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Foreigners' archive: contemporary China in the blogs of American expatriates

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Abstract: This study scrutinized blogs written by American expatriates in twenty-first-century China. The primary objectives were to explore how China is represented in such blogs and to understand the discursive processes through which the American bloggers utilize the blogging technology to narrate their perceptions of the Chinese realities. Drawing on the postcolonial and discursive perspectives, we have determined that the blogs examined here consist of a distinct discursive space of cultural representation and contestation. They were also interpreted as a digital extension of conventional Euro-American travel writing as they share with the genre a set of rhetorical conventions and face the same set of problems of representing the cultural Other. These assumptions guided the discourse analyses of the blogs, written by three American individuals. The study revealed that the bloggers used three prominent metaphors to convey their perceptions of contemporary China, which echo the conventional Western knowledge of the country. During the process, the bloggers were concerned with the Chinese censorship of the internet and they faced challenges from the nationalistic Chinese readers.

Keywords: American expatriates; blogging technology; China blogs; critical discursive analysis; Euro-American travel writings

Introduction

This study examined a particular social space in the making. In a literal sense, this space is digital and technological because it consists of frequently updated online journals, which are known as weblogs or blogs. However, such a space does not refer to just any weblogs on the Internet. Rather, it refers to a cluster of blogs created by and shared almost exclusively amongst foreign sojourners who have come from afar and crossed geographical, national, and cultural borders to taste and experience China in the twenty-first century. With a unifying focus on China-related issues, those weblogs are evolving into a meaningful cultural space where stories about the country are told from the perspectives of a group of foreign nationals. In the current study, we used the term “China blogs” to define this group of weblogs, and as for the foreign sojourners who create such a space and designate it to their host country, we called them China bloggers.

Although China blogs can be used as a convenient conceptual category to describe such a cohort of weblogs, it is impossible to know the exact number of them. Fortunately, a Web portal (www.chinabloglist.org) has provided us with a list of links to those blogs. The latest count of the blogs shows that by early 2010, there were at least 326 China blogs, with new ones being added to the list every day. The information stored and shared in the blogs is abundant and useful, covering almost every imaginable topic about contemporary Chinese life, ranging from serious political commentaries, pop culture, technology, language, and even vegetable prices in Shanghai farmers’ markets. Therefore, those blogs are a useful Web source for would-be China travelers where they can learn about the first-hand experiences of, and note the recommendations from, veteran China sojourners. Moreover, together those blogs could have a global reach, because the bloggers are from all over the world. Despite the fact that the individual China blogs vary tremendously from one another in terms of subject matter, narrative tone, and format, there is a shared effort made by the China bloggers to distance their accounts of China from those of the mainstream Western media that is uniformly critical of China (Jespersen, 1996; Liss, 2003). Many China bloggers believe that being immersed in the Chinese society grants them certain credibility as independent, objective, and trusted sources of information for anything that people want to know about

the country. They are confident that their accounts are “unsmeared by media fear-mongering, political agendas, or economic goal” (Pasden, 2002b) and will project contemporary China in a fair light.

Such a sense of purpose – to provide alternative and grassroots perspectives to look at and to comprehend contemporary Chinese reality – serves as an invisible but also very real bond bringing these men and women of different racial, national, and cultural backgrounds together. In this unique digital and cultural space about and for China, foreign expatriates exchange information, share life stories, engage in discussions, provide emotional support to each other, argue, and gossip. They even extend the online networks offline to meet with each other in person. In sum, China blogs are emerging as a virtual community that has the potential to reach millions of people worldwide and to shape their views of contemporary China.

Research focus

Given what have been said about China in this community, which may bring about changes to people’s knowledge about and attitudes towards the country, it would be ideal to conduct a comprehensive survey of all the blogs. The current study, however, only explored the processes through which a group of Americans use such blogs as a platform to showcase their China experience for the following reasons. First of all, Americans are one of the largest foreign groups in today’s China (Macleod, 2005). Secondly, a primary survey of the China blogs revealed that the overwhelming majority of them are written by American citizens. Lastly, through much of modern history, the rise and fall of the Sino–US relationship has impacted the world in general and the stability of Asian Pacific region in particular. Therefore, we believe that a look into the blogging world of American expatriates in China will shed light on the not so obvious and often overlooked opinions that ordinary Americans may have about the country at an interesting historical moment when the US dominance of the world faces challenges from a rising China.

Although our investigation of a particular kind of American representation of contemporary China in China blogs took into account the changes of the political and economic climates surrounding current Sino–US relations, we did not ignore other factors that play equally important roles in shaping the American expatriates’ interpretations and portrayals of the country. Some of these contributing factors include the conventional Euro-American discourses about China and Chinese culture, burgeoning Chinese nationalism, and the Chinese government’s control, surveillance, and censorship of the Internet. Understanding all these forces and the interplay among them is vital to finding answers to the following research questions that have guided our inquiry. These research questions are:

1. How do the American bloggers utilize the blogging technology in their portrayals of contemporary China?
2. What aspect(s) of contemporary China is/are chosen to be highlighted in the China blogs and in what rhetorical and metaphorical ways?
3. Have the rhetorical conventions used to portray China in the previous travel narratives of Euro-American sojourners been recycled or transformed in the digital discourse under the investigation?

4. How do the Chinese readers respond to the China blogs?

Interpretive frameworks

Our close examination of the select China blogs by American expatriates as an emerging virtual space of cultural representation and contestation has been analyzed with critical and discursive scholarship. The conceptualization of China blogs as a social and cultural space is primarily indebted to Henry Lefebvre's theorizing of space as an intrinsically productive and performative social construct with real implications (Munt, 2001). Lefebvre's propositions were further extended by Sally Munt, who argued that new media, such as the Internet, is a particular "technospace" where individual activities, such as playing virtual games, posting comments in online forums, or establishing virtual communities, become concrete and complex expressions often inscribed by various "social taxonomies" (2001, p. 4), such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. In addition, those intrinsically performative activities can and do produce real or perceptive discursive consequences. Clearly, the blogging of the American expatriates about contemporary China for a worldwide audience is one of the many significant social performances being carried out in cyberspace/technospace. It is this very process that forms a contour of contemporary China as a physical place, produces a plethora of images, and invokes a whole gamut of emotions. In short, it is a whole new way of producing and disseminating the knowledge about the cultural Other in the digital age.

In addition to recognizing the China blogs as a space for cultural representation, we also regard them as a contact zone where cultures encounter and clash. Such a notion stems from Mary Louise Pratt (1992). In her influential book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Pratt defined the "contact zone" as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (p. 4). To be more specific, the contact zone is "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (p. 6). Pratt's theorization was originally predicated on the unequal power geometry of colonial encounters between white Westerners and non-Western cultures in the officially bygone era of colonization. However, we still find it fruitful by associating the China blogs with the cultural contact zone because the asymmetrical relations between the West and the East, US and China, are still lived out, albeit in a much more subtle and muted way, in the post-colonial era and in the globalization of capitalism. Furthermore, much like Pratt's belief that there is space for the Other's voice in the contact zone, we feel that the interactive nature of blogging technology opens up dialogic possibilities for the authors of the China blogs to hear the voice of the Chinese people who are being observed, described, and evaluated. In fact, the contact zone metaphor with its connotation of cultural wrestling and contestation is exemplified through the guest comments made by Chinese readers who express their discomfort of often unreflective accounts of or blatant stereotypes about China in the blogs.

The third premise of the study states that the China blogs constitute a discourse of cultural Othering. According to Teun Van Dijk (1999), discourse is "text and talk in context" (p. 291). For critical discourse analysts, such as Norman Fairclough (1995), discourse is the coherent bodies of representations that do not faithfully reflect reality like mirrors, but are artifacts of language through which the very reality that

they purport to reflect is constructed. Fairclough's view on discourse was apparently influenced by Foucault who attributed the dubious relationship between words and "truth" to the spontaneous and inter-textual natures of statements. Moreover, Foucault did not see discourse as a mere reflection of ideology. Instead, he recognized the constitutive power of discourse in terms of shaping, (re)producing, and maintaining social orders.

As a body of representation, the China blogs purport to reflect the reality of contemporary China from a foreign perspective. In our opinion, it is a discourse about a specific cultural Other. More importantly, it presents a good opportunity to study the exercises of differentiating discursive politics both in public and private contexts (Riggins, 1997). On one hand, American expatriates use their blogs as a public forum to promote intercultural understanding and respect. On the other hand, they cannot help resorting to old stereotypes and prejudices when they speak about China directly to their families and friends back home. Inevitably, the lenses through which they examine China have already been colored and shaped by the ontological and epistemological binary constructs of Self and Other that have historically influenced the formation of Euro-American subjectivity.

In summary, in this study we do not conceptualize blogs as static link lists or a new version of personal Web pages, but rather as an interesting social and discursive channel that occupies an ambivalent position for being both public and private. The discussion of seemingly trivial events there are connected with the larger and wider universe of events and are believed to influence public opinion in indirect but no less powerful ways. Based on such understandings of the social relevance of blogs, we conducted a critical discursive analysis of American expatriates' China blogs as a contact zone of cultures and a digital site of cultural representation.

China under Western eyes: politics and difficulty of representation in Euro-American travel writings of the colonial era

When we suggested that the China blogs should be understood in connection with the larger and wider universe of events, we emphasized the importance of tracing the historical continuity between the online anecdotes and the Euro-American travel narratives about China from a not-so-distant colonial past. Namely, we believe that the China bloggers do not write about contemporary China in isolation of historical and political contexts. In fact, the writings of colonial travelers about China have greatly influenced how the Euro-American public views the country today. Not only did these writings supply particular vantage points to look at China, they also passed on discursive and rhetoric traditions in describing the country to future generations of travelers, including the China bloggers. Moreover, paying closer attention, we were not surprised to see the motifs and themes of the colonial travelogues reappear in the China blogs. To sum up, it is intuitive to see how China has been portrayed historically to better understand how American expatriates blog about contemporary China.

In a wider definition, colonial Euro-American travel writings about China are part of a long tradition of unveiling the legendary culture of the Fast East to the Western public. They were written both by voluntary and involuntary travelers, including diplomats, soldiers, merchants, missionaries, journalists, and scholars of sinology. A cursory survey of those narratives reveals several major themes or motifs that have shaped today's mainstream Euro-American perception of China. First of all, those writings

demonstrated a strong territorial motif closely related to colonial expansion. Second, natural science loomed large in the minds of the travelers who paid special attention to topics such as botany, geology, anthropology, and ethnographic studies of Chinese ethnic minorities. Third, romantic appreciation and depiction of the Chinese landscape was obvious. Last, there were strong evangelizing motives and an emphasis on Chinese peculiarities as evidence of cultural Otherness. Basically, colonial representations of China oscillated between a nostalgic admiration of a fantasized ancient glory of Chinese traditional culture and a repulsion of China's unflattering backwardness and degeneration (Wang, 2004). In the writings of David Spurr (1993), which examine the rhetorical conventions of Euro-American travel writings, the above mentioned motifs and themes were discussed in rhetorical terms, such as surveillance, aestheticization, naturalization/idealization, eroticization, and debasement/negation. According to Spurr (1993), such motifs, themes, and rhetorical conventions provided Euro-American subjects with a perceptual framework and epistemological lenses through which to observe and eventually to produce knowledge about the cultural Other.

Nowadays, the texts by Western travelers of the colonial era have been the target of an ongoing postcolonial critique project that aims to problematize the seeming innocence of the travel writings. The challenge has either an epistemological or ethical dimension. On one hand, as a complex and hybrid literary genre that is connected to autobiographies, eye-witness accounts, memoirs, diaries, collages of news clippings, and official documents, travel writings are about the creation as much as the discovery of places. It is Peter Bishop's (1989) view that "no matter how much effort is devoted to being as true as possible to the empirical material, frequently the travel account masks a totally fictional and imagined journey" (p. 4). In addition, the dominance of vision over other senses as a means to gain knowledge also presents a challenge to the travelers who rely upon their abilities to see/witness the Other because the visions of the travelers are always mediated and filtered. In other words, travelers will not see and understand the visited culture in native terms because their visions are always mediated. Therefore, how much reality of the other culture can be perceived even if it appears "seductively accessible via vision" is questionable (Siegel & Wulff, 2002, p. 110). On the other hand, informed by Orientalism (Said, 1978), critical scholars (Clark, 1999; Philip, 1993) have exposed the Euro-American travel writings' complacency with colonial expansion and exploitation. The scholars noted that travel conducted by Euro-American sojourners has largely been a one-way street in which privileged Westerners "mapped the world rather than the world mapping them" (Clark, 1999, p. 3).

Given the obvious similarity between travel writings and the blogs devoted to recording one's travel experience, it is not far-fetched to infer that the production of the discourse about contemporary China in the blog sphere should conform to some degree to the history, rhetorical conventions, and epistemological limitations of the genre of Euro-American travel writings. Based on this supposition, we formed the following approaches to select the China blogs.

Analyzing the China blogs: design and procedures

When it comes to analyzing the China blogs, the question of "Whose blogs ought to be examined?" became relevant. There were 272 blogs listed on www.chinabloglist.org when we were first introduced to the site in late 2006. Moreover, it is quite commonplace for a well-maintained China blog to have at least 100 posts and hundreds of guest comments in a short six-month period. The sheer number of blog posts

presented a daunting challenge to in-depth analyses. Therefore, instead of being impractically comprehensive, we decided to study a few China blogs. We had a few criteria in mind when we selected the blogs for analysis. First of all, we wanted the blogs' coverage of China to be broad enough to reflect multiple facets of Chinese life. As a result, the China blogs with a narrow focus on a singular subject matter, such as music or technology, were taken out of the picture. Second, we wanted our blogs to have clear narrative structures and to demonstrate, on the blogger's part, an obvious commitment to making current cultural observations. This eliminated dormant China blogs that had not been active for a long time. We also purposefully excluded the China blogs that were written by diplomats, journalists, or scholars of sinology because we are more interested in knowing the perspectives of ordinary American travelers, not those of people with strong professional ties to the country. In the meantime, the technological constraints associated with blog research created many obstacles for us. Inaccessible blog pages due to network failures, disabled links, busy online traffic, and errors in HTML forced us to focus on a few China blogs that had a stable Web presence, received regular visitors, and were fairly well-known in the China blogs community.

This strict screening process helped to narrow down the number of the blogs for closer scrutiny. The early phase of the analyses was used to get the general feel of and to establish archives for each selected blog. We focused on the textual/semantic dimension of each individual blog as well as its visual layout. In the meantime, we highlighted and documented blog entries that commented on Chinese life, people, or society in general.

According to Jager (2001), the key to discourse analysis in data processing is to establish categories of analysis. Based on the initial in-depth reading of the blog entries, we formulated four categories. The first category of analysis was "local context". It pertained to factual information about each individual blog, which included the blogger's profile, the history and mission statement of the blog, number of posts, number of China-related blog entries, and the frequency of posting. The second category was "text surface", which dealt with the graphics and layout of the blogs, including titles, headlines, icons, color schemes, typography, photos, and so forth. The third category was "themes and statement", which contained the blogger's comments on Chinese history, culture, landscape, living condition, Chinese characteristics, Chinese politics/political system, education, cultural artifacts, and language. The fourth category "symbolism" examined the use of metaphors in each China blog. We called the last category "omissions and striking issues" because we used it to note the bloggers' silence on certain topics and issues.

Three blogs: a sketch

Based on the above criteria, we selected three China blogs for analysis. Each approached the common subject of China from unique thematic angles. The first blog, *Sinosplice* (www.Sinosplice.com), was started in April 2002. It mainly featured the blogger John's observation of Shanghai's daily occurrences, and was characterized by a laid-back tone and witty language. The second, known as *The Opposite End of China* (<http://china.otspecial.org>), was launched in early 2005. It showcased the blogger's travel adventures in China's northwest frontier and had comments on people, society, customs, and politics. The final blog, *Speaking of China* (www.speakingofchina.com), was created in 2001. It provided a glimpse into the Chinese life from an American female perspective. Being the most personal of the three, this blog

mainly focused on the blogger's fascination with the Chinese culture and her romantic relationships with Chinese men. In early 2006, the three blogs respectively contained 186, 32, and 133 posts that dealt with China-related observations.

The China flavor

At first glance, the three China blogs look very similar to the personal homepages or regular blogs that we see on the internet. They have titles, highlights of blog entries, the blogger's profiles, blog rings, and advertisements. What distinguishes these from other blogs is a distinct China flavor that they strive to create. A clear focus on China is an unquestionable common theme shared by the three. For example, in the title banner of *Sinosplice*, a bold and stylistic "*Sinosplice*" is set against a green template. Slightly beneath it, John states that the purpose of this blog is to "try to understand China and to learn Chinese" (Pasden, 2002a). In the background, we can see two waving brush strokes that bring out two vaguely visible Chinese characters: 华结. literally, "华" means China, and "结" means knot. The connotation of these two characters combined is the tying of a knot or making a connection, which indicates the mission of the blog: to promote cross-cultural fusions and to forge a union between China and the US.

The Opposite End of China uses the visual elements from China's national flag to show the blog's connection to the country. The red background, radiating golden stripes, and four little stars centering on a big star immediately evoke images of China and the Chinese government. At the top, the word "China" stands out from the title "*The Opposite End of China*" against a part of the map of China showing the location where the blogger Michael writes about his experience (see Figure 1). Like Michael of *The Opposite End of China*, Jocelyn of *Speaking of China* uses the color red in the design of her blog. In addition, she also uses a Chinese fortune doll, dragon boat, and exquisite oriental floral patterns in reference to traditional Chinese culture (see Figure 2).

Framing China: photographic images in the blogs

If the deliberate use of Chinese elements in the blog design indicates the bloggers' insider knowledge of the country and the culture, sharing their travel photos with an online audience further testifies to the authenticity of the bloggers' China experiences. The photographic images not only signpost the bloggers' journey but also endow the travelers' stories with a sense of realism and immediacy, which may come from the social conventions that privilege camera with "a form of objective observation" (Spurr, 1993, p. 26). It is even more so with travel pictures taken by amateur photographers, because people tend to believe that there is little consideration or manipulation going on in that process than what has always been staged in professional photography. However, we often overlook the fact that everyday photography is a socially regulated and highly conventional activity that involves making ontological choices about what is worthy of being photographed.

When examining the pictures posted in the three China blogs, we noticed that certain subjects appear more often in the photos than other subjects do. Among the images of China captured by the bloggers' cameras, nature and culture loom large. Chinese landscape is definitely the number one photo subject from the blogs' online albums. Images of farmers toiling in rice paddies, lush green mountains shrouded in clouds, peaceful river towns, or vast stretches of the Gobi desert appear in the blogs most frequently. Historical architecture is another favorite subject so popular that

we will not believe that bloggers are in China if we do not see pictures of the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, Buddhist temples with up-curved tile roofs, ancient bell towers and pagodas, ruins of ancient villages, or traditional courtyards. Then there are Chinese symbols such as dragon murals, lion-head shaped door bells, red lanterns, and Chinese calligraphy. When people become the subject of these photos they are either ethnic Chinese dressed up in elaborate costumes or local craftsmen displaying their work. Often, when a picture does not contain the above visual elements, it usually shows things that easily connect China with red communism, such as Chairman Mao's statue, China's national flag, or propaganda posters.

Those images, very common in the photos taken by Euro-American travelers to China, confirm a particular kind of impression that the West has had of China. As a matter of fact, looking for those typical symbols of China is so widely practiced in the foreigners' circle that it almost acquires the status of a ritual. At one level, it validates the authenticity of the travelers' China experience. At a deeper level, it frames that experience as a relentless search for a preconceived and often idealized essence of China that is either connected to the country's agricultural past or its unique political system. To sum up, the choices going into photographing China represents a rhetorical strategy of anesthetizing and idealization of what is foreign.

Total China moments and the metaphors

Although taking highly formulaic pictures at real Chinese locations attests to the authenticity of one's travel experience, it is a project that any tourist can undertake. Our bloggers, however, are more concerned about becoming the insiders of Chinese culture who can rightfully share with the world their perceptions of the country. In order to do so, they chose to go native, which means to get a real job, to become the neighbors of common Chinese people, to eat Chinese food on a daily basis, to endure the loneliness of being the only American in a remote Chinese town, or to ride a bike through Chinese neighborhoods to discover signs of authentic China in the "nooks, crannies and odd corners" of the Chinese streets (Jocelyn, 2002).

In their daily negotiations with Chinese life at different Chinese locations, the three bloggers observe, write about, and interpret Chinese society. Whether it is stated or not, they all try to convey to their audience what they consider to be the true spirit of the country. But the word "truthfulness" should be used with caution when it comes to evaluating the extent to which these bloggers succeed in reflecting their China experiences. In fact, no blog is able to capture the complex and elusively true spirit of a country or a culture as vast and diverse as China. Therefore, no matter how hard they try, our bloggers can only put together a few pieces of what remains the unsolvable puzzle of China. We should always keep in mind that the bloggers' descriptions of and comments on their total China moments are necessarily mediated through a series of factors such as the dominant Euro-American views towards China, the unequal Sino-US relations in the not-so-distant semi-colonial past, and the bloggers' own prejudices, as well as their fascination about the country and the culture.

Careful thematic and discourse analyses of the three blogs have revealed that the bloggers often use a binary discourse to describe their total China moments. In other words, their observations of and

reflection on Chinese life are characterized by a set of contrasts between tradition and modernity, nature and human activities, country and city, and bad and good characters of people, as well as cultural practices.

Like most American expatriates, our bloggers, except for Michael of *The Opposite End of China* who opted for a remote border town, live in very developed coastal cities in China, such as Shanghai or Hangzhou. Whereas big cities promise better access to modern amenities and job opportunities, our bloggers still find them to be unattractive and want to escape from these “raucous, smoggy, bustling cosmopolitan place full of tired, yearning masses and crafty businessmen” (Jocelyn, 2005a); from “the 24-hour construction, incessant horns blaring from the traffic, or noisome crooning from the Karaoke bars” (Jocelyn, 2001); and from the glittering high-rises and the “frenzied” and “unfriendly” crowds (Manning, 2005a). In their narratives, Chinese cities are in sharp contrast to China’s small towns or countryside where lots of people cycle, old and friendly people walk the streets at all hours of the day (Pasden, 2004a), and where “people still plow the field with their trusty ox, where a mountain climb yields bamboo and fiddleheads for dinnertime, and firewood to stock the oven, where neighbors stop by causally for the afternoon and linger over a hot cup of green tea, where fresh air, green hillsides and fields that stretch as far as the eye can see . . . where true Chinese hospitality is the rule” (Jocelyn, 2005a). In these near idyllic depictions of small town life, the bloggers seem to suggest that this is the place where the quintessential China is to be discovered.

But the quintessential China does not have to be associated only with a rural lifestyle or untamed nature. Regardless of whether they live in a small town or a major metropolis, our American bloggers have invariably identified and commented on one signifier of Chinese way of living: inadequate and polluted living conditions. In that respect, these bloggers are not so different from their colonial counterparts who considered filth and dirt one of the defining aspects of Chinese habitation. According to Nicholas Clifford (2001), such a deep-seated disdain was usually symmetrical to their idealized admiration of the classic Chinese culture. While the colonial travelers had shared stories about the poverty of the Chinese people and the dirty, filthy Chinese streets and inns, John used words such as “horrible”, “shoddy”, “primitive”, and “cheap” to describe the Chinese living space; Jocelyn was shocked to find that typical countryside homes in China have no formal toilet/showering facilities, nor insulation, and that the interior is “ascetic, dusty, and barely furnished”; and Michael even posted a picture of a Chinese toilet to satisfy his mother’s curiosity. Pollution is another topic appearing in the blogs every once in a while. For John, “life in China comes with more than the recommended daily dosage of dust” (Pasden, 2003c). He complained about raging flames atop smokestacks and canals becoming the dumping ground for industrial waste. As for Michael, the pollution was so widespread that even the air had an awful rancid smell (Manning, 2005c).

In addition to sharing their views on Chinese living conditions, the bloggers take it as their responsibility to report about unusual Chinese customs, as well as to comment on Chinese characters as if they are an indispensable part of the whole package of the China spectacle. Bizarre cultural practices have always been a favorite topic in the travel writings of the past. Much like the old-time travelers who wrote about foot-binding with amusement, John found that no foreigners in China should ever miss seeing public ear cleaning, street peddlers selling caged crickets, or people drinking tiger penis soup to boost male potency (Pasden, 2002c, 2003b). As one of the unique Chinese cultural practices, Chinese medicine and acupuncture also take a center stage in the blogs’ discourse. With no exceptions, the bloggers offer totally contradictory images. Describing an acupuncture treatment he received, John used hyperbole and contrast

to show the pain associated with the treatment, the absurdity of the scenario, and the incompetence of the Chinese doctor who treated him. Basically, he was skeptical about the theories of Chinese medicine and the practice of acupuncture and he doubted that Chinese medicine could ever be “measured up against the western scientific and medical standards” (Pasden, 2004b). In contrast to John’s view, Jocelyn praised Chinese medicine and acupuncture wholeheartedly. She believed that the practice is the vehicle of traditional Chinese wisdom and has the miraculous power to restore harmony between the body and the soul. She felt comfortable being treated by a well-trained and skillful Chinese doctor. The result, she indicated, is the “Chinese answer to Prozac – minus the nasty side effects” (Jocelyn, 2005b).

Throughout the China blogs, we see discursive dichotomy at work projecting contemporary China in contrasting lights. It helps to set the untamed nature against human development and rampant pollution, modernity against tradition, city life against country living, and cultural/philosophical advancement against technological/scientific backwardness. Such dichotomies have long been used in conventional Euro-American travel writings to comprehend the cultural Other (Clifford, 2001). In our view, they reflect a type of conceptual framework that our bloggers often rely on to make sense of contemporary China. It is even more so when the bloggers portray Chinese people as one-dimensional characters with either good or bad attributes. In *Speaking of China*, the Chinese are generally portrayed as kind, decent, and hardworking people with good manners and a “well-rooted sense of justice”. On the other hand, younger women are “VERY sweet”, “adorable”, “invariably cute”, “shy”, “gentle”, and “helpful”. Old women are more “reticent, dedicated to the family, and rarely complain” (Jocelyn, 2004a, 2005a).

The images of Chinese people are different in *The Opposite End of China*. There they were characterized as people having no regard for others, loud, frenzied, rude, and unfriendly (Manning, 2005a). In *SinosplICE*, they are an “annoying”, “crazy pushing horde”, self-centered with a low level of personal hygiene and no sense of privacy, and stubborn and aggressive like children. In addition, they were labeled as the least creative and the most conforming people in the world (Pasden, 2002d, 2005b).

The bloggers’ views on Chinese characters are certainly not new to readers familiar with the Euro-American discourse regarding China, which is known for the juxtaposition of representation strategies such as exoticization, idealization, and negation. There has not been much change in the vocabularies that the bloggers use to describe Chinese society and people. However, it is not accurate to draw the conclusion that nothing has changed in terms of how Americans view and describe China. Based on our analyses, we noticed new metaphors emerging from the blog discourse. More or less shaped by the bloggers’ personal perspectives and experience, they adequately reflect the changes that China has gone through in recent decades. Therefore, they may provide more refreshing ways to look at and understand the country.

For John of *SinosplICE*, there is no singular way to conceptualize China. At some points, he saw the country as a grand central terminal where the entire Chinese society is milling about, and a lot of people take advantage of the chaos and make a profit. At other times, he compared China to a dangerous car chase game that kept him in a perpetual state of excitement. These metaphors give us surprising insight into some important aspects of contemporary Chinese society. While the grand central terminal metaphor conjures up an image of a society that is powered by a bustling economic engine, the car chase game metaphor emphasizes the full speed with which Chinese society is heading towards modernity. The

confusion and chaos indicate the sheer unstoppable force of the economic expansion as well as potential risks facing the ordinary Chinese who get knocked down and bowled over in the game.

John may not have intended to create the metaphors for his readers to comprehend the Chinese reality as he sees and understands it. However, they fittingly reflect the magnitude of the economic growth and social transformation that China has been experiencing. Unlike the conventional view of China, John's China is full of energy and it promises the young American great adventure, opportunity, and unrestricted fun.

While John seeks adventure in China's urban centers, Michael of *The Opposite End of China* followed his dream of adventure to the far west corner of China in 2005 to the city of Korla in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. It became his adopted home and it is all that he knows about China. This part of China is little-known to the outside world. In every respect, it is the opposite of what the West used to know about the country.

On his four-day westward train ride from Beijing to Korla, Michael saw the landscape change from farmlands to mountains, to the arid Yellow Plateau, then to the absolute nothingness of Gansu, and finally to the sublime and exotic "mountain desert nothingness of Xinjiang". He was dazzled by the "vast expanses of alternating sandy and rocky desert" in Southern Xinjiang and the mile after mile of green pasture surrounded by jagged snow-covered mountains in Northern Xinjiang. The scenery brought back memories of the Nevada desert. Even the "Big Sky Country" of Montana could not compete with the "Bigger Sky Country" of Xinjiang. Michael could not think of anything to emulate that beauty except that of America's Wild West (Manning, 2005b).

There are many similarities between Xinjiang, the new frontier of China, and the Wild West. Both are associated with remote, barren, and inhabitable terrains with a dangerous and unforgiving nature. More importantly, Xinjiang embodies the spirit of the Wild West for Michael because, for the young and adventurous like him, it can be a field of action and adventure. Riding a motorcycle and venturing alone deep into the dry and generally hostile ocean of the Taklamakan desert, Michael certainly looked more like a lonely, fearless cowboy than a foreign language teacher. According to him, he survived "two sand storms, three worrying mechanical breakdowns, and four run-ins with jincha [Chinese police]" and prevailed and "came out a stronger man" with "a stoked ego" (Manning, 2005e). With the pride of "the first foreigner to ever have driven across the Taklamakan", Michael congratulated himself for completing a very manly and nature-defying journey like a superman. With this, the Wild West of China became a symbolic but also irrelevant stage for the performance of an aggressive American masculinity.

Unlike John and Michael, who treated China either as a thrilling game to play or an exotic Wild West in the East to conquer, Jocelyn looked at the country as if it were her home. Her narratives of the real China moments often revolved around relationships and interactions that she had with her neighbors, students, co-workers, friends, romantic partners, and relatives of her extended family. Jocelyn made it very clear in her blog that it was much easier for her to find more soulmates and lead a far more social life in China than in the US because most Chinese people treated her as one of their own kind (Jocelyn, 2004b). To Jocelyn, relationships are important, and it was in China that she found the attention and warmth that she was seeking. She felt included and connected. Her story is essentially a story of home coming and finding one's spiritual roots. In the end, she married a Chinese citizen and, metaphorically, China became her borrowed homeland in the East.

China blogs as dialogic spaces for cultures: possibilities and constraints

It is our hope that our analyses have traced the contour of a discourse about contemporary China that is forming on the Internet. While the three blogs that we focused on are not representative of all China blogs, we believe, however, that our findings can illustrate the ways in which travel blogs can be used as a new and effective medium for cultural representation. In fact, we are particularly interested in exploring the possibilities of forging cultural dialogues and cross-cultural understandings in such a space. By cultural dialogues and cross-cultural understandings, we mean the inclusion of alternative and diverse perspectives to counterbalance flattering or sometimes even biased perspectives usually associated with a dominating single author (Shapiro, 1999). In other words, the polyphony of voices helps to achieve eloquence in representation (Mitra & Watts, 2002).

In that regard, travel blogs that are engaged in diffusing cultural knowledge and sharing intercultural experiences have obvious advantages over their close relatives, including travel writings and even print journalism (Matheson, 2004). The multimedia format of blogging enables the bloggers to convey their experiences more vividly and to keep them current. Links to useful websites provide rich background information. For example, both John and Michael used photos and mp3s to show the sights and sounds of China as they experienced them. They also referred the audience to the work of Chinese artists, singers, and dancers through hypertext links. With or without the knowledge of the bloggers, the wide use of multimedia in China blogs not only connects the audience with the Chinese people's lived experience but it also encourages alternative modes of learning by introducing the audience to the voices of the culture.

Drawing from the idealization of the internet as a democratic space, we also believe that the interactive nature of blogs, enabled by inviting guest comment following each and every blog post, creates a technological basis upon which cultural dialogues can be built. Our analyses of the China blogs seem to confirm the possibility that all social actors' voices may be heard, including those from the people who are being represented. In the blogs of *SinosplICE* and *The Opposite End of China*, we noticed such voices, albeit very small compared to the dominant expressions of the bloggers' fellow expatriates. For example, in response to a blog entry that lists and ridicules what John perceived as the unhygienic personal habits of Chinese people, a Chinese guest commented:

I am a little upset to read this article. I never spit neither outdoor nor indoor . . . many foreigners like to say China this, Chinese that, but it's incorrect. Not all Chinese have these bad habits, and some Chinese even hate these bad habits. Like me. So the right way to say is that some Chinese have . . . or some Chinese do. (qtd. in Pasden, 2003b)

Similarly, when John commented that he knew better than his timid Chinese colleagues in how to fight management abuse, a Chinese guest pointed out to John that the better treatment had nothing to do with either the special skills or John's Western style but rather to the unique position of privilege that John occupies in Chinese society as a foreigner.

Similar scenarios can be found in *The Opposite End of China*. In an April entry, Michael reported about a taxi driver strike in Korla. In that blog entry, Michael talked about how angry the taxi drivers were towards the local government because of a proposed tax hike. The blame was on the government. A Chinese guest named Eric posted and corrected Michael's misperception of the incident in the comment

section. Being a native of Korla, he explained to Michael what really happened and argued that the local government was not to blame as much as Michael suggested (Manning, comments section, 2005d).

In 2005, there was a breakout of Chinese protests against Japan in China's eastern cities. In the heat of the boiling national emotion, Michael decided to ask his students about their reactions. He was pleased to announce the result that "not all of the students were itching for a fight" and "there is some room in the tightly controlled mind of a Chinese schoolchild for a bit of nonconformity" (Manning, 2005d). Michael's comments suggested that he disapproved of the strong nationalist sentiment of the protestors who he believed were manipulated by the government and acted blindly. Such a view is very typical in the circle of American expatriates in China. The Chinese authoritarian regime and its control of the freedom of speech of Chinese people have been favorite topics of the expatriate community.

Michael's comments were confronted by the same guest who had corrected him earlier about local taxi incident. He left two long comments to give Michael a history lesson about Sino-Japanese wars and China's humiliating semi-colonial past. He proclaimed with great pride that China is now getting stronger and therefore no other countries, including the US, would stop its unification cause:

We want to let Taiwan home, but the Japanese says no. that is beyond its business. Maybe the USA has the same idea . . . Then we will have a war. I don't know which side will win the war in the end. But the one thing is sure; the war is not good to each side. You know that Sino-America had two wars in the history, one was in North Korea, we won, the other was in Vietnam, we also won. At that time China was a young country, and we had nothing. Now China is stronger. (Guest, 2005)

These comments are typical expressions of China's cyber nationalism, which has emerged in recent years among well-educated Chinese youth who take a more pragmatic approach to democracy and governance. Having great pride in the rise of China as an economic and political power, this new generation of Chinese nationalists is the main force behind the recent wave of anti-foreign online posting, protests, and boycotts of foreign goods (Xu, 2007). Such sentiment has also been expressed through challenges to the American democratic system, a deeply-held distrust of Western media for being biased and inaccurate, defensive reactions to foreign criticism directed at the Chinese government and the ruling Communist party, and the praise of Chinese democratic development on overseas BBS (Qui, 2000). The hostility of young nationalists towards foreigners is troublesome to the China blogs community. It is widely speculated that a blog titled Talk Talk China was closed down overnight in 2006 because Chinese readers were angry about the blog's anti-China message. In light of events like this, Michael and John adopted another strategy to deal with occasional outbursts of Chinese nationalism in their blogs. Usually, they ignored and did not respond to those comments, as they would normally do to comments from fellow expatriates.

The introduction of the voices of the people being represented might mean opportunities for dialogue, but it can also trigger communication breakdown as exemplified in the Talk Talk China incident. This is not the only obstacle preventing the kind of cultural dialogue that we hope for from taking place. As Wacker (2003) suggests, even though the internet provides technological possibilities to transform territorial boundaries, it does not mean that "it exists in a social and political vacuum" (p. 73). After examining the hard realities of China's Internet surveillance and control, we feel that there is still a long way to go before the China blogs can transform into a truly cultural contact zone and a place for dialogue.

As a matter of fact, most China blogs only circulate in the expatriate community in China. Most Chinese Internet users do not know about them, let alone access those blogs, due to the Chinese party-state's tight control of the Internet. Previous studies have revealed that the Chinese government has effectively regulated and contained domestic Internet activities through placing restrictions on the distribution of news, surveillance of and filtering out sensitive words or topics that are deemed dangerously anti-government, blocking, sometimes erratically and unsystematically, foreign websites, and reprimanding, penalizing, and even arresting those whose online behaviors are deemed subversive and disrupting to China's political stability (Matheson, 2004; Wacker, 2003; Yang, 2009). Only a few Chinese netizens know how to use proxy servers outside China to get access to banned foreign websites; not everybody has that level of technical knowledge and sophistication. Unfortunately, among the three China blogs that we examined, only *Sinosplince* can be regularly accessed inside China. Even John sometimes had to circumvent the great firewall of China to update his blog. In 2003, in response to a series of closures and banning of some China blogs, John ranted, "China has done it again . . . The links on my China blogs . . . have been massacred . . . most of these blogs are dedicated to changing the way outsiders think of China. We're out here building bridges, creating windows. And they're getting torn down and smashed by the government of the very country we're trying to benefit" (Pasden, 2003a). In April 2005, after hearing about a fellow blogger who shut down his China blogs for fear that he was under constant watch by the government and that his blog will put his wife, job, and legal residence in China at risk, John used bold fonts to emphasize his frustration and anger (Pasden, 2005a). For his part, in order to keep his blog alive, he chose to self-censor the blog by avoiding sensitive topics, proclaiming that the blog has no anti-government agenda, and purposefully omitting key words.

Conclusion and future directions

Starting out as a small effort to answer the call to incorporate rhetorical, discursive, and critical perspectives into the study of weblogs (Warnick, 2001), our in-depth discourse case studies have revealed the ways in which China blogs have been used as effective means to transmit cultural knowledge and to share cross-cultural experiences. Through the analyses, we notice the similarities between those blogs and Euro-American travel writings, a highly conventionalized literary genre with a long history. The vantage points from which the China bloggers look at and understand China, the images they invoke about China, and the rhetoric tropes that they used to describe China all resemble the ways in which earlier travelers portrayed the country. For example, their images of Chinese culture still very much have to do with the ancient rural past; they still show strong ethnocentric tendencies to focus on the negative aspects of Chinese life, such as underdeveloped infrastructure, pollution, Chinese characters, or behaviors that are not up to the Western civil standards. Clearly, there is a historical continuity between today's digital discourse and the colonial narratives. Yet, inheriting and being influenced by the old rhetoric or representational modes does not mean that our bloggers understand their relations to contemporary China in the old colonizer-versus-colonized framework. We should not understand these blogs simply as an extension of the colonial discourse about China, even though occasionally we see some of its residue in expressions, such as the bloggers' often-unquestioned sense of entitlement judgmentalism, albeit very muted and implicit, and some Chinese guests' critiques of the blogs in simple black and white dichotomy.

The main motivation of the bloggers to write about contemporary China in this space is to open a window to the outside world so that people will have fairer and well-rounded understandings of the country. The bloggers believe that they are able to do so because they mingle with the Chinese and they have the blogging technology to convey their experiences with great immediacy and vividness. A wide range of discursive means are used in the blogs to bring the images of modern China to an online audience. Photos, graphics, audios, videos, and hypertext links expand the picture by linking China's history, current affairs, and the Chinese people's art works and opinions together. With the presence of interactive guest comments, there is a possibility of hearing the voices of the people who are being portrayed. In that respect, travel blogs can become a truly digital platform for a new mode of cultural representation that is characterized by diversity of perspectives and dialogue.

It is our hope that this study points out a new direction for the study of Internet communication genres, such as weblogs. Specially, given the illustrative and experimental nature of the current study, we hope that more in-depth surveys of the digital discourse about China can be conducted to yield valuable empirical data. Closer investigation of the dynamics between blog authors and readers is another area worthy of pursuing. In addition, it would be conducive to ask the same questions about the roles that travel blogs in general play in producing cultural knowledge and its social and cultural ramifications in an age that is marked by unprecedented global integration as well as rampant ethnic and cultural conflict.

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Figure 2. The title banner of “Speaking of China”. Reproduced with permission.