

Cyberactivism in China:
Empowerment, Control, and Beyond

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Abstract:

Building on existing studies, this chapter examines cyberpolitics in the world's largest authoritarian regime, China, and attempts to evaluate the impact of the Internet and social media on the authoritarian rule. Through analysis of cyberactivism and state adaptation in relation to each other, I argue that though the digital technology has empowered Chinese citizens in multiple ways, their general political inactiveness and the pluralization of cyberactivism, exacerbated by state censorship, have prevented regime transition from becoming the shared awareness. Moreover, the Chinese state has adapted far beyond censorship and propaganda. Its attempt to accommodate cyberactivism is also crucial to explain the authoritarian regime's resilience.

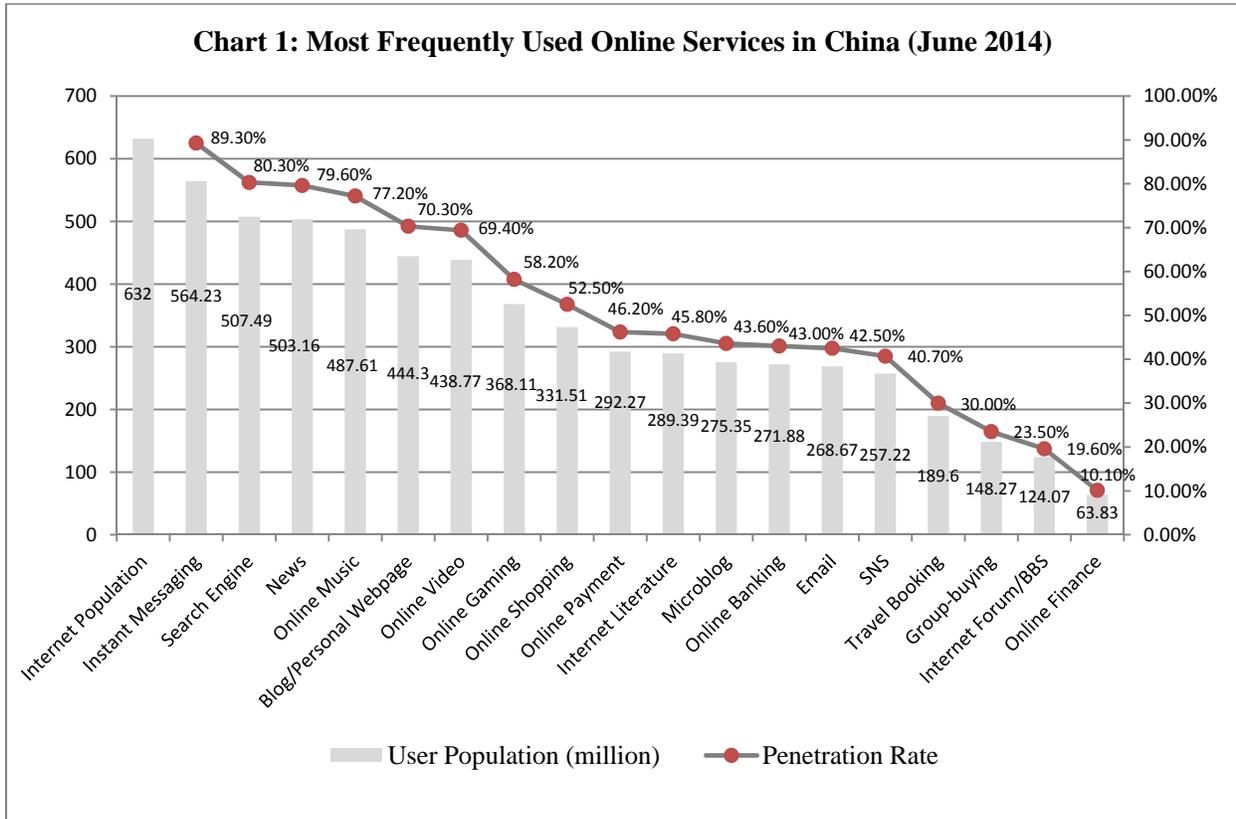
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With the rapid expansion of the Internet and social media, scholars have debated on the socio-political impact of such technological advancements. Those who are optimistic claim that the new digital tools have empowered social actors and fundamentally transformed the relationship between the governing and the governed. Authoritarian regimes, in particular, now increasingly face the “dictator’s dilemma” between imposing control over the digital media and embracing the new technologies to keep up with the rest of the world. As Shirky (2011) puts it, “with the spread of digital media, a state that is accustomed to having a monopoly on public speech finds itself called to account for anomalies between its view of events and the public’s.” However, there are also more skeptical views towards the impact of digital media. For instance, Morozov (2011, also see Hindman 2009), among others, questions the idea of the digital media as serving as a democratizing force, and highlights the way in which the technology may help entrench dictators, suppress dissidents, and impede democratization.

China is an interesting case in this regard as the country has experienced rapid ICT development while maintaining strong authoritarian rule. As **Chart 1** shows, China’s Internet population had reached 632 million (46.9% of the population) by June 2014, and millions of Chinese are online daily, searching for information, entertaining themselves, socializing, and expressing their opinions. In particular, social media platforms like blogs, the Twitter-like microblogs, and online forums have opened considerable space for cyberactivism, allowing Chinese citizens to express, organize, and mobilize. Given the constraints on public participation and expression, the expectation has been that the Internet and social media will serve as a liberalizing and democratizing force, as in the case of Arab Spring (Howard and Hussain 2013). This is why in China Internet users are often called “netizens”: the term implies not only the

online identity, but also some form of citizenship not found offline. Yet, the Communist Party and the authoritarian state, or the party-state, seems to be able to reap the benefits of the new technologies without jeopardizing its own existence.



Source: CNNIC 34th Statistical Report on the Internet Development in China, <http://www.cnnic.cn>.

To what extent and in what ways has the rise of cyberactivism challenged the Chinese authoritarian regime? How has the party-state attempted to overcome the “dictator’s dilemma”? Building on existing literature and the author’s own research, this chapter explores cyberpolitics in China through examination of the challenges brought about by the Internet and social media as well the party-state’s adaptation. I argue that challenges brought about by cyberactivism towards the party-state is relatively unthreatening because on the one hand, anti-regime dissident activism

is weak and seriously contested, and on the other hand, multiple forms of state adaptation, particularly the its efforts to accommodate cyberactivism, help maintain its resilience.

The following sections will first survey the literature, then assess the impact of digital media by examining its challenges towards the regime and state responses to such challenges, and finally conclude the chapter with suggestions for potential future research projects.

Cyberactivism in China: The Big Picture

Approaching the topic with distinctive theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and practical concerns, current studies on cyberpolitics in China can be categorized into three groups. The first group of studies takes a skeptical perspective and questions the political impact of the Internet and social media. Often based on content analysis and survey data, these studies find that the majority of Chinese netizens are simply not politically motivated, just like users in many other societies (Damm 2007; Leibold 2011). A survey done by Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Guo 2007) even suggests that the majority of Chinese support a “managed internet” (83%) and want the state to “manage” online expression (84.8%).

The second group focuses on the empowering effects of the Internet. Besides providing citizens with the space for freer public expression and some agenda-setting power (Hassid 2012; Tang and Sampson 2012), the new technology has also enhanced intra- and inter-connectedness of civil groups (Yang 2003a; 2007), facilitated popular protests and dissident mobilization (Thornton 2008; Chase and Mulvenon 2002), helped citizens hunt down corrupt officials (Gao and Stanyer 2014), and even influenced policy making and implementation (Zheng 2008; Zheng and Wu 2005). Moreover, netizens have also contested state control over online expression. They have creatively circumvented the Great Firewall to visit blocked sites (Mou et al 2014),

discussed sensitive topics under the radar using creative cyber language (Esarey and Xiao 2008; Xiao 2011; Shirk 2011; Yang 2009), and occasionally forced the state to scale back censorship (Li 2011; Rosen 2010; Chao and Dean 2009). Furthermore, netizens also engage in a variety of creative cyberactivism (Herold and Marolt 2011; Liu 2010; Voci 2010), which contribute to the rise of “a rich and lively internet culture” (Yang 2011; 2012) that contests the party-state norms (Lagerkvist 2010).

The third group of studies explores state adaptation to explain why the regime remains resilient (Nathan 2003). As Shirky (2011) suggests, censorship and propaganda are obvious avenues for authoritarian regimes to cope with the “dictator’s dilemma.” The Chinese party-state has established systematic control over the web through network infrastructure, legal and administrative means, and automatic and manual surveillance (Harwit and Clark 2001; Han 2012; Zheng 2008). To censor more effectively, the party-state has delegated responsibilities to intermediary actors like service providers (MacKinnon 2011; Zuckerman 2010), and selectively targeted different content by tolerating general criticism but silencing collective mobilization (King et al 2013). Besides outright censorship, the state has also adapted its propaganda strategies by increasing online presence (Tang et al 2013), adopting popular cyber culture (Lagerkvist 2007, 53-78), and sponsoring Internet commentators (the “fifty cents army”) to manufacture seemingly spontaneous support (Hung 2010; Han 2012). Such state adaptation suggest that the Internet’s impact on authoritarian regimes depends on not only on technology, but also political organization and strategy (Diamond 2010) and that authoritarian regimes can still “call the shots” (Kalathil and Boas 2003: 136; Morozov 2011).

These studies have provided unique visions of cyberpolitics in China. Yet, disagreements remain, largely due to the lack of meaningful cross-group dialogue. Studies recognizing the

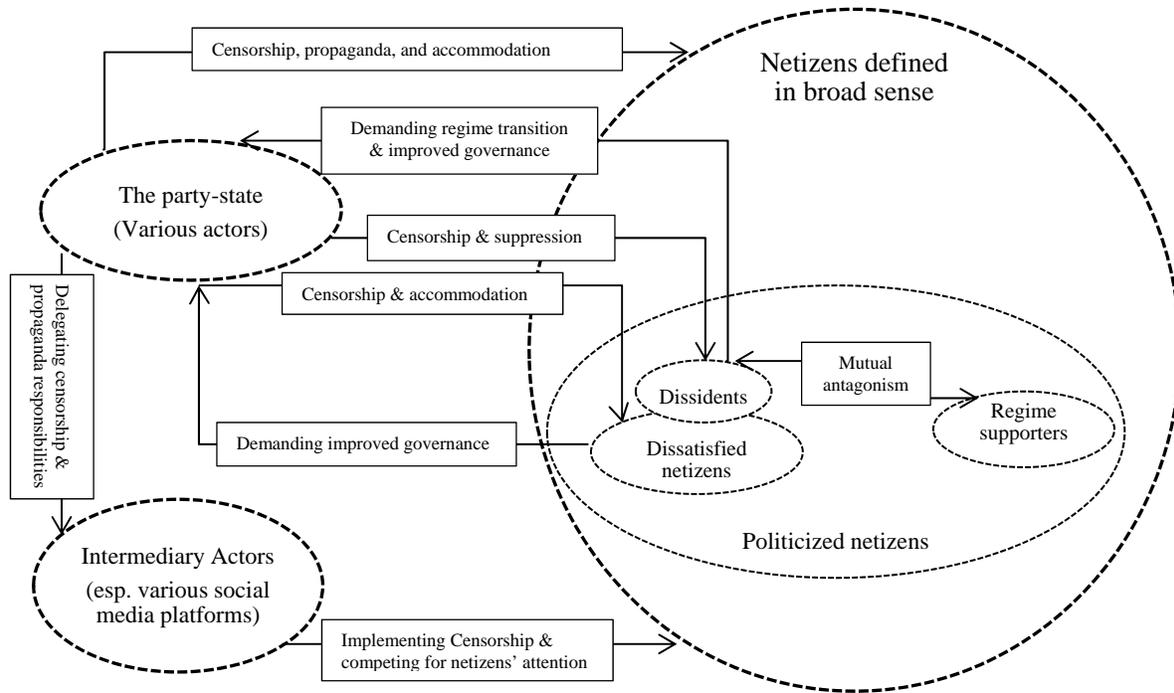
political inactiveness of netizens dismiss cyberactivism too easily. Studies on cyberactivism often assume netizens being politically active and regime-challenging, and do not differentiate actors, targets, and goals in cyberactivism. Studies highlighting state adaptation tend to treat the party-state as unitary, focus narrowly on censorship and propaganda, and fail to consider state adaptation in relation to the challenges. Therefore, to achieve a more balanced and accurate understanding of Chinese cyberpolitics, I propose a multi-actor, multi-dimensional framework in the next section, which reconciles existing views when evaluating the impact of cyberactivism and state adaptation.

Cyberactivism and State Adaptation with Chinese Characteristics: A Multi-Actor Multi-Dimensional Perspective

Since existing studies often highlight only certain aspects of cyberpolitics, a proper multi-actor, multi-dimensional framework may combine their strengths while avoiding the limitations. **Figure 1** illustrates an attempt to construct such a framework. My basic assumption is that Chinese cyberspace is pluralized, and neither the state nor the society should be treated as a monolithic entity. Based on that, I examine the diversity of cyberactivism and breadth of state adaptation. I argue that the regime's resilience is not a result of perfect control, but builds on the weaknesses of anti-regime activism and a wide array of state adaptation. First, though Chinese netizens can be mobilized, there is no shared agenda of regime transition. Other than dissent groups, netizens are of diverse political orientations, many only demand improved governance, and some even prefer the regime to dissidents. Second, the party-state is fragmented and neither the censorship nor online propaganda is centrally administrated, resulting in severe limitations of such state adaptation. In addition, state response to cyberactivism needs to be differentiated as

the party-state has selectively targeted dissidents and collective mobilization, while trying to accommodate cyberactivism that demands improved governance.

Figure 1: A Multi-Actor Multi-Dimensional Framework of Cyberpolitics in China



Intermediary actors, particularly service providers, play an important mediating role. Though netizens have access to diverse online services, cyberactivism primarily happens on social media platforms where users can communicate, coordinate, and collaborate. Microblogs and forums are particularly crucial for cyberactivism. For instance, of the 217 corruption cases exposed by netizens between 2004 and February 2013, forums and microblogs account for 59% and 24% respectively (Du and Li 2014). News portals are important because they not only allow users to comment on news, but also incorporate other social media functions like blogging,

microblogging and online forums. As multinational giants like Facebook and Twitter are blocked by the Great Firewall, it is Chinese conglomerates like Tencent, Baidu, and Sina that dominate the market, each often providing multiple services. For instance, Tencent owns the most popular SNS site (Qzone) and instant messengers (QQ and Wechat). Baidu has the largest search engine and a popular forum (Tieba). Sina runs a major news portal and the most influential microblogging platform, Weibo. These companies not only help the party-state achieve its ICT developmental goals, but also play an important role in cyberpolitics: (1) they have put the regime in a better situation to control the web as they are easier to control than foreign IT giants; (2) as the state has delegated censorship and propaganda responsibilities to them, they can preserve or even facilitate cyberactivism if they choose to. So though discussion below does not single out the role of intermediary actors, it is important to bear them in mind when examining both cyberactivism and state adaptation.

The Challenge of Cyberactivism towards the Authoritarian Regime

To assess the power of the Internet and digital media in the Chinese context, it is imperative to first look at in what ways cyberactivism has challenged the authoritarian regime. It is true that like Internet and social media users elsewhere, most Chinese netizens are concerned with consumerism, lifestyle and private life, rather than public or political affairs (Damm 2007; Leibold 2011; Ministry of Culture 2013). However, Chinese netizens are far from apolitical. Rather, they are more vocal, critical, and more likely to participate in collective action than non-netizens (Lei 2011; Hung 2010; Tang and Sampson 2012; Zheng 2008). In effect, even non-political netizens can be mobilized. More than once, gamers have protested when the state bans or imposes restrictions on foreign games like *World of Warcraft* (Chao et al 2010). Similarly,

when China delayed the market entry of iPhone 6, netizens complained on microblog, asking the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology not only to let in iPhones immediately, but also to unblock Google services (MIIT Microblog 2014).

Yet, Chinese netizens are not pursuing regime change. For instance, the party-state's mouthpiece *People's Daily* has an Online Public Opinion Monitoring Center that tracks popular online topics on public affairs. An analysis of the 580 topics the center collected between 2005 and 2014 (People's Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Center 2005-2014) shows that they are mostly about specific rights, grievances, and scandals. Though cyberactivism related to such issues may question the regime's legitimacy, it is qualitatively different from *dissident activism* that seeks regime transition. In general, dissident activism, though spreads widely online, is of limited influence because it is largely restricted to the dissident groups. Due to state censorship, cyberactivism in China takes artful and playful forms (Yang 2009). For dissidents, outright anti-regime activism is difficult and attracts suppression. Transmitting dissent messages with popular cyberculture helps them evade censorship (as the "cute cat theory" suggests, using popular web tools makes dissidents more immune to state reprisals because shutting down such applications may provoke a public outcry. See Zuckerman 2008) and reach a wider audience. But the move also results in many average netizens not getting the messages or encourages slacktivism that involves little commitment and has little real impact (Christensen 2011; Morozov 2009), thus fail to construct the "shared awareness" (Shirky 2011) often seen as necessary for regime change.

Moreover, anti-regime activism has met its resistance. Chinese netizens are divided in terms of their political orientations (Wu 2014) and dissidents are not always more popular than the party-state. For instance, Han (2012) finds a group of netizens voluntarily defends the authoritarian regime against dissidents. These netizens, who call themselves the "voluntary fifty

cents army” (as opposed to state sponsored “fifty cents army”), acknowledge the regime’s contribution to national unity, social stability, and economic development and consequently, they worry about potential costs and uncertain future of regime change. Referencing the turmoil that accompanied the collapse of Soviet Union and the Arab Spring, as well as governance deficits in democracies like India, they argue that the authoritarian regime is not the worst option. This nationalistic-realistic view is not a direct result of state sponsorship, but nonetheless echoes state propaganda, defends the regime, and adds to its legitimacy. Han’s research echoes findings in survey studies done by Shi (2008) and Guo (2007), suggesting the regime still enjoys considerable legitimacy among citizens.

As a result, although general criticism is common and probably tolerated (King et al 2013), it is far from sufficient to mobilize for regime transition. This was demonstrated by the fruitless “Jasmine Revolution” in which only literally a handful of “revolutionaries” protested on Beijing’s Wangfujing Street, surrounded by hundreds of police, journalists and thousands of bystanders (Branigan 2011). When the police took the protesters away, not a single bystander showed any sympathy or interest in the cause of the protesters, revealing the limited support base of anti-regime activism.

State Responses: Control, Propaganda, and Accommodation

The Chinese party-state is known for its capacity to adapt (Nathan 2003; Shambaugh 2008; Stockmann 2013) and it has made serious efforts to tame the Internet and social media, as revealed above. However, with only a few exceptions like Noesselt (2014), current studies tend to focus on state adaptation in the realms of censorship and propaganda, which are crucial, but far from sufficient to explain authoritarian resilience in the digital era. This section elaborates

why we shall look beyond censorship and propaganda, and explores how the party-state has attempted to accommodate online activism to improve its governance, thus its legitimacy.

Censorship and Propaganda

There is no doubt that the Chinese state has devised a comprehensive censorship system, which is probably the world's "most sophisticated" (OpenNet Initiative 2005). Though scholars have detailed how the system functions (Harwit and Clark 2001, Zheng 2008; MacKinnon 2009; King et al 2013), its effectiveness remains in question. Some suggests that it is sufficient to control (Boas 2006), others see it as full of loopholes and even counterproductive (Esarey and Xiao 2008; Tong and Lei 2013). Both arguments are valid, but incomplete. The censorship system is complicated, yet constantly outsmarted by netizens (Esarey and Xiao 2008; Mou et al 2014). Moreover, as it is not centrally administrated and multiple state agencies with different and even conflicting priorities are involved, the system often fails to produce an optimal outcome for the regime as a whole. For instance, local officials have used censorship to cover up scandals. An Internet police officer in Hainan Province allegedly took bribes from counterparts in other local governments for removing negative postings about them (Xi and Zhang 2014). Relying on intermediary actors like service providers to enforce censorship also allows these actors to push the boundary for business or normative concerns. When asked how they would deal with censorship directives, an editor from a major news portal said that they would not delete the content until the last second so that more netizens can read it (Interview in Beijing, May 6, 2010).

Why, then, is imperfect control sufficient? First, as explained earlier, anti-regime activism is relatively weak. Second, by selectively targeting collective mobilization expression (King et al 2013) and dissident activism, the party-state partially avoids the dilemma implied by

the “cute-cat theory.” For instance, expression related to dissent groups like democratic activists and Falungong is strictly forbidden (thus censorship is often unobservable because such content often cannot be published in the first place), and dissidents are often severely punished. Among the 54 detained cyberactivists listed in an Amnesty International (2004) report, almost all were charged with “subversion,” “distribution of Falungong material” or “leaking state secrets.” Such selective repression not only has dissident voices “nipped in the bud,” but also avoids any public outcry because average netizens are largely unaffected.

Besides censorship, the regime has also adapted its propaganda strategies. While enabling freer expression, the Internet and social media platforms also allow the regime to promulgate its own discourse. To increase its influence online, the party-state has encouraged state media outlets like *Xinhua News Agency* and *People’s Daily* to set up online platforms and granted them the monopoly of news production (other online news services are only allowed to “reprint,” see State Council Information Office and Ministry of Information Industry 2005). The state has also pushed state-run media to occupy popular social media platforms. According to the *2013 New Media Development Report*, traditional media outlets, often under tighter state control, have set up over 110,000 accounts on Sina Weibo by the end of 2012 (Tang et al 2013, p.18). The report states,

“The rise of Central media microblogs has changed mainstream media’s tardiness and muteness in responding to hot-button issues and greatly enhanced their capacity to guide popular opinion online.”

Besides, the state has also innovated in propaganda tactics. For instance, Lagerkvist (2007) finds the regime embracing “ideotainment” strategies that mix popular web culture with ideological constructs and nationalistic propaganda. The “fifty cents army” (Hung 2010; Han

2012), as mentioned above, is another such instance when the state takes advantage of anonymity in online expression to manufacture pro-government voices under the disguise of average users. Since state propaganda has lost its credibility, hiding state identities and acting like netizens may help the state manipulate popular opinion in some cases.

However, there are limitations to state adaptation in propaganda. For instance, though state media outlets have set up accounts Sina Weibo, they cannot prevent critical opinion leaders from gaining popularity. Take Han Han as an example. The best-selling author and rebel blogger has over 41 million followers, far outnumbering any state agency. Even subtle strategies like the deployment of the “fifty cents army” often prove ineffective or backfire. Supposedly a covert force, the “fifty cents army” often gets exposed because they are poorly trained or rewarded. Moreover, like censorship, the system is also fragmented, with local state agencies prioritizing goals other than preserving the regime’s legitimacy. In effect, local governments often expose the “fifty cents army” themselves because they treat it as routine propaganda work rather than something to hide in dark. All such evidence reveals that state adaptation in its propaganda strategies is of limited effect in maintaining its legitimacy.

Accommodation

State censorship and propaganda innovation cannot sufficiently explain authoritarian resilience, suggesting we look beyond these realms. Scholars studying contentious politics in China suggest that popular protests can help improve policy implementation, and thus enhance the regime’s legitimacy (O’Brien and Li 2005). Since netizens often target specific governance deficits, accommodating cyberactivism and responding to the problems (Hassid 2013), however involuntarily, may help increase the regime’s transparency, accountability and responsiveness. In

this sense, the Internet and social media can bring “limited” democracy that enhances rather than erodes the regime’s legitimacy.

The state accommodates cyberactivism actively in multiple ways. First, it has set up e-government platforms to engage the public and experiment with new ways of social management (Schlæger and Jiang 2014). Launched in 1999 to improve government administrative capacity and provide public services online (Qiang 2007), the “Government Online Project” has resulted in 56,348 government websites by 2014 (CNNIC 2014). Though they have not forged organizational reform, e-government projects have enhanced control over state agents, improved public services, and expanded citizen outreach (Lollar 2006; Schlæger 2013; Qin et al 2014). In particular, government websites often have petition channels, which do not automatically solve problems, yet force the government to respond to citizens’ concerns, at least in a superficial way (Hartford 2005).

More importantly, the state also engages the public on popular social media platforms. By October 2013, there were over 100,000 government official accounts on Sina Weibo alone, representing 66,830 state agencies and 33,321 officials (People's Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Center 2013). Tencent boasts 160,000 verified governmental accounts on its microblogging platform, and another 3,000 on WeChat (Tang et al 2014). State agencies also appear on popular Internet forums. Tianya.cn –China’s most popular Internet forum with nearly 100 million registered users by February 2015 – claims to host over 500 government institutions, which responded to 2,259 complaints in 2013 (Tianya 2014). Besides cosmetic effects and propaganda functions, such channels encourage state-society interaction and often help improve governance in one way or the other.

The current Xi Jinping-Li Keqiang leadership is aggressive in incorporating certain types of cyberactivism. Take online anti-corruption as an example. Research suggests that to reap the benefits of free media without risking overthrow, it is rational for the authoritarian regime to tolerate exposure of corruption to a certain level rather than completely unleash or suppress it (Lorentzen 2014). If this argument holds, the regime would be more cautious about online anti-corruption activism because it is uncontrollable. This explains why scholars find that anti-corruption activism has only achieved limited success in China (Ang 2014; Gao and Stanyer 2014; Sullivan 2014). However, with the new leadership prioritizing anti-corruption (between November 2012 and 2014, 68 corrupt officials at the deputy minister level or above were removed, which is astonishing considering that only 145 such high-ranking officials fell in 63 years before this period. See Wu and Qian 2015), it is logically incompatible to continue hold back anti-corruption activism online. As a result, the state began to aggressively incorporate it. In April 2013, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) and Ministry of Supervision (MOS) ordered major news and commercial websites to set up special “Internet-supervision” channels for netizens to tip-off corruption. In September 2013, CCDI and MOS jointly established a portal website (ccdi.gov.cn) by merging several existing online anti-corruption platforms by various party-state agencies to promulgate laws and policies, and promote public engagement. The website allows citizens to report corrupt officials, anonymously if they choose to, and follow up their reports. Official reports claim that netizens have embraced the initiative with enthusiasm: online tip-offs quadrupled from 200 to 800 daily after the portal was launched (Wang 2014). Though further study is necessary to see how sincere or effective the move is, it is obviously strategic for the regime to show its willingness to accommodate rather than standing against the public.

Tentative Conclusion

Current studies disagree on the impact of the Internet and social media on Chinese politics. Instead of negating their contributions, this chapter builds on them and fits them into a new framework that highlights the pluralization of cyberactivism and the breadth of state responses. I argue that though digital media, particularly social media platforms like microblogs, forums, and news commentary channels, has empowered social actors in China, the nature and scale of such empowerment are worth reckoning. Yes, despite general political inactiveness, Chinese citizens have used digital media tools to lodge complaints, defend rights, and demand better governance. However, the pluralization of cyberactivism and netizen groups, exacerbated by state censorship, has prevented social media platforms from becoming hot bed for anti-regime mobilization.

In terms of state adaptation, the chapter echoes authoritarian resilience literature that emphasizes the adaptability of the party-state. However, I propose a broader understanding of state adaptation beyond censorship and propaganda because accommodating cyberactivism plays a crucial role in the regime's attempt to alleviate the dictator's dilemma. Moreover, when examining state adaptation to control the web, I argue that its strength lies less in its rigorousness than its ability to selectively target dissident activism and collective mobilization.

For those concerned with cyberpolitics and democratization in China, there are mixed signals. To a large extent, this chapter echoes the mutual empowerment argument that emphasizes the liberalizing rather than democratizing effects of digital media (Zheng 2008). The analysis suggests that the potential democratic transition depends on not only the state's capacity to control, but also its ability to improve governance as well as the struggle between anti-regime activism and its opponents. The tentative conclusion could be the start point for several future

projects. First, differentiating and comparing cyberactivism more systematically can contribute to the understanding of Chinese cyberpolitics as well as the literature on authoritarian resilience. In particular, any research on the competition between dissident activism and its opposition will help assess the empowering effects of the digital media more accurately. Second, since the state-society interaction online is mediated by intermediary actors, more close examination and comparison of different digital platforms in terms of their role in cyberactivism and state adaptation will be promising. Third, it is still unclear whether cyberactivism that is not an extension of offline mobilization has any significant impact beyond the virtual space. Since Chinese netizens demonstrate no shared awareness of regime-transition, will activism bounded online change their attitudes and subsequently behaviors in the long run? Finally, with a broader view of state adaptation, projects exploring multiple forms of state responses to digital media and the effectiveness of such responses are surely worth pursuing. Despite the different focuses, all these potential projects will improve our understanding of authoritarian resilience and state-society relations in non-democratic regimes.

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