# Chapter 1
# The Internet and the Rise in Self–Empowerment of Chinese Women:
## A Multi–Method Analysis of Women's Blogs

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## ABSTRACT

*Focusing on female Chinese bloggers, this chapter explores the potential of weblogs in the process of female self-empowerment by looking at self-actualisation, construction of social interactions, and the organisation of personal networks. The empirical data used is derived from features analysis of selected female blogs, social network analysis of the relationships between these blogs, and from in-depth interviews with seven female bloggers. This data is complimented by discourse analysis to investigate the communicative purposes of these blogs, and content analysis of selected comments written on the blogs. Overall, the findings show that weblogs help women to become social agents by bringing personal, private and intimate issues onto the public agenda, and by controlling the flow of personal information based on their subjective needs to project a particular identity. However, opportunities for networking between individual bloggers are limited. The processes through which women are empowered as individual actors are also constrained by commercialisation and by traditional norms and gendered cultural stereotypes.*

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Emerging from the United Nation's Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW)[1] held in Beijing in 1995, the notion of women's empowerment opened up a new avenue for the discussion of women's needs, desires and aspirations in China. While female empowerment subsequently developed into a popular topic in China, the processes leading to market economy reforms have also brought about changes in the autonomy of Chinese women. Against this backdrop, it emerges an enhanced sense of women's agency, in opposition to the sacrifices often made by them to undertake traditional obligations and female family responsibilities.

At the same time, the growth of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in China is astonishing. By the end of 2010, China had surpassed the United States to become the world's largest market in Internet use, and in July 2015, Internet users in the country reached 668 million (CNNIC[2], 2010, 2015). During this rapid development of the Internet in China more generally, women also embraced this new communication technology and have gradually integrated it into their daily lives. In July 1997, women represented only 12.3 per cent of Internet users in China, but by July 2015, this figure had risen to 44.9 per cent (CNNIC, 1997, 2015). In particular, due to requiring only simple writing and editing skills, the authoring of weblogs has spread quickly among Chinese women. The number of Chinese women who engage in blogging activities has been almost 10 per cent higher than that of their male counterparts since July 2009 (CNNIC, 2009). This extensive use of ICTs in turn shapes new visions for the processes through which Chinese women become individual actors in their own lives, or ultimately, how they develop a heightened sense of individual empowerment.

Focusing on female Chinese bloggers, this chapter explores the possibilities of weblogs in the creation of self-empowerment among women in China, specifically by looking at self-actualisation, the construction of social interactions, and the organisation of personal networks. To set the background for this analysis, the following section firstly reviews some of the theory discussing empowerment in relation to individual women, and then outlines a conceptual framework for investigating the possibilities of weblogs to foster these women's sense of self-empowerment.

# 2. USING POWER TO UNDERSTAND EMPOWERMENT IN RELATION TO INDIVIDUAL WOMEN

The basic meaning of empowerment is the ability of people to become autonomous, purposive and creative actors in their own choices and decision making (Kabeer, 1999, 2005, 2010; Lister, 2003; Rowlands, 1997). This definition points to an un-

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