

**ICAS Expert Voices Initiative Interview - Prof. William Vogt - September 2023**

ICAS Trade 'n Technology (TnT) Program



Watch the Full Interview (YouTube): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kXQio4sGyE0>

About Prof. William Vogt:

<https://gufaculty360.georgetown.edu/s/contact/00336000014RsqDAAS/william-vogt>

About the ICAS Expert Voices Initiative: [www.chinaus-icas.org/media/expert-voices-initiatives/](http://www.chinaus-icas.org/media/expert-voices-initiatives/)

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

On September 1, 2023, the Institute for China-America Studies (ICAS) Expert Voices Initiative (EVI) conducted an interview with Mr. William Vogt, an author and adjunct lecturer at Georgetown University, to discuss the current state and future potential of the “Chinese Internet.” The interview was hosted in-person at the ICAS office in Washington, D.C. by Yilun Zhang, Trade 'n Technology (TnT) Program Manager.

To many Western observers, China’s Internet appears to be a mysterious ‘black box’ of unknowns and mixed signals. On one hand, the Internet is becoming a symbol of China’s economic growth and opening up with the country’s rapidly growing community of netizens and e-commerce businesses. Widely-used social media platforms like WeChat and Douyin (TikTok) make China one of the leading countries in this new era of information technology. On the other hand, the Internet remains rather closed off due to the Chinese government’s tightening control and censorship over online content and its recent crackdowns on Internet and technology companies. How should observers properly assess China’s Internet society? Is the Chinese Internet a land of free speech or is it more-so a tool for centralized control? This EVI aims to discuss and assess the current state of China’s Internet and provide another depiction of this often unknown territory. Additionally, this event also seeks to explore the roles of various actors in this complex dynamic environment of the Chinese Internet.

## TRANSCRIPT

**Interviewer:** Yilun Zhang - Manager, Trade 'n Technology (TnT) Program & Administrative Officer, Institute for China-America Studies

**Interviewee:** William Vogt - Author & Adjunct Lecturer, Georgetown University

*This interview was conducted by ICAS EVI on September 1, 2023 (EDT) at the ICAS Office in Washington, D.C.*

*\*Note: This transcript, the text verified by ICAS staff using the full video recording, was created with the full intention to stay true to the direct words and meanings of the speakers while being formatted in a comprehensible, helpful manner for the audience.\**

**Y:** Greetings to our audience. Welcome to the ICAS Expert Voices Initiative (EVI). My name is Yilun Zhang. I am the Research Associate and Manager of the Trade 'n Technology Program at ICAS. The ICAS EVI is a series of sit-down, on-camera interviews with top experts in the field related to the U.S.-China bilateral relationship, and today we have Professor William Vogt from Georgetown University to talk about the foundations of China's internet. Welcome Professor Vogt.

**W:** Thank you for having me.

**Y:** Professor Vogt is an Adjunct Professor of Communication, Culture, and Technology at Georgetown University and has published articles on modern China and the impact of information technology in emerging market countries. He is the former Founder and Managing Principal of Weilian Poder Global Consulting, a firm which facilitates client engagement with senior business leaders in mainland China.

Professor Vogt is a two-time graduate in Georgetown University with a bachelor's from the School of Foreign Service, and a master's from the Communication, Culture, and Technology Program. At Georgetown, he founded and led the university's New Media in Asia research group and studied at Capital University of Economics in Beijing. He is also the author of the newly published book *The Foundation of China's Internet*. The views he presents today are solely his own, and do not reflect those of any company, government, or other entities.

Now, Professor Vogt, let me start our discussion with a very bottom-up question. What do you think is the utility of examining China's various cultural and conceptual calculations with regard to the internet? Basically, what really motivated you to dive into this research topic in particular, and could you help us to lay down the foundations of our following discussion to list out the major actors in China's internet environment?

**W:** Sure, well thank you again for having me. It's an honor to be here talking about such an important topic. I believe that looking at the internet in China is central to understanding modern China and, by extension, the world today. As we all know, the internet is a centerpiece of online and offline life, and the Chinese internet, in particular, is unique in that it is, in my view, separate from the rest of the world's internet in terms of platforms, usage, culture, policy. We have to understand this uniqueness to understand modern China due to the tight relationship between technology and society. This relationship has been particularly emphasized in China amongst policymakers within the Chinese Communist Party.

In terms of how I got into this fascinating and multidisciplinary topic, I came across it through two means. One, I had early exposure to Chinese language training, starting in high school, continuing through college. As Yilun mentioned, I studied abroad in Beijing, and I also did a program in Nanjing. So I had some exposure to the language, a little bit to the culture.

At the same time I came of age during the Arab Spring, which was a moment where a lot of scholars and pundits believed that the internet would be this great liberalizing influence and that was going to lead to

lasting, revolutionary change. Now, in the case of the Middle East for example, that is not what happened, and a side story of that period was the fear of the so-called 'Jasmine Revolution' affecting China's political stability. So, I really started looking at those questions. I wanted to get a sense of why China was different in not only its perception of events like the Arab Spring, but also its response and its effectiveness in the response. If you look at those two courses of study at the same time that's a big part of what I bring scholarship-wise and is a big source of my passion in this area.

**Y:** And with regard to those major actors, when you say "the Chinese perspective" to these various events, what are the specific actors you're talking about? Is that the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese government at large, or the Chinese general public?

**W:** Sure, I categorize Chinese internet actors into four buckets. The first, of course, being the state and those who run the state—the Chinese Communist Party—but also the day-to-day bureaucratic managers of the online system. I think the best way of encapsulating that is looking at entities like internet service providers—or ISPs—which are run primarily through state-owned enterprises—or SOEs—and these state-owned enterprises make up a very significant portion of Chinese economy.

There's also the netizen, or online citizen, population to consider. Those demographics are changing now as the internet becomes more of an established commodity and as more digital natives reach adulthood. But there still are some demographic questions and problems to consider, namely the rural-urban divide—in which city dwellers have much more access to vast and reliable internet connectivity than those in the countryside, kind of skewing what the netizen population is able to express in terms of needs and grievances. In terms of grievances, in particular, I think it's important to look at journalists and citizen reporters who are fighting for pieces of accountability within society. They promote, more-or-less, a 'free-er'—but not necessarily 'free and open'—internet, where needs can be met through digital platforms. I spend quite a bit of time in the book talking about some of the interplay between journalists and the state that goes on in order to achieve such limited, but meaningful, accountability.

Finally, there's of course the private corporations that are creating these platforms that we know and love and use. This is the case in China—and in the West and around the world—but in China these institutions essentially created the features that have allowed for the vision of the Chinese internet to come into form. Of course, that is a big topic to consider now given relatively recent crackdowns of the tech industry. Perhaps, we're now seeing a pullback from these crackdowns.

**Y:** That seems like a very dynamic institution that you're talking about. So let's get into it. You mentioned that there are journalists fighting for freer flows of information, freer space to speak up, and you also mentioned that there are recent crackdowns on big technology firms and internet service providers. This somewhat reflects a lot of Westerners' perspectives when the Chinese internet is mentioned: censorship is the first thing that comes to mind. What is your general assessment of that? Do you think that censorship is a good characteristic of the Chinese internet, and is that general understanding of the Chinese internet sufficient enough for Westerners to understand this complex 'other side of the moon,' so to speak, works?

**W:** Well I don't make value judgments about a lot of what I see just because of some of the cultural differences and sensitivities involved. I don't personally believe in internet censorship, but I do understand why it exists in the Chinese system. Part of that has to do with concerns over political stability, and we do see consistently on the Chinese internet periods of bubbling resentment that can become out of hand in a way that's reflective of a netizen population that is so much larger and has more grievances and expectations than we might see in the West—even in large countries like the United States. So I do we why that would be a calculation that both the government and, I would say, certain netizens and citizens would make in order to maintain a sort of peaceful development. That is actually the core behind a lot of netizen grievances—expectations of benefiting

from economic development—so it's not necessarily a rage against the system. More just a campaign for certain tangible outcomes.

That said, censorship is pervasive on the Chinese internet, and a lot of the technical innovations that have come about—namely, things like the 'Great Firewall' and broader innovations in broader cybersecurity—are very much promoted by the state and used in what I would call the 'censorship regime.' It's more comprehensive than just looking at some keywords and blocking them. It's creating a whole mechanism of control that requires a balancing act between promoting enough innovation to create those tools from the private companies that I mentioned, and cracking down so there's not too many options in the system.

**Y:** So you just mentioned private companies. How would you describe the roles of these companies specifically then? As you said, there's a lot of censorship, a lot of crackdowns over these private companies, and there are a lot of grievances among private netizens who simply see some of those internet service providers as 'lapdogs' of the government. Would you agree with that assessment specifically, and, more broadly, what role do you think these Chinese internet giants can play in shaping the environment of the Chinese internet regime? Where do you see them headed in the future given that there is more and more potential for control over the internet?

**W:** Well I think we're in an interesting moment when looking at the role of these private companies. As I said, there have been crackdowns against their growth, expansion, and success in many different products—not just censorship related, but also importantly in e-commerce, payments, business transactions. We now see that there may be some pulling back on that from policymakers, and it's really interesting to see what's going to happen next in terms of what the role of these private companies is going to be.

In the general view of the Chinese internet and how private companies behave as actors, they're the ones producing the products that are used to create this accessible internet. They're creating the interface that we use: Tencent creates and updates WeChat, so when there's a crackdown *on* a company like Tencent that's going to influence how WeChat as a product looks like and how it's going to develop. This kind of gets into the 'crowding out' effect of the state's influence, and the innovation dilemma which has perennially existed in China. The government steps in and limits the options through which these companies can create new projects and implement them—actually use them and sell them and make money. That creates tension with some of the 'reform and opening'-style economic liberalization logic that motivates these companies as for-profit actors.

**Y:** So you're suggesting that basically the Chinese government, even though they have a continuous commitment to 'reform and opening up' and 'peaceful development,' because of these recent actions they are more of a counterproductive force? Or do you think there is still space left for continuous development, economic boon, and innovation?

**W:** I think the Xi Jinping government is trying to calculate that. It's not a business-friendly government. There's been a lot written out there about how business-unfriendly some of these policies like the tech crackdown are. At the same time, there is this state emphasis on information technology—albeit for purposes that lie outside of the economy. But in a capitalist system, in the 'reform and opening' system that benefited China for growth, economic profits are what fuel the technical development that is used by entities like the state. I think that the Xi Jinping government sees that there needs to be some sort of balancing act, but they're certainly leaning away from that 'reform and opening' capitalist point of view.

**Y:** Let's pull in the United States now. You mentioned that the Chinese government needs to make a calculation to balance out the need to pursue internal control with the goal to promote innovation and development.

With the mounting rhetoric about U.S.-China technology and economic competition, could you give me a general assessment? When you see the Chinese prior to these continuous crackdowns, would you say that there is very little difference between the Chinese model and the American model—when it comes to promoting e-commerce, digital economy, this-and-that—or would you say that because of those years of committed ‘reform and opening up’ China may actually take a lead because of its booming social media platforms and various e-commerce and digital economy activities?

**W:** I don’t think there’s a lead *per se*. I think there’s just different forms of development. We have in China more politically negotiated standards, the state taking a much bigger role in using cybersecurity products. For China, the cybersecurity products that go into the censorship mechanisms behind, say, WeChat posts are very much state-driven and policy driven, whereas here in the United States a lot of cybersecurity products are geared towards private entities: companies and individuals.

You don’t see as much of that sort of private advertising in the Chinese space that you do in the U.S. You get literally bombarded with it nowadays. I just saw an ad for LifeLock, for example, which you purchase to protect your identity. Those are concerns that, in China, the government takes on and says ‘this is important,’ and this is why we have this maybe draconian censorship platform: ‘it’s to protect your identity.’ Presumably, that’s the message that goes out. But it’s certainly more state-focused and top-down and centralized which, as I mentioned, does have some implications for innovation because you don’t have the same levels of competition. You really only have one voice of demand.

**Y:** Let’s talk about people then. You mentioned that netizens are actually part of the Chinese internet ecosystem. There are a lot of Chinese netizens who actually look across the Pacific and see that in the West there are a lot of social activities online. Some of these movements left a very strong mark on society. They pushed forward social reforms. Some of them pushed forward political reforms, as you mentioned. Potentially that’s what they expected back in the days of the ‘Arab Spring’ and, potentially, that’s what people expected during the ‘Jasmine Spring.’

But we saw how during COVID times there were cases as well, in China, where, despite the fact that some of the protests and these criticisms were quickly censored by the government or by internet service providers, there are still cases—like Dr Li Wenliang being caught by the police, and his passing later on turned him into somewhat of a whistleblower martyr—of Chinese netizens complaining online, protesting online, such as during Shanghai’s mass lockdown which, by some views, is seen as a driver that pushed for China’s eventual decision to open up from its three-year-long lockdown.

So how would you assess the role of the internet in pushing forward China’s social reform and, potentially, political reform at this stage.

**W:** The way I see it and the way that a lot of scholars—Guobin Yang, in particular—focus on activism on the internet is really that in China it’s about small, localized, achievable goals. So even though there was a lot of high-profile reporting, at least here in the West, about the COVID lockdown protests, those protests were targeted towards the actual lockdown. Some of them morphed into something greater, but in terms of what was actually achieved and was achievable and the thrust behind them, it was all about ending the lockdown.

In other aspects throughout the past few decades, the internet has really existed as a common platform. We see time and time again how in China, there are issues that come up at a very local level that expose certain areas like corruption and create opportunities for some meaningful change that isn’t necessarily broad-based politically. This is where some of the role of journalism and citizen reporters comes into play, because there is the ability to negotiate what kind of coverage can go out in the Chinese internet, what kind of reactions are possible. And then—even within the system—the Chinese government supports what certain scholars, Jonathan Hassid for example, would refer to as ‘safety valves’ and ‘pressure cookers’ on the Chinese

blogosphere. The idea of the 'safety valve,' in this case, is to give netizens the opportunity to vent about certain grievances which may be quite serious but don't reach the level of sustained, collective action against core regime priorities. That's where you saw some of the backlash to some of these COVID protests come: when there was more talk about the regime and getting rid of Xi Jinping, that's where it pushed too hard against those boundaries.

But, in terms of what was actually accomplished, the core grievance was to get rid of the lockdowns—and that's what happened. In some ways, it's encouraging for activist communities abroad because it revealed that there are some avenues to have some substantial change. But, it's just not going to be this overall revolutionary fervor. This isn't the time where we're going to see a kind of 'May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement,' for example, and it's also not a time where 'Arab Spring' concepts are still very relevant.

**Y:** So would you say that there may come a point, when trying to understand Chinese netizens' perceptions and trying to interpret these things, that there might be a misunderstanding among Western observers? As you mentioned, during COVID, I still recall that for many of those mainstream Western news medias—like the *BBC*, like the *New York Times*—it's almost fashionable to trace what these netizens talk on the internet and somehow tie it into a bigger picture about dissent against the central government.

Would you say that this is still a valuable way of understanding what the general Chinese public view on issues is—including on U.S.-China related issues when they quote a lot of 'wolf warrior' type netizen comments, trying to show how China has grown increasingly nationalistic? Would you say that there's still some value in tracking these issues, or would you say it's generally more of a misleading approach, or an overshoot, to trying to understand the Chinese general public's views online?

**W:** This is one of the reasons why I decided to teach my course and write this book. I think there's a lot of nuance that gets lost, there are a lot of well-intended but very enterprising media outlets that want to see that 'spark' that might completely change things and have the scoop on that story. Again, that goes back to looking at the 'Arab Spring' and the 'Jasmine Revolution' and that aftermath and, I think there needs to be a more realistic understanding of that.

That said, I think when looking at specific concerns, some acknowledgement of netizen feelings can be quite useful. I think a good example is the role that youth are playing in society today, especially economically. This idea of, say, 'lying flat' in the midst of one of the worst unemployment crises that's hit the Chinese economy in a long time. I think that example—again, a localized issue, it touches a lot of people, but it's not the kind of thing that's going to overthrow the government—is a concern, and the government does have to make that calculation again about how much the state may be complicit by getting too involved and crowding out the economy.

**Y:** Well since you brought up the youth, I personally know a bunch of youths—the millennials born after 2000—they are absolutely being very active online. A very interesting field in which they've been particularly interested is trying to, in their own words, 'protect their country,' pass on the 'truth'—what they perceive as the truth—in the West. So we see in recent years there are Chinese individuals, including Chinese government officials, registering on Western social media platforms trying to pass on what they perceive to be the truth, trying to pass on what 'the Chinese' believe.

How would you assess that trend? Do you think that is a good way to promote mutual understanding between China and the United States—especially given the very contentious relationship at this moment—or would you say, as some do, that they're more just propaganda agents trying to pass on false information to the U.S.

**W:** I think that it can be helpful. But, again, just looking at the demographics of the netizenry, who are the folks that are going to be engaging in this? These are people who presumably know foreign

languages—especially English—probably have studied abroad, have some sort of grasp of or fondness for international cultural ideas—particularly Western ones—and that can be a useful perspective to a point.

I think China is such a big topic and a big space that I believe there's room for everyone in terms of perspective to get to the truth. It's useful to hear from someone who's maybe a more worldly Chinese citizen. I think it's helpful to hear perspectives of folks in the countryside who are perhaps connecting on WeChat for the first time. And I think it's helpful to hear from folks like myself who have an outsider's perspective and have different biases. So I think it's one piece of a larger puzzle, and I think what it missing is getting those 'last mile' connections so that we can really see what the scope of the netizenry is all about. There are netizens out there who are not posting grievances. They're trying to 'sell their crops' and that's a very different perspective. There's going to be very different forms of activism that come out of that than some of the more worldly and globally-educated perspectives that I think we see more frequently.

**Y:** So would you consider that currently most of the information online is 'too elite-ish' such that people don't really see the full picture of China, especially rural Chinese even though they were given internet access and are posting things on domestic channels instead? Would you consider that to be an important piece of the puzzle for Westerners to get a full understanding of China, and do you think that there could be a platform in the future to help promote the connection between China and the West in that regard?

**W:** I think from a Western point of view that sounds very good. When looking at the Chinese internet though, it's a very isolated space. China has a history of isolationism. I fear that is the direction that the Xi government may be going towards, so I wonder if there is going to be any opportunity to get that sort of data. Data is an important part of this research puzzle because in the China space, sometimes it can be very difficult to get the data you need to make those research conclusions, and I fear that this particular situation might be one in which some data might be withheld or otherwise hard to find.

**Y:** I think this was a very comprehensive and fruitful discussion today. Thank you so much again Professor Vogt. This concludes our EVI today, and for more on our EVI program and the Institute for China-America Studies, please visit our website. Have a good day.

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