Michael Anti (赵静)

Columnist

Industry: Civil Society

Michael Anti, a Nanjing native, is a Chinese columnist, journalist on international affairs and independent blogger. While his background is in not in journalism, Anti began posting political commentary on his own blog in 2001, promoting the ideas of free speech and free press in China. He became famous in 2005 when his blog was deleted by Microsoft at the urging of the Chinese government. Anti has worked at various news outlets including The New York Times, The Washington Post, and the 21st Century World Herald. He was selected to be a Wolfson Press Fellow at Cambridge and a Nieman Fellow at Harvard. Anti graduated from Nanjing Normal University in 1995 with a degree in Industrial Electrical Automation.

Transcript

Interviewee: Michael Anti (赵静)
Interviewer: John Delury
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He graduated from Nanjing Normal University in 1995 and majored in Industrial Electrical Automation. After I graduated, I moved to WuXi. Internet started flourish in 1998 in cyber cafe etc. Till 1998, I have joined the IT industry. We went to Guangdong, back to Nan Jing then Beijing. 2001, Hua Xia Times, since they liked my articles published online, has invited
me to become their commentor. That’s how I entered the news industry. The year after, I became Beijing correspondent of the 21st Century World Herald. 2003 I was sent as a war reporter to Iraq. Unfortunately, the newspaper has been censored because one of my colleagues had published an interview with Li Rui, ex-secretary of Mao Zedong. He was criticizing the ex-Chinese leader. Several months after censorship of the newspaper, I went to Washington Post and New York Times. I worked at NY times as an analyst for 3.5 years. After that, I have received a Wolfson press fellowship at Cambridge University, and Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University. I have studies one year in the US. After I returned to China, I was a professor of journalism for one year. Now I am a home based columnist in Beijing. What I just mentioned is my professional background. The more important aspect of me is I am a blogger. I have started a political blog on November 2004. It was shut down by Microsoft on December 2005. Microsoft affair was one of the origin of American Congress testimony on how the big technology companies should behave in China. There are also affairs such as Shi Tao with Yahoo. Afterwards, I continued online magazine. Until 2009, I have been interested in Tweeter’s practices.

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Basically, my story is almost driven by internet. The internet has changed my life, from a programmer to journalist and commentor. My story may rarely happen in other countries. I just published articles online from a computer sciences background. Now I become a journalist and professional columnist. Since 1998, the internet industry has provided a great opportunity for local young and potential elites. It has secured the mobility of the society. This is similar to imperial examination. Any people, such as a poor kid from the country side, as long as you can pass the imperial examination, you will get a chance to be interviewed by the emperor. You will get a chance to be sent as a mayor to other provinces. Social mobility is one of the reasons why the system of imperial examination has been kept for such a long time. Young and local elites can become a national wide elite through a relatively fair way. In that way, the social elite group are solidary and have hope. However, the system has been abolished since the beginning of last century by the Qing Dynasty. Several years after came the revolution. Why? because those revolutionaries are those who would be able to become officers. Now the channel to become officers have been cut off, they have no choice and become revolutionaries. So a lot of people wondered why the revolution has came so fast, I think there is a cause effect relation between the abolition of imperial examination. Why the cultural revolution has halted so quickly is partly because the Shang Shan Xia Xiang, down to the country side movement. 1968, students had lost the possibility to go to school, they all have been sent to the countryside. Once the social mobility has been cut off, the society felt no close personal interest or benefits with the regime. So I believe that to keep the social mobility is crucial to the society even though there are other big problems. The Internet has achieved this function. The internet can bring a local "nobody" to become a blogger, who has their own website, bring small
companies and medias to big cities such as Guangzhou, Shanghai or Beijing. A lot of my internet friends have all come to Beijing, and become a media person. The internet which has brought local elites to Beijing is the new form of "imperial examination". 00:23 (video 1-1) Which has maintained the limited social mobility of this nation. Of course this mobility has been damaged by other factors such as the price of real estate. People can no longer afford a decent apartment. So in this way, the price has prevented from people to become an elite. A lot of people will leave Beijing.

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Video 1-1

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But in the past 30 years, especially from 1998 to 2010, internet has been playing a role of "New Imperial Examination", in a relatively fair way, bring local "nobody" to have a decent life. That's why I have a lot of hope in internet industry.

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My personal development is not only due to the internet development, but also I have been out of the regime. In the outer space of the regime, there are enough market and space in which I can make a living.

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I don't have to follow the orders of CCP, or ideology. I can pursue my ideal, my liberalism, to make a living, to work for american companies, even work as a freelancer, or for NGO.

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I think due to the open policy and reform and globalization, the Chinese civil society has transformed to be a normal country. Sometimes we ask why China has rised? "China is not rising, just normalizing". 02:18

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Because within a China where people are educated, since the Chinese value a lot the education, if there is a market economy, open environment and internationally connected, the country will certainly become normal. Because of the globalization, after China has become a member of WTO in 2001, the most significant change of China is "China become a normal membership in the international community", - A normal world citizen. After become the normal citizen, China won't be the no.1, maybe in tens or hundreds. During the Tang, Ming, Song, Qing dynasties, China’s GDP had been always ahead. What we are doing now is not fantastic, or rising, but normalizing. If people in China can have a social mobility, and relatively social justice, we can enjoy a personal development. 03:40
If China can become democratic, then the potential of China to develop is even bigger. Even democracy has arrived yet, even though it’s only liberalization, liberalization of the civil society, China can regain their historical level of prosperity.

I think their are two major reasons for the 30 years boom. The cultural revolution has forced all the social elites to the bottom of the society. Deng Xiaoping has given the opportunity for these people to return back and join the social elite class, their passion and their support have given the CCP a second legitimacy. Given them a second chance to rule the China. The National Higher Education Entrance Examination on 1977 and 1978 have played a very important role to maintain the social mobility, bring local elite to the society. As long as you can reach the local elite, to ensure them that you are host of this country, they can release a huge enthusiasm. Their philosophy is pragmatic, they don’t have strong ideology, no strong belief. If they feel hope, they will contribute all their enthusiasm. So the most important factor is that the whole social elite considers the country as their own country since they have found the opportunity.

The second important reason is Deng Xiaoping’s strong leadership didn’t encounter any rival who would be able to challenge his open door policy and reform. So that’s why his policy has been implemented throughout the whole past entire 30 years. This is really important because we have progressed gradually. We didn’t have any back and forth, back and forth development. If so, it would have damaged the enthusiasm of the society. 1978 to 2008, except for 1989 which has been reboosted by 1992, the second open door and reform policy, generally speaking, the past 30 years have been a gradual development. This gradual development has fostered a consistent confidence.

If you go and stop, go and stop, it would be difficult to perceive the future of the country. If you stick to one plan for 30 years, I will be willing to gamble my life in this country. I will be willing to contribute my youth to this country.

That’s why a lot of social elites, even though China is still not democratic, they are willing to join and fight for the society. The major reason is because if you are bind with this rising country, you have your own future. This is very important. Behind all the ideology, personal goal and national goal has been a match to certain extent.

The meaning of 1989 is that the moral barrier disappear.
There are two major benefits. On the one hand, we don’t have to think about the ideology. When you look at the reform in 80s, there was a lot of struggle. But during the 90s, it was much easier. So there was no frame of ideology.

On the other hand, the black side is that we no longer need to care about justice. You can do very dirty things. Such as 下岗, (laid-off), all the contracts, promises, have been destroyed. You can do whatever you want. So each coins have two sides.

On the one side, it has accelerated interest groups which have already possessed major social resources to absorb more social resources. On the other hand, it has destroyed the social justice. This is an economic development without social moral or moral barriers. On the positive side, it’s like a racing car on the high way. The car has reached its highest speed. On the negative side, you don’t know when it will suddenly halt.

I think the generation of 70s, when we were born, it was the end of cultural revolution. When we were at high school, it was before the June 4th. When we went to college, it was after June 4th. So during our high school education, we still enjoy the liberal thinking, we still feel duty towards our country. I have responsibility to the country. This kind of thought is quite common for the generation of 60s. For the 80s generation, they don’t have any these kind of thoughts. Because they have received de-politicalized education. They don’t have any discussion about social justice. The generation of 80s, or 90s, they are individualists without any social responsibility. Consumerists or strive for individual liberty. They talk more about personal right. If you harm their personal rights, they will stand up. This is very strong. The generation of 60s and 70s don’t have that. But the generation of 60s and 70s have such a strong social responsibility or duty, to the extent which sometimes they will sacrifice their own rights.

So this is a big contrast. Well, if you ask, is it a good thing for the 80s and 90s to be individualist? If everyone pursue personal rights, we can achieve and find social justice. the only difference is the point of depart is personal right. For example, when you have censored the internet, kids of 90s will stand up because you have harmed their right to access information. But there are only generations of 60s and 70s wish to contribute to the bigger picture. Because they still feel that they have to social responsibility. They don’t have the same sensation towards the free market while as the 80s and 90s consider as water and air. We still don’t get used to it. We are still sort of idealistic, not so pragmatic. The big difference is if you have talked about justice during your education or not.
For most of the young people, the virtual or material property are the same, for example my Q money is the same as the Renminbi money. Whether I have my right to go to the library and my right to surf on the internet is the same. Whether I become a star on media and on internet is the same. Whether it happens in the virtual world or on the ground is the same to them. For example, there is a game called 魔兽，they will create a movie to protest against the censorship. Because they think the right to play a video game is also a very serious right. Our generation doesn’t have such a strong idea. For us, game is just a game. For 80s and 90s, they grow up with video game, so virtual right is the same as material right for them. At this point, they will fight for the censorship.

What’s your thought about authoritarian regime has been a main factor of China boom

I don’t agree. These kind of thoughts are mistaken because correlation does not imply causation. It doesn’t make sense. If it was a democratic or semi-democratic regime, there still can be economic development. The main reason of economic develop is not the stability that provided by the authoritarian regime or totalitarian regime. The main condition is more the countrie’s ability to provide people with a long term expectation within the society. Then people are willing to bind their property, wisdom, time, energy with the nation. There might be a lot of instabilities. But in the long run, they still consider China is progressing. So they wish to invest. It’s like when you invest in future contracts. No matter the fluctuation, you will still invest in it. The most important thing is not the actual rising price, but the belief that in one year, the price will achieve on a certain level. During the period, the price can even drop below the current price, the belief that the future price will be higher is the most important thing. Deng has a big vision. He has given the big expectation for the social elites at that moment. The success of the previous social elites have given the expectation for their kids. The open market, joining the WTO, globalization have given the hope to the generation of 90s. The hope has been hand over generation by generation. But there is one belief, no matter what kind of political instability happens, that China will be bound with the world. This hope has given my strength and passion to contribute myself to China’s future and China’s democracy. If I didn’t see that, I would have chosen to do something else. But a lot of my friends and I do see the hope.

That’s the impression that Chinese people have for the last 30 years. This impression has given us a lot of confidence that more and more people can not go backwards, although for some political reasons, but the fact that China is and becomes a normal membership of the international community won’t change.
in the next 10 and 15 years, the trends will continue. Open door policy and the globalization have told a successful story. Once you have a successful story, you will repeat it. Even though you might change in the middle, but success will drive you back on the road. But I don’t know in the next 10 and 15 years, if there is some huge political incident, huge economic crisis, the question remains if my next generation will have the same hope as I have. If they see our story as a failure. Then they won’t choose the same road as we did. To predict the next 30 years, we have to look at if we have made China as a successful story. If we fail, China will become a more negative. If we are even, our next generation will still learn from historical lesson. Chinese don’t have beliefs, but we believe in history. Even the CCP says, let the history tells the future. We always believe that the story of our ancestor will influence us. It is true! Including myself, I am keeping correcting the past generation’s mistake, to find a right way.

I think that the idea of stability is the main reason of China boom is not logic. It doesn’t make sense.