

Divergent Narratives on Chinese Internet Censorship:  
Western-centric versus Local Perspectives

A thesis

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

BY

Dana Lee Deutmeyer

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

Ning Ma

May 2021

© Dana Lee Deutmeyer 2021

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge the support and contributions from my advisor and committee members. Committee member Professor Jason McGrath initially introduced me to the topic of Chinese Internet censorship through one of his classes, provided substantial references on the topic, and encouraged me to approach the topic from a different perspective than simply writing about the mechanisms of censorship. Committee member Professor Joachim Savelsberg's input was essential in helping to frame my argument sociologically and has been a constant source of support throughout the writing process. My primary advisor, Professor Ning Ma's, dedication and feedback, especially towards the end of my revisions, was invaluable to the successful completion of my thesis.

I would also like to thank all of my peer reviewers, all of whom made helpful and relevant contributions to various aspects of my thesis. A special thank you goes to my peer reviewer and former classmate, Sutina Chou, for her very detailed suggestions.

Lastly, I could not have completed this thesis without the unwavering encouragement and advice from my mother, Dr. Shin Lee, who read every revision and spent countless hours with me discussing my thesis. My appreciation for her support cannot possibly be overstated.

## **Abstract**

Chinese Internet censorship refers to the Chinese government's policies that attempt to control the circulation of online information. Internet censorship as a focus of study produces multiple, incongruent perspectives, especially among Western academics and authors. This thesis discusses "black-and-white" and "shades-of-grey" perspectives of Chinese Internet censorship. "Black and white" perspectives present Internet censorship as necessarily being oppressive, and are informed by Western-centric biases rooted in an ideologized, essentialized view of democratic principles and Orientalism. "Shades of grey" perspectives emphasize understanding censorship from a local perspective, including how it prompts the development of certain online behaviors. Under the umbrella of Chinese censorship lies various aspects, including the goal of the government to prevent collective action, as well as the underlying motivation of producing a shared understanding of reality. It also includes how netizens experience Internet censorship, how they react to it, and the influences it has on online culture. Importantly, this discussion of Chinese Internet censorship also considers how the West interprets it, which is usually in a very critical manner, as censorship is viewed as antithetical to Western-centric essentialized values of democracy and freedom.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
Chapter II: Literature Review.....	2
<i>Divergent Narratives on Chinese Internet Censorship</i> .....	2
<i>Collective Action</i> .....	4
<i>Self-censorship</i> .....	6
<i>Recent Developments and the Effects of Censorship</i> .....	7
<i>Literature Review Conclusion</i> .....	8
Chapter III: Analysis.....	9
<i>Frameworks for Understanding Internet Censorship</i> .....	9
<i>Internet and Democracy</i> .....	9
<i>Orientalism and Authoritarianism</i> .....	12
<i>Nationalism</i> .....	16
<i>Rituals</i> .....	18
<i>Rationale for Internet Censorship</i> .....	23
<i>Collective Action</i> .....	23
<i>Case Studies of Censoring Collective Action</i> .....	24
<i>Actors of Internet Censorship</i> .....	27
<i>Self-censorship</i> .....	27
<i>How Censorship Affects Chinese Civil Society</i> .....	35

<i>Case Study: Coronavirus Censorship and Western Perceptions</i> .....	44
<b>Chapter IV: Conclusion</b> .....	50
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	55

## **I. Introduction**

Chinese Internet censorship refers to the Chinese government's policies that attempt to control the circulation of online information. As a general rule, censorship is an inherent and unavoidable aspect of China's Internet. However, while Internet censorship does restrict free speech, its ability to totally censor speech online is often overstated. Internet censorship as a focus of study produces multiple, incongruent perspectives, especially among Western academics and authors.

**This thesis discusses “black-and-white” and “shades-of-grey” perspectives of Chinese Internet censorship. “Black and white” perspectives present Internet censorship as necessarily being oppressive, and are informed by Western-centric biases rooted in an ideologized, essentialized view of democratic principles and Orientalism. “Shades of grey” perspectives emphasize understanding censorship from a local perspective, including how it prompts the development of certain online behaviors.**

In general, the goal of this thesis is not to characterize China's Internet, or its censorship, as something that is beneficial or disagreeable. Rather, it is to analyze how netizens (*Internet citizens*, or regular participants in the online sphere) experience censorship, as well as how various parties in the West perceive Chinese Internet censorship. The terms “West” or “Western” are used throughout this thesis and refer to the geographic area of Western Europe, Canada, Australia, and the United States, the latter of which produces many of the books, articles, and other publications referenced in this work.

Specifically, this thesis reviews frameworks used to understand Internet censorship, the rationale behind censorship, and the actors of Internet censorship. Lastly, it presents a case study of Internet censorship that incorporates these various aspects.

## **II. Literature Review**

The literature on Chinese Internet censorship reveals incongruities between West-centric writings and local experiences. This literature review discusses these inconsistencies in relation to the divergent narratives of Chinese Internet censorship, collective action, self-censorship, and recent developments and effects of Internet censorship in China.

### ***Divergent Narratives on Chinese Internet Censorship***

Some authors depict the Chinese Internet as being very restricted due to censorship. Literature that emphasizes censorship's restrictiveness in a larger conversation about the Chinese Internet tends to fall under the "black and white" body of literature. Kai Strittmatter's book, *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China's Surveillance State*, provides a clear example of Western literature that misrepresents the relationship between the Chinese state and its citizens, portraying Internet censorship as a tool exclusively used by the state to maintain power (2020). Strittmatter only provides a very shallow overview of China's Internet policies, while writing in a way that caters more to Western audiences looking to critique China, rather than gain an actual understanding of Chinese Internet culture. For instance, Strittmatter uses non-neutral, provocative language throughout, such as describing the Chinese Communist Party



(CCP) as using “mind control techniques” on the Internet (2020, 52), and going so far as to call China’s society “sick” (2020, 242).

Western mainstream media also tends to present the narrative that Chinese Internet censorship is both very restricting and antithetical to Western values. This narrative often reflects positions expressed in “black and white” literature, resulting in Western media presenting a one-sided view of the Chinese Internet to its readership. Elizabeth Economy’s article, published in *The Guardian*, details the almost-unfailing ability of the Chinese government to censor disagreeable content, as well as the threat Chinese Internet policy presents to the West (2018a). Economy writes, “For the international community, Beijing’s cyber-policy is a sign of the challenge that a more powerful China presents to the liberal world order, which prioritizes values such as freedom of speech” (2018a). Whereas some Western authors describe Chinese Internet censorship as based on essentialized liberal democratic values, other scholars present censorship from a more local perspective, narrating how it is experienced by Chinese netizens.

A disconnect exists between how the West views Chinese Internet censorship, and how it is experienced in China. Primarily, this disconnect is a result of varying understandings of the Internet’s “purpose.” Rongbin Han describes how Western studies of China tend to misrepresent state censorship, resulting in misunderstandings of the censorship system and its effects (2018, 182). Ying Jiang further addresses this conflict, specifically describing how the West views the Internet as a democratizing force (Jiang 2012, 78-9). Specifically, since censorship places limitations on free expression – a value held in high regard in Western democracies – Western literature and news media are

quick to critique how Chinese censorship has stifled the democratic process often associated with the Internet. In comparison, Chinese netizens generally do not desire to have a democratic system of governance, and therefore do not view the Internet as a catalyst for political change. Netizens, according to Jiang, are appreciative of their access to the Internet despite it being censored, as the Internet as-is has already created an exponentially freer space to discuss and gather information than anything that existed pre-Internet (Jiang 2012, 5, 77). Han and Jiang's work demonstrates how "shades of grey" literature reveals the importance of looking at censorship from a local perspective, rather than the more removed, reductive perspective that is often presented in Western literature and media.

### ***Collective Action***

Currently, Western scholars argue that China's main objective of Internet censorship is to quiet incidents of collective action to prevent them from turning into protests. Sociological frameworks are used by some Western scholars to analyze the perspective of the Chinese state. Francesca Polletta uses the framework of rituals to analyze the motivations of the government in suppressing collective action. Polletta describes how public rituals, such as commemorations and holidays, have a history of being appropriated by protesters, who then turn that ritual into an event for their own cause (2004, 152). Furthermore, Polletta's work also has specific relevance to China, as she attributes the practice of quickly subduing events with collective action potential to the Tiananmen Square Incident (2004, 194). While Polletta's conversation about rituals does present some insight into the larger sociological and historical factors that influence

the CCP's decision to censor collective action, it does not address local factors that affect why the Chinese government focuses on censoring collective action events.

“Shades of grey” literature reveals that the CCP focuses primarily on censoring collective action in particular due to the expansiveness of the Internet. Han argues that the Internet has made censorship a more difficult task for the Chinese state because it is so expansive and widely-used (2018, 183-5). In addition, Han notes that netizens can use the Internet as a platform for expression, despite censorship (2018, 183-5). Roiger Creemers concurs with Han's argument, specifically mentioning how, despite the fact that the Chinese government uses the Internet to maintain control over the dissemination of information, the Internet has evolved beyond the point of total control: “Social media eroded the previous monopoly that the party-state enjoyed over the dissemination of facts” (Creemers 2016, 97). In other words, as the Internet has grown so much since its advent, it is not reasonable to attempt to censor everything, leading the CCP to focus on censoring collective action.

Several authors argue that quieting collective action is the primary goal of Internet censorship in China. King, Pan, and Roberts explain how the principal goal of Chinese Internet censorship is to specifically remove conversations, postings, and information about events or topics that could inspire collective action (2013, 1-2). Daniela Stockmann describes how the Internet practices of the Chinese government can provide insight into their goals, which revolve around preventing collective action and discussion (2010, 181). In general, this seems to be the consensus of many other scholars writing about Chinese censorship (Economy, 2018; Guo 2020, 128; Lei 2017, 142-5; Poell 2015, 192; Shirk 2010, 3; Qiang 2010, 209; Qin, Strömberg, and Wu 2017, 119-20; Xu 2017). King,

Pan, and Roberts's research concluded that the CCP tended to over-censor sensitive topics during "volume-bursts" of discussion about that topic, indicating that when something became an important [read: critical, galvanizing] topic online, that is when stricter censorship was implemented. Lei calls these volume-burst-creating incidents "public opinion incidents" or "contentious experiences," and also describes the goal of Internet censorship to suppress conversation about such incidents or experiences (2017, 142-5, 162).

### ***Self-censorship***

Western-centric scholars depict censorship as a task solely undertaken by the Chinese government. In their description of the mechanisms of Chinese Internet censorship, Xu and Albert describe Internet censorship as something the government does directly. For example, Xu and Albert write, "The Chinese government employs large numbers of people to monitor and censor China's media," negating to mention the third parties that are more directly involved with censorship (2009). Furthermore, Strittmatter writes generalizing phrases such as "censors blocked," but fails to elaborate on which actor of censorship (the government or independent third parties) enacts those particular censors (2020, 79). The phrasing that "black and white" authors employ in their discussions of Chinese Internet censorship fails to acknowledge the multiple actors involved in Internet censorship, instead portraying the CCP as being the primary censoring actor. "Shades of grey" scholarship, on the other hand, indicates that self-censorship, or the introduction of a third party in censorship apparatuses, is actually more common in Chinese Internet censorship.

Locally oriented inquiries reveal the significance of self-censorship as a primary form of censorship. Self-censorship is the idea that independent (not state-run) Internet and social media companies enact and enforce their own censorship regulations on their users. Qiang describes an “essential component” of the CCP’s governing strategy to be information control (Qiang 2010, 206). However, given the fragmented nature of the government’s censorship agencies (Han 2018, 56; Lei 2017, 175), including the fact that the state now shares control over the Internet with independent companies such as Tencent and Sina, it is impossible for them to manually censor everything. This lack of control resulted in the introduction of self-censorship. Self-censorship, or “self-regulation” as Creemers calls it, is performed proactively by these companies to ensure they fulfill licensing requirements, without which they could not operate in China (Creemers 2016, 93-5; Han 2018, 57; Lei 2017, 112; Qiang 2010, 207). In fact, Shirk states that the goal of the government is actually to have “politically compliant” Internet providers self-censor their content (2010, 15).

### ***Recent Developments and the Effects of Censorship***

Some scholars note that Chinese Internet censorship has become increasingly restrictive under Xi Jinping’s leadership. Strittmatter describes how online expression has declined under Xi’s rule, writing, “He [Xi Jinping] silenced the internet once more” (Strittmatter 2020, 33). Similar oversimplifications are reflected in Western media, demonstrating that these perspectives are also presented to the larger readership of news media. Economy (2018a) and Reuters (2017) also describe how Chinese Internet censorship under Xi Jinping has increased, highlighting the detriment these increased

restrictions have had on Chinese society. The “black and white” perspective presented by these authors only discusses Chinese Internet censorship in a superficial sense, neglecting the actual discourse it has prompted at the netizen level.

Despite reports of Xi’s Internet censoring critical conversation, some authors report that Internet censorship has actually increased online criticism of the government. Both Han and Yang describe this phenomenon. They argue that increased censorship of the Internet causes netizens to actively resist said censorship and to be innovative in their workarounds of discussing or accessing censored material (Han 2018, 103; Yang 2009, 44). Finally, Lei concludes that the correlation between increased online critique and Internet development could be attributed to the fact that netizens tend to be a more politically independent group to begin with and are therefore more likely to openly critique the government (2011, 309-10). This initial independence/non-conformism, added to the access that the Internet provides, results in a space in which netizens can relatively openly challenge and critique the failings of the government, even under Xi’s increased controls (Han 2018, 45; Lei 2017; 32).

### ***Literature Review Conclusion***

There are incongruities between Western-centric perspectives and local experiences in relation to the different narratives of the Chinese Internet, collective action, self-censorship, and the effects and recent developments of censorship. “Black and white” literature tends to portray Chinese Internet censorship’s relationship with democracy, specifically, how it goes against traditional democratic values. While this narrative is not incorrect, per se, it does not reflect the local or “shades of grey”

perspective of Chinese Internet censorship, as netizens are generally unconcerned with how the Chinese Internet affects democratic potential.

### **III. Analysis**

This analysis presents the frameworks that inform the literature on Chinese Internet censorship, including essentialized views of democracy and the Internet, Orientalism and authoritarianism, nationalism, and rituals. It discusses the motivations and rationale of the Chinese government for Internet censorship, as presented by both the “black and white” and “shades of grey” parties. Lastly, this analysis describes the diverse actors who participate in Internet censorship.

#### ***Frameworks for Understanding Internet Censorship***

##### *Internet and Democracy*

Western-centric views of the Internet are informed by the notion that the Internet should serve as a platform for democracy. The democratic value of the Internet is seen as non-negotiable, as well as being an undeniable and inherent part of Internet usage. Therefore, many Westerners assume that the Internet must bring democracy along with it, especially in places that have more restrictions on freedoms or are not democratic (Jiang 2012, 78-9). In fact, the Internet has been attributed as a key factor in several pro-democracy movements, reinforcing the Western notion that it can be a democratizing force. For example, the Internet helped democratize Mexico in the 1990s and undermine the Suharto regime in Indonesia (Jiang 2012, 78). Most notably in recent history, the Internet and social media played a significant role in a series of pro-democracy protests

and uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa known as the Arab Spring (Brown, Guskin, and Mitchell 2012). Although these examples do confirm the democratizing potential of the Internet, they do not mean that the Internet will prompt democracy in all cases where the Internet is present but democracy is not. In the case of China, which has the Internet but not democracy, this failure of the Internet to democratize prompts much criticism from the West.

Western criticism of China's Internet partially stems from the fact that it has failed to democratize China. Several authors specifically note that Western observers were disappointed with the Internet's spread in China, as they expected the Internet to democratize the country (Gang and Bandurski 2010, 60; Guo 2020, 231; Jiang 2012, 5, 78). However, Poell describes this association with the Internet and democracy as a "fundamental misunderstanding," articulating that increasing freedom and democracy in a particular state is much more complicated than having access to the Internet (2010, 191). This misunderstanding stems from the "black and white" perception that the West has of the Internet, which is informed by essentialized democratic values and often fails to account for local perspectives. The West uses these democratic values as an ideological tool to criticize China's non-democratic government for hindering democratic freedoms through Internet censorship.

Democratic values consequently imply an opposition to censorship. Censorship is generally antithetical to the Western-centric notion of freedom, and is therefore an essential aspect of Western critique of China's Internet. Western critique of Chinese Internet censorship is found in both Western scholarship and news media, which are informed by the same ideals that are so strongly held, they are even expressed by Western



politicians. The American stance on anti-censorship – which is informed by the U.S.’s democratic values – can be seen in speeches by American politicians. For example, shortly following the Arab Spring, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a statement promising that the U.S. would continue to fight against Internet censorship in countries such as China (Xu and Albert 2009). This statement is not only a reflection of Western-centric perceptions of democracy and freedom, but it also reflects the lack of understanding present in the West of the netizen experience of the Chinese Internet and Internet censorship. In other words, just because the West would like to see China become democratized does not mean that Chinese citizens share that same goal or value of democracy.

“Shades of grey” literature on Internet censorship often more accurately reflects the netizen experience, as well as their own political goals, which do not extend to aspirations of democracy. Scholarly writings attending to these local perspectives oftentimes show that Chinese netizens are in support of their government, at least to an extent that they do not desire any type of major political change (Guo 2020, 125; Han 2018, 187; Jiang 2020, 63). This is not to say that netizens do not protest or criticize, but in general, many netizens are relatively satisfied with both their Internet access and government system. At least, they are satisfied to an extent that they do not wish to revolt on behalf of democracy (Han 2018, 185). Of course, the fact that Chinese netizens generally do not care about democracy does not mean that censorship does not still inhibit their freedom of speech. However, without this understanding of Chinese netizen values, many Western depictions remain limited in that they do not reflect how netizens

experience censorship. Western depictions only portray how the West interprets censorship as affecting netizens from afar.

Local perspectives address netizen values and perceptions of Internet censorship. Representing the netizen perspective, Han notes that Chinese netizens may genuinely support the state (and therefore state censorship), and even if they do have grievances regarding censorship, they are not significant enough to prompt an anti-censorship, pro-democratic system overhaul (2018, 185). Jiang confirms Han's former idea, noting that many Chinese netizens not only support the government, but that they are actually frustrated with the constant negative Western commentary on their Internet and government system (2012, 5). These ideas presented by Han and Jiang demonstrate how the mainstream Western understanding of Chinese Internet censorship and Chinese authoritarianism is incomplete. Han, Jiang, and other scholars that describe the local experience are representative of the "shades of grey" perspective, demonstrating that understanding Chinese Internet censorship is far more complex than simply looking at how it impacts democracy and freedoms.

### *Orientalism and Authoritarianism*

In addition to Western-centric views of democracy, Orientalism is another Western phenomenon that affects Western perceptions of China. Said argues that the concept of Orientalism is important in informing Western perceptions of China in general. By extension, Orientalism lends some understanding into how the West views Chinese Internet practices. Edward Said originally introduced the notion of Orientalism, describing it as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over

the Orient” (Said 1978, 3).<sup>1</sup> For reference, “the Orient” refers to Asia and the Middle East. While Said focused the specificities of his theory on the Middle East (which was Orientalized by Western Europe), he also acknowledges that, especially in the American context, the Orient can refer to the “Far East,” or what is now known as East Asia (Said 1978, 3). Said describes authority as being “virtually indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true” (1978, 19-20). In this way, Said is arguing that the West uses Orientalism to assert both Western dominance over the Orient, and Western ideas over Oriental ones. Orientalism is a framework that explains how the West imposes their ideological superiority on others. This ideological superiority entails viewing other nations through the lens of the West’s own ideologies, including democracy. While this does not mean that democracy should be characterized in the same way that Orientalism is (as a negative, biased, judgemental framework), it does mean that democracy can be used as a tool to assert ideological superiority over others, because it is viewed as being a superior mode of governance.

Notions of Orientalism and democracy can have a compounding effect in determining how the West views China. Daniel Vukovich proposes the idea that harsh Western perceptions of China can be informed by both Orientalism and Western democratic values. Vukovich attributes much of the harsh Western perceptions of China to anti-communist, post-Cold War sentiments,<sup>2</sup> in addition to Orientalism (2012, xii, 23).

---

<sup>1</sup> Said actually defines Orientalism in three different ways: The first being as an academic interest, applying to anyone who teaches about or researches the Orient; the second being based on theoretical distinctions between the Orient and the Occident; the third being the Western style of dominating the Orient, as described in the text. While the former two definitions are important, Said argues, the latter is the most relevant, and what his work *Orientalism* looks to explore (Said 1978, 1-2).

<sup>2</sup> Western anti-authoritarian sentiment is not specifically limited to China; it can be seen in Western perceptions of authoritarian Eastern European nations as well. However, Vukovich argues that this sentiment in regards to China is compounded by Orientalism, which does not happen with Eastern European nations.

In agreement with Said's observation of a constant Western desire to maintain intellectual superiority over Asia (1978, 19), Vukovich (2012, xii) describes Western representations of China as resulting from "positional superiority." However, Vukovich also notes that this ostracism stems from Orientalist intellectual tradition, as well as pro-democratic attitudes; the fact that China is not democratic alienates it further from the West (2012, xii, 11). Essentially, Vukovich is arguing that China, because it is "Oriental" and authoritarian, is doubly othered in the West:<sup>3</sup>

"... the discourse of anti-communism, and the lynchpin concept of totalitarianism, are part and parcel of Sinological-orientalism. 'Oriental-despotism' became 'totalitarianism.' Passive and irrational Chinese minds were easily 'brainwashed.' Orwellian oppression reigned, save for a few brave and inspiring stories of the human spirit... *it should no longer be possible to speak of orientalism and China without also speaking of capitalism and the enduring presence of the Cold War, and the specter of the East*" (Vukovich 2012, 21, emphasis added).

Vukovich's analysis incorporates Said's framework of Orientalism with pro-democratic sentiments, painting a more comprehensive picture of Western perceptions of China than either of the former parties do independently. In the case of Western understandings of the Chinese Internet, it is important to understand how various theoretical, historical, and sociological perspectives can all contribute to the West having a consistent and critical view of Chinese Internet censorship. The "double othering" phenomenon Vukovich describes is seen in academic work, the media, and popular culture (Vukovich 2012, 11).

---

<sup>3</sup> "Othering" is a term that describes the process of alienating and attributing negative characteristics to certain groups that differ in some way from the social norm. The West "others" China in Vukovich's analysis because China is non-democratic and Oriental, which are considered "non-Western" values (the West is considered to be both democratic and non-Oriental). Each of these factors individually serve to "other" China from the West, and when combined, they serve to exponentially alienate China from the West.

Western portrayals of China's Internet in academia and news media are informed by both Orientalism and ideologically charged notions of Chinese authoritarianism.

The West has maintained its view of ideological superiority over China throughout history, according to Said and Vukovich. Controversial ideologies in regards to China revolve around the Chinese government system. From the vantage point of the West, China's non-democratic government system is intrinsically opposed to that of Western liberal democracies and necessarily implies greater restrictions on general freedoms, of which the West also disapproves. Pro-democratic disapproval of an authoritarian nation significantly contributes to Western criticism of Internet censorship. Said and Vukovich would argue that Orientalism also plays a role in this criticism. Democracy-informed anti-authoritarianism, along with Orientalism, result in the straightforward and incomplete view that the West carries about China's Internet. Consequently, both Western scholarship and Western media tend to present oversimplified narratives of Chinese Internet censorship due to these frameworks.

Orientalism is perceived as a negative framework for understanding Chinese Internet censorship while democracy is not. However, they are both utilized as frameworks by "black and white" scholars to assert Western ideological superiority. The difference between democracy and Orientalism is that democracy itself is neither "positive" or "negative" (this is not to say that its connotation is not qualified one way or another), whereas Orientalism is characterized as being "negative." As a framework, Orientalism is a critique of how the West views and treats the Orient; Said describes Orientalism as a negative Western framework that is both manufactured and minimizing. Both democracy and Orientalism, however, are ideologies that inform the Western

perspective. Western literature uses democracy to reduce the importance of local experiences by overemphasizing China's non-democratic practices in relation to Western values. Orientalism furthers the Western notion of ideological superiority that allows the West to justify minimizing local experiences in the name of appraising the moral standards of Chinese Internet practices. Eventually, both of these frameworks compound in some Western scholarship and most Western media reporting on China's Internet censorship, resulting in narratives that oversimplify the experiences of Chinese netizens in favor of delineating the oppressive aspects of Internet censorship.

### *Nationalism*

Perceptions of Chinese nationalism can be divided into two groups: the first being authors who describe nationalism as a result of state censorship and who rely heavily on the Western-centric democratic and Orientalist frameworks described above, and the second being authors who represent netizen actors who accept censorship because they support the state. "Black and white" literature attributes state censorship as a primary factor behind constructing Chinese nationalism, describing how censorship and propaganda have served to alter online discourse in favor of the state. Some examples include the promotion of an online app, *Xuexi Qiangguo* (学习强国),<sup>4</sup> meant to promote CCP ideology, and hiring a "fifty-cent army" to post CCP propaganda online (members of the fifty-cent army were supposedly paid fifty cents per post) (Huang 2019; Han 2018, 115-7). Economy (2018b, 40-3) and Strittmatter (2020, 8, 52-3) both argue that the

---

<sup>4</sup> *Xuexi Qiangguo* can be translated in different ways, including "study the great nation," "study to strengthen the nation," and "study Xi (as in Xi Jinping) to strengthen the nation."

Chinese government censors the Internet to promote nationalist agendas, thus inspiring loyalty and patriotism among Chinese citizens. Strittmatter specifically writes, “Of all the ways to unite the nation, nationalism is the cheapest” (2020, 8). In this passage, Strittmatter describes how the CCP promotes nationalism as a way to garner support from the people. He goes on to stipulate that this Chinese nationalism is a threat to Western democracy (Strittmatter 2020, 9). The relationship between Chinese nationalism, censorship, and Western democracy is of particular import to the West because they view Chinese nationalism as resulting from state manipulation (censorship), therefore creating a patriotism that is in support of a non-democratic state. However, others would argue that Chinese nationalism has deeper roots than state propaganda, which can be seen in its relationship to the Internet.

The Internet has created a market for nationalistic products. These products can include anything from songs, to video games, to Chinese-made products (Jiang 2012, 60). Jiang acknowledges the argument that it is possible these nationalistic products appeared as a result of government influence, however, she notes that this would not explain their widespread popularity (2012, 60). According to Jiang, the popularity of these products can be attributed to the patriotism that is now present in many aspects of daily life, especially among the younger generations (2012, 60). Consuming these products, or consuming nationalism, in turn, inspires more nationalism, and thus a cyclical relationship is formed, embedding nationalism into Chinese Internet and consumer culture as both something that is consumed as well as produced. While the Internet aids in furthering nationalistic sentiments, their origin lies in China’s history.

Authors writing from a “shades of grey” perspective describe how nationalism results from local attitudes and Chinese history, and how it affects netizen opinions on censorship. Jiang describes this local nationalism as the “Chinese bottom-up” approach to understanding Chinese nationalism (2012, 56-7). This approach describes Chinese citizens as viewing nationalism as something produced directly by Chinese citizens and as something citizens contribute to their society (Jiang 2012, 56). Nationalism is perceived as being relatively objective, as the people themselves influence its meaning and development (Jiang 2012, 57). Chinese nationalism is also the result of historical contexts, according to Jiang. Jiang argues that Chinese nationalism developed significantly as a result of past relationships with Japan, the U.S., and the USSR, all of which prompted China to become less reliant on other nations, and strong enough to defend itself. Today, Chinese nationalism remains very strong, in part because it is something that has grown with, and in, Chinese culture in recent history. Local-based nationalism, like Jiang describes, contributes to how Chinese netizens view censorship. General support for the CCP, and therefore China, entails relative support for censorship if that is what is required for Internet access. Lastly, local perspectives indicate that online censorship is primarily focused on preventing collective action, rather than hindering the everyday conversations of netizens.

### *Rituals*

The sociological framework of rituals informs literature on state censorship, despite some authors representing the ritual of censorship in a negative light and others arguing for more nuanced interpretations. Traditionally, rituals described an activity,



usually one with social, religious, or historical significance, involving the collective participation of a group or community to sanctify some object or phenomenon, that produced a shared emotional sentiment. Generally, rituals are prompted by powerful actors with the goal of creating a shared reality (Savelsberg 2021, 117). According to Savelsberg, rituals have taken on a more wide-ranging definition in the modern day: “... rituals take place in all spheres of life, while that which they sanctify varies” (2021, 114). Jiang draws on the modern adaptation of rituals; in her view, censorship sanctifies “truth” in public discourse. Rituals become a useful framework for understanding narratives of censorship because authors such as Jiang equate the process and outcome of rituals to be the same censorship. Both can be initiated by powerful actors, including the government, and as rituals create shared understandings, censorship creates common truths.

The “black and white” body of literature often emphasizes how the ritual of censorship is used by the government to control its citizens. Specifically, “black and white” authors describe how censorship acts as a government-enacted truth-creating ritual that serves only to repress the population. Strittmatter accredits censorship, or “conquer[ing] the word” as paramount to maintaining autocratic power (2020, 20). Economy also describes the perceived importance of censorship in subduing the dangers of unchecked information in order to maintain control (2018b, 72-3). Both authors portray censorship as a government ritual enacted solely to control the population by means of information control and creating specific narratives of truth and reality. While the fundamental purpose of censorship is to produce a widely accepted truth, other authors argue that censorship and truth have a more complicated relationship.

Authors who seek to describe the local experience of censorship outline the outcomes of common thought and shared understandings. For instance, Jiang argues that censorship can positively affect the construction of knowledge (2012, 69). Jiang describes how censorship can produce a united narrative or shared understanding of reality that connects subjects to each other, as well as their society's established values. In referencing Foucault, Jiang writes that censorship "produces reality... and truth" (2012, 69), and specifies that this production is not necessarily negative. According to Jiang, censorship (and its creation of shared truths) can be distinguished from repression, and its effects are not always negative; she contends that the result of censorship – the formation of common understandings across a population – can have the effect of uniting a population, which she views as a positive outcome. Jiang's proposition that censorship can have positive effects is important, especially because "censorship" generally holds an exclusively negative connotation. The framework that Jiang views censorship through focuses on analyzing how it affects knowledge, rather than assessing whether censorship itself is positive or negative (she argues that censorship's effects can be positive, not that censorship itself is). Although Jiang proposes that censorship can have arguably positive effects, she nonetheless acknowledges that censorship is usually associated with its more negative results (2012, 68-70). The "shades of grey" perspective Jiang presents serves to simply demonstrate that the truth-production ritual of censorship is more complicated than being wholly repressive, as other authors would suggest. The framework of rituals is helpful in understanding how authors describe censorship, as well as useful in understanding why the Chinese government focuses its censorship on collective action.

In addition to rituals being a framework for understanding how censorship creates shared truths, rituals can also refer to how public events are used to create shared experiences, some of which become the focus for government censorship. Sociologist Francesca Polletta describes how citizens all over the world have a history of taking a traditional public ritual, such as a holiday, commemoration, or festival, and turning it into a platform for protest (2004, 152). Public rituals or events serve the same purpose as censorship in the ritual sense, in that they are both initiated by powerful actors with the intent of creating a shared experience or understanding. Polletta also notes that challengers to the government have a limited scope depending on the political contexts in which they are operating (Polletta 2004, 152). In the case of China, because of the Tiananmen Square Incident and its aftermath – the appropriation of other political anniversaries and public events by the public for protest – the Chinese government now responds much more harshly to collective action events, according to Polletta (2004, 161). Even so, the Chinese government’s relationship with protests and other collective action events are further complicated by other historical and cultural considerations.

Besides Tiananmen Square, China has a lengthy history with protests that affect how the CCP responds to collective action today. Yang observes China’s lengthy history of protest, noting that protesting is actually a foundational aspect of Chinese political culture (2009, 67). Historically, the government has allowed small demonstrations from laborers and farmers because they were not perceived as a significant threat to the regime. On the other hand, China has had no tolerance for allowing protests from the religious group Falun Gong because past experience has indicated that other religious rebellions can result in forceful leadership changes (Polletta 2004, 159; Yang 2009, 67).

Furthermore, Yang describes how citizens would often plan protests on historically or culturally significant days, writing, “Protests often gained power through the appropriation of state rituals” (2009, 68). In protesting during state rituals, such as holidays, citizens’ protests were often legitimated by acknowledgment from state leaders. Yang also gives an example of when protesters have appropriated a state ritual: In 1999, Chinese students protested against a Chinese embassy bombing in Belgrade shortly following May fourth, which is an important anniversary for the CCP. Past protests and appropriation of state rituals often took place physically, whereas currently, collective action tends to take place in the online sphere.

The transference of protests to the online sphere entails a more nuanced relationship between the state, collective action, and censorship. Although protesters used to occupy physical spaces to draw attention (Polletta 2004, 158-9), they are now able to use the Internet to reach an even wider audience. Currently, the Internet’s potential for collective action is quite substantial, considering that the number of Chinese netizens currently sits around 854 million (Johnson 2021b). As the Internet’s reach is so expansive, authors note that it has become increasingly common for the Internet to be used as a platform for protest or activism (Han 2018, 4; Yang 2009, 4). Even the previously-mentioned appropriation of state rituals has made its way online. Yang also describes how netizens have appropriated the state ritual of sloganeering (where the government would poster or paint short, catchy slogans to convey a certain message) (2009, 70). Instead of physically painting slogans on walls, netizens post similarly-styled slogans on online message boards, but to convey their own dissenting or critical message. Currently, the Internet provides a space for netizens to virtually protest. However, due to

the CCP's history with collective action against the government, large-scale online protests are the most likely to be censored.

### ***Rationale for Internet censorship***

#### *Collective Action*

Authors describing Chinese Internet censorship from a “black and white” perspective often focus their arguments on the censoring of dissenting voices, rather than the goal of primarily censoring collective action. For example, Economy (2018a) describes the CCP as “silence[ing] dissenting voices, ” and Strittmatter describes censorship as being specifically aimed toward every individual (2020, 89). The fact that this notion of mass censorship against all individual voices is present in both Western media (Economy 2018a) and more scholarly works (Strittmatter 2020) indicates either an oversimplification or misunderstanding of how Chinese Internet censorship works in actuality. Looking at the approach the CCP takes in Internet censorship, one can see that generally censoring dissenting voices is not a primary goal. Instead, the goal of Chinese Internet censorship is to censor online narratives with the potential for collective action.

Chinese Internet censorship is focused on preventing collective action, rather than individual dissenting voices. Several authors argue that the primary purpose of Internet censorship is to subdue collective action, or otherwise suppress any movement that could result in physical gatherings with the possibility to be disruptive or destructive (Guo 2020, 128; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013 1-2; Lei 2017, 142-5; Shirk 2010, 3; Qiang 2010, 2009; Xu and Albert 2009). As collective action is the primary focus of Internet censorship, individual criticism without the potential for collective action is generally

permitted, contrary to the indications of the authors in the previous paragraph. These authors present censorship as “black and white,” in a very all-encompassing, uncomplicated manner. In fact, several authors note that the Chinese Internet actually houses many critical voices (Guo 2010, 123; Han 2018, 4; Jiang 2012, 75; Qin, Strömberg, and Wu 2017, 127). Furthermore, “shades of grey” authors contend that the CCP not only does not censor all dissenting voices, but that it would be nearly impossible for them to censor all online criticism, even if they wanted to (Lei 2017, 32). The “shades of grey” body of literature lends perspective to the actual goals and practices of the CCP’s Internet censorship, which is to censor events with collective action potential (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 6), which Lei also labels as “public opinion incidents” or “contentious experiences” (2017, 142-5, 163). These public opinion incidents or collective action events are generally related to local political issues, rather than grievances against the central government (Lei 2017, 143). However, in some cases, where the potential for social unrest is high, events that are unrelated to the central government or local politics can be censored, which the following case studies describe.

#### *Case Studies of Censoring Collective Action*

One incident of a censored collective action event was the anti-Japanese protests in 2005. During a time of tension between Japan and China in early 2005, Chinese citizens used the Internet to communicate about several Japan-related events, which they felt were generally disrespectful. These events included government approval of new history textbooks (in Japan) that arguably diminished the severity of Japanese war crimes and the Japanese Prime Minister visiting a memorial for Japanese war heroes, some of

whom committed war crimes (Stockmann 2010, 175). The protests against Japan soon became physically destructive and disruptive, and resulted in destruction and vandalization of both public and private property. The government responded by censoring online information and discussion about these Japanese events, in order to quell the outrage. As a result, the protests quickly subsided (Stockmann 2010, 183-5). Likely, the goal of this censorship was to prevent the further destruction of property and public disorder. Although the protesters were not protesting against the Chinese government at any level (local or central), and were not protesting a political event happening in China, online discussions resulting in these protests were still censored. This indicates the underlying motive of the Chinese government to censor events both with collective action potential, as well as the potential to be disruptive or destructive. Collective action censorship applies to events even if they are not intended to be action against the government. The case of censoring anti-Japanese protests also presents an inconsistency with the “black and white” notion that the CCP is primarily focused on censoring critical online voices. The next example describes how the CCP also censors online discussion of collective action events that are not political in nature, or involve protesting.

This example of the CCP censoring collective action stems from a non-critical, non-political event following the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear disaster. In 2011, the Fukushima-Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in Fukushima, Japan, experienced nuclear meltdowns and chemical explosions following an earthquake and subsequent tsunami, causing concern of radiation poisoning and contamination, especially in neighboring regions. One country that became particularly concerned about the threat of radiation was

China. Following news of the plant breakdown, a rumor started that there were properties in salt that would protect from radiation. One rumor, in the Zhejiang province of China, prompted many people to rush to buy salt all across Zhejiang province. The Chinese government responded by censoring local (near Zhejiang and surrounding regions) online traffic to prevent rushes on supermarkets and other disorderly behavior (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 17). King, Pan, and Roberts's study on collective action censorship in China listed this particular incident as being one of the most highly censored events out of all of the events they studied, despite the fact that it was completely apolitical in nature (2013, 17). Their study of events' "collective action potential" determined, as seen in the example above, that sometimes even non-political events can still become the target of heavy censorship, when they have the potential to physically mobilize the population. Like the previous example, the censorship of the post-Fukushima salt rush indicates that the CCP has other censorship goals besides simply repressing all critical voices. These two examples serve to indicate that the Chinese government focuses more on censoring events with collective action potential, including the potential to be detrimental (as in causing salt shortages in supermarkets) or destructive (causing property damage), above other online chatter. They emphasize the importance of analyzing aspects of censorship from a local, "shades of grey" perspective, rather than simply looking at it in "black and white," which tends to portray censorship as censoring critical voices, rather than censoring potentially disruptive collective action events. Similar to how the "black and white" perspective tends to overlook the goal of censoring collective action, they also often misrepresent the CCP's censorship mechanisms, including the notion of self-censorship.



## *Actors of Internet Censorship*

### *Self-censorship*

Diverse actors, including both Chinese and international/Western corporations, all self-censor in order to access the Chinese market. Self-censorship – the idea that independent corporations censor content on their own platforms, instead of the government censor their platforms directly – allows the CCP to outsource Internet censorship duties to independent companies in exchange for permitting them to operate in China. Currently, Internet service and content providers in China must either be licensed or registered to operate (Creemers 2016, 93). Companies who host the largest online platforms in China also must meet licensing requirements to continue access the Chinese market. Examples of these companies include Sina – which runs Weibo – or Tencent – which hosts WeChat, the most popular messaging app in China (Ruan, Knockel, and Crete-Nishihata 2020). These licensing requirements enable the government to influence online discussions without directly censoring the Internet. Some authors disagree on whether or not the mandate to self-censor is officially enforced or an unsaid requirement, but most authors agree that self-censorship happens regardless (Bamman, O’Connor, and Smith 2012; Creemers 2016, 92-3; Han 2018, 57-8; Poell 2015, 193). Noting the disagreements in current literature on the topic of mandated self-censorship reveals the inconsistencies that exist in reporting on Chinese censorship. These discrepancies further reinforce the value of the “shades of grey” body of literature in that they illustrate the complexities of studying the Chinese Internet. In addition, they highlight the importance of looking at Internet censorship from a local perspective in order to garner a more

accurate understanding of how it works. Furthermore, the fact that there are discrepancies indicates that the oversimplified narrative that “black and white” literature presents cannot possibly account for the various components and differing experiences of Chinese Internet censorship. There are also other disparities in the literature regarding the actual censorship capabilities of self-censorship, indicating that a “black and white” narrative that seeks to place concrete, blanket determinations on censorship is likely oversimplifying.

There is disagreement in the current literature about the thoroughness of self-censorship, the primary method for Internet censorship currently employed in China. Some authors argue that the Chinese censorship system is very well developed and works with great effectiveness and efficiency (Economy 2018a; Strittmatter 2020, 61, 70-6, 82). By “effective” and “efficient,” these authors intend to describe a censorship system that is capable of censoring the larger Chinese Internet quickly and comprehensively. Strittmatter provides examples of how the government quickly shut down activists’ Weibo accounts (2020, 70) and censored the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement into extinction (2020, 73) as proof of the effectiveness and efficiency of Chinese censorship. Note that these two sources, Economy and Strittmatter, are two Western-based reporters (Economy is also a foreign policy advisor, focusing on the relationship the U.S. has with China). Despite both being experts in their particular fields of work and study in relation to China, their reporting tends to reflect more American values, and seeks to place judgement on Chinese government policies and actions, which may explain their interpretation of the Chinese censorship system. Their literature reflects a possible bias in that, compared to other scholars, they tend to sensationalize Chinese authoritarianism and

other critical features of China's government system in opposition to Western-centric values. This narrative of all-encompassing censorship is one that is contradicted by other scholars. In fact, both Guo (2020, 1-2) and Han (2018, 1-2) acknowledge in their own writings the existence of incongruent narratives on the complete capabilities of Chinese Internet censorship. While the "black and white" party presents one narrative – that of Chinese censorship being entirely comprehensive in its ability to censor – the other party finds China's censorship system to be less complete, in part due to the government's reliance on self-censorship.

Scholars who find the Chinese censorship system to be less thorough have come to this conclusion based on how fractured the system is. Authors note that Internet censorship has become increasingly fragmented (Bamman, O'Connor, and Smith 2012; Yang 2009, 28), and that this fragmentation can be attributed to the fact that there are too many agencies and players involved in censorship (Lei 2017, 175). Having too many actors involved in the censorship process results in poorly organized division of labor and responsibilities (Lei 2017, 175). The "shades of grey" side of this debate also argues that placing the responsibility on private companies to self-censor their content has also resulted in a less effective censorship system (Shirk 2010, 1). Several authors describe how Internet censorship is often undermined (Han 2018, 45; Xu and Albert 2009), and how sometimes "censored" information is still available after it has supposedly been removed (Qin, Strömberg, and Wu 2017, 123). These opposing viewpoints illustrate the misconceptions that surround China's censorship system, especially when taking into account the political and cultural background of certain perspectives. Furthermore, these disparities emphasize the importance of supplementing Western news media reports and

other “black and white” literature on China with “shades of grey” literature, or literature that acknowledges the complexities of Internet censorship. Literature or news media that insists on portraying Chinese Internet censorship as simply being a well-oiled machine with the ability to comprehensively censor an entire nation is generally leaving out part of the picture, hence the importance of more thorough sources. These “shades of grey” sources also present self-censorship from a local perspective, illuminating the goals of the CCP behind encouraging self-censorship.

The CCP’s perspective is that self-censorship is the most efficient way to censor the online sphere, thus censorship energies are predominately focused on encouraging self-censorship. Self-censorship allows the Chinese government to outsource its censorship standards to independent companies. Corporations that operate online sites are required by the state to regulate the information and discussions happening on their platforms (Creemers 2016, 93-5; Qiang 2010, 207; Yang 2009, 50). The goal of self-censorship is maximizing efficiency and prompting preemptive, proactive compliance with censorship guidelines, which is possible because independent companies are aware of all of their users, enabling them to track all the information being relayed on their platforms directly (Han 2018, 59). Han (2018, 59) and Shirk (2010, 1) both suggest that requiring censorship from third party suppliers of Internet services saves on both time and financial resources when it comes to regulating information. In fact, Shirk (2020, 1) also describes how placing the responsibility of content regulation on independent third parties significantly contributed to the development of both the Chinese Internet and economy. Allowing Internet content providers to independently create their own censorship infrastructure introduced an aspect of autonomy and willing compliance

with these platforms. Jiang describes the phenomenon of achieving voluntary compliance of Internet content and service providers as being “free yet governable” (2012, 42). While the Internet and social media companies are technically free, it is in their best interest to regulate themselves, and they do so. This makes them “governable.” Although self-censorship is done independently and proactively, and is in the best interest of Internet platforms, (it reduces the threat of sanctions and licensing revocation) this does not mean that it is enthusiastically voluntary.

One common misconception about self-censorship by companies is that they are nothing but willing to restrict their users’ speech. Some scholars argue that many companies would prefer not to censor their platform, but have no other choice (Han 2018, 59). Han also claims that many Internet companies may not genuinely support censorship, but they cannot afford to flout the rules, as this would result in significant fees (2018, 64-5). Essentially, the argument Han presents is that the decision to self-censor comes down to the choice of being allowed to operate in China or not, which, for many Chinese-based companies, is not even a choice. The importance of Han’s contribution on the willingness of companies to censor is that it reflects a “shades of grey,” local approach to Internet censorship. As Han describes how some companies would rather avoid self-censorship, he is presenting a more nuanced perspective of censorship that paints it as something that is interacted with differently at all levels of its implementation. This interaction of online platforms with self-censorship includes being less willing to self-censor, as well as delaying self-censorship on their platforms as a result of this.

Given how the Chinese censorship system is set up, intermediary actors such as Internet content providers or online platforms, do not always censor their users immediately. This delay is done for a variety of reasons. First, as previously mentioned, many companies simply disagree with censoring their platforms. Han posits that self-censorship is contradictory to their company values, and can impede on the profitability of these independent services (2018, 60). Han coined the term “low profile resistance” to describe how the Internet and social media companies subtly subvert censorship guidelines (2018, 60). “Low profile resistance” is essentially synonymous with noncompliance, or at least delayed compliance. Some examples of this delayed compliance might be taking longer to integrate new censors into their platforms or temporarily ignoring content that violates censorship regulations. Guo also argues that some companies keep up their noncompliant content for market reasons (2020, 160). Netizens tend to be intrigued by postings with taboo topics, so social media or news websites will occasionally leave a headline or article posted to their site even though it is not compliant with censorship guidelines in order to generate more Internet traffic.

The examples scholars present of company non-compliance or delayed compliance expose some of the contradictions that the Chinese Internet and censorship system prompts. Scholars argue that self-censorship is mandated by the government. However, these companies only self-censor because it is mandated, and they do not want to face repercussions from the government for failing to comply. Companies can have ethical and economical objections to self-censorship, which makes them less willing to comply. Furthermore, since the censorship enforcement system in China is inconsistent, companies have some leeway in how and when they comply with censorship guidelines,

leading to varying degrees of noncompliance. China's censorship regulations also make it difficult for international companies to navigate accessing their market. With that being said, despite the inherent contradictions that censorship poses to Western-centric values such as freedom, various Western companies have been willing to adopt self-censorship practices in their services in order to sell in China.

While many Western companies have been banned from operating in China, others have actually taken steps to make their products CCP-compliant. Companies such as Facebook and Twitter are not allowed to operate in China as they are unwilling and/or unable to comply with censorship regulations (Leskin 2019). As the Chinese censorship infrastructure primarily relies on independent companies censoring themselves, companies unwilling to do that cannot offer their products to the Chinese market. Companies that are willing to make adjustments, however, include Apple and Microsoft, the latter of which has altered its search engine, Bing, to self-censor in the way that Chinese companies do (Meisenzahl 2019). In addition, Google was also rumored to have started developing a search engine specifically for Chinese consumers, entitled "Project Dragonfly," that would be entirely compliant with Chinese censorship regulations (Meisenzahl 2019; Simonite 2019). These examples are given to demonstrate that self-censorship is not something that only Chinese companies, but also American companies, engage in. Many companies – both Chinese and Western – are willing to put aside their morals in order to access the Chinese market.

The Chinese market represents an expansive earning opportunity for both national companies and ones operating from abroad. Currently, it is estimated that more than 62 percent of the Chinese population is on the Internet, meaning that Internet-based

companies have the potential market of almost a billion people (Johnson 2020a). This means that many companies still attempt to access the Chinese market, despite any potential moral conflicts that could arise by complying with Chinese policies. As can be seen by the previous examples, American companies with the capability to integrate content regulations into their platforms and services often do so (Economy 2018a). They do this despite the fact that complying with government imposed censorship regulations is inherently oppositional to American values because, in truth, most companies tend to care more about profit than upholding values. This conflict between values and practice also exists among Chinese companies, as previously mentioned (Han 2018, 64). Regardless of how Internet companies view censorship, they still impose censorship on their platforms to meet government requirements.

American reactions to American companies operating in China are especially telling in determining Western-centric values and how those contribute to other misconceptions about the Chinese Internet system. The disapproval that is usually applied to Chinese companies self-censoring is immediately amplified when American companies also choose to partake. This is likely because Chinese companies complying with Chinese censorship guidelines is justifiable, albeit distasteful in the Western eye. However, American or Western companies compromising Western-centric values of freedom for market gain is considered more unacceptable. Eventually, American companies must choose whether to comply with censorship guidelines and access the Chinese market, or to appease their Western base and stay out of China. Google's "Project Dragonfly" was actually shut down as a result of backlash from the public



(Meisenzahl 2019), demonstrating that even a tech giant as influential as Google can still get caught in the web of international relations and pro-democratic posturing.

Finally, participation in self-censorship, while being necessary to access the Chinese market, is represented differently, depending on the perspective through which it is perceived. For example, much Western literature still interprets these independent companies as being more willing to censor (Han 2018, 182), despite the fact that Western companies must also comply with censorship guidelines to operate in China. The essentialized democratic values of some Western authors can be seen in their judgment of Chinese self-censorship, and indicate a more myopic interpretation of Chinese Internet censorship. In part, this can be attributed to the fallacy that economic liberalization implies political liberalization, which seems to be paramount in the Western understanding of Chinese Internet practices (Lei 2017, 104). Although the Chinese economy has taken on aspects of capitalism, or economic liberalization, this does not necessarily mean that China has adopted other Western-centric values such as democracy (political liberalization). Therefore, despite existing within a freer market, private companies are still subject to more authoritarian policies such as self-censorship, which is contradictory to Western norms, hence their harsh interpretation of companies that “choose” to partake. Here, the “shades of grey” body of literature helps reveal the contradictions that exist between actual censorship implementation and netizen experience, and how it is represented in Western media. The points made by authors such as Han (2018) and Lei (2017) indicate that compliance with censorship regulation is less about values (like democracy) and more about profit. This dichotomy applies to both Chinese and Western companies.

### *How Censorship Affects Chinese Civil Society*

Western-centric discourse on Chinese Internet censorship focuses on the suppression of free speech and obscures the critical processes developed by netizens to subvert censorship. Authors whose work falls under the “black and white” body of literature paint censorship as being repressive, completely disallowing any type of critical thought or action. Strittmatter describes censorship as creating “slavish subservience” among the Chinese people (2020, 244), indicating that censorship creates a population of netizens that is unable and unwilling to think critically about censorship, or respond to censorship in a creative way. “Black and white” literature’s essentializing approach to addressing Internet censorship, as something that is exclusively and entirely repressive, is mutually reaffirmed in Western news media. For example, Journalist Kiyō Dörner writes articles titled, “Hello, Big Brother: How China controls its citizens through social media,” and depicts Chinese citizens as living in an “Orwellian reality” in which every aspect of their life is monitored and controlled through technology (2017). These examples simply serve to exemplify how the “black and white” approach to representing Chinese Internet censorship can result in an oversimplified perspective. This is especially relevant as other works in the “shades of grey” body of literature indicate that censorship is not entirely repressive, and actually prompts critical thinking and activism among netizens.

Mainstream western perception of Chinese Internet censorship remains shallow and uncomplicated, as it is unable to see past the hurdle of non-democracy, causing it to disregard other developments and local experiences of the Chinese Internet. Gang and

Bandurski yet again reiterate this perspective, arguing that because of their biases, Western Internet activists can only see the negative aspects of the Chinese Internet and often overlook the contributions that the Internet has made, despite its censorship, to Chinese society (2010, 60). According to Jiang, Western media depicts the Chinese government as a “powerful monster,” which Jiang attributes to the label (“authoritarian-liberal”) that is placed on it (2012, 75, 78). Vukovich also describes Western characterizations of the CCP as an “anachronistic” and “evil” institution, holding China back from joining the democratized world (2012, 3-4). Jiang argues that the “authoritarian” label is why the West is especially concerned with the freedoms of Chinese netizens, and citizens in general, and why the West views Internet censorship as the critical impediment on the advancement of democracy (Jiang 2012, 75, 78). In fact, Western media and “black and white” literature often reflects this desire that the Internet will prompt a pro-democratic change, which is why, when it does/has not inspired this change, these groups revert to blaming the Chinese government and Internet censorship regulations for restricting democracy and freedom.

Conceptions of democracy and freedom inform both the “black and white” and “shades of grey” perspectives on Chinese Internet censorship, depending on whether they are framed as being the ultimate goals of the Internet, or desires of Chinese netizens. Whereas the “black and white” body of literature, as aforementioned, desires the Internet to bring about democratic change in China, this is not the desire of most Chinese netizens. Addressing this point, Jiang concludes that, “China is as liberal as everyone wants” (2012, 114). Jiang’s quote reveals how censorship and the Internet are viewed from a local perspective, where netizens are not as concerned about the democratic

potential of the Internet as Western observers are. Looking at Internet censorship from the local level often reveals that netizens experience online censorship much differently than how it is portrayed by the West.

The ways in which Internet culture has developed and grown in response to and in spite of government censorship demonstrate the resiliency of the Chinese netizens. While censorship does impinge on free speech and expression, netizens have managed to turn Internet censorship into an impetus for development. Netizens have been prompted to be more independent, find different platforms and modes of activism, creatively market content, and raise awareness of the extent and effect of the government's meddling. Unfortunately, these developments are not seen as being as significant from the Western-centric perspective, as this perspective emphasizes the democratic potential of the Internet. Therefore, despite the various developments that have spawned as a result of the Internet, "black and white" literature does not view them as being substantial replacements for the development of democracy. To rebut this notion, Gang and Badurski state, "These changes cannot be understood purely through the prism of Western democratic desires" (2010, 60). Their quote epitomizes the West's priorities for China's Internet. Western society is so concerned with the democratic state of a nation (or non-democratic, to be precise), that it is generally willing to disregard any developments that do not advance a democratic state.

One of the most significant ways censorship has altered Chinese society is how it changed the activist culture. Most notably, most activism now mostly occurs online and in a more passive form. Before the mass expansion of the Internet, activism and protests took place physically and on a large scale. The latter type of activism is described as

“grand-scale activism” by Guo, who epitomizes this form of activism with the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest (2020, 125). In general, current-day activism on the Chinese Internet is much more subtle and places an emphasis on political performativity,<sup>5</sup> according to scholars (Guo 2020, 126, 157; Han 2018, 78; Yang 2009, 85). Along with the scale of activism, scholarship indicates the focus of activism has shifted as well. Instead of working with the goal of large-scale political change, the goal of activism is now to facilitate smaller change and resolve “immediate social problems” (Guo 2020, 125). Both the more subtle, performative mode of activism, as well as the change in its overall objective were a result of censorship and netizens adjusting their style to navigate around the censors. As a result of online censorship, netizens activism has become more innovative.

Netizens are required to be more creative in their activism – and online posting in general – in order to subvert the censors. Examples of this creativity include netizens using homonyms and homophones (the Chinese language is full of them) to confuse censors, omitting or replacing certain characters in a phrase, or using common euphemisms (Han 2018, 86). Han (2018, 4, 8) and Yang (2009, 86) attribute the political climate and mandated censorship as contributing to developing these inventive tactics. “Creative,” “innovative,” and “artful” are all words used to describe the new techniques of netizens to avoid censors (Han 2018, 4, 8). Han even dubbed the term “pop activism” to describe the new type of online activism that seeks to utilize these creative, innovative,

---

<sup>5</sup> There have been a few exceptions to this new passive form of protest, most notably the anti-Japanese protests that occurred in the early 2000s which turned destructive and violent. The physical ramifications of these protests prompted the CCP to mandate censorship to quell all online discussion surrounding Japan in an effort to stop the protests (Stockmann 2010, 183-5). Seeing as how protests that turn physical get shut down quite quickly, many netizens protest online, where they have more leeway for expression.

artful techniques to prompt conversation. Pop activism has arisen as a result of the political climate on the Internet, especially censorship. It relies on “innovative tactics of expression” (Han 2018, 78), which include performative and expressive tools to discuss politics. Han also labeled it “pop” activism because of its popular usage. Widespread engagement is a key component of pop activism; it allows many actors to utilize similar tools for expression despite having different agendas. Significantly, Han attributes the rise of pop activism to the muddying of boundaries between politics and online culture (Han 2018, 78). Other authors have also noticed this integration of politics into the Internet, particularly because of how much China’s politics affect its Internet.

Chinese Internet censorship guidelines resulted in the Internet developing a political connotation. This phenomenon can be seen in how netizens respond to, and interact with, censorship. Qiang argues that censorship provokes resentment among netizens, who then use the Internet as a platform to criticize the government on (2010, 210). The relationship that is formed between netizens and the government is along the lines of: as government censorship defines the Internet, the Internet accordingly defines the government. Defining the government, in this case refers to “the CCP’s dominance [is] being exposed, ridiculed, and criticized, often in the form of political satire, jokes, songs...” (Qiang 2010, 210). Lei describes this rise of a rebellious, activist, noncompliant Internet as the development of a contentious public sphere (2017, 33). Lei’s contentious public sphere is not only developed because of netizens’ response to government censorship, but it also serves the purpose of forcing the state to acknowledge and engage with it. The political connotation that censorship entails of the Internet results in netizens being more critical of not only the government, but also of what the government can

influence, including information. For this reason, censorship has prompted netizens to be more critical of the information they find online.

Censorship has created netizens that are more critical of where their information is sourced from. More and more netizens have started turning to the Internet as an outlet for information and discussion. Gang and Bandurski note that, as a result of censorship, netizens increasingly rely on commercial, online sources of news, rather than party media (2010, 55). Lei even points out how government censorship, especially in state-run media, caused Chinese readers to be more critical of said media (2017, 105). In fact, strict government control has resulted in increased distrust of Chinese political institutions (Lei 2017, 105), demonstrating that censorship not only affects Internet culture, but also how people view larger aspects of Chinese society. Independence is becoming a valued trait; netizens perceive independent news sources as being more credible, and therefore those sources fare better economically. Comparatively, independent sources have more freedom over censoring their own content compared to state-run media. This results in these independent companies being perceived as a more trustworthy source for news (Qiang 2010, 217). Censorship, in sum, has compelled netizens to turn away from the Party, and towards the Internet for reliable news. Netizens more heavily rely on the Internet than non-netizens, and therefore censorship affects netizens more significantly.

Censorship arguably affects Internet culture and netizens more than it does non-netizens. Netizens have a unique relationship with censorship that non-netizens are less likely to experience because of their fewer interactions on/with the Internet. Lei conducted a survey in which she interviewed netizens and non-netizens on several different aspects of culture. She found that non-netizens were more likely to blame local

issues for the cause of problems in China. Netizens, on the other hand, blamed a lack of civil and political rights as a fundamental cause of problems (Lei 2017, 166). Their perception was likely formed because they experience these injustices more frequently, through regular usage of the Internet. Similarly, these interviews also found that comparatively, netizens identified themselves as victims of “the loss of rights” (Lei 2017, 166). Non-netizens did not share this perspective because Internet censorship is more obvious and changeable than censorship in other forms, for example print media. With Internet censorship, netizens can see when censors are activated and when they change. They notice when their posts are taken down, and how censors hinder their online activity. Lei’s assertion that netizens are critical actors in their online interactions reflects how “shades of grey” literature can reveal that censorship is more complicated at the local level. In addition, netizens’ unique relationship with the Internet can result in them picking up on certain online censorship behaviors and drawing attention to them.

Censors can serve to increase online activity as a result of the attention drawn to censorship. When a particular topic or content becomes taboo or censored, this draws attention to the topic, resulting in increased popularity. In this way, censorship has changed online culture, especially since the implementation of self-censorship. Independent companies are mandated to self-censor their content, but because of the fragmentation of the government’s enforcement system, they have some leeway over how these censors are enforced. Oftentimes, they use censored content to draw traffic to their websites. Guo notes how “the removal of online content functions similarly to the recommendation mechanisms web editors employ to attract user attention,” later describing how these independent Internet companies work in collaboration with other



online actors to promote the censored content, thereby popularizing their webpage (2020, 159). Guo also illustrates a similar strategy that web editors use to draw attention to their page. Web editors occasionally recommend a controversial post, knowing that it is likely to be censored, and subsequently remove said post (Guo 2020, 160). This strategy leads netizens to search their site or the Internet for the censored content, consequently generating traffic and attention. Again, this phenomenon highlights the importance of analyzing Internet censorship through a local perspective, as it reveals nuances that are not addressed in more generalizing, black and white reports of online censorship. One particular benefit of utilizing local experiences to analyze censorship is that it allows for the inclusion of more specified examples.

One specific example of how censorship can actually increase online attraction to a specific phenomenon is that of activist and intellectual Han Han. Guo references an incident in which a young activist and Internet personality named Han Han posted a political essay on online platform Sina (2020, 159). Shortly after the essay was posted, it was removed by Sina's censors. Rather than preventing any further online discussion of Han Han's essay, its removal had the opposite intended effect, and resulted in increased attention to Han Han's work. Netizens, both curious about the content of Han Han's essay and dismayed about its censorship, worked together in a display of activism to collectively publish various parts of the essay until the complete essay, albeit in parts, could be found online. Han Han's censorship, and subsequent netizen response, led to his essay skyrocketing in popularity. This example contradicts the assumption often found in "black and white" literature and Western media that censorship only serves to stifle discussion. Furthermore, this incident demonstrates how censorship can serve to

popularize content that might otherwise have been relatively uninteresting. In fact, the netizen response to Han Han's censorship alludes to the ways in which censorship has transformed online activism. The effects of censorship on activism, as well as collective action and self-censorship can be exemplified in one final case study of the impacts of Coronavirus censorship on netizens.

### ***Case study: Coronavirus Censorship and Western Perceptions***

One very recent example of the Chinese government censoring in an attempt to prevent collective action is the recent outbreak of the Coronavirus. COVID-19 started as a small viral outbreak in Wuhan, China that quickly spread across the globe. Multiple aspects of the COVID outbreak are relevant to analyze in terms of Chinese censorship. This analysis focuses on incidents involving Dr. Li Wenliang, one of the first whistleblowers about this novel virus. Firstly, it covers censorship regarding the initial discovery of the Coronavirus, and secondly, it discusses censorship surrounding the COVID-related death of Dr. Li. Finally, this analysis of COVID censorship is not making assumptions or judgments about how COVID censorship affected the spread or impact of the virus. It merely examines how the Chinese government reacted and why.

The first case of censorship surrounding the Coronavirus started around the time of its initial discovery. Two doctors involved, Dr. Ai Fen and Dr. Li Wenliang posted messages on WeChat, a popular messaging app, about a new virus. Their posts were quickly censored by local authorities. In the case of COVID-19, as well as many other topics in China, censoring is primarily done by independent companies in compliance with government regulations. After the initial outbreak of COVID-19, social media and

messaging apps such as YY and WeChat began censoring phrases such as 武汉海鲜市场 (*wǔhàn hǎixiān shìchǎng*) “Wuhan seafood market,” and phrases including references to the SARS virus (Crete-Nishihata et al. 2020). One argument as to why China quickly censored these phrases was because they represented a discussion with collective action potential, even if that potential was non-political. To draw on a previous example, the government censored discussion of the post-Fukushima salt rush, partially to prevent the spread of false rumors, as well as to prevent mass rushes on supermarkets. The collective action that the government hoped to prevent by initially censoring discussions of the Coronavirus could very well have been mass panic. Additionally, the CCP could also have censored COVID content to inhibit the circulation of unverified information. Online chatter surrounding the Coronavirus started to trend as a result of citizen concern for this new unknown virus. Much like the post-Fukushima salt rush, this event was not political and essentially had nothing to do with the Chinese government (at first) (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 17). COVID, like the salt rush, was censored simply because of the potential for disruption it possessed.

Dr. Li Wenliang’s death prompted another surge of censorship on social media platforms. Li was one of the first medical professionals to attempt to warn others about the Coronavirus, and was quickly reprimanded by the government for doing so. Therefore, when Dr. Li caught COVID and died as a result, public outrage ensued (Crete-Nishihata et al. 2020). People blamed the government for Li’s death, and he became a martyr. The general outcry surrounding Dr. Li’s death prompted the CCP/social media companies to censor conversations or phrases that included his name. CitizenLab, a research group based out of the University of Toronto, conducted a study on

Coronavirus censorship and discovered 19 censored keyword combinations referencing Dr. Li Wenliang. Dr. Li's name specifically became censored because the public reaction to his death was political, and directed at the government, unlike other general COVID keywords or topics that were also censored. More importantly, as Dr. Li's name was being censored, the hashtag #wewantfreedomofspeech began trending on a Twitter-like app called Weibo (Ruan, Knockel, and Crete-Nishihata, 2020).

The initial reaction that netizens had to Dr. Li's death was a response to not only his perceived martyrdom, but also the government's treatment of him during his life and death. Dr. Li was censored twice by the government. First, when he discovered COVID, and secondly after he died. Following his death, his name and other keywords relating to him were censored online (Crete-Nishihata et al. 2020). Guobin Yang argues that "As power seeks domination, it incurs resistance" (2009, 44), and in this case, that is exactly what happened. The posthumous censoring of Dr. Li's name precipitated the netizen response. In an almost opposing sentiment, Polletta states that, "as challengers innovate, authorities do too" (2004, 161). As Yang's quote aptly described the netizen response to Dr. Li's death, Polletta's suits the government's response to the netizen uprising. In response to netizens collectively protesting online, the state responded by completely shutting down and removing any traces of the hashtag surrounding the dissent to prevent online protesting from turning into physical activism.

Freedom of speech has a complicated history in regards to the Chinese government, because of the government's past with free speech movements. As previously alluded to, the Tiananmen Square Incident of 1989 is a major contributing factor to how the Chinese government handles protests today (Polletta 2004, 161). In this

case, however, because the hashtag specifically calls for greater freedom of speech, which was one of the demands of the student protesters at Tiananmen Square, it became a point of particular concern for the government. The government did not want this call for freedom of speech to end like the one at Tiananmen Square. Social media companies, mostly at the behest of the CCP,<sup>6</sup> mandated a quick response to this hashtag, as it was viewed as a challenge to state authority with the potential to mobilize. *South China Morning Post* reported that the hashtag #wewantfreedomofspeech was quickly taken down and eventually disappeared without a trace (Chen 2020). The government's hasty response was a reflection of China's past experiences. Furthermore, their response can be analyzed through frameworks regarding rituals and truth.

Various theories help analyze both the netizen and government response to Dr. Li's death. Specifically, the lens of rituals can be applied to interpret their responses. In the case of Dr. Li's passing, both the censorship and the commemoration could be considered rituals. The censorship immediately following Dr. Li's death, including the suppression of the #wewantfreedomofspeech hashtag is a truth-production ritual enacted by the government, and meant to create cohesion amongst the populace. Foucault argues that "'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it" (1977, 133). Censorship, which produces "rituals of truth" (Jiang 2012, 69), served to not only provide

---

<sup>6</sup> Research from CitizenLab's study on Coronavirus censorship on Chinese social media shows that YY, a live-streaming platform, may actually have preemptively over-censored its platform initially, therefore hindering everyday conversations that were entirely unrelated to COVID (Ruan, Knockel, and Crete-Nishihata 2020). YY's overzealous self-censorship during the initial stages of COVID indicates how some independent companies may exceed the official censorship guidelines. This abundance of caution could be attributed to these companies' desire to remain free from sanctions, as well as desire to continue to have impeded access to the Chinese market.

a widespread, common, cohesive understanding of Dr. Li's passing, but also allowed the government to control the anger of netizens to prevent them from physically acting in a way that would challenge the status quo.

The netizen commemoration of Dr. Li's death is considered a ritual in another aspect. Polletta identifies commemorations as a type of public ritual that can be taken over by protest (152, 2004), which is what happened in this case. Although the public online commemoration for Dr. Li was not a government-sponsored affair, as are most of the commemorations that Polletta analyzes, it was still a public occurrence that was taken over by the masses in order to protest. Netizens took over this public mourning for Dr. Li by flooding Weibo and other social media platforms with the hashtag #wewantfreedomofspeech, thereby turning this relatively non-political commemorative event into an online protest with the potential to inspire (physical) collective action.

Western reporting on COVID reflects general disapproval of the Chinese government system, indicating that the failure to contain the Coronavirus is a result of China's system of governing. Many news articles emphasize China's authoritarian or communist government as a primary reason behind the mass outbreak (Buckley 2020; Shih, Rauhala, and Sun 2020; Wang 2020). These news articles indicate the continuing presence of anti-authoritarianism that is reflected in Western media and the "black and white" body of censorship literature. Arguably, Orientalism also played a role in the portrayal of COVID censorship in Western media. As Vukovich has contended, Western perceptions of China are influenced both by essentialized democratic tendencies, as well as Orientalism (2012, xii, 23). Likely, both of these lenses affected Western reporting on Coronavirus censorship. Examples of these biases (pro-democratic, Orientalist) can even

be seen just by looking at the titles of news articles: “China Vowed to Keep Wildlife Off the Menu, a Tough Promise to Keep” (Myers 2020), “Distrust of China Jumps to New Highs in Democratic Nations” (Buckley 2020), and “China Peddles Falsehoods to Obscure Origin of Covid Pandemic” (Hernández 2020) were just a few. Many of these articles perpetuate and sensationalize cultural stereotypes about China, which Said emphasizes as a significant component of Orientalism (1978, 26). These articles also highlight the failings of China’s non-democratic government, illustrating the double-othering effect Western media places on China. Western media tends to present a narrow perspective on the Chinese Internet in general.<sup>7</sup>

Lastly, Western news media reporting on China’s handling of COVID demonstrated that the general Western understanding of how and why the Chinese censorship system works is flawed. Whereas many news articles reported on Internet censorship and COVID in a style that would leave the reader to conclude that the Chinese government directly censors its entire population’s messages, in actuality Internet censorship is more complicated. Most Internet censorship is a result of the government attempting to prevent collective action, as previously discussed, so when there are massive outbreaks, or “volume bursts” of online conversation about a certain topic, that is where the government focuses its censors (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 16). In addition, most censorship is implemented through intermediary actors, such as Internet or social media companies who self-censor their own platform’s content to remain in compliance

---

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, many Western social media platforms also undertook COVID misinformation campaigns to censor false rumors about the Coronavirus from their apps and sites, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube (Gharib 2021, Gilbert 2020, Spring 2020). Western reporting on this Western censorship framed it as something that was both necessary and positive. Their efforts to censor false information are arguably not significantly different from the CCP’s efforts to censor COVID initially, especially if the CCP’s efforts were an attempt to combat false rumors and prevent panic.

with the government's guidelines. These misrepresentations of COVID censorship exemplify why it is important to have contributions to Western literature on Chinese censorship that present censorship from a "shades of grey" perspective that accounts for the cultural and historical factors that inform the government's censorship. Unfortunately, Western news media, which reaches a larger audience than academic publishing, also generally fails to represent the intricacies of Chinese censorship.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The topic of Chinese Internet censorship is a complicated, multifaceted one. Under the umbrella of Chinese censorship lies various aspects, including the goal of the government to prevent collective action, as well as the underlying motivation of producing a shared understanding of reality. It also includes how netizens experience Internet censorship, how they react to it, and the influences it has on online culture. Importantly, this discussion of Chinese Internet censorship also considers how the West interprets it, which is usually in a very critical manner, as censorship is viewed as antithetical to Western-centric essentialized values of democracy and freedom.

There are many aspects of the Chinese Internet worth exploring. This thesis specifically focused on censorship, its effects, its actors, and interpretations of it. Utilizing theoretical frameworks provided by Polletta, Said, and Vukovich allow the underlying motivations of the Chinese government to be understood. Analyzing Chinese censorship through the lens of rituals informs the discussion of how tools for structuring everyday life are employed by the government to create a cohesive, harmonious society with shared values and experiences (Jiang 2012, 69). It also sheds light on how history



and past experiences influence how a government responds to similar situations in the modern day. Theories on the production of knowledge and truth via means of censorship activities likewise contribute to the understanding of motivations for censorship. These various theories assist in the full comprehension of how some authors depict China's Internet censorship as a means of producing common truths and a shared reality across society. While it can be argued that Chinese censorship is partly successful in censoring to maintain control – it is successful in preventing physical gatherings of collective action – it has also inspired resistance to the government and its censorship. This seemingly contradictory relationship essentially encapsulates the complex dynamics of Chinese Internet censorship.

Internet censorship in China is full of many of these incongruities. Online speech is restricted by the government, yet censored content is sometimes more popularized than non-censored content (Guo 2020, 159). Censorship results in netizen discontent, and they attempt to subvert and sometimes protest censors, but they are not seeking to inspire major political change (Guo 2020, 125; Jiang 2020, 63). Self-censorship is apparently the most effective and efficient way of censoring, but it has also resulted in a greater lack of control over the Internet on the part of the Chinese government (Bamman, O'Connor, and Smith 2019; Guo 2020, 1-2; Han 2018, 59; Shirk 2010, 1; Yang 2009, 29). Chinese companies self-censor to access the Chinese market even though self-censorship is harmful to their business model and oppositional to their company values (Guo 2020, 160; Han 2018, 60). Furthermore, American companies flaunt their own values of democracy and freedom, yet some still put aside those values in order to operate in China. Whereas for other American companies, this is not even a remote possibility

(Meisenzahl 2019). What these examples all demonstrate is that China's censorship is complicated, and should be perceived in shades of grey, rather than black and white determinations of whether it is good or bad, successful or not.

While this thesis argues for the more nuanced, "shades of grey" approach, the "black and white" perception of China's Internet is much more flattened. Western-centric values of democracy and freedom, viewed as absolutes, are what informs the Western understanding of Internet censorship. Orientalism, as a framework provided by Said, is also a contributing influence on Western perception (Said 1978, 3). Vukovich furthers Said's Orientalism framework by suggesting that Western perceptions are also influenced by essentialized perceptions of democracy, in addition to Orientalism (2012, 21).

Although the frameworks of Orientalism and democracy have different connotations, they ultimately serve as tools to assert ideological superiority over China's non-democratic system and practices. It is important to include these Western interpretations of censorship juxtaposed with how censorship is actually working, and how it is perceived and experienced in China. This is to not only draw attention to implicit biases Western readership might have, but also to demonstrate that situations are often more complicated than they appear at first glance. This thesis also emphasizes the importance of consuming Western media about China with a little more critical thought.

With that said, there of course are limitations to this paper. The most important one being that there are so many aspects of China's Internet that it would be impossible to discuss all of them within the scope of this paper. As the focus of this paper is censorship, and Western reactions and interpretations of censorship, many important cultural aspects of Chinese Internet culture were neglected. Unfortunately, it seems to be a habit of

scholars – including the one writing this paper – to gravitate towards writing about censorship when addressing China’s Internet. Perhaps this is because of how unique China’s Internet and censorship system are, especially when compared to Western systems, or maybe it is a result of being inspired by the already existing literature and research on the Chinese Internet, much of which also emphasizes its censorship. Even when specifically addressing Internet censorship, there are many more facets than can be explored in one essay, that affect how censorship is implemented, how it is perceived, and the effect that it has on Chinese netizens. Netizens’ reactions to Western perceptions and misunderstandings were also not comprehensively addressed, although in short, netizens tend to have negative reactions to Western media reporting on their Internet/Internet censorship (Jiang 2012, 4).

Further work to be done on the topic includes continuing to study the cultural changes and effects that censorship has had on Chinese society. Specifically, one relatively unexplored aspect is how netizen reactions to censorship have altered the way censors work, if they have at all. It would also be interesting to see how Chinese Internet culture would change if censors were removed, although this particular topic is probably not a feasible point of study, at least in the foreseeable future. Looking at any effects censorship has had on physical, non-Internet life and culture would be another relevant topic. Another important aspect to consider would be how religious, ethnic, and cultural minority netizens experience the Internet and censorship differently from the rest of the population. Lastly, this area of study could use a comparative analysis between the censorship that is mandated by the Chinese government, and implemented via

self-censorship, and the self-imposed censorship on Western social media apps, otherwise known as “community guidelines.”

Although it is not possible to explore every aspect of Chinese Internet censorship, this thesis presented multiple theoretical frameworks to understand how Chinese Internet censorship is perceived, and how different actors engage with censorship, resulting in a complex picture of how Internet censorship affects Chinese netizens. This thesis opens the door to further research to improve the understanding of Western interpretations and reporting on Chinese Internet censorship.

## Bibliography

- Akyol, Mustafa. 2015. "Turkey's Authoritarian Drift." *New York Times*, November 10, 2015.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/11/opinion/turkeys-authoritarian-drift-election-erdogan.html?searchResultPosition=2>.
- Bamman, David, Brendan O'Connor, and Noah A. Smith. 2012. "Censorship and Deletion Practices in Chinese Social Media." *First Monday* 17, no. 3.  
<https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v17i3.3943>.
- Blanchard, Ben. 2017. "China to Further Tighten its Internet Controls." *Reuters*, May 7, 2017.  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-internet/china-to-further-tighten-its-internet-controls-idUSKBN1830AG>.
- Brown, Heather, Emily Guskin, and Amy Mitchell. 2012. "The Role of Social Media in the Arab Uprisings." *Pew Research Center*.  
<https://www.journalism.org/2012/11/28/role-social-media-arab-uprisings/>.
- Buckley, Chris. 2020. "Distrust of China Jumps to New Highs in Democratic Nations." *New York Times*, October 6, 2020.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/06/world/asia/china-negative-pew-survey.html?searchResultPosition=26>.
- Creemers, Roiger. 2016. "The Privilege of Speech and New Media: Conceptualizing China's Communications Law in the Internet Age." In *The Internet, Social Media, and a Changing China*, edited by Jacques deLisle, Avery Goldstein, and Guobin Yang, 71-85. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Crete-Nishihata, Masashi, Jakub Dalek, Jeffrey Knockel, Nicola Lawford, Caroline Wesley, and Mari Zhou. 2016. "Censored Contagion II: A Timeline of Information Control on Chinese Social Media During COVID-19." Citizen Lab. Last modified August 25, 2020.  
<https://citizenlab.ca/2020/08/censored-contagion-ii-a-timeline-of-information-control-on-chinese-social-media-during-covid-19/>.
- Dörrer, Kiyō. 2017. "Hello, Big Brother: How China Controls its Citizens Through Social Media." *DW*, March 31, 2017.  
<https://www.dw.com/en/hello-big-brother-how-china-controls-its-citizens-through-social-media/a-38243388>.
- Economy, Elizabeth C. 2018. "The Great Firewall of China: Xi Jinping's Internet Shutdown." *The Guardian*, June 29, 2018.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jun/29/the-great-firewall-of-china-xi-jin-pings-internet-shutdown>.
- Economy, Elizabeth C. 2018. *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- The Editorial Board. 2016. "Poland's Tragic Turn." *New York Times*, December 21, 2016.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/21/opinion/polands-tragic-turn.html?searchResultPosition=14>.
- Foucault, Michel. 1975. "Discipline and Punish." In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of The Prison*, by Michel Foucault, 200-224. New York: Random House, Inc.

- Foucault, Michel. 1977. "Truth and Power." In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, by Michel Foucault, 109-133. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gang, Qiang and David Bandurski. 2010. "China's Emerging Public Sphere: The Impact of Media Commercialization, Professionalism, and the Internet in an Era of Transition." In *Changing Media, Changing China*, edited by Susan L. Shirk, 38-76. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gilbert, Ben. 2020. "Instagram is Targeting Fake Coronavirus News and Finally Taking Disinformation and Hoaxes Seriously." *Business Insider*, March 24, 2020. <https://www.businessinsider.com/instagram-changes-moderation-policy-for-coronavirus-hoaxes-2020-3>.
- Gharib, Malaka. 2021. "WHO is Fighting False COVID Info on Social Media. How's That Going?" NPR, February 9, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2021/02/09/963973675/who-is-fighting-false-covid-info-on-social-media-hows-that-going>.
- Guo, Shaohua. 2020. *The Evolution of the Chinese Internet*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Han, Rongbin. 2018. *Contesting Cyberspace in China: Online Expression and Authoritarian Resilience*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hernández, Javier C. 2020. "China Peddles Falsehoods to Obscure Origin of Covid Pandemic." *New York Times*, December 6, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/06/world/asia/china-covid-origin-falsehoods.html?searchResultPosition=3>.
- Huang, Zheping. 2019. "China's Most Popular App is a Propaganda Tool Teaching Xi Jinping Thought." *South China Morning Post*, February 14, 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/tech/apps-social/article/2186037/chinas-most-popular-app-propaganda-tool-teaching-xi-jinping-thought>.
- Jiang, Ying. 2012. *Cyber-Nationalism in China: Challenging Western Media Portrayals of Internet Censorship in China*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press.
- Johnson, Joseph. 2021. "Countries with the Highest Number of Internet Users as of December 2019." Statista. Last modified January 27, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262966/number-of-Internet-users-in-selected-countries/>.
- Johnson, Joseph. 2021. "Global Digital Population as of January 2021." Statista. Last modified April 7, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/>.
- King, Gary, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. 2013. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2: 326-343. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055413000014>.
- Lei, Ya-Wen. 2017. *The Contentious Public Sphere: Law, Media & Authoritarian Rule in China*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lei, Ya-Wen. 2011. "The Political Consequences of the Rise of the Internet: Political Beliefs and Practices of Chinese Netizens." *Political Communication* 38, no. 3: 291-322. DOI: 10.1080/10584609.2011.572449.

- Leskin, Paige. 2019. "Here are all the major US tech companies blocked behind China's 'Great Firewall.'" *Business Insider*, October 10, 2019.  
<https://www.businessinsider.com/major-us-tech-companies-blocked-from-operating-in-china-2019-5>.
- Marton, Kati. "Hungary's Authoritarian Descent." *New York Times*, November 3, 2014.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/04/opinion/hungarys-authoritarian-descent.html?searchResultPosition=6>.
- Meisenzahl, Mary. 2019. "These 6 Tech Companies have made the Controversial Decision to try to Operate in China." *Business Insider*, October 10, 2019.  
<https://www.businessinsider.com/tech-companies-censoring-content-for-china-apple-microsoft-2019-10>.
- Myers, Steven Lee. 2020. "China Vowed to Keep Wildlife Off the Menu, a Tough Promise to Keep." *New York Times*, June 7 2020.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/07/world/asia/china-coronavirus-wildlife-ban.html?searchResultPosition=159v>.
- Poell, Thomas. 2015. "Social Media Activism and State Censorship." In *Social Media, Politics, and the State: Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube*, edited by Daniel Trotter and Christian Fuchs, 189-206. New York: Routledge.
- Polletta, Francesca. 2004. "Can You Celebrate Dissent? Holidays and Social Protest." In *We Are What We Celebrate: Understanding Holidays and Rituals*, edited by Amitai Etzioni and Jared Bloom, 151-177. New York: New York University Press.
- Qiang, Xiao. 2010. "The Rise of Online Public Opinion and Its Political Impact." In *Changing Media, Changing China*, edited by Susan L. Shirk, 202-224. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Qin, Bei, David Strömberg, and Yanhui Wu. 2017. "Why Does China Allow Freer Social Media? Protests versus Surveillance and Propaganda." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 1 (Winter): 117-140. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.1.117>.
- Reuters Staff. 2019. "China Blocks Websites, Internet Accounts in New Cleanup Campaign." *Reuters*, June 12, 2019.  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/china-censorship/china-blocks-websites-Internet-accounts-in-new-cleanup-campaign-idUSL4N23J1RW>.
- Ruan, Lotus, Jeffrey Knockel, and Masashi Crete-Nishihata. 2020. "Censored Contagion: How Information on the Coronavirus is Managed on Chinese Social Media." Citizen Lab. Last modified March 3, 2020.  
<https://citizenlab.ca/2020/03/censored-contagion-how-information-on-the-coronavirus-ismanaged-on-chinese-social-media/>.
- Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Savelsberg, Joachim. 2021. "Affirming Genocide Knowledge through Rituals." In *Knowing about Genocide: Armenian Suffering and Epistemic Struggles*, by Joachim Savelsberg, 3-35. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Shi, Zengzhi and Guobin Yang. 2016. "New Media Empowerment and State-Society Relations in China." In *The Internet, Social Media, and a Changing China*, edited by Jacques deLisle, Avery Goldstein, and Guobin Yang, 71-85. Philadelphia:

- University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Shih, Gerry, Emily Rauhala, and Lena H. Sun. 2020. "Early missteps and state secrecy in China probably allowed the coronavirus to spread farther and faster." *Washington Post*, February 1, 2020.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/02/01/early-missteps-state-secrecy-china-likely-allowed-coronavirus-spread-farther-faster/>.
- Shirk, Susan L. 2010. "Changing Media, Changing China." In *Changing Media, Changing China*, edited by Susan L. Shirk, 1-37. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Simonite, Tom. 2019. "US Companies Help Censor the Internet in China, Too." *WIRED*, June 3 2019.  
<https://www.wired.com/story/us-companies-help-censor-Internet-china/>.
- Spring, Marianna. 2020. "Social Media Firms Fail to Act on Covid-19 Fake News." BBC, June 4, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52903680>.
- Stockmann, Daniela. 2010. "What Kind of Information Does the Public Demand? Getting the News during the 2005 Anti-Japanese Protests." In *Changing Media, Changing China*, edited by Susan L. Shirk, 175-201. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Strittmatter, Kai. 2020. *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China's Surveillance State*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Thomala, Lai Lin. 2021. "Time Spent with Internet Media in China Q3 2020, By Type." Statista. Last modified February 11, 2021.  
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/>.
- Trottier, Daniel. 2015. "Vigilantism and Power Users: Police and User-Led Investigations on Social Media." In *Social Media, Politics, and the State: Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube*, edited by Daniel Trottier and Christian Fuchs, 208-226. New York: Routledge.
- Vindman, Alexander and Garry Kasparov. "In Russia, It's not Navalny vs. Putin. It's Democracy vs. Authoritarianism." *Washington Post*, March 22, 2021.  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/03/22/russia-its-not-navalny-vs-putin-its-democracy-vs-authoritarianism/>.
- Vukovich, Daniel. 2012. *China and Orientalism*. New York: Routledge.
- Wang, Vivian. 2020. "China's Coronavirus Battle Is Waning. Its Propaganda Fight Is Not." *New York Times*, April 8, 2020.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/world/asia/coronavirus-china-narrative.html?searchResultPosition=228>.
- Weitz, Eric. 2003. *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Wisse, Ruth R. 2020. "Vote for the Czar, It's Important." *Wall Street Journal*, August 31, 2020.  
[https://www.wsj.com/articles/vote-for-the-czar-its-important-11598895028?mod=searchresults\\_pos8&page=1](https://www.wsj.com/articles/vote-for-the-czar-its-important-11598895028?mod=searchresults_pos8&page=1).
- Xu, Beina and Eleanor Albert. 2017. "Media Censorship in China." Council on Foreign Relations. Last modified February 17, 2017.  
<https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/media-censorship-china>.
- Yang, Guobin. 2009. *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*. New



York: Columbia University Press.

Zhong, Raymond, Paul Mozur, Jeff Kao, and Aaron Krolik. 2020. "No 'Negative' News: How China Censored the Coronavirus." *New York Times*, December 19, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/19/technology/china-coronavirus-censorship.html>.