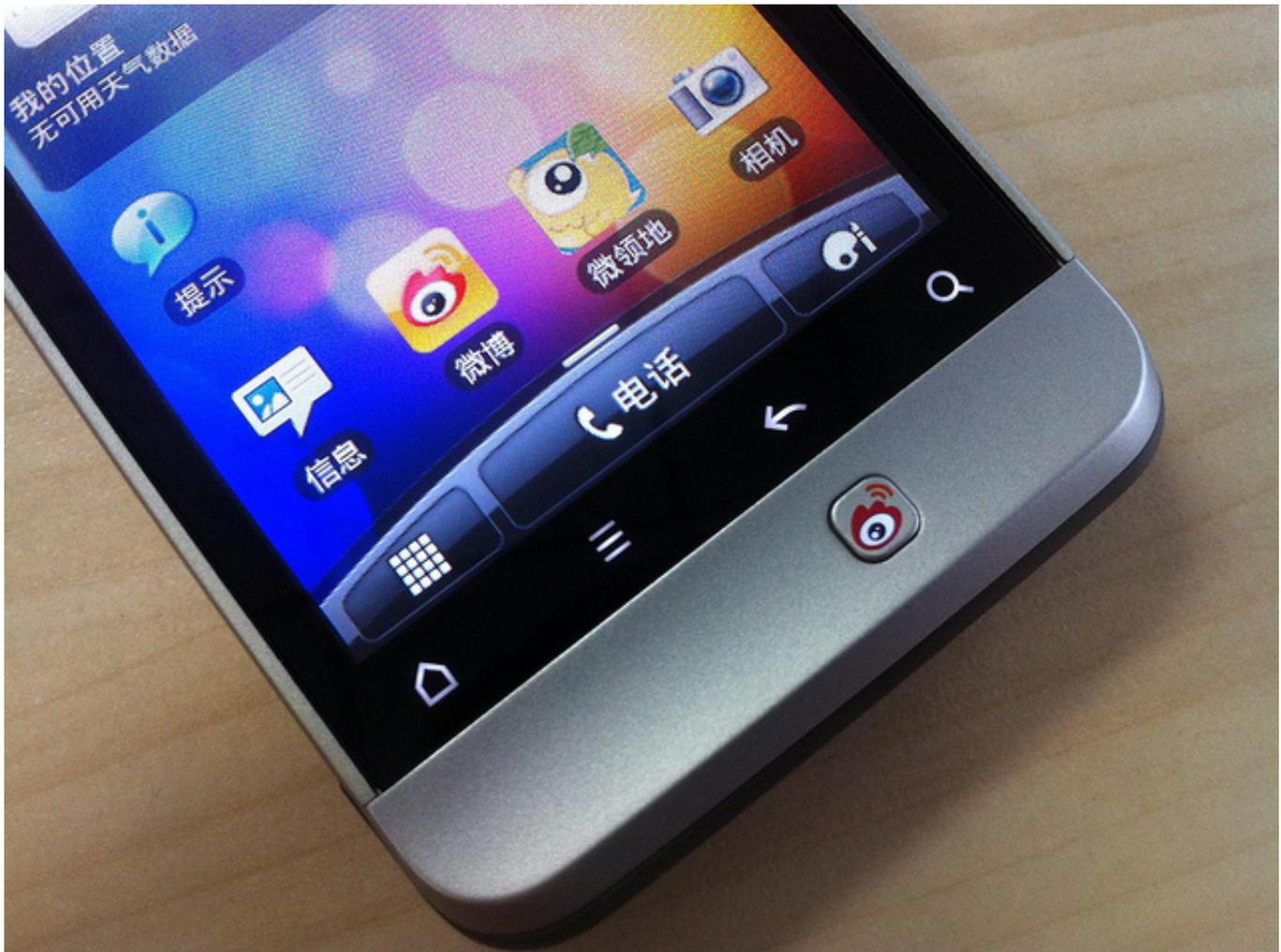


## The way Xi moves: free speech under assault in China

Shi Yige examines different approaches to censorship in China, and argues that while internet controls might avail the leadership in the short term, they are unsustainable.



In China today there are three principal spheres of public opinion: schools, commercialised media and the internet.

In the 1980s schools were a place of intellectual ferment. But following the events of June 4, 1989, schools were unable to recover their former role as centres of thought and expression. More recently, controls on university faculty and instructors have been draconian, applied in two ways. First, there are strict controls on the hiring of qualified teachers, so that those with more independent views find it difficult to enter universities. Second, instructors with contrarian or more active ideas are seen as “dangerous” and actively suppressed — or are otherwise marginalised, as was Xiao Xuehui (???) of Southwest University of Nationalities.

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In some cases, instructors are directly removed, as were [Xia Yeliang](#) (???) of Peking University, [Zhang Xuezhong](#) (???) of Eastern China University of Politics and Law, and [Chen Hongguo](#) (???) of Northwest University of Politics and Law.

Third, controls have been tightened on younger instructors, with assessments, for example, that demand credentials on politics and ideology. Fourth, resources for projects and topics are utilised in order to purchase allegiance, so that scholars everywhere are lining up to be complicit. The first three of these methods form the stick and the last is the carrot.

Where students are concerned, they employ a coordinated set of stability preservation techniques, strictly controlling their speech, associations and gatherings. To this is added the pressures of testing, assessment and career placement, so that students find it almost impossible to create a sphere of free and uninhibited speech. In sum, China's universities are ponds of dead water, and they present no real challenge to authorities.

By commercialised media I mean principally metro newspapers and news magazines. Most representative are those of the Nanfang newspaper group, and also Caijing magazine and Caixin Media.

Commercialised media in China had their so-called golden decade from 1995 to 2005. During this period Chinese glimpsed for the first time what market-oriented media and news reports looked like. Media professionals and the news itself underwent rapid change.

During this decade public opinion was largely in the hands of these commercialised media, aided by the force of the internet. They had real power to set agendas, as we saw in [the Sun Zhigang case](#) and [SARS](#) in 2003. Unfortunately, commercialised media always had a ceiling in the form of a whole system of news controls. What's more, the focus of many market-oriented media was on entertainment over public affairs reporting.

As the internet grew into a dominating force, commercialised media faced pressure from two sides — from worsening press controls on the one hand, and from fast, expansive and, in relative terms, freer web-based platforms on the other. Before they had time to go into full flower, commercial newspapers and magazines were in decline.

The third public opinion sphere, the internet, has developed in four major phases — web forums emerging after the year 2000, blogs emerging after 2005, Weibo emerging after 2009, and WeChat emerging after 2012. In the early phase of each stage of web development, Chinese authorities lacked the experience they needed to apply control, and this meant relative space for expression. This was especially true in the early days of Weibo, which all at once created the fantasy that "[the surrounding gaze](#) can change China."

The golden era of Weibo lasted a short two years from 2009 to 2011. During this time it was

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possible to see just about any public affairs topic imaginable. Major milestones included the [Wenzhou railway crash](#) and the death of [Qian Yunhui](#). As discussion heated up on Weibo, it turned increasingly to issues such as “universal values” (constitutionalism, democracy), which became an emerging social consensus.

After Xi Jinping came to power, he began comprehensively reigning in all spheres of public opinion. First came the single-chop campaign against universal values with the so-called ‘[Seven Don’t Speaks](#).’ Then came a series of combination punches.

The [Southern Weekly incident](#) in January 2013 became justification for an official culling of the media. Southern Weekly became cannon fodder, an old warrior of liberal ideas brought to its knees. Not only has the paper now lost many of its finest journalists, but its reputation as a liberal stalwart has suffered and many intellectuals have abandoned it.

Of course, traditional media present little difficulty to the authorities. They can be brought to heel with tried-and-true methods of media control — through the dictates of the propaganda department and the application of pressure at the management level. Newspapers and magazines are no longer the focus of public opinion control.

We are now also seeing a reassertion of control at universities in China. For example, the [recent remarks by Yuan Guiren](#) (???) , China’s minister of education, about the need to “comprehensively hold [strategic] public opinion positions” through stronger internet controls, emphasising also that school leaders needed “to hold themselves to the strictest standards as socialist politicians and educators”.

And right on the heels of Yuan’s piece in the official People’s Daily came the release of a Party document on the strengthening of ideological and political work among young faculty and other teaching staff.

Much of this noise at China’s universities is just that, a puff of posturing that becomes little more than a bureaucratic exercise. But the more important point is that campuses are not the strategic focus, not the root cause of official anxieties over public opinion control. So far, we can say, attempts to control ideas at China’s universities have been largely successful.

The internet remains the most crucial battleground of public opinion. [Lu Wei](#), the director of China’s State Internet Information Office and a deputy director of the State Council Information Office, has pursued a policy we can characterise as killing the ringleaders to tame the bandits. He has gone after the so-called ‘Big V’ account holders on Sina Weibo, those users, often well-known scholars, lawyers, journalists or businesspeople, who have a huge following and can influence how stories break. These users have had their accounts removed or their posts censored. Some have been “invited to tea,” a euphemism for those involuntary sit-downs with state security thugs. In some cases, users have been detained.

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This increased pressure on internet activity has been supported with judicial interpretations, such as one establishing criminal charges of disturbing public order for cases where “rumours” are passed on 500 times or more on social media.

The overall objective of the Chinese authorities, it seems, is to neutralise those pivotal points in the network that can galvanise debate. The concrete means of achieving this is the strategic targeting of ‘Big V’ accounts combined with a more general culling of opinion within the broader base of users. A round of crackdowns in 2013 had an appreciable affect on ‘Big V’ accounts, with the pall of fear substantially toning down discussion. Many historically active users backed off, censoring themselves. The overall chilling effect was obvious to all.

In fact, the rise of WeChat is not necessarily bad news for the leadership. WeChat is a semi-closed platform, and it cannot drive public debate so easily as Weibo. The only means to a more public identity on WeChat is registration of a public account, but control is exercised actively on these accounts — crossing the line results in immediate account deletion. The public account registered by well-known journalist [Shi Feike](#) was deleted after just a few weeks.

The most recent round of widespread WeChat account deletions makes clear that the authorities are as resolute about WeChat control as they have been about Weibo. In fact, these most recent WeChat account deletions correspond with [the newly-created Internet Security Group](#). Once Xi Jinping became head of the group, State Internet Information Office director Lu Wei was keen to hold up a few examples. More importantly, though, this tells us that the authorities will not tolerate any threat, latent or otherwise, or any unwanted public opinion that has the potential to expand.

But while internet controls might avail the leadership in the short term, they cannot work in the longer term. Ultimately, the desire to control the thoughts of the people, to restrict speech and debate, is like trapping the moon in a well or pursuing the sun over the horizon (or nailing Jell-O to the wall?). Under the broader trends of globalisation, information growth, marketisation and democratisation, the ideas of the public will continue to mature, and when these ideas intersect with real interest conflicts, there is the potential for a mass movement of resistance.

Public opinion controls cannot resolve structural conflicts. For the moment, all of the structural problems in China are glossed over with GDP growth, with breakneck development. As soon as the economy stalls, the government will have to take responsibility for the mess that lies behind. And the methods at its disposal are already diminishing. Over the past twenty years, China’s human rights dividend has been spent, and the land financing model of the past 10 years has reached a dead end.

I think dramatic social conflict is unlikely to happen within the next five years. While the authorities have few methods at their disposal, they do have sufficient means for suppressing dissent — deep pockets, guns and soldiers. For a short time, perhaps, they can continue to draw on their resources to perpetuate the regime of stability preservation.

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But as Xi begins the second half of his term in 2017, the economic contradictions will be even more pronounced, and the resources of stability preservation will be nearly exhausted. When you add to this the internal Party struggles that are likely to come to the fore, it is very possible that China will enter a period of extreme instability.

This article was first published on the [China Media Project](#), a project of the Journalism and Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong. It has been republished here with permission. Shi Yige is a veteran journalist writing under an assumed name.

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