

**Strong Weibo, Smart Government:  
Governmentality and the Regulation of  
Social Media in China**



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## **Abstract**

Sina Weibo, a social media platform launched in China in 2009, has channeled new energy into the Chinese new media landscape. The acknowledged political significance of the internet has been amplified by the arrival of Weibo. Many scholars argue that Weibo has the potential to expand democratic communication in Chinese society; however, this thesis develops a critical perspective on the common equation between Weibo and expanding democratic communication, arguing that these discussions underestimate the Chinese government's efforts and oversimplify China's sophisticated internet culture. A distinctive response to Weibo has emerged within a constantly evolving relationship between the Chinese government, Weibo, and its users. This state response affects the formation and inhibits the growth of public spheres in the context of Weibo.

The debate over the democratising influence of Weibo is rooted in the Western focus of individual liberalism, which assumes that participation in public discourse is clear evidence of the public sphere. This study concludes that in contemporary China, public discourse fails to meet the normative and ideal public sphere, due to effective government control. This thesis examines both the greater freedoms and the continuing control of information simultaneously taking place on Weibo, managed strategically in selective cases, especially in political spheres. Moreover, the apparent freedom on Weibo in fact offers a subtle means for the regime to shape political outcomes. In addition, this thesis argues that the ways in which the state manages and manipulates public discourse in China operate within a complex, interactive, proactive and adaptive process; the state both selectively tightens and loosens public discourse online in order to facilitate control.



The transformation of statecraft from a relatively simple and coercive form of censorship to a more complex style of governance coincided with the “overall planning” attitude of the current leadership in reaction to the new media. The adoption of a proactive attitude by allowing selective freedoms to information, aims to promote social harmony as an important national goal for China’s leadership. The concept of a harmonious society marks a shift from purely economic-centred, authoritarian development to more people-centred and sustainable development.

This thesis adopts a theoretical approach based on the Habermasian notion of the public sphere and the Foucauldian notion of governmentality. While these two theories appear to be in opposition, by applying both to the contemporary Chinese media landscape, it is possible to better understand the mediated version of the public sphere that has emerged in China, and the negotiated dialogue between Weibo and its regulators, and between public expression and official control.

## **Declaration**

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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'Constructing autonomous patriotism on Weibo: The case of "Ding was here"', presented at the International Communication Association (ICA) regional conference held from October 1 to 3, 2014 in Brisbane, Australia

'Cultural control and new transformative regulatory measures in China's social media', presented at the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA) annual conference held from July 9 to 11, 2014 in Melbourne, Australia

'Seeking channels for public space: Media use and political engagement for China's subculture groups', presented at the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA) annual conference held from July 4 to 6, 2012 in Adelaide, Australia