Beyond “The Great Firewall”:
A Closer Look at Online Public Discourse in the People’s Republic of China

by

Charmaine Chen
Class of 2012

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors from the College of Social Studies

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2012
Acknowledgements

I would like to give special thanks to:
Stephen Angle

For advising this thesis.

Becky Eidelman
Erhard Konerding
Isabella Litke
Peggy Nelling
Aditi Shivaramakrishnan
Nicole Updegrove

For editing and proofreading this work. All remaining errors are my sole responsibility.

Eva Chan
Eddie Huang
Lim Beng Dee
Elizabeth Tan
Mark Ting
Wang Yan
My tutors in the College of Social Studies
My professors at Wesleyan University

For their guidance and mentorship.

Conan Cheong
Andrew Chung
Charles Horne
Marshall Ruben
Siyou Tan
The Middletown Chapter of the Alpha Delta Phi

For their kindness, patience and generosity.

This thesis is dedicated to:
My family
The netizens of China
# Table of Contents

## I. Introduction: The role of online public affairs discourse in China
- a. The Role of Intellectuals in Public Discourse
- b. The Development of Individual-Oriented Media
- c. Approach to the Study of Online Discourse

## II. The Rules of Law in China: A Spectrum of Legality
- a. What is a Chinese Citizen?
- b. Forms of State-Individual Relationships
- c. Official Avenues of Participation
- d. Rightful Resistance
- e. Negotiating Expectations, Boundaries and Acceptable Forms of Dissent

## III. Media and the Internet: Regulations and Loopholes
- a. The Use of Media Publicity in Activism
- b. Media Efficacy in China
- c. “Me-Media”
- d. Online Discourse
- e. The Chinese Internet
- f. Restrictions on Online Discourse
- g. Innovating Around The Great Firewall
- h. The Future of Internet Regulation in China
- i. Decentralized Channels of Expression

## IV. Wenzhou High Speed Rail Collision: Online Counter-Journalism
- a. Initial Reports
- b. Official Media Discredited
- c. Netizen Journalism and Protest
- d. Damage Control
- e. Persisting Netizen Dissatisfaction
- f. Derailed Development
V. Wukan Land Disputes: Online Support for Offline Protest
   a. The Problem with Land Rights 89
   b. Individual Household Resistance 89
   c. Wukan: A Different Type of Model City 95
   d. The Siege on Wukan 97
   e. Local Officials: Containment and Compromise 100
   f. The “Wukan Model” and Lingering Tensions 110

VI. Conclusion: The value of online discourse in China 121
   a. “Zhongguoism” and Public Choice 122
   b. Online “Sous-veillances” and Governmental Accountability 124
   c. Party Insecurity and Intensified Regulation 128
   d. Importance of Online Discourse 131

VII. Bibliography 133
Introduction: The Need for Online Public Discourse in China

In 2010, China’s online population numbered some 420 million, 31.6% of its total population.¹ With an increasingly technologically literate population, it was perhaps inevitable that China, as an ostensibly socialist, one-party state would be exposed to political and social frictions with the creation of this new public space. Though not all Chinese Internet users use the Internet for political purposes, and the Chinese Internet is still best understood as a national intranet, this public space has allowed users from diverse geographic locations to interact with relatively greater freedom.

My thesis analyzes the interactions of Chinese Internet users who voice their sociopolitical concerns on the Internet, participate in dialogue regarding the governance of their polity, and at times participate in online activism. I refer to these users as “netizens”. My goal is to examine the ways in which “netizenship” is changing the nature of Chinese citizenship, and how the Internet has served as a liminal space in which the concept of mutual responsibility between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Chinese citizens is being negotiated and reworked.

Though the government still has veto power over what can and cannot be said on the Internet, the sheer volume of online information, as well as the permeability of “The Great Firewall,” makes censorship a relatively inviable long-term solution to effective control of media on the Internet.² This can potentially result in increased


² The term “Great Firewall” is derived from The Great Wall of China. Just as the Great Wall was built to keep out barbarian invaders, so the “Great Firewall” blocks out sensitive Internet content.
discourse and information sharing between Chinese netizens and their government as the Chinese Communist Party tries to maintain order in a rapidly changing country. Through my case studies, I intend to destabilize the dichotomies between censorship and effective online activism, and outline ways in which online resisters are a powerful element of public discourse in China.

INTELLECTUALS IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

China’s intellectuals have a tradition of questioning and destabilizing monolithic notions of the state. Court intellectuals had a practice of sending memos to officials and the emperor, petitioning on matters of conscience and principle and drawing attention to flaws in the governance of the nation. Pre-Maoist intellectuals such as Gao Yihan (1884-1968) stated that the state was not to be seen as a natural thing. According to Gao, the state is composed of citizens’ activities, and that the “reasons that give rise to activities are like hosts, and the activities are like guests.”

The year 1989 saw the proliferation and increased visibility of diverse ideological groups that opposed the post-Maoist path that China had taken. The main groups were the Neo-Maoists, Neo-Nationalists, Neo-Conservatives, the New Left, and the Liberals. Most importantly, intellectuals from all of these groups were included within the party establishment and were seen as a key resource in policy-making. However, with increased literacy among the populace due to the literacy

---


5 Goldman, *From Comrade to Citizen*, 95.
campaigns of the Maoist era, ordinary people, along with intellectuals, began to use petitions to protest against corrupt practices such as land expropriation, that caused them material suffering. Through events such as the June Fourth Incident at Tiananmen Square, the broader public challenged official policies in conspicuous ways. Moreover, rather than petitioning as individual intellectuals in theoretical language, citizens petitioned in groups for practical changes.

In academic journals, intellectuals had nearly free rein to debate, and as Goldman notes in *From Comrade to Citizen*, because academic journals were circulated almost exclusively among a closed circle of university intellectuals, they were able to cover more sensitive topics, as long as scholars avoided directly attacking the party line. However, the post-Maoist era still faced chronic and severe problems with Deng Xiaoping’s “opening-up” policy, such as “corruption, injustice, urban unemployment, rural unrest, unfairness in economy, growing gap between rich and poor, problems in economic reform, and the plundering of state capital.” Along with the broader range of intellectual discourse, there was a grassroots struggle to find concrete solutions to social injustices. Some scholars were sensitive to this need.

Why was the widening scope of public discourse important? As Gao said in “The State is not the Final End of Life” in 1915, discourse allows people to be conscious of their rights. Public discourse made the state a means for the people to

---

6 Ibid., 79.
7 Ibid., 98.
9 Gao, "The State is Not the Final End of Life," 81.
achieve their ends, and not an end to which the people were a means. As individuals began to discuss what the state could do for them, and what it meant for a state to be legitimate, they gained a growing sense of ideological autonomy and political efficacy. They were no longer merely a part of a collective, but were individuals who could potentially change the course of their society, regardless of education, as long as they could formulate and articulate their political ideas.

Moreover, memories of cadres confiscating seed grain to meet unrealistic official quotas during the Great Leap Forward, causing the Great China Famine of 1958 to 1961, emphasized the danger of a state where “people on the verge of starvation were not allowed to call out that they were starving.”\(^\text{10}\) The attempts to “sweep away all monsters and demons” during the Cultural Revolution by repressing dissenting opinions had also caused intense turmoil.\(^\text{11}\) This suffering was still fresh in the minds of many in China, and thus individuals were reluctant to accept the silencing of dissent for the sake of national stability.

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDIVIDUAL-ORIENTED MEDIA**

Why is the Internet such an interesting public space? It is an example of “me-media” – media portals that are easily accessible and customizable for the individual consumer, and permitting individuals to simultaneously produce and consume information. Netizens are able to react immediately to whatever information they consume, sharing their interpretations and collectively re-narrating events as they


\(^{11}\) Ibid., 431.
happen. In China, cyber-dissidence started among the urban, educated youth of the post-1989 generation. Though this generation is often seen as rich, selfish, and socially disengaged, the Internet allows for them to engage with their society on their own terms, often at little personal cost, using online forums and blogs to anonymously criticize party policies. This cheap, rapid access allows for subversive netizens to combat resource-rich business and government bodies through their own autonomous production and dispersal of knowledge.

In 1986, the Chinese Academic Network (CANet) initiated a partnership between Beijing Applied Computing Institute and Karlsruhe University in Germany to create a network of technological communication between the two institutions. In August 1994, China set up its first-level domain name registration server (.cn) and opened its Internet router for academic and military purposes. With the opening of ChinaNet in 1996 allowed businesses to take advantage of this new form of communication, meaning that the general public gained Internet access. Since then, there has been a meteoric increase in the number of Internet users in China, from 620,000 in October 1997 to 94 million in December 2004, and 420 million in 2010. The dynamics of Internet access in China will be explored further in Chapter Two.

---

12 Goldman, From Comrade to Citizen: The Struggle for Political Rights in China, 186.


15 Ibid., 137.
The content published on websites is much more easily altered than text printed in newspapers. The messages can be diverse, shifting with present necessity. The sheer volume of information on the Internet allows netizens to bypass traditional media gatekeepers such as print editors and censors. Through the Internet, subversive netizens are able to provide counter-information to misleading ideologies, create and redefine their social and political objectives, present their independent historical narratives of events, mobilize like-minded individuals, generate support and resources, and create alternative discursive arenas. In the 1990s, a number of the collectively organized petitions in China were addressed to the international media and put on the Internet, and reported back into China via foreign-owned private media companies. This wide international circulation of Chinese netizens’ complaints brought a great deal of visibility to the Chinese political scene, and the world began to take note of political developments in China.

In 1998, Radio Free Europe optimistically proclaimed that democracy was right around the corner for China, as the government would surely be unable to repress the deluge of information and communications on the Internet while maintaining the appearance of its open-door policy.

Four years later, China’s Ministry of Industry and Information Technology issued a directive for a country-wide installation of the Green Dam Youth Escort. This

---

16 Ibid., 162.
18 Goldman, From Comrade to Citizen: The Struggle for Political Rights in China, 79.
19 Zhou, Historicizing Online Politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China, 144.
filtering software was designed to block “harmful information” such as pornography and radical political content from all computers in the People’s Republic of China. American politicians responded to this development with claims that the Internet “is destined to be a tool of surveillance and repression” for the Chinese government, and declared that the Chinese Internet was “lost”, and the fight for Internet freedom was over in China. And it was true that in 2002, search results on Google and Altavista were heavily censored in China, and Internet users in China were required to register their accounts with the local police bureaus. However, the foreign politicians’ predictions of doom proved to be somewhat exaggerated and premature.

It is true that the Chinese Internet cannot be viewed as an engine of democratization in the sense in which the foreign politicians and activists use the term. With the restriction of information from international search engines, Internet freedom was no longer a matter of foreign interest groups freeing Chinese netizens from governmental restrictions, but netizens themselves negotiating a new public space and creating their own freedoms through diverse and creative discursive methods. With the new restrictions on the Chinese Internet, there was a proliferation of Virtual Proxy Servers, and amateur and professional hackers in China alike began to engage in increasingly sophisticated programming and file-sharing activities that allowed for netizens to connect to banned sites. Yet just as netizens were becoming increasingly creative, the legitimacy of both the central and local levels of

20 Ibid., 144.

21 Goldman, From Comrade to Citizen: The Struggle for Political Rights in China, 187.

22 Ibid., 187.
government was beginning to become increasingly insecure as a result of this new online activism, and online activity was viewed as a potential threat to political stability in China.

The Online Community in China

As frictions began to emerge between the CCP and netizen resisters, online subversive movements began to develop networks of mutual protection and advocacy. On June 3, 2000, Huang Qi, a Chengdu computer engineer who had set up a website to track down missing people from the June 4, 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, was detained. Visitors to his site were able to follow his arrest as it happened, as he posted a final message on his site just prior to his arrest.²³ Liu Di, a cyber-dissident and People’s University psychology student who went under the online alias of Stainless Steel Mouse, protested, “We could not bear to see Huang Qi alone struck by the mishap of imprisonment and ourselves remaining at large and therefore decided to surrender ourselves en masse to justice so as to show fairness.”²⁴ She urged netizens to publicly discuss Huang’s arrest and to petition the government for a free and fair trial for the activist. Liu Di donated money to Zeng Li, Huang Qi’s wife, who was in deep financial distress after the arrest of her husband. As a result, Liu Di was arrested on November 2002, and her apartment was searched. Police confiscated her computer, floppy disks and books.²⁵

²³ Ibid., 192.
²⁴ Ibid., 194.
²⁵ Ibid., 195.
In response, the President of the magazine *Democratic China*, Liu Xiaobo, organized a petition to protest Liu Di’s arrest and attempted to deliver a petition signed by 690 Internet users to the National Party Congress.\(^{26}\) In addition, Du Daobin, a minor government official, organized Liu Di’s petition defense, stating that prolonged detention without trial was a violation of criminal procedure law. Du was then detained in October 2003 for posting online essays denouncing the party’s repressive policies and calling for democratic reforms. His detention created outrage as netizens claimed that Du’s arrest “violated the right of citizens to freedom of expression under Article 35 of the present Constitution,” and ran counter to China’s acceptance of international practices on the protection of human rights, as stated in the UN human rights covenants to which China had agreed.\(^{27}\)

Du’s case caused the public to begin to question and request a more specific articulation of the difference between a “crime of instigation to subvert the power of the state” and the freedom of expression under Article 35 of the Chinese constitution.\(^{28}\) On February 1, 2004, one hundred intellectuals, both within and outside of the party, demanded clarification as to the extent to which one could legally criticize government. Petitions were posted on both domestic and international websites.\(^{29}\) Du ultimately had a trial on June 11, 2004, but his lawyer Mo Shaoping was not notified in time to defend him in the trial. Du was then charged with

---

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 195.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 198.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 198. “Article 35: Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration.”

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 197.
subversion, and was sentenced to three years in prison, which was later commuted to four years’ probation.\textsuperscript{30}

This is an instance of netizens banding together to aid a member of their own community. As a netizen supporting Du’s cause stated, “people of all walks of life, especially Internet users and people writing in the Chinese language [must] show concern for this case, because showing concern for Du Daobin means showing concern for ourselves.”\textsuperscript{31} This sense of solidarity has come out of the increased communications online and the awareness that what happened to one netizen could well happen to any netizen. As Liu Di observed, “the Internet has replaced the functions of organization in many respects, which stimulates the integrity of Chinese society and provides the space for the nurture of a citizenship society in China.”\textsuperscript{32} Through highly publicized conflicts with the government, netizens gain a sense that they too can affect government decisions, and in cases of unlawful detention, a sense that other netizens will band together to advocate and petition for them.

\textbf{APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF ONLINE DISCOURSE}

I first gained an interest in this topic while considering about the coexistence of a free economic system with China’s one-party authoritarian state, and the activity in the interstitial spaces between state and society. In exploring the idea of freedom, agency, and deliberation existing in parallel with what appears upon a superficial analysis to be an authoritarian state, I began trying to find loopholes of agency in the

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 199.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 198.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 196.
one-party system. My advisor pointed me in the direction of the idea of a “decent
democratic centralism”, and I found the idea of a responsive authoritarian state
entrepreneur in China, I came across Archon Fung’s theories on deliberative
democracy.\footnote{Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright. "Experiments in Empowered Deliberative Democracy: Introduction," May 1999, \url{http://www.archonfung.net/papers/experiments.pdf} (accessed September 2, 2011)} This then led me to look at how individuals can exercise their political
will and fully engage their societies, which is a problem even in democracies today,
and a word that came up constantly in my readings, thoughts, and discussions was
“deliberation.” As the Internet is the widest and most diverse deliberative space in the
world, I decided to explore Internet discourse in China.

My secondary source readings have ranged from general theories of Internet
political participation, such as \textit{Historicizing Online Politics}, \textit{The Net Delusion} and
\textit{Online Territories}, which deal with the implications of wider, faster and more diverse
deliberation for governments and the quality of political discourse today, to scholars
focusing specifically on the development of modern Chinese politics, to more in-
depth secondary scholarship concentrating on Chinese online discourse.

I found it particularly interesting to contrast the etic and emic perspectives of
China-centered Internet scholarship. Scholars from outside China writing about
Chinese Internet activism was somewhat different from scholarship by scholars from
actively engaged in online communities such as \textit{Sina Weibo}. I found that all the
scholars struggled with the fact that the deliberation is always decentralized,
unpredictable and hugely variant in quality. This was at times presented in a negative light, such as in the *Net Delusion* where Morozov deals with the ideas of “slacktivism,” a phenomenon where netizens’ subversive actions remain online and do not translate into real-life action such as protests and petitions. Many other scholars seemed to push for the consensus that increased deliberation meant a stronger push towards democracy, but I propose that online deliberation has intrinsic value, in that it expands the scope of public discourse. Through reinforcing community solidarity and creating a common language with which sociopolitical issues can be discussed, online discussions become a conspicuous form of political action that can have a long-lasting impact on China’s political fate.

I also wanted to probe the “gray” areas of indifference that have yet to be regulated because they do not currently pose a direct challenge to the party. Instead of looking at directly subversive discussions, which were, at any rate, generally censored out of microblogs and forums shortly after they were posted, I looked towards the more ambiguous field of rightful resistance based upon appeals to the law, generally to higher levels of the central government. This activism is rooted in the local-central divide in the governance of China, where local governments are most often blamed for the failure of policy, as they are the ones directly applying or interpreting laws. Thus, the central government is more amenable to challenges to the local government. I noticed through my case studies that citizens unseated or discredited local officials, and the central government responded to public unrest by removing these officials

---

from their posts.

Yet I could not fully agree with this simplified relationship. Online discourse allows for the reinforcement of certain pre-existing norms in Chinese political life, such as the scapegoating of lower-level bureaucrats and the deification of the central Party leaders, but it also permits individuals to create more diverse interpretations of current events. Rather than the black-and-white view of the People’s Republic of China as either a repressed and stultified sociopolitical community or a pressure cooker of political tensions, I sought a balance between conflict and compromise. I chose to approach the Internet as an instrument for the redefinition of the Chinese sociopolitical narrative, a virtual community of mutual correction, discipline and norm creation where citizens and officials can interact in a slightly more spontaneous, unrestricted manner.

I chose Wenzhou and Wukan as my case studies because they were the two most significant events in the Chinese news in the past nine months. They have a few key similarities: both were intensely censored out of traditional news media when they first began, both are indicative of systemic problems that have existed for the past two decades in China, and both relied heavily on citizen journalism to draw government attention to their cause. Both also resulted in the removal of local officials from office, with locals still voicing their belief in the central government and their loyalty to the CCP.

My evidence was largely drawn from micro-blogs and both Chinese and international news sources. I paid some attention to quantitative data from surveys on
news and micro-blog websites, but the actual numbers are less valuable to me than the nature of the comments attached to the votes. My best resource for primary sources was Sina Weibo, which is the oldest and most popular micro-blogging platform in China, known for having an intense “hits are king” approach in trying to maintain as many hot button topics as legally permissible in order to maintain high levels of user interest and blogger traffic.

I also used external China-affairs websites such as China Digital Times and China Media Project to get quick summary data on trends in current events in China. As with many forays into the exploration of a political sphere, my research method for my case studies on microblogs consisted of “learning to swim by actually swimming.”36 I created a microblog account and immersed myself in the chatter, hoping to find trends that pointed towards specific hot button topics that were ripe for analysis. I focused initially on microblogs due to the speed and ease of writing and publishing the short posts, which were limited to less than 200 characters, excluding screenshots. As time went by and I became more familiar with the microblogging portal, I branched out to other news outlets through following the hyperlinks and screenshots posted by the microbloggers.

My goal for this thesis is to explore the creation and development of the connected, active citizen in the age of Internet-mediated discourse. I explore how individuals maneuver around the restrictions that they encounter in their political systems and reach a greater level of understanding and compromise with their

36 Zhou, *Historicizing Online Politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China*, 149.
government. I present netizens not as purely revolutionary individuals, and the
government not as purely reactionary. Instead, I aim for a more balanced reframing of
the Chinese political narrative with recent developments in Internet communications
technology at the forefront.
The Rules of Law in China: A Spectrum of Legality

In this chapter, I define social engagement in Chinese society and examine how individuals in China have historically engaged with the law. In the first part, I describe various Chinese theories of citizenship, state, political participation, and agency. In the second part, I grapple with the concept of rightful resistance, a method of resistance by which dissenting citizens struggle to change their political system using ideals from its legal code. I analyze methods of rightful resistance and define the boundaries between legal and illegal forms of online resistance. Through this, I hope to refute the assumption that resistance in China is always radical and illegal, and argue that with some provisions, resistance can be a productive part of a harmonious political order.

WHAT IS A CHINESE CITIZEN?

When approaching China’s legal system, we must keep in mind that legal theory is linked to practice, and that the enforcement of law is highly interactive. Citizenship and political engagement in China applied over layers of historical precedent for political bargaining through incredibly diverse styles of government, from the imperial dynasties to the Republican government, from Maoist Communism to today’s free-market socialism.37 As Tianjian Shi remarks in Political Participation in Beijing, China’s political system is not a machine, but a complex, multi-layered organism.38 While President Hu Jintao declared in 2008 that China would become the

---


world’s example of the scientific development of a harmonious society, different sectors of society are conspicuously articulating their diverse visions as to what this development should entail.\textsuperscript{39} The subjectivity of this goal provides an interesting canvas for a system of social and political engagement, with many loopholes and gray areas for officials and citizens to negotiate.

\textit{Political Engagement}

When Tianjian Shi was studying political participation in Beijing, a poll on the role of bureaucrats revealed that 39.9\% of Chinese respondents believed that “bureaucrats should ignore government policy when necessary.”\textsuperscript{40} It is interesting that a significant portion of the population believes in the negotiability of law, and the viability of political bargaining.

In order to understand social engagement, we must dissect three of its components: the nature of participation that makes up social engagement, the definition of citizenship, and the role of citizenship and participation in creating a sense of agency and political efficacy for citizens. I recognize that political participation encompasses both resistance and compliance. Further, I also acknowledge that resistance is spread over a continuum of legality including permissible activity, legally ambiguous righteous resistance and illegal actions, all of which are expressed through citizen activism. As I will explain much of this thesis is


\textsuperscript{40} Tianjian Shi, \textit{Political Participation in Beijing}, 26. Table 1.2: People’s attitudes toward modifying rules by government officials. Out of a sample of 757 Beijing residents over the age of 18 between December 1988 and January 1989, 34.2 percent stated that they believed leaders should comply with regulations, 39.9 percent said that leaders should modify regulations, 24.6 answered “don’t know,” 1.3 percent declined to answer.
centered on legally ambiguous forms of online resistance, where an action has not yet been outlawed, but is also not an officially sanctioned avenue of participation.

Citizenship is the combination of agency and social ties, existing in the intersection between the private moral identity and the public role as a politically engaged citizen. This combination of private morality and political affiliations is expressed through informal methods such as blogging and formal methods such as voting.

When co-nationals participate in the political sphere, they develop a sense of agency and identity as members of the national community. I hypothesize that over the course of Chinese nation-building, Chinese nationals have developed three forms of identity: a private identity, a relational identity defining how they interact with other individuals both in China and abroad, and a public identity as a Chinese national, with the rights and responsibilities to their country that this identity entails. Individual citizens’ engagement with their state is defined by the negotiation of the practical terms of these rights and responsibilities. In this chapter, I explore different definitions and theories of citizenship, and engage with the definitions and limits of rightful resistance in order to flesh out what it means to be a good citizen while still engaging in forms of dissent against injustice. I examine forms of creative resistance and reflect on the social ties fostered by individuals interacting in communities of resistance, and the potential for empowerment that stems from such movements.
The traditional definition of citizenship is based on a “substantive normative ideal of membership and participation in a political community.” More concretely, citizenship is a legal, political and moral status bound to an individual’s belonging to a political community whose sociopolitical works he or she can affect. The right to citizenship is not in the same category of rights as the human rights to food, shelter and safety. While citizenship includes the right of individuals to gain access to their needs by demanding that their government acts as an advocate for their needs, citizens’ rights are not the same thing as human rights. Thus, it is entirely conceivable that a stateless human being can have human rights without being a citizen.

I will avoid the conflation of citizenship with democracy. Citizenship is a necessary condition for democracy, but a non-democracy can still be composed of citizens. In short, citizens are individuals who engage their political systems in ways that exhibit their individual beliefs regarding their appropriate role in their countries.

**FORMS OF STATE-INDIVIDUAL RELATIONSHIPS**

I propose that there are three general configurations of state-individual relationships in China. Though the terms *gongmin* (public people), *guomin* (national people), and *renmin* (people’s people) are historically loaded due to their use in official rhetoric, I borrow these terms in order to distinguish these categories of identity from the English terms “subject”, “national,” and “citizen,” respectively. By

---


43 Ibid., 160.
using the Chinese terms, I attempt to establish the distinctively China-centered nature of these categories. Keeping in mind that not all individuals in China enjoy the same type of relationship to the state at any given time, we will now delve into the definitions of these levels.

_Gongmin_

In Imperial China, Confucian ideals provided some counterbalance to monarchical authoritarianism. Confucian social relations created tight, albeit hierarchical relationships of mutual obligation between superiors and their inferiors. In the political realm, this relationship played out between the imperial rulers and the subjects, with intellectuals as the interlocutors.\(^{44}\) Political intellectuals throughout China’s history played the role of _gongmin_, the public national. Intellectuals in Imperial China balanced their loyalty to the imperial dynasties with their responsibility to represent the interests of the _laobaixing_ (common people, literally “old hundred surnames”) and to effect social change to ensure social stability. However, these intellectuals were occasionally punished with death or exile. In those cases, they were exalted posthumously as national martyrs. Holidays such as the Dragon Boat Festival are still celebrated today in honor of intellectuals like Qu Yuan, who sacrificed their lives defending their moral principles and the interests of their country.

---

The officially sanctioned role of intellectuals fostered public dialog, at least among a selected elite. These intellectuals were expected to be selfless and impartial parties in political life. Intellectuals thus had the freedom, within certain limits, to serve as whistleblowers, pointing out and preventing corruption in the government of China, and also as interpreters of the law for the people. Thus rulers, including Mao at certain times during his rule, embraced dissenting individuals as purifying elements of the state apparatus.

Prior to the age of mass media, only intellectuals had the duty of yanshuo, or public speech. Through these public performances of political rhetoric, intellectuals changed or reinforced public opinion, according to social necessity. These performances also had the power to incite strong public responses due to their wide audience. The oral transmission of political fact and opinion made politics accessible to even the illiterate. However, there was a significant barrier between the producers of information and the consumers of information. The producers were the intellectuals, and the consumers were the illiterate, lower classes, not necessarily poorer but not well connected politically. Even when rhetoric dealt with the rights of

45 Ibid., 162.
46 Ibid., 166. In Chinese, the intellectuals were exhorted to yi tianxia wei ziren, meaning to “treat everyone under heaven as one’s own kin”
47 David Strand, “Citizens in the Audience and at the Podium,” Changing Meanings of Citizenship in Modern China, eds. Merle Goldman and Elizabeth J. Perry (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002): 49. Strand cites a story in Li Boyuan’s turn-of-the-century novel, Wenming xiaoshi (A Short History of Civilization) as an example of literati speech making that blends roles of rebel and defender of communal values. The novel is about officials conspiring to sell land to foreigners and exterminate the commoners, and the protagonist Huang spontaneously speaks out and inspires his community to action.
48 Ibid., 46
49 Tang, Public Opinion and Political Change in China, 91.
marginalized classes, the marginalized classes did not have a formal arena in which they could represent themselves.⁵⁰

*Guomin*

The next form of state-individual relationship is what I will define as that of the *guomin*, or the “national people”. *Guomin* have no privileges apart from the nation, but are bound by an extensive set of duties and obligations to the nation. During the late Qing and early Republican era, appeals to nationalistic sentiment were used in anti-footbinding, anti-opium, and anti-imperialism movements in order to mobilize against foreign threats.⁵¹ However, the issue with this relationship between the state and the individual was that it created a false sense of unanimity. *Guomin* were obliged to serve the interests of the nation as defined by the incumbent rulers. Noncompliant *guomin* were labeled as enemies of China.

The issue of equality was also prevalent. The problem with having an imagined uniform collective in times of national crisis meant that any attempt at individuation was suppressed and seen as self-centered. There was assumed equality, but no dialogue regarding how that equality allowed for the inclusion of marginalized groups, creating a group of second-class nationals that had theoretical rights, but little opportunity to negotiate the practical implications of these rights. Under the rhetoric of nationalism and movements towards democratic representation, a barrage of

---


⁵¹ Strand, “Citizens in the Audience and at the Podium,” 53.
nationalistic rhetoric from populist orators distracted rulers and activists from grassroots movements towards practical socioeconomic justice and subaltern rights.52

An population who had this particular problem were the illiterate, who still lacked access to the scholarly framework for acceptable dissent. Speaking at public forums and rallies was a privilege reserved for the bourgeois elite intelligentsia, mostly men who had the benefit of education.53 These elites imposed their vision of the nation’s future upon China, glorifying modernity, rationality, and advancement but nonetheless reinforcing a class vision rooted in traditional hierarchies, community obligation and noblesse oblige.

Renmin

The underrepresented subaltern groups were ripe candidates for the Maoist revolution, where mass literacy was combined with the preexisting tradition of public speech-making, and the subaltern groups were allowed to speak for themselves. Individuals began to refer to themselves and each other as tongzhi, commonly translated as “comrade,” but literally, “companion in aspiration,” rather than gong min. This idea of co-aspiration demonstrated a compliance of wills and a strong unanimity, and for the first time, individuals were able to formally report and denounce their feudal leaders to the central government as class enemies. The state became an instrument through which all individuals could act. Though Communist


53 Ibid., 95.
authoritarianism eventually threw China into a tailspin of repression and famine, it was a turning point in the history of principled insubordination in China.\textsuperscript{54}

After Mao’s death, movements such as the Democracy Wall movement, the Tiananmen incident and numerous other protests began to express citizens’ demands for practical human, civil and political rights, with an emphasis on the inalienability of these rights. The privileges of citizens were no longer governed and enforced by the state, but were rights that citizens were able to negotiate and for which they would fight.\textsuperscript{55} Individuals had the power of directly influencing the state apparatus through their political mobilization.\textsuperscript{56} Common people became literate, and were encouraged to make their voices heard in the public sphere.

Through this process, they became what I refer to as renmin, the active citizen that sees their role in the nation as less of a passive belonging and more of an active shaping of their polity. Though this term was used in the Maoist era in the slogan, “\textit{wei renmin fuwu}” (to serve the people), renmin was truly appropriated by the masses in the post-Maoist era. The Cultural Revolution had created a generation aware of the danger of unquestioning obedience, a mix of semi-educated elites and intellectuals denied political positions and instead relegated to menial occupations in the


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 166.
This potent mixture of anger, power, and education enabled Deng Xiaoping to unseat the Maoists and bring forth China’s rapid movement towards state-owned capitalism, but also triggered a subtler movement towards increased political participation.58 While cities were populated by more educated citizens with better direct access to Party officials through a dense political network, the countryside provincial governments often featured less opaque networks of political power that exiled intellectuals could influence to create grassroots change.59 The lines between ruling and being ruled became less clear as the People’s Republic of China was seen as the public property of all Chinese citizens.

After Deng Xiaoping’s ascent to power, a backlash against the vigorous activism of the Maoist era resulted in the withdrawal of Mao’s “Big Four Freedoms” of public expression. Despite the withdrawal of their rights of expression, the Pandora’s box of active citizenship had nevertheless been opened. Citizens began to protest, both legally and illegally, for laws on state compensation for seized property, a minimum wage, migrant worker’s rights, and food safety regulation.60 As China modernized rapidly, foreign media exposure and interest in the country blossomed. In

---

57 Ibid., 168. Though individuals of poor political backgrounds (ex-government officials, landlords and other pre-Liberation elite) and their offspring were able to get a university education, they were denied party positions and forced to take on lower-status occupations due to their history.

58 Ibid., 168. Democracy Wall activism was a theme of contention in the leadership power struggle, as Deng Xiaoping tried to draw populist support away from Maoist ideology and towards his reform movement.


the Special Economic Zones, legal restrictions were loosened to attract new foreign investors and send a message that China was keeping up with the rest of the world both politically and economically.61

**Official Avenues of Participation**

Before exploring forms of resistance outside of official avenues of resistance, I investigated the ways in which individuals participate in the formation of the network of government and legal decision-making in China through elections and petitioning. It is important to understand these before addressing why and how individuals may choose to operate outside of this system. Due to the lack of bureaucratic unity between different local levels of government and the central government, individuals are able to find and exploit *maodun* (矛盾), rifts and contradictions between the different levels of government.

*Elections*

In order to understand the link between local bureaucrats and individual citizens, we must discard the idea of China as an absolute dictatorship. There are multiple types of elections in China, from leadership elections for local village leaders and work unit leaders to the election of deputies to local people’s congresses and party representatives. The 1979 election law created regulations for a secret ballot, more candidates per precinct, and county-level voting. Though nominations are not open, with the CCP determining which candidates are eligible for participation

---

61 Ibid., 304-305. Yu cites the disparities between foreign and local workers’ minimum wage in China’s Special Economic Zones as an example of a lack of effective government regulation in the area, as well as the vast dependence on relational networks for basic privileges such as residence permits, healthcare and education. Urban workers, once the rulers of the Maoist China as part of the dictatorship of the proletariat, were humiliated by becoming Deng’s surplus army of labor.
in the election, the regulatory purpose of the election makes it a viable outlet for political action.

Though work unit leaders can coerce their employees into voting for certain favored candidates who provide them with political favors, losing an election sends clear signals to the central government that a cadre is incompetent and incapable of controlling his or her constituency. Leadership elections for work units and village leadership work in much the same way, and this is further complicated by the fact that managers cannot fire their subordinates in state owned enterprises (SOEs). Therefore, an unpopular leader is easily revealed either through voting practices or work slowdowns.

With the privatization of the Chinese economy, however, these kinds of actions are becoming less prevalent. Yet, SOE workers still have a powerful outlet for protest, as their managers depend on their loyalty to maintain their often tenuous professional positions. Therefore, they have a great deal of leverage in terms of how strictly certain laws are applied in the workplace, and can also utilize their relationship with their managers to gain favors in other parts of their lives. Work unit leaders thus have split loyalties, with obligations to their workers as well as higher levels of government. These cadres must therefore cement their political standing by negotiating between the orders of higher levels of government and the social realities of their work groups or villages. These interests can sometimes come into conflict.

---


63 Ibid., 41.

64 Ibid., 57.
The central authorities use such voting activities to keep tabs on the activities of local cadres and socialize the public into ritualized political ceremonies. Voters also use these elections as leverage to ensure that the cadres keep their interests in mind when enforcing day-to-day governmental policies.\textsuperscript{65}

\textit{Petitions}

Citizens can also directly petition higher officials to have cases of unjust action reviewed. When petitioned, the standing committee can decide to issue a "supervision letter" (\textit{jiandu han}) that mandates court action in an open trial.\textsuperscript{66} However, petitioning is viewed by citizens as a form of communication, not necessarily an effective or efficient method of conflict resolution, and citizens’ perception of political efficacy through this avenue is relatively low, as they do not have consistent personal contact with these representatives.\textsuperscript{67}

Though citizens tend to look to their inner circles of influence to initiate political change, when work unit leaders and village leaders prove unresponsive, petitions can be lodged directly to higher-ranking officials through the \textit{guowuyuan xinfangju} (国务院信访局), the Office of Letters and Visits.\textsuperscript{68} To resort to this method of problem solving indicates a deep failure on the part of the cadre in charge of the petitioners, and these cadres are often removed from their posts. However, as with most bureaucratic outlets, this method is relatively inefficient, and there is a fair

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 36.

\textsuperscript{66} Jimin Lian, "Min gao guan renda jiandu zuo houdun" (People's Congress Supervision Supports Ordinary People Suing Officials), \textit{Minzhu yu fazhi (Democracy and Rule of Law)}, no. 7 (6 April 2000): 29.

\textsuperscript{67} Shi, \textit{Political Participation in Beijing}, 59.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 61.
amount of “ball-kicking” or *ti piqiu* (踢皮球) where a complaint can be transferred from office to office for what can be years until an official chooses to take note of it out of political expedience or personal connection to the petitioners.69

In the last few years, officials in localities have used the 1995 Regulation on Letters and Visits to prohibit such collective complaints to higher officials. In Dangshan County, Anhui Province, for instance, local cadres announced that "it is illegal to send more than five people to lodge a complaint" and "it is illegal to instigate the masses to lodge a complaint."70 However, villagers referred to a legal magazine, which stated that the 1995 regulations prescribed procedures for collective complaints, but did not rule against mass parties. Local officials in Henan also announced to their villagers that bypassing levels when lodging complaints was a crime, but when villagers sought clarification from their State Council's Bureau of Letters and Visits, their local cadres were forced to retract the message.71 This skipping of levels, or *yueji* (越级) is a highly effective way to lodge complaints.72 Given the right series of connections, petitions can be taken up to the central party level in Beijing; however, many local cadres try to either compromise with the petitioners before they resort to this action.

69 Ibid., 62.


Administrative Procedure Law

In response to upheavals following Deng Xiaoping’s opening-up policy, created by government corruption and land misappropriation with increased economic privatization, the Administrative Procedure Law was adopted on April 4, 1989. The law was drafted “for the purposes of safeguarding correct and timely trial of administrative cases, protecting the lawful rights and interests of citizens, legal persons and other organizations and ensuring and supervising the exercise of administrative power by administrative organs according to law.” It was intended to create official avenues for legal recourse, in order to cut back on public incidents and protests. After the Tiananmen mass incident on June 4th, 1989, the law was officially put into effect in October 1990, and hailed as a "milestone of democratic and legal construction". Many cadres claim that the legal education initiative that began in the 1980s (pu fa) is making individuals “too smart” and difficult to handle. However, litigation was seen as expensive, and only 9% of 1368 rural respondents from Fujian, Jiangsu, and Jiangxi surveyed between 1999 and 2001 said that they would consider filing administrative lawsuits against township government. The direct personal relationships that citizens enjoy with their local cadres make it difficult to lodge


74 Ibid.


76 Lumin Chen, "Dou shi pufa re de huo" (The Disaster is All Due to the Legal Education Drive), Minzhu yu fazhi (Democracy and Rule of Law), no. 11 (6 June 2001): 31-32.

77 O'Brien and Li, “Suing the Local State: Administrative Litigation in Rural China,” 76.
official complaints, as complainants risk retaliation or uncertain enforcement of the final court decision.\textsuperscript{78} Individuals can sometimes be detained, coerced, bribed or otherwise induced to drop a lawsuit after a case has been filed.\textsuperscript{79} For this reason, litigation is often seen as a last resort.

The legal power of the Administrative Procedure Law (APL) is limited. Individuals are only allowed sue for specific misdeeds and not the actual regulations and decisions that they deem to be unjust, and the Party Secretary cannot be subject to administrative litigation.\textsuperscript{80} To avoid legal trouble, local cadres often have the Party Secretary officially perform potentially controversial actions, such as land expropriations.\textsuperscript{81} Though there is room for maneuver on the part of citizens, there is also a significant amount of flexibility for the local government to be as soft or hard as they need to be.

Cadres can also refuse to appear at their court sessions. According to legal researcher Yang Haikun, "It is not rare for administrative departments to refuse to show up in court, refuse to answer questions, refuse to pay litigation fees, and reject court rulings."\textsuperscript{82} In this case, higher courts are more likely to be effective, as the officials are less likely to flout the orders of their superiors, and the effects of local


\textsuperscript{79} O'Brien and Li, "Suing the Local State: Administrative Litigation in Rural China," 83.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 80.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 80.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 80.
protectionism are less pronounced at higher provincial or central levels. In addition, Party Committees can also issue internal orders forbidding sensitive suits regarding financial issues, enterprise autonomy, unlawful birth control, land expropriation and illegal demolition. In Fan Jinxue’s discussion on the rule of law in China, Fan remarks that it is deemed "inappropriate for the court to offend administrative departments." Thus, China’s legal system has a long way to go before it becomes an independent court. Should judges rule against the Party officials, there could be informal inquiries about the case. Prosecuted officials commonly negotiate with and bribe judges with whom they have a personal connection in order to settle the case in their favor out of the formal courts of law.

Though APL is a frustrating process with uncertain results, it provides officials with a significant incentive to pay attention to their legal behavior. A survey in Jiangsu showed that 73% of officials felt that APL had led them to be more attentive to their duties and had increased their awareness of rule by law. The practice and possibility of APL has also empowered villagers, and subverted the idea that law existed solely to punish the common people. APL introduces the idea that citizens can

83 Ibid, 80. O’Brien and Li cite Pei, "Citizens v. Mandarins" (p. 847) where Pei argues: "Given the higher professional qualifications of judges and legal staff in the appellate courts and their relative insulation from local government agencies involved in the lawsuits, it is reasonable to assume that Chinese appellate courts exercise a higher level of impartiality and autonomy in judicial review”.

84 Ibid., 81.

85 Jinxue Fan, "Lun falii xinyang weiji yu Zhongguo fazhihu" (On the Crisis of Faith in Law and China's Effort to Build the Rule of Law), Shandong shehui kexue (Shandong Social Sciences), no. 6 (November 1997), p. 49.

86 O’Brien and Li, “Suing the Local State: Administrative Litigation in Rural China,” 84.

appeal to the law to protect themselves against corrupt officials. Rather than being merely subject to the law, citizens gain a sense of political efficacy through recourse to the law.

**RIGHTFUL RESISTANCE**

Patrick Deneen’s essay on turning an active society into a good society suggests that “good” forms of active citizenship involve “high levels of activity, aimed at articulating and securing the common good of society, cultivated and extensively undertaken.” The expected result of such activism is that of an intensified consciousness of one’s rights as a citizen, and a cognitive liberation from passively accepting the normative codes of lawfulness. Active citizens are not necessarily law-abiding, though they can be. Rather, they seek to transform understandings, commitments, and affiliations defined by their country’s legal code in pursuit of a society that is more consistent with their world-view.

As O’Brien and Li define it in their study of resistance in rural China, rightful resistance occurs when citizens “forgo violence and criminal behavior” and instead go through legally ambiguous channels, appealing to their government’s formalized

---

88 Changqi Li, "Nongcun fazhi jianshe ruogan jiben de sikao," (Reflections on some Basic Questions Regarding Building Rule of Law in the Countryside), *Xiandai faxue (Modern Legal Studies)*, 23, no. 2 (April 2001): 34.


policies and its legitimizing myths to justify their activism against the actions of local officials.91

The foundation of rightful resistance is the idea that all power is uneven and entropic, tending towards disorder. Paradoxically, with every small measure of control and repression that the state attempts to exert over its citizen-subjects, the cost of maintaining order becomes higher. The more artificial order a state exerts over its citizens and territories, the more costly it is to maintain the state – not only economically but also in terms of required social, political, and moral capital. In order to remain sustainable, a state must consist of citizens who are to some degree capable of self-rule and self-control. Citizens thus have a duty to forge a balance between their duties to the state and the freedoms they desire.92 Without the state, there can be no citizens, and to maintain the political integrity of a state, citizens must be able to maintain a degree of legality in their activism instead of departing entirely from the system and devolving towards anarchy or outright rebellion.

**Discourse and Effective Resistance**

A prerequisite to creating such a symbiotic relationship with the state is that of citizens bearing witness to contentious political discourse and successful examples of rightful resistance. These conversations alert them to the resources available that enable citizens to ensure that the state delivers on its obligations.93 The success of some of these contentions through available state institutions such as litigation and

---


petition is also crucial, so that citizens understand that they can still work within the state apparatus to alter the behavior of state officials. Thus, a state that is able to withstand the trials of rightful resistance cannot consistently frustrate the appeals of its citizens.\footnote{Ibid., 19.} Citizens engaging in rightful resistance must expect to win their cause through law-abiding means, sometimes taking advantage of weaknesses and loopholes in legal codes, but never engaging in outright defiance to rule.

Deneen’s citizenship empowerment model, where citizens coordinate formal and informal resources to subject unaccountable power to critical public scrutiny and thus intensify the mediating gaze of the public upon authority figures, is a powerful way in which the masses can actively engage authorities without being outwardly disruptive.\footnote{David S. Gutterman and Melissa Buis Michaux, “Searching for Active Citizenship,” \textit{The Active Society Revisited}, ed. Wilson Carey McWilliams (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006): 236.} Citizens become agents of accountability and reason, and not of rebellion.

\textit{Threats to Resistance}

Inimical to the reasonable demands of rightful resistance are both conservatism and disillusionment with the state. The conservative form of thought, that “the people” have a “congenital inadequacy to defend themselves and their interests” and therefore need a benevolent state to determine and define their needs, is a highly unstable system.\footnote{Antonio David Cattani, “Worlds of Emancipation,” \textit{The Human Economy}, ed. Keith Hart, Jean-Louis Laville and Antonio David Cattani, (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010): 351.} So too are movements of “official nationalism”, where classes threatened from exclusion create an official rhetoric of rights while at the
same time alienating the majority of citizens.97 The hexie (和谐) “harmonization” initiative in China before, during, and after the 2008 Olympics is one such example, where harmony was code for the repression of unfavorable public opinion in an attempt to co-opt Chinese citizens to the bureaucratic mission of maintaining a façade of order in the state.98 Also antagonistic to rightful resistance are a people so frustrated with their social and political environment that they lose all hope in the system and turn to anarchy. These two scenarios of excessive conservatism and extreme radicalism are really two sides of the same coin – too much of one will almost inevitably lead to the other.

Finding Allies in Resistance

If resisters have a reasonably high expectation of success and certainty that their actions are legally justified, rightful resisters have the incentive to generate immense publicity for their actions. They are deliberately conspicuous and confrontational, believing that their demands are legitimate, lawful and need only be articulated for the government to respond.99 Often, these protests are the most difficult for elites to crush, as they are embedded in a language of loyalty to the state and conformity to norms that elites themselves use to maintain order among the

---

97 Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York, NY: Verso, 2006): 99, 224. Anderson outlines the process through which citizens create their own popular memory and rhetoric if official rhetoric and language is co-opted by the government and begins to alienate citizens and prevent them from advocating for their rights. This section was censored out of the first printing of this book in China.


masses.\textsuperscript{100} One such appeal is that of property rights, where individuals protest the demolition of houses without adequate compensation.

Through appeals within the system, rightful resisters gain access to a broader menu of available resources and allies, strengthening their bargaining position within the constraints of their legal environment.\textsuperscript{101} Rather than taking for granted that governmental rhetoric is consistent with governmental action, they look critically at the gaps between authoritative pronouncements such as party documents, their Constitution, state council regulations, Central Party propaganda or official speeches and their physical reality.\textsuperscript{102} They appeal to the higher authorities to unseat unqualified and unresponsive local rulers, while at the same time affirming the accuracy of their interpretation of the law.

Resistence and Compromise

Rightful resistance is a challenge to the vision of a zero-sum game between society and state, where society must be weak for the state to be strong, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{103} Rather, it shows that the stability and strength of a state is dependent on the strength of social bonds and the civic responsibility of the citizens that constitute the state. There are no neat antagonistic relationships; rather, the interactions between citizens and their state are a subtle interplay of power, a blend of popular and official

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{101} Cattani, “Worlds of Emancipation,” 352.
\textsuperscript{102} O’Brien and Li, Rightful Resistance in Rural China, 6.
\end{footnotesize}
discourses to create a genuine national enthusiasm.\(^{104}\) This is a result of a realistic approach to bargaining, where strong citizens agree to be compliant as long as their officials deliver on their promises, and strengthen standards of legitimacy through their own mechanisms of maintaining state accountability.

**NEGOTIATING EXPECTATIONS, BOUNDARIES AND ACCEPTABLE FORMS OF DISSENT**

The balance between reasonable expectations for one’s government, given pre-existing legal codes, and the drive towards greater social and political justice creates a healthy tension that enables citizens to experience fully their own political efficacy. Legal codes in China since the Qing Dynasty have always theoretically permitted citizens to press claims against corrupt local power holders.\(^{105}\) Whether or not these measures were effective is another question, but the key point of this chapter is that not all resistance needs to be antagonistic to the law to be effective. Rather, active citizenship and resistance brings the theory of official rhetoric into practice in the lives of citizens. The next chapter addresses the Internet in particular serves as a discursive forum for conversations about governmental accountability.

---


Media and the Internet: Regulations and Loopholes

In this chapter I explore the role of the media in social activism in China, and how cyberspace as a medium of expression offers new opportunities for public action, increasing the overall sense of sociopolitical efficacy of netizens in China. By describing the ecology of the Chinese Internet and the changes in the rules governing it, I seek to present a rudimentary guide to the ways that netizens find and exploit loopholes in this new and relatively egalitarian space. First, I shall outline the evolution and use of media in general political life in order to give a picture of the significance of mass media in today’s political world. Next, I describe a picture of the peculiarities of China’s online community and the opportunities and obstacles this creates for netizens.

The Use of Media Publicity in Activism

When litigation or petition fail, resisters turn to media outlets in order to gain popular, non-governmental support for their cause. Due to its key role in communication and entertainment, popular media is a much more dynamic channel for resistance than formal political action. Newspapers, radio broadcasts, television programs, and Internet content are all environments in which new ideas can be experimented with to test public reactions, without the costs of going through “official” litigation in an attempt to change the law or impeach authorities. The presence of these outlets as a sort of ideological laboratory makes them flexible and accessible to almost all individuals who are able to communicate through language. In his analysis of the significance of print and popular media, Anderson writes that
the novel and newspaper are technical means for “re-presenting” the kind of imagined community that is the nation.\textsuperscript{106} This “re-presentation” means that there can be multiple voices and multiple viewpoints without one having to prove itself superior to another.

**MEDIA EFFICACY IN CHINA**

China’s entry into the WTO in 2001 vastly improved Chinese media outlets, as it forced open China’s strict media import rules and put state-sponsored media in competition with international news sources.\textsuperscript{107} Chinese readers began to abandon domestic news sources in favor of international news, as they deemed international news to be more interesting, more objective and more accurate. The low sense of media efficacy (11% said that they would express opinions or complaints through media) in 1999 also expressed the disillusionment with Chinese public media as an effective outlet of expression.\textsuperscript{108} As foreign news sources entered the country, market competition began to create a disincentive for overt censorship of controversial topics that attracted more readers, and censorship became both subtler and more active. Instead of simply erasing or refusing to report news, the official CCP national paper, *People’s Daily*, was often forced to reword news on popular topics in order to cast the government in a more positive light.

However, as private newspapers in China began to become more established, peak readership began to drop off and *People’s Daily* lost its monopoly on public

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{107} Tang, *Public Opinion and Political Change in China*, 86.
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 89.
\end{flushleft}
opinion in China. Private newspapers covered popular legal issues of corruption, lawsuits, and public health issues to expand their appeal to Chinese readers eager to access critiques of governmental action, and *People’s Daily* had to follow suit or risk losing its domestic market share.

The central government was also required to allow 49% foreign ownership of its telecommunications and Internet-related businesses, and according to the WTO agreement, this share had to increase to 50% by 2003.\(^{109}\) Due to the highly privatized nature of this sector, the central government permitted Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to self-regulate in cooperation with the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) and State Council Information Office (SCIO) in regulating the information disseminated online.\(^{110}\)

**“ME-MEDIA”**

In his writings on what constitutes an active society, Patrick Deneen states that the Internet is a sort of “semiotic democracy”, in which all individuals, not just political actors or communications experts, actively produce popular culture.\(^{111}\) The Internet is a form of semi-professional cultural production and cheap “mass self-communication,” and allows for a two-way relationship between the individual connected to the Internet and his or her community. The individual both produces and

---


consumes the culture to which he or she belongs, thereby gaining ownership through their engagement with their customizable “me-media”.

**Online Discourse**

The ideological laboratory of the Internet community allows for individuals to develop a sense of intersubjectivity. The Internet is an arena where policy questions and other moral questions regarding the future of a polity can be discussed informally.\(^\text{112}\) Personal opinions are exposed to the judgment of a broad public consisting of many diverse interests, and individuals receive almost instantaneous feedback and censure on their blog posts, microblogs, comments on news articles, and other forms of self-publishing that allow for their ideas to evolve in response to their social realities.

Public spaces such as the Internet, beyond being a place of self-expression, become “loci of self-government, moral training, reconciliation of the many and the one, intermediate area between state and economy, where humans are not reducible as voters or consumers.”\(^\text{113}\) Internet media is a form of collaborative appropriation of national realities, with unpredictable results.\(^\text{114}\) As the powerful interact with the relatively powerless through the medium of the Internet, both parties negotiate a contractual, relational approach to political life that is more amenable to forms of rightful resistance.\(^\text{115}\) Authority is no longer unilateral, and resistance is no longer

\(^{112}\) Deneen, “From the Active Society to the Good Society: The Second Sailing of Amitai Etzioni,” 231.

\(^{113}\) Stalder, “Digital Commons,” 321.


purely antagonistic. Rather, each individual is a node in an endless network of communication and information sharing. There is a constant re-narration of the power structures of the state.

Moreover, the availability of the Internet as a release valve for pent-up political frustrations and pressures serves as a cathartic outlet for discontent before frustrations grow to catastrophic levels. This neutral space for communication allows for productive contentious conversations that make compromise and non-radical reform possible. On the other hand, the spontaneity of online discourse also means that the airing of radical and destructive opinions is possible, and this will be explored in more depth later in this chapter. The Internet thus allows for a wider spectrum of public opinion to be expressed within the netizen community.

*Communication between Resistance Movements*

The emergence of the new public space of the Internet has created new paradigms for production and dissemination of knowledge and opinion. These paradigms are based on broader rights to access, distribute, and transform publicly available information through expanding access to technology, knowledge and opinion to a broader audience. By decreasing the cost of mass self-communication for Internet users, the Internet allows netizens take advantage of microblogs, forums and other online portals and express and discuss their critiques of social and political realities more sincerely, and to a broader audience.

---

While grassroots protests allow for maximum citizen engagement and locally appropriate solutions to social issues, communities worldwide sometimes struggle with the same issues and solve problems in the similar ways. Online information sharing allows resistance movements to more readily adopt effective elements from other movements instead of having to develop their own. Without information sharing, movements expend their limited time and resources trying to come up with strategies that another protest movement may have already invented. Through information sharing on the Internet regarding methods of dissent, advocacy leaders and activists have the freedom to sift through a great volume of information, selecting methods that are relevant and discarding those that are not, at a very low cost. Protest is thus made more effective, and resisters can continue to innovate upon their knowledge base by adding whatever new information they have discovered to the digital commons.

**Online Narratives and Community Building**

Online communication also allows individuals to collaborate within the state, despite their lack of official political power. Individuals and groups share narratives of conflict, compromise, and cooperation with the state. Netizens can observe and experience commonalities such as personal beliefs and world-views, moral values, common interests, national and ethnic heritage, and shared experiences of power and oppression.

---


Such communication can create a sense of trust, of awareness of one another and of unity, in which the netizen has “no idea of what [fellow netizens] are up to at any one time, but he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity.”\textsuperscript{119} This sense of confidence and continuous flow of information builds trust that allows for a transition from “thin” trust, characterized by obligatory ties of reciprocity between strangers, to “thick” trust, a trust based on social relations that arise out of interactions made possible by the aforementioned norms.\textsuperscript{120} This creates a virtual community of concrete relationships in the place of the abstract awareness that defines the thin trust of a common national identity without direct communication between co-nationals. Without this ability to connect, appeals for civil, political, social and economic rights remain abstract and centered on the individual and his or her narrow community. With these relationships, these appeals take on the nature of collective rights, unifying individuals in broad coalitions so that they can personally and emotionally identify with other proponents of the same cause on a level that can be characterized as a sort of imagined kinship, not just general self-interested association.

\textbf{The Chinese Internet}

When China first introduced the Internet in 1986, the CCP leadership was aware that it would allow for a vast number of gaps and loopholes in information regulation and therefore become a potential source of social disorder. Contrary to what \textit{New York Times} editorialist Nicholas Kristof wrote in 2005, the Chinese

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{119} Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism}, 25.
  \item \textsuperscript{120} McNeill, “Social Capital,” 276.
\end{itemize}
leadership was not “digging the Communist Party's grave, by giving the Chinese people broadband.”

This assertion, along with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s statement in January 2010 that an open Internet was the “one essential prerequisite for freedom and democracy,” represents a somewhat naïve and simplistic view of an immensely complex place of public contention in the most populous country in the world.

If democratization were the goal of Internet public participation in China, it is clear that netizens have a long way to go, and that the online communication alone may be insufficient to bring about such a change. But if we allow that political participation and media efficacy are desirable and important components of any political system, we should explore the subtleties of the activities of Chinese netizens to see how they interact within their particular political system.

The Chinese Netizen

What is a netizen? I define the netizen as an Internet user who participates actively in political discourse online. A Chinese netizen need not be a Chinese national. This category may include overseas Chinese, Sinophiles deeply engaged with Chinese current events and individuals abroad who post important news updates onto microblog feeds, as will be the case in the Wukan study in chapter 4.

The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) estimated that as of 2008,


more than 50 million Internet users in China read blogs daily. A CNNIC study estimated that of the 420 million Internet users in China as of 2010, 70% of the users were under 30, and more than 40% were university educated. Members of this young and educated demographic are potential opinion leaders should they choose to engage in online citizenship. More importantly, they are also the primary labor force and consumers of China.

Internet communication enables these well-educated netizens to break free of local regulations and communicate a wide variety of ideas to other netizens. Online discourse has become yet another tool in the netizens’ arsenal of political engagement, empowering them to invent methods with which to circumvent obstacles to open public discourse and engage in resistance movements.

Netizen Journalists

Journalists are a subset of this online population. Many journalists writing for state-sponsored papers are also prolific bloggers outside of their professional lives. Though they are obliged to write according to party directives regarding touchy subjects in their occupations, they come in contact with privileged information in the process, and some elect to release this information through microblogs and online videos. Prior to the October 2011 decision that required bloggers to register with their names and identity card numbers, blogging could be done under an online alias.

---


124 Ibid., 40.

Moreover, once certain events attracted a sufficiently strong online followings, paper and television media soon followed, with newspapers such as *Southern Weekend* covering these stories in their editorial section on the Internet, *Net Eye*, under the cover of technological news.\(^{126}\)

**Netizen Celebrities**

Of course, no form of popular culture creation through mass media can come without risks. The rise of “expert netizens” with higher levels of education, more political connections, and access to more avenues of expression has a homogenizing effect on opinions expressed online.\(^{127}\) The rise of this elite class of media creators can lead to bandwagoning, mob mentality, and lack of authentic and earnest online debate, but this is a normal and inevitable side-effect of mass media. However, if these forms of protest rest within the main tenets of righteous resistance, damage to the society at large should be minimized. This phenomenon, however, brings forth the need for a balance between grassroots activism and obtaining the support from elites who have the social and political resources for mass mobilization.\(^{128}\) When analyzing online discourse, the distinction must be made between forging connections between a privileged class and a subjugated class, and allowing a privileged class to co-opt and define the interests of a subjugated class as has been the case at certain points in China’s history.

---

\(^{126}\) Qiang, "The Battle for the Chinese Internet," 54. These incidents are not reported as political events but rather as technological trends.


\(^{128}\) Ibid., 246.
Restrictions on Online Discourse

Many netizens are concerned that the central party apparatus has been resilient enough to adapt to the destabilizing effects of online discourse through a strategy of authoritarian deliberation. Internet scholar Min Jiang describes four main deliberative spaces in the Chinese Internet: “central propaganda spaces,” such as the websites for different departments of state bureaucracy; “government regulated commercial spaces,” owned by private firms and subject to governmental regulation; “emergent civil spaces,” nongovernmental websites that are required to register with their municipal governments and meet censorship requirements or risk being shut down; and “international deliberative spaces,” websites and surveys hosted beyond the jurisdiction of the Chinese government. Through this list, we see that there is still considerable room for maneuver and negotiation, especially in the latter three categories.

After the Internet became open to the public, the CCP was quite aware that this new mode of communication would require a multilayered strategy of control. Various departments and offices including the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) and the State Council Information Office (SCIO) were put in charge of Internet regulation. The municipal branches of these departments were put in charge of all


130 Rebecca McKinnon, “China’s ‘Networked Authoritarianism’,” Journal of Democracy: Liberation Technology, 22, no. 2 (April 2011): 36. In Footnote 10, McKinnon notes that China’s “Great Firewall” only controls one category, that of the “international deliberative spaces.”

131 Qiang, "The Battle for the Chinese Internet,” 50.
media within their regional jurisdictions, and distributing and enforcing central censorship directives to relevant media agencies.\textsuperscript{132} However, the degree to which these directives were followed was generally left up to individual companies.

\textit{Internet Service Cessation}

Before and during the Beijing Olympics in August 2008, authorities attempted to ramp up Internet censorship to prevent untoward public mishaps. Attempts to install a program, the Green Dam Youth Escort, in Internet cafes throughout the country were met with a public outcry, and vehement international objections to this the Green Dam initiative led the central government to scrap plans for a universal adoption of Green Dam.\textsuperscript{133} Though Internet cafes in China are officially expected to record customers’ identity card numbers, this practice is often neglected so that cafes do not lose business.

The actual process of regulation is made more complicated by the fact that the Internet Service Providers (ISPs) provide Internet connectivity throughout China without regard to provincial borders, while the local CPD and SCIO offices have only municipal enforcement rights.\textsuperscript{134} When real crises surfaced, Internet connectivity was cut off altogether by blocking ISP services in a geographical area. This was the case when ethnic riots occurred in the Xinjiang province in July of 2009, and residents and businesspeople lost connectivity in the region. However, they were able to travel to


\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 51.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 45
the neighboring province of Gansu to engage in online activity.\footnote{Josh Karamay, "Blogger Describes Xinjiang as an 'Internet Prison','} \cite{Karamay2010}

However, complete Internet service cessation is a generally undesirable and untenable solution. Given China’s rapid economic growth and the increasingly Internet-reliant global economy, the threat of losing Internet access makes China a relatively less attractive destination for foreign businesses and expatriates. Thus, service cessation is seen as a temporary and extreme measure.

*Selective Content Blocking*

Short of disconnecting or slowing down Internet connections, the SCIO and CPD also issue directives to the ISPs to block certain search terms and problematic content, as will be discussed in both the Wenzhou and the Wukan case studies in Chapters Three and Four. Chen Tong, a chief editor of the *Sina Weibo* microblog portal, described the process as "round the clock policing, constant coordination between editorial and monitoring, daily meetings discussing latest sensitive keywords, new topics, and problematic content."\footnote{Johnathan Ansfield, "China Tests New Controls on Twitter-Style Services,"} \cite{Ansfield2010} This elaborate and labor-intensive system of censorship greatly increases the operational costs of maintaining such an online community.

The expectation that all Internet activity will be met with instant results also means that posts are normally published before they are vetted. This creates a significant time lapse between the dissemination of the information and censorship, as
millions of entries are posted before they can be vetted for content. The laxity of regulation by the ISPs is in part due to the prohibitive cost of employing an educated labor force that is available around the clock, every day of the year, to maintain constant surveillance of online activity.

There is also a strong incentive for Internet companies such as Sina Weibo to post potential hot-button topics that can increase the number of hits on the site, and thus increase advertisement revenue. This incentive does not sit well with conservative censorship regulations. On one hand, some previously sensitive topics such as Taiwan independence have been issues in national consciousness for so long that they are tame enough to be published freely. On the other hand, there is content that is so popular and so attractive that to censor them would result in a massive loss of readership, where censorship ceases after a few days to increase site traffic. These two zones of deliberate negligence often serve to undermine government censorship directives.

*Positive Propaganda*

The Chinese Communist Party also pushes for SCIO Internet Bureau to publish positive propaganda about public issues in an attempt to turn or at least moderate the tide of online public opinion. This practice is commonly known as Astroturfing in the international online community. In China, the Fifty-Cent Party (wu mao dang) in 2008 numbered some 280,000 individuals. The name “Fifty-Cent Party” stems from the rumor that these government-subsidized netizens are paid fifty

---

137 Qiang, "The Battle for the Chinese Internet," 56.

138 Qiang, "The Battle for the Chinese Internet," 55.
cents for every post that they put on microblogs and forums to redirect the discussion in a pro-party direction. This Internet army was made up of a diverse group consisting of retired officials, members of the Communist Youth League in universities aiming for Party affiliation after graduation, and low-ranking cadres.\textsuperscript{139} The Fifty-Cent Party is currently met with disdain by netizens, and individuals who post opinions supporting the actions of unpopular officials are often denounced online as “\textit{wu mao}”, regardless of their actual Party affiliation.

The central government also attempts to create outlets of ritualized and mediated dialogue online. In September 2010, the Central Communist Party created an online bulletin board called "Direct to Zhongnanhai", where the public was invited to send messages to Party officials. Earlier in 2009, just prior to meeting of the National Party Congress, President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao held web chats on official E-Parliament websites, soliciting policy suggestions from netizens. In the 2010 Government White Paper on Internet discourse in China, "over 60 percent of netizens have a positive opinion of the fact that the government gives wide scope to the Internet's role in supervision, and consider it a manifestation of China's socialist democracy and progress."\textsuperscript{140} While some of this may merely be lip service and government rhetoric, it cannot be denied that the CCP is gathering crucial public opinion and can use this to further the agendas of whichever leaders have both access to the information and the power to act accordingly.

\textsuperscript{139} McKinnon, “China’s ‘Networked Authoritarianism’”, 41.

\textsuperscript{140} McKinnon, “China’s ‘Networked Authoritarianism’”, 42.
China is not the only state to systematically block certain types of sensitive content in order to discipline its citizens. While it is perhaps one of the most politically sensitive states, countries such as France and Germany block their statewide Google search engines from displaying search results for racist, anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic content. Viewed from this angle, China’s attempts to maintain national stability do not seem quite so out of the ordinary, though they often have stronger nationalist and political overtones. One must also keep in mind that most financially privileged individuals in the country have access to Virtual Proxy Networks (VPN) which allow them to access blocked content for a small fee by routing their activity through a server in another country.

For those who cannot afford or do not have the connections to a VPN server, foreign websites and news media that provide Chinese-language services, such as BBC, Radio Free Asia, and Hong Kong and Taiwan newspapers, are distributed by tech-savvy "information brokers" through screen shots on online bulletin boards, mass private e-mails and coded microblog summaries. As current censorship technology is text-based and can only censor out pictures by color, and not content, screen shots are an essential tool in preserving text information online in a way that

---


143 Qiang, "The Battle for the Chinese Internet," 53.
cannot easily be taken down by censors.\textsuperscript{144} Thus, it is possible for determined, connected and curious netizens to access almost all the online information they need. 

\textit{Artful Contention: Creativity in Textual Discourse}

Artful contention occurs when there is a gap between official rhetoric and actual day-to-day reality. It is a form of satire in which dissenters turn the language of oppressive or illegitimate rulers against social injustice. When bureaucrats and party cadres use populist language to justify actions that violate citizens’ rights, the original language of dissent becomes part of a vocabulary of oppression that does not relate to the common people.\textsuperscript{145} The people, without official recourse to existing vocabularies other than that of recently uprooted conservatives and absolutist revolutionary despots, then turn to using wit and irony to express their individuality and liberate the language of revolution from all existing forms of rule.

The Chinese language, with its ideogram characters developed over a long history and used as a common mode of communication between groups with different spoken dialects but the same written text, is particularly amenable to this form of artful contention. At its roots in ancient history, during the development of its language, China “imagined itself not as Chinese, but as central, imaginable through

\textsuperscript{144} Ben Hu and Shipeng Guo, “Jiqimao guoguan, jiafeimaoguolu - luba huaji huang de shi yu fei,” (Doraemon passes, Garfield filtered - controversies over ‘Green Dam Youth Escort’), Southern Weekly, June 10, 2009. Authors note that images are filtered by color content - one example of the level of sophistication of Green Dam’s image filtering system was images with more than a predetermined amount of the color pink being blocked as pornographic.

\textsuperscript{145} Taylor, “Community Participation,” 243. In China, this is evident in the phrase “\textit{wei renmin fuwu},” which means “to serve the people,” but the CCP used this during the Maoist era to force people to act against their own interests and welfare for the good of the party, such as through forced relocations, grain confiscation and excessive hard labor.
the medium of [a] sacred language and written script.” The ability to read and write Chinese characters signified civilization and cultural pride, and the ideograms took on a power of their own by uniting all literate Chinese in a common verbal tradition. Therefore, the work of online spoof (e-gao) writers, who manipulate the very same symbols that are the fabric of Chinese cultural heritage to protest against their current political system, is a highly entertaining and effective form of online activism. This linguistic cleverness denotes a type of semi-professional culture of protest, to the point where the ability to protest humorously is something of an art form and a sign of advanced literacy among Chinese netizens.

THE FUTURE OF INTERNET CONTROL IN CHINA

Given the plurality of methods with which netizens work around official regulations, censorship and pro-state online propaganda are inadequate solutions to dissent on the Chinese Internet. For its limited effectiveness, censorship is also extremely inefficient. No matter how vast the army of censors the state has at its disposal, the avalanche of information shared on blogs, microblogs, online bulletin boards and video-sharing websites following any significant event as well as creativity of netizens in working around censorship makes it impossible to silence dissent. In addition, the diatribes of international activists against China’s repression of Internet discourse creates a stigma around China’s censorship activities in the international community. Though censorship may continue for some time, further


publicized attempts to block information flow may jeopardize China’s attempts to define itself as a modern, flourishing state in the international community.

That said, when there are severe crackdowns on Internet communications, this repression is sometimes internalized by netizens. As online celebrity Han Han said, after a few encounters with content censorship, an individual may begin to self-censor and subconsciously refrain from writing about politically sensitive topics. When microbloggers submit entries and do not see them on their pages, or see that their posts are taken down after a few hours, they refer to this phenomenon as being “river-crabbed” (bei he xie), a spoof on the term for “harmony” in official rhetoric. This spoof indirectly insults the CCP’s obsession with social stability. However, as netizens notice their microblogging websites being shut down or blocked off with greater frequency surrounding certain actions and events, they might begin to shy away from posting about more sensitive topics.

Figure 1.1: A fine specimen of a river crab.149

---

148 In Mandarin, the term for harmony, he xie (和諧) is a homophone with the term river-crab (河蟹). The river crab has thus become an iconic figure in the Chinese online community for when the government is being particularly repressive.

DECENTRALIZED CHANNELS OF EXPRESSION

While the CCP is selectively responsive to online activism, it is by no means deliberately moving in the direction of greater democracy unless absolutely necessary to prevent large-scale unrest, as will be seen in the case study on Wukan. Not only do direct challenges to the Party cause both reformists and conservatives within the party to unite, but also most successful and educated individuals in China depend on a series of guanxi network connections within the central government for at least part of their success, and are likely to ignore or shut down outright attacks on the CCP.  

However, despite what Internet scholar Rebecca MacKinnon predicted in *Networked Authoritarianism*, it is not true that “the Chinese people's ability to engage in serious political dissent or to organize political movements that might effectively challenge the CCP's legitimacy has actually diminished.” If anything, the subtlety of carefully maneuvering in the small ideological rifts within the state apparatus has served to enrich political life in China, and lends another level of complexity to Internet political participation.

It must be noted that much of this contention happens domestically, within the “Great Firewall” of China. As Guobin Yang remarked in *The Power of the Internet in China*, the Chinese Internet is contentious, fierce, passionate, and playful, where “ordinary people assume an unprecedented role as agents of change, and new social

---

formations are profound.” A crucial property of netizenship is the ownership that individuals take over their own political fate. Instead of appealing to foreign governments to intercede on their behalf, individuals take matters into their own hands and develop a sense of political self-efficacy.

As the Internet is the central locus of expression for many social tensions, it remains a crucial resource for the Chinese Communist Party to assess the state of the country, diagnose weak spots in their policies, and design new means of social and political engineering. A particularly popular use for online public opinion among central party officials is to keep their local cadres in check. Hu Yong, a Beijing Internet expert, stated that when negative opinions of local officials bypassed municipal censorship and were disseminated nationally on blogs, central authorities could be informed of local corruption and take action as necessary. Given the right combination of luck, facility with artful contention, and the correct timing, this method can be a more successful and cheaper version for official petitions, as it allows netizens to skip more levels of governmental bureaucracy and give maximum exposure to their complaints, not only to fellow citizens but also to a vast number of governmental officials.

The effect of expanding ideas and definitions of participation, communication and relationships to the state has been to increase citizens’ political efficacy. While China has yet to extend full citizenship rights to all of its nationals, fewer sectors of

---

152 McKinnon, “China’s ‘Networked Authoritarianism’,” 34

society would cite the lack of available avenues of dissent as a major deterrent to political expression. Due to the constant fluctuations of social and political conditions, as well as the vastly divergent local application of policies, it is hard to clearly define the state of political expression and participation in the People’s Republic of China at any given moment. Yet the multiplicity of voices coming from this country of unpredictable relationships, where repression can lead to increased expression and official corruption can open the door to increased political participation, indicate that if anything people are communicating more, and are able to access a cornucopia of radically different visions of what China will be in the future.

Through active communicative citizenship, citizens experience greater agency in their legal systems. They are not deterred from acting on their political ideals for a lack of resources, as they are able to test the political waters and amass alternative resources to challenge the sociopolitical hegemony of their officials. They begin to imagine the possibility of having masses of supporters in their broader community whom they have not met yet, waiting to come out of the shadows once a worthy cause is articulated with sufficient clarity and persuasive sway. With other reasoning individuals, they can act on their desires to discuss, redefine and reinterpret the laws by which they are governed. They cultivate a sense of respect for others as potential allies and resources, and with that come stronger and more varied types of

---


social cohesion. And through this dialogue, they negate prejudice and particularism, as they can understand their society as one where diversity breeds not only opponents, but also unexpected allies.

It is impossible to predict what will come out of this system of sustained online interaction, especially with the new regulations on Internet microblog registration suggested in 2011. And perhaps the benefits of online solidarity will be offset by the lack of face-to-face contact that is one of the alienating effects of Internet addiction plaguing our increasingly Internet-dominated society. But if one thing is true about China, and perhaps every other political community, is that once freedoms are extended and experienced, it is very hard to take them back again. The hope is that the intensified means of egalitarian communication can help both authorities and laypersons to develop more honest methods of communication, and develop stronger ties of mutual obligation and responsibility.

156 Ibid., 354.
July 23rd, 2011
Wenzhou High Speed Rail Collision: Online Counter-Journalism

**INITIAL REPORTS**

At 8:34 p.m. on July 23, 2011, two high-speed trains of the “Harmony Line” traveling to Fuzhou collided close to Wenzhou in the Zhejiang province, close to the city of Wenzhou.

*Figure: 2.1: Screenshot from Yuan Xiaoyan’s microblog: A passenger from the Fujian province, Yuan Xiaoyan, posted on her microblog using her Internet-connected mobile phone, "Problem on D301 at Wenzhou. The train came to a halt and then there was a very strong collision, and then a second one! And then the power went out! I'm in the last carriage. Hope nothing goes wrong!! This is too horrific!!" Yuan then went on to post updates about her escape from the train on her microblog until she had to turn off her device due to poor weather conditions.*


**Figure: 2.2: Screenshot from Yuan Xiaoyan’s microblog**

From the right: “July 23, 20:50: Not a single railway employee has arrived. I hear an ambulance, perhaps a call for help has gone out. We are in the last railway car, and we are fine. I want to go home.

July 23, 21:13: I hear that the bridge has collapsed. in front of us, there are four cars that have fallen off the rails. The last two cars have been separated from the rest of the train. This is too horrible. Luckily I am fine. It has already been a half hour; it is very stuffy in the car, we can’t open the windows.

July 23, 21:25: We are getting off the train. Walking along the rails, we don’t know where we are. I am still alive.

July 23, 21:35: Lightening and thunder, it is raining. I am turning off my phone.”

The train D3115 was traveling from Hangzhou to Fuzhou, and D301 from Beijing to Fuzhou. There were more than 1,400 passengers on the two trains. This post was followed by similar microblog posts from other survivors. Friends and family members of missing victims posted on the passengers’ microblogs trying to establish contact with their missing loved ones.

159 Ibid.

OFFICIAL MEDIA DISCREDITED

Despite the scale of the disaster, the report in People’s Daily relegated the article to a small section in the lower left hand corner of the second page.¹⁶¹

Figure 2.3: This picture of the page was posted on a microblog registered in Shanghai, Jizhedejia (记者的家): “Please save this: Today’s People’s Daily. Second page, bottom left corner, evidence of the value of life [to official news media].”

¹⁶¹ Jizhedejia, Microblog. Sina Weibo. July 24, 2011, 11:25 a.m., http://weibo.com/1677311094/xgdh7m98i. (accessed July 24, 2011) From the top left, clockwise, the story shares the page with articles on personal banking, housing in Liaoning, the Chinese national soccer team’s 7:2 victory over Laos, culture in Heilongjiang, personal credit record confidentiality and the multiple blockages of foreign tort persecutions.
Comments on the post cited the incident as “an embarrassment.”

Microblogger Niuchichao (牛吃草) bemoaned the paper’s lack of editorial integrity, observing that the article had been placed beneath the report on the national team’s soccer victory over Laos:

“How could it be? Not only do they put it off to the side, but they even put it under China 7: Laos 2!”\textsuperscript{162}

In addition, pictures were released on the Zhejiang-based microblog Zhejiang jiaotong zhi sheng (浙江交通之声), which reported less than 16 hours after the incident that:

“[t]here are now seven to eight cranes at the site of the incident, and they have dug several large pits next to the fallen train cars. The excavators are beginning to break apart and crush the fallen cars, and are pushing the pieces into the pits and burying them.”\textsuperscript{163}

Chinese microbloggers reacted with disgust, posting comments such as those of Lou yi si (陋易丝):

“The reason for this incident hasn’t even been investigated, and they want to destroy corpses and extinguish evidence? Overseas, they investigate incidents for years, not even letting a piece of glass go unexamined. Do they think there are too many Chinese people? Well then let’s just sacrifice those no-good, greedy, corrupt officials to save our nation’s resources!”\textsuperscript{164}

Some netizens, such as bob90, also directly quoted legal regulations governing railway emergencies, claiming that the railway bureau had acted illegally, and

\textsuperscript{162} Niuchichao, Microblog comment, Sina Weibo, July 24, 2011, 11:50 a.m., http://weibo.com/1677311094/xgdh7m98i (accessed July 24, 2011)

\textsuperscript{163} Zhejiang jiaotong zhi sheng, Microblog, Sina Weibo, July 24, 2011, 11:54 a.m., http://weibo.com/1750935105xgdz78HLR#a_comment (accessed July 24, 2011)

\textsuperscript{164} Luo yi si, Microblog, Sina Weibo, July 24, 2011, 3:22 p.m., http://weibo.com/1750935105xgdz78HLR#a_comment (accessed July 24, 2011)
expressing rightful resistance, as outlined in the earlier chapter on legal forms of resistance in China:

“Railway Incident Emergency Rescue and Investigation Protocol: Article Four, Emergency Rescue, Line Twenty-Four,’No work unit or individual should destroy the scene of the incident”165

NETIZEN JOURNALISM AND PROTEST

In reaction to these photos, there came a rash of paike (拍客) amateur videos by civilians posted on Youku, Sina Weibo, and other video-sharing websites documenting incidents such as the burial of the railway cars as early as July 25, two days after the incident. The term paike literally means “filming guests.”

Figure 2.4: Screenshot of a video taken and posted by Youku user Zhongguadedou (种瓜的豆) at the scene of the accident titled, “Video: <Paike> Aftermath of the crash: In burial, another dead body found.”

165 bob90, Microblog comment, Sina Weibo, July 24, 2011, 12:39 p.m., http://weibo.com/1750935105xgdz78HLR#a_comment (accessed July 24, 2011)
Netizens posted comments such as those of netizen Shuiwoshiyuan (水我源) commenting on what seemed to be footage of a dead body covered in black material being removed from the wreckage:

“It’s being ‘harmonized’ again.”\(^{166}\)

Other viewers complained of the jumps in video quality, saying the video had been censored to hide the sight of bodies falling from the trains. User Kuailedeqiongguang (快乐的穷光) remarked,

“Who would do this? Hang him! There were still living people in those cars, and now if they weren’t dead before they’ve definitely been offed by now!”\(^{167}\)

A poll on Sina Weibo asking netizens why they believed the wreckage was buried revealed that a vast majority of netizens believed that it was an attempt by officials to cover up evidence.\(^{168}\) The poll was taken down between July 24 and 25, but not before 61,382 out of a total of 62,924 microbloggers that responded to the poll had expressed grave doubts as to the integrity of the officials who ordered the burial of the train cars.\(^{169}\)

**The Rescue of Yiyi**

Further challenging the official account of the incident was the rescue of a two and a half year old girl, now known as Little Yiyi. Thirteen hours after orders were

---

\(^{166}\) Zhongguadedou, "Video: Aftermath of the crash: In burial, another dead body found," Video, Youku, July 24, 2011, [http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMjg3OTE2NTQ0.html](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMjg3OTE2NTQ0.html) (accessed July 24, 2011)

\(^{167}\) Ibid.


given to cease the rescue efforts, she was found by Shao Yerong, a police chief who defied official instructions to abandon the rescue efforts and insisted on examining the train while it was still on the tracks instead of pulling it down with a crane.\(^{170}\) Shao gave an account of the incident, stating that he had removed twelve bodies from the train car before finding Yiyi in a space created by a fallen steel rod. She was found after officials gave the signal that there were no further signs of life in the wreckage. The discovery of the twelve bodies as well as the surviving girl provided netizens with concrete grounding for their suspicions that the government’s search and rescue effort had been insufficient. The spokesman for the Ministry of Rail, Wang Yongping, reacted to reporters’ questions about the rescue of Yiyi simply with, “It was a miracle.”\(^{171}\)

Until August 14, 2011, Yiyi’s extended family continued to seek financial assistance from the government. Owing the media hype surrounding Yiyi, special attention was paid to her medical care, and she was given a private room so that her relatives could care for the orphaned girl. Her uncle also issued a plea to the Chinese government and the Chinese public, saying that despite the declaration on August 2 that Yiyi had recovered after surgery, she still lacked feeling in her legs and thus was still in need of medical attention.\(^{172}\)


\(^{171}\) Ibid.

\(^{172}\) "Wenzhou train wreck victim's family demands compensation from the Ministry of Railways," Online Report, *NetEase*, August 15, 2011, [http://news.163.com/11/0726/08/79SIIA9400014LP2.html](http://news.163.com/11/0726/08/79SIIA9400014LP2.html) (accessed August 23, 2011) Her uncle said, “We want to be as thorough as possible, to avoid a situation where Yiyi’s legs have problems in the future, and to avoid having to regret not doing everything we could to fight for her well-being.”
Demands for Truth

Microblog threads demanding the truth multiplied. In particular, microbloggers demanded the publication of a full list of the missing, injured, and deceased passengers, refusing to believe the official report that 38 died and 192 were injured in the crash. In fact, there was video evidence of more bodies being removed from wreckage after the official death toll had been released. Also noteworthy were the odd uniformity of the news reports covering the crash. On July 25, the official death toll reported by CCTV was 39, with 192 injured. On July 28, the numbers reported by ChinaNews, an online news source, remained exactly the same.

---


A Zhangzhou-based microblogger, Wogebishigeliangren_zhangzhou (我隔壁个好人_张洲) posted the following picture:

Figure 2.5: In his comments, he said, “This picture is very precious, and hard to come by. Please pass this on, and tell me this: one, how many bodies can come out of this “patty”, and two, I checked, this train was almost full, and this is only one of the cars. How can there only have been 39 deaths?”

This post was reposted 123,767 times, and the thread was still active in October 2011, three months after the incident.

**Figure 2.6:** One microblogger, hundun_xingkong (混沌_星空), commented in response, “Who believes what the government (ZF for zhengfu (政府) the term for government in Chinese) says any more? Anyway, I don’t believe it, the government always minimizes large issues, and dissolves small issues! And they control news channels! They’re waiting for us to forget!”

In response to a demand for more information on the crash, user wozelide (我这里的) reposted a post that reported a death toll of 216, citing a leak from an insurance company through a national Chinese badminton player.

**Figure 2.7:** The blog post from the user Zhangzhouyanyi says, “The Wenzhou train crash investigation’s newest figures for the death toll, 216 people! 216! 216! The news source comes from the China Badminton Athlete Wei Jie’s insurance company connections.”

---


Though this source was unofficial, it gave netizens a foundation on which to base their analyses and speculations regarding the accuracy of the official death toll. It was enough of a challenge to the official, unchanging figure of 39 that it led netizens to carefully analyze the information that had been given to them.

Speculations on the original post questioning the number led to netizens demanding the names of the deceased and missing. There was speculation that no whole bodies were found—that the bodies had been crushed and could therefore not be tallied. However, there was also widespread frustration that the Ministry of Rail never released the names of the passengers.

**Collaborative Online Action**

Netizens started taking matters into their own hands, compiling a list of victims on a shared Google document where links to any available online news on them could be added. In the document, the name, sex, age, and regional identification of passengers—and any distinguishing marks they might have—were listed by anyone who knew of them being on the train. Then, links to online sources, mostly microblogs, containing information about them were added. The document contained four separate pages – one for the dead, one for the missing, one for the injured, and another for the unidentified found in the wreckage.

---

180 "20110723 Wenzhou - Google Document: Please send information to D3115D301@Gmail.com." Accessed April 5, 2012. [https://spreadsheets.google.com/a/wesleyan.edu/spreadsheet/lv?hl=zh_TW&key=0AhAAAz5vWhOpmdG1VQlVHWGM2RWk2cHJPc3ZDRzZydVE&hl=zh_TW&f=true&noheader=true&gid=0](https://spreadsheets.google.com/a/wesleyan.edu/spreadsheet/lv?hl=zh_TW&key=0AhAAAz5vWhOpmdG1VQlVHWGM2RWk2cHJPc3ZDRzZydVE&hl=zh_TW&f=true&noheader=true&gid=0).
The posts normally involved a basic description of the missing victim, and a request that their description be passed on to rescue volunteers on the scene of the accident. One of the posts was from relatives searching for a three-year-old boy:

“Wang Zi Jia, male, 3 years of age, third car, fourteenth seat, responds to the name Wang Zi (Prince), 95 centimeters, wearing a yellow T-shirt, black shorts, sandals, lost in the chaos. Please be kind enough to pass this on, many thanks!”

Most notable, however, was the section listing the dead – at the time of the creation of the document, it listed 43 dead, as opposed to the official number of 39. Later on, several on the list of the injured or missing were also listed as dead.

**Damage Control**

Perhaps as an attempt to stem the tide of “breaking news” that served as fodder for online discussion, strict instructions were given to the press as to how to report the incident. The press was instructed to focus on covering charitable actions with a minimal amount of analysis and speculation to ensure “information accuracy” to the masses.\(^{182}\) While these directives were ostensibly to avoid widespread rumors and panic, no concrete information was released regarding the causes of the incident, which led to further speculation.

\(^{181}\) Ibid.
Figure 2.8: The first text message from the Ministry to journalists on the July 24th at 5:34 p.m. read, "Reporting directive: Stories reporting the Wenzhou incident should use the same title ‘7/23 Yong-Wen Line Important Railway Happening’. Please reply." The second message, sent out twelve minutes later at 5:47 p.m., read, “From now on, stories regarding the Wenzhou high-speed incident must have, “Facing disaster with great love” as the main theme. There should be no raising of doubts, no reporting of facts, no analysis. Do not report it on your personal blogs. On television programs, please make requests for appropriate types of service information, and be careful to use the correct music.”
However, these instructions were too late. The seeds of online discussion had already been planted. One microblog user, Shoudeyunkaikanyueming (守得云开见月明) posted:

“Even if it gets ‘harmonized’, we must still spread the news. The pictures are already saved into my computer, and government censorship would be useless. We need the truth!”

Such comments highlighted the resilience of microblog activism against government censorship. The forums, surveys, and discussion threads on the Wenzhou incident remained incredibly active up to two months after the incident, even after some were shut down. The key strength of microblogs was that they were enormously regenerative; netizens could report not only facts surrounding the incident, but also whether or not their posts had been “harmonized” or censored, and members often reposted in order to create as many copies of a valuable post as possible.

*Decreasing Regulation*

Thus, censorship of microblogs became relatively minimal as time continued, with governments opting to stop further comments on certain threads rather than erase threads altogether. Overt deletion was simply too conspicuous and led to the humiliation of the government in the eyes of the online community. In a survey polling Sina Weibo users about which news source they trusted to report the Wenzhou incident accurately, 91% stated that microblogs were their most trusted source, preferred over Xinhua, the national television channel CCTV, local papers, and

---

reports directly from the Ministry of Rail. However, foreign newspapers were not given a place in the poll. Though microblogs were at times denounced as portals for rumor mongering, the only way the government could really hope to counter microblog discussion and prove microblog reports to be rumors was to release reliable statistics that people demanded.

_Cash Compensation_

At 1:00 a.m. on July 26, 2011, news was released regarding the cash compensation to the families of the deceased. An online article on the Shanghai-based news site, East Day, reported that:

“…according to the Railway Ministry’s relevant regulations, the compensation standard is set at 172,000 yuan as the base amount plus 200,000 yuan insurance settlement for a total of 372,000 yuan. This base amount is set and will not change. Those who sign agreements without further negotiation may, as appropriate, be given [an additional] more than ten thousand yuan as a reward.”

Some netizens responded to this negatively. Shanghai-based reader and commenter *Pitezhu* (皮特竹) responded:

“Life is cheap to them like this, dying of dubious causes and then forcing people to quickly accept compensation. Is it because they’re planning to close the case once the money is taken?! This is a blatant disregard of humanity!”

However, this settlement was the only simple option available to families of crash victims. According to a deleted post on Xinhua News, Wenzhou lawyers were

---


186 Ibid.
ordered not to represent train crash victims and to report anyone seeking to file a legal claim regarding the incident to the city’s Judicial Bureau and Lawyers’ Association.\textsuperscript{187} The day after, when netizens had expressed widespread indignation about the order, spokesman of the Judicial Bureau Liu Xianping denied that the order had been issued at all, saying that the Lawyer’s Association had referred to the Judicial Bureau without proper authorization.\textsuperscript{188} A spokesman of the Lawyer’s Association agreed, stating that the initial statement was issued to avoid conflicts.

\emph{China’s High-Speed Rail: Structural Faults and Rushed Construction}

This incident further eroded the reputation of China’s Ministry of Railways: it had already been under fire earlier in the year during a corruption investigation. Minister Liu Zhijun was dismissed in February under accusations of taking bribes and the embezzlement of public funds.\textsuperscript{189} The actual details of Liu’s corrupt actions were not released to the public, but he was said to have taken more than 800 million yuan in bribes. Liu was a high-ranking official in the party as well as minister of the railways. The high-speed rail was his pet project, into which he had invested over 700 billion yuan.\textsuperscript{190} Prior to the many safety issues that plagued it throughout 2010 and 2011,

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
China’s high-speed rail lines had been a source of great national pride. China anticipated linking its underdeveloped provinces to commercial centers to ensure the efficient transportation of its massive workforce. Furthermore, the high-speed rail system broke the world records for train speed at 260 miles per hour and seemed to be proof positive that China had pulled ahead of the West technologically, after decades of borrowing from it. The audit by China’s National Audit Office shows that Liu created a 1.3 trillion yuan debt in 2009.

This was not the first accusation of malpractice to target the high-speed railway. In a report on Sohu, a Chinese search engine, investigators accused the Ministry of using fake coal-ash powder to make the concrete used for railway construction. The report, published by China Economic Times, hit on the crucial lack of accountability that enabled such corner cutting, stating that,

“Construction overseers are accountable by law for the quality of their work, but in a case like this, when the warranty of the railway is, say, 100 years, it may take up to 30 or 40 years for people to notice problems with the quality of the work. By then, it may be hard to punish those who are officially responsible.”


195 Ibid.
The Wenzhou incident was only the most recent in a series of accidents that called into question the safety of the enormous project. On July 16, a mere two weeks after the July 1 opening of the new Beijing-Shanghai line in time for the 90th anniversary of the CCP, three power outages were reported within four days of each other.\textsuperscript{196} Though these glitches were attributed to summer thunderstorms and lightening strikes, they indicated that appropriate power checks and precautions had not been put into place in case of emergencies on the high-speed rail. Adding to speculation was the sight of workers installing temporary flooring in the Nanjing South Railway Station to meet the deadline, then tearing up the flooring soon after the celebration in a “renovation” effort projected to cost about 9.5 million yuan. Even more alarming was the finding of loose nutcaps on the 26-mile Jiaozhou Bay Bridge in Qingdao, reported to be the longest sea-bridge in the world.\textsuperscript{197} These significant flaws added to speculation that the high-speed rail project was overfunded, under-monitored, and bound for disaster.

\textit{Reaction from the Ministry of Railways}

After the Wenzhou incident, Ministry of Railways spokesman Wang Yongping appeared at a press conference asserting his confidence in the rescue efforts. Wang stated that the burial of the train cars was because the rescue efforts were extremely complicated, and it was in fact inconvenient to begin rescue without burying some of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
the cars first to facilitate the rescue effort. Later in the interview, Wang promised that the name list of the victims would be published, and that a thorough investigation was under way. He stated that the black box that recorded the activity of the train had been found and was undergoing analysis, and that results would immediately be reported to the public. On the night of July 24, 2011, Wang claimed that the death toll was 35 as opposed to the 41 reported online. He vaguely claimed that the victims would be adequately compensated, in accordance with article 33 of the regulations concerning railway accidents and emergencies. This article stated that passengers could be compensated up to 150,000 yuan for personal injuries, and 2000 yuan per article of cabin luggage lost. No attempts were actually made to find or return the personal belongings of railway passengers.

He ended the interview by saying, “I don’t care if you believe it, I believe it anyway.” (“至于你信不信，我反正信了”) His insensitive statement was parroted by netizens to criticize the improper handling of the situation. Through the creative use of homophones, netizens responded to Wang’s statement on various microblog platforms, and some users’ comments turned “反正”(anyway) into “反证” (against the evidence, or anti-evidence), implying that Wang was hiding evidence. Netizens voiced their doubt and distrust of the government and their beliefs that the

---


199 Ibid.

200 "Railway Spokesman Wang Yongping responds to Wenzhou incident," Video, *Youku*, July 24, 2011, [http://static.youku.com/v1.0.0188/v/swf/loader.swf?VideoIDS=XMjg4MTQwOTA4&embedid=OTkuNTA2NTluNDgzLwMeUVmU2t0aG1wWdpGFiJfZG9XaGV0aGVvX3lydV9iZWNpZXZlX2l0X29yX25vdCfXaXQiRlOTI0ODAiOTIzX3VwX3RvX3lydSfYnV0X0lfZG9fYW55d2F5Lg==](http://static.youku.com/v1.0.0188/v/swf/loader.swf?VideoIDS=XMjg4MTQwOTA4&embedid=OTkuNTA2NTluNDgzLwMeUVmU2t0aG1wWdpGFiJfZG9XaGV0aGVvX3lydV9iZWNpZXZlX2l0X29yX25vdCfXaXQiRlOTI0ODAiOTIzX3VwX3RvX3lydSfYnV0X0lfZG9fYW55d2F5Lg==) (accessed July 26, 2011)
government was “anti-evidence” or “anti-truth”. This wordplay quickly became a satirical Internet meme through which individuals expressed their doubts about the government’s accountability.

Delayed Central Government Reaction

Only on July 28, five days after the incident, did Premier and Party Secretary Wen Jiabao visit Wenzhou to view the disaster site and visit injured victims in the hospital. In an interview he claimed that his delay was due to grave illness, and emphasized the need for faster rationalization of science and technology in China. Intriguingly, Wen appeared to have been well enough to meet with the Japanese trade delegation led by Kono Yohei on July 24, 2011, the day after the crash.201

In response to questions from Xinhua News Agency and CCTV regarding governmental oversight of investigations, Premier Wen pledged that the process would be open and transparent, with accurate and timely information released to the masses. He emphasized the importance of proper handling of the case and praised the citizens of Wenzhou for their charitable actions of donating blood and caring for the victims of the crash in their local hospitals.202 A news channel video showed Wen bowing to the families of the deceased wearing a sorrowful expression and laying a wreath at a memorial to the victims. When the video was uploaded to the video-hosting website, Youku, the next day, a netizen commenter Ichyby, sympathetic to


Wen, commented, “Don’t give the Premier so much trouble, he’s old, be kinder.”

But not all netizens were that sympathetic. Another commenter, Zhoudabing (周大饼) criticized the video and its easily impressed viewers, and complained that there was too much emphasis on bolstering the CCP’s reputation rather than sincerely addressing the victims’ plight:

“I have to say something, during the 7/23 accident, how many people’s legs and backs were broken? How come this [suffering] wasn’t filmed? This video only shows Wen’s attitude, if only the government could seriously and justly deal with this issue, what we want is concrete action.”

**PERSISTING NETIZEN DISSATISFACTION**

Surveys posted earlier regarding netizens’ level of satisfaction with railway investigations were quickly disabled, though the posts remain on site archives:

*Figure 2.9: When a survey was posted at 11:23 p.m. on July 25, 2011, an overwhelming 98% of 195,655 microbloggers said that they were dissatisfied with the government’s treatment of the situation. The options here include “Extremely satisfied (1413; 1%), Basically satisfied (3096; 2%), BAH! (191,146; 98%).”*

---


204 Ibid.

Figure 2.10: This survey was posted asking, “Is everyone satisfied with the investigation of the Wenzhou incident?” The responses were: “Basically satisfied”, “Extremely satisfied”, and “... (speechless)”. This survey was frozen a few hours after it was posted due to an overwhelming influx of negative, anti-government opinion.²⁰⁶

In an open letter written on July 28, 2011, ex-spokesman for Ministry of Education, Wang Xu Ming, admonished Wang Yongping for his insensitivity. He chided him for his overly optimistic, casual attitude at the press conference, stating that the Ministry of Rail spokesman should not have smiled during his press conference. He also stated that a more senior official should have been at the press conference. He admitted it was a difficult position for Wang Yongping to be in, but also that Wang should have explained the absence of the senior official. Finally, he warned against excessive optimism about the technological superiority of the high-speed rail. He told Wang Yongping that, “A disaster is a disaster. Do not try to turn it around into a good thing,” advising him to be more sincere and straightforward in the future.²⁰⁷ In the letter, Wang Xuming pointed out the key difficulties in the structure of China’s ministries; the spokesmen were rarely placed in charge of key decisions

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

regarding the ministry’s actions, but they were the first to come under public fire in disasters such as the one in Wenzhou.

In a follow up interview on August 1, 2011, Wang Yongping responded that Wang Xuming’s letter was simply an expression of opinion and was not of critical importance. He also maintained that he had told the truth at the press conference on July 24, 2011, and refused to admit to dissimulation. A Sina.com commenter, Baojia huayuan (包家花园), commented on the article with empathy for Wang’s difficult position:

“How could he even tell the truth? A spokesman is to defend his ministry. Internet users attacked not him, but the Ministry of Railways. It has not released data, people cannot help but to speculate…originally it was not a big deal, and if they had admitted to the mismanagement of rescue efforts, it would have been forgiven…Spokesman Wang did not lie, but the media response was a normal reaction of Internet users.”

*Dismissal of Wang Yongping*

Despite the softening of attitudes towards Wang Yongping, he was still dismissed from the ministry two weeks later. On August 16, 2011, a brief news report on Sina.com stated that Wang Yongping had been fired as spokesman for the Ministry of Rail.

In response, Sina user and commenter ywsycrbp wrote:

“Wang Yongping’s dismissal is not a solution to everything that is wrong with the high-speed rail concept in China. China is still falling over itself to prove its merit, always with quick-fix solutions and shortcuts, it hasn’t

---


changed at all! How can this be a reasonable system, if it keeps trying to use the same problem solving methods on the same problems?"\textsuperscript{210}

It was also reported that Wang Yongping had been transferred to Poland. His new post was to represent China in the collaboration of ex-Soviet states in the development of railways.\textsuperscript{211} There were a variety of responses to this development:

\textit{Figure 2.11: A mobile user commented on August 18, 2011 at 7:58am, “The Polish are going to suffer now!” To which another user replied, “The Polish don’t understand Chinese, a “miracle” will not happen.”\textsuperscript{212}}

\textit{Figure 2.12: Another mobile user commented, “We’re letting him go without pursuing investigations of the incident???”}

After Wang was let go, further comments in official news media on the incident ceased, though microblog dialogue continued until it naturally petered out in October.


\textsuperscript{212} Ibid.
The Chinese netizens’ experience of the mismanagement of the Wenzhou incident can be summarized via yet another homophonic turn on Wang Yongping’s ridiculed statement: “我反政信了” (“I believe in the anti-government”). The radical writer Han Han, known for his unwillingness to appear in interviews, discussion panels, and press conferences, published a piece entitled “The Derailed Nation” on his Google Plus account. Evidence that the post on Sina.com was deleted was a conspicuous silence on the writer’s blog from June 30th, 2011 to October 16th, 2011, with the most recent post being two simple Chinese characters, “测试” meaning “testing”.

Han bitterly criticized the skewed morality of Chinese officials caused by the legacy of Communism:

“The country’s not moving forward because a lot of them judge themselves as if Stalin and Mao were still alive. So they’ll always feel like the victim. They’ll always feel like they’re the enlightened ones, the impartial ones, the merciful ones, the humble ones, the put-upon ones. They think the technological drumbeat of historical progress is a dream of their own making. The more you criticize him, the more he longs for autocracy.”

The piece triggered a great deal of political debate in the comments section. A number of commenters celebrated the fact that Google Plus posts could not be censored, deleted, or “harmonized.” User and commenter Cheng Bingjie (程炳杰)

---

213 Han Han, "The Derailed Nation," Google Plus Stream post, Google Plus, July 28, 2011, https://plus.google.com/107872353914364246649/posts/1LwkzR1G2pc (accessed July 30, 2011) Google Plus is sporadically accessible to China’s netizens, depending on the political situation at the moment, as explained in the Internet chapter. Sina.com, however, is more tightly controlled. Some microbloggers also have parallel accounts on Google Plus, where they can post and disseminate information that is too sensitive for the Sina.com ISP.


215 Han Han, "The Derailed Nation"
wrote, “Thankfully, on this piece of clean earth, there is a free space for Brother Han.” Another Han Han supporter, Yang Zhiqiang (杨志强) said, “Not yet harmonized – this is encouraging,” perhaps speaking of both Google Plus’ autonomy from the Chinese state apparatus as well as the author’s freedom of thought.

However, Han’s celebrated blog post also criticized Chinese microbloggers. He noted that despite all the criticism of Chinese officials online, nothing further had been done to cast light onto the railway accident. Name lists had not been published, the cause of the accident is still unknown, and online activism for justice for the victims of the Wenzhou crash seems to have ceased.

The result of the conflicts, public outcry, and governmental confusion surrounding the Wenzhou incident were mixed. On one hand, no further results from investigations have been reported, and the incident is still shrouded in mystery. On the other hand, the Chinese government has taken the technological shortcomings of the high-speed rail to heart. On August 10, 2011, China’s State Council ordered that the high-speed rail run at slower speeds and suspended further rail construction. Railway construction investment was also scaled back, and 54 high-speed locomotives were recalled for safety checks.

It is true that microblogs and other independent online forms have made the Chinese people aware of the faults of their government. If the CCP’s response to

---


social unrest arising from deeper systemic issues is to dismiss petty officials such as Liu and Wang in order to appease public opinion, how can netizens directly address the sources of corruption and lack of accountability?

The following case study of Wukan explores how grassroots activists used Internet communication attempted to alter the norms of party leadership and gain more meaningful compromises from the central government.
December 14, 2011

Wukan Land Disputes: Online Support for Offline Protest

On December 14, 2011, local police commenced a siege on the Guangdong Province fishing village of Wukan in an effort to put an end to a three-month protest over land rights. The protests began in September 21, 2011, when local officials sold land to a land development corporation without consulting the villagers or arranging for adequate compensation for farmers. The issue of local officials initiating illegal land expropriations has been an ongoing struggle ever since Deng’s privatization reforms. The nail-house phenomenon, where individuals remain on their property and attack developers despite official orders to vacate, has traditionally been a method of subversion of such land-grabbing activity. However, the Wukan case was exceptional due to the scale and duration of the protest, as well as the matching intensity of local governmental repression and the dramatic central government response.

THE PROBLEM WITH LAND RIGHTS

China’s transition from a state-planned socialist economy to a model of market socialism has triggered vehement popular protests. Tsinghua University professor Sun Liping estimates that 180,000 protests occurred in China in 2010, roughly four times as many as 2000. By taking a closer look at the organization and


motivations behind the protests, a clearer picture begins to emerge of why the CCP must take the protests so seriously.

In 2007, 33.6% of protests concerned land rights, and 31.3% of protesters were rural peasants. 220 73% of the total petitions filed to Beijing were complaints about land use, and 87 of the 130 mass confrontations between peasants and police in 2004 were based on land use disputes. 221 China scholar Steve Hess notes that land disputes are much more difficult for the government to resolve, as land is an immobile and limited resource and protestors often have strong emotional connections to their property. 222 It is relatively easier to create jobs and improve workers’ legal rights than to settle a land dispute with the inhabitants of a village.

Property Law

The difficulties concerning property law are rooted both in China’s history and its current trajectory towards market socialism. It must be noted that in traditional China, informal leasing and ownership arrangements arose naturally from lineage ties and local economic relationships, without government regulation or intervention. 223 In From the Soil, Fei Xiaotong’s classic study of Chinese rural society, Fei posits that rural exchanges of property are grounded in implicit norms based on social


relationships rather than a system of contracts for ownership and sale.\textsuperscript{224} During the early Maoist period prior to decollectivization, land could not be freely bought, sold, or leased. During Deng Xiaoping’s rule, there was a transition from state ownership to private ownership. This transition was almost exclusively regulated by local party cadres. The central government’s oversight of local officials was lax and allowed for many of these cadres to sell public land for personal profit.\textsuperscript{225}

After China’s opening-up and reform period, Jiang Zemin introduced the new sociopolitical strategy of the CCP for the 21st century under the banner of the “Three Represents.” In an effort to create more class alliances, reduce the number of social conflicts and accelerate China’s modernization process, Jiang proposed that the CCP should seek to represent “advanced social productive forces,” “the progressive course of China’s advanced culture,” and “fundamental interests of the majority.” Under this new system, the capitalist, business-oriented former “class enemies” have been invited to join the Chinese Communist Party. The introduction of codified, enforced laws governing property is still a relatively new concept with varying results throughout China, but as businesspeople are increasingly taking political control of villages throughout rural China, land is being expropriated unfairly from the peasants in order for their cadres to make a profit.


Systemic Incentives for Corruption

A case study of northeast rural Yunnan by Guo Xiaolin showed that in 2001, 60 to 70 percent of profits from land sale for urban development were taken by the township and county governments.\(^{226}\) Within this system, land use is separated from land ownership so that foreign and domestic investors could use land without actual ownership rights over the land. Thus, officials claimed that the farmers in Wukan had been using the land that had been expropriated from them, but had no permanent ownership rights over it. This system resulted in a proliferating property black market of turning legally public land into private property by renting out land to foreign corporations without actual transfer of property rights.\(^{227}\) As state agencies and state units (danwei) are the main land owners in rural China, local-level officials can easily manipulate the vague regulations of the central government to sell land that villagers are currently using for profit.\(^{228}\)

Moreover, local authorities have little regard for the central government’s regulations governing the expropriation of land. These laws were put in place to ensure a sustainable course of privatization, but in 2002, county governments were responsible for nearly 50 percent of cases involving illegal authorization over land conversion and transaction.\(^{229}\) Theoretically, when rural land is expropriated, the collectives that give up the land receive an expropriation fee to compensate for the


\(^{227}\) Ibid., 411.

\(^{228}\) Ibid., 415.

\(^{229}\) Ibid., 429.
lost land, provide for the resettlement of the peasants, and compensate for lost crops.\textsuperscript{230} When the land is sold, the state charges the purchasing party a price that consists of the expropriation fee paid to the rural collective, administrative costs, and the conveyance fee. Thirty percent of the conveyance fee goes to the central government, and the rest goes to local governments.\textsuperscript{231} The original landowning peasants are not involved in any part of these negotiations. The actual bargaining parties involved, the purchaser and the local governments, have the incentive to drive down the compensation to the peasants in order to lower the purchasing price for the land while maintaining government profits.

Jiang Xueqin, former United Nations press officer and China correspondent for \textit{The Diplomat}, noted that one of the underlying issues lay in the fact that,

\begin{quote}
“\textsc{The Party’s authority and legitimacy are predicated on guaranteeing at least 8 percent GDP growth a year, and economic growth is the mandate of all Party officials. If you’re a rural township, your best shot is to grab that worthless land and put a factory or a condo on it. The magic of economic statistics is that, even if the factory or condo is empty, the value of land shoots up, and so [do] your career prospects.}”\textsuperscript{232}
\end{quote}

The system of sticks and carrots in the bureaucratic apparatus creates strong incentives for corruption, as long as one can hide it from the central leaders.

\textsuperscript{230} Zhaohui Hong, "The Poverty of Rights and Chinese Farmers' Land Property," \textit{China's Rural Economy after WTO: Problems and Strategies}, eds. Aimin Chen and Shunfeng Song, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006): 106. Article 47 of the Land Management Law states that "the compensation for land eminent domain has to include that for the land itself, supplementary expenses for farmers' resettlement, and the replacement value for the crops and other materials attached to the land. It should be from six to ten times the average annual value of production based on the calculation of the previous three years prior to the land acquisition." (Quoted from \textit{China Election and Governance Web}, 23 September 2003, \texttt{http://chinaelectionsblog.net})

\textsuperscript{231} Lin and Ho, "The State, Land System, and Land Development Processes in Contemporary China," 430.

Ambiguity of Legal Regulations

Peter Ho, a scholar of land expropriations in China, argues the "institutional indeterminacy" of land laws in China “is partly the result of the efforts by the central leadership to create some leeway for reacting to societal developments."\(^ {233}\) The question that remains is how long this transition period will take, and how many more peasants will be forcefully evacuated from their land without their due compensation before China is deemed “stable enough” for an enforceable set of property laws. No complete civil code (\textit{minfadian}) exists in China today. The 1986 General Rules of the Civil Law (\textit{minfa tongze}) established civil law, but it is a collection of regulations with few specific prescriptions regarding how they should be enacted in reality.\(^ {234}\) Thus, China’s civil law is best understood as a series of suggestions for legal conduct, with considerable room for maneuver.

Due to the increase in conflicts between the interests of commoners and the interests of the government, on March 16, 2007, the National Party Congress debated and passed China’s Property Law, with 2,799 lawmakers voting in favor and only 52 against, as well as 38 abstentions.\(^ {235}\)

\(^{234}\) Lin and Ho, "The State, Land System, and Land Development Processes in Contemporary China," 413.
**INDIVIDUAL HOUSEHOLD RESISTANCE**

Some educated, middle-class “protest entrepreneurs” have made some headway at gaining justice for their land losses by appealing to this law while simultaneously making the wider public aware of cases of property conflicts. The case of Yang Wu and Wu Ping, a couple in Chongqing, is an example of one such media-savvy response to governmental injustice. To publicly reveal the illegal actions of the local officials involved in the land-grab, Yang Wu stood atop the couple’s property in the midst of a demolished neighborhood waving a Chinese flag and a banner citing China’s Property Law, “A citizen’s legal property is not to be encroached upon.”

---

236 Hess, "Nail-Houses, Land Rights and Frames of Injustice on China’s Protest Landscape," 922. NPC passed a property law in March 2008 mandating, “The property of the state, the collective, the individual and other obliges is protected by law, and no units or individuals may infringe upon it.”
His wife, Wu Ping, held a series of interviews and press conferences broadcast nationwide, and before long, the couple’s struggle became a hot-button topic on the Internet. After two years of struggle, they received an apartment as compensation, and they ended their protest and followed orders to evacuate their home.\textsuperscript{237} Despite this anticlimactic ending, what is notable is that the couple linked their appeal directly to the law. Wu Ping stated in an interview that, “First, I want to defend the dignity of the law; second, I want to defend my own legal rights and interests.”\textsuperscript{238} Their provocative actions and recourse to the law enabled them to gain the attention of both government officials and the wider public, and this tilted the odds strongly in their favor.


\textsuperscript{238} Hess, "Nail-Houses, Land Rights and Frames of Injustice on China’s Protest Landscape," 922.
Prosecuting Officials

In one of Andrew Mertha’s interviews regarding land litigation in Chongqing, a lawyer from Chongqing recommended that in order to take a case to court, one should first “determine how much power the administrative agency in question has vis-à-vis the court that would hear the case.” Mertha uses this lawyer’s account as an illustration of China’s complex and highly idiosyncratic court system, “If it was relatively high, she would advise to settle, if not avoid bringing the suit altogether; if low, she might recommend taking the case to court.” Thus, protestors often choose to rely on more than one method of appeal to gain a favorable verdict. In addition to taking cases to court and reporting local corruption to higher levels of government, they also try to generate as much publicity as possible through media outlets.

Wukan: A Different Type of Model City

The following case of Wukan is a property protest on a grander scale. Rather than engage in provocative activity to attract the media on an individual or household scale, the villagers of Wukan banded together and organized an almost twenty-year-long campaign for their property rights. Wukan has been put on the map as the first village in modern China to declare autonomy from the state for any period of time, and in the process, their dramatic action gained a few compromises from the central government. Most importantly, the Wukan “mass incident” set a precedent for what is now being lauded by the CCP and netizens alike as the “Wukan model”, a method of

---

interaction between the government and the people to arrive at what both regard as a harmonious compromise.

Prolonged Struggle for Land Rights

Prior to land protests, the village of Wukan was coined a “model village” by the CCP for its exemplary reputation for public peace, civility, and harmony. However, the village had experienced a long history of land grabbing with no compensation forthcoming from the local government. Since 1993, when the Wukan Hong Kong Industrial Development Corporation was established, local authorities had been surreptitiously selling off communal village land to the development company.  

In 2009, this issue came to the attention of a majority of villagers, and a leaflet entitled “We’re not ‘Dead Village Slaves’” was issued in protest of this. At the same time, a delegation of twenty Wukan youth traveled to the Guangzhou Zhongshan Park to petition eleven provincial, city, county and small-town governments to halt the unjust actions of their local officials. By March 14, 2011, the sixth petition was brought before the Guangdong Provincial Complaints Bureau, this time by thirteen Wukan village representatives, a group elected with the local authorities’ permission.  

On September 21, 2011, three thousand villagers gathered in Wukan to discuss the developments and collectively petition the Lufeng County Government regarding

---


the building of the Jade Laurel Garden. A dozen villagers vandalized the Jade Laurel Garden construction site, and three Wukan youths were arrested. The next day, Wukan’s committee of voluntary civilian petitioners gathered for further discussion, but was disbanded by the local police, and street violence ensued. On September 23, 2011, thirteen village delegates from the voluntary committee met with county officials, who consented to abolish the villagers’ debt, return land and conduct an investigation on the incidents in the county.

Public Security Crackdown

On November 11, 2011, four thousand villagers prepared a petition for the Lufeng Municipal Government, and the mayor of the county, Qiu Jinxiong, appeared personally to address their demands. On December, 9, 2011, five of the thirteen elected representatives, including Xue Jinbo, were abducted by Public Security officers, held without trial and allegedly tortured. A Lufeng City official only informed Xue’s family of his whereabouts two days later, when Xue was reportedly admitted to a hospital in Shanwei. However, when the family arrived at the hospital, officials told them that Xue had arrived at the local prison at 7:00am the day before, and had died at 10:00am on that day. The family was only contacted at 11:00 p.m., thirteen hours after his death. The official cause of death reported was due to


a preexisting cardiac condition, and the local party paper reported that Xue’s family had agreed with the report, though Xue’s daughter later stated that her father had no history of heart problems.

The Wukan police did not permit the family to take photographs or videos of the dead man’s body and refused to return the corpse to the family for funeral rituals, stating that the corpse was state property and was to be cremated. Xue’s son, Xue Jiandi, was interviewed by worldwide news agency *Agence France-Presse*, and he stated that he only wanted his father’s body returned to the family, saying, “He belongs to us, not to the government.”

**THE SIEGE ON WUKAN**

In response to this injustice and the local government’s indifference on the part of the local government to their repeated petitions, Wukan villagers stormed the village on December 14, 2011. Rioters drove the local police and party officials out of the village, and Wukan became the first Chinese village in modern history to have declared village-wide autonomy from government officials and security forces. The police then launched a siege on Wukan, preventing food and goods from entering the village, and the government blocked all Internet reports on Wukan, Lufeng and Shanwei. This brought the situation in Wukan to the attention of netizens

---


247 Andrew Jacobs, “Village Revolts Over Inequities of Chinese Life”
worldwide, who quickly rallied to the cause and linked Chinese netizens and microbloggers to foreign reports on Wukan.

Internet Blockade

One day after the siege began, China’s International Business Times reported that “in Sina Weibo, if you search for “Wu Kan (吳坎)” the webpage will show, “According to legal regulations and government policy, the results for the search term “Wu Kan” cannot yet be displayed,” followed by suggestions for other hot topics on Sina Weibo. Even more than a month after the blockade, a search for microblogs regarding Wukan yielded error messages for microblog posts written between December 15 and January 23.

Using digital hidden transcript, microbloggers soon worked around the government regulations and began to discuss the issue on microblogs. New keywords began to appear, such as “W-kan” (W坎), “Wu-K” (吳K), or simply “WK”. While there were some attempts at censorship of those particular search terms, by mid-January, a handful of threads were created discussing the Wukan incident.


Figure 3.2: In a Sina Weibo search for “Wukan village”, using Romanization of the word “kan”, on December 17th, the search reports 238 results, yet displays none of the results, with the announcement “Sorry, we have not found anything related to this term, please modify your search term.” and a redirection below to an unrelated post on the Western zodiac.

This report of censorship was followed by an alert from Charles Custer, blogmaster of Chinageeks, who presumably had access to a VPN server. He reported that a microblog user had uploaded a video of the protest, but had his account deleted soon after. According to the report, police had chased a screaming woman out of the house. According to the BBC reporter Martin Patience, the villagers were shouting “Long Live the China Communist Party!” and “Defeat corruption, return the land!” A commentor on the article remarked, “If you had told me a few months ago that a Chinese village would unite, expel local officials and that a thousand police officers

would then unite to invade the village, I would tell you that you were insane.” The
dissident celebrity and artist Ai Wei Wei commented that the incident was a result of a
gross mismanagement of communications between the local people and the
government.\textsuperscript{251}

A more complex use of technology occurred in Wukan itself, where some young villagers attempted to communicate with the rest of China. Two high school students utilized group-communication software to transmit messages about the injustices in Wukan to 150 listeners. The staff of the unofficial Chinese internet news blog “Look at China” (\textit{Kan Zhong Guo}) were able to transcribe the broadcast and report on the situation on the ground.\textsuperscript{252} Wukan had officially become a landmark event in China’s media history. The media blockade was therefore insufficient to suppress news of the incident from spreading throughout China, and Wukan villagers were consciously pursuing international and domestic attention.

\textit{Foreign Media Reporting}

The Wukan siege drew the attention of the BBC and other foreign news media outlets, and Wukan’s proximity to Hong Kong meant that Hong Kong newspapers were soon reporting on the issue as well. The first paper to report on the situation in Wukan was the Hong Kong daily newspaper, Ming Pao. A reporter for the paper flouted local authorities’ orders not to enter the village to get first hand reports on the story, which went viral online among netizens observing the situation four days after

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{251} “Chinese Internet blocks Wu Kan village protest from search engines,” \textit{International Business Times}.
\end{itemize}
the siege began. He reported that the villagers had enough rice stored for seven days, along with donations of food from restaurant owners and the villagers’ own supplies from private vegetable gardens and fishing activities. Neighboring villages had also offered food donations to support the villagers’ battle. The reporter also observed that the villagers had re-launched demonstrations, using the same slogans reported by the BBC.

The news report noted that sick villagers were afraid of leaving the village to seek medical care. It described civilian sentries on foot and on motorcycle, armed with sticks guarding all entrances and exits to the village, who were expelling all suspicious entrants to the area, including journalists. The villagers also launched more rallies seeking redress for other incidents surrounding their activism against unjust land expropriation. Among these side movements were demands for a full autopsy and investigation into the death of Xue Jinbo. Yang Semao, chairman of the provisional council of representatives, demanded that the corpse not be cremated according to the orders of the local authorities, but that it be autopsied and the cause of death revised. 253 This success was celebrated by Chinese netizens, and Wukan remained a hot button topic on Chinese microblogs.

Inadequate Domestic Media Coverage

The microblogger Shantoudaxueshudong (汕头大学树洞) a student from Shantou, Guangdong, posted a photo of the Hong Kong Ming Pao on December 19, criticizing the failure of the Chinese press to cover the Wukan incident.

Figure 3.3: The microblog post states: “The whole world is paying attention to Wukan, except us idiots: the whole world (other than China), every periodical, television channel, features updates from the ‘Wukan Incident.’ But our great nation has a national media that is totally mute about this situation. We’re just digging our own graves.” The headline of Hong Kong Ming Pao, reads, “Village struggling for four months besieged by Public Security, has enough grain rations for 130 thousand people for 7 days.”

Other microbloggers also lamented the fact that Chinese newspapers did not cover the event more thoroughly and posted links to external sites for people with access to VPN to follow the event, with short summaries attached. The following image, from the Weibo account of user dingding1969 (丁丁的Twitter), is an example

of how villagers contacted the foreign press, and also how microbloggers circumvented the restrictions on foreign press reports on Wukan.\textsuperscript{255}

\textbf{Figure 3.4:} The post is a summary of a report by the BBC:

“\textit{BBC \textless Witness: Guangdong Wukan Village continues to be sealed by party police}\textgreater

A Wukan villager contacted a BBC China online correspondent and says that the entire village is gathered to mourn Xue Jinbo.

According to the report, seven thousand villagers were at the ceremony.

An anonymous villager that agreed to a BBC interview says that the Public Security Bureau (PSB) requests that the villagers sign a document confirming the truth of the PSB report before Xue’s corpse is returned to his family.”

The BBC report with the reported information appeared later that day at 10:34am Eastern Standard Time, about half a day after this microblog post was published.\textsuperscript{256}

\textsuperscript{255} dingding1969, "Wukan continues to be sealed by party police," Microblog, Sina Weibo, December 16, 2011, 10:43 a.m., http://s.weibo.com/weibo/%E7%83%8Fkan%E6%9D%91&rd=NzU4N&page=6 (accessed December 18, 2011)

\textsuperscript{256} Andrew Jacobs, "China village protest: Wukan mediator Xue Jinbo mourned."
Bridging Information Gaps through Microblogs

Earlier, a Swedish microblogger RuidianrenFredrik (瑞典人Fredrik) had begun a series of microblog posts documenting press activity in Wukan.²⁵⁷

Figure 3.5: RuidianFredrik posted at 10:10am on December 15th, “Xinhua has arrived at Wukan, what do they plan on reporting?” with a link to an article on the United Kingdom Telegraph, remarking on interviews conducted with Chinese state media officials and spokespersons. ²⁵⁸

This microblog on December 15th, 2011, is the earliest trace of the Wukan siege on Sina Weibo. RuidianrenFredrik (瑞典人Fredrik) continued to post informative links and screenshots for the next few days.


Figure 3.6: RuidianFredrik posted a picture of an iPhone screen at 12:55 p.m. on December 15th, publishing a text message reposted from other microbloggers, stating the new banned terms on Sina Weibo.

The message reads, “WLYeung: After a test run on December 14th, Sina Weibo has decided to ban: Lufeng, Wukan (in Chinese and the Romanized term), 'Wuya Kanke', ‘9.12’...tortured to death, sit-in, protest, siege...”\(^{259}\)
Figure 3.7:
Screenshot posted by RuidianFredrik of an iPhone with the news report from December 16th. On top of the report, RuidianFredrik remarks, “Wukan protest continues, more and more Western reporters appear.”
The report describes the mourning ceremony for Xiu Jinbo, where villagers set up an empty altar and demanded justice for the dead leader. The report also states that officials denied unnatural causes for Xiu’s death, but that Xiu’s family rejected that claim. The end of the report states that villagers inform the reporter that Xiu’s older brother was still being questioned by the Public Security Bureau, and that officials were attempting to create a financial settlement with Xiu’s family to stop their activism. Xiu’s family insisted that no money was necessary, only the return of his corpse, but the police refuse to return the body.260

Figure 3.8: Over the next few days, RuidianFredrik continued to post links to foreign news reports on Wukan. The following two posts were posted December 17th, 2011 at 4:26 p.m. and December 19, 4:15 a.m., both stating, “Today’s news report from Wukan” followed by a link to Telegraph UK news reports.²⁶¹

The foreign newspapers not only provided a fuller picture of the event than the Chinese newspapers, but also added a degree of credibility to claims that domestic Chinese media was unresponsive.

Local Officials: Containment and Compromise

The mayor of Shanwei County asserted to Xinhua reporters that “the authorities will firmly crack down on anyone who organizes and incites the villagers,” and that Xinhua news had reported the mayor’s assertions that Lin Zulian and Yang Semao were the ringleaders of the protest. It was a classic case of scapegoating; Lin and Yang were accused of organizing the villagers in building barricades around the village on December 8th, the day before the representatives were arrested, to “prevent officials from entering the village and stop perpetrators of earlier riots from leaving

the village and turning themselves in to the authorities.” The mayor also added that
the Chinese government was working to solve the village’s issues, but Lin and Yang
“spread rumors and encouraged the barricades”, thus setting back their work.262

Continued appeals to Central Government

The general theme of the discussions on Weibo was that the Wukan officials
were corrupt, and Xue Jinbo could not be permitted to die in vain. However, netizens
continued to call on the CCP to mete out the correct punishment and compensation.

Figure 3.9:
Microblogger Mianweisanshi (绵炜三世) writes, “The issue of Wukan village is in fact not that
complicated: firstly, it is that the officials have never made an agreement with the villagers regarding
the selling of the land. The money from the land sales has been distributed privately by the local
officials themselves.
Secondly, the village “elections” were a farce.
Thirdly, the financial accounts of the village are a mess and the officials are all suspected of
corruption.
From the underhanded, opaque practices of land sales to electoral fraud to corrupt officials, people's
legal rights and sense of right and wrong have been violated, and obviously, the more the authorities
try to cover it up, the angrier people will become.”263

Netizens also expressed anxieties that Sina Weibo would continue to delete
blog entries dealing with sensitive material due to the recent developments in Internet
regulation in China. They also lamented the willingness of Chinese people to turn

262 Ibid.

http://s.weibo.com/weibo/%25E7%2583%258Fkan%25E6%259D%2591&r=MTY5M&page=4
(accessed December 19, 2011)
against each other for personal gain, to the point where thugs and other corrupt petty criminals turned against their fellow citizens for to gain financial profit and to avoid political trouble.  

**Figure 3.10:**

Microblogger Songwenshisifeizi (颂文是死肥仔) posts, “We have no choice, Sina Weibo is not like that. I fear that the microblogs will be sealed. The masses are too weak, the authorities are too strong, the shit[sic] people are too selfish, they oppress and bully themselves, do we dare say that those party thugs are not shit[sic] people? Those people that drill for oil are not shit[sic] people? Those that make poisonous milk powder are not shit[sic] people? It has always been those shit[sic] people cooperating and working together, the actual people that are robbing us are the privileged shit[sic] people!”

*Protestors Threaten Escalation*

At 2:00pm on December 20, 2011, *China Economic Review* reported that the situation had reached an impasse, and Wukan villagers had threatened to march into the neighboring town of Lufeng if government officials failed to give in to their demands. That night, police retreated from their siege, Wukan villagers resumed negotiations with the Lufeng government.

---


Perhaps because of this perception of villagers becoming “harder to handle”, provincial authorities quickly responded to this threat with a compromise, and the villagers called off their protest on December 22, 2011. Yang Semao, one of the leaders of the Wukan voluntary committee, announced:

"We have called off our plan to march to the city government of Lufeng after Zhu Mingguo, Guangdong's deputy Party secretary, met with us and agreed to protect our interests…Zhu promised to acknowledge the legitimacy of the village's temporary representative council and agreed to release those arrested."  

*Figure 2.11: dingding1969 (丁丁的Twitter) reposts a report at 10:13 p.m. on December 20 from Voice of America. The microblog post reads, “VOA <China’s authorities remove the majority of police forces besieging Wukan> Wukan’s villagers say that the protestors have for the most part forced the authorities to make some concessions. The police forces besieging the village have for the most part retreated. The village representatives have resumed negotiations with the Lufeng local officials, and demand that the police completely cease the siege, permit reporters to examine the corpse of Xiu Jinbo, and allow the villagers to form and elect their own independent investigative committee. If the government officials agree to these conditions, the Wukan villagers will cancel Wednesday’s protest."* 

---


Wang Yukai, a professor at the Chinese Academy of Governance, stated in an interview with *Global Times* that because the representative council in the village was elected in a popular election that was not officially organized by the government, the recognition of the council by authorities as a legitimate ruling body would be a step in the right direction.268

In an interview with *Nanfang Daily*, a regional newspaper, the deputy Party secretary of Guangdong, Zhu Mingguo, conceded that there had "been mistakes in local government work” and that before September 21, petitions by Wukan villagers were “rational and supported by fact.” But Zhu maintained that the villagers were wrong to protest, and he urged protestors to admit to their wrongdoing. The government also agreed to return Xue’s corpse and continue to investigate the case. The armed police besieging the village left on the evening of December 20, when the villagers first declared their intention to expand the riot. Yang said that the villagers had cancelled their plan to petition higher authorities.269

*Fall of Zheng Yanxiong*

Not all officials shared the Zhu Mingguo’s conciliatory attitude. Shanwei Municipal Party Secretary Zheng Yanxiong was interviewed about his failure to control and react to the situation in Wukan. He said that the demands that he refused to address had been rational, but the methods unreasonable. This statement showed clear disregard for the six petitions brought before different local officials in a nonviolent manner. He also made several insensitive comments, such as:

---

268 Ibid.

269 Ibid.
“You think deploying the armed police doesn’t cost money?! There are hundreds of armed police and for the police to be stationed here means our mayor’s wallet becomes thinner and thinner by the day, I’m telling you.”

Zheng also presented himself and other local cadres as the victims of protests, saying:

“Every day, we become less powerful than the day before, the methods of control are less and less available to us, and our responsibilities become greater while the ordinary common people demand more, getting smarter every day and becoming more difficult to manage by the day.”

He claimed that even if he were dismissed, a similar official would replace him, and the situation would not change. He also accused the villagers of using methods were unreasonable and out of control.

Zheng’s remarks, though insensitive, betray a blatant insecurity that is prevalent in the consciousness of local party cadres now that they must cater to both central government and private business interests, while maintaining control of the villages they are responsible for. Further, the dissemination of the information to the foreign press, and his failure to ensure control over what was reported in the news was humiliating and a sign of incompetence. Zheng complained that the villagers had contacted foreign journalists in order to create a commotion and make him look bad. He asserted that foreign journalists were “all too eager for [Chinese people] to get into fights, for socialism to fall into chaos. That’s when they’ll be happy.”

---


271 Ibid.

272 Ibid.
He also delivered the one line that became a humorous internet parody to define the public perception of his farcical role in the Wukan incident, “If outside media can be trusted, then mother pigs can climb trees.”

Figure 3.12: Screenshot of Zheng Yanxiong at the press conference where he denounced foreign press involvement in China’s domestic affairs, at the moment when he delivered the line, “If outside media can be trusted, then mother pigs can climb trees.”

---

273 Ibid.
274 Ibid.
Figure 3.13:
“Mother pigs can indeed climb trees.” Zheng’s line inspired this piece of political humor, which secured Zheng’s reputation as an incompetent party cadre and a target for scorn in the Chinese netizen community. *In the lower right corner, the artist wrote, “Crazy? Upload and pass on!”* \(^{275}\)

Election of Local Activist

On January 16, 2012, the central government permitted Wukan to elect a new Party Chief. The formerly scapegoated ringleader of the protestors, Lin Zuluan, was elected by the villagers to be the Party Chief of Wukan, and he was charged with the task of organizing the village’s next election. Lin was one of the thirteen representatives elected by the village to lead their land protests. His predecessor had been chief for forty-two years and was accused of involvement with the land grabs. A villager, Zhang, optimistically commented in an interview with *Agence France-Presse* that this was "a decision that everyone in Wukan supports and it is an important move that will help resolve the land and village finance disputes…the former party committee has been dissolved…and are under investigation for

\(^{275}\) Ibid.
corruption.” Though Xue’s body had yet to be returned, and the land issue had not been fully resolved, the atmosphere had relaxed somewhat.276

At the same time, doubts remained as to whether or not further progress would be made regarding the land expropriation and compensation, given that the election appeared bring the village into a more conciliatory position with the CCP. Throughout the protest, the CCP remained in good standing with the people; recall that people tended to blame corrupt local officials. There is the sentiment that once local officials change, policy implementation will change, but without central party oversight over the officials, it is unclear how any changes can remain permanent.

**THE WUKAN MODEL AND LINGERING TENSIONS**

The Wukan “Mass Incident”, (as it was officially referred to), has opened up a new strategy for both villages and local authorities to cope with land grab issues and mass protests. On one hand, officials such as Zhu Mingguo predict that there will be many imitative incidents in the future, as villagers rather than individuals or households begin to organize mass protests, not just individual or household battles against appropriation of their property.277 Furthermore, it is expected that past cases of land grievances may be opened up once again to investigation and appeal.278

---


278 Ibid.
Ultimately, the Wukan villagers’ successes do not mark the end of China’s land grab conflicts. Wukan also drew the attention of the foreign press away from issues in the big cities towards issues in rural areas, reminding the world of the oft-neglected sector of China not in Beijing or Shanghai. Beyond this, also, is a consciousness that even rural citizens, if sufficiently motivated and organized, can utilize foreign media for their own ends. The Zheng Yanxiong incident suggests that foreign media was not only a threat to local cadres, but that foreign media can be utilized by locals to bypass local officials and contact the central government. As China draws more and more foreign media attention each day, this consciousness is crucial for future protest efforts.

Broader Effects on the Netizen Community

Netizens are also becoming increasingly aware of the key communicative role they play in creating and maintaining popular memory online. On Lunar New Year, along with the usual seasonal greetings came admonitions to remain conscious and vigilant, and memorialize the happenings of 2011.
Microblogger Koushui_sir （口水_sir） wrote at 12:59am on the first day of the Lunar New Year, in a post addressed to the central government and the local bureaucrats alike, “they killed my people and you still did not investigate, you group of barbarians...why do we feed you? You suck our blood, buy our lives, one day, you will not be able to run away. We feed you, and we can also kill you.”279 Microblogger Mangmanglucheng （茫茫旅程） replied sympathetically, “Writing this, my eyes are full of tears...we forgot 7.23 (Wenzhou), we’ve forgotten Wukan...how much can we still remember? Our rage lost to our lack of persistence. Eventually, who have we satisfied – we know this more clearly than anyone else. When we have to face horror alone, no one can complain, you did this to yourself.”280

It is clear that that unless local and central officials remain open and willing to accept dialogue with citizens, protests will become larger, more organized and more intensely publicized. With this snowballing threat of political disorder, the government and the Party will find that censorship is no longer an effective strategy, and, as Zheng Yanxiong noted, repression can at times be more damaging to the state apparatus. What this means for Wukan in particular still remains uncertain. What this means for China is that the tension between having too much and too little power still exists. The central and local governments have a great deal of power in theory, but in practice, the actual implementation of this power depends largely on the “powerless” masses that can still revolt.


**Conclusion: The Value of Online Discourse in China**

The Internet has emerged in the past three decades as a public space defined by spontaneity, ambiguous norms, and rapid transmission of information. These properties have allowed online discourse to play a key role in changing the nature of citizenship in China as a result of increased participation in political life on the Internet. China’s one-party political system has not prevented Chinese netizens from developing and expressing alternative political viewpoints. This form of interaction is defined by its complexity, changeability and subtlety, and is most fully expressed through the proliferation of informal channels of communication and information sharing. Online information streams are decentralized and largely difficult for the government to control, though the CCP is certainly attempting to rein in online discourse by requesting identification information for bloggers and blocking sensitive topics.

In Wenzhou and Wukan, individuals online and offline have interacted to address long-standing systemic problems in their governmental institutions. Through creating vigorous online discourse, they have drawn both popular and governmental attention to these problems, and have begun to seek solutions. Moreover, in comparison with the rich online political dialogue on microblogs and news sites, netizens have framed traditional domestic media as inadequate, inaccurate and unreliable, and more individuals are turning to microblogs and online news sites to gain information.
Both of my case studies address long-term systemic problems in China’s economic and political system. The Wenzhou study addressed the CCP’s unbalanced mission to modernize the country as soon as possible and break international records for high-speed trains in order to enhance national prestige, while neglecting the safety and well-being of Chinese citizens. In its haste to unveil the record-breaking high-speed railway in time for the anniversary of the CCP, the Ministry of Railways overlooked some major flaws in the construction of the railway were overlooked.

Through decentralized netizen journalism, such as in the case of the *paike* videos of the Wenzhou railway crash, netizens were able to turn their gaze upon the actions of their government. The actions of the railway ministry, the rescue forces and Wen Jiabao were videotaped and analyzed. These opinions became part of a wider discourse about the government’s obligations to its citizens. Through this critical observation, netizens initiated a system of what is known as “sous-veillance,” surveillance as a form of grassroots activism.281 In Wukan, despite the Internet blockade, this form of surveillance also occurred with assistance from netizens located elsewhere who were willing and able to relay information back to China.

“ZHONGGUOISM” AND PUBLIC CHOICE

I regard the Internet as a neutral discursive medium rather than a force of democratization. Democratization is a loaded term, with heavy implications of Western influence, modernity and “rational” Western thought. Thus, by sidestepping this and analyzing only the effects of China’s online political discourse as something

uniquely centered on China, I aspire to be as realistic as possible when I describe what China’s netizens can hope to gain through online discourse.

In his exploration of public choice in Chinese political life, Zhao Tingyang remarks that democracy is not a panacea for social problems, and that: “[i]n fact, careful and sincere observations can better detect truth and come to a better reflection of public choice than do democratic elections, which become spoilt by money, misled by media and distorted by strategic votes.”282 He goes on to emphasize the need to focus on relationships, noting that “the political makes sense only when it deals with ‘relations’ rather than ‘individuals’, and the political is meant to speak for co-existence rather than a single existence...This political conception could find a strong argument in Chinese ontology, the ontology of relations, instead of the western ontology of things.”283 Such an relationship-centered approach is only possible through networks formed by honest and spontaneous discourse, both online and offline.

The Chinese independent intellectual, Ji An, identifies a type of nationalism that can be labeled as “Zhongguoism” (China-ism), whereby people can spontaneously build a peaceful country rather than allow foreign democratic ideals or the central government dictate what is best for them.284 Online discourse allows for these spontaneous conversations and thought experiments to occur. Offering

283 Ibid., 33.
284 Zhou, Historicizing Online Politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China, 190.
otherwise extreme or dangerous thoughts on the Internet - and having them moderated by one’s peers and equals - allows individuals to develop the discipline of moderating their own thoughts and interests, while recognizing that there are innate interests that they may share with other co-nationals and their government as well.

Ji An further suggests that political discourse should avoid viewing democracy as an ultimate goal in itself. He contents that the term democracy is not specific enough to denote the goodness or justness of a society or system of political thought. As Ji himself says:

“My friend, don't talk 'democracy' to me; what do you want to say, what do you want to control, how do you want to control it? Please speak using your own name and your own words. It is not necessary to use 'democracy' as a trademark to sell your goods; it will be fine if you sell them using your own brand name.”

285 Zhou, Historicizing Online Politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China, 191.

ONLINE “SOUS-VEILLANCE” AND GOVERNMENTAL ACCOUNTABILITY

A defining aspect of both case studies was the use of citizen journalism to turn the public gaze upon political actors. These netizen journalists report from the actual location of conflict, and maintain visibility of the on-the-ground situation by disseminating videos, microblog discussions, blog posts and articles to keep the online community up-to-date and maintain prolonged interest in the topic. “Sous-veillance” where grassroots activists use cameras and text messages to coordinate action and create a popular history as a counterpoint to official history, is a powerful method of creating popular memory as a counter-narrative to the official

285 Zhou, Historicizing Online Politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China, 191.
interpretation of historical events. In China, many of these “sous-veillers” are in fact journalists for state-sponsored papers such as People’s Daily. These journalists are in the privileged position of being able to access the sites of the incidents with few limitations, though they are typically given directives about how and what to write. However, outside of their professional writings, many of these journalists keep online microblogs and blogs, and post more complete reports under their online aliases.

In Wukan, “sous-veillance” became an international endeavor because the government had shut down all online communication for the region. However, the netizens were still able to maintain heterogeneous discourse by posting summaries of international newspaper articles on Wukan. The state thus lost monopoly over the ability to interpret and narrate happenings to citizens in other parts of the country, as well as to the world. Moreover, among the netizens that were not physically located in China, they gained a sense of solidarity with the villagers in Wukan as they took it upon themselves to overcome the Internet blockade and maintain contact with the resistance movement.

In both cases, the central party acted in favor of the citizens’ complaints, further lowering the status of local party cadres who acted unlawfully according to the interpretations of rightful resistors both online and offline. In these processes of communication, netizens gained a sense of political efficacy, such as when the villagers in Wukan managed to have their first truly independent election. While actual monetary compensation has not yet been granted to the villagers of Wukan,

---

they celebrate the gains they have made, and present new models for political resistance and behavior to other members of their imagined community. In cases where netizens protest the moral grounds of governmental action, there is a consciousness of deeper ethical concerns beyond the immediate case of socioeconomic injustice. As Liang Qichao, a Chinese political thinker from the early twentieth century noted, the question of public discourse and resistance is not, “Can my gains from suing the government cover what I lose in court expenses?” but the political and ethical implications of fighting for one’s right to freedom and security.\textsuperscript{287} While compensation is no doubt an important part of lobbying for the social welfare of citizens, the message sent to the CCP and to local officials through both of these movements is that Chinese citizens are legally literate and have access to resources that allow them to hold their government accountable.

In “The Question of People’s Rights in the Provincial Constitutions”, Gao Yihan states that individuals should have the right to freedom of speech and thought, not just in theory, but in practice. Beyond political rhetoric about freedom in China, the state needs to demonstrate a real commitment to being accountable to its citizens.\textsuperscript{288} Wukan and Wenzhou, as intensely trending and publicized incidents, were on one hand a challenge to the actions of the local governments, but were also an opportunity for both central and local governments to demonstrate their ability to redress wrongs and show their willingness to reform and be responsive to their needs.


citizens. These events were prime public and international relations opportunities for the CCP, and the awareness of the gaze of both the Chinese public and the world moderates the actions of the Party.

National Stability and Party Reputation

The CCP central party officials have a deep awareness of the type of reputation that they want as a state apparatus that governs a socialist free-market economy. In a government-sponsored White Paper in 1991 on human rights in China, the official rhetoric has it that “it is the fundamental wish and demand of the Chinese people and a long-term, urgent task of the Chinese government to maintain national stability... [and] secure a well-off livelihood for the people throughout the country so that their right to subsistence will no longer be threatened.” However, the White Paper also states that the state of human rights in China should be judged relative to the history of the country. Often, the argument has been raised that due to China’s national uniqueness, the party must regulate discourse more carefully in order to prevent the vast country from descending into disorder and chaos. However, especially the siege of Wukan demonstrates that the excessive use of regulation on the part of the Public Security Bureau and the Central Propaganda Bureau, when taken too far, can at times lead to even more disorder.

Instead of letting the state dictate the nature of their uniqueness, Chinese netizens are creating a cacophonous stream of opinions, narratives, and critiques of a


290 Ibid., 357.
variety of lived experiences in China. This heterogeneity is key to the development of political efficacy in the Chinese online public, and is instrumental in creating and maintaining a free space in which individuals can shape their country.

In *From Comrade to Citizen*, Goldman notes that “in a political system without an independent judiciary or elected legislature, freedom of the press and association, an opposition party, or independent unions, one of the only ways for individuals is to focus attention on their grievances is to start protests; protests can be risky, but they do get attention.” The highly visible and vigorous protests regarding Wukan and Wenzhou signaled to the party that the state apparatus was falling short of the expectations of Chinese citizens.

**PARTY INSECURITY AND INTENSIFIED REGULATION**

In October 2011, the 6th Plenum of the 17th Communist Party Congress again raised the issue of Internet regulation. While the desire to improve the regulation of Internet discourse was clear, it was also affirmed that sites were unlikely to be shut down altogether.

---


A Chinese netizen, Keso, outlined three reasons why the government would not shut down Weibo and other similar sites:

1. People need an outlet for their views and emotions, and a visible one is safer than an invisible one;
2. Sina Weibo is controlled by people the government trusts, and the risks from shutting down Weibo are greater than the risks from not shutting it down;
3. The government can use Weibo to its advantage.²⁹³

Despite all this, users of Sina Weibo and Tencent, as well as various other microblogging portals in China, experienced a shock when President Hu Jintao came into conflict with the domestic security head Zhou Yongkang. The conflict concerned the dismissal of Bo Xilai, the former CCP Committee Secretary of Chongqing on March 14, 2012.²⁹⁴

At any rate, when the rift between Hu and Zhou was revealed, a series of rumors circulated on microblogs about a potential coup led by Zhou in Beijing.²⁹⁵ A few days after Bo’s dismissal, Sina Weibo blocked his name on its search engine.²⁹⁶ On March 31, sixteen websites were shut down, and six people were detained for “fabricating or disseminating online rumors,” according to the State Internet

²⁹³ Ibid.
²⁹⁴ Scott Greene, "Coup Chatter Wakes The Great Firewall," Online Report, China Digital Times, March 21, 2012, http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2012/03/coup-chatter-wakes-the-great-firewall (accessed April 1, 2012) Bo’s dismissal was significant due to his reputation for heavy-handed populism and strong stance against crime in the Western municipality, and the fact that it came about abruptly when his Public Security Bureau head, Wang Lijun, broke the ranks and sought asylum at a United States embassy. There was speculation that Wang was seeking asylum from Bo due to his involvement in a corruption scandal.¹⁵
²⁹⁶ Greene, "Coup Chatter Wakes The Great Firewall."
Information Office (SIIO). Comments were also disabled on Sina Weibo for three days, and a Sina public-relations representative stated that the blocking of comments was to prevent the circulation of rumors and illegal information in general, not any particular incident. Netizens received the following message:

“To all Weibo users, recently, comments left by microbloggers have started to contain much illegal and detrimental information, including rumors. In an effort to clean them up in one stroke, commenting function of Sina Weibo will be temporarily disabled from 8 a.m. March 31 to 8 a.m. April 3. After the clean-up, we will reopen comments section. Necessary clean-up of information is conducive to providing everyone with a better communicating atmosphere. Thank your for your support.”

It was speculated that the government-mandated block of commenting functions was a punishment for Sina Weibo’s failure to enforce the real-name registration regulation proposed in October 2011. ChinaGeeks founder Charles Custer noted that the restrictions was meant to send a message to the companies,

“If [the CCP] think Weibo poses a real threat to social stability, they will not hesitate to pull the plug...it will never come to that, because Sina and Tencent aren’t stupid. They may have been playing fast-and-loose with the real name regulation rules...they both understand that complying with regulators is the only way a company can do business in China.”


**Figure 4.1:** From Meiermi’s microblog. The character on the left says, “Hey, is it true that forbidding comments can prevent rumors?” and the one on the right says, “Of course not, [the SIIO] just wants to remind you who’s boss.”

---

**IMPORTANCE OF ONLINE DISCOURSE**

It is evident that the CCP understands that the Internet can be used as a tool for social change; as such, it is expedient for the Party to monitor the Internet closely, yet be sensitive to the issues that are expressed through it, rather than clamping down on discourse altogether. The Internet regulatory system is more than a mechanism for repressing or permitting the circulation of information. Internet activism is still highly decentralized, and laws governing online behavior are still inconsistent with no clear system of enforcement. This gray “zone of indifference” where actors can experiment with different modes of expression and discourse has drawn attention from all sectors of Chinese society and will remain an important arena in which long-standing social and political questions are discussed and resolved in a practical, not rhetorical manner. As Zhao posits, in Chinese political life, “we do not say that...[an] institution or a political system is better but rather does better as evidenced.”

---


303 Zhao, "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All under-Heaven'," 31.
more leverage for political bargaining. Further, this bargaining need not be
adversarial, despite the emerging insecurities and uncertainty facing China. Zhao
argues that “one of the principles in Chinese political philosophy is...‘to turn the
enemy into a friend,’ and it would lose its meaning if it...[did] not remove conflicts
and pacify social problems - in a word, to ‘transform’ (化) the bad into the good.”
If channels of communication remain at least partially open, there is still hope that
social and political relationships in China can remain flexible and become more
responsive to citizens’ real needs.

304 Ibid., 34.
Bibliography†


----, "20110723 Wenzhou - Google Document: Please send information to D3115D301@Gmail.com." Accessed April 5, 2012. https://spreadsheets.google.com/a/wesleyan.edu/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0AhAAz5vWhQpmdG1VOlVHWGM2RWk2cHJPe3ZDRzZvdVE&hl=zh_TW&f=true&noheader=true&gid=0.


† Where readily available, I have cited the sources by their full legal names. Where names have been unavailable, I have used their online usernames. Where unavailable, the name of the source creator has been left blank. All screenshots and quotes are the property of the bloggers that created them.


Chen, Lumin. "Dou shi pufa re de huo" (The Disaster is All Due to the Legal Education Drive). Minzhu yu fazhi (Democracy and Rule of Law), no. 11 (6 June 2001)


Fan, Jinxue. "Lun falii xinyang weiji yu Zhongguo fazihua" (On the Crisis of Faith in Law and China's Effort to Build the Rule of Law). Shandong shehui kexue (Shandong Social Sciences), no. 6 (November 1997)


Li, Changqi. "Nongcun fazhi jianshe ruogan jiben wenti de sikao" (Reflections on some Basic Questions Regarding Building Rule of Law in the Countryside). *Xiandai faxue (Modern Legal Studies)*, 23, no. 2 (April 2001)


Lian, Jimin. "Min gao guan renda jiandu zuo houdun" (People's Congress Supervision Supports Ordinary People Suing Officials). *Minzhu yu fazhi (Democracy and Rule of Law)*, no. 7 (April 6, 2000)


----, "Railway Spokesman Wang Yongping responds to Wenzhou incident." Video. Youku. July 24, 2011. http://static.youku.com/v1.0.0188/v/swf/loader.swf?VideoIDS=XMig4MTQwOTA4&embedid=OTkuNTAuOTluNDgCNzlMwMzUyMjcCY2hpOnFkavdpGFsdGlivZXMubmV0Ai9zcGFjZS9XaGV0aGVyX3IvdV9iZWXpZXZlX2l0X29yX25vdCxfXQlRTJlODA1OTlzX3VwX3RyX3IvdSxfYnV0X0lfZG9fYW55d2F5Lg.


