



**Social Media Content Regulation in China: Analysis of English  
Language Wechat Accounts**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This study analyzed "social media content regulation in China: through an analysis of English Language Wechat accounts". The research study used quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze English language Wechat channels, with the datasets of the use of English language in China as well as all legislative and legal frameworks for the media sector including all the practical obstacles for content in local and foreign languages including access, content creation and channels of content distribution and delivery. The study had three objectives. Those were: to study the content of Wechat subscription Channels in English language, to study the censorship role of social media in China and to study the role of English Language in Chinese society. Accordingly, the study had three research problems: 1. Was there a difference between China related news and international news in Wechat Channels? 2. What are the regulations in English Language Wechat Channels in China? 3. Which Wechat Channel published more English language content? Study looked through 27 Wechat pages and chose 9 most popular English Wechat channels in order to categorize their content into 4 categories as international news, China related content, promotional content and entertainment, & contentious material. According to the findings there were a total of 774 English articles published in Wechat channels. China Wire has also published English articles and there were 456 China related content in Wechat channels. The study showed that foreigners in China are disadvantaged in terms of content creation and distribution regardless of the language used. At the same time English language seems to provide at least some alternativeness in case of web-based content*

## 1. Introduction

For most people, it is relatively difficult to learn a second language and in the case of China mostly young educated people can be characterized by higher level of proficiency in English which is by far not too common. It poses a challenge especially for the government, a challenge since in case of wanting to control channels of content distribution it exerts much greater pressure on recruitment of the cadres, supervision of the content and also drawing the new line for the regulatory bodies since the permissiveness will vary depending on the context. Obviously in terms of content regulations, generally local content tends to be more penalized than foreign content. This could be observed throughout the centuries and is quite common. In many cases Governments are unsuccessful in getting information from "educated middle class" using uncontrolled sources since they are relatively fewer and supposedly highly literate after proper measures have been applied. China Government has the power of blocking the main channels of access to information selectively when a sudden necessity arises. So after Reuters had published an article about the wealth of Xi Jin Ping's relatives it has been immediately blocked and what is interesting is, direct censorship is only a part of the reason for being cut-off from a potentially large market which can have really a bad influence on a media. Chinese internet's composition seems to be much more different than that of the West. In China there are more, different social media and communication platforms than in western countries and the peculiarity of Wechat, or more exactly the English language status of its official channels was the main point of our investigation.

The cultural and language differences are important from the point of view of this study. As well as that it was a different stage of economic and social development with

reforms started earlier and higher growth rates in the absence of developed industry.

In 1990s there was a press law published which however in practice isn't any more specific and interestingly for us doesn't say anything about the content: (It's forbidden to publish content as it is):

1. Inciting to resist or breaking the Constitution or laws or the implementation of administrative regulations.
2. Inciting to overthrow the government or the socialist system.
3. Inciting division of the country, harming national unification.
4. Inciting hatred or discrimination among nationalities or harming the unity of the nationalities.
5. Making falsehoods or distorting the truth, spreading rumors, destroying the order of society.
6. Promoting feudal superstitions, sexually suggestive material, gambling, violence, murder;
7. Terrorism or inciting others to criminal activity; openly insulting other people or distorting the truth to slander people.
8. Injuring the reputation of state organizations.
9. Other activities against the Constitution, laws or administrative regulations.

(New People Republic China Internet Regulation Report, 1998)

"China-based websites cannot link to overseas news Websites or distribute news from overseas media without separate approval. Only "licensed print publishers" have the authority to deliver news online. Non-licensed Web sites that wish to broadcast news may only publish information already released publicly by other news media"(China Internet Censorship Overview).

In mid-April, 2016, a propaganda story poster went viral as its topic was about a foreigner seducing a rank and file government clerk in order to get classified information that ended up being seen ridiculous by most foreign readers (Dangerous Love On National Security Education Day translation by China law translate) and was many times reprinted including official state newspapers in English. The "funny fact" here is that there was a man being sentenced to death after sharing some thousands of documents with some foreign entities around the time the story was published.

What are the effects of the separation of Chinese internet from the World Wide Web? It's for sure peculiarity of its inner content which is prone to "freewheeling" once the censors are not exactly able to do their jobs properly. So for example in 2003 during the SARS epidemic, big chunks of population took circulating hearsay seriously about the virus being a biological weapon made by Taiwan and many stores had no more vinegar for sale since it had been said to be the alleged antidote ( James, 2011).

In this sense, in periods of a perceived treat or catastrophe foreign media outlets that are less accessible may be perceived as much more credible sources of information after the cases of Government covering up some serious accidents, tragedies and social events. After some initial failures Chinese media started adjusting to this state of being and after the train crash in 2012 there was initially no mention of it in the state media. Right now negative news is frequently produced by Chinese journalists; however obviously they try to present the Governmental point of view. The downside will be inaccessibility of important news inside China by foreign reporters. Even though there are some holes in the system, overall the internet control is so efficient that many countries like Zimbabwe or Cuba are nowadays purchasing surveillance technology from China (Reporters without Borders, 2006). At the same time there is a

big chunk of population that actually uses software for censorship circumvention. According to the report made by Global Web Index, there are more than 90 million Virtual Private Network (VPN) users in China as for 2013. China was on the third place after Indonesia and Vietnam. These numbers can be compared with the VPN use in countries like United Kingdom (UK) or United States (US) that doesn't exceed 5%. In another dataset inside the US congress report there is between 5% and 10% of Chinese users who use VPNs (Thomas, 2012). However, the VPN policy differs according to the region and to the period. So in Xinjiang the VPN policy is much harsher and the users can have their internet and mobile services cut off in case of authorities detecting usage of VPNs. This follows a complete internet shutdown for 9 months in Xinjiang in 2009 (Paul, 2015).

The VPN issue is however quite difficult to grasp since the data is not reliable and the motivation behind blocking or allowing certain VPNs to function is unclear. It seems that Chinese Government is especially severe towards free VPNs and there also seem to be existing VPNs which are probably controlled by the Government. The issue with VPNs is really interesting because the Government in many instances will welcome the use of them and many Chinese companies (Including China Central Television) have their Facebook pages that are daily updated. It seems that as long as it's controllable and in hands of people loyal to the regime, the Government in most instances doesn't really mind and truth be told: most Chinese people don't have a need of using any circumvention.

According to the Chinese Government, 802 million people are now actively using the internet, which is 57.7% of the population. 788 million people are mobile users, which is 98% of the country's total user base. Data was published by the Chinese Internet Network Information Center in 2018.

Additionally, the proportion of users using mobile devices to access the Internet is

changing and recently has already overtaken the use of Personal Computers. At the same time the usage of Internet cafes has decreased while connecting from home has gone up. "The number of micro blog users also expanded rapidly. In July 2012, the number of those using Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of Twitter) reached 300 million. As many as 35 million use Twitter and 65.2 million had Facebook accounts in spite of the fact that Chinese authorities block access to these two sites "edit". Additionally, more than 70% of Chinese bloggers are under 30 years old (Jeffrey, Julie, 2012). The age composition of Chinese bloggers is a crucial factor in the apolitical blogosphere in China. Most Chinese bloggers were born after the 1980s and are members of China's "Generation Y". The majority of these young bloggers in China use blogs as tools to record their personal thoughts and have really little to do with any potentially subversive content"(Ying, 2012). As we see, there is a big generation gap as well as rural- urban gap between Chinese users from rural areas and from big cities.

Chinese government in many ways seems to be acting reasonably in restricting access to information or internet. However in practice, in majority of cases it's just limiting and making it much harder to access any type of content that is not controlled by the state. Only in really important cases the content regulations are strictly enforced. What is also important is the places in China in which the potential target audience is present.

"In rural areas protesters were less effective at using the new technologies, partially due to lower rates of Internet penetration, and accordingly were less successful in persuading the authorities to change the status quo"(Olesya, 2012). This comes as no surprise noting different level of government legitimacy in rural and urban areas. Urban areas are generally more privileged in recent years by gaining the majority of population. It is also a fact that leniency of local authorities outside of the most developed regions towards any form of dissent or even

legitimate protest is much different. If local dissidents are trying to circumvent local authorities and try to complain to higher level officials in Beijing they may be "stopped" on the way by "special envoys". Here foreign languages can have a real impact on local level since it's seemingly more difficult to find cadres that could execute it.

It all makes it abundantly clear that censors employ different methods, depending on the location and language of the website and also its ownership structure and purpose the authorities will use different methods or won't interfere at all. Also some domain names are permanently blocked so that for example all Word press registered websites will be inaccessible. When foreign media report on an important story, usually Chinese media will do it too in spite of a blackout before just to maintain the control over the flow of information. The way of reporting will be usually changed since the flow of information cannot be stopped entirely. Ying Jiang, the author of the book "Cyber Nationalism in China"(2012), while doing the research used some QQ Chinese language forums about politics which were openly critical about the government but because being totally left out and published on a government controlled platform (QQ) it doesn't really bother authorities or maybe even beneficial for the people wielding power by showing how irrelevant certain points of views are since they can be blocked anyway anytime. If there is any real content that could be classified as forbidden on a website hosted inside China, the Chinese authorities will send an email to the owner of the website with proper instructions and if there is no response, some stronger actions may be taken like a police dispatch or even shutting down the website and criminal proceeding. Similar procedures must apply to unwanted things placed on other non-web platforms with also inner-company regulatory bodies.

Beijing does not allow direct capital investment in tech companies by foreign capital. The companies trying to expand seem

to go around the government regulations. Even content websites seem to be more strictly controlled than Wechat. If "inappropriate" content is posted online the website is most likely to get blocked whereas Wechat will just suggest to delete the given content. If the content is hosted on a "foreign" website obviously procedure will be different, the authorities have no way of blocking its host server, but they can block the Internet Protocol address or change the links on Chinese websites leading to it, making it virtually inaccessible without typing the address directly or inaccessible at all. Non website content platforms based abroad are basically all inaccessible in China. Because of that for a long period of times even "Slide Share" was blocked. Also in 2005 a new Government policy has been introduced. There are Government employees or other related parties who participate in online discussions with the goal of influencing them. If we look at some of foreign forums, there were some commentators who expressed a clear bias towards Chinese Government's point of view and if it is not a proof of "Government engagement" and what is important to mention is not much different from "Western PR work", it is still significant from the attempts to control content.

Chinese history identity issues of China and the status of English is much different than in countries of the western hemisphere. Older Chinese generations have rather neutral or slightly negative attitude towards English being largely cut off of the medium, younger Chinese people in many ways perceive English as one of the indicators of social status. What is interesting here is, only some characteristics of English are considered. English is perceived only in terms of consumerism and professional ascend. It is largely separated from its political context. It's being very confusing for many westerners to discover that people, who are fluent in English, know only the consumerist side of the western culture at times not being able to

point on the map where the countries are and which languages they are using. As in the statistics mentioned before there is only really tiny fraction of the population that is providing web traffic for websites which display political content (Alec, 2008). The well-educated Chinese born in the 80s do not know the ideological fervor of their parents' generation and it also seems to translate into the field that this study is trying to research since the way of thinking has been changed so much and the generation division in China has also a huge impact on knowledge in foreign languages.

The ability of reading content in English language is not universal but encompasses at least 5%-10% of the society. The news in English language won't be perceived in the way news in Chinese language is. If individualist way of thinking in gathering information will tend to benefit Western model of media, it seems that English speaking Chinese people may also have some Sino-Marxist views that will be later illustrated in the case of anti-cnn.com.

Research Problems of this study were: was there a difference between China related News and International News in Wechat accounts? What are the regulations in English Language Wechat accounts in China? And which Wechat account has published more English language content?

Research objectives of the study were to study the content of Wechat subscription accounts in English language, to study the censorship role of social media in China and to study the role of English Language in Chinese Society.

## 2. Materials and Methods

For this study, the content analysis method was used to evaluate selected Wechat channels. The methodology of the study revolves around analysis of news reports about regulatory environment and in the research part concentrates on qualitative and quantitative analysis of the content of Wechat channels. The period is from 01-04-2019 to 30-04-2019 as one month period.

Researcher looked through 27 Wechat pages (The Global times, Shanghaiist, The Beijinger, Here DG, China Daily, African Time, Spoonhunt, Shameless, Twoc, That's PRD, Tryna, Esl in China, Nihao Suzhou, CCTV news, Grab talk, ExpatExpress, DG Today, Ch Ch, Niubi Panda, Tefl Lemon, Ctrip daily deals, The funky bubble box, imandarin, Go Kunming, Expats Hunan, New worldesl) and have chosen 9 most popular English Wechat channels in order to classify their content into 4 categories.

1. News (Important international events) events that could be interpreted as having major impact not just on China but on world community and then are published on major international news outlets.
2. China related content (Chinese local news, strange China news and any content that provides more or less serious information related to life in China)
3. Promotional content and entertainment (direct or indirect ads, information about events happening).
4. Contentious material - this is probably the most difficult category to define since of course the choice of channels wasn't coincidental. The necessary criteria were: Relatively many views, China related content, some degree of content generation (not only reprints what eliminated channels like for example "African News", English language).

According to these 4 categories researcher has analyzed total of 774 English language articles.

The basic information about ownership comparing it with content of the channels is being analyzed in this research. Researcher used database to determine ownership since that is the ultimate sovereignty over a website. Subsequently content was divided into a few categories:

1. Consumer advice and entertainment (non-political eating out, where to party etc.)
2. Updates regarding legal situation and changes in areas affecting most people (mostly legal updates and changes areas affecting expats, usually retranslated or taken from official Chinese websites)
3. International political news and analysis (only if they appeared in Chinese media before or aren't contradicting with governmental point of view).
4. Local news (translated from Chinese) - usually these are "weird China stories" (like a story of a woman who two times went out without clothes to dance naked on the street) or "foreigner China" story however it's mostly concerned with consumerism and entertainment.
5. Copy writing content "copied from the internet" generic content like the 5 type of the most beautiful dogs, 3 types of peoples everybody like etc.

Three hypotheses were used in the study.

1. English does not really provide alternative clusters and in minds of most people doesn't serve circumvention of information restrictions.
2. Opening up of China did not really open it up in relation to media.
3. Wechat's English channels, while being peculiar in their own ways are rather conformist.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Analysis of Wechat subscription accounts from 01-04-2019 to 30-04-2019

Account name	The beijnger	Shanghai	Expat Express	Guide in China	Panda Guide	Time out Beijing	Global Times China	China Wire	Global news
International news	1	1	3	3	5	1	1	20	6
China related content	5	10	18	95 (40 local news)	48 (25 local news)	5	86	154	35
Promotional	43	36	17	47	81	58	2	39	9
Contentious material	0	0	2 (VPN info)	2 (reprints)	4	0	0	0	14
Total number of articles	48	37	37	142	126	63	90	183	48

Total of 774 English Language articles were analyzed on 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2019 to 30<sup>th</sup> of April 2019.

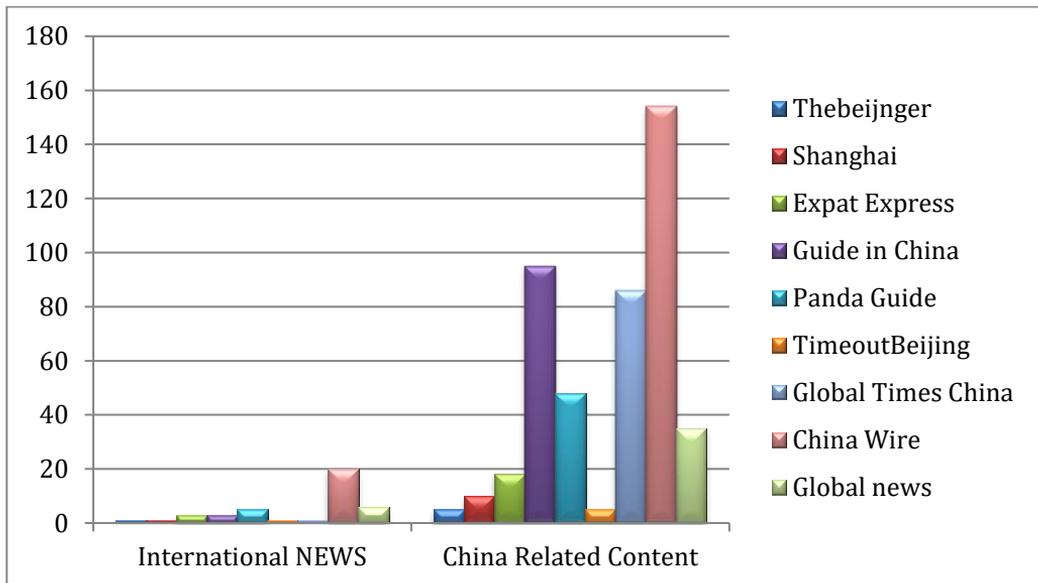
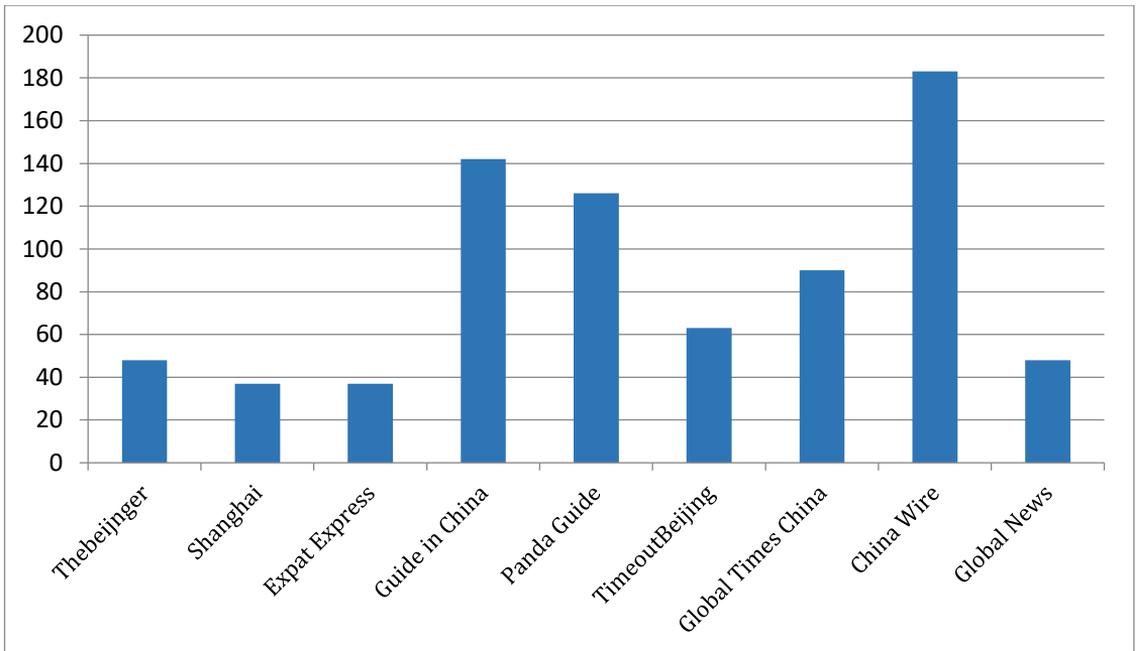


Figure 1. Difference between China related content and International News



**Figure 2.** Total Number of Articles published in Wechat accounts

According to the findings, majority of English articles were published in China related content. That was a total of 456 articles. China wire has published 154 articles. International News had only 41 articles.

China wire published 183 articles and Guide in China published 142 articles. Panda Guide has published 126 articles.

There are many websites hosted abroad that are actually operated by foreigners. Most popular Wechat subscription channels in English are owned and sometimes even edited by Chinese nationals even if it seems that "foreigners" have a natural advantage in doing so. It is not really possible to check the ownership details of a channel however seemingly there is no foreign owned Wechat channels among the analyzed ones. It could probably be ascribed to media laws that are present in China and in this way it would not make it any different than the ownership of Chinese language media and also to difficulties of opening a subscription account on Wechat. Even if the content deviates in some way or another from the pattern it

usually will be some kind of hedonist deviation. From enumerated channels: Expat Express is owned by a Chinese man who as the channel description claims runs it with backing of the local Government in Nanjin. Panda Guide is registered under an address in Toronto by an alleged naturalized Canadian citizen who claims to be a university scholar of name Grant Dou. The website is registered in Canada under the Panda Guide's company name. However, the company does not figure anywhere in Canadian company registries. Timeout Beijing seems to be a part of a multi-million-dollar network of Time Out magazines. However, Timeoutbeijing.com is also registered by a Chinese national at least nominally. Guidein China is according to online data of domain ownership registered by Duke Zeng, a Chinese national from Shenzhen. A prominent exception seems to be The Beijinger, a local media outlet that was started by an American who claims to reside in China for twenty years. There is no seeming difference in the content The Beijinger provides compared to other channels except for being the most commercialized one. There

is also an interesting example of apparently "dissident" Wechat channel which is supposedly run by an alleged foreign student from Pakistan in Hangzhou and is registered as a personal Wechat subscription account which actually provides info about blocked and changed content of websites in English and articles concerning China. The articles posted there are product commercials sponsored by third parties, copy writing reprints and finally articles that one would find controversial given the current media situation in China. Articles' names involve ones like: "China's crackdown on Christian Churches" or "Step aside Xi..." giving the disappointing predictions about Chinese economy and details about Chinese companies that are supposed to have bad impact on their business. By definition such channel will be far from professional, content is hectic, really often nor properly edited and updates are irregular. Some of its posts have however more page views than most English channels on Wechat. The channel stands in the opposition to another Wechat news channel "Global Times". The latter belongs to People's daily and seemingly keeps in line with the publishing policy of the latter. It is mostly about China however the news posted there are surprisingly often touching delicate subjects. I look closer into the content of the articles reporting everything from the point of view of the Chinese "raison d'état". As for Chinawire, everyday there is a "column" for reprinted tabloid articles - usually from British tabloids that also teach a word of Mandarin that is related to the article. Every day there is a "column" for serious international news that also appears in other Chinese media outlets. There is also an average of two articles per edition being translated or reposted content from Chinese media outlets. In the end of April 2016, Chinawire posted an article "420 Bust: Foreigners in Shanghai Caught with Cannabis" and shortly after this, this article was "deleted by the author" and their website ([www.echinawire.com](http://www.echinawire.com) - hosted in China) has become inaccessible. Of course as we can see

from the last paragraph - Wechat has some built in "regulatory features" and even if the last example is a post seemingly deleted by its author probably it was not deleted without a reason. There is a confirmed key filtering algorithm functioning in 2018-2019 so that certain keywords could not be sent even in a private message. Right now the key filtering mechanism seems to encompass fewer words than before. However, it still exists. For example, one cannot type the name of a prohibited cult-like social movement that had its momentum in the 1990s. There used to be some more keywords. In case of sharing sensitive materials it is not only keywords that are being filtered but also images and videos. So for example there is the recent example of Economist and Times English language covers that are not sharable on Wechat moments. They feature an image of the current secretary of the Chinese Communist party Xi Jin Ping transforming into Mao. It seems that subscription accounts are not the only way for such expat news outlets to operate. There are also "news and content channels" that use personal accounts. It is bound with limitations such as 5000 accounts as the contacts limit and moments as the only option to share content with multiple people at the same time with subscription accounts having no such limitations. It may be really convenient for foreign nationals since it doesn't require a Chinese ID. There is one account that I have come across using this strategy. Foreigner China - starting with personal account has developed into an "event and promotional channel" and it makes it peculiar but it hasn't been analyzed in the study since it only offers advertising and promotional content.

#### **4. Conclusion & Recommendation**

In August 2011, BBC News pointed out that the "Internet and micro blogs have not changed the fundamental nature of government in China, but they are rather just forcing officials to change the way they operate"(Michael, 2010). However surprisingly it seems that foreign languages,

especially in the "inner media" or Chinese intranet, the environment does not really seem to provide above average "alternative clusters" for people who are using them. Reason is the "structure of the internet" in which no potentially destabilizing elements are allowed which includes foreigners, people with bad record or people without the right connection to the system. The mentioned example of "Global News China" actually provides some "contagious" content but it also happens with content in Chinese language just to mention Wechat. Chinese censorship system seems to be really sophisticated and there is a strong trend of limiting access if not blocking foreign language websites, especially sharing websites, websites that publish reports targeting Chinese leadership and the most popular websites that allow access to news or communication platforms. Looking at it more carefully for sure, reasons for this are not only political but also economical. Because of the Golden shield project (the Great Firewall of China) many foreign websites in China are not functioning and that makes reaching customers terribly difficult. Consumer habits are being shaped by the internet environment formed by regulations and existing content and promotional platforms. In practice, for small businesses that cannot afford proper localization and legal support, this makes the China's enclosed internet structure deadly. The tech giants with firm links to the Chinese state, like Baidu, Tencent or Alibaba employ business.

When it comes to Wechat subscription accounts during the research that was conducted, Researcher wasn't able to find a big difference in content that wouldn't conform to the Government policy and content restrictions in English and Chinese. Furthermore, it's really difficult to search for any account names in pinyin or foreign languages in Wechat. Some results of testing the engine will automatically convert into Chinese when written in English. Also what is really important in the Wechat channels are all owned by Chinese and it is a systemic

policy that prevents foreigners from creating any content distribution channels. Use of foreign languages seems not to have too much impact on content because of regulatory structure that prevents foreign influence either by limiting access or by limiting possibilities to create channels that are not web based like it is in case of Wechat. In the end what we have to take into account is not only direct regulation of content and information in China but also other forms of content regulation like self-censorship which in Chinese context may be even more important. This also translates into different languages.

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