

Media, Power, and Protest in China: From the Cultural Revolution to the Internet

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In December 2004, public security officers visited a non-governmental organization in Beijing to investigate several postings that had just appeared in the organization's internet forums. The management of the organization was not aware of these postings. After all, dozens of them were posted daily in its online forums and whoever went through the quick online registration procedures could easily post messages there. Discussions in these forums did not usually touch on politically sensitive issues, yet somehow, several messages related to Falun Gong had popped up. These were detected by public security authorities. Upon investigation, the public security officers found that the organization had nothing to do with the postings, but requested its management to monitor its online forums more closely in order to prevent such postings from appearing again (1).

This episode illustrates several new developments in the complex relations among media, power, and resistance in China. The first is the use of the internet for resistance and dissent. A few postings appeared seemingly out of nowhere. Apparently, they carried information that state authorities attempted to suppress. The second is that the episode involved an NGO, which exists relatively independently of the state. The third is the mode of power in operation. The organization in question was only one of thousands in existence in China. Its online forums were just a few among millions. And yet they did not escape the gaze – and pressure – of state power, even though in this case that was applied with moderation.

In this essay, we will delineate the main features of these developments. To do so, we will compare social activism in present-day China with two critical moments in recent Chinese history: the Cultural Revolution (2) and the student movement in 1989. We will focus on three aspects – the repertoires of contention, the forms of organization, and the relationship of media to state power. The comparisons are necessarily elliptical, and perhaps at best serve as a call for a more historically sensitive understanding of the issues involved. Our basic argument is that with the expansion of new information technologies, both the forms of popular contention and the mechanisms of political control have expanded. In addition to the traditional location-based protests, new forms of online activism have emerged. And although state power continues to be repressive under some con-

ditions, its mode of operation is becoming more disciplinary in the Foucaultian sense, with growing emphasis on governmentality. These changes respond both to structural transformations of Chinese politics and society and to the more specific encounters between citizens and state power in the age of the internet.

Repertoires of Contention

Repertoires of collective contention are culturally reproduced ways of acting collectively. Over the three periods of interest, the repertoires of contention have expanded. In each case, media technologies are an integral part of the change.

The main repertoires of contention in the Red Guard Movement included street demonstrations, putting up wall posters, producing and disseminating media materials, public debates, hunger strikes, the occupation of public spaces, and mass struggle meetings. Many of these had, of course, much older provenance in labor struggles, the May 4th Movement, and the Communist Revolution itself (3). Some of these contentious activities, such as street demonstrations, depended on physical locations and face-to-face interactions. Other activities, such as the printing of leaflets, depended on rudimentary mass media. Printing machines, mimeograph machines, loudspeakers, and portable microphones were the most common media technologies in the 1960s.

Mass struggle meetings were no longer used in the student movement in 1989. But otherwise the repertoire of contention in 1989 resembled that of the Red Guard Movement. Street demonstrations, hunger strikes, wall posters, and public speech-making were still among the most important items in the repertoire. The occupation of public spaces, which had been largely limited to school campuses or office buildings in the 1960s, achieved a much more powerful expression in 1989: the sustained occupation of China's symbolic center Tiananmen Square. In addition, a new item gained prominence in the repertoire – the demand to hold dialogues with government authorities. One of the most glorious moments for student protesters in 1989 was the nationally televised dialogue between student leaders and Premier Li Peng (4).

In both periods, the main repertoire of contention was tied to physical locations. Wall posters were put up along heavily frequented sidewalks and gathering spots.

Demonstrations took place in the streets or on school campuses. Hunger strikes and public speech-making took place in public spaces, not privately. To protest is to make a public performance. Symbolically important places give special meaning to these performances. Thus Beijing was almost always the center of action and Tiananmen the center of Beijing. To some extent, this tradition has persisted to this day. Yet because state authorities have become just as conscious of the mobilizing power of symbolic centers as activists, they have initiated new ways of space control. Tiananmen Square, for example, is now fenced. This change is ostensibly to guide traffic but the Square has certainly become much less friendly to potential crowd activities. Similarly, the public bulletin boards in the Triangle (sanjiaodi) area of Beijing University, traditionally a national center of protests, have recently been removed to "beautify" the campus environment (5).

In 1989, old media technologies such as mimeograph machines, portable loudspeakers, and handheld megaphones were still prominent – though the megaphones were now enhanced by electronic amplification. Yet many new electronic technologies had become available, including computers, cassette recorders, boom boxes, cameras, copy machines, fax machines, and of course television (which had minimal presence in China in the 1960s). These new technologies were an integral part of the movement repertoire. Commercially available copy machines, for example, became a means of mass reproducing movement materials such as handbills.

Television was by far the most powerful new media in 1989. Some of the images were traditional, but the medium transformed their impact – as when tearful mothers pleading to government leaders to take care of the hunger strikers. Well aware of the power of television, student leaders challenged government authorities to televise live their meeting with Li Peng. Never before in Chinese history were students seen on national television sitting next to a top leader in direct dialogue and militant negotiations. Television turned these episodes into media events of a global scale because of the internationalization of media culture that was already taking place then (6).

Today, people protest in many of the same ways they have always protested. Demonstrations and the occupation of public spaces frequently happen in rural areas; labor strikes are common in the cities. At the same time, a new, online form of activism and protest has appeared. This online activism adopts a digital repertoire of contention ranging from the disruptive forms of direct action such as the hacking of web sites to non-disruptive forms such as the circulation of petition letters. Although both types are used, non-disruptive forms are much more common. The posting and cross-posting of messages, a routine part of social interactions in Chinese cyberspace, sometimes turns into radical protest activities known as "internet incidents" (7).

Non-disruptive forms of digital protest take discursive forms. Posting, reading, and responding to messages are the typical activities. Internet postings are virtual wall posters. They resemble wall posters in form, function, and production. Like wall posters, they are mostly produced by individuals, posted in public spaces, and express personal views. Like wall posters, they consist of a variety of discursive genres such as essays, poems, and slogans. Thus conventions of popular protest continue to shape practices in the digital age.

Another feature of online activism is its integration with other media forms and modes of protest. Sometimes, online activism is a reflection of street protests. The numerous street protests in recent years often spill over into cyberspace, provoking debate and protest online (8). At other times, cyber-protest led to street demonstrations. Online activism is thus mingled with, but does not replace, conventional forms of protest. Online activists repost or comment on writings from newspapers. And online activism can become very influential by achieving a cross-over to the mass media or the international media.

Let us look at the case of online activism concerning a tin mine explosion in Nandan, Guangxi. The accident occurred on July 17, 2001 and killed 81 miners. The local government and the mine authorities covered it up for about two weeks. News about the accident first hit internet bulletin boards around July 27, provoking protest (9). A journalist from a People's Daily branch station in Guangxi went to Nandan on July 30 to investigate and subsequently dispatched an emergency report back to its headquarters in Beijing. On July 31, People's Daily Online published a short news release titled "Mysteries Surrounding an Accident in the Mining Area of Nandan, Guangxi." This report was widely carried in various web sites. The online forum "Strengthening the Nation Forum" reportedly witnessed a sharp increase in the number of posts about the mine disaster – daily posts numbered in the tens of thousands. On August 2, after reading the news release of People's Daily Online, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji instructed thorough investigation of the case.

The Forms of Organization

Since the Cultural Revolution, major changes have taken place in the forms of civic organizations. Numerous legitimate social organizations and new organizational forms have appeared since the 1990s. Although these developments reflect structural transformations in Chinese politics and society, media technologies are an integral part of these changes as well.

During the Cultural Revolution, Red Guard organizations and factions proliferated. The social basis of movement organizations had at least three types. One was class origin. In middle schools in particular, student factions fell along the fault lines of class origins. The second social basis was professional affiliation. Thus there were

workers' organizations, journalists' organizations, rebel groups of disabled people, and so forth. Within worker organizations, there were textile workers groups, iron and steel factory worker groups, etc. The third and perhaps most important social basis was the existing organizational structures of Chinese society, mainly work-units and schools. It was in schools and work-units that Red Guard organizations were first established.

Wall-posters were an important means of mobilization in work units. Posted in the central locations of a work-unit compound or a school campus, they would attract crowds of viewers and provide materials for discussion and debate. They were an effective tool for establishing organizations and recruiting members. For example, the first Red Guard group, established in the middle school attached to Qinghua University, announced its organizational identity with members signing its first wall posters as "Red Guards." Besides wall posters, an important part of the Red Guard Movement was the Red Guard press. An organization worthy of its name usually published a "little paper." These little papers became bearers of organizational identities and effective tools of publicity and debate.

As in the CR, professional affiliation and work units provided the social basis for movement organization in 1989 (10). Students and citizens organized themselves in schools and work-units and demonstrated under the banners of their universities, government ministries, media agencies, and so forth. Wall posters and handbills continued to be important organizational tools.

Unlike in the CR, however, student movement organizations did not publish movement journals or newspapers in 1989, despite the availability of more resources (11). During the CR, Red Guard newspapers were an important weapon of factional struggle and organizational identity. Despite internal conflicts among student leaders and movement organizations, factional struggles were not an issue in 1989. Nor were there many movement organizations. This partly explained the absence of organizational publications. But most importantly, as the movement unfolded, students began to view the occupation of Tiananmen Square as their central task. To keep the occupation in the public limelight depended on the attention from Chinese and international media. For this purpose, public performances in Tiananmen Square were more important than editing newspapers and writing articles (12). To the extent that the student movement in 1989 was weak in theory and deliberation, the lure of media visibility was partly responsible.

The major new developments in organizational forms since the 1990s are the rise of legitimate social organizations and the pluralization of organizational forms – integral parts of an expanding civil society. The variety of organizational forms includes officially registered social organizations, unregistered NGOs, informal social networks, student associations, web-based groups, and online communities.

These developments are rooted in new structural conditions. On the one hand, state decentralization and institutional transformation have created some limited political space for independent social groups. On the other, the changing urban landscape has transformed the physical space for the organization of people. More and more people live away from their work-units and in isolation from their peers. Some students have begun to live off campus, renting their own spaces rather than living in student dorms as in the 1960s and 1980s. New media technologies, including both the internet and cell-phones, become especially important as a means of organizing individuals dispersed in this fragmented urban landscape.

Chinese civic associations have responded enthusiastically to the internet. They are making more and more use of it to organize activities such as campaigns and petitions. A survey of 129 urban grassroots organizations shows that 106 (82%) organizations were connected to the internet and 69 (65%) had web sites as of December 2003. This is similar to the level of internet uptake by voluntary associations in other developing nations. Of the various types of civic associations, those oriented to social change attach special importance to the internet. In this sense, a "web" of civic associations oriented to social change has emerged in China (13). In contrast to at least the most famous social movement organizations of earlier times, they rely on non-confrontational approaches to pushing for gradual social change.

For some new types of organizations, new media technologies are more than an organizational tool. They are essential to their existence. These new organizational types are digital networks such as online communities, web-based groups, mailing-lists, and personal contact lists in email and cell-phones. They constitute part of the associational revolution in contemporary China (14).

Online communities are not social movement organizations or advocacy networks – any more than local neighborhoods are. But online communities lend themselves to rapid transformation into activist networks when occasions arise. They commonly start out as social networks typically based on common interests. Thus there are online communities of sports, films, parenting, martial arts novels, current affairs, environmentalism, and what not. Social networks of various forms have always existed and have always provided an important social basis for movement mobilization. This was true both in the 1960s and 1989. Yet compared with conventional social networks based on primary and secondary groups, online communities involve more indirect, mediated, and long-distance relations. The ties are thinner but are much broader and thus are particularly conducive to low-cost and speedy coalition-building and mobilization. This was what happened in the anti-Japanese protests in 2005, when, according to a New York Times article, e-mail, text-messaging, and bulletin board discussions "inflamed public opinion and served as organizing tools" (15). An

interesting part of this story, directly relevant to our discussion about media and state power below, is that the public security authorities also adapted to the technological change. According to the report cited above, the day before a planned demonstration in Shanghai, local police sent out a mass text message to cell phone users to urge restraint.

Digital networks and social activism are mutually constitutive. Most cases of activism are mobilized on the basis of pre-existing networks. In the 1989 student protests, university networks played this role as students were mobilized by specific campuses, classes, and cohorts (16). In some cases, however, activism leads to the birth of new networks. The environmental campaign to stop dam-building on the Nu River is a case in point. After the campaign began in 2003, activists started a mailing list to discuss strategies and share information. In the middle of these discussions, it was suggested that an informal "China Rivers" network be established to coordinate and institutionalize social activism for the protection of water resources in China. Soon a "China Rivers" web site was launched. Then activists began to produce a regular electronic newsletter (five days a week except weekends) that gathers media reports about environmental issues. Running to about 20 pages in print, the newsletter is distributed to a large network of individuals. The circulation of this newsletter thus in itself serves to stitch together a social network.

With the appearance of digital networks, individual actors become extremely important. Studies of online activism in Western societies find that individual movement entrepreneurs have become influential in internet-based movements (17). This is consistent with the theoretical vision articulated by Ulrich Beck that the reinvention of politics in contemporary society partly depends on the rise of "subpolitics." By subpolitics, he means politics conducted by collective or individual agents outside the political and corporatist systems (18). This is certainly true in the case of online activism in China. The cyber-protests mentioned earlier were launched by individual internet users. The logic of the internet network is such that once information enters the network, it can provoke radical responses. Though not always actualized, the potential for contention is always there. Part of the power of the digital networks is that it harbors this political potential.

Media Tech and Changing Modes of State Power

The modern state is an apparatus of information control as well as the control of the means of physical violence (19). Information control is partly about media control. Thus on the part of state authorities, preventing and suppressing social movement mobilization entails media control. From the perspective of movement activists, challenges against state authorities involve struggles over information channels.

Media struggles in the Cultural Revolution centered on newspapers and wall-posters. Because of state spon-

sorship, Red Guard organizations enjoyed remarkable freedom in producing their own newspapers. The official announcement of the launching of the Cultural Revolution explicitly called on the "masses" to air their own views. But the freedom to publish newspapers did not mean freedom of speech. Most Red Guard newspapers simply followed the directions of the political wind on high. When dissenting views did appear, they were typically disguised in orthodox Marxist and Maoist rhetoric, and even so, few authors of dissent escaped the fate of repression.

The situation in 1989 was different. There was no state sponsorship of any movement media. In the initial period of the movement, the state maintained strict control over official media channels. Yet several conditions combined to undermine control. By 1989, Chinese citizens had acquired many channels of accessing information from abroad. These channels included the Chinese diaspora and foreigners in China, who were already beginning to be linked by the internet. The international media covered the movement extensively. Internal divisions among the elites created further openings. Finally, journalists were active participants in the movements. As a result, for a short period in the movement, the official media, both newspapers and television, became remarkably open. They covered the events extensively and indirectly contributed to mobilization both on the Tiananmen Square and in other parts of the country.

In 1989 media openness lasted, however, only as long as state authorities remained hesitant to crack down on the movement. Once repression set in, mass media quickly restored its official face. Media closure happened much more quickly than it took to open them up. The exercise of state power over newspapers and television hinges on the control of the means and agents of production – the printing presses, editors, and journalists. These are susceptible to control because they are centralized.

In the age of the internet, this repressive mode of power continues to limit the possibilities of contention. From time to time, internet activists in China face harassment and even arrest by public security bureaus. Yet as our analysis of online activism shows, online contention has not decreased because of control, but has increased in frequency and impact. This suggests that the centralized mode of power is becoming harder to operate because the means of media production has become decentralized and mobile. Cell phones, email, web sites and other new media technologies are integrated into everyday life. Ordinary people themselves become content producers on the internet. This also means that it is harder to achieve a complete elimination of media traces of activism even after order is restored or movements are suppressed.

State power is evolving in response to the new mode of activism. It is becoming more capillary in its mode of existence and disciplinary (as opposed to repressive) in its mode of operation. This is reflected both in policy and practice. In policy, the Chinese Communist Party announced an important decision in September 2004 to strengthen

its "ability to govern," which stresses both principles and methods of governance (20). In practice, the internet is one area where this new mode of power exerts itself most deliberately. It is one of the most important arenas for Chinese state power to experiment with its self-transformation in response to new social and technological challenges.

To understand this new mode of power, let us examine the main features of internet control in China. The first thing to stress is that over the past decade, an entire regime of internet control has evolved in China, consisting of new bureaucracies, new laws and regulations, and new practices (21). The historical trend is an increase in the types, scope, and sophistication of control. For example, BBS forums are now carefully monitored but were not a major locus of control in the earlier years. Second, the agents of internet control appear to be dealing with a hierarchy of issues, monitoring some issues more closely than others. For example, among China's internet users, it is well known that topics related to Falun Gong and the 1989 student movement are off limits whereas many other topics are tolerated most of the time.

Third, the techniques of control include both negative and positive ones. Negative techniques of control have evolved along three lines. Repression continues to be exercised. Examples include arresting a cyber-dissident or assigning bulletin board managers to censor posts. Another is technological control, which happens through the manipulation of hardware, software, and codes. Filtering of key words and blocking of web sites belong to this category. The third is psychological control. The first two kinds of control, when widely known to internet users, have the effect of a panopticon. By accustoming citizens to the idea that they are always being watched, the agents of control may induce self-censorship.

To supplement negative techniques of control, the Chinese state has taken positive approaches to internet control by guiding users to happily do things in line with state agendas. These are practices of governmentality. For instance, as a means of channeling internet users to follow official sources of news and other information, all the major newspapers have gone online in what is known as an official project to "occupy" the new frontier. Apparently in order to compete with the colorful attractions of commercial portal sites, even the highest-level official online news organs such as People's Daily Online and Xinhuanet are not beneath sexing up their headline news pages with pictures of barely-clad female fashion models. These web sites also support large online communities with lively online forums. The online forums resemble most other non-official forums, but differ in that they also attempt to guide discussion by publicizing designated discussion topics, much as the print version of People's Daily is used to publicize party policies and guide public opinion.

The combined use of negative and positive techniques of control has powerful but often invisible constraining effects on the free and open use of the internet.

Struggles over the internet will remain at the center of political struggles in China for years to come.

Concluding Remarks

How have new media technologies shaped the landscape of Chinese politics? Our analysis suggests that with the development of new technologies, new repertoires of contention and new organizational forms have appeared. It is clear that the broad trend from the Cultural Revolution, through 1989, to the present, is a shift from large-scale, concentrated, location-based but largely spontaneous protests to individualized, decentralized, and legitimately organized forms of social activism. The new forms have not replaced the conventional forms of protest or organization, but have expanded the fields of resistance and protest. In Gramscian terms, these are part of an extended "war of position" as activists seek to expand the envelope of what is officially accepted and unofficially seen as normal (22). How this will affect future direct confrontations is unclear. Will the "war of maneuver" be indefinitely postponed because of these outlets for protest that is ever more widespread and occasionally effective but seldom transformative? Or will a much wider part of the Chinese population have come to regard themselves as citizens rather than subjects and be prepared to join in?

Parallel to the changes in the forms and organization of protest, state power itself has undergone change. Power has become more capillary in form and more disciplinary in its operation.

These patterns of change are undoubtedly related to broader structural processes in contemporary China. These include state decentralization, market transformation, urbanization, and globalization. Our analysis highlights the central role of media technologies. Media technologies have changed in China over the past few decades. So have the modes of power and forms of resistance. Whereas newspapers dominated the political scene of the 1960s, television had become equally important by 1989. Since the 1990s, the internet has developed rapidly. Whereas mass demonstrations dominated the earlier scenes, networked forms of social activism, some of which are quite routinized, have become salient. Each time a new technology appeared, it became a new field of struggle between the power apparatus and social actors. From these struggles new forms and practices of power and activism emerge. The motor of change is not technology per se. Nor is technology a mere reflection of political reality. Rather, new technologies induce change by disrupting and thus transforming the field of political struggle.

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