

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

During the 2003 outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in China, I was segregated from the outside world for several months. To avoid possible contagion of the disease, all activities on university campuses like mine were called off. For the first time, surfing the web became a “full-time job” for students. Confined in my dorm, I worked remotely as a part-time translator for Sina, the then dominant news portal in China, while frequenting bulletin board systems to gather information about life in the US. As was later acknowledged in the Chinese media, SARS cultivated a special emotional attachment to the Internet for a large number of Chinese. This is not only because online media challenged the state’s initial cover-up of SARS, but also because this moment of national crisis fostered a strong sense of community among early netizens. I am one of them.

Nine years later, I developed my emotional ties to the Chinese Internet into a research project. For her support throughout this project, I am deeply indebted to my advisor, Sung-Sheng Yvonne Chang. Her unflagging enthusiasm for this project, commitment to the highest standards, and guidance during different stages of my writing have continuously inspired me. I also benefited immensely from the wisdom of Janet Staiger, Kirsten Cather, Madhavi Mallapragada, and Huaiyin Li. Their words of encouragement and invaluable insights throughout the development of this project were sincerely appreciated.

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As I neared the completion of this book in March 2020, the global coronavirus pandemic was posing severe challenges to all walks of life, on a much broader scale than did SARS. Since the SARS outbreak in 2003, the digital ecosystems in China have changed drastically, due in part to the proliferation of social media platforms, the dominance of mobile applications, and ever-changing user demographics. Started in the mid-1990s as an alternative space, the Chinese Internet today showcases the enhanced corporate management of user-generated content, the prominent visibility of state actors online, and the development of a full-fledged model of e-commerce. Internet users researching COVID-19 find themselves embroiled in endless battles to access relevant information and discern truth from rumor. Pandemic-inspired measures such as border controls, suspended flights, and lockdowns further impede the essential ideas of mobility and utopianism promised by technological modernization. However, despite all the chaos and political strife, the world is more closely connected than ever before. An endorsement of global solidarity and human dignity is perhaps the only way to get out of these predicaments and future ones. Digital technologies contribute to this process in no small way.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE CHINESE INTERNET

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