Jacques deLisle, Avery Goldstein, and Guobin Yang (eds)


In this edited volume, deLisle, Goldstein, and Yang bring together leading scholars of media and politics in contemporary China to reflect on the ‘rise of new media’ and the ‘technological, economic, and political change’ (1) it has wrought in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The book manages to successfully balance introductory elements and original research, providing a timely representation of the growing academic field of China internet research. The compendium should appeal to students and researchers alike, though a background in China studies is likely to be necessary to fully benefit from the many PRC-specific debates that the volume touches on.

Thematically, the volume covers three major topics: the internet and civil society (chs 1-3), law and the internet (chs 4-6), and the internet and foreign relations (chs 7-10), preceded by an introductory chapter by the editors. This introduction contextualizes the various contribution, outlines the volume’s agenda, and sets the stage for the individual chapter by placing the focus on the diverse and ‘complex contestations’ that today ‘characterize China’s new media and their interaction with society, policy, and law’ (3). Due to the scope of this endeavour, and the richness of the contributions, this review will first cover each theme separately, summing up the main arguments that the various authors make. It will conclude with reflections on what the book and its contributions might reveal about this rapidly evolving field.

**Civil Society**

The volume’s discussions on the internet and its relevance to Chinese civil society are kicked off by Jiang Min from the University of North Carolina. Much like the editors (3), Jiang raises the question of whether simple dichotomies of dominance vs resistance or state vs society suffice to explain the Chinese situation, arguing instead ‘for a dialectic coevolution of the state and an emerging Chinese civil society mediated via the Internet’ (31). To illustrate this point, Jiang presents a number of intriguing cases of ‘cultural jamming’ that highlight how internet users creatively rework political discourses and iconographies online (34). This includes discussions of the so-called Big-V microblogging celebrities in China (named after the letter ‘V’ that marks their accounts as ‘verified’), of Ai Weiwei’s political art and activism, and of a 2012 meme that
saw numerous social media users post selfies of themselves wearing dark sunglasses – an act meant to raise awareness for the plight of Chen Guangcheng, the blind human rights lawyer who was kept under house arrest by the authorities from 2010 until his high-profile escape to the US in 2012.

Jiang goes on to examine how such acts of resistance or activism contrast with ‘uncivil society online,’ meaning the crude and abusive mud-slinging that frequently accompanies digital interactions in the PRC. Recent clashes between public intellectuals in particular lead Jiang to caution against overly optimistic views of the ‘conducive role’ that the internet might play ‘in the development of China’s emergent civil society’ (41). Instead, she finds that ‘through social media, paid commentators, and self-seeking personalities, abrasive exchanges between ideological factions have propelled the Chinese online space to be more fragmentary, polarized, theatrical, and cynical over time’ (Ibid.). The author rounds off her survey with a discussion of state interventions, specifically the recent clamp-downs against perceived ‘online rumours,’ and she concludes that digital technologies should best be understood as mediators that shape politics based on the complex ‘social, cultural, and political protocols surrounding such technologies’ (48).

Many of these themes re-appear in the subsequent chapter on ‘Connectivity, Engagement, and Witnessing on China’s Weibo,’ written by Marina Svensson, the head of Lund University’s Digital China project. Svensson draws from her extensive experiences on human rights and cultural heritage issues in China to provide a carefully balanced discussion of online activism and its potential effectiveness in China. This includes a review of the debates surrounding ‘clicktivism’ and ‘slacktivism,’ two terms emblematic of the scepticism that is frequently voiced about how meaningful and sustainable online activities really are. At its core, the chapter engages primarily with the question of whether digital practices such as meme-sharing or online petitioning should be considered forms of civic engagement in the first place (59-60). The author also discusses how NGOs deploy digital technologies to reach their target audiences (60-61), how campaigns to raise public awareness become ‘crowd-sources’ (62), how Sina’s microblogging service Weibo has been used for micro-charity work (63), and how ironic cultural commentary and angry indignation have come to shape specific political issues (65-67).

Throughout her assessment, the author remains keenly aware of the controversies that surround such activities, and the fact that they are often criticized as meaningless. Svensson, nevertheless, finds value in such activities. In her assessment, digital technologies afford Chinese media users an unprecedented ability to ‘share sentiments and concerns that before were hidden from the public view or only shared among trusted friends’ (60). While often subtle,