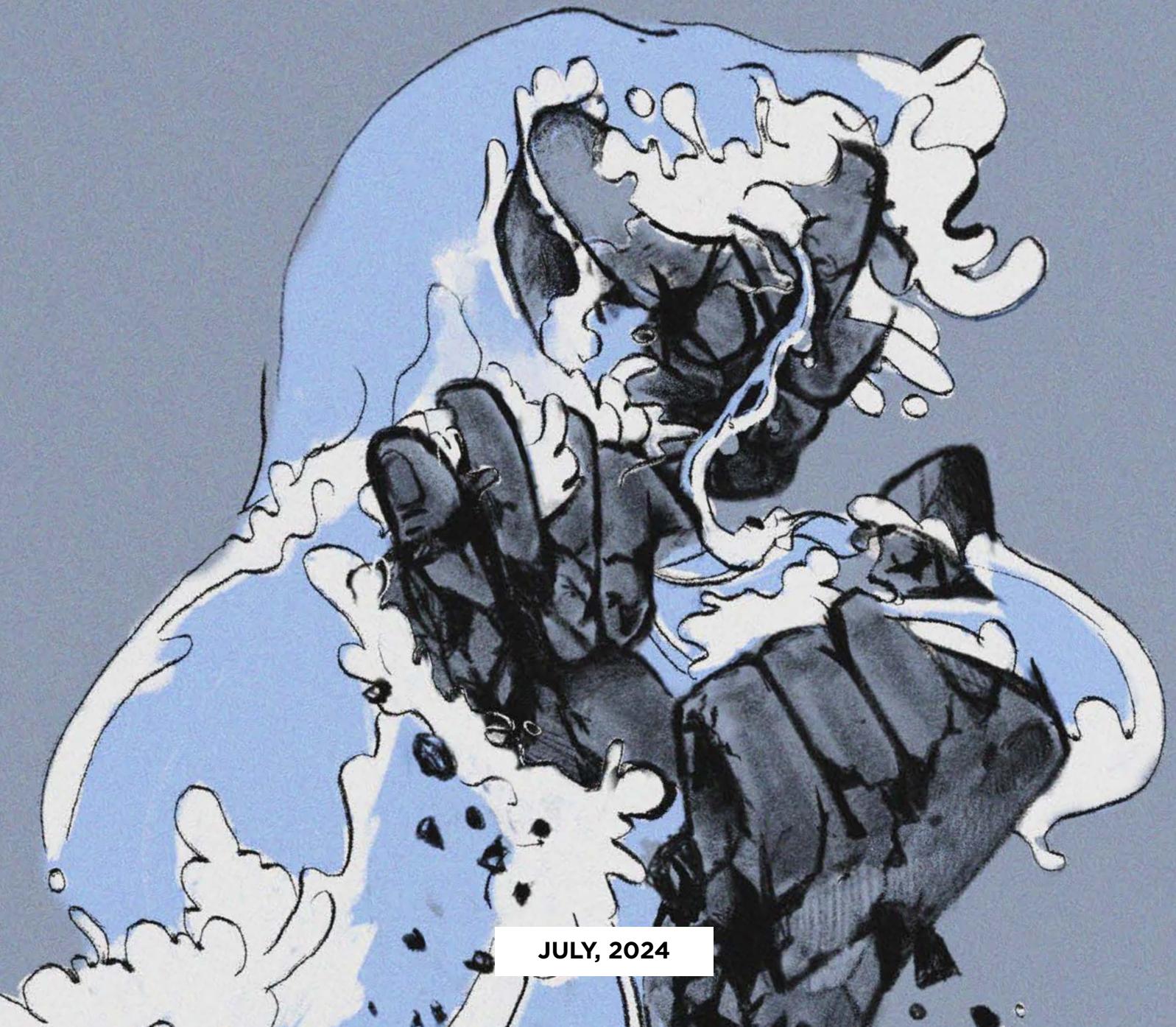


Being Water/ Taking Action

*Internet Freedom and Activism by Another Name from the
Chinese Youth Community Perspective*

BY AUSTIN HUANG



JULY, 2024

Author's Note

Special thanks to the Chinese action-takers who inspired this report, shared their experiences, and are still taking actions toward a better society.

The report is my personal memo from an era of deterioration for civic participation in China during the late 2010's and, I hope, a new step toward bridging gaps between Chinese youth and the internet freedom community. It is also a journey inviting you to walk in the shoes of those action-takers, feel their hopes and fears, and see the world through their eyes, then to observe your own role in internet freedom narratives, and take action from your new perspective.

What started as more of a documentary was eventually remodeled into a fictional drama in a fictional city that also serves as a user experience report. Field experience and interviews were converted into stories that depict action-takers' mentality in detail, while preserving their anonymity. An analysis section offers a framework for linking your own work to the stories. Then a candid epilogue presents reflections on Western-centric power dynamics.

“Be Water” is the slogan I borrowed from the Hong Kong protestors. My wish is that every one of us can flow and be resilient together, like water, no matter how harsh the circumstances might be.

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Table of Contents

I. Preface	1
II. Introduction	3
III. Urban Youth and Development Crises	5
IV. A Day in the Life of an Ordinary Girl	7
V. “Not Dark Yet”	15
1. Tammy Drinks Tea: Keeping the Cops in the Loop	15
2. Urban Village: A Way to Help the Community	17
3. Our Next Meeting: Planning a Hackathon	19
4. A City Clerk, an Uncomfortable Encounter	22
5. Mark in the Dark: The Power of Street Smarts	23
6. Hot Pot Reunion: Good Friends in Bad Times	25
7. Emergency Tea: Negotiating with Authorities	27
8. The Hackathon: An Ordinary Girl Has an Idea	28
9. Six Months Later	33
VI. Analysis and Opportunities	34
Takeaways	41
VII. Reflections	42
VIII. Appendices	46

I. Preface

**What was the first thing you did when you saw this report?
Did you take a screenshot or save the webpage as PDF?
Did you download the PDF and then rename the file?**

If you didn't, congratulations! You probably are not living under an authoritarian regime. If you did, you are not alone. In China, it's normal to assume web content could be removed or blocked at any time. Such assumptions are the default.

This report seeks to capture that mentality among Chinese youth for readers in the internet freedom community outside China, and to ask how we can design our programs and tools informed by the lived experience of people in authoritarian states.

For instance, most of the discussion regarding China in the internet freedom community has been focused on circumvention tools and encrypted messaging. Many developers and funders ask for the latest updates of technology and politics "on the ground," such as which app is blocked or which app is safe. However, as the political controls can be drastically tightened at any moment, any snapshot of technology usage could be outdated in 10 minutes.

Another blind spot in outside perceptions of China is the role of small informal groups in supporting their communities. Though it doesn't go under the name of activism, and the people involved may not think of

themselves as activists, there are pockets of community action throughout China, especially in the cities. And though they may keep some of their opinions to themselves, the actions they take are often visible.

For some educated urban Chinese youth, such actions are driven by networks, not by single leaders who see themselves as political actors, nor by formal organizations or NGOs. To support such network-driven initiatives, these communities rely on tools besides the circumvention or encryption tools that are the most common concern of the international internet freedom community. One interviewee said, "Tools are not the point. We are building decentralized networks, so that when one node fails, the network stays robust. The same applies to tool usage. Each tool is just a tool that we can't totally rely on because it may fail at any time. Be fluid and strong, like water."

So this is not a story about digital security, or even internet freedom, in the usual sense. These communities are not primarily looking for basic access or total anonymity. The priority is to reach out to more people. They want to build robust and resilient networks that have impact in their own spheres of influence, often locally, but sometimes even about national issues. They may not even say they are seeking greater freedoms or human rights. Many of them work on a variety of social issues without referencing "freedom" or challenging the regime. In fact, many such projects have operated in the context of the mainstream narratives promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Poverty reduction, for instance, is a common focus of these community-based actions and also fully aligns with national policy priorities.

With their focus on action and change, not disruption or disobedience, members of these groups often refer to themselves as “action-takers” (xingdongzhe 行动者), a term that avoids any radical connotations and honors anyone who’s taking action to make a difference.

With their focus on action and change, not disruption or disobedience, members of these groups often refer to themselves as “action-takers” *xingdongzhe* 行动者, a term that avoids any radical connotations and honors anyone who’s taking action to make a difference. (For a Glossary of all highlighted terms, see Appendix C.)

This same pragmatism leads action-taker communities to jump from platform to platform, tool to tool, depending on the sensitivity of their project and the communication needs of each group at the moment.

They may communicate and launch their campaigns mainly on highly censored public platforms, since their goal is to reach more audiences. Many consider this an inevitable risk. After all, the safest way is to do nothing, as one interviewee put it. So action-takers decide on trade-offs case by case, including ongoing interaction and negotiation with the authority whenever necessary.

This report puts the reader in the shoes of those Chinese action-takers and internet users, to walk you through a range of scenarios from their varied perspectives.

The report begins with an introduction and notes on the economic and cultural context for youth in Chinese cities, then presents detailed scenarios about censorship, action-taking, and technology choices in the form of two fictional stories. We then provide analysis in support of the fictional scenarios, reflections on the report process and findings, and some basic takeaways for the internet freedom community. The report appendices include

further descriptions of action-takers’ technology habits, references, and additional resources about the products, platforms, and trends mentioned, notes on interview protocols for a more restrictive environment, and a glossary of key Chinese terms used.

To explore these realities in China—and the associated user behaviors—we’re asking you to get rid of the most popular frameworks for thinking about digital activism, technology needs, and the fight for internet freedom. Then, we want to invite you to explore approaches to networked thinking, community collaboration, and what they mean for future technology support and technology design.

This report is a snapshot reflecting events and field experience during the three to five years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews were conducted with more than a dozen action-takers from six of China’s largest cities. The report focuses exclusively on the context of more professional and middle class youth communities in large cities. (Notably, the findings should not be used as a reference regarding rural areas, autonomous regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet, or Macau and Hong Kong.)

Many features of the action-taker landscape are likely still applicable today, while some will be quite different due to shifts in technology, politics, and most importantly the changing restrictions imposed by the Chinese authority. Either way, the author hopes these lessons and modalities can inform a roadmap for supporting action-takers both in China and in other contexts with comparable restrictions.

II. Introduction

There are two main assumptions implicit in Western internet freedom work that this report seeks to challenge:

- **The first is only seeing narratives of human rights and anti-authoritarian activists.** Many young action-takers in China would completely avoid calling themselves activists. Their narratives and actions are not directly linked to anti-censorship, but grounded in other forms of social good. (After all, anti-authoritarian campaigns cannot solve poverty.)
- **The second is a narrow view of digital security as an individual's access to the “free” internet, to non-censored devices, or to encrypted communications.** In China, it would be impossible to create any wide social impacts without relying on some of the highly censored Chinese platforms.

Although the information ecosystem in China is almost a closed loop, and virtually all content on Chinese servers is censored, many people retain some agency in their digital lives, both as consumers and as communities. It is common to use a hybrid of domestic censored services, non-domestic services, encrypted services, and offline content sharing. People’s use of these methods depends on their technical capacities and also on the sensitivity of the work that they do. Some just want to watch Korean dramas, or do research outside the Great Firewall. Others may be more engaged in social issues—but even those groups often stay inside “the red lines,” following the government’s narratives on the content they view or post.

Despite the limitations of the Chinese ecosystem, many groups conduct real work on social and civic issues. Such groups are continually emerging and dispersing in China, online and offline. They focus on social good for themselves and for others – even though the government doesn’t strictly allow for this type of action. Their members are predominantly tech savvy youth; digital natives.

Over the past decade, a range of these self-organized youth communities have seen real impacts from their work on social issues such as working conditions, gender equality, environmental protection or education. These communities do not operate through individual leaders or as formal organizations. Their members aren’t “human rights activists” and have no desire to be seen as such. They are, instead, “action-takers.”

This report illustrates how young action-taker communities work in a collaborative model based on network strength and resiliency. These groups are defined by their ability to adapt and persist in the authoritarian context. In response to their political and operational realities, they have learned to be fluid in their tactics, similar to “be water”—the Bruce Lee fighting philosophy adopted by GenZ activists during the protests in Hong Kong and Chile in 2019.¹

That adaptability extends to action-takers’ technology usage as well as their approach to membership and organizing.

For international groups seeking a holistic approach to internet freedom in China, it is important to understand the diversity of user needs, the unpredictability of the authoritarian regime, and the pragmatic choices that

¹ Emanuel, L. (Dec 27, 2019). A year of resistance: The global spread of civil disobedience. *The Telegraph*. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/global-protests-2019/>

action-takers and regular consumers make in their daily lives. However, most foreign-sponsored digital training programs have a narrow focus on privacy and security. Traditional internet freedom work imagines organizations and political activists as the primary user, overlooking these lower profile action-takers whose needs included convenient and safe collaboration tools, not just secure direct messaging options or circumvention tools.

It is common to use a hybrid of domestic censored services, non-domestic services, encrypted services, and offline content sharing. Some people just want to watch Korean dramas, or do research outside the Firewall.

The report began as user research to help inform product development for internet freedom tools. In order to give international readers a fuller picture of these users, we have created two fictional scenarios, instead of more traditional individual “personas.” These more fully developed user stories illustrate how young people encounter technology and censorship day by day, and how action-taker

communities use a range of technologies, working both discreetly and in plain sight.

By focusing on the technology habits of action-taker communities, the report seeks to close that gap in the internet freedom community’s understanding of the Chinese context. Only then can we ask, What is distinctive in the tech needs of this community? What do they require, what tools and product development processes can support them best, and, as importantly, how can the lessons from the Chinese context carry over into other country settings?

III. Urban Youth and Development Crises

Before we enter the stories of action-takers, we should take a look at the social-economic challenges Chinese youth are facing, more than just censorship and surveillance. One is the aftermath of fast urbanization.

As China's economy took off in the late 1980's, the country experienced rapid urbanization. By 2001, 37.66% of the population lived in cities. By 2021, the figure had almost doubled to 63.89%; over 900 million urban dwellers.² The difference of city and countryside is defined strictly by laws as CCP started from supporting "farmers and workers" and maintains the tradition of Chinese empires to control floating population. All citizens are assigned as either a resident of a specific city or a rural resident of a village, which decides the qualification of all social welfare, travel permits, education and real estate licenses etc. This very specific household registration system of the population is called *hukou* 户口.

The CCP's tradition to test new policies in limited cities also enlarges the gap between the wealthy coastal cities and inland villages away from world trade routes. As a

result, millions of domestic migrant workers *nongmingong* 农民工 flood to the cities without a city resident qualification and thus are excluded and marginalized from many urban policies.

Even without the strict *hukou* registration system, it is not easy to accommodate such a large population flooding to a city. And surging urban expansion has led to disruptive new development, new waves of demolition and sometimes conflicts between the two. "Urban villages" *chengzhongcun* 城中村 emerge as migrant workers flock to the outskirts of booming cities, or as city expansion absorbs rural villages which are then scheduled for demolition to make way for modernization efforts.³ Domestic migrants in these villages face a particular risk because without a local *hukou* they will have no chance for compensation when they relocate.

The difficulties of the urban village is the topic we set for our fictional action-taker community, Neverland, to work on. Please remember, wealth inequality, rural-urban divides, tensions between central and local governments, declining GDP growth, rising unemployment, a rapidly aging society, a convoluted education system, are all areas of "disintegration" that cannot be solved simply through more freedom of expression. All these problems have contributed to increases in CCP censorship and surveillance as a means to ensure social stability.⁴

2 Urbanization data retrieved from Xinhua Wang on Sep. 27, 2021. https://web.archive.org/web/2021103095610/http://www.news.cn/video/sjxw/2021-08/05/c_1211316706.htm

3 Chu, N., Litzinger, R., Wang, M. & Zhu, Q.; Guest Editors' Introduction: The Urban In-Between. *positions* 1 August 2022; 30 (3): 411-427. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-9723646>

4 He, Q. & Cheng, X. 何清漣、程曉農 (2017) :中國潰而不崩 [China: Crumbling but not Collapsing], 台灣:八旗文化 <https://www.kobo.com/tw/zh/ebook/Z6yfJY5OkDeblWEsOndow>

Wealth inequality, rural-urban divides, rising unemployment, and a convoluted education system are all areas of “disintegration,” that cannot be solved simply through more freedom of expression. All these problems have contributed to increases in CCP censorship and surveillance.

Putting on the Chinese government’s hat, they want to improve the situation as well—probably not in a democratic way, but they at least attempt to address these issues through national policies. That shared interest between the authority and community members creates a grey area for action-takers to pursue their social good agenda and “follow” the party’s teaching at the same time.

Furthermore, China is a country way too huge, diverse, and complicated to be ruled with total efficiency, despite foreign narratives. It is an authoritarian regime, but it is also a vast bureaucratic system. Along with dozens of ethnicities and varied local attitudes, government policies and policy implementations differ from province to province. Policies in the capital or some provinces may not be implemented nationwide, yet. Policy experimentation at the city level has been a party practice since Reform and Opening in 1986.⁵

This variability not only disagrees with typical foreign narratives about China, it has also allowed us to protect our research interviewees by mixing experiences from the six largest cities into fictional stories, to help elaborate the mentality and technology usage of young action-takers.

5 Zhou, C. & Xiao, B. (December 1, 2018). China's 40 years of economic reform that opened the country up and turned it into a superpower. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-12-01/40-years-of-reform-that-transformed-china-into-a-superpower/10573468>

IV. A Day in the Life of An Ordinary Girl

The following stories, while made up, are based on interviews, on research, and on the author's direct experience living and working in China. The stories reference many historical and recent events, but none of the characters or situations are real.

In the first story, we focus on how one ordinary young person navigates a censored internet as a professional and non-political person who cares about the people and community around her. In the second story, we explore how informal action-taker groups stay connected and work to make a difference, while staying smart about how to work online and offline in a censored society.

You're walking into your office lobby. Like every morning, you pass through security and facial recognition screening, thinking about work, worried how to stay ahead in a city of 20 million people. But today is a little different. It's your 25th birthday, and half your mind is already on the end of the day, when you'll meet up with your besties to celebrate. After all, you're a hardworking girl from a small town with a good job at a successful company. You deserve a night out and a fancy cocktail.

But the minute you step into the office, you can tell something's wrong. Really wrong. No, no one will be leaving early, or relaxing. A publication tied to the top state-run news agency has just posted an article condemning video games as "spiritual opium."⁶

This would sound bad to anyone. Opium is the scourge that once brought the country to its knees. But for you, it is really bad, because your company is a gaming company. And you are an associate in the marketing department. No wonder everyone's in a panic. It is a signal that the entire gaming industry may face a crackdown like the one a few months ago that forced all the tutoring companies to switch from businesses to non-profits.⁷

Where's your boss? You only catch a glimpse of her as she rushes into a meeting with other managers. Okay, think. You sit down, log in, and immediately cancel all your company's scheduled social posts on Weibo 微博, WeChat 微信, and Douyin 抖音, the original domestic version of TikTok.⁸ To be safe, you even go back

⁶ Li, C. (August 3, 2021). Chinese video game shares plunge after state media calls the products 'spiritual opium.' *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/03/technology/china-video-game-tencent.html>

⁷ Reuters (July 23, 2021). China bars for-profit tutoring in core school subjects -document. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-bars-for-profit-tutoring-core-school-subjects-document-2021-07-23/>

⁸ Verot, O. (January 10, 2023). Douyin vs Tik Tok: What are the Key Differences Between Chinese and Global Tik Tok Apps? GMA. <https://marketingtochina.com/differences-between-tiktok-and-douyin/>

through past posts and hide the ones that most obviously would go against the direction state media seems to be heading. Maybe there will be a stronger message, or maybe that won't come for weeks or months. But the writing is already on the wall. There's no question what's happening.

You know that, before the end of the day all the trending topics left on Weibo will echo this new direction. For more damage control, you go into your search engine ad settings and suspend all the potentially sensitive keywords.

“Anytime you search for something not work-related, you use your personal phone, which has three different circumvention apps on it.”

This isn't the time to be slow or sloppy. You've got a good job and you can't afford to lose it. You sketch out three possible new marketing strategies, so you can have something to show to your boss once her meeting is over.

Wait! You should stop and run your social media analytics first. As you scan posts from around the country, you see that users are unhappy about the article. Angry posts are flooding the Internet. You hurry to screenshot sample posts from gamers and influencers. Posts like that could be deleted or taken down any second.

You also Google to check the opinions outside “the Wall.” Oh yes, your company—like hundreds of other internet companies—uses VPNs so that staff can get to services such as Google, Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram. Gaming is a global industry and Chinese companies have a huge share of the market. You need to stay connected to all that.

But even though the company has a way to access Google and Wikipedia, you wouldn't just Google *anything*. One time you thought about checking the company's filters by trying to Google “June 4th,” but you didn't dare. The company monitors everyone's computers, of course. Anytime you search for something not work-related, you use your personal phone, which has three different circumvention apps loaded on it: Something called V2Ray that a geek friend set up for you, an expensive foreign VPN tool (that's the “IQ tax” you have to pay), and a free, clunkier VPN. The third one is probably sponsored by the government, but you still use it when the others don't work, or when you want to switch your IP back and forth seamlessly, to watch Korean dramas blocked by the Great Firewall but then flip back to buy China-edition merch that requires a domestic payment.

You're not a political person or a “reactionary” *fandong fenzi* 反动份子. When you bother to use circumvention tools to *fan qiang* 翻墙 (online slang for “get over the wall”), it's mainly to watch foreign dramas or to follow celebs and influencers on Instagram.

With everything that's going on, you WeChat your friends at other gaming companies, to check how bad it is at their offices. In one thread with your college friends—group name: “Adorkable Foodie Squad” (吃货萌萌哒)—someone shares a screenshot of an internal memo from another state-run publication. The image has a few lines through it to avoid being censored by image recognition. You don't know if the document is real or not, but you

forward it to your marketing team WeChat group anyway. At this point, you're gathering as much information as you can—what a crazy day.

Meanwhile, you see that the stock price of Tencent, China's—and the world's—largest gaming firm, has already tumbled more than 10%. Western media sounds weirdly happy about it—they always respond fast to bad news in China.⁹ Sometimes you wonder why they want China to look so bad. Don't they see all the good things that are also happening here? China is on its feet and winning again. Your village has modernized, your family has climbed out of poverty, and you've been able to make it to the big city, all thanks to the motherland and the efforts of the Chinese people. China is advancing AI technology and building infrastructure in poor countries across the globe, helping them pull out of the struggles that China suffered from Western colonialism.

Your boss is still in that meeting. Your only contact with her so far has been quick notes in WeChat, and comments on your work materials on Shimo Docs 石墨文档, an online collaborative document editor. Her document comments also come to you as chat messages because the Shimo Docs editing tools are integrated right into WeChat (you're still not sure if you love that feature!). You order lunch delivery for her and the team using Meituan 美团.

“Western media sounds weirdly happy—they always respond fast to bad news in China. Sometimes you wonder why they want China to look so bad. Don't they see all the good things that are also happening here?”

In an industry crisis like this, naturally the Water Armies (*shuijun* 水军) may charge your company more. Those are the thousands of paid workers who use fake accounts and bots to manipulate public opinion on social media. You sigh and send notes to your *shuijin* agencies, reminding them to be ready to push the company's official statement in a couple of hours. You might as well also contact the ghost writers for advertorials *ruanwen* 软文 and your partnered influencers and gaming streamers. You're already planning which companies your Water Armies should attack online so your own company can look better.

What else? What else? What other narratives or tricks would signal that the company is on board with the new line? You check Weibo and, just like you thought, everything you see now echoes the same message. The top hashtag on Weibo's front page trends (微博热搜) is condemning “gaming addiction.” You message your boss again. You can't wait any longer, you tell her. An official statement that comes too late will be seen as a political mistake!

Wait—here she comes, bursting out of the meeting still holding her lunch. She glares at you. “What's your problem?” she says. “This is not a marketing decision, it is up to the Government Relations Department.¹⁰ Didn't you bring your brain? Just let the GR team do its job! This is not the time to try and show off!”

⁹ Reuters. (August 8, 2021). Tencent vows fresh gaming curbs after ‘spiritual opium’ attack zaps \$60 billion. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/tencent-falls-after-china-media-calls-online-gaming-spiritual-opium-2021-08-03/>

¹⁰ Lo, X.R. (August 16, 2019). Research: How Political Connections Help (and Hurt) Chinese Startups. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2019/08/research-how-political-connections-help-and-hurt-chinese-startups>

Okay, that was really bad. A few minutes later, the GR guy sends you the company's official statement. This is the same guy who's always strutting around like he can do no wrong—as if none of you knows his dad is a senior official in the party. Honestly, his connections are probably his top job skill. You paste the text into the **Guanggao Minganci 广告敏感词** app yourself, to double-check if that showoff's work would pass censorship. Fine, it passed.

With your boss over your shoulder, you post the company's official statement across the different platforms you help manage. Now finally you have time to stand up and get coffee. Of course, you're still checking the social feeds on your phone every few seconds on the way to the kitchen and back. You see your boss's supervisor approved your proposals for the Water Army and advertorial messages. At least that's all right.

"Bad day here," you text to the Adorkable Foodie Squad, "Worst birthday ever 😭😭😭."

"You are not alone. 🐾 are in our offices," says one friend who works in a pop science media company. The 🐾 emoji is a pun, because pandas are a "national treasure," and in Mandarin "national treasure" *guobao* (国宝) has the same pronunciation as "national security" *guobao* 国保.¹¹

At least no one has shown up at *your* office for a rectification *zhenggai 整改*.¹² But how could a pop science publication get in that kind of trouble? You send her a sticker with the words "give up struggling in the mud of destiny." In a 1-on-1 chat you tell her, "If you need someone to talk to, you can call me on Zoom after work. It's safer, so no need to fq."

You say "fq" for *fan qiang* as a habit—phonetic abbreviations can avoid getting sensitive keywords flagged. (Of course, you don't know that most of Zoom's software engineers are actually in Beijing and that Zoom recently suspended a group of activists' accounts in the middle of their online meeting.)



"Give up struggling in the mud of destiny"

She replies, "it's fine xswl," (which stands for *Xiao Si Wo Le* and is like saying "lol"). "One of our writers posted comments that fact-checked some anti-Japanese stories and he got attacked online for being unpatriotic. I don't think it is a big deal, but it gives 🐾 an excuse to check on us."

You reply, "nsdd," (short for *Ni Shou De Dui* or "You are right"). Then you switch to your sockpuppet account *majiahao 马甲号*, to leave supporting comments on your friend's Weibo. The attack on that writer probably didn't come from the authority. Thanks to the propaganda system, online patriotism is so feverish that they don't even need paid trolls *wumao 五毛* anymore. The thousands of "*xiaofenhong 小粉红*" online will spontaneously do the job out of their own intense patriotism.

¹¹ Amnesty International. (March 6, 2020). Pho noodles and pandas: How China's social media users created a new language to beat government censorship on COVID-19. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/china-social-media-language-government-censorship-covid/>

¹² Rectification (*zhenggai 整改*) for a tech or media company could include interviews of senior staff, financial fines, review of company databases and internal documents, a website shutdown for 1-3 months to reform the workflow and set up political editorial guidelines, and even the installation of onsite government supervisors. The term "rectification" originated with internal practices of anti-corruption and centralization by the early Communist party, but today refers to a more diverse range of actions regulating individual organizations or an entire corporate sector.

That reminds you that you may still have photos posted with Nike shoes in them. Nike recently made a statement about cotton from Xinjiang and labor practices.¹³ You check your accounts and change your WeChat “Moments” (朋友圈) to expire after three days.

You actually already don't post your own comments on social media, just the company's marketing campaigns, career development stuff, and travel photos. When the CCP had its 100th anniversary, you changed your WeChat profile pic to mark the occasion. Everybody you know is on WeChat, including clients, and you just never know when or why your “friends” will report you. You heard about one colleague who lost a promotion to the same guy who reported him for liking a post by a singer considered a “Taiwan separatist” *Taidu fenzi* 台独份子. You'd never want to risk a chance for promotion.

You open Douyin to relax. One influencer you follow is live-streaming with new clothes by one of her designer sponsors. You buy one of the dresses in about 30 seconds, pay inside the app with AliPay 支付宝, and then immediately check the shipping status. There. One dress is already at the *Fengchao* 丰巢 packstation in your neighborhood. Fine, it's not healthy to use shopping to relieve stress, but the other way is to eat, and you're on diet. (How else will you fit in your new dress?)

A notification pops up on your phone. It's time for the team meeting. The team's kanban board in WorkTile is up on the screen. During the retrospective *fupan* 复盘 with your boss, she says, “You actually weren't bad today. But tomorrow, I want to see a social media strategy for our new teenager protection plan. We need to be proactive. Education and skills-building would be a good tie-in for the next Tencent 99 Giving Day (腾讯九九公益日).”¹⁴ Then she grabs her bag and leaves—probably to have dinner with some insider sources. Otherwise, she'd never leave the office before 10:00 pm.

“ An official statement that comes too late will be seen as a political mistake!

You can finally leave the office—well, almost! You forgot to do the daily tasks on Xuexi Qiangguo 学习强国 the CCP app.¹⁵ You need to watch videos to learn Xi's Thoughts and pass quizzes for your political education. There is also a company-wide competition between departments for the high scores. So you eat dinner at your desk, play the Xuexi Qiangguo video on your phone, and watch a Korean drama on your laptop.

You call Didi 滴滴打车 for a taxi home—your company reimburses taxi fees after 9:00 pm—and forward your ride information to a friend for safety. You are exhausted, but you don't feel safe falling asleep in a cab. You open

¹³ Friedman, V. & Paton, E. (March 29, 2021). What Is Going On With China, Cotton and All of These Clothing Brands? *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/29/style/china-cotton-uyghur-hm-nike.html>

¹⁴ Tencent (September 10, 2020). 2020 99 Giving Day Breaks Record for China Internet Charity Platform by Tencent. <https://www.tencent.com/en-us/articles/2201081.html>

¹⁵ Spence, P. (March 6, 2019) How to Cheat at Xi Jinping Thought. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/06/how-to-cheat-at-xi-jinping-thought/>

your English learning app, memorize and pass a vocabulary test, and share your score in a WeChat Moment, which shows that it is your 120th day of English practice in a row—you rank second in your friend circle.

Finally, you make it home. It was not the evening you wanted, but at least it's still technically your birthday. At the packstation, you scan your QR code and the drawers with your packages pop open. There's the dress you bought on Douyin, and some cheap groceries from Pinduoduo 拼多多, and a package in plain brown wrapping—that one must be the surprise gift your friend Betty said she got you.

You walk upstairs to the fourth floor, open the door, and turn on the light. Your roommate's already asleep, but she left a Happy Birthday note and a cupcake for you in the fridge.

“Thanks to the propaganda system, online patriotism is so feverish that they don't even need paid trolls *wumao* 五毛 anymore. The thousands of “xiaofenhong” 小粉红 online will spontaneously do the job out of their own intense patriotism.”

You look into the mirror. You look terrible! Your makeup is a mess after an exhausting day. You decide to take a quick shower, redo your makeup with a look you just learned on Xiaohongshu 小红书, put the new dress on, and take a bunch of selfies with the cupcake. (The gift from Betty was a sex toy that you don't think is appropriate for social media.)

You want your birthday to end on a good note. You play one song from your favorite singer, Xu Wei's “The Blue Lotus.”¹⁶ These days, you try to store the songs locally because some of them are removed from NetEase CloudMusic.¹⁷ You kind of miss the old days when you could find everything on BiliBili 哔哩哔哩—even if most were pirated—and check out the movie groups on Douban 豆瓣. Well, it doesn't affect you that much. You have less time than in high school and you still know how to find free content and apps, it just takes a little more skill with circumvention tools. But the wall is growing higher. Sometimes the connection just drops. Sometimes all you have is the 15 free minutes from your VPN app. You are looking for other VPNs options.

You beautify your selfie: one click to smooth the skin, a few touches to slim the face and enlarge the eyes. To create a WeChat “Moment,” you add eight more photos and a caption, “Happy Birthday to myself for an amazing year with all of you!” The photos show your volunteer activity, hiking, baking, a game release press conference, your favorite book of the year, and the Party's 100th anniversary celebration.

¹⁶ Xu Wei (March 25, 2016). *The Blue Lotus*. [Video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jikdu_9r27g

¹⁷ Digital Music News. (July 1, 2019) Chinese Regulators Crack Down on Music and Audio Apps — Including NetEase Cloud Music. <https://www.digitalmusicnews.com/2019/07/01/china-app-music-netease/>

Replies from your friends start to come in, some in comments, some in private messages. That's nice. You eat your cupcake, listen to the music, and stare at the travel postcards on your wall. Then you open Douyin again like always, and watch some silly clips. Two hours go by.

Suddenly you want the Longevity Noodles your mom always made for your birthday—even though you've been ignoring her messages all day. There's probably 20 messages waiting. At least they are not calls. You managed to teach her how to send audio messages, since she can't use the English keyboard to spell out Chinese words. You're sure it's mostly her grumbling about getting married before you're too old. In fact, you are already too old by her standards.

Great, she also sent you photos of some guys. You don't know why it is so hard to meet an "okay" guy. It doesn't seem totally fair that guys your age in similar jobs can totally focus on their careers because they know they can still get a younger, prettier, wealthier wife in five years, when they'll have higher salaries.

But you're not a feminist. You're not blaming it all on men. If you want to live a better life, you have to earn it, not complain about it. You're doing your best to become a better person by "loving yourself." You subscribe to many influencers' self-improvement podcasts on the Ximalaya 喜马拉雅 app. You follow Xiaohongshu for the latest styles. It's like Chairman Mao said, "Study well and make progress everyday. (好好学习天天向上)" The best investment is in yourself.

Still, sometimes you wonder the meaning of it all. Why work so hard when you'll never afford to buy an apartment here? And the system makes it nearly impossible to get a city hukou here, which determines your housing options, and your kids' education. You don't want to go back to your small town, and you know you are the only child your parents can count on, so you stay, and send money back home every month.



"I finally lie flat. As long as you are a loser, no one can exploit you."

“ Sometimes you wonder the meaning of it all. Why work so hard when you'll never afford to buy an apartment here?

You lie down on your bed, and then you chuckle because that reminds you of the "lie-flat" meme *tangping* 躺平.¹⁸ Some people say working hard won't get you anywhere. You aren't that cynical. You are practical. You open Du Xiaoman 度小满 to check your bank accounts. It is not bad. You have saved 25k RMB.

Still, on your 25th birthday, you wonder why you feel so lost. You want something different, something more, something meaningful. One friend told you about a hackathon for city innovation. That could be cool. Plus you really need more volunteer hours to have a chance at that hukou. You're not a game designer yourself, but your friend says "gamification" is a hot topic.

¹⁸ BBC. (June 3, 2021) China's new 'tang ping' trend aims to highlight pressures of work culture. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57348406>

You find the registration form, open your resume on Jianshu 简书, a content creation and sharing platform, to copy your CV, then try to answer the first application questions:

1. Please introduce yourself without introducing your school, occupation, or hometown.
2. What is your dream?
3. Tell us one thing you have done to make the city better.

It seems strange that there's nowhere to give your CV details. Without your job or your hometown, how are you supposed to introduce yourself? You stare at the ceiling in frustration. Wait a second, why not just choose a creative self-introduction template on *Jianshu*? The dream is easy to answer, as everyone wants to achieve the "Chinese Dream." The third one is tricky. You get upset again. You actually don't have any superpowers to do anything. After fine-tuning PR words all day at work and for your own birthday, you are tired. You give up straining for the perfect answers. Whatever:

1. Hi I am Lucy. I love cupcakes. I am a "single dog" and a Douyin addict. I like the song, "Lucy in the Sky in Diamonds," by The Beatles, but hate the movie "Lucy."
2. Leave my hometown and live in a big city as a businesswoman.
3. I recycle every day.

A few days later, surprise! You were accepted to the hackathon. Maybe they also love cupcakes? But not long after that, there's another surprise: A new regulation is released that gaming companies can only offer service to kids under-18 between 20:00 and 21:00 on weekends and holidays.¹⁹ No one thought the final policy would be that severe. You didn't know how naive you were. All the work you did that day ended up accomplishing nothing. ●

¹⁹ Feng, Z. (August 30, 2021). China cuts children's online gaming to one hour. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-58384457>

V. “Not Dark Yet”

So what is the story of the action-taker community organizing the City Innovation Hackathon that Lucy plans to attend? Why and how do they host such an event? What considerations were prioritized? What challenges do they face? Is it possible to engage someone apolitical and “drained” sang 表 like Lucy to take action on social issues?

The following story presents a group called NeverIsland, a fictional community of people taking action to help to improve urban development issues.

Millions of workers from outside China’s cities flood to urban areas seeking work, even though they will not have social welfare protections because they are registered under countryside hukou of their home villages in other provinces, not the local city hukou. Even Lucy, the ordinary girl from the first story, lacks the benefits that would come with a local city hukou. Her university education gives her an edge, but thousands of local workers subsist below the poverty line, juggling “gig economy jobs” to help support the life of conveniences that Lucy and other urban white collar workers enjoy. Even without the household registration limits, it is not easy to accommodate such a large population flooding to any city.

Our imaginary action-taker group, “NeverIsland,” are focused on urban issues like domestic migrant workers in a fictional city, but across China, groups like this are working together, more formally and more informally, hoping to address challenges like poverty, gender equity, environmental protections or education. As the story demonstrates, such action-takers work in an uncertain environment where the “red lines” of what is politically sensitive are constantly changing. They must navigate government electronic surveillance and the scrutiny of local authorities. They jump from platform to platform, seeking not to hide their existence, but to be adaptable and cautious in their degree of visibility and their dependence on any one leader or member.

This need to balance community impacts and security risks defines the action-takers’ mentality and thus their technology approach. Their goal is action, not secrecy or revolution. They work to reach out and inspire more youth to take action, not just to get media coverage or to hide, as many digital security guidelines assume.

1. Tammy Drinks Tea: Keeping the Cops in the Loop

It is six weeks before the City Innovation Hackathon that Lucy signed up for. At a café downtown, one of the event organizers, Tammy, sits down for tea with a government policeman.

This isn’t unusual, they have known each other for years now. He is a *guobao* 国保, part of the political police force tasked with “maintaining the harmonious stability of society,” or *weiwen* 维稳.

“Long time no see,” Tammy says. “Here are the papers I filed about our event with the Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau *shi minzheng ju* 市民政局.” She knows the papers are a formality. The event application would never make it through the bureaucracy’s approval process, but by filing them, she shows she has followed the official process for a law-abiding organization.

In her younger years, Tammy was a journalist working for the state media, then later a campaigner working against corruption. That was in a different political climate. Today she runs a local nonprofit organization, but the authorities still watch her closely, and she’s used to “drinking tea” *he cha* 喝茶 every few months with the *guobao*.

“Drinking tea” is the common ironic shorthand for these unofficial—and uncomfortable—chats with the authorities. Chats like these are a mind game the police play to control and intimidate. People like Tammy have carefully found ways to move forward in the grey area, under strict political oppression.

This particular *guobao* has been watching her for five years. It doesn’t mean they’re friends, but there’s no need to dance around each other. He skims through her documents. “Well, your writing has improved,” he says. “But what’s this hackathon? Hacking what? I thought your organization does education work, not fancy tech.”

“He is a *guobao* (国保), part of the political police force. “Drinking tea” is the common ironic shorthand for these unofficial—and uncomfortable—chats with the authorities.

“This isn’t ‘hacking’ in the usual sense,” Tammy says. “We’re doing youth education on how technology can do good. We’ll have software developers from Big Tech speaking. ‘Hacking’ is about a hands-on spirit, encouraging young people to get involved in making the city better. Tencent and Alibaba hold tech-for-good events all the time.”²⁰

“Who is your sponsor?” he asks.

“This project is under the Municipal Education Department for youth innovation.” She shows him some of the pages. “Here is the budget approval, and our list of guest speakers and mentors. We’re also inviting the Director of the District Institute of Education (区教育院), of course.”

“Who’s this?” He points at the guest list. “Why do you need a foreigner in a city-level youth event?”

“He is a visiting scholar at the business school of Peking University. A professor from MIT can help us market this as a high class hackathon,” she says. “It will look good for the city government, too. Also he’s fluent in Mandarin. His wife is Chinese.”

²⁰ Chen, L. (September 6, 2019). New Initiative Makes It Easy to Do Charity Anywhere. alizila. <https://www.alizila.com/new-alibaba-initiative-makes-it-easy-to-do-charity-anywhere/>; Xie Xiao 谢幺, 2014 年 4 月 4 日), 以黑客的名义做公益, 是一种怎样的体验? [What is it like to do charity in the name of a hacker?], <https://www.leiphone.com/category/gbsecurity/188S2AtC6FKPZURv.html>

“We wouldn’t want anything bad to happen,” the *guobao* says. There is a pause.

“Don’t worry,” says Tammy. “We’re taking great care with the participant list. Besides, smarter cities and social innovation are a centerpiece of national policy right now.²¹ The hackathon is inspiring the youth to contribute.”

“Well, if that’s all.” The *guobao* pays for both of them and leaves his tea unfinished. It is not a “No.”

2. Urban Village: A Way to Help the Community

Back twelve weeks before the City Innovation Hackathon, in fact, the day it was conceived, Tammy, Roger, and a few colleagues were having noodles in a small square at the edge of the city. They had just held a community event for families in this “urban village” *chengzhongcun* 城中村 of migrant workers from the countryside often live. Families in these enclaves are constantly working, but lack the city resident status (*hukou*) that would help them with childcare, access to formal education, or medical resources.

“Whenever we have these meetings,” Roger said in his Beijing accent, “I’m reminded how large the problem is and how few people, especially young people, notice it, or get involved.”

Roger is a graduate student in a business school program. He was also one of the first members of “NeverIsland,” a small group of urban youth trying to make city life a little better for poorer workers, overlooked groups, and the community in general. It began as a few students photographing an urban village to document the challenges for the migrant workers that live with little dignity and the constant threat of eviction due to city expansions.²² Urban villages like this one are scattered throughout the city.

As the group grew, they came to call themselves NeverIsland – a play on “Neverland” from *Peter Pan* and the idea that no human being should be a “lonely island” in a thriving city. The core group is small, only a couple dozen people, but the public WeChat group has more than 100 members and their official account *gongzhong hao* 公众号 has around 5,000 followers. Some are local and join monthly meetups in person, but many participate exclusively through the online group.

“We don’t have real data on it, obviously,” Ben said to Roger, “but plenty of our members are college age. And they have friends, right? People in their networks. ...” Ben is a software developer and one of NeverIsland’s tech-savvy members. He was new to activities like today’s, but his enthusiasm reminded Tammy of the twenty-some-things from her activist days.

Sarah pushed her noodles back and said, “So how could we raise awareness for those youth and engage them to take actions?”

²¹ National Development and Reform Commission of People Republic of China 中华人民共和国国家发展和改革委员会, 2020 年 5 月 15 日), 我国新型智慧城市发展现状、形势与政策建议 [The development status, situation and policy suggestions of new smart cities in China] https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/xxgk/jd/wsdwhfz/202005/t20200515_1228150.html; Zhang, Y., Liu, Y., Zhao, J. et al. Smart city construction and urban green development: empirical evidence from China. *Sci Rep* 13, 17366 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-44061-2>

²² Buckley, C. (November 30, 2017). Why Parts of Beijing Look Like a Devastated War Zone. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/world/asia/china-beijing-migrants.html>

“Why not a hackathon?” Roger suggested. “They’re trendy right now. A lot of companies and NPOs are teaming up with local startups and doing ‘innovation’ events.”

“Wait,” said Sarah. “What would we be telling them to ‘hack?’” Sarah was a little older than Ben. She worked as a freelance translator and also volunteers helping kids at a local library, which was how she heard about NeverIsland.

“No, no. No one would think that these days,” Ben said. “It just means, like, a meetup to look for solutions—but, yeah, usually still with tech. I think it would attract students, even if they’ve never heard a term like ‘urban innovation.’”

“—or even ‘hackathon,’” Sarah said. Ben made a face at her.

“I like this idea,” Tammy said. “My non-profit just got new funding and we could support the best ideas with seed grants.”

“We are lucky you can help sponsor this work,” Roger said. Tammy’s NGO works on youth issues. It is a long way from her activist days, but that was a different time. From a registered organization, she can do a different kind of good, help smaller groups like NeverIsland, and stay out of trouble. Mostly.

“Tammy,” Sarah said cautiously, “if it’s OK to ask, do you like it better advising behind the scenes than being the activist like in the old days?”

Roger’s smile got more serious. “We’re lucky that she is where she is,” he said. “Staying on the right side of the red line. Still filing formal policy suggestions, even if they don’t go anywhere. Drinking the occasional tea.” He raised his own cup.

The core group is small, only a couple dozen people, but the public WeChat group has more than 100 members and their official account (*gongzhong hao* 公众号) has around 5,000 followers.

“Look,” Tammy said quietly. “I still think we have a responsibility to put our values out there when we can. And Roger, sometimes they do take our advice. For instance, businesses can’t ask female applicants for a pregnancy test anymore.²³ At the same time, grassroots community work is still important. It is not dark yet.”

“OK, then!” Sarah said. She made a note on her phone. “We’ll put the idea on the agenda for next month’s meeting. I’ll update the Google Doc. Roger, can you present the idea at the meeting? Also, can you give a heads up to the group now in WeChat?”

²³ Tang, D. (February 23, 2019). Chinese bosses cannot demand pregnancy tests. *The Times*. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/chinese-bosses-cannot-demand-pregnancy-tests-bcfgorohm>

Roger began talking into his phone. He sent several audio messages straight to the NeverIsland WeChat group. It's a group for trusted friends, but any member can add a new member. Roger prefers audio messages because you can't just screenshot them like text.

Tammy said, "I can share a Word doc with the terms of our mini-grants. I just need to get it from my Baidu Netdisk (百度云网盘)."

"So your office is finally putting work files in the Cloud?" Ben said.

Tammy sighed. "I've never been good with tech, all right? My files work fine on my laptop, but I have a new colleague who wants everything on the Netdisk."

"Makes sense," Ben said. "You're almost one of the cool kids!"

Tammy thought about how different the technology was 20 years ago, before the Cyberspace Administration (网信办) imposed new restrictions, before the National Security Law (国安法) or the Charity Law (慈善法). It made her sad thinking about the small freedoms Ben had never tasted. In the first 10 years of China's internet, no one had needed to *fan qiang* for fuller access. But at least today's young people weren't sitting around believing more freedoms were just around the corner.

"Anyway, you should get started with this idea," Tammy said. "Meanwhile," she looked at Roger, "I'll plan another tea. And this meal is my treat."

3. Our Next Meeting: Planning a Hackathon

It was eight weeks before the City Innovation Hackathon. Sarah was updating the monthly agenda in Google before she left for the NeverIsland meeting. She had already transcribed Roger's audio messages so people could read more about the hackathon idea. She took a screenshot of the agenda and sent the image and the Google link to the WeChat group.

"Last call!" she wrote. "I am printing out the agenda in 10 min." She knows no one really reads the notes beforehand. Mostly people text anything they want to talk about now, on the morning of the meeting.

One response came in from Ted, a member traveling out of town for his architecture firm. His flight was canceled and he wanted to join in virtually using Zoom. He added, "My company pays for the enterprise plan!"

Emily, who moderates the NeverIsland's official account on WeChat, texted, "I'm sick today, Ted. So Zoom sounds good to me too." But Ben replied almost immediately, "Plz not Zoom. Let's use Jit.si instead."

Sarah checked the time and then wrote back, "Not Jit.si. It comes in and out. What about Google Meet? Most of you have Google accounts and ladders right?" A "ladder" is shorthand for a way around the Great Firewall, such as a VPN, since all Google services are banned in China.

“Sounds good!” said Emily. “I’ll use the shared Google account to log in. What’s the password?”

Ted answered in a WeChat audio message. “It’s the movie we all hate,” he said, “plus the date that doesn’t exist.”

“PLZ,” Ben shot back. “NEVER send pw on domestic platforms! 🚫🚫🚫.” Sarah grimaced. Another day on Never-Island. She put her phone in her pocket and hurried to catch the bus.

Downtown, in the meeting room she reserved, Sarah scanned the QR code and verified on WeChat to get in. No-contact booking was especially good for meetings like this; less chance of snoopy questions from the owners. And Sarah liked it when the Neverland meetings were in person. Fewer tech glitches to deal with and people felt safer speaking their minds.

Mark showed up a few minutes later to help set up. He looked simultaneously artsy and rumpled, as usual. “Saw the agenda,” he said. “Boring!”

“We need the government’s support and private sector’s money if we want to reach more people. We can’t live in a fantasy land where the real world isn’t happening.”

“Have you seen Roger’s proposal about a City Innovation Hackathon? Maybe you could use it to propose a group art project around the city. That’s totally your thing.”

“Yeah, sure,” he pulled a crumpled paper notebook out of an ancient backpack. “Young Jack Ma wannabes will love the idea of sleeping on the street for a month to show people how the world works.”

Mark wheeled the room’s projector into place. “Damn!” Sarah said when she looked at the projector, “I forgot my Mac adapter.”

Marc snorted. “Fancy Apple user. I’m sure it goes well with your eco-friendly coffee beans.”

She looked at him. “You’re the artist!” she said. “And Apple devices are generally safer.”

“If you say so,” he said. “The safest tech is no tech. For instance, I left my phone at home. And I left it on so I don’t suddenly drop off the radar. Don’t count on your iPhone to protect you, especially with all Chinese iCloud user data stored at Guizhou-Cloud Big Data (云上贵州).²⁴ The cops are just a phone call away!”

More people showed up. Some brought snacks and one brought some sodas. Once everyone was settled in and Mark confirmed a quorum, Sarah began moving through the agenda.

²⁴ BBC News (July 18, 2018). Apple iCloud: State firm hosts user data in China. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-44870508>

The third item was “Feedback and follow-ups.” Jason, who was a salesperson said, “I got some very good photos at the last picture book-making workshop.”

Roger asked, “Can you share them now?”

“The files are too large,” Jason said. “I can bring them on a drive for the next meeting.”

Ted’s voice interrupted from the laptop on the table. “I bought a new drive and several SIM cards during this trip. I’ll bring everything next time.”

The final item for discussion was the City Innovation Hackathon. Roger stood up and gave the in-person attendees a short pitch. He confirmed Tammy’s NGO would act as the umbrella organization. “We need a city *lingdao* (领导) to do the opening,” he said, “I think I can get the director from the city’s Institute of Education.”²⁵

Ben added comments about the hackathon trend. Emily sent several emojis in the Google chat and then typed, “THIS IS AN AWESOME IDEA! Great way to get the word out about our work too!”

“The safest tech is no tech. For instance, I left my phone at home. And I left it on so I don’t suddenly drop off the radar.”

“Are you kidding me?” Mark said. “NeverIsland should stand with farmers and workers in the class struggle against the oppression of capitalism. What’s radical about a bourgeois performance that turns the community’s effort into the face of the government and those rich tech companies? Your hackathon doesn’t challenge power at all. Where is our avant-garde spirit?”

“I respect your point, but we just don’t need to say all of that out loud!” Roger said back, “We need the government’s support and private sector’s money if we want to reach more people. We called ourselves NeverIsland to stand for keeping people connected. We can’t live in a fantasy land where the real world isn’t happening.”

Sarah said, “Don’t you think it builds community when people brainstorm together?”

In spite of Mark’s objections, the vote was in favor of the hackathon. Tasks and assignments got handed out. Emily created a new WeChat group for hackathon planning. Ben created a “parallel group” on Signal.

The talk of city officials reminded Sarah of something. She made a note to herself as she headed home.

25 *Lingdao* (领导) is a term originally used in the CCP hierarchy that became a general term for superior or supervisor in any institution. In this instance, with no other institution mentioned, it would still mean a senior party or government official.

4. A City Clerk, an Uncomfortable Encounter

It is the Monday before the City Innovation Hackathon. Sarah has just made a coffee with fair trade beans. “Good thing Mark isn’t here,” she thinks. Her speaker plays a long “white noise” track from her favorite café in Amsterdam. Sounds of coffee grinding, silverware, conversation, and background music. It helps her concentrate when she works from home.

The café audio doesn’t make Sarah a techie, but she does use a VPN all the time for her translation work and to keep in touch with foreign friends through Telegram and WhatsApp. Last week she was chatting with an AI dating bot (which honestly was less condescending than her last boyfriend, a friend from college who got more politically active and then broke up with her “for her own good” before leaving town).

She turns off the ambient sound, grabs a folder and a colorful box, and then walks a few blocks to her local government subdistrict office *jiedaoban* 街道办.²⁶ One reason Sarah manages most of Neverland’s paperwork is that the group holds most of its events in the same subdistrict. Another reason is that the head of the subdistrict happens to be a family friend.

Sarah gives Michael, the subdistrict clerk, a big smile when she walks into the local office. “How are you, Michael?” she says. “Do you want some cookies?” She holds up the box she brought, cookies from a charity event with local moms, and also puts her folder down on the counter.

“Sarah!” Michael says. “And what’s this?”

“Here are the forms you told me to prepare for the City Innovation Hackathon. I hope everything is in order?” All cases related to Neverland’s work are processed by Michael.

“Sure, sure, sure,” he says, “I don’t see any problems. How is Director Wang doing?”

“My uncle is doing well,” Sarah says, “Thanks for asking.”

“There is something you can help me with too,” Michael says. “The *lingdao* have asked us for a ‘neighborhood culture’ study by the end of the month. But the problem is, you know, my culture level is low unlike you college graduates.”

“That would be no problem!” Sarah says. “After all, you always take care of us. It would be our honor to contribute to help the neighborhood office. Send me the details and I’m happy to help compose something.”

“That is very nice of you,” Michael says. “And so are the cookies! What a nice surprise. Sarah, and one other thing. We just received the latest list of ‘special investigations’ and you don’t have to worry about that. But next Tuesday, there may be a fire safety inspection.”

“That is good to know.” She smiles. “You definitely won’t hear about any issues.”

Later, Sarah is at a café drinking her afternoon tea and updating the Neverland documents Michael needs using

²⁶ *Jiedaoban* (街道办) is the most local government level for a city area. All official paperwork for different agencies in the local and central government gets processed through these offices. A jiedaoban typically oversees ~5 km² and 30-100k residents.

Feishu 飞书, a domestic platform for document sharing and project management. In a few minutes she needs to catch a bus to the class she teaches for migrant children without a city hukou or money for school.

She posts that the subdistrict forms have been filed, and adds some notes to the group about Michael's "neighborhood culture" report. (She does not write down anything about the upcoming fire inspection.) It's useful having all this in one place; she doesn't know why more of the group doesn't try these project management tools.



This is the backyard of the world's factory. He wants a new no-brand phone and a replacement battery laptop. Everything's cheaper here, which is good because art comes first for Mark, not work.

By the time she is arriving at the library run by the resident committee *juweihui* 居委会, the sky has turned grey and it has begun to rain. She's trying to avoid the puddles because with no drainage system some are deep like sinkholes. But she's walking fast because it doesn't feel entirely safe in the narrow alleys. Suddenly she hears a voice.

She looks back quickly and a man says, "Sarah."

It's David. Her ex. What is he doing here? He's soaking wet and hasn't shaved in days. He looks different. He must be in real trouble if he left his current city and came here.

After all that talk about keeping her out of trouble, of course this is his first stop. It's not the kind of trouble she wants. But this sinkhole may be too big to walk around.

"I didn't know where else to go," he says.

She just looks at him.

5. Mark in the Dark: The Power of Street Smarts

On Tuesday, four days before the urban Hackathon, Mark wanders the street taking photos like a flâneur. He is obsessed with the city's gritty corners. He snaps a shot of an address, 6F-4, No. 89, Happiness Rd. There's some irony putting the idea of happiness next to 6, 4, and 89, the date of the Tiananmen Square massacre. On the next corner, a pile of sex worker ads are scattered on the ground: a vintage model next to a WeChat QR code. For this one, Mark switches his flash off. It is not dark yet.

His next stop is a big market with electronics vendors.²⁷ This is the backyard of the world's factory. He wants a

²⁷ Inspired by Huaqiangbei (华强北), a neighborhood renowned for its electronics markets, with supplies from the electronics factories

new no-brand phone and a replacement battery laptop. Everything's cheaper here, which is good because art comes first for Mark, not work. He picks up odd jobs like food delivery and doing car repairs to make ends meet.

His phone rings in his pocket. It's Sarah. "Hey Mark," she says, "can you check your Sig? An old friend needs a hand."

"Give me five minutes," says Mark.

Mark stops in the nearest mall *shangchang* 商场 and uses Tencent Mobile Manager to find a public WiFi network with no password. He connects by using his phone number to get an SMS verification. The phone is registered under his real name, which means his national ID and photo are also linked to it..

He sees he has been added to a new Signal group called "Davvv." Some NeverIsland members want to host a dinner salon for an old friend, David. Can Mark make a little banner to use for an announcement message?"

“The message, "*tianlengle, renjianbuchai*," (天冷了,人艰不拆) basically means "Winter is coming" and "Life is already hard, so don't expose the truth." The second phrase is a pun, because "expose" and "demolish" use the same Chinese character.

David must be in trouble, Mark thinks, or he would have said he was coming. "What's the salon topic?" he asks.

"Demolitions and violent eviction of migrant workers in his city," Sarah answers in the group.

"Ok," says Mark. "So, no name or location on the banner. Just the time and topic?"

"Right," Sarah answers, "it will be by invitation. We just need something to circulate on WeChat or Telegram."

Mark selects one of his urban photos, showing several old men living under a bridge. He adds a "Blade Runner" filter and two short phrases, "天冷了, 人艰不拆." The message, "*tianlengle, renjianbuchai*," basically means "Winter is coming" and "Life is already hard, so don't expose the truth." The second phrase is a pun, because "expose" and "demolish" use the same Chinese character. There's nothing about NeverIsland or David in the image. And because it's just an image, the text is less likely to get read or flagged. Mark sends the banner to the NeverIsland WeChat group.

nearby. See <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gallery/2014/jun/13/huajiangbei-shenzhen-market-smartphone-parts-in-pictures>.

A few minutes later, he is back on the street taking photos. He didn't bother asking where the event would be, because he knows where David always stays. It will be good to get some firsthand news about the problems in another city. Hopefully afterwards they can even get in a few hours making graffiti.

6. Hot Pot Reunion: Good Friends in Bad Times

It is the Wednesday night before Saturday's hackathon. Mark steps into the little bar owned by Charlie, one of the friends of NeverIsland. All the lights are on, but the sign on the door says, "Closed."

He can smell the hot pot when opens the door. About ten people are here. The atmosphere is tense, but everyone smiles when he walks in.

David is here too, but, man, he looks different. "Where's your hair?" Mark says as David gets up to greet him. "What happened to the rock star radical?"

"He had to make some changes," David says.

"I'll try to get used to it," Mark says. "At least you finally look like a factory worker."

"Then you'll be glad to know I took the bus," David says, but he isn't smiling. "Train was too risky." Clearly, he was worried about being detained during an ID check. To board the train, you need to tap your national ID to pass through the gates.²⁸

"At least you didn't travel during *Liang Hui* 两会," Sarah says from the corner. During important Party events, travelers would face extra screening.

"I thought about that when I bought my ticket," says Amy, a former NeverIsland member who traveled from almost 200 kilometers away. "But I had to see our little brother once more. I suppose it's less of a risk for me."

Charlie hands Mark a drink and then says to David, "Your family is here and we're happy you're in one piece. So what's happened?"

David sits back down and looks around. "We were crowdsourcing the results of all the demolitions. No surprise, many participants got called in to drink teas. I am fine with that, but a lot of the kids got so scared that they blocked us afterwards on all their social media. It is a pity, but this is not news. There were a few worker protests, though, and—"

"Can you hang on a second," says Rebecca, a social work student who came in by high speed rail like Amy. "My phone just died and I wanted to record the latest news."

"What the hell?" shouts Charlie. "You've been recording all this?!"

²⁸ China Discovery. (May 23, 2018). How to Get On/Off the High Speed Train in China. <https://www.chinadiscovery.com/china-high-speed-train-tours/how-to-board.html>; South China Morning Post. (Jan 23, 2018). A look at China's push for digital national ID cards. <https://www.scmp.com/tech/article/2129957/look-chinas-push-national-digital-id-cards>

"I do it all the time in school," Rebecca says. "The audio helps me digest things later when it's an intensive talk. I don't think this conversation was that sensitive."

"You should have asked," says Mark, sticking a fish ball into his mouth.

“Memory is a weapon,” says David. “Or at least we have to believe that. Even if it’s gone by the next day.”

"Whatever the topic," Sarah says, "getting people's consent helps keep trust in the circle. Everyone agrees to take the risk on their own."

"It's fine with me if you're recording," says David, "I am already on the list anyway. I'm more worried about you all."

"What about Debra?" Charlie says, mentioning another mutual friend. "She has been disappeared *bei xiaoshi* 被消 for months."²⁹

No one has heard anything.

"But things do seem better here than at home," says Amy. "My city is tightening the regulations on private non-enterprise units *minfei* 民非 and urban space usage. It really depends on the leadership."

Rebecca, who put her dead phone away, says her own city is encouraging neighborhood-based arts projects. "If that experiment goes well," she says, "maybe they will widen it to other cities, like the wave of liberal policies since Reforms and Opening."

"I doubt it," says Charlie. "I'm glad this is a safe place to meet up, but we all know that this neighborhood will probably be gone in a few months."

"We're glad too, Charlie," Sarah says. "But yes, I do wonder sometimes if it's worth the risk. I mean, David, look at you. ..." She trails off.

"Memory is a weapon," says David.³⁰ He sees them looking at him. His old friends. "Or at least we have to believe that."

"That's what graffiti is for," Mark says.

David laughs and nods. "Even if it's gone by the next day."

Charlie adds the rest of the beef to the hot pot and they all sit down to eat, relishing the company while they still have the chance.

²⁹ "Be disappeared:" See <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/11/chinese-social-justice-activist-disappeared>.

³⁰ A popular saying among action-takers, which might be derived from a quote from Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting."

7. Emergency Tea: Negotiating with Authorities

The next morning, the Thursday before the hackathon, Tammy is approaching the same downtown café, where she can see the *guobao* is already sitting. His invitation came out of the blue last night and she sent Roger an audio message right away on WeChat.

“How is everything going with the hackathon?” she asked.

“Well, we made some adjustments with the sponsors,” Roger replies in an audio message. “I’m sending over the guest and sponsor list. And we got a confirmation from the lead speaker, one of the directors at the Institute of Education.”

Tammy knows the sponsor changes must be related to that article last week calling video games “spiritual opium” for kids. “Good,” she says in another WeChat message, “so you removed the more sensitive displays. Then why did I get a call?”

“Yes,” he sends back. “We removed the sponsorship from that gaming company. Sorry you got a call. We’ve added more material on teenagers’ mental health, and that will be part of the final reminders and promotions we send out tonight to participants, sponsors, government officials, and media.”

At the same time, a text from Roger appears in Signal. It says, “I wasn’t there, but there was a meetup at the bar last night.” That is enough for her to guess what’s probably going on.

Tammy’s Signal app hasn’t been fully functional for months—she reads her notifications to see messages, but cannot send—so she sends a final WeChat audio message: “Thanks for the updates. Mental health is extremely important for teenagers and the urban innovation event is a good platform to get that message out.”

She reminds herself once again why it’s good she’s not an official NeverIsland member, or in all their chat groups. As she sits down at the café, the *guobao* says, “You know why you are here, yes?”

“Sure,” Tammy replies, “You want an update about the hackathon on Saturday. Here is the final attendee, volunteer, and sponsor lists, including VIPs and the latest agenda.”

Guobao takes the papers and another sip of tea. “By the way,” he says, “I heard someone is in town.”

“Yeah, I heard about all the kids flooding the airport because that music idol arrived last night,” she says. “What does that have to do with the hackathon? Don’t worry, students will still show up. We may not be as big as a pop star, but these kids are hardworking and enthusiastic and ready to put that positive energy into this work.”

“Hmm,” *guobao* says, “if I were you I might not be so sure. What about—”

“You absolutely have my word,” Tammy says. “Look, we have known each other for more than five years. You must know that I don’t like surprises. And I always keep my promises.”

“I hope so.”

“Count on it,” Tammy says. “See you then.”

She knows the *guobao* will come on Saturday with several other cops in plainclothes. On her way home, she sends a private WeChat message to Roger: “I just drank some tea. Be careful of the final hackathon budget. We don’t have capacity to add any new guests.”

8. The Hackathon: An Ordinary Girl Has an Idea

It is Saturday evening and the City Innovation Hackathon is about to begin. Lucy, the game company marketing associate from the previous story, stands at the entrance to the event. It is in an old factory complex that was transformed into a “creative park” with co-working spaces and some galleries.

Lucy is dressed in American vintage style to look classic and creative. The event looks plain compared to the corporate events she has organized. A dozen homemade booths, posters on easels. No fancy video displays or anything like that. There is just one registration table, marked by some balloons.

At least the volunteers look friendly. Someone with the name “Sarah” on her nametag welcomes Lucy at registration asks her to scan a printed QR code.

“This is how to get the WeChat Mini-Program *xiao chengxu* 微信小程序 for the hackathon,” Sarah says. “There’s an event schedule, and a place to book time with one of our mentors. There’s a bunch of ways to get involved.”

Lucy adds the Mini-Program on WeChat and wanders around, feeling awkward. She came alone because the friend who told her about the event had to work the weekend.



The City Innovation Hackathon is in an old factory complex that was transformed into a “creative park” with co-working spaces and galleries.

At the food table, she reaches for a snack. A voice with a Northeast China accent stops her. “That one is disgusting,” says a girl near her. “Take this bun instead. Don’t worry, I’m a top foodie in the city!”

Lucy takes one bite on the bun. She doesn’t like talking with her mouth full. “Hi, I am Ella,” the girl says.

Lucy swallows and says, “Lucy.”

“Are you going to propose a project?” asks Ella.

“Oh, no,” Lucy clarifies, “I am just here observing and learning. How about you?”

“I am going to go up and pitch for my group,” Ella says. She’s taller than Lucy, and has the more plain-spoken attitude Lucy associates with the northeast of the country. She points to a table with two or three other girls. “We want to propose a treasure hunt RPG in the city. You’re welcome to join us. But you should pitch your own project too! I just registered for our spot using the Mini-Program.” She shows Lucy the sign-up form in the app.

“Oh, I really don’t think so,” Lucy says again, “but nice wallpaper!” Ella’s phone has flipped back to the main screen, showing pop idol Jung Kook from BTS.³¹

“Right?!” Ella replies. They talk about BTS and Ella shows Lucy some of the second-hand clothes on sale in the vendor booths. One booth is a collective of local single mothers. Lucy almost forgets she is here for a credit to add to her resume.

A voice comes over the speakers. It is Emily from Neverland using a wireless microphone. In addition to hosting the member WeChat group, she also hosts some of their in-person events.

“Welcome to the City Innovation Hackathon!” Emily says. “Before we have our beloved Director of City Institute of Education give his opening remarks, I hope everyone is signing up to share an idea during the pitching round. Ladies and gentlemen, please give big applause for Dr. Chen!”

As the *lingdao*’s speech goes on, Lucy pretends to be listening, but she’s actually considering Ella’s suggestion to pitch an idea. Even though she isn’t sure what the winning ideas get—an award? help to try out your idea?—a successful pitch would look better on her CV than simply showing up.

She clicks through the Mini-Program and signs up for the last open slot.

Now, in the stage area, the last sponsor is talking about how they helped increase the recycling rate with an app. Then after some more thank-you’s, the idea pitches begin. Most of the ideas sound sophisticated and pretty high-tech. One group of engineering students has a proposal to catch pedestrians crossing at red lights using facial recognition.³² Lucy starts to bite her nails.

Finally, it’s her turn to step onto the stage. “Hello,” she says nervously. All the hosts and speakers are looking at her now. Sarah smiles at her from the registration table. She notices Ella waving another bun at her. “I am not as experienced as the previous speakers,” she says. “I work in the tech world, but I don’t know how to code. I am just going to say a small but real problem.”

She talks about working late nights and wanting to feel safe traveling home. Recently there was a wave of violence against women who used the ridesharing app Didi Dache.³³ “I am fine with long working hours as long as

³¹ Cheung, R. (March 27, 2019). Who are the BTS Army? These K-pop fans will do almost anything to catch a glimpse of their idols. *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/entertainment/article/3003457/who-are-bts-army-we-join-some-k-pop-superfans-stakeout-hong>

³² XinhuaNet. (June 20, 2017). China Focus: Facial recognition installed at Chinese crossroads to tackle jaywalking. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/20/c_136379719.htm

³³ Dai, S. & Tao, L. (August 30, 2018). Didi’s latest murder case shines a light on crimes committed by rogue drivers and vetting procedures. *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/tech/article/2161836/didis-latest-murder-case-shines-light-crimes-committed-rogue-drivers-and>

it pays well,” she says, “but is it possible to develop an app for us tired tech workers who want to feel safe falling asleep on the taxi back home? My company pays for our taxis after 9:00 pm, but they can’t guarantee we’ll be safe. I hope the smart brains here today can help me. Thank you.”

OK, that was a mess, she thinks. She makes a quick bow and runs off the stage. As she feared, no one comes to ask about her idea. She sees Ella walking over and prepares a funny comment so she won’t sound too pathetic.

But Ella just grabs her arm and drags her to her table. “Girl, I knew we were birds of a feather. We want to team up our idea with yours.”

Ella introduces her to Hebe, a game development engineer, and Selina, a user experience expert. “Wow,” Lucy says, “I don’t see why you guys would even need me!”

“I don’t do Feminism. And I am not a Feminist.”

Selina says, “Lucy, you basically told us a user story!” She talks a lot with her hands.

“A what?” Lucy says.

“Plus you said you work at a gaming company, right?” says Ella “So, even if you don’t think you get it, you kind of get it!”

Hebe, who has blue hair and a nose stud, says, “Our idea is an RPG game about city life—”

“Sorry, I wasn’t really listening to the other presentations,” Lucy says.

“It’s fine,” Hebe says, in a really flat voice, “you looked like you were gonna puke. But your idea is good. We’ve been talking about a game where men have to experience what life is like for a woman in the city.”

“Oh, wait,” Lucy says. “No. No, I don’t do Feminism. And I am not a Feminist.”³⁴

“I get that,” Ella says. “The city should be for everyone, all the genders. But how many men do you think are bothered by the problem you talked about? Do they get scared to death going home late?”

“We’re not lashing out at men,” Selina says, “I just wish more men could see the zillion inconveniences in women’s daily life.”

Hebe says, “It’s not about enemies.”

34 Huang, Q. (March 8, 2024). Chinese “Incels”? Misogynist Men on Chinese Social Media. *The China Story Project*. <https://www.thechinastory.org/chinese-incels-misogynist-men-on-chinese-social-media/>; Erguang 尔光, (2017 年 3 月 31 日). 从微博禁言到“清真圣母”体制内外如何围剿中国女权 [From being banned on Weibo to the “Halal Virgin Mary”, how feminism is suppressed by the establishment and beyond?]. *Initium Media 端传媒*. <https://theinitium.com/article/20170331-opinion-erguang-feminism-china>

“Final pitch,” Ella says. “You would get to keep going with your idea! It will be fun. I swear ... in the name of Jungkook.”

Lucy agrees to join the brainstorming, but she didn’t come here to join a cause. Does being for women mean you have to be against men?

The group starts with Lucy’s taxi ride as an example “storyline,” which is nice, but then some of the vocabulary goes over her head. She’s never done any prototyping, for instance, and doesn’t know how to pick a game “engine,” except—

“Well,” Hebe says to her, “does your company build WeChat Mini-Games?”

“All the time,” Lucy says. “It is a core part of our closed-loop user retention strategy.”

“Wow, listen to you!” Ella says.

She shrugs. “I worked on the slide deck.”

“Okay, so then we would use Cocos Creators, not Unity, for the game engine,” Hebe says. “It works better with the WeChat MiniGame module.”

“You know what?” Lucy says, “WeChat games are also good for social. It’s easy to add touch-points where users can share the game through different channels.”

“I love it!” cries Selina.

Ella says, “Oh, we’re going viral...!”

They add more “scenes” to their sample scenario—choosing a taxi or a public bus, walking through an alley, looking for your keys.

Unfortunately, the other mentors at the hackathon are not as encouraging. One says the game is “too dark.” Another tells them it has no business model.

So, the team does not win any hackathon awards, but they decide it is worth meeting up again, because they like the idea. “More importantly,” Ella says, “we deserve to treat ourselves to a dinner right now!”

As the girls are leaving, one of the older event hosts walks over to them. It is Tammy from Neverland. “That was a very original proposal for a game,” she says.

“Thank you very much,” says Ella.

“Even if it didn’t win the day here,” Tammy says, “don’t let that stop you from getting more ideas.”

“Oh, we won’t,” says Hebe.



She looks around the bus with a different perspective, jotting down details about the other riders and the advertising posters to use for the new game.

“Good,” Tammy replies, then looks across the room. She sees Roger saying goodbyes to the deputy director of the Institute for Education who stayed until the end. “Thank you again for participating,” she says as she turns to join the others, “and remember: It’s not just about what we think you should do.”

At dinner after the hackathon, Lucy learns that the other girls are part of a local group that meets up monthly to talk about gender-related books and movies. Last month, they watched “Happy Together,” a classic Hong Kong film about a romance between two men.³⁵ This week was their first experiment with tech activity instead of a reading or a film.

They talk more about the game idea. Selina plans to sketch out “wireframes” for key screens in the game. Ella makes a new WeChat group for them, titled “No Business Model.”

“You know,” Lucy says, thinking aloud, “maybe we could have our next meeting at a hot pot restaurant. My company just gave us all coupons, so I can cover the cost. I can say I am hosting a focus group to interview female gamers.”

Hebe says, “That’s basically true.”

“Sweet,” Ella says, “By the way, I already paid the bill and split our bills with Group Money Collection 群收款 in the ‘No Business Model’ group.”

Each of them pays in WeChat, and pretty soon Lucy is on the bus back to her house. Normally, she’d be playing a game or looking at Douyin, but she is still excited about the new game idea and her “No Business Model” friends.

She looks around the bus with a different perspective, jotting down details about the other riders and the advertising posters to use for the new game. Out the window, she watches the neighborhoods she knows go past in the dim light.

³⁵ *Happy Together* (春光乍泄). See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happy_Together_\(1997_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happy_Together_(1997_film)).

9. Six Months Later

Six months after the City Innovation Hackathon, here is where the NeverIsland community and their friends find themselves:

NeverIsland still runs their neighborhood libraries, story time sessions, and weekly films. One of the winning projects from the hackathon just finished a fashion show featuring senior workers in an old factory and is selling NFTs of the show to support injured workers.

Lucy has now become an influencer on Douyin. She introduces otome games 乙女游戏 for girls.³⁶

Sarah moved out of the city to work on a farm in a sustainable village community *shengtai cun* 生态村, but she still participates in NeverIsland remotely and offers free English classes in her village.

Tammy's suggestions for new education policies have made progress and have now been endorsed by several deputies of the National People's Congress (人大代表).³⁷ Unfortunately, her NGO is also currently under rectification, with all operations stopped during a political review; the future is uncertain. She tells Roger that by now she is used to progress and setbacks happening simultaneously.

Roger has started a new social enterprise that helps companies improve corporate social responsibility by focusing on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Ben was arrested because the authorities discovered he had been backing up censored content to foreign servers.³⁸

Ella moved to Wuhan and started her career as a dentist. She continues organizing a local circle of Feminist readings and film screenings.

Emily still manages the NeverIsland WeChat group, but there has been much less activity since Ben got arrested and Signal was blocked by the Great Firewall. She still works full time as an accountant, and posts short articles to the group from time to time.

David was disappeared three months ago. No one knows where he is being detained or if there will be a public trial.

Mark still wanders in the city late into the night, looking for moments of beauty and surprise to capture. 

³⁶ Zhou, W. (February 14, 2022). Chinese otome games mark Valentine's Day with fresh female content. TechNode. <https://technode.com/2022/02/14/chinese-otome-mobile-games-mark-valentines-day-with-fresh-female-content-mr-love/>

³⁷ National People's Congress. See http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/stateStructure/node_3826.htm

³⁸ Based on a real-life incident. See "Terminal Star" case: 中国数字空间 2021 年 8 月 15 日) : 端点星, 获取自 <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/%E7%AB%AF%E7%82%B9%E6%98%9F>

VI. Analysis and Opportunities

1. User Stories, in a Story

“Nice stories,” you may be thinking, “but now what?” What do Lucy and her boss and Tammy and David and Ella and *guobao* have to do with funding, product design, or training in the internet freedom community?

Like a user journey in conventional product design, these stories are here to immerse you in the needs and priorities of a range of tech users and communities in China—their political context, their complex and varied relationship to risk, in other words their mentality. They may think differently than you or your colleagues have imagined, and those differences can be a tool for how we design future products and future efforts in the internet freedom community.

The characters can guide us through our analysis of how people move fluidly between various tools. Their technology habits and their deliberate choices show how they collaborate, how they conceive of risks and security practices, and how they think about action. As the stories show, we are looking not only at individual “personas” but also at informal groups and even wider, looser networks. Sometimes the network is the user.

Unlike the stereotypical Western image of an activist, these groups are not seeking to act publicly against the government or start a revolution. They are focusing on social good for themselves and for others—even when the government doesn’t strictly allow some types of action. They aren’t self-identified “human rights activists.” They would call themselves as “action-takers” *xingdongzhe* 行动者.

Both stories show how young middle-class people in China balance caution and risk in their various uses of technology, with a focus on how action-takers navigate political risks and outreach tactics as they make technology decisions to support their work.

In the case of Lucy, we see an ambitious worker with no interest in Feminism encounter a community that kindles a spark of interest in getting involved. The story of the Neverland community shows the range of activities that action-takers might engage in, and the range of attitudes they each might hold about politics, security, or technology.

2. Action-Takers and Approaches to Change

These action-takers want to change the society. They focus not on subversive actions but on social issues and on expanding the network. Engaging one more person to care and take action is a win. With that goal in mind, we can see the different approaches these groups take to inspire more youth to take actions to make society better, working in resilient networks—while seeking to avoid serious political consequences such as detention or arrest.

Most of the characters are aware of the state’s methods of surveillance, and the risks of crossing the “red lines,” online or offline. They are not necessarily risk-averse, but they live in a constant negotiation between public outreach and personal safety.

Action-takers want to inspire as many as possible, so they inevitably need to rely on Chinese domestic platforms if they want to reach those who might join their events and groups.

Lucy, the “Ordinary Girl”

The story of Lucy and her day at work serves as the baseline for the day-to-day experience of many of the middle class urban youth. She self-censors as a habit, even though she does not see her own actions as political or even very sensitive. Indeed, as we learn later, she is disinterested in an activist’s identity.

Like a user journey in conventional product design, these stories are here to immerse you in the needs and priorities of a range of tech users and communities. As the stories show, we are looking not only at individual “personas” but also at informal groups and even wider, looser networks. Sometimes the network is the user.

She posts patriotic messages when necessary on her own social media as well as the company’s, even though she is not a political enthusiast. For Lucy it is the default that online contents are manipulated by the state or by paid actors like the “Water Army” she hires to promote her company. She may not like the censorship, but she treats it as the necessary norm for the society.

Having lived under an authoritarian regime all her life, Lucy’s mentality is different from someone growing up

in a Western democracy. She embodies the spirit of casual, non-political tactics for getting along—as in the Chinese saying, “The top has its policies, while below they have their strategies (上有政策下有对策).”³⁹

She is also used to switching between real-name and anonymous accounts and platforms within and outside of the Great Firewall. She only uses circumvention tools when she needs to. She uses emoji and abbreviations to bypass keyword—flagging censorship with her friends. She lives and works online mostly within the ecosystem of Chinese domestic platforms, which is the default ecosystem for any action-takers to start their outreach.

Lucy is just the sort of person that Neverland wants to move from passivity to action. In her second appearance, at the City Innovation Hackathon, we see her connect with new peers on a social issue she does care about, and eventually becomes an influencer on Douyin introducing otome games to female players—which is a lot more Feminist than she imagined herself back on her birthday.

How Neverland Navigates

The story of Neverland shows the range of activities that action-takers might take, and the range of attitudes people within such a community might have. Though their politics and attitudes are diverse, they all want to build better lives for their communities and their country. They work at the local scale—e.g., one community or one location, one network and sometimes one person at a time. Many of them believe that whether you want to change a neighborhood or an entire political system you have to change as a society together, not just demand the government to change.

With their broader outreach—organizing a public hackathon with official support—Neverland’s goal is to inspire as many as possible to do something for social good. In such cases they need the Chinese domestic

³⁹ This is one of the harder concepts to convey to Westerners or translate adequately into English, although there are many sayings like this in Chinese. One article describes how “compliance ... is understood by Chinese citizens to be a fluid negotiation.” See <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/blog-entries/churches-posters-and-state-propaganda>.

platforms to find their audience. But for a private, sensitive meetup like the hotpot with David the activist, their approach is different because they are closer to the “red lines.”

When Being Public Is Necessary

While they conceive and brainstorm the City Innovation Hackathon, members of Neverlsland are careful. They tend to use non-domestic platforms to have the initial conversations, even though some members have poor access to stable circumvention tools.

Then they do the event planning and all external marketing more transparently, in full view of the authority, on domestic platforms. These young action-takers use project management tools beyond messaging apps and circumvention tools to get their work done, as any “digital

They are not necessarily risk-averse, but they live in a constant negotiation between public outreach and personal safety.

native” would. And without marketing on domestic platforms, they could not reach someone like Lucy.

To discuss a more sensitive issue like the last minute questions from the police, the core organizers still use encrypted channels. Even so, when Tammy’s Signal app is unable to send outgoing messages, her fallback is to message Roger over WeChat, but she communicates using only vague words; this is common.

We see another kind of dance when Tammy “drinks tea” with the authorities. She proactively clears up doubts or potential accusations of treason for “colluding with foreign hostile forces” (勾结境外势力) or “inciting subversion of State power” (意图煽动颠覆国家政权). Another regulation bars “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” (寻衅滋事), which is a smaller crime but very easy to convict.

Neverlsland’s basic aims for the hackathon are: bringing in similar-minded people, fostering the action-taker community, incubating some community projects, and, of course, not getting the hackathon canceled.

When Being Private Is Practical

On the other hand, it is a different story to organize a private, sensitive meetup with someone like David, who is on the run from a police investigation. The hotpot at Charlie’s is invite-only. It is not a Neverlsland event, technically. The announcement made by Mark is not clear about the event’s purpose and is highly “encoded” with culturally specific references for its netizen audience. And while the invitations are still sent to a small WeChat group, the key plans and invitation details are given only in encrypted platforms.

You can see the different attitudes and sense of risk among the hotpot participants. Some are very sensitive about devices overhearing and GPS data, which are vectors for police monitoring and future questioning. Others are naive, or reckless, or feel they have nothing to lose. For David, for instance, he is already on the run and eager to tell his story, but it is important to hide his location and to protect those who are meeting him. Rebecca, the young student, wants to record the conversation for herself and doesn’t think it would be a problem (or maybe the chance of being arrested or having her phone examined never occurred to her). Ben knows better as a software developer.

Nevertheless, for everyone taking the risk to show up there in-person, the first motivation is the story sharing—the chance to hear what’s truly happening without censorship or filters. For the organizers, the aims for the meetup include: making sure the gathering happens; seeing that no one gets detained or questioned; story-sharing and real issue discussion; and continuing to strengthen their resilient community.

Just as no single leader, or member, is more central than the network, so too are individual tools less important than adaptability, resiliency, and the preservation of connectedness.

3. When “Being Water” Is Second Nature

Our hope is that the profile that emerges from these stories is of a user persona that defies single types of technology use or simple need states. You may even think the people in the stories have contradictory needs, which would be an accurate conclusion! That is one of the reasons we chose more dimensional fictional characters—instead of flatter personas—to show what it means to “be water.”

The slogan “Be Water” comes from the famous Bruce Lee quote: “Be like water making its way through cracks. Do not be assertive, but adjust to the object, and you shall find a way around or through it.”⁴⁰

This flexible but persistent spirit can be seen in our characters’ distributed, adaptable tech usage, their style of collaboration in Neverland, and in the tone and semantics of their public expression on digital platforms. Though foreign readers should bear in mind that action-takers like Neverland don’t see themselves as protestors—and some are skeptical of the Hong Kong protests in particular.

Just as no single leader, or member, is more central than the network, so too are individual tools less important than adaptability, resiliency, and the preservation of connectedness. If less-private tools work for sharing less-sensitive information, those tools will get used. Decisions are a constant negotiation between practicality and privacy, between convenience and caution.

And a lot happens “in plain sight” as mentioned above. The goal is not to look completely obedient or “clean.” Some activists don’t turn off their phones, for example, because it might look too suspicious if their signal vanishes for a stretch of time; instead, they just leave their phones in another room or find a noisy place to talk. And most of them said they still post to social media. “You have to look normal,” one said. “Not using social media flags you to the police. They want to know what you are doing, so I consciously post food photos and some critiques of the government.”

Some action-takers interviewed said they want to enable authorities to feel they see a full and realistic picture. “They don’t actually believe you will entirely change your behaviors,” one said. “Once you are on the list, your name will never be crossed off. The difference is how intensively they monitor you. Occasionally finding me doing something small the government doesn’t like can actually help make them feel things are under control.”

To be clear, no one in this environment confines their every day communication exclusively to encrypted channels, or uses circumvention tools by default. For action-takers like Neverland, their tech choices flow through a range of needs: to reach more people, to hold discussions, to collaborate on schedules or documents. In short, to make something happen, but to stay out of trouble. This pragmatism is the reason they:

- jump between platforms depending on the sensitivity of the subject
- communicate simultaneously using different threads, different vocabularies and narrative in across different platforms
- attempt to accommodate different levels of tech users in collaboration across digital platforms and offline media

The action-takers interviewed were not interested in picking one single best tool for each need, e.g., a preferred messaging app. They were looking for tools

40 Bruce Lee Foundation. (2017) Bruce Lee discusses the significance of his appearance in “Longstreet,” The Pierre Berton Show (1971 [Video]. Google Arts & Culture. <https://g.co/arts/VLPSpiVcgYff3zZy7>

that expand and secure a dynamic community. As the interviewee cited earlier said, “Each tool is just a tool that we can’t totally rely on because it may fail at any time. Be fluid and strong, like water.”

Whether it is the selective use of censored public platforms, deliberate vagueness, and “code-switching” to balance community with security, choosing network resiliency over single leaders, or constant flexibility in technology choices, the fluidity of action-taker networks is a defining characteristic. To remain in action in a restrictive context, you often need to “dance in shackles,” always balancing self-censorship and public speech.

These varied tactics with a shared philosophy can comprise elements of a bottom-up strategy to build democracy. It is important to remember that the political climate and political risk dynamics are always changing. In China, the prospect of “dancing in shackles” has vastly diminished over the last ten years. Nevertheless, as we analyze the approaches of action-takers and other tech users during the pre-Covid years researched, we can and should look for how these lessons from China can flow into other national and regional contexts.

“The safest way is always doing nothing,” an interviewee said, “but you have to do something meaningful, don’t you? I just can’t hold myself back because if everyone obeys and is too scared to do anything, then the horrible situations now will never change. Let’s see how far we can go. Every step counts.”

4. Analysis: Tech Habits and Needs

The stories illustrate how action-taker communities function in this context, how technology can and cannot enable group collaboration, communications, organizing, and outreach, as well as such challenges as surveillance,

censorship, and the shifting location of the “red lines” around some positions and activities.

Through Lucy and the members of the imaginary community Neverland, the stories provide profiles of the range of political attitudes, goals, comfort with risks, and relationships to technology. A key purpose of the stories is to challenge the simplified stereotypes of Chinese activists. For instance, Sarah and Roger are CCP members but also work on self-initiated community projects that could irritate the government.⁴¹ David, on the other hand sometimes crosses the “red lines,” and faces more serious risks and consequences as a result.

Action-takers are not homogeneous. There are diverse living souls supporting each other in the network.

⁴¹ CCP membership can be a sign of status. In high school and university, only outstanding students get invited to join the Party. On every job application, there would be a box to fill in your “political background.” There are more than nine million CCP members registered in 2020 and the number is still growing.

Action-Takers: A Range of Tech Savvy

Throughout the stories, you can see a diversity of technology uses, political positioning, and risk tolerance among the characters:

Ben, the software engineer

Ben is the tech guru for Neverland on electronic devices and software issues. He helps provide circumvention connections and reminds his fellow members about digital security risks. He likes to find projects on GitHub and other domestic forums to catch up with the latest tech development. He is also in many Telegram and Discord groups. He is a little bit paranoid. He is a contributor to an open source project on circumvention tools, mostly developed by Chinese coders with documentation in Chinese.

Sarah, the community coordinator

Sarah is comfortable with circumvention tools. She is used to Western standard web environments because she lived abroad and still works with foreign clients. She makes technology decisions for Neverland (based on Ben's recommendations). She is the only one in the story in a position to follow all the "standard" digital security practices provided by Western training. The reasons are that: 1) she is fluent in at least one European language; 2) she is proficient with the tools in the Western internet ecosystem; 3) she has Western standard payment methods and phone numbers she can use.

Mark, the hippie artist

Mark the one with street smarts. He can only read Chinese and is suspicious of any Western content. He is not a fan of circumvention tools or complicated digital security instructions. He learns from his friends in the electronic shops, the black market, Chinese online forums, and from the ones already in trouble, so he knows about the latest surveillance techniques and tech. He is not a coder, but he is an expert in coding and decoding political messages, online and off.

Tammy, the senior NGO CEO

Tammy is less tech savvy than most of her Neverland friends. She is in her 50s and relies on the youngsters to help her set up her devices. But sometimes she doesn't want to bother the kids, or she thinks something is too complicated, so she just does things the ways she's used to. Her phone has been monitored for at least a decade anyway. She uses WeChat Moments all the time to post images of her charity work. (*Guobao* can see these and sometimes even "likes" them.) She knows circumvention tools aren't always safe, so she just gets updates from outside of the Great Firewall whenever she goes to Hong Kong, where the Internet is not blocked by the Great Firewall yet. This is a circumvention method called "across the wall by body" *roushen fanqiang* 肉身翻墙.

Different Positions Toward the Establishment/Authority

Embrace the establishment

Roger is a successful graduate student who knows how to secure government resources by saying what the government wants to hear. On the surface, he is a beloved pet of the authority, but underneath, he disagrees with many national policies. He is working to change the society by going into community service (of course, with the resources provided by the government).⁴²

Negotiate with the authority

Tammy was a journalist and activist and has been on the watchlist of the political police for years. Now she is the CEO of a local NGO and "dances in shackles" with the authorities so she is able to influence national policy and support local youth projects through her organization. She believes some changes can be made within the official system and she also supports some unconventional actions challenging the establishment.

Cooperate with lower level staff

Sarah is not interested in politics. She simply wants to

42 *Tizhinei* 体制内. This refers to both the CCP party and the government, national enterprises, state media, and other institutions created under the legacy socialist system. Private companies are not included when people refer to *tizhinei*.

Character	Occupation	Political alignment	Working with establishment/authority	Usual level of sensitivity/risk	Tech savvy	Use of circumvention tools
Lucy	Marketing in gaming	Non-political/apolitical	—	Low	Medium	Medium
Tammy	Journalist & Director of NGO	Liberal	Yes	High	Low	Low
Sarah	Freelance interpreter	Non-political/apolitical	Yes	Low	Medium	High
Roger	MBA student	Liberal	Yes	Low	Medium	Medium
Mark	Artist	Marxism	Against	Medium	Medium	Low
Ben	Software engineer	Anarchy	—	Low	High	High
David	Activist	Marxism	Against	High	Medium	Medium
Ella	Future dentist	Feminism	—	Low	High	Medium

do community service to help local children in need. So she negotiates with the Sub-District Office to help make sure the paperwork can get through for official support. She is low-key and wants to stay out of trouble.

Mock the authority

Mark uses art to expose the ridiculousness of the status quo. His reading and his thinking are based in Marxism, communism and Maoism. That is why he strongly condemns hosting a hackathon sponsored by the government and Big Tech.

Mobilize against the authority

David, the activist, is the opposite of Roger. David actively organizes protests, online collective movements, and labor strikes to combat the establishment. The mobilization of ordinary people definitely crosses the “red lines” of the authority. Therefore, he got “disappeared” a few months after the events in the story.

Action-Takers: Different Tactics to Manage Risk and Censorship

Broadly speaking, people can use very different methods to ensure that individuals and community networks are safe from the authority, for example:

Technology savvy

In the know-how and interventions of Ben, the software engineer, we can see how technology remains a key tool for action-takers. Ben is Neverland’s technical expert on digital security and works with Sarah, the community coordinator, to determine which tools are the safest and the most practical for the full community. Their choices show how more technical members think about risk, public outreach, and basic tech “housekeeping” in a shifting climate.

Political savvy

Tammy represents how political experience can help to deal with surveillance and the police. She protects the younger action-takers both with her political negotiation experience and by offering her NGO as legal entity when necessary. Sometimes, she is willing to bear the responsibility of being arrested, in order to protect the less experienced youth.

Physical tactics

David on the run represents the risk and difficulty of escaping the nation-wide surveillance system. He tries to protect himself using an actual physical disguise, and avoids leaving any digital footprints. (A range of other physical security measures regarding detentions, arrests and jails are not addressed in the story.)

Takeaways

- **For funders:** Take an ecosystem approach to technology investment. Support and maintain a portfolio of tools and trainings that can be adaptive to various users in various scenarios. Action-takers need infrastructure. There is no single best tool or approach.
- **For product teams:** Develop open source components and modules so that groups or individuals can assemble a set of tools that meets their needs but is still simple to use with minimum exposure to censorship or surveillance.
- **For user researchers:** This report seeks to respect the context and voice of those who were consulted and those whose stories informed these fictional examples. It is important for user researchers and product designers to see that the representation of communities like the action-takers is a responsibility.
- **For digital security trainers:** Co-create your training program or syllabus in close partnership with local communities or experts who understand the nuances, needs and “red lines” in their own technological and political context.

VII. Reflections

1. Mentality and Culture Differences

Writing this report itself involved platform jumping and balancing outreach and safety, in ways that parallel the lives of the action-takers in China. Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, all correspondence and drafting for this report started with very high digital security, most of all to protect the author's and interviewees' identities as much as possible. For that reason, the author, the mentors, the editor, the designers, and the program manager have been jumping between unencrypted and encrypted platforms. The author has also been self-censoring along the way, to ensure that the content that does become public fully protects the author and all parties interviewed and consulted during the process.

But to portray the characters' mentalities responsibly turned out to be a greater barrier than to manage multiple technologies. The editorial process revealed important gaps in mindset. What does it take to translate the subtleties, mentality, political thinking, and default norms of Chinese youth to English-language readers who have little knowledge of China, even as they work to build and fund tools for Chinese users in China?

These questions of mentality are central to understanding action-takers' motivations, organizing methods, and user behaviors. The report attempts to convey the nuanced, constantly self-censoring, and networked mindset of the action-takers—how they live, think, organize, and use technology to make this society better. What drives them? What are their goals?

In a series of intense conversations between the author

We needed to show that action-takers don't think or act like Westerners, who have set most of the standards for technology development and user design. Our report calls on the Internet Freedom community to broaden its perspective.

and the editor over several months, the depth and relevance of culture differences, political contexts, language and idiom became clear. We needed to show that action-takers don't think or act like Westerners, who have set most of the standards for technology development and user design. Our report calls on the internet freedom community to broaden its perspective on the use cases in China beyond interface translation, technology constraints, and the advanced surveillance methods imposed by the government.

Because centering action-takers' mindsets and agency is the essence of the report, it is necessary to locate the background and origin of the author's own insights. I am not Chinese nor a native English speaker. I am an Asian raised in Asia who received their higher education in Mandarin. I am writing the report in my third language, English, and the mentality underlying Chinese and English are of course different. In the first drafts, I wanted the writing to sound more American, to help connect with Western readers. But in the later versions we reversed some of the American idioms into more authentic translations

from Mandarin, not only to preserve the mentality better, but also to maintain authenticity for Chinese-language readers and to preserve some cognitive dissonance for English-language readers. After all, these action-takers are not Western souls trapped in Chinese bodies oppressed by the CCP's authoritarian regime.

In my own balance between visibility and personal safety, I made the decision to overcome my fears and disclose my background for the purpose of honoring the report's perspectives. My goal in doing so is to make it clear that this report is neither a Westerner's observation of China (which could impose an "Orientalist" gaze) nor an insider's account from China (which would of course be even more authentic).⁴³ I am one foot in China and one foot in the West, trying to bridge the lack of empathy.

This report is neither a Westerner's observation of China, which could impose an "Orientalist" gaze, nor an insider's account from China, which would of course be even more authentic.

That is hard. Working with an American editor, it took countless conversations to explain the inner logic of political sensitivity and self-censoring, the intuitive reflexes of all the people in the story. Why would everyone in the gaming industry immediately panic just because of one opinion article? Is it appropriate to use the English word "apolitical" when someone has to take online "political classes" assigned by the party every day? What is the English word to describe Roger's attitude, being a good CCP member, using government money for an event that also advances his own agenda?

For the American editor, a background in the mindset of the Western-centric internet freedom community was a key challenge to helping portray the attitudes of the action-takers. Here I have invited the editor to share his experience in his own words: "As we worked, I needed to consider that obedience and resistance are not as distinct in this context as they are in many traditional Western narratives. And as an American—especially as a white man—I found I had to make an even more subtle adjustment hearing the action-takers' story: to understand that, for people like Sarah and Roger and Tammy and David, the threat of crossing those 'red lines' is pervasive, continuous, and implicit. The differences I might imagine between conformity, cynicism, civil disobedience, and subversive behavior could not simply be mapped onto the experience of the action-takers. Their condition of risk is constant, and their attitudes about it are simultaneously more frightened and less shocked than a person like me would imagine in their place."

I present the editor's words in first person in order to underscore and celebrate the dialogues and constructive tensions that emerged during the editing process. We dived deep on what action-takers believe can bring changes to the political structure in China. What started as work translating cultural nuances expanded into discussions about social movements and activism.

2. Reflexivity and the Orientalist Gaze

But there was an elephant in the room: the political and power structures that dominate the report funding and the report writing.

For instance, one simple phrase felt very uncomfortable for me as we edited: "matching our solutions to the needs of people on the ground." This may be a common turn of phrase in training or international development, but I couldn't help but ask: Who are the "we?" Why are the people "on the ground" not an "us?" Why do "we"

43 Martínez Robles, D. (2015). China and "Orientalism". obo in Chinese Studies. doi: 10.1093/obo/9780199920082-0113

have the “solutions” but people “on the ground” only have “needs” to be “matched?”

I hope that we can change the question, “How can we match our solutions to the needs of the people on the ground?” to “How might we co-create solutions with communities, in their contexts?”

The discomfort then became self-interrogation: Am I a part of the “we” who decide for “the others,” from a Western observer’s superior perspective? Am I only in a position to tell Chinese action-takers’ stories “for” them simply because of my adjacency to the white-dominated Western world? If not, how shall I write in English without covering my true colors with the ubiquitous Western narratives where you discover, represent, and ultimately “save” the “Orient,” the “Global South,” and all the poor “others?”

These Western-centric narratives and colonial power dynamics can be difficult for many readers (and editors and funders!) to see clearly. The internet freedom community should address the question of Reflexivity as has been done in anthropology and in international development for decades. Reflexivity is about examination of power and relationships between researchers and the community to be studied.

For example, as we wrote about the challenges of cultural translation and power dynamics, I was shocked that the American editor considered the power imbalance between myself and the interviewees, but did not consider the power imbalance between me and him. He seemed to want to see me as an equal, where the differences between us were about culture, not power. But our power is hardly equal. I needed to remind him that, for most of the world, European/American warships and cannons arrived first and charity work followed much later.

The world has spent 500 years learning to adapt to white people’s agenda to survive. I am no exception. In fact, my power over my interviewees was because of positionality I had received funding to present them to the West. One Chinese action-taker friend pointed at my nose and said, “You exploited us!” They accused me of hypocrisy for taking money from Western funders to write about them when I clearly had avoided news about recent crises or their suffering.

As an Asian living in Asia, I have been on the receiving end of Western experts dropping by for a few days and then claiming the authority to speak for us on the international stage. It’s extremely dangerous to do parachute research on “the users” in difficult political contexts by “scientific” methods without recognizing the power of the West in setting the agenda.

For most of the world, European/American warships and cannons arrived first and charity work followed much later.

On the other hand, the status quo is that many Western countries have been the pioneers in technology and democracy at the global scale. Therefore, most of the research, tech development, and funding support for internet freedom inevitably pours from Western countries to their previous colonies and territories. How might the internet freedom community share and iterate those resources without reinforcing the imperial structure? This change in approach is especially urgent when authoritarian regimes continue to justify their oppression using cultural relativism and nationalist calls to resist Western imperialism. We need to prove that internet freedom is a universal good and opportunity, not simply a narrative tactic to serve Western interests.

I was advised to identify my target audiences and what they want to know before writing the report. However, I did it the other way around. I vented the texts first, then wove them into a report and finally realized who I was writing to.

I want to express my gratitude to my Chinese action-taker friends, who have shown me what is possible for an ordinary citizen working to make society better under such an authoritarian regime.

- **To Chinese action-takers**, I hope you will see your agency honored in the report and that you are willing to share your insights (please correct me!) and to co-create practical, useful solutions with the international internet freedom community.
- **To people who are in power in the internet freedom community**, with mostly Western-centric education, I want you to recognize your inevitable Western-centric bias towards the world—no matter what your family heritage or race is.
- **To people like me**, who are squeezing yourself to fit the Western agenda and struggling to shift the paradigm, I want you to know that you are not alone.
- **To people who care**, I want to invite you to join the initiatives of decolonizing technology and to envision what a more truly global internet freedom solidarity can look like.

To move forward, one of my proposals is to rephrase the question to “How might we co-create solutions with the community in their contexts?”

3. Inspiration and Gratitude

I want to express my gratitude to my Chinese action-taker friends, who have shown me what is possible for an ordinary citizen working to make society better under such an authoritarian regime.

They took me in even though I was not from there. They mentored me to navigate through my own fear and keep a sense of purpose—especially when I vomited after realizing I had made a bad digital security slip.

I am not proud of myself for being too scared to remain there. I have the choice to leave, but those friends do not. I have not stopped questioning why it was me writing this report, not them, who are so brilliant and intelligent. Fear is contagious, but the action-takers showed me that you can “keep calm and carry on,” and maintain your hope and sometimes even your sense of humor.

I will always remember the time that we cloned an open source project and set up an intranet to host the service in a basement so that we could brainstorm online without self-censorship. We cheered when our digital collaborative document was finally projected on the wall and everyone started commenting freely via their devices in different colors.

In that moment, I felt free and uplifted by what we can create and break through with technology.

VIII. Appendices

Appendix A: Tech Uses

For action-takers in contexts like the ones in these fictional stories, technology choices are designed to maximize scale, efficiency, and robustness of action over a short time, while simultaneously minimizing each individual's risk, often by breaking activities into smaller tasks.

Key features of this networked action strategy based on “negotiated” risk include:

- ability to learn or participate without required contact with organizers
- distributed working groups and modular project sharing among members to allow file access, updates or collaboration even if one person or one working group loses access
- small number of administrators with full access
- minimum necessary use of secured channels by more digitally savvy admins or editors

As discussed in the report, action-takers need to be nimble and adaptable in their tactics and technology choices. The policies and even the attitudes of the authority shift frequently and will directly affect a community's limitations and decisions.

The featured tasks and activities below are meant to illustrate how such communities function, how technology can and cannot enable group collaboration, communications, organizing and outreach, and how challenges including surveillance, censorship and the shifting location of the “red lines” impact action-takers’ choices.

Action-Takers: key technology needs and activities

Web Development

In the case of digital infrastructure such as web sites or web domains, technologists in the action-taker community rely on circumvention tools and non-domestic platforms more often than other action-takers. They use alias accounts—separated from their personal and working accounts—to help them quickly set up the tech infrastructure for a website/MiniApp/visualization, etc. Servers are usually overseas cloud services that are also heavily used by Chinese businesses, reducing the chance that authorities will block the server connections even if a single domain gets censored.

Anonymous identity

When the objective is reaching a high number of people through a website or app, community coordinators often end up using their real names to purchase new domains, since a real name is usually needed for billing.

This same challenge places more risk on the people who create online accounts in order to directly administer a web page, WeChat group, GitHub repository or shared document. Admins like this are usually action-takers with more experience in dealing with the authority.

They usually don't mind giving personal information to non-domestic platforms, as long as those platforms have no record of frequently handing in personal data to the Chinese government. Only developers highly involved in circumvention tool development or civil society supports spend lots of time building entirely anonymous identities online, which more developers practice due to the worsening political circumstances.

File-sharing and distributed work

When groups are taking photos, screenshotting certain contents, or gathering local data from offline sources, they may aggregate some content in a shared online location or collaborative spreadsheet. This, two-way sharing can help to mobilize or recruit participants without requiring direct contact between organizers and new or occasional participants.

Ongoing collaboration and community spaces

In a censorship or surveillance environment, it is safest and more efficient to limit group size and access rights in any sustained online group or workspace. This creates the need for sensitive, dynamic, and distributed collaboration methods for a community, with a need for multiple trust levels for participants.

For instance, most not-too-sensitive communities have at least an internal WeChat group for core members and another WeChat group open to friends in trusted networks. Action-takers choose particular tools and platforms based on the sensitivity of a topic and the likely tech capacity of participants. Some of the basic needs and activities driving these choices include:

- members-only spaces, providing, for instance, full access to online or offline workspaces, voting privileges in decision-making, options for speaking or posting to the wider community (although most communities interviewed for this report said they tried to avoid single representatives)
- brainstorming ideas, organizing, hosting events, reflecting together on next steps, which often includes extra due diligence and final decisions about communication modalities depending on the participants and sensitivity
- hosting or contacting a wider network, i.e., using platforms specifically for wider outreach to non-members who frequently participate but have no rights or member obligations to the group

Public Outreach

Despite the risks of more visible public events, accounts or spaces, action-takers do not seek to rely solely on small private groups. They want to influence more people and find more followers and like-minded citizens. They often host less prominent, more community-based activities such as book readings, hot pot dinners, film nights, etc. As mentioned in the report, outreach like this is often not considered sensitive—and easy access to and for participants is essential. So, tools like Weibo and WeChat Official Accounts are useful in communities and in schools, where groups want to build influence but still need to be careful.

It is usually not a centralized process, as many action-takers distribute their files and archives across local storage, cloud drives, and paper records. For safety, some online files would include an expiration setting for external viewers.

Meanwhile, in some cases, such as disaster response, action-takers aim for national media coverage and local support as quickly and widely as possible. Because the authorities are likely to eventually crack down on any group action that is big enough or visible enough, a challenge with this model is how long a public group or “crowdsourcing mob” can exist in order to make an impact. Usually it is less than 10 days. This kind of collaboration can be triggered by sudden, devastating, and controversial events spreading over the internet, when ordinary people want to do something to help, e.g., after huge earthquakes, train accidents, during floods or epidemics.⁴⁴

Politics change so fast that it is hard to guarantee that contents considered OK today won’t turn into sensitive issues one week later. The authorities also have tended to prioritize control over organized public events or any viral content, before digging into every small, private communications of individual citizens.

Appendix B: Interview Safety Protocols

1. Interviews via end-to-end encryption communication or self-hosted server.
2. The interviewer is not physically in the country. All interview records will be de-identified and saved in foreign devices or cloud services with encryption. There will be hand-written notes.
3. The interviewee's name/alias/organization will not be mentioned in any digital records. The interview transcript will be saved using only code names and be deleted by a predetermined date after publishing the research report.
4. Raw notes will not be shared with any third party. Nevertheless, the synthesized personas or community characteristics may be mentioned in discussion with external colleagues, e.g., "Many interviewees love Marvel movies."
5. The research draft will only be shared with external colleagues via encrypted open source services hosted on foreign servers, or via PGP emails. The interview date may be mentioned in those documents.
6. The interview will only be recorded with interviewee's consent with a mini-recorder or a clean phone.
7. Safety first. Interviewee can request to go off the record or to end the interview at any time.
8. Direct quotes should only be used anonymously and with interviewee confirmation whenever possible.
9. You can modify the above privacy protection measures to fit your needs.

Appendix C: Glossary of Concepts and Products

Chinese Politics and Society

户口 | hukou. Household registration. See <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/chinas-hukou-system/>.

城中村 | chengzhongcun. Urban village.

农民工 | nongmingong. Domestic migrant workers in the city who are farmers from the countryside.

维稳 | weiwén. Maintain social stability. Short for 维护国家局势和社会的整体稳定. See: https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/173699/China_Analysis_Control_at_the_Grassroots_June2012.pdf.

国保 | guobao. National security police to guard political stability. Short for 国内安全保卫. See <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/%E5%9B%BD%E4%BF%9D>.

整改 | zhenggai. rectification. Short for 整顿改革.

反动份子 | fandong fenzi. Reactionary. A common accusation in communist narratives made against someone critical of the Party's leadership.

台独份子 | Taidu fenzi. Taiwan separatist.

勾结境外势力 | gojie jingwaishili. Colluding with foreign hostile forces (criminal charge).

意图煽动颠覆国家政权 | yitu shandong dianfu guojiazhengquan. Inciting subversion of State power (criminal charge).

寻衅滋事 | xunxinzishi. Picking quarrels and provoking trouble (minor criminal charge).

网信办 | wangxinban. Cyberspace Administration. Short for 国家互联网信息办公室).

民非 | minfei. Private non-enterprise unit. Short for 民办非企业单位).

民政局 | minzhengju. Civil Affairs Bureau, often the agency in charge of the registration and qualification for minfei.

街道办 | jiedaoban. Sub-district office. Short for 街道办事处.

居委会 | juweihui. Resident committee. Nominally local self-governed resident group elected to support jiedaoban. In reality, the government funds the staff

and projects, and the Party commands through the Party's branch (党支部) inside the juweihui.

两会 | Liang Hui. The Two Sessions, the collective term for the annual plenary sessions of the National People's Congress (人大) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (政协).

人大代表 | Renda daibiao. Deputies of National People's Congress. See: <https://www.voachinese.com/a/who-represents-the-people-at-the-two-CCP-sessions-20210304/5801372.html>.

国安法 | guoanfa. National Security Law.

慈善法 | cishanfa. Charity Law.

Slang terms

行动者 | xingdongzhe. Action-takers. Anyone who takes action to build a better society, not necessarily an activist or NGO worker.

翻墙 | fan qiang. Online slang for “get over the Great Firewall.” It can also be abbreviated as “fq.”

智商税 | zhishangshui. “IQ tax.” Often used to refer to the financial cost of circumventing censorship.

肉身翻墙 | roushen fanqiang. To physically cross the border out of China to access the “free” internet.

水军 | shuijun. “Water Armies.” People hired to flood or “wash” the online comments to promote specific narratives for particular commercial or political interests.

五毛 | wumao. Commenters or Water Armies hired by the government to post online to manipulate the public discourse.

小粉红 | xiaofenred. “Little Pinks.” Young super-patriots commenting online to support the government out of nationalism without any financial incentives.

软文 | ruanwen. Advertorials. Paid content disguised as independent editorials from self-media and fans.

马甲号 | majiahao. Anonymous online accounts. It is common to create different aliases for different purposes, or for politically sensitive activity such as “Boys’ Love” or criticizing the government.

喝茶 | he cha. “Drinking tea.” Refers to talks, informal warnings, or formal police investigations of political crime suspects. See: <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/renquanfazhi/hx2-01302024083258.html>.

被消失 | bei xiaoshi. “Be disappeared.” Passive voice

to imply that someone was forced to disappear against their will, often by state actors.

领导 | lingdao. A term originally used in the CCP hierarchy that became a general term for superior or supervisor in any institution.

复盘 | fupan. Retrospective review. A term originally from the game Go, referring to step by step review of game play.

躺平 | tangping. “Lie-flat.” Similar to “quiet quitting” in response to work pressures.

丧 | sang. Drained. A depressive vibe shared by Chinese youth; the feeling of being unable or uninterested in doing anything. See <https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2018/02/sad-sangs>.

xswl. Short for Xiao Si Wo Le 笑死我了. Like “lmao” for “laughing my ass off.”

nsdd. Short for Ni Shou De Dui 你说的对. “You are right.”

人艰不拆 | renjianbuchai. Short for 人生已经如此的艰难 有些事情就不要拆穿. “Life is already hard, so don’t expose the truth.”

Chinese Products and Services

微信 | WeChat (Tencent)

朋友圈 | Moments

小程序 | Mini-Program

群收款 | Group Money Collection

公众号 | Official Account

支付宝 AliPay (Alibaba)

微博 Weibo (Sina)

超话 | Chaohua. Supertopics like hashtags.

热搜 | Resou. Trending ranking board.

抖音 | Douyin. Chinese app for short videos that is very popular among young people. Its success led to a fork project that created TikTok for the overseas markets.

美团 | Meituan. Group-buying app for locally-found consumer products and retail services, including entertainment, dining, delivery and travel, etc.

丰巢 | Fengchao. E-commerce smart logistics service.

滴滴打车 | Didi. Ridesharing app that forced Uber out of the Chinese market.

淘宝 | Taobao. The first successful large e-commerce platform in China. (Owned by Alibaba.)

天猫 | Tmall. E-commerce platform with certified retailers and higher quality products. (Owned by Alibaba.)

度小满 | Du Xiaoman. Baidu’s fintech arm that provides short-term loans and investment services.

拼多多 | Pinduoduo. Group-buying app that targets the lower-income market with cheaper products. See <https://econsultancy.com/pinduoduo-growth-story-china-ecommerce>.

小红书 | Xiaohongshu. A lifestyle platform combining elements of Pinterest, Instagram, and Amazon. Literal translation is “Little Red Book.”

哔哩哔哩 | BiliBili. The largest video-sharing and streaming website in China, a hub for fan subcultures.

喜马拉雅 | Ximalaya. The largest audio story and learning platform in China.

豆瓣 | Douban. Fan database and forum to create Chinese content about films, books, music, recent events, and activities.

知乎 | Zhihu. The largest knowledge-sharing platform in China, similar to Quora.

石墨文档 | Shimo Docs. Cloud-based productivity suite that combines chat, documents, spreadsheets, and other features in a simple interface.

WorkTile. Project management tool which offers OKR, instant messaging, calendar and kanban board, etc.

飞书 | Feishu. Collaboration platform with instant messaging, video meetings, calendar, docs, and emails in one place.

简书 | Jianshu. Website and mobile application that allows users to read and write Chinese and English versions of books or documents.

百度云网盘 | Baidu Netdisk. Cloud storage service.

广告敏感词 | Guanggao Minganci. App that proofreads text in order to pass the latest censorship policies.

学习强国 | Xuexi Qiangguo. An official interactive learning app primarily designed to teach Xi’s Thoughts.

V2Ray. A circumvention protocol developed mainly by Chinese developers. See <https://www.v2ray.com/en/>.

乙女游戏 | otome games. Video games with a romance theme that primarily target female players.

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Be like water making its way through cracks. Do not be assertive, but adjust to the object, and you shall find a way around or through it.



Read the report
online on Github