the Party did not have much influence over TikTok and its algorithm compared to its Douyin counterpart, recently leaked audio demonstrated that it is not the case as while the data is secured in a location outside of China, Beijing-based employees had access to the data itself (Baker-White, 2022). In other words, the Cybersecurity Law and the National Intelligence Law still applied to the company through the citizens that worked within the company itself and the parent company as well (China, 2016, Art. 47; China, 2017, Art. 7; Dackö and Jonsson, 2019, p.2; Jia and Ruan, 2019, p.3; Ryan et. al., 2020, p.37-38). Therefore, they are obligated to provide tools for the Party to access user data of anyone who is on the platform, irrespective of the physical storage location (Frier, 2022). This creates a few information and data concerns.

First, the access to user data by the Party allows for espionage of sensitive information of platform users and aid in the continuation of extralegal operations towards dissidents based outside of China. Two known operations, Operation Skynet and Operation Fox Hunt, while they have no formal connection with TikTok data, have been

known to perform harassment campaigns or even clandestine kidnapping of Chinese dissidents (Department of Justice, 2020). Second, due to the opacity of the code, the Party could feasibly request that the parent company, Bytedance, direct its subsidiary TikTok company to tweak the algorithm in order to promote divisive topics (Baker-White, 2022) or promote the clustering of niches into a harmful social trend via *associative diffusion* (Goldberg and Stein, 2018, p.2-3). Inside such network clusters provided by social media, the landscape may expose subcultures that may be interpreted and evaluated by users as a part of the platform's culture (Goldberg and Stein, 2018, p.6-7) thus encouraging said users to participate in said subculture for some kind of social gain (Pullman and Taylor, 2012; , 2018, p.25-26; Shan and Chen, 2021, p.34). Most notably, a recent rise in American youths diagnosed with rare mental disorders has been hypothesized to be connected with TikTok's algorithm that may have elicited the surge in self-diagnosis of many disorders in a large-scale Munchausen by Internet event (Pullman and Taylor, 2012; Jargon, 2021). According to analyst reports, around 95% of the content that is watched on TikTok comes from the recommendation algorithm that is employed by the company that traps the user in an endless exposure cycle in order to maintain engagement (Jargon, 2021).

The possible reach and consequences that TikTok may have on the global culture as a whole brings the company and parent company under scrutiny (Baker-White, 2020). As more users join the platform and create content, the aggregate informational stock comes under the technical influence of Bytadance, who as per Chinese law, has an official Party branch inside of the company. Adjustments of the algorithm may result in an effective informational encirclement as the user is spurred deeper into content holes (Jargon, 2021). While human behavior moderates the content consumption to some extent, the informational field that has been created by the encirclement is hard to break through as it does not predicate on one topic, but rather on a series of related gaps. These complex informational gaps are often filled by the algorithm, which then may be absorbed into the user's perception of reality in the form of beliefs or guided behavior.

Platform control confers immense amount of power over the accessibility of content that appear in the wider cyberspace. In the current regime of abundance of information, indexing algorithms, whether from search engines or social media platforms, adjust what pieces of data and information can be seen by the larger audience according

to how the algorithm is coded to function. Human perception of reality and subsequent behavior as a reaction to said perception is predicated on the information that is observed and understood. If access to information is revoked or denied, the mind will seek to fill the gap with the information that is available, giving the person an incomplete view of the world. A conundrum then exists. The manipulation and construction of search engines give inordinate power to unaccountable companies that may be inadvertently spreading propaganda from a rival state, yet at the same time if it suppresses the information then it may be denying the individual an information under the guise that it is propaganda.

For those that study such topic, the ethical dilemma that exists has profound implications. A mind can be carefully sculpted through our cognitive processes. The mere act of observing information may cause a series of reactions that may either challenge our preconceived worldview or entrench us more deeply in our own values system. The trend of the future is clear as more people join these platforms, the more they may be subject to the whims of algorithm and its master. Under constraint imposed by software companies, the eye of the mind of the individual is enthralled to its benevolence as it may be subject to a reduced informational pool. Thus, one may be condemned to ignorance if they are not inherently curious.

3.5 – Exportation: A Rejected Product

Despite the many methods and mechanisms at the disposal of the Party, the control of informational flows outside of China's digital sovereign boundary does not appear to have much success. Though presented throughout the chapter, the penetration of the information environment by the narratives championed by the Party did not precede a more positive evaluation of China's current political system nor did it engender any sympathy towards the Party and its leader Xi Jinping. It failed at generating enough offensive soft power in order to guide global public opinion towards its stated goals. In fact, due to the modulation of the message, a negative opinion may have been formed instead. As Pew Research has shown in a 2021 survey, over 50% of the population of fifteen sampled countries out of a total of seventeen listed their opinion of China as unfavorable (Pew Research, 2021), thus indicating the broad failure of the program. The poor results from the Party's export of propaganda demonstrates two important points when it comes to informational warfare: a) cultural-ideological adaptations are necessary

when exporting propaganda and b) overt blunt use of economic clout to silence discussions generates a backlash against efforts.

The results of these opinion survey demonstrate the difficult nature of shifting a nation's values and beliefs to be aligned with. When analyzed against the theory of the Noosphere, the challenge becomes salient. Informational flows do impact and help shape the Noosphere, however the core values of a collective cannot easily be molded or distorted if there is an ample market of ideas. The complexity of the information eco-system that exists in the international stage categorically creates a barrier for full informational domination. In turn, the lack of full control, not only in the digital sphere, but also in different sources of informational impulse such as media institutions, education and interpersonal relationships, impossibilities a noticeable shift to occur in the course of only a decade.

Conclusion: A Failing Paradox

With the digital revolution, media and communication systems underwent a complex transformation that changed the landscape of information forever. Old paradigms were broken as the creation of far-reaching media was not beholden to a small group of wealthy individuals, but it had been greatly democratized with the fall of entry costs (Nye and Goldsmith, 2011). The continued reduced barrier of entry allowed people to create their own presence in the digital space and create content that could reach several thousand or even millions with the advent of various platforms and social media. These complex information ecosystems did not maintain the media model that had been traditionally one-to-many based (Lévy, 1998, 81-85; Kalathil, 2020, p.35) eliciting a general change in society over the decades that cyberspace was rapidly evolving.

Typically, the sentiments that have surrounded the growth of these spaces have been generally positive. While much of it had centered around the decline of communication costs and the potential of political revolution in autocratic countries (Kalathil and Boas, p.2-3, 2003; Guo, 2020, p.1-4) little had been done to truly investigate how these states and societies were adapting to the rapid changes (Guo, 2020, p.1-4). The lack of research on the adaptation has led to little understanding on how the informational flows could be weaponized in an offensive manner. Whilst studies exist on the information/disinformation, this is a dichotomist paradigm that does not explicate an ideological conflict within cyberspace, but it participates as it disallows the researcher to

take a neutral position in analyzing it. These ideological conflicts take a narrative edge, utilizing in full the strategic potential of soft power in the digital context, taking information from an ancillary tool to a main focus (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1997, p.417-421). Hence why the current study sought to understand if such weaponization of the informational flows were possible by utilizing the question if and how China exported censorship and propaganda beyond its digital borders as a hypothesis.

Objectively, the research sought to explore, through the hypothesis, key abstract topics of the field that had no normative definition. Important concepts such as information, while the basis for the soft power theory, had no guiding epistemology. This research was able to produce an inquiry into the origins of philosophy of information and produce a normative definition for information within the field of political science. However, there is still much left to be developed as the field of the philosophy of information requires an examination of ontology, which this study did not heavily venture into. Therefore, despite the initial results, more research needs to be done in the field in order to bridge the existing gap between philosophy and the practical political applications; the definition requires expansion and robustness tests via heuristic case studies (Pal, 2005, p.234).

By continuing this line of research, soft power will necessarily need to undergo a re-examination. As demonstrated by the study, the current comprehension of soft power is extremely limited in veritable application; therefore, the rescue of the Theory of Noopolitik paradigm (Nikonov et. al., 2015, p.123) is important. It was by using the baseline of that theory, the concept of the noosphere, that was key in understanding the tactics and aims of the Chinese state. Through the introduction of the theory, much needed nuance was added to the securitization process enacted by the Party and Xi Jinping as well as delineating the object of securitization, which is the ideology.

The Noopolitik theory established a coherent insight into the complex dynamics that can be observed within cyberspace between various players and how it invariably plays into grand strategies. It elucidated China's exportation of censorship and propaganda beyond its borders as a form of asymmetrical warfare as a defense. This weaponization of digital system comes from the cultivation of a specific culture via educational system and rhetoric. Noopolitik has shed insight into the mechanics that underpin this process in spite of a general lack of normative philosophical definitions for

important resource stocks such as information itself. Ideologically speaking, the mechanics for the weaponization of these systems are derived foremost from a uniquely defensive standpoint as the securitization process seeks to protect the constructed noosphere where the collective ideology rests. Information that sustains the legitimacy of the ideology to the people is secured as any information that may question it is cast as an existential threat to the *social fabric* that grants power to said ideology.

This is especially true of any ideology whose cultural foundations lays atop of tautological information; a simplified view of the world that is true within its representational context. As when more information is presented in the information matrix the ideology does not stand to scrutiny, which may lead to the collapse of an autocratic or authoritarian regime. Hence the securitization of information important as it seeks not to protect the society as often proclaimed by a ruling elite. The elites, via securitization, promote censorship and the mold the information environment so fault cannot be found with them or their policies. The framing is deliberate as a veneer of compassion masks true intent thereby modulating the message to resonate with the people living under the securitized reality, which now officially has a meaning to exist coming from the state. As Ellul once said "He is convinced that what is, is good. He believes that facts in themselves provide evidence and proof, and he is willingly subordinates values to them; he obeys what he believes to be necessity, which he somehow connects with the idea of progress" (1973).

Furthermore, the analysis via the securitization process via Noopolitik has demonstrated the offensive capacity of such an act. As the population accepts the narrative of a threat to their own society, swarths of civilians are willing to ignore, discredit or even act as extra-official propagandist in many spaces, particularly the digital space. The execution of the strategy is complex as it requires a previous molding of civil society through education and the active shaping of the digital space through decades in order to attain high levels of trust in the ideology. Therefore, the relationship between cultural-ideological heritage and digital systems cannot be untangled with ease as the fabric of the network is shaped with the conservation of the base function of the society in mind. The collective unconscious, the noosphere, encompasses and directs the development of cyberspace and the infosphere in order to sustain its existence. Societal adaptation to the information environment is itself the rendered weapon.

The complication that inherently exists comes in the fluid characteristics of cyberspace and the information that flows through it. It's a dynamic deterritorial ecosystem that requires censorship and propaganda to match the pace of its ever-changing landscape, hence the hermit nature of the Chinese Internet becomes salient when compared to the global market and presents challenges for the exportation of its ideology. The very Internet that the Party had adapted its propagandistic and censorious tools cannot work due to the very cultural-ideological heritage that had influenced the Western Internet as a whole. This different information environment necessitated the exploitation of existing moderation mechanisms or algorithms to promote censorship and ideological message of the Party with some blunt impositions that came with the economic clouts of having such a large digital market that entertainment corporations wanted to participate in. All of these analytical insights were achieved thanks to the utilization of the Noopolitik framework as presented by the study.

Nevertheless, further study is required in the field. As previously mentioned, information as an abstract concept had no normative definition in political science despite its importance in the current world. This study did create one, however this is only the start of the amount of research that needs to be done within the subject matter. An ontological examination of information. The procedure on how information is processed, how people adapt their perceptions to reality to the information, and how the political processes are affected by these changes in perception is a focal point for future inquiry. Though research in misinformation/disinformation has a wide existing literature, the lack of a philosophical foundation for information in the political science realm engenders an ideological bias that is inherent to the studies produced. The normative definition first proposed here requires a philosophical expansion within the context of meta-physical ontology.

Fundamentally, as research into the subject develops, so should the concept of soft power naturally change as the definition of its resource stock is further enhanced. This will further expose and develop the theory of Noopolitik in the West. It will establish a better comprehension of the policies chosen by not only autocratic state, but also democratic countries as well. It will expand the horizon of possible analyzes further of ideological conflicts and best incorporate dynamic contexts such as the mediatic and digital sphere. From this we might be able to create a counterweight to the natural

authoritarian tendencies that arise in large platforms, such as social media; through which we may safeguard each individual's freedom of thought. With renewed interested in the philosophical basis of information and truth, it will be exciting to see how discussions will arise and eventually consolidate on a theoretical basis in order to endow with an enlightened comprehension how our natural freedoms as man will exist in the digital new world.

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