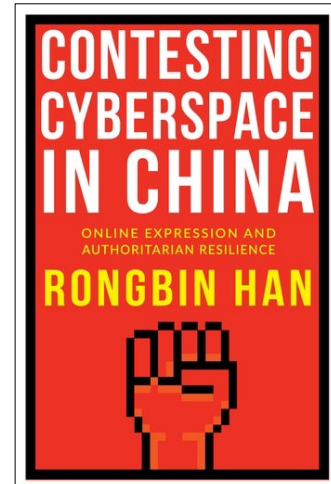


Rongbin Han, **Contesting Cyberspace in China: Online Expression and Authoritarian Resilience**, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018, 315 pp., \$32.00 (paperback).

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Is it unfair to begin a review of this book with quotes from Alain Badiou, the French Marxist with connections to Maoism? Perhaps.

Before quoting Badiou, and to make my critical perspective clear, this book lends itself to one of two responses: advocacy of a superior liberal American democratic model, or distress at the author's negative approach to the achievements of the Chinese one-party system since 1949. That **Contesting Cyberspace in China: Online Expression and Authoritarian Resilience** is grounded in uncompromising support for Western liberalism gives it a myopic perspective drawn from the author's ineffective deductive methodology. Described as "guerrilla ethnography," Han sources much of his content from Chinese bulletin boards and two university Internet conferences for forum managers in China that he attended. Han admits to ethical concerns about his methodology, ultimately claiming that "Leading scholars . . . at Harvard University have used similar sources in their research" (p. 25). Harvard University does not set the global standard for qualitative research.



Now to Badiou.

In *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, Badiou (2012) notes that "the dominant media" had suggested "a simple interpretation of the riots in the Arab world: ... a desire for the West" (p. 48, emphasis in original). He continues, saying that "the space of realization of emancipatory ideas is global" and that "genuine change would be an *exit from the West*, a 'de-Westernization'" (p. 52, emphasis in original). Such strong positionality leaves little doubt that Badiou draws a clear line between the Western imperial project, headed up by the United States from 1945 until the rise of China.

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States had unlimited hegemony. After that, China—mostly in collaboration with Wall Street financiers and large multinational corporations—was able to establish itself within a global arbitrage system in which the flow of goods and services changed the calculations of economics and social and political power. Since 2017, following the election of President Donald Trump, the United States has increasingly claimed to oppose China, moving to decouple low-cost Chinese industrial production from U.S. consumption and return manufacturing to the continental United States, thereby somewhat isolating the United States from China. Curiously, toward the end of the Trump's first term as president, it is almost as if Badiou's de-Westernization of China was underway. (From a U.S. perspective this is accurate, but from the perspective of China looking west to Europe and to the Global South with its Belt and Road trade initiative, this is mistaken.) During the transition from neoliberal

integration to apparent disengagement with the United States, social organization in China has been conceived around the notion of "socialism with Chinese characteristics."

Unfortunately for U.S. observers, the separation of national interests is increasing, especially with U.S. conservatives promoting a chaotic version of U.S. nationalist isolationism that is dominating foreign relations. This recent shift makes this study of the Internet valuable as a time capsule of the author's preferred American liberalism, as the U.S. and Chinese systems consolidate their differences.

In addition, by mid-2020 the Chinese were confidently utilizing electronic communication across vast geographical spaces, with Statistica (2020) estimating 927 million Internet users, with 1.36 billion expected by 2025, compared with the United States' 281 million: in the latter case, the United States is close to a saturated or mature market, and Han is correct to note the difference in national Chinese priorities for the utilization of networked technologies.

As a time capsule of his preferred Western liberal democratic political system, Han's research captures the aspirational ideals of that ideology while drawing contrasts with the complex system of controlling censorship that protects what he describes as the authoritarian Chinese regime. Indeed, he is honest in his objectives: political liberalization, democratization, and "to achieve regime change" (p. 4).

Indeed, for communication scholars with an anti-Chinese, even racist orientation, the book will serve as succor to already established prejudices. This sustenance will be doubly enhanced for readers with imperial Western preferences and anti-communist politics, who consider the government of China as illegitimate because it is not democratic, as much because it is communist, or who do not understand or recognize the continued emergence of a counterpoint to the U.S. hegemon. For readers with these preferences, *Contesting Cyberspace in China* will be like a throwback to a Cold War tract, a point that is made all the more disturbing by Han's use of Patricia Thornton's claims that China, like all nondemocracies, "suffers a birth defect it cannot cure" (p. 187).

Despite such limitations, Han offers a view of China's complex communicative environment. The cyberpolitics he explores move in many directions: Some forces are directly managed by the state, some by technology industry executives entrusted with overseeing content responsibilities, some by activist citizens with a strong commitment to China, but not always the Communist Party, some by students or others influenced by outside interests, and so on. The disaggregation of the "Party-state" as he calls it, from governance processes in ministries and at the level of national industrial organization, make for an even more complex narrative.

Han identifies yet fails to adequately elaborate on the additional complexity of what Min Jiang (2010) referred to as a combination of "capitalism, authoritarianism, and Confucianism." Han documents the transitions in the evolving program of Internet content control, identifying the harmonizing priorities of the Chinese government, a concept that is foreign to liberal Westerners, who struggle to comprehend information systems that impose limits on increasingly individuated libertarian demands.

Intermediaries with connection to the state and the party fulfill the task of content control, developing an institutional model that differs from Western ones, insofar as there is a claim to Chinese communal traditions in which local authorities are given power to manage local activities. (The control of the coronavirus pandemic by Chinese authorities is likely to indicate the application of this community-based model. Peter Hessler described the system in a March 2020 *New Yorker* article, "Life in Lockdown in China," and his building's organization early in 2020.)

China's netizens are as diverse as heavy Internet users anywhere, with a significant difference: They are active users of new popular cultural material that is as diverse as the views inherent in the television, cinema, and books that are the Chinese public's source material. The rise of pop activism, in this newly energized field of Chinese users, suggests a change in the way the rising standard of living is translating into new cultural expressions. That is, the millions of social media users in China are increasingly engaged with many ideas and emotions that are relatively new to China and, indeed, Western in orientation. This is, as Han notes, part of the liberalization of China.

The rise of pop-activism is a "double-edged sword" according to Han, because while "it may be effective in popularizing political information, it sometimes backfires when playfulness dilutes the message and when controversial ideas cause antipathy among netizens wishing to stay away from politics and simply have a good time online" (p. 100). That Han has little to say about the political economy of netizens "having a good time" is indicative of the assumptions he brings to the research and misses the point of national communication systems generally: The utility of the Internet as a communication tool for the Chinese state and national development is central to its role as a counterhegemonic tool to U.S. imperialism.

His contribution to discourse competition is similarly limited by his priorities. Nevertheless, he makes a valuable contribution to understanding the emergence of anti-Western attitudes among netizens, documenting competition between a variety of users online. Similarly, his close attention to the Fifty Cent Army—a voluntary collection of pro-state activists who work together to dox and criticize nonstate actors—indicates that his research usefully identifies the many forces at work in China that cannot be predicted to engage in compliant digital activities.

Censorship of the Internet in China is an important topic. That this book inadequately addresses the many challenges of information flows in China is determined by the author's unrelenting antagonism to his homeland's "authoritarianism" and his preference for "democratic values." Consequently, it is less instructive than it should be.

In this respect, the significance of location should not be underestimated. For example, Han is U.S. educated, after undergraduate study at the elite Peking University. His positionality is that of the assimilated American, who adopts, as intercultural communication research has shown, to the host culture, dropping preferential readings of "homeland" culture as inferior to the identity that has been adopted in order to succeed in the new country. (I say this as a naturalized American, who refuses to sign on to exclusionary "America first" ideology.)

Such assimilation contrasts with those who do not present their work as primarily about the need for a U.S. and Western democratic ideology in China. Chinese researchers in the United States have recently adopted Chinese media studies, something on display when I conducted the Chinese Media Technology Nexus Conference at Boston College in December 2019.

As Han suggests, there is competition in the discourse. In relation to his book, it is about de-Westernization.

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