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‘Dear Premier, I finally escaped on YouTube’: A Cyberconflict Perspective on Chinese Dissidents

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‘The struggle is worthwhile, if it provides new ways to communicate with people and society’.

‘If someone is not free, I am not free’.

(Ai Wei Wei).



Image 1 and 2. Screenshots of artist and dissident Ai Wei Wei’s parody of PSY’s Gangnam style on YouTube incorporating handcuffs in his dance routine.

Introduction

This chapter employs the cyberconflict perspective (Karatzogianni, 2006; 2009; 10 March 2010; 2012a; 2012b) to offer an in-depth analysis of Chinese dissidents in the People's Republic of China (PRC) focusing particularly on the last decade. Although cyberconflict as a framework was formulated to examine conflicts transferring online -- ICTs used as resource or weapon in online and offline mobilization and propaganda wars, such as the anti-globalization and anti-Iraq war movements or the ethnoreligious conflicts in Israel-Palestine, India-Pakistan and others during the pre-social media era of digital development -- it has proved subsequently useful to examine conflicts and resistances in rapidly accelerating hybrid media environments. For example cyberconflict analysis was used in developing theory on resistance networks against state and capital and the differentiation between active and reactive network formations (Karatzogianni and Robinson 2010). Also, theory on the impact of transformations of technosocial agency on orders of dissent in protest movements (Karatzogianni and Schandorf, 20 October 2012) and intercultural conflict and dialogue in transnational migrant networks and digital diasporas (MIG@NET WP 10 September 2012).

A cyberconflict perspective would discuss how politico-economic reforms, the media environment, and e-governance have affected dissent in China (i.e. communist party ideology, constructions of social and political identities, representations of and by dissidents, and link to e-governance; control of information, level of censorship; alternative sources; media effects on policy; political contest). Second cluster of elements of concern would be the effect of ICTs on mobilization structures, organizational forms, participation, recruitment, tactics and goals of dissidents, as well as changes in framing processes and the impact of the political opportunity structure on resistances. Third, in relation to ethnic, ethnoreligious and cultural dissent, how the communist party state and dissident group identities are constructed in relation to ethnic/religious/cultural difference, and the national and competing identities construction. Also, hacktivism (or invariably termed digital activism, tech activism, cyberactivism) and information warfare in China would be discussed in a variety of settings, especially in relation to social networking media and contemporary dissent.

As this chapter is of a more limited nature, it restricts in discussing a few of the most relevant components especially relevant to recent events in the history of Chinese dissent, namely the political and historical context, media components and e-governance, and dissent in China in the age of social media.

Political Environment and Historical Context of Dissent

The potential succession of China as the next global hegemon is not the object of this chapter, although it obviously systemically contextualises dissent in China in relation to wider forms of resistance networks in the world system against the hierarchies produced by the social logics of state and capital (Karatzogianni and Robinson 2010). The Google-China cyberconflict in 2010 reflected the antagonism between the U.S. and China in terms of cyberattacks, allegations of industrial cyberespionage, and

human rights questions inevitably surfaced. At the same time, censorship, surveillance and the ethical issues over American foreign policy and business to 'promote' human rights as part of their national and corporate social responsibility respectively became part of the discussion (Karatzogianni 10 March 2010).

In April 2012, Chen Guangcheng fled his house arrest to the US Embassy in Beijing. He is a longtime advocate, known as 'the barefoot lawyer', and blind from an early age, who since 2005 spent four years in prison for his work against abuses in official family planning practices and remained under detention escaping to the US embassy. Negotiations between the two countries resulted in him given permission by China to study in the U.S. Increased connectivity of dissidents to transnational networks outside China through the digital public sphere means that more perhaps is to follow in that regard.

'Mainstream' affluent educated Chinese are also voting with their feet, as they abandon China and although few emigrants from China cite politics, they talk of an at-all-costs strategy responsible for ruining the environment, as well as 'a deteriorating social and moral fabric that makes China feel like a chillier place than when they were growing up' (Johnson 2 November 2012). Moreover, this is a political environment where communism has been increasingly abandoned and so the party has to rely on coercion and force to control the population (Kurlatzik 2003: 52). The lack of clear progress toward greater respects for rights threatens China's prospects in the world: 'Though many nations are willing to refrain from criticizing Beijing at the United Nations and in other international fora, none of the world's major democracies will treat China as a true equal until it develops a respect for civil liberties' and 'accepts the rule of law' (ibid., 57). Indeed, as one of the editors of this volume exasperates (Rawnsley, 2007):

When will China's political leadership realize that free speech and freedom of publication are indispensable for governance, and are especially crucial for continuing of China's modernization and development?

And yet, it is the historical context, which can provide the answer to the up until now failure of protest, dissidents and resistance groups to topple the 'Communist' regime, effectuate reform or engage in any sort of dialogue with the elites forming the hierarchies of the state apparatuses. Besides the obvious crackdown and cruelty of a regime that is intensely authoritarian and has come to resemble fascist everyday practices, this analysis supports the assertion by Kelliher (1993) that one of the reasons has been dissidents' demand of liberalization instead of democratization. To this, my analysis adds that such an ideological framing of the identity and strategy of Chinese dissent has damaged and will continue to damage the dissident movement.

Kelliher (1993) has argued that to understand what was termed 'the democracy movement' (*minyun*) in its various phases (1987-9, 1986-7 and 1989) means to 'examine how Chinese intellectuals conceived of democracy; what political role...assigned for themselves; and what sort of elite-mass relations prevailed within the movement, between intellectuals, on the one hand, and workers and peasants, on the other' (p.380). In his analysis, Kelliher argues that mainstream activists who dominated the movement focused on liberalization, as in the establishment of rights to protect people's freedoms from government interference. It was only radical elements of the movement who pushed for democratization and popular sovereignty. The exile journal *China Spring* talked of 'first strike for human rights and then for democracy'.

It is worth diverting here to add that one of the major articulators of Chinese dissidence are political exiles and the diaspora in Western countries, Hong Kong, and Macao (Shu-Yun Ma 1993), and Taiwan (ibid., and media in Taiwan Rawsley, M.Y.T 2012).

The Kelliher argument is significant also in another sense. Intellectuals monopolized the debate, creating an idea that excluded mass supporters and were unable to talk to peasants and workers in a language they understood, while the urban-rural divide devastated prospects for a mass democratic movement (Kelliher 1993: 381). This democracy was limited in a sense to intellectuals to the extent that Kelliher argues that ‘the notion of elite democracy was a close cousin to the new authoritarianism (*xin quanweizhuyi*) - the hard government/soft economy variety, the notion that democracy would have to wait until the economy developed (ibid).

Furthermore, in the transnational panopticon created by global information flows Chinese citizens participate in a neoliberal governmentality (Fong 2007). Ho-fung Hung and Lam-ching Ip (2012) describe Hong Kong as an offshore civil society residing simultaneously inside and outside China’s sovereign power. The rise of community movements fighting development in 2008-9 (against the Hong Kong Express Rail Link), and liberal media organizations from Hong Kong targeting the mainland, point to a stubbornness to hold on to civil society and freedoms and stay on the path to democratization.

And yet, Chinese citizens

with no ties to the government or media were complicit in efforts to hide, challenge, or downplay the very discourse of Chinese backwardness they helped produce. Their complicity resembled less the obedience of subjects who feared government repression than participation in the kind of neoliberal governmentality described by Foucault, in which the individual is made part of the state through regimes of knowledge discipline, and practice rather than overt repression.

(ibid. 534)

Add to the impact of neoliberal governmentality, the political culture in China, where there is emphasis on sacrificing for the collective in an idealistic manner against individualism, and where public rhetoric is lofty, symbolic and moralistic (Pye 1990) and the political mix can be impossible for dissidents to overcome.

A Parenthesis: Dissent and Information Uncertainty

Before delving into the media environment and e-governance highlights of the Chinese case and their relevance to dissidence, a brief parenthesis must be inevitably hypertexted into our discussion. The first issue involves discussing dissent on a more general level, its value for societies (Falk 2008-9) and the second spending a bit more

time on the mechanics of dissent and the role of information in affecting revolutionary behaviour (Ginkel and Smith's 1999 game theory model).

Falk (2008-9: 252) follows Sunstein's (2003) *Why Societies Need Dissent* where he argues that societies can blunder when blindly following what others do, due to social cascades where large numbers of people in organizations think or do something because of the beliefs and motivations of early movers. As a result, Falk thinks that protecting dissent is more than protecting dissidents, we are protecting our own social and individual interests. In

authoritarian regimes dissidents hold the only hopes of nonviolent change and political evolution. In democracies, we need dissent to safeguard and protect our most basic civil liberties, for a litmus test of their subversion remains the extent to which we trade away liberty for enhanced security.

(Falk 2008-9: 253).

Besides the political advantages of accepting dissent as a vital part of a well functioning society, there is also the issue of information. The information environment that Ginkel and Smith (1999) base their game theoretic comparison of Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution and the Tiananmen Square democracy movement might have significantly changed, for example in terms of the acceleration of global information networks. However, due to the extremely controlled media and telecommunications environment in China, more than a few of their conclusions remain relevant. Ginkel and Smith contend that repressive regimes last as long as they do in the face of massive public discontent due to information uncertainty and in their model, the depth of information affects revolutionary outcomes (ibid., p. 310). In fact, citizens will not revolt unless prospects to succeed are high and they will not know until they actually rebel. In their own words:

The government is uncertain about the discontent of the people. The dissidents do not know whether the mob will follow their call for mobilization and cannot know with certainty the strength of government. The mob is not sure that it can trust the dissidents and is wary of challenging the government. Often beliefs persist, unchanged for many years. In effect, the system can become informationally frozen.

(ibid.)

Another important issue involves what resource mobilization theorists term the political opportunity structure (for applications see Karatzogianni, 2006). In the Velvet Revolution dissidents looked to events in Poland and Hungary, so in that sense 'exogenous events throw new information into the system. With the informational uncertainties conquered, revolutionary participation cascades, and the mob rapidly overthrows the government' (Ginkel and Smith 1999: 304). In Tiananmen there was no external signal that the government was weak and did not make concessions, there was control of information and there was no communication between the dissidents and the government, while there was in cases where revolutions were successful. Pye (2001) also comments on the publication of the Tiananmen papers that the leaders of the regime relied on highly informal and essentially extralegal decision-making practices. These lessons have kept the Chinese communist party in power.

At the time of writing, November 2012, an once a decade change of leadership in the communist party is occurring in China. Remarkably, the Tiananmen paranoia has meant that the regime has forbidden pigeons, balloons, and handles on the windows of taxis had to be removed in fear of the dissemination of dissident material. Amnesty reported an intense crackdown on dissidents to prevent protest with at least 130 people detained since September, dozens of activists placed under house arrest, individuals removed from Beijing, offices of community groups closed down, and activists held in 'black jails' (unofficial unlawful secret places of detention). The Ministry of Information Technology expressed the need to 'seal the network' (*fengwang*), during the Party Congress, and it was impossible to access the New York Times article exposing the financial operations of Premier Wen Jiabao (Barboza, 26 October 2012). Controls were imposed on the transport network to restrict movements to places protests are expected, Beijing, Tibet and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. The Beijing Aizhixing Institute of Health Education, which offers advice to workers and migrants closed after its staff were threatened (Amnesty 2 November 2012). Ping-Pong balls, remote-control toy airplanes were also banned, cabdrivers were promised rewards for turning in suspicious passengers in, and at least half the capital's prostitutes were reportedly arrested or driven out of town (Jacobs 3 November 2012).

The Economic Times (3 November 2012) reported that authorities banned the words 'death', 'die' or 'down' from songs on television. Music composer Gao Xiaosong wrote on his microblog the words were deemed 'unlucky'. The outlet quotes a microblogger: 'In the face of these absurdities, we are powerless. It's a reminder that no matter how ridiculous and comical, this is an era that we can't laugh in.' (ibid.). Ai Wei Wei, an international artist and famous dissident, who is quoted in the start of the chapter and is going to be discussed more extensively below, said his police minders allowed him to engage with anything, except the coming party congress. 'To be honest, it's O.K. because it's just an internal meeting for those people. It has nothing to do with me. Or with anyone else, really' (Jacobs 1 November 2012b).

In addition, Shao Jiang (1 November 2012), another leading dissident writes in what in one paragraph summarizes the political climate in the country:

"Stability maintenance" has been bolstered as a way to strip the rights of human rights lawyers, activists, petitioners and digital activists. This is a departure from the reign of President Jiang in the 1990s, which was characterized by its suppression of members of the China Democracy Party and Falun Gong practitioners. Methods of suppression under the recent administration have become more calculating than before, with authorities making blatant and extensive use of diverse and often harsher techniques to retaliate against activists, including abduction, enforced disappearance, torture, illegal detention in "black jails," soft detention, forced "tourism" (a form of residential surveillance away from home), and trumped-up charges like "disrupting public order" or "tax evasion."

Media components and E-governance

Delving into the media context, it is worth mentioning the centrality of e-governance for the regime as a panacea mechanism to solve what is a crisis of governance. Kluver (2005: 76) is convinced that too much scholarship and media attention is spent on internet infrastructure development or political control and so he concentrates on e-governance in China as an attempt to deal with this crisis of governance:

‘Urbanization, the rapid emergence of new economic classes, and the forces unleashed by openness to the outside world have introduced instability to social and political relations that have threatened to introduce the “chaos,” *hunluan*, that the Chinese state is mythically charged to resist’ (ibid., p. 78). This is also supported by earlier accounts. ‘The Chinese government has chosen to address through information technology, problems of corruption, transparency and local government reform, and the development of poor areas’ (Kalathil and Boas, 2003: 13).

A second crisis Kuver identifies is of confidence to the leadership and a crisis of legitimacy, while a third involves what he calls ‘China’s incentive structure for not telling the truth’, where leadership are prone to cover up or downplay bad news and serious problems (ibid. cites Ding 2002: 200). E-government goals were to strengthen the centre by gaining surveillance; to minimize the distortion of information supplied local officials; to normalize citizen-state relations and to ensure transparency to critical information flows (Kluver, 2005: 85). Nevertheless, although these are the goals, Kluver views China’s problems as institutional, social and cultural and not as technical. Another important point connecting to the impact of the technical as such, is argued by Rawnsley (2007):

The internet is designed to facilitate the decentralised dissemination of information and make possible horizontal communications, practices that are essential for successful economic modernisation, but are completely incompatible with a system of governance based on vertical and centralised communication.

‘This is because the international Internet connections had to be made through a small number of state controlled backbone networks’ in China (Kalathil and Boas, 2003: 21). In addition to questions of architecture, the global information flow and social media, however well monitored and censored by the regime, tend to create a credibility gap, which exposes and discredits the government (Rawnsley 2007). In that sense, the crisis of governance, which the regime clumsily relies on e-governance to solve, in fact becomes even bigger, as ‘In its quest for a harmonious society the government is still willing to use coercive methods of social control, or deliberately vague and arbitrary regulations to maintain its monopoly on power’ (ibid.). The laws governing Chinese cyberspace are also vague, in line with techniques used by other authoritarian states.

E-governance in China involves a certain historical continuity, as under Mao Zedong the media were there to serve state ideology, and the norm was the vertical control of communication with communications only accessible by elites (Kalathil and Boas, 2003:18). In the 1970s, the media became tools for economic and cultural development, while the present Chinese vision is to create a healthy and orderly online environment.

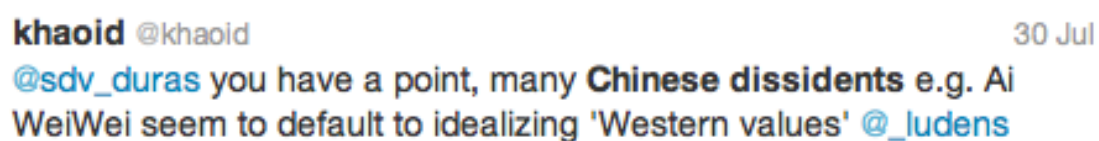
In the *Politics of Cybeconflict* (2006) I extensively make use of the RAND report by Chase and Mulvenon (2002), where they describe and analyse Chinese dissidents’ use of the internet and the Chinese government’s counter-strategies. The dissidents used

email spamming, set up proxy servers to access blocked sites, set up sophisticated websites, used email lists, bulletin board sites, file trading and e-magazines and a particular group (the Falungong) even organized a mass demonstration and a press conference through the internet. The main dissident groups examined in the Chase Mulvenon report are the Falungong religious sect, the Chinese Democratic Party (CDP) and the Tibetan community-in-exile. I followed their take on the groups, and placed them under the sociopolitical cyberconflict category as they were fighting for similar demands of a sociopolitical nature such as power, participation and democracy against the communist party state and its censorship and repression. However, it can be argued that the Uyghurs, the Tibetans and the Falungong are ethnoreligious groups and as such the elements of ethnoreligious cyberconflict can be also used to analyse their relationship with the state. As it is impossible for lack of space to cover all dissident groups in this chapter, and follow all threads of analysis, for instance on the class and networks society in China (Qiu 2009) and citizen social activism or the difference between entrepreneurial activism and activists entrepreneurs (Yang, 2009), the last section focuses on the most recent dissent: labor, internationally recognised and celebrity dissidents. What I argue through the examples below is that the emphasis on liberalization rather than democratization is still here, there are concrete reasons for this continuity, as mentioned in the previous sections and this is contributing to the survival of the Chinese regime.

Chinese Dissent in the Age of Social Media: Material and Affective Labor

‘Overall we feel that every person has a right to express themselves and this right of expression is fundamentally linked to our happiness and even our existence. When a society constantly demands that everyone should abandon this right, then the society becomes a society without creativity. It can never become a happy society’.

(Ai Wei Wei video interview Lamborn 25 October 2012)



khaoid @khaoid 30 Jul
 @sdv_duras you have a point, many **Chinese dissidents** e.g. Ai WeiWei seem to default to idealizing 'Western values' @_ludens

Image 3. Twitter Screenshot: Debating Chinese dissidents and Western Values on Twitter, 30 July 2012

There are three examples that are used here to illustrate some of the issues already mentioned. First, the expectation that intellectuals should be dissidents and the debates over artistic and literary awards to Chinese dissidents and non dissidents as part of what Hardt and Negri have termed immaterial and ‘affective labor’ (2000; see also more on this in Karatzogianni and Schandorf, 20 October 2012). Secondly, the problems connected to workers in China and on the fragmentation and ideological framing problems of dissidence, and the cellular mobilization challenging the state on legality or social contract discourses. And thirdly, discussing briefly the overall social media impact on Chinese dissidents in terms of connecting them instantly to a global

digital public sphere, digital gap and the digital have-less in China's rural areas notwithstanding.

A Western conception of intellectuals is that they are automatically expected to be dissidents. In China a long political tradition expected intellectuals to serve the state. The lines/limites of government tolerance tend to move constantly, as it is true for authoritarian regimes. For example, Zhou Yongming (2005) provided a snap shot of political commentary in Chinese cyberspace of *Minjian* (used to mean private unofficial independent marginalized outside the (*tizhi*) current system writers. *Minjian* intellectuals admit that they are outsiders but not activists, stopping short of the advocacy of organized dissent that has been viewed as the limit of government tolerance.

Mo Yan, a literary figure who was awarded the Nobel for Literature asked for the release of Liu Xiaobo — the 2010 Nobel Peace prize winner, who is in prison, but was criticized by Chinese dissidents and international critics of the Chinese government for not challenging the government in his writing and for his status as a 'state intellectual' as the vice chairman of the state-run Chinese Writers Association. The government, silent on Liu Xiaobo, was happy to acknowledge the honor in Mo Yan's case, with the Communist Party's propaganda chief, Li Changchun saying it 'reflects the prosperity and progress of Chinese literature, as well as the increasing influence of China' (Tatlow 2012b). At the same time the In the winner of 2012 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade other Liao Yiwu, accepted his award with 'a scorching speech whose theme was: "This empire must break apart." (ibid.)

In the Global Times (16 October 2012), which reflects the Chinese government's views, Shao Reping in a surreal twist *asks dissidents to overcome their hatred*, in what is highly reflective of the problem of dissidents sticking to liberalization claims instead of wholesale democratization demands:

But China's reform and opening-up is a process of building up social justice and increasing individual rights and dignity. Those who cannot feel the momentum are either closing themselves off or fail to separate their personal experience from the zeitgeist.♦♦ Germans probably think this award could exert some influence on China. But Chinese are used to Westerners using dissidents. Compared with the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo in 2010, the latest book award will barely draw any attention... Neither China nor Western countries will cancel their communications with the other just because of some dissidents. Dissidents must face the constancy of the relationship. Chinese dissidents who have been abroad should have the responsibility to overcome hatred.

The exiled writers forming The Independent Chinese PEN Center (The China post 15 October 2012) had made a statement on its website backing Mo Yan's support for Liu, who is the honorary president of the organization, but also urging him to join the organization in 'focusing on freedom of speech and writing in China, especially with regards to other writers like Liu Xiaobo who have been jailed, and help them to recover their freedom as soon as possible' (ibid.)

The case of artist Ai Wei Wei is significant in that regard, not only because he used social media to collect funds when the government accused him of tax evasion, but

because he is the kind of 'explicit' dissident, the style of which the Western press understands and in that sense he knows to encourage and play on this conception to connect and engage an international audience. Ai Wei Wei was arrested 'on his way to Hong Kong in April 2011 when he was taken into custody at Beijing's international airport and detained for 81 days amid a government crackdown on political activists. His studio in Beijing was raided, and his wife and several employees were taken into custody for questioning.' (Clary). He was then released in June 2011 and started to give back the financial support to people sending him money (some throwing paper planes with money in his home yard) after his case could not be pursued further, his passport is withheld.

Although he was a contributor to the design of the Bird's Nest" Olympic stadium for the 2008 Summer Games in Beijing, Ai Wei Wei

criticized the government over the 2008 Sichuan earthquake that left nearly 90,000 people dead or missing. Many of the victims were students who died when their poorly constructed schools collapsed on them. Ai has compiled a list of more than 5,000 of those students. Part of the list is on display at the museum, accompanied by audio of people reading the names of the students...Ai also has a work called "Snake Ceiling" on display, made of hundreds of backpacks latched together in the shape of a snake. These are meant to represent children's backpacks left behind after the earthquake.

(ibid.)

I would argue that Ai Wei Wei in his ideological framing of his dissent also follows the liberalization path ('every person has a right to express themselves and this right of expression is fundamentally linked to our happiness and even our existence' interviewed in Lamborn 25 October 2012), hence he is accused of idealizing western values in the twitter screenshot at the start of this section. However his style of dissident that the West understands and appreciates as he is explicit and connected at the international level via social media and artist circles in major cities around the globe. For example his art is exhibited internationally and a movie made about his activism was played in many international film festivals. The parody video (screenshots images 1 and 2 in the very start of this chapter with handcuffs dancing to Gangnam style global pop sensation), points to an artist and a dissident that understands social media activism, and how to get and retain the attention of an international audience. He is also not a *minjian* intellectual as he is explicit in his opposition to the government and persecuted because of this explicitness.

At the same time as Ai Wei Wei creates and sustains an interest on dissidence and other famous Chinese dissidents mentioned above keep the limelight on human rights in China, Chinese workers continue to be subject to the hegemony of the market and of the state (Blecher 2002: 287). Pun (2005) argues that global capital and market mechanisms have inflicted an unprecedented wound to society and that

the persistent influx of peasant migrants into the migrant areas did not give birth to a new Chinese working class in the past two decades. The making of the class force, is after all, retarded, shattered and destroyed not only by the market apparatus but by the state machine. Dangongmei, as half peasants and

half proletariat, are *displaced subjects produced by the hybrid conjugation of state and market machines*. (my italics)

In fact, Lee C.K. analyzing the fragmentation in the labor force describes the types of protests differentiating between workers' grievances, capacity and subjectivity. There are nonpay protests against arrears of wages and pensions; neighborhood protests against substandard public service, and bankruptcy protests focusing on job tenure compensation, severance packages, illicit sales or cadre corruption (2007: 71). 'The common denominator underlying these incidents is a pervasive working class feeling of betrayal by the state and victimization by the market economy'. In that sense these are protests of desperation. Lee looks at how workers frame themselves in protests, including the 'masses' (*qunzhong*), 'weak and disadvantaged groups' (*ruoshi qunti*), 'working class' (*gongren jieji*) and 'citizens' (*gongmin*). The argument is *class consciousness is muted* and that working class power is identified to such an extent with state socialism, so that this category is exclusionary for labor, especially for a new generation of workers who must confront the domination of the capitalist class, for example migrant workers (ibid. 195).

Here again workers demands are informed by material moral standards based on legality or the social contract, confirming the rights liberalization thesis, since any hint of 'demands for independent unionism or for democratic rights of political participation, or challenges to regime legitimacy' remains absent, while 'beyond this pattern of nonpolitical cellular protests, underground efforts in forming unions for laid-off workers have emerged in several provinces....have been crushed by police arrests and imprisonment, failed to have effect' (ibid. 112). On the matter of cellular activism, Lee argues that it is decentralization which spawns this type of activism, while legal authoritarianism spurs an insurgent rhetoric around legality and the social contract is sued to regulate employment relations (ibid., 113). So due to a decentralized legal authoritarianism, the local state is the target of protest and dissidence, while legalism and the social contract are used as a way to frame demands. Uneven development 'leads to fragmentation of worker interests cross localities and work units, producing cellular mobilization' (ibid.).

Qiu (2009) who wrote on working class activism and the impact of ICTs, argues that although the digital have-less are deprived of prospects,

To a great extent, have-less young people are deprived of their access to low-cost education and subjected to gloomy job prospects. Yet at the same time, we see the spread of ICT knowledge to a greater portion of society and the formation of grassroots urban networks among have-less youth through the very same institution of schools. The problems triggered by for-profit reform force angry youth to roar together – not only in Zhengzhou and Dalian but also online and in the blogosphere – to protest the unfair situations that they are thrown into. This time, their voices are heard.

(p. 140).

Another example discussed by Qiu about the power of blogs in pre-social media period was the example of Uniden employees 2004 in a Japanese electronics plant in Shenzhen, where the workers used blogs to broadcast the progress of their collective action (ibid., 194). Nevertheless, Qiu does not view working-class ICTs constituting

a sufficient condition for cultural and political empowerment: ‘Given the early formative stage of the technosocial emergence, its still has to involve larger segments of the urban society, including elite members, mass media, and institutionalized forces, especially the state’ (bid. 243).

During the regime leadership change in November 2012 in China, a prominent dissident, Shao Jiang wrote in the Amnesty website that activists are on the offensive via social media, and notice his framing again about rights protections in my earlier liberalization frame historically chosen by dissidents in China: ‘Under the new Xi Jinping-Li Keqiang regime, major battles over rights protections and political reforms will continue to be fought in cyberspace, which has more and more frequently led to real-world citizen actions’ (1 November 2012).

A recent example of social media boosting protest is the one in Ningbo, where protesters demanded that the local government scrap plans for an \$8.9 billion expansion of a petrochemical plant to be operated by a subsidiary of state-run oil giant Sinopec. Within two days the authorities promised not to go ahead with the project. The protesters were middle class and were informed by the danger to their city through microblogging and social media (Larson 29 October 2012). Similar environmental protests have take place elsewhere in China. Ma Yan, an environmental list who won the Goldman prize, pointed to social media s being responsible for the frequency of environmental protests in China: ‘Social media is a game changer. People can educate themselves and share information’ while Larson who is quoting the activists, writes that ‘The marches in Ningbo, Shifang, and Dalian were all organized largely through micro-blogs, smartphone apps, and text messages’ (ibid.).

To conclude, in this sense, Chinese citizens follow in the steps of dissidents increasingly motivated to practice their own unofficial and ‘uninvited’ democracy. ‘The Internet satisfies an immediate social need. It provides a new medium for citizens to speak up, link up’ (Yang 2009: 225), while the general pattern seems to be that china’s users are attracted to the Internet more for social than for commercial purposes (ibid., 106). It remains to be seen whether dissidents can overcome the quest for liberalization and pursue democratization through popular citizen support via social media in demanding popular sovereignty over the country’s development and sociocultural future rather than just liberalization and the protection of human or civil rights.

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