Through the Looking Glass: Twenty years of research into the Chinese Internet

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Abstract:

This paper is a first report on a research project the author conducted with the help of a research assistant and a PhD student between September 2012 and March 2013. The project collected detailed information on articles, book chapters, books, etc. published by academics on the Chinese Internet between 1990 and 2013.

590 entries were collected in a database, all with title, abstract and publication details, plus a pdf version where available. The database was started with known titles, Google Searches and content lists of journals, and progressed via the reference lists of found publications. Initial findings of the research are summarised in the paper, and the conclusion raises several questions for future consideration in the research of the Internet in China.

Through the Looking Glass: Twenty years of research into the Chinese Internet

The Chinese Internet is huge, it is diverse, and it is different from the Internet elsewhere… or so claims the introduction of almost every paper on the Internet in China. It offers many opportunities for business people, citizens wishing to express their opinions, consumers interested in purchasing goods or in watching entertainment programmes, etc.

The Internet reached China around 20 years ago – depending on when exactly the starting point is set, and research into the Chinese Cyberspace has been conducted for just as long by a growing number of researchers from many different disciplinary or national backgrounds. However, who actually knows what has already been published on the Internet in China? Who is keeping track of points and studies made? Is there merely a growth in output, or a learning from and building on previous knowledge?

The original impetus for this study was the discovery by the author in 2011 of an article by Jack Qiu (2000) who had already made most of the points the author of this paper was preparing to make in a book chapter. After finding the article, the author proceeded to dig deeper and came across several others on the Chinese Internet published during the 1990s and all but forgotten by 2011. Table 1 shows a part of the results of the author's initial digging, demonstrating that some topics just keep coming back in academic discourses – even in the author's own publications.

1994	Zheng, C. (1994). Opening the digital door: Computer networking in China. *Telecommunications Policy, 18*(3), 236-242.
1996	Hao, X., Zhang, K., & Yu, H. (1996). The Internet and information control: The case of China. *The Electronic Journal of Communication, 6*(2).
1998	Taubman, G. (1998). A not-so World Wide Web: The Internet, China, and the challenges to nondemocratic rule. *Political Communication, 15*(2), 255-272.
2000	Qiu, J. L. (2000). Virtual Censorship in China: Keeping the gate between the cyberspaces. *International Journal of Communications Law and Policy, 4*, 1-25.
2002	Chase, M. S., & Mulvenon, J. C. (2002). *You've Got Dissent!: Chinese Dissident Use of the Internet and Beijing's Counter-Strategies*. Washington D.C.: Rand Corporation.
2004	Shie, T. R. (2004). The tangled web: does the internet offer promise or peril for the Chinese Communist Party? *Journal of Contemporary China, 13*(40), 523 - 540.
2006	Damm, J., & Thomas, S. (2006). *Chinese Cyberspaces: Technological Changes and Political Effects*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
2008	Herold, D. K. (2008). Development of a Civic Society Online? Internet Vigilantism and State Control in Chinese Cyberspace. *Asia Journal of Global Studies, 2*(1), 26-37.
2010	Rosen, S. (2010). Is the Internet a Positive Force in the Development of Civil Society, a Public Sphere, and Democratization in China ? *International Journal of Communication, 4*, 509-516.
2012	Hassid, J. (2012). Safety Valve or Pressure Cooker? Blogs in Chinese Political Life. *Journal of Communication, 62*(2), 212–230. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01634.x

Table 1: Publications on the Democratisation of China at two year intervals

Looking through reference lists of articles published on the Internet in China, one soon notices that with few exceptions sources older than about 5 years are no longer 'quotable', while some researchers also appear to assume that publications outside their own discipline should not be consulted at all. The author decided to apply for funding to investigate *our* past a bit more closely – what has already been published, who are *we*, what are *we* working on, and what might be missing and therefore an opportunity for future research?

Randy Kluver and Chen Yang conducted a similar project about which they published a report in 2005 that was fairly negative in its conclusions despite an assurance by the authors that their research report was not

> meant to disparage the research that has been done, nor its relevance, but rather to illustrate the lack of a systematic approach to studying the Chinese Internet. Much of the research generated so far has been exploratory in nature, and has naturally rested on pre-existing questions, such as China's political transformation. (Kluver, & Yang, 2005: 307)

Judging from the experience of conducting a similar research project, not much has changed since 2005. The research published on the Internet in China remains rather descriptive and exploratory with few attempts to integrate these studies into the wider context of Internet Studies internationally, while 'China's political transformation' still appears to be one of the main drivers of research.

In what follows, this paper will first explain the methodology adopted in this study, before attempting to draw a few general conclusions from the data to address such issues as who is studying the Internet in China, and in what are *we* actually interested. The paper will conclude with a short discussion of some of the questions arising from the analysis of the data that provide pointers for future research into the Internet in China.

1   Methodology

For this research project, the research team consisting of the author, one Research Assistant, and a PhD student collected information about publications on the Internet in China into two separate databases. The first database was created using the bibliographic software package Mendeley, which allowed for the collection of exact bibliographic data, including an abstract or short summary, as well as the attachment of the publication in the form of a pdf-file.

A second database was created using FileMaker that contained additional data on the publications and their authors to allow further analysis (see table 1). It was decided to base the data collection around the identity of the first author, following the theory that the first author of academic publications is supposed to be the main or corresponding author of a piece.

Year of publication
First Author
Departmental affiliation of first author
Country of affiliation of first author
Title of publication
Abstract or Summary of publication
Up to 10 keywords provided by the publication

Table 2: Data collected in the databases

Google searches were performed to find initial publications, which were then perused to identify additional publications, either by looking at other articles published in the same journal, or via the list of references quoted. Publications were only added to the database, if they were 'quotable', i.e. could be accessed again reliably and therefore quoted in a list of references, and an abstract or summary could be found to add to the database, to provide more in-depth information about the contents of the publication. Ideally, a pdf-file of the publication was downloaded and added to the bibliographic database as well, but this proved not possible in some cases due to a lack of access by the researchers to the publications.

At the end of the funded phase of the project, the databases contained over 800 entries, but after a more thorough checking of the entries and their contents for multiple entries of the same source, publications that were not China-related, or not Internet-related, etc. the databases were left with 590 entries, on which this paper is based. Additionally, it was decided to add a researcher-selected subject keyword to each publication, as the original list of keywords was either too broad, e.g. China, Internet, ICTs, or too specific for comparative purposes, e.g. e-procurement, Super Girl, Qiangguo luntan, etc. Each publication was assigned one of five keywords: *business*, *international issues*, *politics*, *society*, and *theory and methods*. 'Health' (including psychology) was discussed as another potential keyword, but it was decided that the publications about health-related issues were less clinical and more social in their approach to their topic and could therefore be included in the group labelled 'society'.

Given the methods used for data collection, the data presented here cannot claim to be anywhere near complete, and it is the author's plan to continue to add entries to the databases as new or other publications are discovered. However, the data collected of 590 publications between 1990 and 2013 does represent a large part of the presumed total number of publications on the Internet in China during this period, and can reasonably be assumed to provide indications as to the state of affairs in the research of the Internet in China by academics.

2   Who are we?

2.1   Academic Affiliations

Looking at the affiliations of first authors, research into the Internet in China is being conducted across many disciplines (see table 2), with departmental affiliations ranging from Forest Science (Bio-energy information on the Chinese Internet) to Stomatology (Patient attitudes towards online dental information in China).
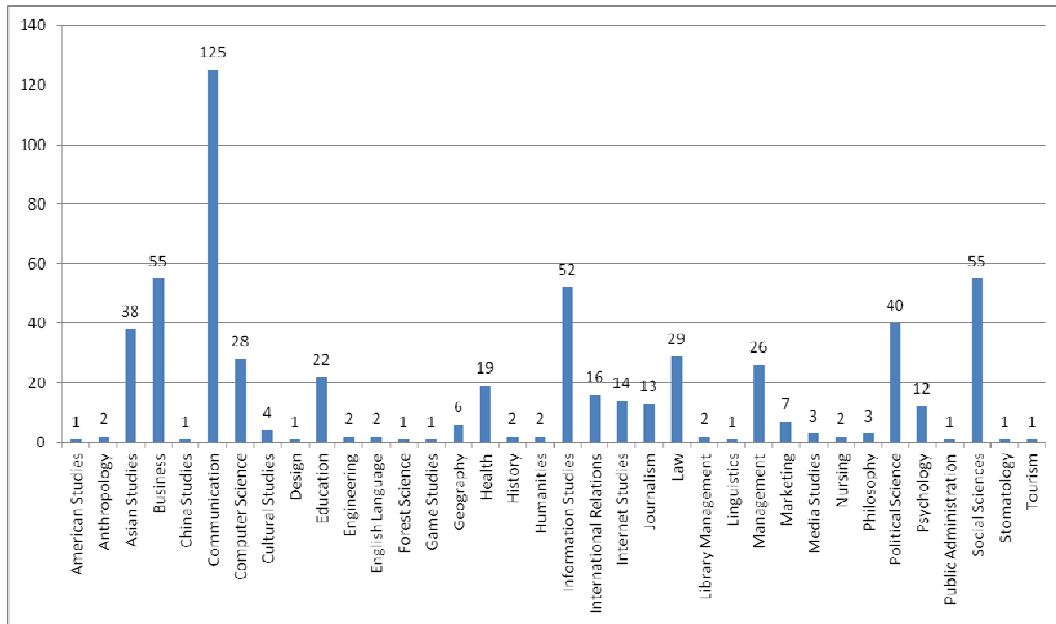

Table 2: Academic Department of First author

Although departments of *Communication* are most strongly represented, their 'dominance' is partly due to a splintering of other areas of knowledge into smaller disciplines, e.g. Business, Management, Marketing. A grouping of similar disciplines results in a more evenly spread distribution (table 3).
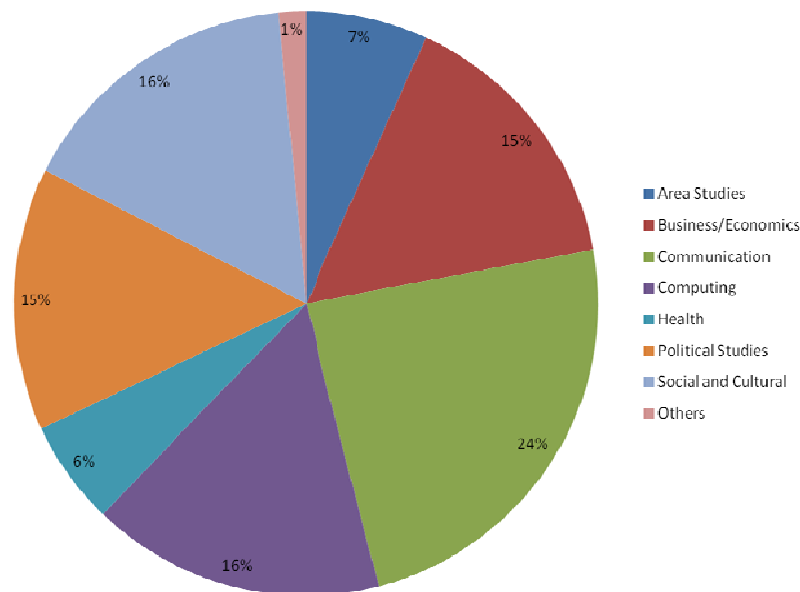

Table 3: Grouped departmental affiliations

The wide range of departmental affiliations of researchers working on the Internet in China suggests a healthy, multi-disciplinary environment in which to research Chinese Cyberspace, but also points to the lack of cohesion and even definition in the 'field' of Chinese Internet Studies, a designation hard to apply to the publications discussed here. Studies on the Internet in China are conducted by researchers from many academic disciplinary backgrounds, while the subject matter under study itself is only loosely defined by a vague reference to technology, i.e. 'Internet', and an underdefined geo-political designator, i.e. 'China'. Studies on the Internet in China have often little in common with each other, as each author applies his/her own disciplinary approach to their research, and targets their publication at on-going discourses within their field.

2.2   Countries of affiliation

In an attempt to situate the research done within its institutional contexts, the publications were also assigned 'countries of origin'. In this context, country designators entered into the database are not based on the *identity* of the first author, but instead on the *location of the academic institution* they were affiliated with *at the time of publication*. This was done to avoid guessing an author's national identity based on his/her name, photograph, or available online information. Additionally, it was assumed that the authors' work environment would have a greater impact on their approach to the Internet in China than their country of birth. This does mean, though, that the same author can have more than one country designator, e.g. Rebecca MacKinnon published articles while working in Hong Kong, as well as in the USA.

As table 4 shows, the authors of publications in the database are working in many different countries, but the figures also point to significant problems in the study of the Internet in China, or with the state of academia in general.

Authors of publications on the Internet in China are predominantly based in the USA with even 'Greater China', including China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao, lagging behind, while all of Europe have produced only a third of the publications on China that US-based academics have published. Completely missing are authors from Africa, Spanish-speaking countries, except for Bolivia, and Southeast Asia, except for Singapore.
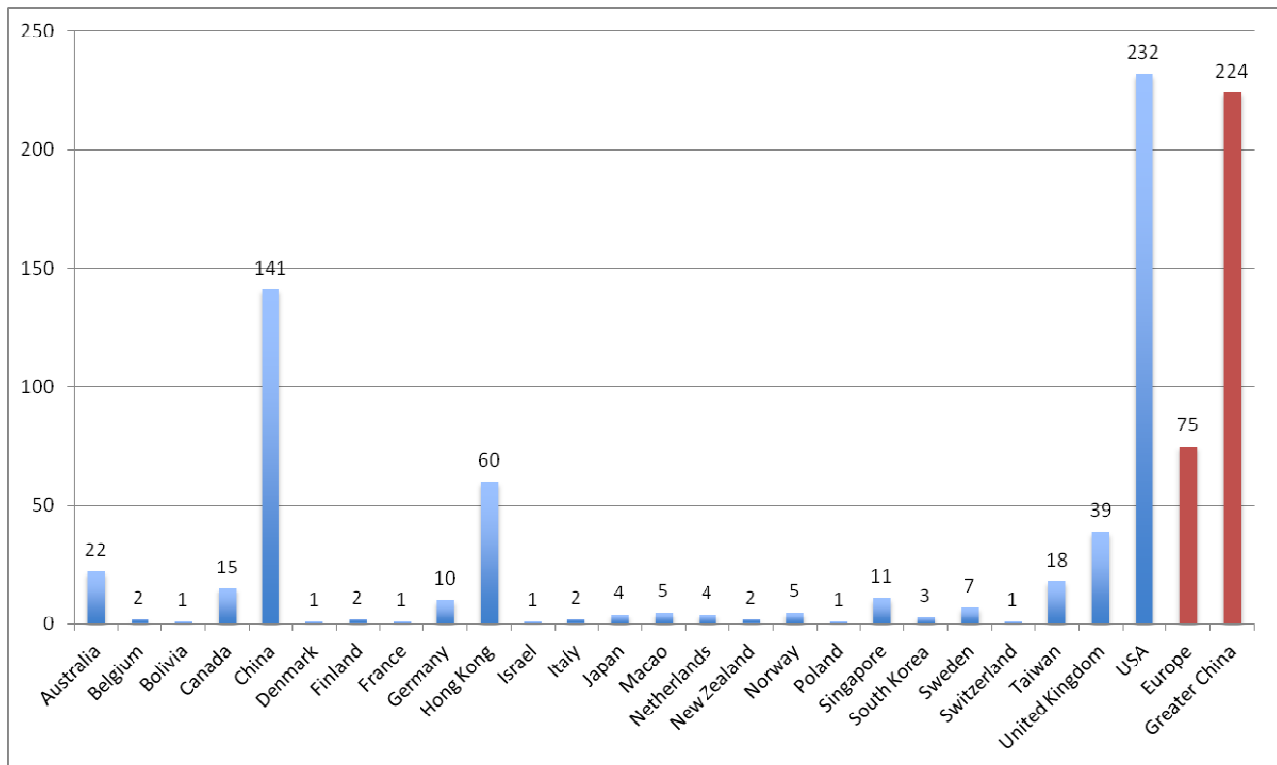
Table 4: Country of affiliation of first author

The data suggests that there are probably several large research communities based in non-English speaking countries outside the scope of this article, without even any significant interaction with the publications studied in this research project. This is supported by a look through the reference lists of studies in the database, which include very limited numbers of references to non-English sources. This is especially worrying considering that this also excludes almost all of the research done on the Chinese Internet in China itself from interacting with English-language discourses on the Internet in China.

The publications in the database suggest that while their authors collect their *data* from Chinese online and offline sources, the *academic discourse* that they represent largely ignores all non-English input, while the authors with a non-English background who do 'cross over' rarely refer to their 'home' communities in their publications.

3   What are we doing?

The 590 publications gathered in a database for this research show that 'Chinese Internet Studies' as a field is on a stable growth trajectory (see table 5), despite minor, occasional setbacks, which could also have been caused by insufficient data, e.g. the dip in publications in 2006 and 2007. After a slow beginning in the early 1990s, the growth in the number of publications appears to follow the growth of the Chinese Internet beginning in 1997, with over a third of all collected publications published since 2009.
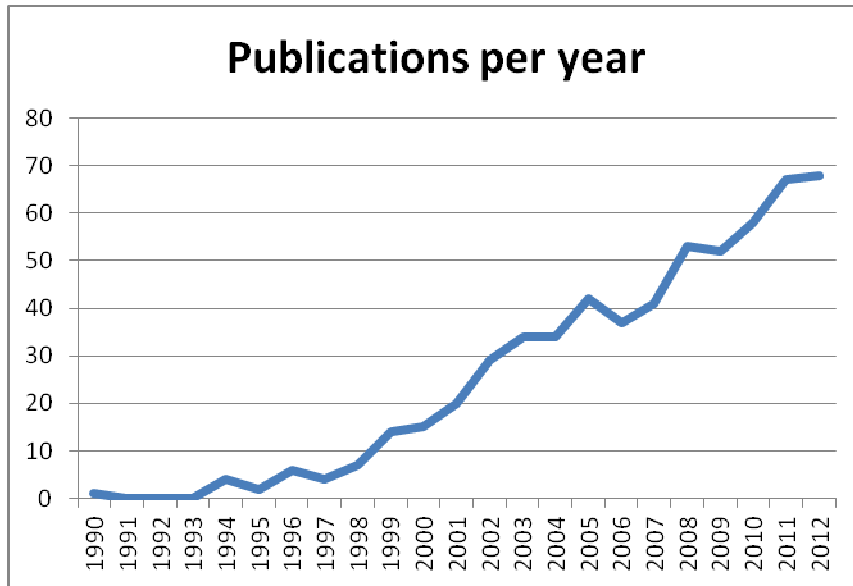
Table 5: Chinese Internet Studies in general

Based on the keywords assigned by the research team, political and social issues dominate the topics discussed in publications about the Chinese Internet, with 37% and 35% of the publications respectively (see table 6). Business-related articles constitute 19% of all articles in the database, while the remaining 9% is almost evenly split between discussions of international issues and articles about either specific theories or the application of methods, in which the choice of the Chinese Internet as the sample studied is almost incidental.
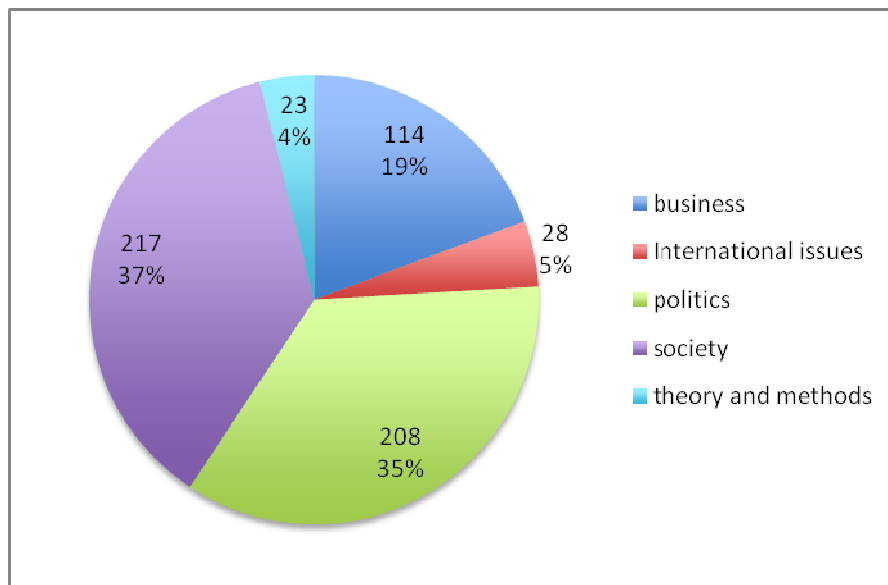

Table 6: Publications by topic area

A look at the largest three topic areas throughout the period under study shows that in general, articles on business-related topics are increasing at a much lower rate than those on politics or social issues (see table 7). Somewhat magnified by an unexplained 'dip' in 2007, the data also shows that only since 2006 have there been more publications on social than on political issues, which dominated between 2000 and 2006.
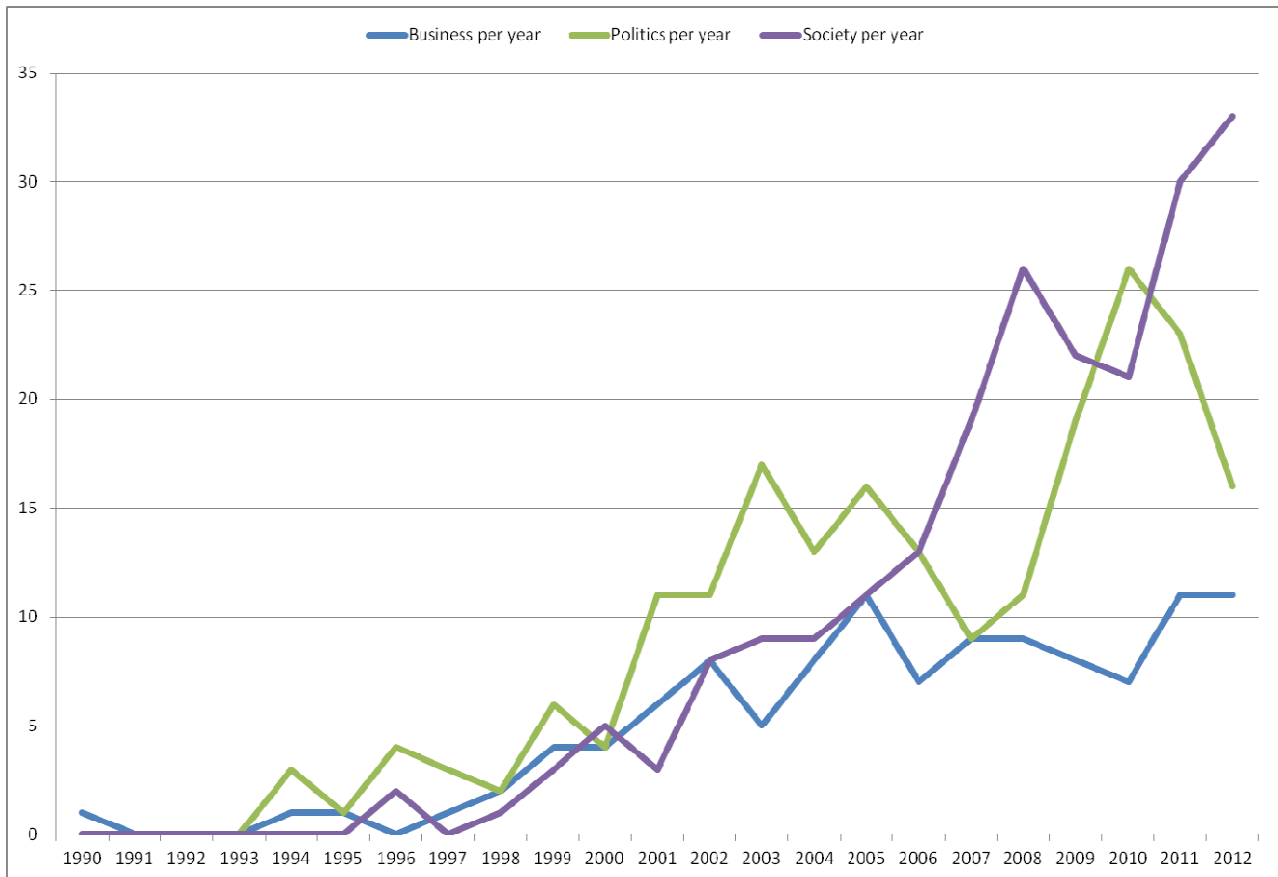

Table 7: Largest three areas by year

Dividing the data into publications by country for the four countries with the highest number of publications, shows that in the USA and the UK researchers focus more on political issues, while in China and Hong Kong more studies were produced discussing social issues not political ones (see table 8). Of additional interest is that of the 30 articles published on psychological issues with the Internet since 2006 (included in 'society' here), all had a first author with a Chinese name.

Table 8: Subject areas in four 'largest' countries

There is a similar, but reverse imbalance when considering publications on the topic of whether or not the Internet will contribute to the emergence of democracy in China (see table 9). In the USA and in the UK, over 85% of the publications discussing political issues have focused on the potential democratisation of China through the use of technology, while just over 50% of those published in China or Hong Kong do so.

	USA	China	Hong Kong	UK
Internet brings democracy	88	17	10	13
Others	13	13	8	2

Table 9: Number of publications on political issues

4   Questions raised by the data

The publications collected by the research team raise a number of issues about the study of the Internet in China that future research might want to address, or at least reflect upon. First among them is the question whether this research area actually exists. Surprisingly, in over 20 years of studies on the Internet in China, there is no firm evidence as yet, whether the Internet in China should be studied separately from the Internet elsewhere.

While Hans-Jürgen Bucher (2004: 427) argues that 'we can indeed speak of a Chinese Internet in China', James Leibold (2011: 14) quotes Evgeny Morozov to conclude that 'a perverse kind of

"digital Orientalism" […] prevents us in the West from asking the same sort of difficult questions about the internet's impact in China that we have long asked ourselves.' He argues – and based on the lack of research in that direction so far, the author of this study concurs:

> [M]ore empirical, comparative, and cross-disciplinary research is required to determine whether Chinese netizens are employing these new platforms in fundamentally different ways from their global counterparts, and the precise implications of these changes. Might the passage of time reveal that the digital activism required to ignite a prairie fire of revolutionary, democratic change in China is being snuffed out by the dull flicker and gentle tapping of millions of isolated, individual computers and their smiley-faced bloggers?

We need more studies that look at how people in China are using the Internet to do what they want to do, i.e. in what *practices* are Internet user in China engaging and how are they constructing their own offline and online lives in relation to these practices (Hobart, 2000: 41f)? To ask a leading question: Is politics and the pursuit of democracy *really* the most important issue for Chinese Internet users, or is it just the most important issue for us researchers?

Another issue raised by the data is of course the lack of interaction between researchers in the database and non-English speaking academic communities. While this may be understandable in the context of 'other' languages, i.e. Spanish, German, French, Swedish, etc., ignoring research published in Chinese by researchers in China is harder to excuse. If we are doing research on China, and on the Internet, then we should be able to find (and read) research published by our academic colleagues in China – such as the articles discussing China's 'star' blogger Han Han, published by Gao and Zhang (2012), Pan (2007), or Xiao (2012), e.g. via the databases offered by cnki.net. Given the fast-growing numbers of Chinese Internet users we keep quoting in our publications, and the over 20 years of research history in our field, we might want to begin incorporating more perspectives from non-English speaking countries into our discourses, especially those from China.

At the end of this paper, the author therefore agrees once more with Randy Kluver and Chen Yang in their conclusion that:

> It has already become clear that […] the experience of the Internet will […] begin to reflect Chinese sensibilities, just as it now embodies primarily Western sensibilities. Thus, Internet studies will need to apply the theoretical and methodological sophistication that has developed over almost a decade of work [over two decades now] to the experiences of the nations that will comprise the next wave of Internet expansion, growth, and transformation. (Kluver, &Yang, 2005: 307)

5   References

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Hobart, M. (2000). *After culture: Anthropology as radical metaphysical critique*. Yogyakarta: Duta Wacana University Press.

Kluver, R., & Yang, C. (2005). The Internet in China: A Meta-Review of Research. *The Information Society, 21*(4), 301-308.

Leibold, J. (2011). Blogging Alone: China, the Internet, and the Democratic Illusion? *The Journal of Asian Studies, 70*(4), 1023-1041.

Pan, L. (2007). 80hou laoshi yu 90hou xuesheng [A teacher born in the 80s and students born in the 90s]. *Qingnian Jiaoshi 7*: 62-64.

Qiu, J. L. (2000). Virtual Censorship in China: Keeping the gate between the cyberspaces. *International Journal of Communications Law and Policy, 4*, 1-25.

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6   Note

There are plans to publish the bibliographic database on which this research is based. This will happen, if not as soon as many – the author included – might hope.