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Social Media: Tool for Social Good or Aid to Slacktivism?

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Introduction

The amount of information discussing China now found online has grown considerably over the last several decades. While we hope that this growth is creating a proportionately greater understanding of China, this does not necessarily follow. Understanding China has long been a serious challenge for Westerners in general and for Americans in particular.

China has often been for the West the “Other”—viewed not so much for what it truly is, but rather as that which we ourselves are not. China is often presented simply as a cautionary example: “Sure, China has great economic growth, unlike the U.S. recently, but China does not have freedom of religion, so there is nothing to be learned from it!” is the sort of twisted trope that is often encountered.

This function of China as the “other” has been supported by a systematic set of stereotypes about Asia, often termed “Orientalism.” Orientalism presents Asia, including China, in terms that in the past functioned to justify Western dominance as appropriate and necessary because China was afflicted with an entire constellation of negative characteristics such as backwardness, incompetence, and corruption. Obviously, if these attributions were ever justified, they are no longer appropriate in this era of rapid increases in Chinese economic strength.

The fact that it has long been difficult to understand China, however, is not to say that it is impossible. Materials dealing with China are now more easily available than ever before, many of which can be found online.

In this editorial we consider first the issue of the quantity of materials concerning China now available and their quality. We conclude by introducing WWW sites and materials that the reader may find useful in constructing his or her own understanding of China.

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1 A very good discussion of Edward Said, the name most associated with the notion of Orientalism, from his book by that same name, can be found at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orientalism_%28book%29
Is there now more information on China?

To test our belief that much more information is now available on China, we relied primarily on a search of the digital materials published by *The New York Times*, simply because we have regularly used it for our own research (and hence understand its layout and general approach to the news) and because its search functions permit considerable variation on search terms and on the time period searched.  

This is not an ideal or exhaustive search, because we know that the news space in the NYT, as extensive as it is relative to other newspapers, is in fact limited relative to ad space, etc. Only a small fraction of potential news and information about China can appear in the NYT. However, even this basic and limited tool is very useful.

To begin, we first ran a simple search on the occurrence of the term “China” in the NYT over the past several decades:

By decades:

- From 1/1981-12/1990 there were total 19,773 occurrences of articles in which the word “China” appeared.
- From 1/1991-12/2000 there were 24,728 occurrences.
- From 1/1/2001-12/31/2010 there were 45,800 occurrences.

These numbers suggest more than a doubling from 1981-1990 to 2001-10; by far the biggest increase came during the decade 2001-2010. From this it is easy to conclude that yes, there is much more information available about China than was the case in the past several decades, and that the amount may be increasing rapidly at present.

Just as an indication of the total volume of material on China vis-à-vis our own sample, let’s compare the NYT production of digital material on China during 2010 to that of the Internet as a whole as indicated by a Google search. The NYT had 5800 references (primarily in article headings) to China over the past year. The same search (“China”, past year) turns up 3,580,000,000 English language Internet pages with the same word. So the NYT China-related content is a very small fraction of the total. While we have not demonstrated this, it also seems

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2 This sort of content search might seem a very impressionistic and uncertain means of assessing public concerns, but it is a time-honored methodology in scholarship and often yields very interesting and useful results; we believe it does so here. In Chinese Studies, see such works as Harold Roberts Isaacs, Scratches on our minds: American images of China and India (1958), and the many works of Richard W. Steele. See also the Pew databases at: 
http://pewglobal.org/database/?indicator=24&survey=6&response=Favorable&mode=chart
reasonable to assume that the total content on the Internet has also grown substantially over the past several decades.

Now that we have demonstrated that yes, there is more information available on China than ever before (at least in the NYT) let us now see what might be useful to a concerned student of China. What are the various ways of using the WWW to increase our understanding?

Our methodology here is again a very simple one; we are listing materials with which we are personally familiar, or those which have been recommended by professionals in the field, most often by Clare Richardson-Barlow and her friends from the graduate programs at the Monterey Institute of International Studies or at Tsinghua University in Beijing.

We have broken the resources discussed here into categories below. However, these categories are somewhat artificial. Many sites incorporate a wide variety of media, including text, video, blogs, commenting systems, etc.

**News Sites**

**The New York Times:** [http://www.nytimes.com/](http://www.nytimes.com/) The NYT is, unfortunately, currently groping for a business model that might enable it to benefit from its status as “America’s Newspaper of Record.” This includes, sadly, charging for digital access. But a registered reader can still get a number of free stories per month. Nonetheless, the NYT remains the single largest source of material on China.  

In following the NYT, however, some stories seem to me to be more balanced than others. Some have argued that the NYT sometimes “frames” China stories in a manner that places news events in contexts which are themselves political, even when discussing seemingly apolitical events such as SARS, flood or earthquake relief, etc. Always read any material from any source with a very critical perspective. If the information is important to you, then be sure to get differing views.

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See also [http://www.overcomingbias.com/2010/01/china-bashing.html](http://www.overcomingbias.com/2010/01/china-bashing.html).


**Huffington Post:** [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/) A major source of digital news and opinions. It frequently leads major stories before they hit print. Free; run searches on China, Taiwan, etc.


**The Epoch Times:** [http://www.theepochtimes.com/](http://www.theepochtimes.com/) This is the newspaper of the Falun Gong movement, a banned group in China. To most Americans, this is an issue of religious freedom. To the Chinese government, the organization is a dangerous cult. To me, it is both the above and also a typical millenarian Buddhist pyramid scam. For the most critical views of China, go here.

English-language newspapers with strong Chinese views from “Greater China” which includes Hong Kong, Singapore, and Chinese communities overseas such as Malaysia, etc.

**The China Daily:** [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/index.html](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/index.html) The China Daily is closely controlled by the CPC (Chinese Communist Party) and is clearly a subjective source. For those of us who have been reading such Chinese sources for many years (Since 1965 in my particular case). it is much more open, and readable than such Chinese sources have ever been. It is most useful as a sort of gauge as to how the Chinese are responding to issues, both international and internal to China. It is also useful for the close student of China to always ask the question, “Now how could the Chinese possibly come to these conclusions...?”

The China Daily has interactive sections where you can read comments by Chinese (and foreign readers) on the news and even post your own views. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2011-05/20/content_12550029.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2011-05/20/content_12550029.htm)
The China Economic Review: http://newcer.chinaeconomicreview.com/ began in the United Kingdom and then was purchased by Hong Kong and Chinese interests. It draws on a large number of Western perspectives and is usually thought of as relatively independent in its views.

China Today: http://www.chinatoday.com/ Chinese portal to many English language sources; it also aggregates materials on China from Western sources.

April Media: http://en.m4.cn/ is a very interesting, clearly and strongly nationalist media site operated by a graduate of Beijing’s prestigious Tsinghua University. It is provocative and opinionated. Read it!
http://en.m4.cn/archives/9136.html

South China Morning Post: Out of Hong Kong, the SCMP is one of the most reliable voices on Greater China, which includes China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore and other overseas Chinese communities. See it at:
http://www.scmp.com/portal/site/SCMP/
(it carries a free 14-day trial after which it is about four U.S. dollars per month.)

Xinhua: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english2010/ Xinhua is another official Chinese English-language source. Again, when reading it, you must understand that it is both an official Chinese source and simultaneously a useful window into Chinese opinions.
Sino Daily http://www.sinodaily.com/ has a variety of specialized sites dealing with agriculture, space technology, with Chinese and Western points of view.

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News Aggregators:

These are sites that collect links to stories appearing other places. Sometimes these are “pushed” to your desktop, other times, you go to them as useful portal sites.

**Asia Chronicle:** [http://asianchronicle.com/](http://asianchronicle.com/) It aggregates news dealing with Asia. The World News (WN) Network was founded in 1995 and launched online in 1998, with the primary objective of being the most comprehensive, one-stop news resource on the Internet. Today, World News has over 20,000 global thematic and regional news sites.

**UN Wire:** [http://www.unfoundation.org/our-solutions/campaigns/un-wire/](http://www.unfoundation.org/our-solutions/campaigns/un-wire/) A daily email digest of issues facing the U.N. It is free and can be targeted to your particular interests. It aggregates news stories from the international press.


More Specialized Periodicals such as scholarly journals and research reports:


**US Chamber of Commerce:**

**Stratfor:** at [http://www.stratfor.com/](http://www.stratfor.com/) This is an independent think tank which delivers daily updates with an emphasis upon military, economic, and political developments. There is a free one week access which would let you decide if this is a useful investment for you. [http://www.stratfor.com/stratfor_search?s=china](http://www.stratfor.com/stratfor_search?s=china)


**Devex:** [http://www.devex.com/en/](http://www.devex.com/en/) An international development group; the site has a good job search and resume posting. It is also a networking site and is free.

**Eurasia Group:** [http://www.eurasiagroup.net/](http://www.eurasiagroup.net/) It treats business and politics as linked. Many free reports and daily stories from the world press, more services for paying clients

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**Foreign Affairs**: http://www.foreignaffairs.com/ The leading liberal journal on foreign affairs with limited access for major pieces, but lots of interesting short notices. Digital subscription is $32.00 per year and includes 50 years of archives.

**The McKinsey Quarterly**: https://www.mckinseyquarterly.com/
A research group, which does wonderful brief reports. See for example, on Chinese Internet Users: https://www.mckinseyquarterly.com /Segmenting_Chinas_digital_consumers_2795

**NWCC The Northwest China Council**, which sponsors many events in the Pacific Northwest and has many resources available to members is found at: Organization that sponsors many events in the Pacific Northwest and has many resources available to members, is found at: http://www.nwchina.org/

**Pew Research Center**: http://pewresearch.org/ You may not find this site useful very often, but when it is useful, it can be very useful indeed, as it does constant opinion sampling on a wide variety of topics. We use it quite frequently. You will find years of specialized reports free and downloadable as PDFs.

**World Politics Review**: http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/ or http://about.worldpoliticsreview.com/overview/ A very broad site with a great deal of Asian information and daily newsletters for media stories you can sign up to receive. See for example this aggregation of new stories focusing on cyberspace in Asia: http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/issues/14/media-and-communications Free trial or 99 USD annually

**Wiley-Blackwell**: http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/Brand/id-35.html Major publishing house with a great catalogue with specialized titles dealing with China and many other topics.
Blogs

Note — Many “Chinese” blogs are written by foreigners living in China, “expats” or expatriates. Sometimes these are insightful and useful; often they are cynical, even hostile and very snarky.

**ChinaSmack**: [http://www.chinasmack.com/](http://www.chinasmack.com/) is a media portal that focuses on Internet-related issues and pop culture in China. It is often “R” rated and the layout is rather chaotic, but it has excellent archives and searches can often turn up surprising perspectives of Chinese Netizens. See, for example, the discussion on the death of Bin Laden, found at: [http://www.chinasmack.com/2011/stories/osama-bin-laden-dead-chinese-netizen-reactions.html](http://www.chinasmack.com/2011/stories/osama-bin-laden-dead-chinese-netizen-reactions.html)

**The Peking Duck**: [http://www.pekingduck.org/](http://www.pekingduck.org/) While I am not too familiar with this one, I liked its broad coverage and apparent objectivity.

**China Blog List**: [http://www.chinabloglist.org/](http://www.chinabloglist.org/) for an extensive list of English-language blogs written (usually) by English speaking expatriates. Want to know what they think about any given topic? Ask them!

**Cryptogram Bruce Schneier**: [http://www.schneier.com/crypto-gram.html](http://www.schneier.com/crypto-gram.html) Blogs and emails dealing with security issues, particularly cybersecurity. Good, even even analysis.

**Twitter Sites**

Like all Twitter feeds, you may find these mindlessly irrelevant or exactly what interests you...

**Sinofinance**: [http://twitter.com/#!/sinofinance](http://twitter.com/#!/sinofinance) twitter feeds.

**The Sino Gglaste Twitter**: [http://twitter.com/#!/thesinoglance](http://twitter.com/#!/thesinoglance)

**DTN Asia Twitter**: [http://twitter.com/#!/DTNAsia](http://twitter.com/#!/DTNAsia)

**DigitalFellows Twitter**: [http://twitter.com/#!/wisat/digitalfellows](http://twitter.com/#!/wisat/digitalfellows) Twitter feed re digital content business from technology to consumer behavior.
Learning Chinese Online

The Oregon Virtual Education Center has created a site for teaching Chinese language on line. This will be the first run of the class, go to the above site to learn more. http://www.orved.org/content/chinese-language-classes-start-fall

Mandarin tools — Twitter and web resource http://www.mandarintools.com/ A very comprehensive site for learning Chinese on line. Some very sophisticated tools for all levels and all purposes. The Chinese dictionary and flash card training program (for smart phones) comes highly recommended. Trial account.


A nice site: http://www.aaronpinero.com/mandarin/learning/34-apps/60-dianhua-dicitonary discusses online dictionaries and advanced use of the iPhone for studying Chinese.

http://www.appolicious.com/curated-apps/172-best-mandarin-chinese-learning-apps This is also a nice site for iPhone users.

Chinese Learn Online at: http://www.chineselearnonline.com/ver1/ I have no experience with this site, but I am impressed by the apparent ease of use and think the podcasts an excellent tool. It has a number of free lessons available so you should be able to try it and make your own decision as to whether or not it works for you.
Cyberwar and China

Interface: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/ In the e-journal Interface of the Berglund Center for Internet Studies, which I edit, I often review works concerning cyberwar issues or write about them myself. See http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/search.php and run searches cyberwar and cyber war.

Conclusion

We hope that our audience will find the materials and sites discussed here useful. It is very important to remember, however, one of the grave dangers of Internet research: it is all too easy to confine oneself to a university of data and opinions about which we are very positive because they agree with our existing prejudices. It is very important to read a wide variety of opinions and of resources lest we become like the frog living in a well described by Mao Zedong: “He thinks the sky is only as big as the top of the well. If he surfaced, he would have an entirely different view.” ⁵ All serious students of China must try continually to examine the wider sky of opinions, both Chinese and American.

⁵ http://thinkexist.com/quotation/we_think_too_small-like_the_frog_at_the_bottom_of/153576.html