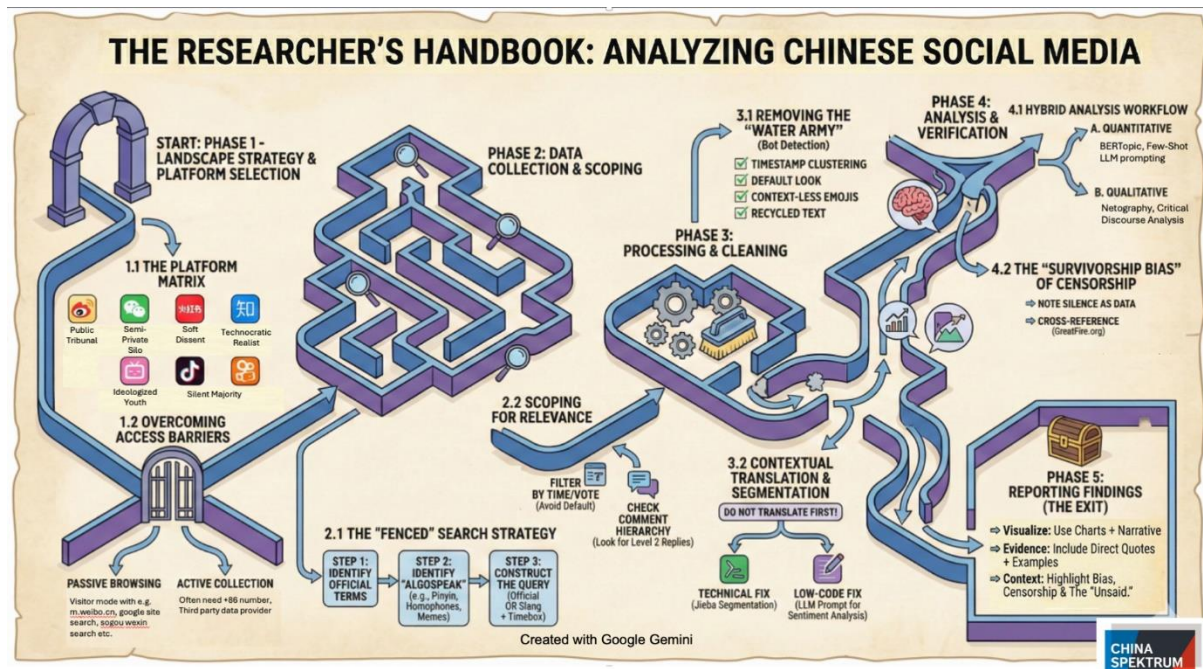




How to China Spektrum

The Researcher's Handbook on Decoding Chinese Social Media

Navigating the Digital Labyrinth to Understand China

Supported by

Introduction: The Digital Window

Why is the analysis of Chinese social media indispensable? To understand modern China beyond official narratives, one must look to its digital sphere. With over 1.1 billion internet users, China is not merely a market; it is the world's largest digital ecosystem and a "laboratory of the future" where trends emerge and vanish at a velocity unknown to the West.

Unlike traditional media, which operates top-down, Chinese social platforms act as societal seismographs. They function via a "bottom-up" agenda-setting mechanism. Major societal debates—such as the "Chained Woman" case or controversies surrounding pre-made food—originated from user discussions, forcing state media to react. For the external observer, these platforms offer a unique opportunity for digital ethnography. They serve as an internal window to reality, allowing researchers to see exactly what Chinese users see and to understand the authentic, immediate public sentiment.

Part I: The Challenges of the Ecosystem

However, entering this field requires navigating a fragmented and hostile environment. There is no monolithic "Chinese Internet." Instead, data is scattered across thematic silos: **Weibo** acts as a public tribunal (similar to X/Twitter), **WeChat** functions as semi-private silos, **Xiaohongshu** serves as a hub for lifestyle resistance and "soft dissent," while **Bilibili** and **Zhihu** host Gen Z ideology and technocratic discourse, respectively.

Researchers face significant hurdles beyond fragmentation:

- **Commercial Noise & The "Water Army":** The discourse is increasingly industrialized by Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs). Authentic observations are often buried under "noise"—insaged content and algorithmic hype.
- **Access Barriers:** Technical hurdles are high. Real-name verification often requires a Chinese (+86) mobile number, and "burner" accounts are quickly detected and banned via device fingerprinting.
- **Multimodal Complexity:** Sarcasm and dissent have migrated from text to video and audio. A user might verbally praise a government policy in a video while using melancholic background music or distortion filters to signal the opposite meaning—nuances that pure text scraping misses completely.
- **Advanced Censorship:** Censorship has evolved from simple deletion to "shadow banning" (where posts are only visible to the author) and image recognition that detects text within memes. Furthermore, users practice "preventive obedience" (self-censorship), forcing researchers to decode a complex landscape of silence and omission.
- **Algospeak:** To evade filters, users employ coded language, which creates a language barrier. "Harmonious" (*He Xie*) becomes "River Crab" (homophone). Emojis, such as the "Dog Head" (🐶), are used as irony markers to signal, "I am just joking, please don't arrest me."

Part II: The Methodological Approach

To navigate this maze, we employ a structured, five-phase workflow tailored to this specific environment.

Phase 1: Landscape Strategy & Platform Selection Before data collection begins, we must determine where the relevant conversation is happening. We map the "Platform Matrix" to understand the function of each app—whether it is for public outrage (Weibo) or private networking (WeChat). Securing stable access, often through verified accounts or third-party data providers, is the prerequisite for entry.

Phase 2: The "Fenced" Search Strategy Standard keyword searches fail against censorship. We instead use "Concept Searching." Rather than searching for a sensitive word like "Unemployment," we construct queries around related concepts ("Flexible employment," "Graduation = Jobless") or slang. We explicitly avoid default algorithms that favor "rage-bait" and instead filter by time to ensure transparency. Furthermore, we look at the "Comment Hierarchy": on platforms like Bilibili, the top-level comments are often curated, while the "Level 2 Replies" contain the authentic debate.

Phase 3: Processing & Cleaning Raw data from Chinese social media is extremely "noisy." A crucial step is removing the "Water Army" (paid bot networks). We identify these through timestamp clustering (inhuman posting frequency), context-less emojis, and recycled text. For content analysis, we employ intelligent deduplication—counting a specific argument only once to understand the *variety* of discourse, while counting the *volume* of duplicates only when measuring viral reach.

Phase 4: Hybrid Analysis (The Mixed-Methods Approach) An effective analysis almost always combines quantitative and qualitative methods.

- **The "Survivorship Bias" of Censorship:** The first step is analyzing what is *missing*. If a major event occurs and the comments are uniformly positive or the topic is absent from trends, this silence is data. It indicates total suppression.
- **Quantitative Analysis (The Macro View):** We use this to detect the lifecycle of trends ("Peak Detection") and analyze semantic variance. Organic debates use chaotic, varied vocabulary; artificial campaigns often use repetitive sentence structures ("star topology" vs. organic "tree topology").
- **Qualitative Analysis (The Micro View):** This is where we decode the "Why." We use Narrative Analysis to understand how events are framed (e.g., natural disaster vs. human failure). We employ Visual Semiotics to decode memes where text is forbidden. Crucially, we practice "Digital Ethnography," spending time in communities to understand evolving slang and cultural metaphors (like "Human Mine" or "Chives" for exploited workers).

Phase 5: Reporting Findings The final output must contextualize these findings. It is not enough to translate text; we must translate culture. By highlighting the "Unsaid," identifying the bias of censorship, and providing direct evidence through quotes and visual examples, we reconstruct a reality that is otherwise hidden behind the Great Firewall.

CHINA SPEKTRUM

Debates beyond the party line

China Spektrum strengthens our knowledge about China by providing nuanced insights into domestic Chinese debates. Despite increasing censorship and efforts by the Communist Party to steer discourse, Chinese intellectuals, experts, entrepreneurs and citizens hold diverse views on China's current challenges and development.

China Spektrum analyzes relevant current debates and positions among Chinese intellectuals and experts, as well as public discussions unfolding on social media and platforms online, focusing on three themes, namely China's:

- Visions for the future
- Digital transformation
- Role in the world

A collaboration between think tank and university, **China Spektrum** translates findings rooted in qualitative and quantitative research methods into short and easy-to-read formats. In our regular **China Spektrum Analyses**, we showcase the spectrum of opinions on various issues and explain how these relate to official party-state positions. The annual **China Spektrum Report** summarizes key developments in China's public discourse sphere. Project results are presented in events and podcasts.

China Spektrum started out in German and has evolved into an English language publication to meet the growing international demand for insights into debates and discussions inside China.

China Spektrum is a joint project of the **China Institute of the University of Trier (CIUT)** and the **Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS)**.

The project is supported by the **Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom**.

