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A DYNAMIC INTERPLAY: THEORIZING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN

ONLINE ACTIVISM AND GOVERNMENT CONTROL IN CHINA

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Dynamic Interplay: Theorizing the Relationship Between Online Activism and

Government Control in China

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The relationship between the state and bottom-up activism in an authoritarian

regime in the conventional wisdom is antagonistic, and activists' use of new media

technology intensifies this conflict. Although a handful of existing cases (e.g., Iran,

Ukraine, Egypt, and Tunis) have strengthened the belief that digital media can help bring

down the remaining authoritarian regimes. Yet in the case of China, this is not the

scenery we observed. How Internet activism in China contend with the government

control in the past 17 years? Why the Chinese government and activist choose and

change their strategies across issues and over time? And how can we understand the

interaction between the evolution of online activism and the tightened control by the

government in an authoritarian deliberation? In this project, through a combination of

case studies and longitudinal study, I found that Internet activism in China has already

become a comprehensive practice with sophisticated strategies and tactics serving several

major repertoires. This result reflects the establishment and the expanding of a counter

public sphere. And then through the operation of organizations, groups and individual

activists, half of the activism cases successfully entered the central public sphere, becoming public agenda. Along with this development is the change of Chinese government's treatments to Internet activism from ignorance to strategic "management" as the result of the long-term negotiation between the activists and the authoritarian government. I then develop an ecosystem to illustrate this process and argue that all the mechanisms that channel the periphery sphere to the central sphere form a dynamic balance. The Chinese government and the activists both take advantage of this structure to achieve their objectives, and a collaborative relationship between them has actually formed in these political contentions.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Interaction in Contentious Politics: Three Activism Cases

May 23, 2000, Beijing, in front of the auditorium of Peking University (PKU), one of the most prestigious universities in China, more than 500 students were gathering, lighting candles on the ground to mourn the passing of a freshman, who was found murdered outside the secondary campus[1] on May 20. Because of the university's information control[2], most of the PKU students learned of this tragedy two days late from "Yi Ta Hu Tu 一塌糊涂" – the campus bulletin board (BBS) of Peking University and other interpersonal channels, instead of from the university (Rosenthal, 2000). The "cold-blooded treatment" and particularly "the intention to block the news by the university management staff" became the major agenda of the online discussions (Neo6, 2000), which quickly led to student demonstrations after the news was spread all over the campus. During the demonstration, the students demanded to speak with top university officials. The collective mourning activities and the protest on May 23 continued to a second day, with a growing number of students participating. The demonstration ended with a dialogue between the university president and student representatives, and the permission to hold a memorial service on campus for the victims.

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[1] Changping campus, which is in a suburb of Beijing, about one hour's bus ride from the main campus.

[2] The official announcement arrived three days late, and the information control was believed to be related to the coming of June 4 anniversary of the 1989 pro-democracy protests.

On March 20, 2003, in Guangzhou, the capital city of the province of Guangdong in southern China, a 27-year old college graduate, who had been detained three days before, after being stopped by the police, for forgetting to bring his identity card with him, died in the medical clinic of the detention center. Suspecting the official statement that it was a normal death due to heart disease, his family and friends posted the story and a petition online (Hand, 2006). A journalist from *Southern Metropolis Daily* read the postings and then published an investigative report on April 25, which found that the young man had very likely been beaten to death (Tian, Li & Liu, 2013). Within the first couple of hours after the report was posted online, the news generated over 4,000 comments (Xiao, 2004), and the discussions immediately spread throughout Chinese cyberspace. Traditional media, including some major state-run media outlets, picked up the story, together with the waves of protest online, making the case one of the top issues on the public agenda. The central government, through the media report, ordered Guangdong authorities to conduct a thorough investigation into the case. At the same time, two groups of legal professionals submitted petitions to the Standing Committee of National People's Congress (NPCSC) regarding the legality of the Custody and Repatriation system. In June 2003, three months after the death of the man in custody, not only were the involved detainees and officials in charge convicted and given sentences, the State Council also announced the repeal of the Custody and Repatriation system.

On December 25, 2010, in Zhaiqiao village, Yueqing, a coastal county-level city in Zhejiang province in eastern China, a village activist who had led a six-year campaign against local officials on their land policy, was crushed under the wheel of a truck outside of his home village. The officially defined "traffic accident" led to small-scale villager-

police clash on the scene as there were rumors saying it was a murder (Bower, 2011). The horrific pictures of the car accident scene were posted on the second day on Tianya, one of the most popular online forums in China, generating more than ten thousands comments and igniting widespread fury. Although these forum postings were then blocked and removed by an order from higher authorities, the censors failed to prevent the spread of the "murder" story in cyberspace through other platforms (Yang & Wong, 2010). In response to netizens' suspicions, local police held the first press conference on December 27 and the second one two days later. The state-owned television CCTV also aired interviews with the suspect driver and eyewitnesses. The local police and CCTV's reconfirmation of the earlier conclusions, however, did not silence the online discussion. Internet users and some journalists continued to question the discrepancies revealed by the photos and the official explanations. They started to call for an independent investigation into the case. Several groups of activists travelled to Yueqing to organize their own investigations by visiting the scene and interviewing local eyewitnesses. Among them, the team led by Xu Zhiyong, a well-known civil rights activist and a former college lecturer, published a twelve-page investigation report online, with the conclusion consistent with the official version (Xu, 2012).

These are three typical Chinese online activism cases that happened at different times. From the capital, Beijing, to the major city, Guangzhou and then to the small village, Zhaiqiao, after sixteen years of diffusion and development, the Internet had changed the means and methods used by ordinary citizens throughout the country to communicate and negotiate with the authorities. In these cases, the Internet played an obvious role in collapsing information controls, forming influential public debate,

spreading rumors, creating information cascade, and facilitating offline actions. This role, however, did not arise overnight. From the above three cases, we can easily detect some aspects of the development of online activism's strategies and tactics over time. For instance, the interval time of transferring the information between offline and online is shorter because Internet users have developed their skills not only in using the Internet but also in the techniques to bypass information control and censorship. The online protesters also matured, adapting different and multilevel ways such as demonstrations, online petitions, and citizen journalists, to influence the decision-making process. On the other side, we can also observe Chinese government's increasing level of involvement, including censorship, control, and a more proactive attitude, which is usually understated in studies and analysis. The most important change over time reflected in these activism cases is the closer interaction between the activists and the authorities.

The interaction in contentious politics, as Tilly and Tarrow (2007) described, usually refers to a process "in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties (p.4)." The forming of the interaction relies on the challenger who made the claim, the target that is challenged, interested third parties, and the mechanism that connects those involved. Tilly and Tarrow discussed in detail the construction of the interaction in several specific contentions and social movements, work that lays the foundation for subsequent social movement analysis. The Internet, because of new media's specific characteristics, largely changed the frequency, strength, and scope of contemporary contentions in some countries and, therefore, raises new questions for current research. The three cases from

China, though they happened in different places at different times and started with different causes, have some internal links that make the interaction between the activists and the government a continuous and cumulative process.

The current study started with research focusing on activities on both the activism side and the government side of Chinese online activism to explore the interaction and its key mechanism elements. This study asks a further question: after a long-term interplay, what are the outcomes for online activism particularly regarding its role in driving political change in China? And how do we understand the interaction between the development of online activism, the tightened control by the government, and the visible democratic outcomes?

1.2. Internet: An Unambiguous Force for Democratic Change

Since the late 1980s, scholars from social science, communication, and political science have looked for evidence that the Internet can influence our political life. The early studies gave high credibility to the Internet, due to a widespread assumption that cyberspace is inherently liberalizing (Lewis, 2013). Together with economic globalization, the adoption of the Internet in a less democratic society would inevitably bring a new democratic order (Kluver, 2005). Indeed, the prevalence of new media worldwide changed the manner of information dissemination and political participation, as well as the nature of mobilization in collective actions. Over the last two decades, we have also seen the increasing use of new media technologies in activism and social movements in countries with different political systems. However, with the fast diffusion of the Internet from developed countries to developing countries and from educated

groups to broader user groups, accumulated empirical studies found results that conflict with this early "blind optimism" (Kalathil & Boas, 2003). For example, while providing abundant information, the Internet also contributes to polarization online (DiMaggio et al., 2001). While participating in online activities increases levels of political engagement (Swigger, 2013), the political information provided by the Internet's many alternative resources influences voters' perceptions on political opportunities and could negatively affect their intentions to participate in political elections (Bailard, 2012). Decentralized movements promoted by new media have taken the place of the traditional movement to become the major form of contemporary political contentions (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Because of their lack of durable political structure, however, after the brief victory this new kind of movement is usually unable to establish a new government to replace the old one (Faris & Etling, 2008). Those people who believe they are empowered by the new technology, in most cases, are still led by political elites. The role of the Internet in politics is more complicated than researchers previously thought. Politics continues to be influenced and shaped by many factors in the political system, not just the Internet. Internet studies have moved beyond the more simplistic view of the power of the Internet in changing politics to turn attention to more specific ways in which the Internet might shape politics in a variety of national contexts.

The core question generated by Internet use in authoritarian countries is usually whether the use of new media can foster or facilitate democratization in these regimes. The rise of new media has led many observers to question whether authoritarian regimes, where the governments conventionally restrict media freedom to limit citizens' access to information, can still control the flow of information. The idea that because new media

lower the costs of obtaining information, particularly for those against a regime, and provide convenience to mobilize citizens in collective actions, new media can undermine authoritarianism (Cottle 2011; Shirky 2011). "Resistance" and "control" represented two major researching perspectives. From the existing cases (e.g., Iran, Ukraine, Egypt, and Tunis), the most prominent role of new media in authoritarian countries can be found during their revolutionary movements, as the Internet can expand political opportunities and speed to mobilize the citizens. The evidence of the role of the Internet and its associated social media in the Arab Spring has strengthened the belief that digital media can help bring down the remaining authoritarian regimes. In the authoritarian countries that haven't experienced revolutionary protest, the Internet has already empowered the citizens to surpass the governments' information control and form a counter public sphere. Those might become the prerequisites of the revolutionary movement, as some scholars believe that the transition from authoritarian nation to more democratic nation could be gradual and cumulative (Shirky, 2011), though this assumption lacks support from empirical studies in current literature.

Other scholars, alternatively, point out that many authoritarian states have been very successful in shaping and monitoring Internet use by the citizens (Kalathil & Boas, 2003; Thussu, 2006). Authoritarian states can even learn from previous events and adopt new methods for controlling dissent and activism activities (Morozov, 2011). These studies found that while citizens become more active in cyberspace, governments also tighten control and strengthen monitoring. As a result, these "pessimistic attitude" scholars assert that because of sophisticated regulation and censorship, people from authoritarian countries such as China, Vietnam, Cuba, and Iran did not benefit from the

democratizing effects of the Internet, and democratization through the use of new media in these countries is unapproachable (Harwit and Clark, 2001; Rodan, 1998).

Specific case studies generate both ideas: that the Internet is a revolutionary power for regime change in contentious politics and that because of authorities' capacities for surveillance and control the democratic role of the Internet in authoritarian regimes is severely limited. Two things are usually taken for granted in these studies. First, many studies oversimplify the role of technology in authoritarian regimes. Political change is not the outcome of a technology, a group of activists, or a critical event. When we study the impact of new media in an authoritarian regime, we need to consider *how the technology works in this specific context* and examine the interactions between the use of technology and the mechanisms that will influence its impact. These may include: political opportunities, the traditional media, the characteristics of the public sphere, the quasi-democratic institutions, and governmental policies. Sometimes government control is a reaction to citizen activism, but it can also be the cause of activism and Internet uproar. Second, current debate over the democratization influence of new media in authoritarian regimes is rooted in Western definitions of democracy and individual freedom, and many studies considered authoritarianism and democracy as two sides of one coin. As a result, in the absence of sufficient conditions or evidence to realize democracy in an authoritarian country, technology is more likely to be considered as the accomplice of the authority. While the argument about "control" and "resistance" is still going on, some studies acknowledge a gray zone, a more gradual transition from authoritarianism to democracy.

This gray zone is defined by Levitsky and Way (2002) as hybrid regimes that refer to the combination of features from both authoritarianism and democracy. In reality, the situation is much more complicated than a simple combination. From the earlier studies, the relative tolerance from the authoritarian regime was interpreted as authoritarian resilience, which describes a "more fair, more effective, and more sustainable" authoritarian system (Nathan, 2003). Recent studies show that in some cases authoritarianism has successfully absorbed some of the characteristics of democracy, called, variously, authoritarian deliberation (He & Warren, 2011), consultative authoritarianism (Teets, 2013; Truex, 2014), responsive authoritarianism (Reilly, 2011), or pluralized authoritarianism (Lewis, 2013). These studies in recent literature indicate an ongoing transition within many authoritarian regimes resulting from the tension between two forces – the internal demands for change (mostly from the bottom up) and the effort to retain power and authority (top down).

Whether focusing on the Internet's resistance function or on censorship by authoritarian regimes, when we talk about these mechanisms of change – in terms of both resistance and control – we must realize that they actually co-exist, taking place simultaneously, and interplaying with each other. To better understand the political impact of Internet use in authoritarian regimes, in this study we focus on Internet activism as a research subject, as this activism is usually the most direct of contentious actions by Internet users against the government to negotiate rights with the authorities. To study the co-existing relationship and the interactions, this study chooses case studies and longitudinal methodology that can examine the changes over time. After providing the horizontal comparison studies, this study selects two cases in the time axis to conduct

a vertical comparison study, with the purpose of building a comprehensive model for the mechanism of Chinese Internet activism. The process to conduct the research will be discussed in detail in the methodology chapter.

Among the authoritarian countries, China stands out for both the intense degree of online activism and the breadth of its control system, which make it a comprehensive case for studying the interactions between activism and government to understand the Internet's political impact in authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, activism, just like other forms of contentions, in any country will have its uniqueness as it is usually formed under and stimulated by certain political opportunity. The following section will discuss the political changes and the opportunity arising therefrom in China in the last three decades, which paved the way for the rise of online activism.

1.3. China from the 1980s: The Changing Political Landscape

The political landscape in China changed over the last three decades. The Chinese government has put a lot of effort into accommodating a "socialism with Chinese characteristics" that combines Marxist concepts and a capitalist market economy. The reason for this choice can be traced to the transition from a totalitarian regime under Mao Zedong to an authoritarian system under Deng Xiaoping in the 1970s. Deng started economic reform in 1979, also called Reform and Open-up policy. This reform signified the shifting of the core task of the Chinese Communist Party from class conflict to economic development. Deng's economic policies liberalized the Chinese economy and opened it up to the global market, which has made China one of the fastest growing

economies in the world for the last 30 years, and the growing economy also led to a radical transformation of Chinese society in many aspects.

The Tiananmen Square Protest of 1989 is a turning point of political change in the recent history of contemporary China. After the student demonstration in June 1989, the Chinese government strictly controlled coverage of the events in the domestic press and discharged media professionals who reported sensitive topics. The political reform and economic reform were largely halted and did not resume until Deng Xiaoping's 1992 southern tour. Succeeding Chinese leaders have been highlighting social stability and political harmony as the premise of further political reform in their policies.

After 2000, China's fourth-generation leaders, on many public occasions, started to endorse the idea of accelerating political reforms, highlighting the need for a democratic system in China and the effort to build China's soft power. Their approach to democracy has been ambiguously framed as "incremental democracy." Central to the idea is "embracing all useful elements of various theories and doctrines" of democracy while staying true to the current "Chinese situation and traditional culture" (Yu, 2003). During the 90th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2011, President Hu emphasized that what is crucial to China's political reforms is a renewed vision of citizenship that enables the people to "enjoy democratic rights in a more extensive way," and the rights include "to be informed, to participate, to be heard, and to oversee." These speeches suggest that, at least in Chinese leaders' rhetoric, China has begun to affirm the value of and need for democracy, although not in a way to "copy the western political system." Some scholars believe that the current generation (fifth generation) of leadership is more likely to promote political reform than their predecessors based on their political

and educational backgrounds (Li, 2008), and the current anti-corruption campaign seems to demonstrate the confidence of the authorities to self-correct and enact reform policies. The empirical evidence for these claims can also be found in the increased transparency in local and national politics, the experimental elections at the village level, an increasing openness to various forms of non-government organizations, and the rising demands for free speech and media as well. Some scholars, however, including Andrew Nathan (2003), have argued that the real purpose for pursuing "democracy" by Chinese leaders is to improve the quality of party rule so as to "make the authoritarian system more fair, more effective, and more sustainable, which is called "resilient authoritarianism."

1.3.1. The Commercialization of Mass Media

As the market-oriented economy has developed since the early 1980s, Chinese mass media, including newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations, have been allowed to sell advertisements and compete in the marketplace. The acceleration of the commercialization of Chinese mass media, mainly television and newspapers, started in the late 1990s, as the government sought to strengthen Chinese media organizations to withstand competition from foreign media companies. Most of these commercial publications are part of media groups still led by party or government newspapers. At the same time, the authoritarian government invests effort and resources to control the media industry through implementing media censorship. (For instance, the government controls print publications by requiring a license and limits the number of these licenses (Qian & Bandurski, 2010).

The economic reform and the need to compete in the global market forced the Chinese government to reconsider its control of the media industry. This, however, does not mean that the media could be independent organizations or corporations in China. The predominant state television broadcaster Chinese Central Television (CCTV) is still directly under the supervision of the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT, which is subordinate to the State Council of the People's Republic of China). For these media, the primary task is to be consistent with national policy and party interest. As a result, Chinese media professionals face a dilemma. They have to reach their market objectives to survive, while on the other hand, they need to avoid any political risk. This competitive and delicate situation creates some political opportunities for these traditional media professionals and urges them to play some role in the online incidents later.

1.3.2. The Economic Factor

China's rapid economic growth is believed to be an important factor in stimulating political change, including the democratization process. This economic impetus comes from two directions. China is now the second largest economy and is playing an increasingly important and influential role in the global economy, which builds a tight relationship between China and other major economies. The economic interest behind these relationships forces the Chinese government to become more cautious or even to make concessions when dealing with some controversial issues. Another way to explain the economic impact on politics in China considers the changes also from the individual level. Along with the improvement of economic status and the

establishment of economic independence, the Chinese people gradually became aware of personal interests and the importance of equality in political life. The concession from the government and the self-awareness from citizens formed an excellent opportunity for bottom-up political movement.

1.3.3. The Internet as a New Force

The Internet was launched in China in 1994. The Chinese government has embraced the Internet as a necessary element of the information infrastructure for a modern economy. Different from previous mass media, the Internet rewrites the power distribution in media discourse in China and challenges the top-down propaganda model that was established from Mao's era by providing the Chinese people with a means to connect to the world and a public space for free speech. During the past decades, an increasing number of Chinese citizens have become capable of participating in massive online activities. According to the report of the Chinese Internet Development by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), by the end of 2012, the number of Chinese netizens was 564 million, composing 42% of the total population. Most of these netizens are from the urban areas (72.4%).

Hu (2011) summarizes three fields within which the Internet has made changes in Chinese society. The Internet first promotes information dissemination in China, enhancing citizens' right to know. Second, the Internet provides a public space for deliberation particularly on topics related to political and social issues, which form public opinions. In a survey conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Science, 71% of Internet users agreed that the Internet provides more opportunities to express their

political views, and 61% agreed that there are more chances to criticize the government online (Liang, 2003). Third, the Internet is also an important tool for Chinese citizens to be connected and organized. Since public demonstration is strictly controlled and restricted, the Internet has become a major alternative for collective activities in China. As one of the pioneer scholars who studied Chinese activism online, Yang (2009) points out in his book *The Power of Internet in China* that Chinese netizens have already transformed the regime of control into a "world of carnival, community and contention" (p1).

As the size of the online public keeps growing, the government invests heavily in controlling online content and the potential political opposition. The Chinese government has historically established a regime-determined technology policy since the Maoist era. After that, since the transition of political order from the Maoist era to Deng's era of reform and opening up, and then to the post-Tiananmen era of economic development, the Chinese politics of technology has shifted its means (to the society) and the value (to the Party). Seeking a balance between the need to develop information technology and at the same time keep hold of its power is the current goal for the Chinese Communist Party (Paltemaa & Vuori, 2009). Considering this parallel in the growth of both online activism and state Internet control in recent years, it is important to ask whether grassroots Internet activism has influenced the government towards democratization? Or is it instead a process largely controlled by political elites? Or is it actually an interactive process that drives changes in both sides? Bearing these questions in mind, the next chapter will: (1) first examine literature on the political role of the Internet in general, (2) review studies concentrating on the authoritarian context and China, and (3) develop a theoretical

framework to capture the structural change both in cyberspace and in the larger political

system as the outcome of the communicative activities promoted by the new technology

in authoritarian regimes.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. New Media and Democracy

Scholars disagree as to the technical development of the media and the consequence of political change. On one side, many scholars celebrate the convenience, speed, interactivity, and flexibility of new media, suggesting that they offer more freedom than traditional media by creating unlimited forms of interaction and resource sharing. The Internet can provide individuals with information and knowledge that was difficult to obtain or access before. The Internet also offers a virtual space within which citizens can discuss, organize, and take action. These new actors particularly refer to groups marginalized by mainstream political relationships (Bimber, 1998). On the other hand, some scholars argue that the future of any "new" technology will inevitably see more surveillance and control. While the new communication technologies provide more choices to the public, they give "ever-greater powers of surveillance and manipulation to power elites" simultaneously (Garnham, 1993). Apart from this, democracy associated with the Internet is also threatened in other aspects, such as the problem of the digital divide and the increasing involvement of corporations. In western scholarly literature, how the Internet can promote democracy is mainly analyzed from these perspectives: political attitudes and participation by Internet users; perceived political opportunities by potential activists; and the possible new form of collective action. These pre-formed lenses of Internet-democracy have also been broadly applied in studies in other parts of the world.

Political participation. Empirical studies focusing on American Internet users find that Internet use is positively related to political knowledge, engagement, and participation on the premise that the Internet is used primarily for information-seeking purpose (Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). In other countries, the Internet not only provides users with a large amount of information previously inaccessible to them, but also, more significantly, becomes a window for users to see and learn about the outside world. Chinese netizens have been found to be more politically opinionated and more likely to embrace the norm of democracy than users of traditional media (Lei, 2011). One of the reasons is that, besides the quantity of information it offers, the Internet enables the dissemination and production of information that is much less likely to circulate and emerge in other media in China, such as the western concept of democracy (Lei, 2011). A nationwide public opinion survey showed a similar result where individual Internet use was positively associated with increased citizen demand for democratic governance, particularly in less democratic countries, through influencing citizens' political attitudes (Nisbet, Stoycheff & Pearce, 2012). The increased knowledge gathered via the Internet does not always generate positive attitudes. In Tanzania the spreading of information regarding the local government resulted in negative evaluations of government performance. This negative evaluation led citizens to be less willing to participate in the presidential election (Bailard, 2012).

Political opportunity. Many scholars believe that the political impact of the Internet begins with the change of citizens' perception of political opportunities, which is their judgment of the potential cost or benefit of their political behaviors. This view

echoes the same concept in social movement studies that the emergence of a collective action and its development largely relies on judgment based on perceived political opportunities rather than emotional stimulus (anger, resentment, etc.) or resources provided (Tarrow, 1996). Specifically, Internet-empowered activists can bypass censorship and state regulations (Garrett, 2006). This ability is particularly important in circumstances involving governmental malfeasance. In China, the Internet, instead of mass media, has generally become the primary place for scandal exposure, and Chinese citizens frequently break through the rigorous censorship to obtain information using P2P, VPN, and other network technologies. The Internet can also promote protest ideas and tactics across the globe, so that the success of the protest in one location could encourage activists in other places through the dissemination of information online (Ayres, 1999). As the "first informational guerrilla movement" (Castells, 1997, p.72), the Zapatistas have become the catalyst for a variety of transnational activisms to oppose globalization. The experience of the Zapatistas has been adopted by activists who regard themselves as similarly vulnerable groups. These political opportunities created by new media are essential in certain contexts in which the political structure traditionally provides little space for bottom-up movements.

Collective action. By reducing the cost and time in regard to information access, activity coordination, and community formation, the Internet is able to increase participation in collective action by people who are geographically diffused (Rosenkrands, 2004). Research shows that Internet-based collective action can be more efficient and flexible than traditional forms of actions in terms of forming collective identities regardless of participants' diverse backgrounds (Garrett, 2006). Scholars

linking media technology to the promotion of collective action also seek new organizational forms. Bimber, Flanagin & Stohl (2005) reframe traditional collective action theory, arguing that there is a transformation from the emphasis on the establishment of a formal organization to a range of activities that are dependent on "individuals' moving from a private domain of interest and action to a public one" (p.377). The Internet, in this sense, by providing highly accessible communication tools and information exchange platforms, encourages and accelerates the crossing of private-public boundaries, thereby increasing the probability of collective actions. Bennett & Segerberg (2012) theorize this growing individualization in digital protests as connective action, which is based on personalized content sharing across media networks. The Internet has become the predominant factor in forming the large-scale action networks in contemporary contentions (e.g. Arab Spring, indignados in Spain, Occupy Wall Street, etc.). Both Bimber and Bennett realize that there is a diminishment of a formal and centralized organization in today's Internet-enhanced movement, but the character of organizing needs further exploration.

During a political crisis, social media can easily take the place of traditional news media and become the dominant information channel for the public. Social media can provide instant reports in unpredictable situations by sharing and retweeting messages among netizens, which Papacharissi & Oliveira (2012) name the "drama of instantaneity" and the "user-generated collaboration." Through analyzing the news distributed on Twitter with the hashtag #egypt during a period before and after the resignation of Mubarak, they argue that the storytelling online reflects an affective character that may carry important implications in explaining how individuals decide to engage, to connect

and to build solidarity with each other, and why there is a sense of community among protestors who are using social media (Zhou et. al, 2011). Similar findings are reported by other studies. Gillan & Pickerill (2008) found that in online discussion boards, symbolic expressions of solidarity play a key role in mobilizing activists. Emotional mobilization is more likely to be used in authoritarian societies (Zhao, 2006). Yang (2009) found that the collective action in Chinese cyberspace is mobilized primarily by "emotional labor," which is fairly common in other activisms mobilized by new media in China.

The problematic digital democracy. In western literature, the criticism of the democratic role of the Internet focuses on the digital divide and the involvement of corporations. The digital divide is the result of unequal access to the Internet by members of a society. This gap between people who have access to digital media and people who do not can lead to distinct perceptions of political environment and cause inequality in political participation. Even the people with Internet access have different capabilities in managing vast volumes of information. Another perspective on the digital divide, as some scholars argue, is that the Internet only offers a place to reinforce existing opinion rather than to promote a public deliberation, because people are more likely to meet and discuss with "like-minded" others online. Analysis by Le Grignou and Patou (2004) of the use of the Internet by members of an association echoes this argument that the gap between an expert and a non-expert is widened by the use of the Internet.

The engagement of major business and corporate power has also become a concern for some researchers. Scholars argue that corporations gradually become the gatekeeper of Internet content (Pickard, 2008), and the financial control that restrains

digital production helps maintain the position and power of mainstream media (Castells, 2007; Chadwick, 2005, p108). On the other hand, regarding the adoption of media technologies, not only citizens but also mass media (e.g., newspaper, television) and political elites use the Internet to achieve their traditional goals (e.g., online news sites and campaign WebPages). In this sense, mass media and new media are gradually converging, and the fundamental structures of economic and political power are transferring from real life to virtual space as well. This is the situation that Marxist scholars criticize. When people at the grassroots level are complacent and enjoying their freedom to obtain information, interact with people and organize protests, the tool they are using, the form they are acting in, and the potential success of their resistance are still determined by the system they oppose (Garnham, 1993).

2.2. Liberation versus Repression: New Media in Authoritarian Regimes

Centralized states are more likely to attract collective actions that rise to the summit of the political system than a decentralized political system (Tarrow, 1998). Scholars who believe that Internet activism can bring political change to authoritarian countries highlight the nature of the Internet that promises a decentralized political system and thus can empower the grassroots by forming a public sphere for potential political deliberation and activism. In the Arab uprisings, social media such as Facebook are believed to have played important roles behind the movement against the authoritarian regime (Cohen, 2011; Webster, 2011). The impact of social media includes transforming organized groups and informal networks, establishing external linkages, developing a sense of modernity and community, and drawing global attention (Zhou,

Wellman & Yu, 2011). By using a global sample for the 1993 to 2010, Ruijgrok (2017) find evidence that Internet use facilitated the occurrence of protests in authoritarian countries, while the same trend does not show in democratic states.

On the other hand, the authoritarian regime's approach to Internet management is still state-centered, putting the party interests first, and following the propaganda model. Using China as an example, the government regards the Internet as another mass media channel that can be used to sway public opinion, and its approach to control the Internet includes using a multilevel monitoring system, shutting down publications or websites, and jailing dissident journalists and activists. In the context of an authoritarian government, the motivation to participate in political activities has been largely eliminated by the perceived political risks rather than the political opportunities offered by new technology. In China, the college students' lack of willingness to engage in online opinion expression is largely because of their worries about negative political impact on their personal and social life (Mou, Atkin & Fu, 2011). In Azerbaijan, after the "donkey blogger" affair, the arrest of two activists prevented participation in further political protests and also demoralized frequent Internet use by Azerbaijan netizens (Pearce & Kendzior, 2012).

In these countries, the mass media is controlled and operated as the propaganda tool of the government. Whether the public sphere built online could surpass the public sphere built by mass media to eventually reach the broader public and generate political pressure is problematic. Hamdy and Gomaa's (2012) comparative study of news framing of the Egyptian uprising by state-run newspapers and social media discovers distinguishing frames of the same issue in different types of media. While social media

are more likely to define the protests as "a revolution for freedom and social justice," the government newspaper framed the event negatively as "a conspiracy on the Egyptian state" with the warning of economic and political consequences. This could explain the popularity of social media and the loss of the public's trust in mainstream media during the February 2011 uprisings. This implies that new media as an alternative to mass media promotes the dissemination of uncensored information among grassroots users and weakens the dominant role of mass media in social life. It also implies a possible change of citizen media preference from mass media to social media that would happen in any authoritarian country, particularly during a political crisis.

A recent trend in the study of the Internet and democracy in authoritarian countries suggests emphasizing the long-term effect of activism online that may or may not lead to immediate political outcomes (Lynch, 2011). Lim (2012) examines activism that took place in Egypt from 2004 to 2011. She explains that, for activists during this period, social media offered space and tools that activists could use to connect with each other and expand their networks. Although the government controlled the development and the result of a single protest, it was unable to prevent the expansion of such networks. These networks played a significant role later in the Egyptian revolution. By the same token, the long-term development of political attitudes, the building of shared repertoires of contention, and the practice of online framing are necessary for a sustainable political change. In regard to China, Internet activism became more frequent in recent years, and we have witnessed an increasing significance of the Internet's role in bringing the grassroots' power into the political decision-making process. On the other side, a slow

and long-term change can also provide time for authoritarian regimes to adapt and absorb

the change, which makes the direction of this change remain uncertain (Lynch, 2011)

2.3. Control versus Change: The Lasting Debate on Chinese Internet

While scholars concur on the increasing importance of the Internet in Chinese

public life, researchers studying the political role of the Internet have not reached a

consensus. Echoing the controversy on the Internet's role in democracy is a "free versus

control" debate regarding the political consequence of Internet use in China. As early as

1996, Larry Press coined the phrase "dictator's dilemma" to describe the conflict between

retaining an authoritarian power and adopting information technology and the Internet to

obtain economic growth in Cuba. This statement was then employed by scholars in cases

of other communist and authoritarian regimes (Kedzie, 1997), and became conventional

wisdom that technology threatens authoritarian rule. From 2000, along with the

intensified global diffusion of the Internet, case studies conducted around the world

showed opposite conclusions. Among these is a major work by Kalathil & Boas, "Open

networks, closed regimes" (2003), in which they argue that the Internet actually brought

both challenge and opportunities for authoritarian regimes. Based on studies in eight

countries, they found that a capable and efficient state could even use technology to

enhance authoritarian rule through proactive policies and control. This view informs

many Internet studies in authoritarian regimes, including China.

2.3.1. Government's Control and Censorship

The Chinese government's control of the Internet started early, as the Internet was constructed. The so-called "Great Firewall of China" as a major part of the party's "Golden Shield Project" is a general surveillance setting that can prevent netizens' access to foreign websites. At the same time, regulations and controls on licenses for Internet service/content providers and Internet outlet owners were established and enforced based on needs (Harwit & Clark, 2001; Shie, 2006). Apart from these, the most studied topic on the Chinese Internet is government control of Internet content, which is commonly known as Internet censorship (Bamman, O'Connor & Smith, 2012; He, 2008; King, Pan & Roberts, 2013; MacKinnon, 2008; Ng, 2014; Shie, 2006). Among the many initiatives of the government, Internet censorship is the most straightforward and influential to ordinary users and activists.

Internet censorship refers to the control by the government of information and ideas circulated online. The Internet censorship system in China is part of the traditional media censorship system but involves more government efforts and human labor. The Central Propaganda Department of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has a central and guiding role over every aspect of public life. It oversees the entire media system and works with State Administration of Press & Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SARFTF) to control media outlets, monitor media content, and enforce censorship. The Internet domain is managed by China Internet Network Information Center, which is under the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology. Ministry of Public Security and Ministry of State Security have been reported to have recruited Internet commentators and Internet police from 2000. Internet commentators are trained to guide discussions in Chinese cyberspace, and Internet police are responsible for removing anti-

communist comments. State Administration for Industry and Commerce is also involved, being responsible for regulating Internet cafés or Internet bars. After obtaining licenses from local commercial administration departments, owners of Internet cafés must register with local Public Security bureaus before opening for business (Shie, 2006).

Within this top-down and multi-layer control network, censorship grew to include multiple levels of actions and executors. Based on limited literature, the news reports by the *New York Times*, and case descriptions collected by this study, I constructed the following six different stages of content censorship.

"***Blocking or Filtering Information***" is the most common approach and sometimes the first step for the Chinese government to control information flow and limit the citizen's right to know. For example, after Chinese citizens used text messages to expose the national cover-up of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic, the government began to filter billions of telephone text messages (Kahn, 2004). This strategy is also used frequently in regard to cases related to foreign media. In October 2012, for example, the government blocked access to the Web site of The New York Times in Mainland China in response to an article describing wealth accumulated by the family of the country's prime minister Wen Jiabao (Bradsher, 2012).

"***Removing Online Content***" is the most visible approach for government to terminate the dissemination of information among Internet users. It is usually implemented by the Internet service providers, which are encouraged and promoted by CCP as "self-censorship." The first pledge on promoting self-discipline between Internet industry regulators and companies was signed in 2002, and the central government required Internet and telecom network operators to closely monitor the content generated

on their networks (Kine, 2010). In their 2012 annual report submitted to the United States Securities and Exchange Commission, Sina Corporation (the service provider of Sina Weibo) points out that in China the regulation of the Internet industry and the interpretation of the prohibited content online is vague and subjective, and the government can easily revoke their business, block the website, and impose additional restrictions on their business operations, once they are deemed to be in violation of any existing laws or regulations.[3]

Recently, an increasing number of researchers started to investigate this aspect of censorship, attempting to find out, through empirical studies, the underlying pattern of government's information control. A study by King, et al. (2013), finds that the current Chinese government is primarily interested in removing posts with the potential to prompt "collective action," and the postings critical of the government are usually not the target of Internet censorship. Cairns & Allen (2016) examine government censorship on microblog during an anti-Japanese demonstration and find that the government used censorship in a strategic way, turning it on and off based on the situation and needs. The full opening of online speech in this nationalism case, as they argue, not only allows a way to "let nationalist-minded netizens blow off steam," but also shows the political elites' acceptance of the anger expressed online. These studies changed the "rigorous and thorough" impression of Chinese Internet censorship and suggest a more flexible and tolerant censorship system in China.

"*Limiting Online Speech*" is a strategy usually stimulated by individual cases but aims to reach a long-term effect. The "real name system," for example, is a system the

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[3] Content cited from Sina corporation Financial Release in 2012.Its online version cab be found from http://corp.sina.com.cn/chn/Annual_Report_2012_Final.pdf

Chinese government attempted to build from the early 2000s. The "real-name system"

requires Internet users to use their legal names to register an account on the blog, BBS,

microblog and websites. Until recently, the campaign for implementing the real name

system by the government was still going on, but the effect of this attempt is not as

obvious as expected (Caragliano, 2013). Another attempt by the government to limit

online speech is the "Green Dam Youth Escort 绿坝" in 2009, which is a content-control

software. The government required all personal computers sold in the country to include

this software that can filter out pornography and other "unhealthy information" from the

Internet (Wong & Vance, 2009). Being strongly opposed by the public and industry, the

project was postponed and then revoked.

   "***Shut Down Media/Organization***" is also a commonly used strategy, this one

aimed at domestic news media organizations and media companies. Examples include the

shut down of a magazine, dismissal of a newspaper editor, and a temporary crackdown on

social media. In 2005, the editor-in-chief of the *Beijing News* was dismissed because of

its critical and investigative reports - "multiple errors" – related to official mistakes.[4] The

next year, China's Propaganda Department ordered the closing of *Bing Dian* (*Freezing*

Point 冰点), an influential weekly newspaper, to curb the spread of information and

views that were unfavorable to the Party (Pan, 2006). In March 2012, because of their

role in promoting the spread of a rumor of political coup, Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo

were forced to shut down their servers for three days to clear up rumors and other

"harmful content."(Chao, 2012)

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[4] According to a report by Reuters, the precise reasons for the dismissal were not
announced, and this ambiguous accusation led to a later strike. The Reuters' report can be
retrieved from http://www.irishtimes.com/news/authorities-remove-editor-of-outspoken-
beijing-newspaper-1.1288563

"***Cutting Off Internet Connections /Cell Phone Service***" is an uncommon

strategy and has only been used in regional violent conflict. In the 2009 Ürümqi riot, the

Internet connection and cell phone services in Xinjiang were completely disconnected for

six months. It wasn't until May 2010 that the local Internet service was fully opened

again to the public. (Xinhua News, 2010)

"***Arresting Activists and Dissidents***" as an information control strategy existed

before the Internet. Political dissidents are using the Internet as a tool for their activism,

and their online speech is considered more threatening to the government than their

offline speech. The best known jailed dissidents in the past ten years include

democracy/environmental/HIV activist Hu jia, the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu

xiaobo, Chinese contemporary artist Ai weiwei, and blind lawyer Chen Guangcheng.

All these controls, including the Great Firewall, the regulations, the multi-level

censorship, serve the politics of technology for contemporary political order, which

contains only one essential criterion: that, as Paltemaa & Vuori (2009) argue,

"technology must not be allowed to jeopardize the position of the CCP as the exclusive

holder of the ultimate political power in China." From this point of view, traditional

media were used to convey information between the central government and the public,

becoming the opinion leader when online public opinion was needed and keeping silent

when social tension needed venting. The so-called "safety valve" function of the Internet

was emphasized in several studies to understand the Chinese government's strategic

tolerance of online speech (Cairns & Allen, 2016; Hassid, 2012; MacKinnon, 2008).

2.3.2. Internet-Promoted Political Change

On the other side of censorship is the use of the Internet by Chinese citizens. Many studies, encouraged by successful activism cases, claim that the Internet clearly has democratic consequences, and the Internet has created a quasi-public sphere in which citizen's rights were defended and collective actions were mobilized. (Lagerkvist, 2005; Tai, 2006; Yang, 2009; Xiao, 2011) These studies give more attention to the resistance potential of the Internet and its function in facilitating political deliberation and policy change.

Another major wave in studying the role of the Internet in China focuses on political beliefs, values, and behavior change of Internet users based on survey data. Considering the Internet as part of the established media system, Lei (2011) found that the Internet contributed to a more decentralized media system and a more critical citizenry, as Chinese netizens are more politically opinionated and supportive of the norms of democracy than traditional media users. By analyzing the survey data collected by World Internet Project, Shen, etc. (2009) argued that, although many usages of the Internet seem to have little to do with democracy, Internet participation opens a new channel for individual expression and builds loosely structured networks, which could have crucial implications for the realization of a civic public domain. Wang (2014) goes further to examine how the degree of Internet exposure and the types of usage influence the political beliefs of younger netizens. Xie (2008), instead of focusing on the active younger users, explores the civic engagement of older Chinese facilitated by their participation in Internet activities. These studies, in short, are formed under a common belief that the Internet can help build a new social consciousness that potentially challenges authoritarian rule.

Considering the diversification of online activities in China, some researchers argue that applying western democratic views to examine the political role of the Internet in China could oversimplify the results and limit our understanding only to the "freedom versus state controls" debate. (Meng, 2010) They realize that, beyond the political activities, Chinese netizens create a large number of cultural and entertainment products, which form an alternative political discourse, "a collective manifesto," and represent how these ordinary users negotiate a mediated communication space every day (Meng, 2010 P504; Meng, 2011; Wang & Hong, 2010). Furthermore, many scholars profoundly rethink the Chinese case, asking for alternative approaches and theories to study new media in China. They point out that China has a unique political context that needs to be considered carefully in each case study, and the relationship between the state and the users is not always antithetical, as most current studies assume (Damm, 2007; Meng, 2010; Yang, 2011).

2.3.3. The "Gradual Change" Argument and the Problem in Current Studies

From these two distinct perspectives – the control-focused and change-focused - in studying the Chinese Internet, a common theme can be found. Both perspectives reveal that the change technology brought to Chinese politics will not be radical revolutions as has happened in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Instead, technology could make a "gradual evolution toward democracy over the long run," (MacKinnon, 2008) "gradually force an opening for free expression and civil society," (Xiao, 2011) and "bring about a long-term change in the political system." (Dai, 2007) These slow changes are not always positive, but their cumulative effects can be subtle and profound (Yang, 2011).

The literature on the political aspects of China's Internet has relied primarily on case studies, particularly focused on successful activist mobilization through the Internet and on survey data collected in a certain period, making the results difficult to generalize across time and sometimes suggesting inconsistent conclusions. The studies looking into how regimes attempt to control cyberspace and prevent collective actions online suffer from similar problems. Neglecting time as a variable is equivalent to ignoring the development of technology and the changing political environment, the two factors among the most important components of economic growth in contemporary China. In addition, the "gradual change" assumption as a gradually increased consensus also lacks empirical evidence. A combination of case study and longitudinal study, which I will undertake here, can help us better understand this complicated process. Our task is to broaden our understanding of netizens' activities and government responses not in snapshots but in the big picture. Finally, given that China's political development has critical importance globally, particularly as a major case among authoritarian regimes, to conduct a study of the Chinese case that can provide comprehensive understanding and empirical evidence on this gradual change has broad impacts.

2.4. Theoretical Frameworks

2.4.1 Center/periphery Public Sphere

Democracy depends heavily on interactions between citizens and a shared voice generated as a result of this interaction. Creating a space where this deliberation can take place is essential for a civil society. Habermas (1989) formulated the term "public sphere" as a space of practices "between the private interests of everyday life in civil

society and the realm of state power," in which "the circulation of information, the exchange of opinions and the formation of public opinion will be located" (Bentivegna, 2006; Kellner, 2000). The emergence of the Internet is immediately regarded by many scholars as a new means of creating a public sphere because this Internet-based communication environment has the potential to be a public forum, and so-called cyberspace has the characteristics to be a "new public space" (Jones, 1997).

To distinguish the new media sphere and new media-based activism from the traditional mass media sphere, some scholars propose a multiplicity structure in regard to a public sphere. Among them, Downey & Fenton (2003) present two domains of public sphere, one of which is a "common domain" consisting of dominant media and the other is a "counter-public sphere" that is the public sphere of the dominated (p.188). Media in the common domain, such as cable television, dominate the information sources for the society, while media in the counter-public sphere, such as alternative media, are used for activists and interest groups to promote their messages. This multiple public sphere echoes Habermas's (1996) center/periphery dichotomy in his later work as the revisiting of the structure of the public sphere and an illustration of how public opinion can act as a guide for politics. In this system, the center holds the "complexes of administration"(p355) that have the capacity to act and the periphery holds "those non-governmental and non-economic connections and voluntary associations"(p367) that enable conflicts in the private space to become a public topic (Salter, 2003, p124). The periphery is defined by "its informal, highly differentiated and cross-linked channels of communication" (p356). The link between these two is communicative actions that produce and maintain a public sphere. The role of media, in this sense, is their

communicative ability to bring problems from the periphery to the center, to generate

critical debate in a wider public, and ultimately to put problems on the action agenda.

Despite its roots in liberal western concepts, this multiplicity structure of the

public sphere is particularly useful for understanding the impact of Internet activism in

many cases. The Internet first contributes to the generation of a "microsphere" linking the

private life and a deliberative space for people (Dahlgren, 2001). In this space, people

exchange ideas, look for affiliations, form "diasporic communities" (Pavlik, 1994), and

discuss solutions. Those linked groups across different geographic regions then use the

Internet to make their ideas or problems known to a macrosphere, in which the

mainstream media and administrative system can be reached. Before the emergence of

the Internet, it was difficult for the public sphere built among activists to surpass the

public sphere built by mass media (Gitlin, 1980). With the help of this digital technology,

groups and individuals that "have been traditionally excluded or marginalized in the

mass-media public sphere" have the capacity to deliver their opinions to a larger public

and reach the mainstream media more effectively (Downey & Fenton, 2003).

2.4.2. Media Agenda and the Internet Agenda in China

First developed by McCombs and Shaw in 1972 in their studies of the presidential

election, agenda setting theory describes the phenomenon that mass media can select

certain issues/stories in a broad topic, make it important through frequency and

highlighting, and as a result influence what the audience should think about. Examination

of the agenda-setting functions of the mass media not only refers to the hypothesis about

the influence of the news agenda on the public agenda, but also includes the study of the

sources that can shape the media's agenda. There are many potential factors that can

influence mass media's agenda, ranging from external sources in government, the

political position of the news corporation, and the idiosyncrasies of individual journalists

(McCombs, Einsiedel, & Weaver, 1991). In the case of China, the State Administration

of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFTF) directly supervises the mainstream mass

media. SARFTF determines the leadership of national level media enterprises such as

China Central Television (CCTV) and has the responsibility to censor any materials in

media that may touch sensitive areas of concern for the Chinese government, which

means that the mass media agenda in China is usually highly consistent with the

government agenda. In other words, the mass media are used as instruments through

which the Party can propagate its ideologies and government policies (Pan, 2000).

The agenda from different media can also influence each other, which is called

intermedia agenda setting. It examines the transfer of issue salience across media

platforms (McCombs, 2004). The early research on intermedia influence focused on the

relationship between traditional media, such as daily newspapers and national news

agencies (McCombs & Shaw, 1976; Reese & Danielian, 1989). Most recently, the

concept of intermedia agenda setting is expanded to the intermedia influence between the

Internet and other media, while most of them are focusing on the intermedia agenda

setting between online news and various media forms in political campaigns (Lee,

Lancendorfer, & Lee, 2005; Roberts, Wanta, & Dzwo, 2002). Although in many activism

studies the Internet has been confirmed as an important tool for activists to generate

public attention and set the public agenda, in the current agenda setting literature, very

few studies put specific focus on Internet activism and its relationship to mass media

agenda, or in other words, the agenda setting effect of online user-generated topics. As the first study to address this gap, Groshek and Groshek (2013) compared the topical agendas between traditional media and social media, identifying a reciprocal agenda-setting effect.

Although the importance of Internet activities in China has attracted increasing scholarly attention, the study of their agenda setting effect is still limited and unsystematic. Some studies show that in China the agenda of discussion online is quite different from the agendas provided by Chinese official media, particularly in political incidents (Li & Qin, 2001; Zhou & Moy, 2007), and in some instances, the alternative online media can influence mainstream media agendas (Wu, Atkin, Mou, Lin, & Lau, 2013). In other studies online opinion was found to have no agenda setting effect on government, and conversely the government led the topics of online discussion (Luo, 2014). Conducting an agenda setting analysis in this study can fill both the gap of Internet activism agenda setting studies and the Chinese Internet agenda setting studies by investigating whether online agenda set by activists in each activism case influences the official media agenda and the government at the national level in China. Since this study explores the agenda setting effect of a series of activism cases over time, instead of emphasizing the individual case, its investigation focus is whether the activism issue generated online by the public has been covered by official media, and if so in what way.

2.4.3. Authoritarian Deliberation

Echoing the coexistence of control and freedom regarding the Internet's role in an authoritarian context, scholars have formulated several concepts that attempt to define

this dynamic. Authoritarian deliberation is the combination of two seemingly opposite concepts: authoritarianism and deliberation. He and Warren (2011) revisited the concept of deliberation and distinguished it from the democratic decision-making process. They then state that the authoritarian state can theoretically have a deliberative system and in this system democratic institutions are not necessary. They conceptualize the theory as below:

The authority … then makes a decision that reflects and accepts the substance of the deliberation…the authority retains the power of decision, but the decision borrows …its legitimacy from deliberation. Importantly, in authoritarian deliberation, the power holders control "the domain and scope of the deliberation, and limit citizens' capacities to put issues onto the political agenda" (He & Warren, 2011. P274).

According to He and Warren, China is definitely one of these countries that are currently maintaining the authoritarian regime while also generally allowing a process of deliberation. They propose two major deliberation domains in China. One is the administrative level deliberation, which refers to the political debates in different levels of the People's Congress and the deliberative forms such as village elections that are set up according to government policies. The other form of deliberation takes place outside of administrative departments and starts with citizen discussions online and the policy debate in the public sphere. These citizen activities are often stimulated by resistance and turned into activism that can generate pressures for political elites to consult with the people, and by which a deliberation is formed. Authoritarian deliberation, in this sense, is regarded as theoretically existent and functionally motivated in the Chinese case but still needing empirical evidence. In a later study, Lewis (2013) goes further to confirm an

emerging deliberative public sphere in Chinese cyberspace – which he called "pluralized authoritarianism" – using criteria from general theories of deliberative democracy. First, Chinese cyberspace expands information availability as a relatively independent media channel. Second, there are quality persuasion and rational-critical interactions in online discourse. Last is the formation of and increasingly Internet-driven mobilization.

Deliberation in authoritarian government, on one hand, can help these governments to calm social conflicts and control political dissidents by channeling them to conversations. On the other hand, deliberation could potentially decentralize the power of authoritarian government and encourage citizens to question the legitimacy of the governing. Specifically in the case of Internet activism, deliberation in China could be understood as a strategy of the Chinese government to prevent online activism from escalating to unpredictable social movements, which is also described by Weller (2008) and Reilly (2011) as "responsive authoritarianism," in which the societal forces can be beneficial to authoritarian rule as long as the state is able to sustain the balance between control and freedom. On the other hand, the concession of government could also lead in the future to deliberation-led democratization. The critical turning points will be whether deliberation follows the government agenda or is more likely to be led by empowered citizens and independent political organizations.

In summary, online activism as political activities that aim to build a civil society in an authoritarian state is a worthwhile phenomenon to explore. **What** are the outcomes of online activism in an authoritarian country, particularly when it has been developing for more than seventeen years? And **how** do we understand the interaction between the

evolution of online activism and the tightened control by the government in an authoritarian deliberation? These are the main research questions driving this project.

Center/periphery public sphere theory suggests an ideal situation in which when new media emerged as a relatively independent mode of communication in an authoritarian regime, it could: (1) provide a space where the alternative information could be disseminated and circulated; (2) facilitate effective and meaningful communications in this space that can generate public opinion; and (3) foster a channel for public opinion to influence government decision making and policy changes. If this sphere had been successfully established in China, we should expect to see, through their agenda setting effect, an increasing number of online activism cases appear in the government's agenda. In authoritarian regimes, however, the independence of the Internet did not last long, or such an ideal situation never existed. We observe instead more strategic and tactic-based contentious activities in cyberspace, and the capability of such activities to reach the central sphere becomes questionable. The authoritarian deliberation theory, based on macro observation of the status quo, regards cyberspace deliberation as only one component in a scenario in which the voices of citizens (some through cyberspace) actually generate a broader deliberation in different domains in an authoritarian country. This theory suggests that the deliberation is not limited to netizens in cyberspace, but also occurs between citizens generally, who raise the issues, and the government, which attempts to eliminate the negative effect brought by the grievance through responsive conversations.

Instead of adding more evidence for the debate of control and freedom, this study focuses on the interaction between government control and cyberspace resistance over a

long time period. Based on the theoretical framework, chapters 4, 5, and 6 will focus, respectively, on (1) the strategic and tactic-based contentious activities by Chinese Internet users over time, (2) the agenda setting effect of online activism on official newspapers, and (3) the formation of an activism sphere and its interactions with outsider agencies in two comparable cases.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This research is a combination of case study and longitudinal study. The underlying logic for choosing case study methodology is dictated by the research questions and the object of study. Previous studies and comparisons with other social science research methodologies show that the case study is a preferred strategy when "what" or "how" questions are asked and when the phenomenon analyzed is contemporary within a real-life context (Yin, 1994). The case study as a research strategy (Stoecker, 1991) usually suggests that (1) the unit of analysis is the case; (2) the emphasis of reporting is the case description and the specific context in which the case exists; (3) more variables of interest than data points are allowed (Yin, 1994, p13); and (4) multiple sources of evidence are relied upon. Because of the above characteristics, the case study is the best choice for this exploratory research.

Longitudinal study is observational research that collects data over time with the purpose of analyzing and measuring social change. A longitudinal study allows a diachronic analysis of the incidence of conditions and events (Ruspini, 2000) to study long-term effects. With this broad method of research, types of data for analysis may vary according to the purpose of the research. The current study is a multiple-case study, as the data collected are about a series of activism cases over time. To maintain validity, a longitudinal study requires that the subjects or cases analyzed be the same or comparable from one period to the next (Ruspini, 2000) and involve some comparison of data

between periods (Menard, 1991). In other words, the criterion or measurement for the cases collected needs to be consistent. In this case, we need to define activism cases first before data preparation.

Activism is the practice of using intentional actions to support one side of a controversial issue. It usually relies on a network of individuals, groups, or organizations that share collective identity and attempt to bring about social, political, economic, cultural, or environmental changes (van de Donk, Loader, Nixon & Rucht, 2004). Activism can take a wide range of forms of action, from blogging to street marches, or even guerrilla tactics. Internet activism, as the name suggests, refers to activism enhanced by or based on new media technology[5]. The new media technology here include mobile devices, the Internet, and a variety of digital content and networking programs, such as online videos, forums, blogs, and social media. Based on the descriptions above, we develop three criteria in selecting activism cases for this study: (1) developed or enhanced through the Internet and other new media technology; (2) formed extensive networks and interactions among netizens, activists, and the public; and (3) aimed to solve controversial issues on political, cultural, and social problems. Each case selected must satisfy all three conditions at the same time.

Agenda setting and framing as methodology are also applied in this study to provide evidence and descriptive analysis of the hypothesized relationship between online activism and government behavior. Sometimes considered as the second-order agenda-setting (McCombs, 1997), media framing also shows "principles of selection,

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[5] Internet-enhanced refers to the use of websites, email lists, or alternative media as the additional tool to communicate and to mobilize physical movements. Internet-based, by contrast, is used to describe the action that can only take place online as a new form of activism, such as hacktivism or email bombing (Vegh, 2003).

emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about the issues and events that happened and have been reported by the media" (Gitlin, 1980, p.6). The significance of studying media framing comes from its capacity to reflect the strategies of "constructing and processing discourse" (Pan & Kosicki 1993) through "repeating, reinforcing, and placement" (Entman, 1991, p.7). In this study, as the government has complete control over the newspaper analyzed, the framing reflects exactly the government's strategy and attitude toward the activism cases, as well as the meaning of events it defined and attempted to transmit to guide the public's perceptions. These framing strategies by the government, as Entman (2004) summarized in his "cascading model," include "word choice, information distribution and withholding, and timing."

3.2. Research Design

This section introduces the project's research design. In order to ensure the quality of case study, current study first develops a database of cases, and then uses multiple sources of documents to build the database for each case. The following part will discuss the data collecting process and the pilot study result.

3.2.1. Building an Internet Activism Index

Due to the lack of a complete list in available literature, the first step of this study is to build an Internet Activism Index. Data were collected from both English and Chinese sources. For English sources, I choose *The New York Times* because of its

credibility in international reports and specific focus on the Chinese Internet[6]. This news data are collected through Westlaw Campus Search, a database containing the full text of *The New York Times* from 1980 to the present. The reason to start from the English sources is that the outsider reports are free of censorship and therefore may potentially include some cases not covered by domestic material.

By using the keyword combination "Internet" and "China"/ "Chinese," 6188 articles were retrieved as the initial database. I then looked through the title and the first several paragraphs to do further screening based on three questions: (1) Is this article about any form of activism in Chinese cyberspace? (2) Is this article about any form of activism in which the Internet plays a role? (3) Is the topic of this article related to Internet restriction and censorship that influence online activities? Finally, 428 articles, including news, world briefing, editorial, letter to the editor, and op-ed columnists, from January 1, 2003, to December 31, 2011, are collected for Index building.

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[6] *The New York Times* includes the special topic "Internet Censorship in China," a collection of "news about Internet Censorship in China, including commentary and archival articles published in *The New York Times.*"

Year	No. of Articles
2003	14
2004	18
2005	27
2006	43
2007	23
2008	53
2009	57
2010	109
2011	84

Figure 1. Number of articles in *The New York Times* on Chinese Internet Activism and related topics from 2003 to 2011

The *New York Times'* reports on Chinese Internet activism increased every year in general and rose dramatically in 2010. The introduction of microblog (weibo, the Chinese version of twitter) by Sina Corp. in August 2009 might be a key stimulus, as the speed and the information flow accelerated by microblog made the control of online activities much more difficult than before. "Online activism incidents" (41%), "Chinese government censorship" (25%), and "political dissidence" (21%) are three major focuses of *The New York Times'* reports. The report on censorship and dissidence has an interesting drop after 2010. Based on the news articles retrieved from *The New York Times*, 85 online activism cases have been collected.

Figure 2. Number of *New York Times'* reports on activism incidents, censorship, and political dissidence from 2003-2012

Domestic sources checked for additional cases include books (*New Media Events Research* by Qiu and Chan (2011), *The Annual Report on Public Opinion in China* by Yu (2010, 2011, 2012), *Boiling Ice-cold* by Du (2009), *Study on Internet Event in China* by Deng (2012), etc.) and the "*Annual Report on Internet Public Opinion* (中国互联网舆情 分析报告)" by people.com.cn (2009-2011). Also considered as supplementary sources were: several independent online archives, including China Digital Times (CDT), which is an independent, bilingual media organization aiming to "bring uncensored news and online voices from China to the world," and Danwei, an online media intelligence publication that tracks companies, brands, investments, topics, and people on the Chinese Internet and in the Chinese media.

As a result, the Activism Index based on data collected from the above sources will be relatively integral and reliable, as it covers data from Chinese official documents, the credible international media from foreign countries, the university affiliated organization and independent organizations. In total, 145 Internet activism cases from 1994 to 2011 are collected for this study (see Appendix B). The data integrity, however, is the biggest limitation of the current index. The cases collected here are the ones that are more likely to attract public attention, become a public topic of discussion, and are more influential than those not gathered through this study.

3.2.2. Coding Activism Cases

After building the index, I reviewed the data for each case for coding. Case data are mainly from three sources: the original Internet records that include online discussions, personal blogs, and microblog postings directly related to the activism case; the news reports on the activism incident; and the research paper/books that usually contain field study and interview data. The secondary accounts by some websites (such as Wikipedia and Baidu Baike) are also taken for reference. For case studies, the online bulletin discussions and microblog postings are also retrieved for further analysis. Based on these materials, each activism case was coded on its timeline, subject category, geographic location, major platform, and the major actions taken online. Several questions are also addressed in each case to explore the narrative frame, which include: What is the problem or issue identified by the activists? What are the causes defined in online discussion or digital action? Who is responsible for the problem that this action is trying to fix? And what are the solutions, or the alternatives to the problem?

The strategy and tactic used by activists and the different repertoires of online activism in different periods are the emphasis for case data reading. The initial analysis of activism cases suggests three phases in a typical Internet activism case: information disclosure online; online discussion/debate, which may build collective identity or demand; and formation of actions. Although cases collected in this study mostly reached the second or the third phase, we understand that many stories placed online did not get as much public attention as might be expected.

3.2.3. Locating Official Reports on Activism Cases

I selected *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*) as the official news source because it is directly affiliated with the Central Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party and is the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. It is usually regarded as an authoritative source of the government's policy agenda and accepted as the voice of the Communist Party (Li, Qin, & Kluver, 2003). In addition, People's Daily is the second largest newspaper circulated in Mainland China, with 2.52 million copies sold daily. The *People's Daily*'s articles for this study are retrieved through Princeton University library portal, which has a full-text database of this most important newspaper of CCP, from 1946 to the present.

The first step to locate official reports on each activism case is to determine the keywords for searching. To include all relevant articles, I selected three phrases from each case, including "name of the key person," "specific location the incident took place," and "the incident name used by mass media," and conducted separate searches. After examining the pilot data, I set six months as a reasonable time frame to count the

total responses for each case. As a result, 526 articles were retrieved from *People's Daily* for the agenda setting part of this study.

In short, to answer the research questions, this study applied multiple approaches. An Internet Activism Index from 1994 to 2011 was built and coded for a longitudinal analysis. The results, which focus on the evolution of online activism regarding its changed subjects, repertoires, strategies, and tactics over time, are discussed in Chapter 4. Then in Chapter 5 the agenda setting effect and media framing on the official newspaper are investigated to provide a more comprehensive picture of the interplay between online activism cases and government reactions/strategies over this seventeen-year period. In Chapter 6, I conduct a comparative study of two cases from two different periods to further examine the factors changed over time that can affect the dynamics between online activism and government behavior.

Chapter 4

The Evolution of Chinese Internet Activism 1994 -2011

4.1. Introduction

The Chinese Internet was initiated by the Chinese government as an opportunity for national scientific and economic development. Initiating the Chinese Internet echoes the policy of opening as part of economic reform that was restarted after Deng's 1992 Southern tour. On January 24, during his trip to Zhuhai in Guangdong province, Deng said "the rapid development of the economy is based on science, technology and education…science and technology are a primary productive force… and China should take its place in the world in the field of high technology too." (Deng, 1994, p377-378) While economic development again became the priority of the communist party, building a national Internet network was placed on the political agenda, too.

Prior to providing Internet service to the public, the Chinese government announced the first regulation of the computer information system in February 1994. The government generally claims that the information system cannot be used to harm national interest, the collective interest and the legitimate interests of citizens. The Ministry of Public Security is claimed to be the party of supervision, monitoring, and regulation. The Chinese government, at this moment, was quite positive about introducing the Internet to the public without prepared regulations on Internet behavior and use. Three years later, the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) was founded as a non-profit organization and administrative agency for Internet affairs affiliated under the Ministry of Information Industry.

According to the *Chinese Internet Statistics* released by CNNIC, which is usually collected twice a year, the number of public users of the Internet expanded rapidly and became the most in the world in 2008.

Data sources: *Chinese Internet Statistics* by CNNIC

Figure 3 Growth of Chinese Internet Users from 1997 to 2012

4.1.1. Development of Network Tools and Platforms

The Internet started a communication revolution for people to connect with each other and has quickly become the tool and the platform for activists. Different Internet-based technologies have different architectures and encourage different kinds of usage. At the early stage, email was the dominant application to help users reach the broader outside world. The first recognized online activism case – a campaign to help diagnose a university student, Zhuling, who was a victim of an unsolved thallium poisoning case – started from the emails that Zhu's friends sent through the Internet to foreign Internet

usenet groups. The Bulletin Board System (BBS), including Shu Guang (曙光) BBS of Chinese Academy of Sciences and Shui Mu (水木) BBS of Tsinghua University, which were the earliest two BBS built in 1994 and 1996, respectively, were the main opinion battlefields for early activism cases. Since the users of BBS were very limited at this early stage, the early activism cases, such as the Baodiao movement, the online responses to the riot of Indonesia and demonstration against U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, have only generated heated discussions among students and higher education professionals. These small-scale campus BBS are also easy to be monitored, managed, and censored.

Starting from 1998, the regional and national BBS began to emerge. Tian Ya BBS (天涯论坛), founded in 1999, quickly became the major national BBS for Chinese netizens. Until recently, it had been playing a critical role in online activism, particularly in information spread and public opinion forming. The instant message tools, including QQ and MSN, were getting popular in college and Internet Cafés among the younger netizens at the same time. These interactive applications accelerated the dissemination of information among individuals, and, therefore, became essential tools for mobilization. Another significant development of Internet use is the introduction of personal blogs from 2003. The number of Chinese bloggers reached 16 million at the end of 2005 (Xinhua News, 2006). The adoption of blogs by Chinese netizens enhanced the role of the Internet in promoting freedom of expression and formed a strong public sphere online called blogsphere. Furthermore, the writing and debate online brought up different kinds of opinion leaders who had major effects on online activism cases. Later, while Facebook and Twitter were becoming popular in the US and other major regions in the world but

banned in China in the late 2000s, the Chinese version Facebook "Renren" (人人网）and
Chinese version Twitter "Microblog" (微博）took the place of BBS and Blog to become
the dominant social media for netizens, as well as the major platforms for online
struggles and advocates.

In short, from its introduction to the public, the Internet kept providing
convenience and opportunities for Chinese netizens. The creation and use of Internet-
based applications like BBS, instant messengers, blogs, and social media are the technical
support in facilitating the development of activism, and they are indispensable to the
increase of activism cases, alteration of activism strategies, and tactics used online in
different periods.

4.1.2. Political Contention, Activism, and Social Movement

Tilly (2006) considered activism and social movement both to be forms of
political contentions. When such contentions become sustained, organized, collected, and
of a certain scale, they become social movement. Sometimes, the movement can become
a radical revolution. In this sense, activism usually refers to contentions that are either
small or large -scale, more fragmentary, unorganized, and with more diverse forms.
Online activism thus has been used broadly in many ways. Van de Donk, et al. (2004)
suggest that online activism usually means networked individuals who form a collective
identity in a certain time and bring changes to social, political, and cultural issues. With
new media, individual activists are easily connected with each other without being
affected by distance. The emotional reactions evident online can be seen by broader

recipients using the Internet, which could generate a snowball effect, making the

emotion-stimulated actions form faster.

Figure 4. Internet Activism Cases by Year

When the Internet was introduced to activism, it not only provided new features

but also new scenarios to this form of contention. With the involvement of new media, a

social movement might not need a tangible organization as before, and might be regarded

as several activism efforts. The flexibility of social media created nodes in various spaces

to connect activists and participants with great speed, promoting mobilization and easier

growth from small-scale activism to large-scale social movement. This circumstance may

generate the question in China's case that, while there are hundreds of online activism

cases every year, have any of them been forming a social movement that could gradually change the society? The issue in this hypothesis is whether these activism cases shared a common goal and made it a consistent aim throughout different cases. This chapter, besides reviewing the development of online activism from 1994 to 2011, is also attempting to look for the argument for this hypothesis.

Figure 5. The Geographical Distribution of Internet Activism Cases

*Figure data based on current research

4.2. Internet Activism in China: Causes

The effort to categorize Chinese online activism often started with considering whether it is a social issue, a political issue, a cultural issue, or a nationalism case. In actuality, there are many cases spanning two or more categories. For instance, the environmental protest against a paraxylene (PX) chemical factory in City Dalian in 2011 is first a social issue. The protesters demanded that the plant be shut down and relocated, as it releases toxic chemicals to the residential area. At the same time, one of the main stimuli of the mass protest is the suspicion of the government's involvement in establishing and protecting the factory from scrutiny, which makes this case a political issue.

In the following section, the collected 145 activism cases are categorized based on their causes. This categorization helps us know what events could easily lead to Internet activism in China, and with the timeline, it can also help us understand what kinds of issues have aroused activism in different periods. The six groups of activism events include: human rights (including women's rights, children's rights, worker's right, etc.), environment and health, freedom of information, anti-corruption, democratic movement and political dissent, cultural activism and nationalism. Among them, human rights compose the major case causes, and have several specific focuses.

The dominant focus of the human rights cause is ***the unusual death or injury of a citizen or citizens***. In these cases, the Internet is usually the first place for questioning the

cause of the death or injury and initiates the investigation. The apparent purpose of the investigation is to discover the truth of the death or injury, which is usually different from that announced by the local authorities. And thus, this kind of online activity can easily become a confrontation against the local government, as it challenges governmental authority. Some of the activism initiated by human rights concerns drove policy changes. For instance, the Sun Zhigang case in 2003 resulted in the abolition of the custody and repatriation system. This category of activism is also more likely to occur when the involved suspect or suspect's family is wealthy or has relatively high political status, such as the BMW hit case in 2003 and Li Gang case in 2010. The netizens are more willing to rely on their own investigations, as the local government is considered likely to cover up the crime.

Cases caused by **land dispute** formed another group of influential activism. *Land dispute* refers to the incidents ignited by a dispute over land between an individual/collective and government. Under current regulations, Chinese urban land belongs to the state and some rural land is owned by collectives. Government could obtain huge revenues through transferring land use rights, which resulted in local government's relying on "land business." In these urban cases, such as the "nail house case" in 2007, the local government usually lists land for sale without the consent of the land users or owner, and before a contract settles the dispute between the government and individual, the building is demolished by violent means. In a rural area, the confrontation is almost always from under-the-table land deals made by village cadres. It usually results in demonstrations by the villagers and petitioning (Shangfang 上访).

Social morals are also a popular cause of online activism. This refers to the online debates or actions that condemn or support a person's behavior or beliefs, asserting what is or is not acceptable for him/her to do. The most mentioned topics include integrity, professional ethics, and family ethics. Family moral issues made up the majority of online activism cases in 2006 and 2007. It usually targets the individual who is suspected of betraying his/her family. Integrity and credibility are also major problems that concern netizens. In 2007, a villager in Shaanxi claimed to take a photo of the endangered South China tiger, and this photo was then quickly identified and officially released by Shaanxi Forestry Department. Chinese netizens started a four-month online investigation and finally verified it as a forged picture. This case is an example of how Chinese netizens fight to subvert the conclusion by the official sources.

In this category, there are some major cases fighting for ***children's rights***. As early as 2003, Chinese netizens gathered online and mourned a two-year-old girl who was dead at home due to local police's ignorance of her mother's request when she was sent to the rehabilitation center. The disregard of young life and the safety of children ignited anger online on more than one occasion. At the end of 2010, online calls for campus safety became the primary agenda of Chinese cyberspace after several campus homicides and school bus accidents. In 2011, Dr. Yu Zhengrong, from Chinese Academy of Social Science, initiated using microblog a nationwide campaign against abducting and trafficking children, encouraging netizens to take pictures of begging child and posting them online.

Environmental protest is a new phenomenon, along with the country's deepening environmental crisis after the 1990s. Online activism, usually as part of the protest,

improved the diffusion of information and the mobilization capacity for the street

demonstration. In the case without offline collective action, such as "pm 2.5 campaign"

in 2011, the online activism effectively brought up public awareness of environmental

problems and accelerated formation of a government agenda in environment remediation.

Online advocacy for environmental issues can be short-term action, particularly in the

cases driven by local residents against building a chemical plant in the suburbs of a city

or against the pollution brought by the current plant, such as "Xiamen PX plant" case in

2007 and "Dalian PX plant" case in 2011. Some environmental activism lasts longer,

from several months to years, when the problem occurs in relatively remote areas and

may need higher authority's involvement, such as the "Nu Jiang Dam" case in 2005.

Similar to environmental issues, the problem of *food safety* gradually surfaced

after the 2000s as a result of the failure of government regulation within the fast

expanding market economy. But until 2008, after the "San Lu Formula Scandal" was

exposed online, the food safety issue became a recurring topic online. The rapid spread of

news online and netizens' intense discussions help keep the issue as a consistent public

agenda.

Information censorship is not new to the Chinese, but in the Internet era,

resistance from the information seekers – the Chinese netizens - increased. Not only did

netizens disseminate information not allowed or censored in the past, but also made their

own voice surpass the mainstream voice. In 2009, the "Green Dam Youth Escort" case

demonstrated a successful grassroots campaign against the government's plan to tighten

Internet control by mandatory installation of software on personal computers. In 2010,

when Google announced its closing of its Chinese mainland search engine because of

self-censorship required by the government, many netizens showed their support online and also physically by sending flowers to the company's headquarters in Beijing. The Internet real-name policy was also postponed several times because of strong opposition from netizens.

By using the Internet, Chinese citizens can better scrutinize government's behavior during ***natural disasters and major accidents***. The emergence of citizen journalists broke the previous balance in which the mainstream media monopolized the sources of information and controlled public opinion. Netizens now expressed their doubts online about every initiative taken by the government and relied on information from various sources, particularly from themselves. For instance, in the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, the Internet became an information center to collect a list of the missing even earlier than the official media. Netizens also mobilized unofficial rescue forces and provided a channel for netizens to oversee the government's rescue work. In the Internet era, the cover-up of an incident by local authority is not as easy as before. In 2001, the concealed Nanda Mine accident was first disclosed online by anonymous, which was followed by journalists' investigation. The whole scandal finally got revealed two weeks after it happened. In the Shanxi "bloody brick kiln" case, the local journalists who first reported the scandal used the Internet to expand the influence of the report to draw national attention, which finally made the scandal become a public topic. The illegal kiln was later closed and this kind of business was banned.

As early as 2004, the Internet was used to report officials' misconduct. The first case appeared at the end of 2004. The vice secretary of the CPC municipal committee of city Shenzhen was suspected of abuse of power in obtaining financial and other support

to help his daughter study abroad and then film a movie. As the movie was made mandatory for school screening and purchasing, the parents' complaints online exposed the corruption. After 2008, online ***anti-corruption*** became more routine, and the biggest accomplishment of this kind of online activism was the "online anti-corruption" campaign launched by Xi Jinping in 2013, when he was just promoted to General Secretary of the Communist Party.

 Dissident is the category mentioned many more times in English language sources than domestic sources. In fact, only a few dissident cases obtained nationwide attention as the Chen guangcheng case did. Chen is an activist advocating for women's reproductive rights, land rights, and the welfare of the poor. He was arrested in 2006 and was then put on house arrest or "soft detention" at his home after being released from prison in 2010. Groups of netizens, including human rights activists, scholars, journalists, celebrities, and ordinary netizens, went to visit him to show support, although most of them were blocked by unidentified persons and even were beaten by villagers. With the help of his neighbors and netizens, Chen finally escaped and fled to the U.S. Embassy in Beijing in 2012. This is the most successful case in which the Internet played a critical role in liberating a political dissident.

 Online activism or campaigns asking for ***democratic change*** includes two cases. The first one is called the Chinese Jasmine revolution in 2011. Following the Arab Spring, several posts appeared online asking citizens "jogging" on the street to demonstrate their political attitudes. The movement quickly failed as police obtained the meeting details from the Internet, too, and arrived earlier to dismiss the crowd. The other major case is the "Independent Candidate for Congress campaign" in 2011. Opposed to traditional

organization-nominated candidates, several self-nominated citizens started their political campaigns online and offline to run for congressional seats. As they challenged the party's domination, their activities were not tolerated by power holders. The campaign finally failed after the government announced that these independent candidates were unqualified for the election.

Cultural activism covers a large range of cases. It usually refers to an independent case related to cultural struggles from the grassroots. For instance, the "Protecting Cantonese Campaign" in Guang Dong province in 2010 is an Internet-coordinated street demonstration against the enforcement of making Mandarin replace all the dialect languages in television programs. Sometimes, cultural activism also refers to the form of activism, such as Egao, also called cultural jamming or political jamming. This form of activism was popularized in 2006, when Hu Ge put an edited movie clip online to ridicule a commercial movie by a famous director, Chen Kaige. These creative, short, energetic, and ironic Internet-based works rapidly became a common form of expression and appeared in many online activism cases.

Nationalism was a major category for online activism during the early years. These cases usually started with rising patriotism after political events such as the Diaoyu Island conflict in 1996 and the US-China flight crash in 2001. The common purpose of nationalism activism is to defend the interests of the nation and people particularly when the response of the government does not meet the expectation of netizens. In the case of the riots of Indonesia in 1998, the Internet was the first place to reveal the news to the public, earlier than the official newspaper. The Chinese government chose a neutral stance afterward, which stimulated an autonomous nationalism. As a result of the anger

spread online, Chinese hackers started their first organized international attack action. Anti-Japan is always on the top agenda of online nationalism and sometimes it can develop to street demonstration. It's worth mentioning that these nationalism demonstrations are usually Internet-coordinated and government-acquiesced. Accordingly, the large-scale anti-western demonstration in 2008 was not only the angry response by Chinese people after a series of riots in Tibet and Xinjiang, but it can be seen also as an unofficial statement of the Chinese government to the west's intervention in the stability of Chinese territory.

The above categories cover the majority of online activism cases that occurred in the past 20 years. Besides them, there are cases that are ***news-generated public debate***. Examples include the trial of Liu Dawu in 2003 and the Ma Jiajue murder case in 2004. During the early years of the Internet, these cases were considered to be activism cases as they generated a large amount of discussion or debates online in a certain period. The phenomenon itself is new to the society and the public, creating a feeling that the domination of mainstream media was subverted by online opinion. While people have become familiar with this "simply a more radical form of public debate," (Yang, 2003) this news-generated discussion or debate is then defined as a hot topic or general public opinion, no longer appearing on the list of online activism.

Table 1. Timeline for major Internet activism by their categories

	Human Rights	Nation-alism	Dissident	Information Control	Corruption & Scandal	Environmen-tal & Food	Land Dispute
Before 2001	2	4	1	0	0	0	0
2002	0	2	1	1	0	0	0
2003	3	1	0	1	0	0	0
2004	1	1	3	2	1	0	0
2005	1	1	1	2	0	4	1
2006	1	0	0	3	0	0	0
2007	1	0	0	0	1	1	1
2008	5	2	2	0	3	3	0
2009	7	0	0	3	4	1	1
2010	5	1	0	1	2	0	3
2011	7	0	3	2	2	5	1

4.3. Internet Activism in China: Repertoires, Strategies, and Tactics

Chinese online activism has very diverse topics. The strategy and tactics used in each activism case also varied depending on the major technical tools used, the agent involved, the government's initial responses, and the cause of the activism. From the collected materials, I also found that the activism cases may share some characteristics, use similar strategies, and form a certain kind of action style, which forms several collective action repertoires of online activism.

4.3.1. Information Protest on Campus BBS: Prototype of Chinese Internet Activism

The early stage of online activism runs from 1995 to 2001. The data from CNNIC show that the users of the Chinese Internet during this period are relatively young (between 20 and 35 years olds) and include young professionals and college students, and the most used interactive platforms are OICQ and campus bulletin boards (BBS). This profile sets limits to the subject of online activism to only campus incidents and nationalism issues.

Generating a large amount of online discussion and then causing a sudden increase in Internet traffic are common in these early cases. The large volume of messages can be overwhelming and can overload the network server, which results in the temporary closure of the bulletin board in many cases. Besides technical problems, politically sensitive issues were sometimes mentioned as the real reason for the closure of the bulletin boards, as the discussion there usually contains information transferred from diverse sources and opinions that may be contrary to the information provided by the mainstream media.

In these early cases, the most prominent function of the campus BBS was to provide a channel for disseminating information not reported by mainstream media. In the case of the demonstration against Indonesia, the translated foreign reports and news from Taiwan/Hong Kong spread on the BBS were the only sources informing the public about the atrocities in Indonesia against ethnic Chinese (Hughs, 2000). Similarly, the "Triangle" forum of Peking University was the first place to inform the students that one of their freshmen was murdered and that the school attempted to cover up the news (Yang, 2003). The Internet also became the place where the students could express their anger and discontent to the government and any form of authorities. And followed by the

information dissemination and discussion, the Internet quickly became a place for the students to organize street demonstrations.

Although these bulletin boards are individual campus based, a network can be established to connect them during the activism. When a case was discussed in one school's bulletin board in Beijing, it could then quickly appear in another school's bulletin board in Xi'an, which forms the cross-campus network. And this network is the main means of mobilization in nationwide nationalism street demonstrations. A BBS user "heaven" posted on May 8 about how the student demonstration was gathered, organized and dismissed in the case of "U.S. bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade" in 1999, he wrote:

"Around 2 pm, there have been already crowds in front of canteen no10, with the same anger I joined them. There are banners and slogans ready for the demonstration, and many logo posters…It's just past 3pm, the bus arranged by school came, and students got on the bus in an orderly manner…schools organize their own groups, moving forward one by one…In the tree-lined road in front of the U.S. embassy, it's full of demonstration students, and on the roadside is also full of angry crowds…After two laps demonstration, the sky is darken, and students were evacuated by their schools." (Jerry, 1999)

This onsite report was quickly circulated among different campus bulletin boards, and was responded to and supported by students from various cities. Along with the spread of the news through the bulletin boards, the students' demonstration also spread to different cities. They used this cross-campus network to exchange information, update the progress, and share the emotional experiences. It can be said that the use of campus BBS by college students in these early cases has already formed the prototype of a typical

Internet activism in China. It starts from the dissemination of unfavorable information, then develops a great amount of debate, and finally reaches the consensus for demonstration.

4.3.2. Cyber Nationalism

These early cases contributed most in the formation of cyber nationalism movements. From the anti-Indonesia protest in 1998, the demonstration after the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, the cyber attack after Lee Teng-hui's "two states" talk, to nationalist protest of the midair collision of a Chinese jet and U.S. plane, in less than three years, the Internet has been the major carrier of four nationalism movements. The frequency of occurrence provided intensive practice for both the Internet users and the government to develop a mature use and management of the Internet in similar cases. Their interaction forms a certain repertoire for the online nationalism protest with Chinese features.

The online nationalism protests, including those that happened later - anti-Japanese in 2005 and 2010, and anti-Western in 2008 - are all international affairs and were triggered by external incidents. It usually started from the strong protests online against the narrative of the mainstream discourse, the netizens' anger about the absence of governmental response, or the accusations of the weakness of the state's reaction to the incident. By using the Internet, these nationalist netizens engaged in nationalist politics in their own ways and created meanings that are usually not in line with the official discourse. The cyber-nationalism quickly led to the call for street demonstrations, and the boycott of products from the targeted country. Through examining the forum postings

during the 2005 anti-Japanese protest, Liu (2006) found that the online discourse created

by nationalism is fairly rational and pluralistic, full of negotiation and polarized opinions.

The offline demonstration was also strategically debated by netizens, instead of merely as

the impulsive result of nationalism. These online discussions and debates were believed

to form a specific political domain that can promote the ordinary citizen's "public

discursive right" (Liu, 2006).

Although the demonstrations were often initiated by netizens who felt that the

government action couldn't satisfy their growing sentiment and anger, their request for

the permission to demonstration was approved by the government in most cases, which

led to several nationwide nationalism demonstrations. It was always a question for

scholars on the motivation of the Chinese government to take the risk of permitting

national protests in these nationalism cases. Taking the 2008 anti-western demonstration

as an example, Chen (2012) argued that this is a government strategic-oriented

nationalism movement. The online nationalism, particularly the boycott-Carrefour

movement, was used as cyber public diplomacy that directly influenced the diplomatic

behavior of the French government regarding their attitude to Tibet unrest. Analogously,

by comparing the two anti-U.S. cases in 1999 and 2001, Weiss (2013) argued that

authoritarian leaders could benefit internationally through managing nationalist protests

to signal their diplomatic intentions. Domestically, permitting the demonstration was also

considered a way to divert the public's attention from criticizing the government and vent

netizens' frustrations (Shen, 2007; Zhao, 2005).

The demonstrations or boycotts in nationalism cases approved by the government,

either for reasons of diplomacy or as a result of physically releasing the cyberspace

tension, can also be demobilized by the government for the same reasons. Internet censorship is usually the first signal that the government has decided to stop this massive mobilization. In the 2008 boycott-Carrefour movement, the government first described the boycott as an emotional expression by Chinese citizens and "the French government should rethink their actions (BBC Chinese, 2008)." While the boycott effect was occurring, the words "Carrefour" and related phrases were blocked in Chinese search engines, which significantly reduced the size of the boycott and demonstration in the next several days (Liu, 2006). Similar processes and Internet censorship took place in the anti-U.S., anti- Japanese, and anti-Indonesia movements, showing the critical role of the Internet not only in mobilizing, but also in the cool-down of a nationalism movement. The process also suggested a repertoire specifically formed in the nationalism cases that usually includes online discourse and campaign, cyber protest turning to social actions, use of civil discourse power by the government, and dismissal by the government through media censorship.

Hacking as a tactic

Hacking, as a specific tactic and a form of activism in nationalism cases before 2001, is an alternative channel that Chinese netizens sought to express their patriotic and nationalistic impulses. The first mass hacker attack was in 1998 in response to the riots toward ethnic Chinese in Jakarta. Emotionally mobilized individual hackers formed the "Chinese Hacker Emergency Conference Center." They used e-mail bombs and conducted Denial-of Service (DoS) attacks against Indonesian government websites (Henderson, 2008). In August 1999, Chinese hackers started a cyber war in Taiwan and

defaced several Taiwanese websites with pro-China messages, declaiming that Taiwan was always a part of China, against Lee Teng-hui's "two states" talk (Denning, 2000). An alliance of Chinese hackers was formally formed after the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. In this case and the later plane incident in 2001, the alliance organized several larger-scale cyber attacks on U.S. government sites and other organization's websites.

Different from other hacking activities, these nationalism-based hacking attacks were not limited to professional hackers. Just like the demonstration held in front of the U.S. embassy, the cyber war also has a comprehensive mobilization. In the China –U.S. cyber attack, the "Chinese Hacker Emergency Conference Center" published the passwords of more than 250 U.S. websites, encouraging capable netizens to attack these websites. These technology geeks also provided quick start guidance to teach netizens to use email bombs to paralyze the sites. In this case, the hackers regarded themselves as "guardians of the country, protecting it against the malignant forces of the U.S. and NATO.[7]"

4.3.3. A Collaboration Between Media, Legal Professionals, Activists, and Netizens

Around the year 2000, a group of nationwide bulletin boards was launched, which included Xici Hutong (1998), Tian ya BBS (1999) and Sina BBS (1999). These bulletin boards quickly took the place of campus BBS as the major carriers for online activism. These nationwide open networks further eliminated the geographical barriers for citizens

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[7] This sentence is cited from an online article "The Six Attacks of Chinese Honker Alliance" by anonymous. The article was retrieved from http://wenku.baidu.com/view/86e9c86caf1ffc4ffe47acdc.html

to communicate and also attracted more extensive and diverse BBS users. An increasing number of citizens through these easily accessible platforms joined the online discussions, and some of them formed groups of online activists. Many of these activists or opinion leaders were already activists in the pre-Internet era, and the others were younger generations enlightened by using the Internet. Journalists from traditional media started to understand the Internet as a source of information, while also seeing it as an alternative means to release news they may not be able to publish via a traditional channel.

With these technological supports and usage expansions, the number of online activism cases increased significantly and the topic greatly expanded, ranging from social issues to controversial news stories. Internet-based activism started to become a significant social segment in China. In these cases, activists with different backgrounds, including non-students, were deeply involved. In these early cases, some essential components that form the characteristics of online activism in China had been established, tested, and developed.

One of the results of the reform of the Chinese media industry was that coverage and investigation of social incidents, politically considered to be "negative reports," appeared more frequently in traditional media. Traditional media became the primary source of information for intense online debates and activism, particularly during the earlier stages of Internet diffusion. This explains why most cases in 2003 and 2004 started with reports in local newspapers. This trend was gradually replaced as Chinese netizens became more comfortable using the Internet to spread stories and expose corruption, making the Internet the first place where the information appeared. In these cases, the follow-ups by traditional media and journalists' deep coverage are also

important to determine the resolution of the incidents and the progress of online activism. In this sense, online activism from its early stages of development was the result of cooperation between the new media and traditional media. Compared to the main role of the Internet in maximizing the media exposure of each case to keep it on the public agenda, the mediation role of traditional media changed based upon different cases.

In these early examples of activism, the overwhelming public opinions expressed online that were prompted by newspaper reports or online stories were first influenced by judicial results. The reasons that the judicial system became the first battlefield for online activism may include three aspects: the perceived imperfections in the legal system, the abuse of power in law enforcement, and the intensive involvement of lawyers in these cases. These legal professionals usually intervened as advisors, defense counsels, or legal activists who organized online petitions and led the online debate together with other scholars and human rights activists. The intervention of legal professionals gave legitimacy to these scattered online contentions, which helped take the issues beyond cyberspace and eventually impact real policies.

Regarding the critical roles of traditional media/journalists and legal professionals, a well-studied example is the "Sun Zhigang" case in Guangzhou in 2003. In this case, journalists from *Southern Metropolitan Daily* first uncovered the detention and unnatural death of Sun, a college graduate working for a clothing company, who was beaten to death while in custody. The decision to publish this investigative report put the newspaper and the senior editor in jeopardy later[8]. The report turned Sun's incident from a small post online to waves of Internet protests. Teng Biao, a human rights activist and

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[8] In January 2004, several editors from *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, including Cheng, were prosecuted for corruption. Cheng was acquitted four months later.

lawyer, read the newspaper reports online, and discussed the Custody and Repatriation Regulations with colleagues. Together with the other two legal scholars, Xu Zhiyong and Yu Jiang, Teng Biao submitted a petition to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPCSC), arguing the legality and constitutionality of the Custody and Repatriation Measures. They were not the only legal professionals to take action. One week later, another group of five senior legal scholars submitted an Investigation Petition to the NPCSC calling for a special commission of investigation to look into Sun's case (Hand, 2006). The involvement of lawyers and legal professionals and their petitions received significant attention and generated extensive reports by traditional media. Three months after Sun's death, after bringing the case to trial and sentencing all of those responsible for Sun's death, the authorities took a more aggressive step. The State Council, chaired by Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, approved the repeal of the Custody and Repatriation Measures by new regulations.

In other cases, rights activists, scholars, and opinion leaders, as well as traditional media and lawyers, also became critical for developing an activism case. In the Huang Jing case (2003), after learning the story from the Internet, rights activist Xu Jiangxin took the initiative to contact Huang's parents. He encouraged and guided them to use the Internet to defend their legal rights in regard to the death of their daughter. Together with journalist Zhu Yinnian, Xu launched an online petition asking for the reinvestigation of Huang's death. Public issue scholar Ai Xiaoming, in her blog, pointed out the possible sexual violence against women in this case, bringing the topic of women's rights onto the public agenda and giving specific significance to the Huang Jing case. In a collective protest in the Taishi village incident (2005), activist, legal experts, and scholars,

considering themselves observers, came to the village to record the protests and publish online reports. Their postings became alternative sources for the public to learn the real-time information about the incident, completely taking the place of mainstream media and journalists. Netizens' observation reports and critical thinking also appeared in controversial news cases. In the Li Siyi case (2003), Kang Xiaoguang, a researcher from the Chinese Academy of Science, conducted a field study in Li's neighborhood, interviewed case-related personnel, and published a book online called "*Appeal.*" The book provides a profound critique about the lack of a child welfare system in China and also depicted in detail the reaction of the government and the public, particularly the quick reactions online when the tragedy happened.

Rumor as a tactic

Rumor is unconfirmed information or explanation of events circulating through interpersonal communications. According to Shibutani (1966), uncertainty, anxiety, and sense-making activities are the major reasons for people to produce rumors. In the situation of a crisis, the lack of reliable information sources, combined with anxiety, make rumor particularly easy to appear and spread. With the help of the Internet, rumors travel much faster and wider than before, and sometimes have massive impact. The use of rumor in online activism by Chinese netizens is an obvious choice.

Rumor is quite common in Chinese online activism cases, particularly in the early stage of the development of online protests. Rumor has become a kind of everyday resistance and a form of public opinion (Zhou, 2012). In official media, Internet rumor is always criticized as deliberate defamation and purposive lying created by people with

ulterior political motives, but from the other perspective rumor actually has a positive impact on mobilizing activism events and facilitating commitment from authorities.

Chinese netizens used rumor to investigate facts, oversee government officials, and seek judicial justice. In the Su Xiuqin case (2003), driving a BMW SUV Su ran her car into a crowd and killed a peasant woman, whose tractor had scratched the SUV. In the following trial, Su was found guilty of reckless driving and sentenced to prison for two years with three years probation. Su was found guilty of reckless driving and sentenced to prison for two years with three years probation. The light sentence outraged the public. Many people believed that Su's connections resulted in leniency. The rumor spread online that Su was the daughter-in-law of the provincial leader. Under public pressure, the provincial government conducted an investigation to deny the rumor. The same tactic of spreading rumors online has appeared in many activism cases. Examples include the Weng'an incident (2008), the Hang Zhou racing car accident (2009), the Yao Jiaxin case (2010), and the Guo Meimei case (2011). In these cases, a rumor that the authorities protected the suspect or the perpetrator because of some particular relationship became the most acceptable explanation among netizens. The rumor was widely circulated through the Internet and media. If the result of the investigation did not clarify this relationship according to the netizens' request, the rumor could become lodged in the collective memory and repeatedly brought up in later similar cases (Zhou, 2012).

In mass events, such as environmental demonstrations and village protests, rumor is usually an effective way to gather and mobilize a large number of participants. The gathering of people and a "walk" demonstration by more than 20,000 residents in the Xiamen PX case (2007) started with a mobile phone message that the forthcoming PX

plant was "an atomic bomb" and "the people of Xiamen will live with leukemia and deformed babies" (Liu & Zhao, 2010). In village protests, such as the Taishi village incidents (2005) and the Weng'an incident (2008), through interpersonal communication the unconfirmed details of detained villagers (that they had been beaten to death) prompted thousands of villagers to gather and confront local law enforcement agencies.

Rumor in Chinese online activism is not always misinformation. Sometimes it is information that ordinary people do not have the resources to verify. The rumors in the SARS outbreak (2003), the Jilin chemical plant explosion (2005), and the Southern China tiger fake photo (2007) all proved to be true. Among them, the rumor in the Jilin chemical plant explosion caused panic among residents that forced the government to update their announcement with the real situation shortly after their first announcement. In the Southern China tiger case, the rumor appeared online. Although repeatedly denied by the official from the Shanxi Forestry Department, the rumor led to a six-month debate and investigation by netizens on whether the photo of the extinct wild South China Tiger was faked.

4.3.4. The Mobilized Grassroots Power: Human Flesh Search Engine

To date, most of the online activism cases have been led by elite-based discourse, which includes journalists, legal professionals, and other social activists. Since 2005, however, netizens have found powerful communications tools. With increasing diversification of Internet users after 2005 came Web 2.0, which turned increasing numbers of Internet users from browsers to creators of online content, with products such as blogs. The empowered netizens, supported by the simultaneous development of self-

expression online, facilitated the innovation of online activities. Online activism started

to embrace a new wave of contentions that were entirely initiated and promoted by

ordinary netizens. A broad range of social issues, including family morality, animal rights,

and cultural debates, have become activism topics. Human flesh search engine (HFSE)

just emerged under this circumstance as a significant new strategy for online activists.

As a literal translation from the Chinese nomenclature "renrou sousuo," the

English phrase "human flesh search engine" first appeared in Roland Soong's English

blog "EastSouthWestNorth" on Feb 21, 2008, in which he translated a story published on

a Chinese online bulletin board. In this story, angry Chinese netizens tried to use any

possible resources to find out "the beastly uncle" who allowed his dog to attack his little

niece. This offline physical action brought on a call to arms in chat rooms and online

forums and was simply called "human flesh search engine." Different from a computer-

based search engine, HFSE started in a virtual community in which thousands of netizens

voluntarily united for the same purpose for a period of time. HFSE depends on the human

force to filter information. These people are not professional journalists or hackers, but

they purposely use all possible resources, in particular their social networks, to search for

the identity of a certain person, a company, or the truth behind a story. HFSE, in this

sense, can be considered a form of collective intelligence and social search, including the

pattern of crowd sourcing (Wang, Hou, Yao & Yan, 2009).

A HFSE case usually started with a picture, a video, or a written document posted

online. Someone then posted open questions to generate discussions and online searching

regarding the materials disclosed. The postings could be transferred to several other large

network websites and bulletin boards to involve more human forces. An open call was

also made for offline investigation. After obtaining the information from Internet digging

or individual sources (e.g., the telephone number, home address, or company name),

netizens contacted the targeted individual or acted in ways they thought would promote

justice. The first HFSE case involved the search for a woman who used her high heel to

stab and crush a kitten's skull. The video of this act was accidentally found by a netizen

and posted on one of the largest bulletin boards, MOP. Angry netizens needed only six

days to locate the place of the video shooting and find out the identity of the woman – a

pharmacist in a local hospital. She was then suspended from her job after the

investigation, which was facilitated by online outrage[9].

HFSE first emerged because of morality issues. Netizens believed they should

enforce justice on behalf of heaven ("ti tian xing dao"), and punish people whose

"immoral behavior" was beyond the law. In 2008, HFSE was used for the first time as a

powerful tool to identify government officials in an anti-corruption campaign. A well-

documented case is the location of a chief official of the Real Estate Management Bureau

in Jiangning district of Nanjin, the capital of Jiangsu province. Through old news pictures

of Zhou, netizens found that he smoked luxury brand cigarettes and wore an expensive

watch, which were not affordable with the salary of a civil servant. More information

about his family members' business was then revealed online, business that directly

benefited from his work as a public servant. With the growing evidence released by

netizens, the government of Jiangning District was forced to start an investigation (Gao &

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[9] The description of this case is concluded from a series of special reports by Sina.com.
Special reports of woman slaughtered kitten. Content can be found from
http://news.sina.com.cn/z/nvzinm/.

Stanyer, 2014). The result of this investigation was that Zhou was sentenced to 11 years for corruption and bribery involving more than 1 million Yuan.

HFSE can also be implemented in a formal way as a "civic investigation team." As a specific combination of HFSE and citizen journalists, a civic investigation team first appeared around 2008. The team is usually composed of voluntary netizens and activists. In the case of the "5.12" Wenchuan earthquake (2008), based on the Chinese government's past record of reporting such disaster events, the netizens kept questioning the credibility of the official number of deaths. Ai Weiwei, a contemporary artist and activist, then organized a civic investigation team. About 68 volunteers went to Sichuan from January to April in 2009. Through contacting government agencies and conducting field interviews, they collected the names of students who died in this earthquake, mostly because of collapsed school buildings. The report of their investigation and a documentary film were then posted online (Ai, W., 2013). In a later "hide and see" case (2009), the civic investigation was proposed by the local government to calm down an online uproar (Zhang, 2009). Another well-known civic investigation case is the Qian Yunhui case (2010), in which three groups of voluntary activists and netizens spontaneously organized to investigate the death of Qian (Chen, 2010).

The popularity of HFSE generates criticism for its invasion of privacy rights. Both official media and some academic research also highlight its violent side, saying it "triggered a legal dilemma between privacy violation and public opinion" (Cheung, 2009; Wang, Hou, Yao & Yan, 2009). Such criticism, however, cannot undermine the use of HFSE as an effective means and an additional outlet for Chinese netizens to gain justice they don't believe the government can achieve. The exposure, collection, and circulation

of personal data of corrupt officials greatly increased the efficiency of the official system

to remove officers for misconduct. As a controversial strategy of online activism, after

several radical cases, netizens' digging online or offline in a targeted individual's

personal information is no longer the dominant strategy. In most cases, the HFSE works

as a part of the tactics, playing a supporting role to provide evidence in these online

contentions.

Internet satire and meme as an everyday tactic

Chinese cyberspace has also become a medium for satire and memes covering a

broad range of forms and content created by netizens as alternative political discourse

and everyday practices of playful resistance (Meng, 2011; Yang & Jiang, 2015). Online

activism usually facilitates more innovations. For activists, using Internet satire can help

express opposing opinions and give vent to negative emotions, while also avoiding

conflict with governmental control of speech on political and sensitive topics.

The first Internet satire culture formed as part of online activism is Egao. As a

specific Internet culture, Egao was known from "a bloody case of a steamed bun (2006),"

in which Hu Ge, an amateur director, reedited the movie *The Promise* to a short, hilarious

piece. This 20-minute edition defeated the original movie to be the most popular "movie"

in many unofficial rankings and BBS by Chinese netizens, providing a new form for the

digital generation to express their criticism and emotions. In this sense, Egao deconstructs

the controversial, popular, or politically serious topic to make it parody. It provides a safe

alternative for Chinese netizens to express their dissatisfactions, while also providing

humor. Creating parody is also a liberating cultural practice by netizens to go against

"established norms and values" (Gong & Yang, 2010). Hu Ge's Egao on the movie *The Promise* highlighted the gap between ordinary audiences represented by the technology-savvy netizens and the well-established elites, including its director Chen Kaige. *China Daily* used "ant" and "elephant"(Huang, 2006) to describe the two sides in this case, which reflected the attitude of mainstream media on those Egao producers, regarding them as the grassroots on the bottom of the power - small and weak as individuals, tenacious and powerful as collectives, and existing everywhere.

Political satire is not new, but it has flourished with Internet users. Yang & Jiang (2015) suggested a typology of online political satire in China, which includes Duanzi (jokes), national sentence-making, multimedia remix, online performance art, and online news comments. The differences are not always obvious. In the case of "My father is Li Gang" (2010), a 22-year-old driver hit two college students on the campus of Hebei University and tried to speed away. When intercepted by the University security guard, he yelled, "My father is Li Gang," who turned out to be the deputy police chief in Baoding, Hebei Province. This phrase rapidly went viral on the Internet and focused widespread outrage on what the Chinese call "guan er dai" - offciallings (the second generation of government officials) and their arrogant disregard of the rules and the rights of others. Netizens incorporated the phrase into sentences, political duanzi, classical poetries, fictions, popular songs, and MTVs. These "Li Gang form" satires quickly spread all over the bulletin boards in China. Consequently, public reactions became more difficult to control, and together with media reports, the situation created great pressure to resolve the case fairly.

The most essential feature of Internet political satire, as Yang & Jiang (2015) suggested, is its network nature as social practice. Internet political satire is created by collaboration and circulated by interaction. The content is usually a combination of symbols and meanings shaped by the social –historical junction of contemporary China. Enabled by these creative and collaborative tactics of "making do" (de Certeau, 1984) every day, Chinese netizens to some extent have coped with government censorship. The newly emerged "Biao Qing Bao" (emotion package) as a specific Internet meme enhanced this everyday experience of sense-making behavior. "Biao Qing Bao" refers to GIFs that loop short video or animated clips, or just several still photos (Chen, 2016). The GIFs are usually accompanied by text caption and have been used extensively in social media and instant messaging. The form of "Biao Qing Bao" gives Internet users more autonomy in content creation, particularly those political sensitive moments, and many of the materials come from the collective memory. Examples include a popular emoticon of a panda with a glass saying "native," which alludes to the Party's former leader Jiang Zemin to exaggerate the ironical effect of his words to Hong Kong journalists in an interview after being asked sharp questions. The posters that the Chinese government has used for propaganda tools are also converted to a series of "Biao Qing Bao." The deconstruction of the leadership images and serious politics, which could be easily removed from the Internet before, is now forming a pervasive entertainment and resistance culture in social media platforms with the proliferation of "Biao Qing Bao," even without the occurrence of any incident in the real world.

4.3.5. The Rights Defense Movement

The term "rights defense," or the Chinese "维权, emerged to describe actions that ordinary people and social activists have employed to defend their own legal rights or the rights of others (Hung, 2010). The term was first used by media in 2003 after several notable rights defense cases (e.g., the Sun Zhigang case, the Huang Jing case, and the Sun Dawu case[10]). After that, the term spread via the Internet, and the idea of rights defense quickly spread and developed into a movement that consists of cases occurring constantly all over China.

Along with the right defense movement has been the establishment of rights defense lawyers, a group of lawyers who seek to protect and improve the rights of citizens. Rights defense lawyers led most of the early cases, and the strategies they adopted were shaped by the outcomes of rights defense online activism (Hand, 2006). The lawyers who took the moderate route, which means working through legal rather than political means, have a higher success rate than their colleagues who engaged in a more radical way because they considered the authoritarian system as the major cause of all the problems (Fu & Cullen, 2008). The former situation includes but is not limited to cases of consumer protections (Sanlu milk scandal[11], 2008), discrimination against vulnerable groups (Deng Yujiao case, 2009[12]), and litigation related to the abuse of power by officials (Luo Caixia case, 2009[13]). While the latter usually touches the most sensitive cases, such as defending political dissidents, radical rights defense lawyers also

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[10] Sun Dawu is a rural industrialist. He was arrested on suspicion of a controversial charge of "illegally absorbing public funds."

[11] Sanlu milk scandal is a food safety incident happened in 2008. It has influenced thousands of infants and directly resulted in six deaths.

[12] Deng Yujiao is a waitress working in a hotel. She stabbed a local official to death during an attempted rape.

[13] Luo Caixia was a fresh graduate when she found that her identity was stolen by her high school classmate, who used Luo's examination scores to enter the college.

played an essential role in drafting *Chapter 08*[14] to challenge the one-party system in China.

Chinese people's rights defense activities existed before the Internet era, but the use of social media and new technologies have maximized exposure of these cases. As a result, when the grassroots character of online activism has been fully established by Chinese netizens, many ordinary citizens started their own rights defense activism online instead of going to court. A series of urban anti-demolition online activism cases started in 2007. In these cases, homeowners used the Internet to display their confrontations against the government by posting stories, photos of their "nail house," or even living the self-immolation online to show their protest. Making their stories well known to netizens and getting their emotional support (sympathy or anger) were the keys to solving the problem, so these individual fighters sometimes chose extreme practices. The taxi driver Sun Zhongjie (2009)[15] who was entrapped by local police as cut off one of his fingers to prove his innocence. The pneumoconiosis activist and migrant worker Zhang Haichao (2009) decided to undergo surgery to prove he was suffering from the lung disease pneumoconiosis. After their stories were reported by media and generated concern online, these individual fighters were all successful in resolving their cases. The outcomes were greatly affected by online sentiment and opinions. These cases showed that Chinese

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[14] Chapter 08 is drafted by several radical political activists and posted online on 9 December 2008 with more than 300 signatures. It declaims that constitutional democracy is the alternative to one-party dictatorship and spells out 19 steps for political reforms.
[15] Sun Zhongjie, a 19-year-old driver, was seized allegedly conducting illegal cab operation by local policemen after he picked up a pedestrian who asked for a lift. In order to fight back, Sun chopped off the pinky finger on his left hand as a way to declare his innocence. This operation later confirmed by the Shanghai municipal government as a violation of discipline

netizens, instead of blindly accepting the government's agendas, are now being awakened and empowered to set their own policy agendas both in cyberspace and physical life.

4.3.6. Environmental Protests, Microblogging, and Environmental Movement 2.0

Environmental protests have benefited greatly from the Internet era. New media technologies expanded the scope and the scale of environmental protests, and environmental concerns have gradually become a top issue on both the public and political agendas. The first environmental protest brought to the public by the Internet was the "Nujiang Dam controversy" (2005). In this case, NGOs and intellectuals played crucial roles to generate public debate on the construction of a large dam in the Nu River, the last free-flowing river in China. Their articles and talks were circulated online, and with intensive reporting by media, they were able to force the government to suspend the proposal.

The anti-PX protest in Xiamen in 2007 is usually considered a milestone in Chinese environmental protest. Different from the street demonstrations in early nationalism cases in which the demonstration was actually approved by local police, the protest against the building of the PX plant in this case was a mass gathering mobilized by new media (including mobile phone and Internet) that the local government tried to prevent. The protest started with the circulation among mobile phone users of a message from anonymous sources regarding the decision to build a PX plant near the residential area in Haicang, a suburb of Xiamen, exposing the potential risk of the chemical product to the public. Mobile phone messages precisely targeted the local residents, including those who did not use online forums. Within one week, the most circulated message

became the call for collective action, which resulted in a large and peaceful

demonstration titled on the Internet as "take a walk" or "collective strolling" (散步). In

response, the State Environmental Protection Administration conducted an environmental

impact assessment of the PX project, followed by a public hearing. By December 2007,

the local government announced the relocation of the plant to a nearby city.

Three features distinguish the Xiamen anti-PX protest from previous

environmental protests, making it a transformative event that set up a template for later

cases. First, in this case Internet and mobile technology were first used to mobilize

environmental protesters, including elites[16] and local residents, for the public good.

Second, with the combination of various activities online and offline, the scope of

participation and the sphere of action were substantially expanded, compared to the

Nujiang case. Third, the Internet reinforced the policy advocacy before and after the

street protests, which became a critical strategy for environmental NGOs in later activism

cases (Steinhardt & Wu, 2016). The repertoire of the Xiamen anti-PX protest was then

adopted or partially adopted in many environmental protests, including the Chengdu anti-

PX protest (2008), the Panyu anti-incinerator protest (2009), and the Dalian anti-PX

protest (2011), forming a wave of environmental movements that started with the Xiamen

case.

Microblogging service was launched in August 2009 by Sina, the largest Chinese-

language Internet portal, as a substitute for Twitter. Microblogging actually developed by

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[16] The problem of Xiamen PX plant was found out by a Xiamen University professor Zhao Yufen who is also a delegate to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. She organized the drafting of the motion with other 105 fellow delegates to call for the relocation of the plant. The online agitation on this topic began to emerge when their motion was not adopted.

combining the features of both Twitter and Facebook, including the 140 letters limitation, follower/reposting, and also picture/video functions. Microblogging, as a new form of social media, expanded rapidly among Internet users and had reached 300 million users by March 2012 (Rapoza, 2011; Sina, 2002). The Internet users who had been scattered on different forums and applications now were aggregated to the larger platform, which flattened the gap between ordinary netizens, media professionals, and social elites, making the formation of an activism case much easier and faster.

Microblogging speeded up the information flow, enhanced the agenda setting function by using hashtags, and to some extent weakened the impact of censorship. It has quickly become the main platform for corruption exposure, personal appeals, and online petitions. To spread information faster and wider before being censored, as well as to effectively show their attitudes with minimal political risk, microblog users developed a strategy called "surrounding and gazing"[17] (围观). This strategy is rooted in modern Chinese literature and culture as a kind of public spectacle. In microblogging, it is a unique contention mode used by Chinese netizens to show their silent but collective participation and also refers to concentrated public opinion. In a typical "surrounding and gazing" case, immediately after the news or appeal or petition was posted on a microblog, netizens reposted the message on their own accounts with only a short phrase like "surrounding and gazing," "close attention," or just "forwarded." The powerful snowball

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[17] In the Media Dictionary by the China Media Project, the "surrounding gaze" is a specific notion and phenomenon online and often refers to its potential dimension as concentrated public opinion. The China Media Project is an affiliated program at the University of Hong Kong focusing on key issues in Chinese media and communication development.

effect of microblogging makes impossible the effort to remove the content without any trace.

Microblogging connected Internet activism closely with people's daily activities. Microblogging also further empowered netizens to provide the networked space where activism could be sustained through instant and visible daily interactions with social elites and opinion leaders. Several microblog campaigns emerged from 2010, including "Taking pictures to rescue trafficked children," "Independent candidate for People's Congress Campaign" and "PM 2.5 campaign," suggesting a new form of online activism. In these cases, netizens usually united and behaved following certain instructions suggested by a leading person, whose real identity was usually verified by Sina Corp, to form large-scale online collective action. This model of elite leading grassroots protests was not new, but it was more moderate and orderly, particularly for the environmental cases. Compared to previous environmental protests, the PM 2.5 campaign did not rely on street demonstrations any more. Instead, NGOs and elite activists employed microblogging to constantly mobilize netizens, making it a sustained policy advocacy and generating great power in the public sphere. Before October 2011, smog was simply considered "foggy weather" by most people until the US Embassy set up its own air quality index (AQI) daily report on its microblog account (Watts, 2011), and Pan Shiyi, a well-known property developer, posted a screen capture of their air report. Pan's microblog was quickly reposted by his friends and followers, which brought attention to AQI and its difference from the air pollution index (API) provided by the Beijing Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau (Page, 2011). Zheng Yuanjie, a famous fairy tale writer, launched a "Beijing air quality survey" on his microblog. At the same time,

Feng Yongfeng, founder of Green Beagle, an environmental protection NGO in Beijing, initiated an online appeal, calling for people to monitor the concentration of PM2.5 themselves (Zhou, 2012). Among many others, these activities greatly increased awareness of the problem of air quality and the importance of PM 2.5, followed by a public call to the government. As a result, from December 21, 2011, the new standard including PM 2.5 started to be implemented in major cities all over the country.

4.4. Conclusion

This chapter charted the emergence of different strategies and tactics used by Chinese netizens in online contentions, as well as the repertoires they formed, in chronological order. Within these limited pages, nine types of online activism have been discussed, with prominent cases offered as examples. Some of these have specific repertoires, such as cyber nationalism, elite leading environment protest with offline demonstration, rights defense movement, cyber anti-corruption, and microblogging campaign. Although they are introduced according to the time when they first emerged, this does not mean that the repertoires developed in the early stages have been replaced by the repertoires that emerged later. In most cases, the repertoire is more likely related to the category to which the case belongs, and earlier activism cases tend to become models for later activism in the same category.

The development of strategies and tactics, on the other hand, runs through all these repertoires and other activism cases. Cyber-hacking, rumor, HFSE, and Internet satire are four major strategies or tactics formed based on the available platforms and the character of the users. No matter what kind of strategy or tactic netizens used, the main

purpose, basically, is to achieve these four things: first, create an alternative channel for information circulation and generate unofficial discourse among citizens; second, provide a specific narrative frame to engage other netizens; third, facilitate collaboration among netizens and form collective action; fourth, meet the public's expectations and needs.

In short, Internet activism in China appeared when the Internet was first introduced to the public, and after 17 years of development, has already become a comprehensive practice that involves all social strata throughout the country and covers many aspects of human rights and social life. The process of activism is also a convergence of various strategies used in protest activities before and after the emergence of the Internet. These online contentions, combined with offline actions, have exerted tremendous pressure on the Chinese government, and are considered by many scholars as a great threat to the authoritarian regime. The next chapter will examine the government's reactions and treatment of online activism through analyzing longitudinal data from the official newspaper. The discussion will further explore the dynamics of the interplay between the government and online activism.

Chapter 5

Agenda Setting Effect of Online Activism on the Official Newspaper

5.1. Activism Cases in Official Reports

Among the 145 Internet activism cases from 1994 to 2011 collected in this study, about 50% have been reported or discussed in the official newspaper, *People's Daily*. If we count by the year, the percentage of activism cases that have relevant articles in the official newspaper jumped from 0 to 33% in 2001, and reached its peak 75% in 2009. The number then gradually dropped to 52% in 2011, and by contrast at the same time the total number of Internet activism cases continued to grow. Since the collected articles are within six months after the cases happened and we only collected the articles with a primary focus on one or more cases, the current analysis result is relatively conservative. The analysis excludes the articles that discussed the case beyond this half-year frame, as well as the articles that just mentioned the cases as examples for other topics. In addition, some cases, particularly the ones involving controversial trials, could last years. The reports and discussions of the trial results are mostly exclusive in the current dataset. As a result, the actual proportion of the activism cases that appeared in *People's Daily* could be a bit higher.

As we discussed in Chapter 4, most of the activism cases before 2000 are online discussions and actions generated after intense political conflicts between China and other countries, such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island dispute, the United States bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, and the riots in Indonesia. In these cases, the government's political goals converge with the activists' nationalist sentiment. These

official reports are entirely based on these issues' political significance as related to

China's international policies. None of these articles are responses to the online activities.

Based on the above reasons, we excluded reports of these cases from Table 1.

Table 2. The total number of activism cases per year and the number of activism cases
reported by *People's Daily* per year

Year	No. of cases	No. of cases reported	% of cases reported
1994	0	0	0%
1995	1	n/a	0%
1996	1	n/a	0%
1997	0	0	0%
1998	1	n/a	0%
1999	2	n/a	0%
2000	2	0	0%
2001	3	1	33%
2002	2	0	0%
2003	9	4	44%
2004	9	2	22%
2005	11	4	36%
2006	14	6	43%
2007	7	5	71%
2008	20	11	55%
2009	20	15	75%
2010	18	12	67%
2011	25	13	52%

| Total | 145 | 73 | 50% |

Figure 5. Percentage of activism cases reported by *People's Daily* from 2000 to 2011

The activism case-related articles in *People's Daily* present three types of content (see Appendix A). The first group of articles simply responds to the issue/incident that triggered the activism, describing the occurrence of the incident, the process of the investigation if it had one, and the outcome. In this study, we define this kind of article as "issue-centered." The articles will be categorized in a second group if they mainly discuss the underlying causes of the incident, the problem of the political environment, or the potential impact on relevant policies/regulations. These "discussion-centered" articles show the importance attached by the government to these issues/incidents. It may also indicate the success of setting government policy agenda by way of Internet activism. The third group of articles focuses specifically on the role of the Internet and the activism strategy by netizens, which in this study is defined as "Internet-centered" responses. This

group of articles reflects the official media's framing of the Internet's role in these activism cases, which to some extent actually reveals the government's attitude and strategy to deal with this new contention format emerging from the grassroots.

Table 3. The number of official articles on activism per year, by type

Year	Issue-centered	Discussion-centered	Internet-centered
2000	0	0	0
2001	30	0	0
2002	0	0	0
2003	10	3	0
2004	5	4	0
2005	13	5	0
2006	4	13	10
2007	26	20	4
2008	33	18	10
2009	25	31	10
2010	28	22	16
2011	29	41	14

Figure 6. Comparison of the three types of articles

Articles on People's Daily Covering Activism Cases

Figure 7 shows that the number of relevant articles in *People's Daily* kept growing from 2003, with an annual growth rate of 26%. The "discussion-centered" articles started to emerge in 2003, and the "Internet-centered" articles appeared in certain ratio in 2006. Before 2006, the "issue-centered" article is the dominant among three categories. Comparatively, the "discussion-centered" articles have the higher annual growth rate, and those finally made up half of the total articles in 2011. "Internet-centered" articles emerged later than the other two categories, and maintained a slower but stable growth rate.

5.2. Early Activism and "Issue-centered" Articles: The Invisible Internet

Chinese online activism emerged as early as 1995, and before 2000 it largely

referred to limited information dissemination, small-scale online debate, and the

formation of a collective hacking group called "Honker Union." In August 1996, in

response to the building of a lighthouse and planting of a Japanese national flag on the

disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Island by a Japanese right-wing group, Chinese civilians,

including activists from Hong Kong and Taiwan, struggled to land on the island to

protect and advocate Chinese sovereignty over the islands (Pan, 2009, p.152). As the

earliest Internet users in China, college students generated heated discussions on campus

BBS (bulletin board system) from early September 1996. The unusual gathering under

such a sensitive topic resulted in the forum's temporary closure for maintenance and the

removal of relevant discussion threads[18]. In comparison, the official newspaper only

published one report on this issue on October 1 about the death of Chan Yuk-cheung, a

prominent leader of the protecting Island movement from Hong Kong. The content of the

official report and the online activities do not show any agenda setting effect from each

other.

Then, the Honker Union (also known as "Red Hacker Alliance"), as an informal

group of young Chinese hackers, formed later in 1996. Its Chinese name "red hacker,"

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[18] Since its launch, the SMTH BBS has been reformed several times and the old records
became inaccessible to the public. But before its closing to the public, some of the
articles have been already reposted to the other campus BBS, including a posting named
"The Chronicle of the Events on SMTH BBS," which has been found on SJTU bbs (the
campus BBS for Shanghai Jiao Tong University). In this posting, the author reviewed the
development of SMTH BBS from 1995 to 2005 including the technological and
administrative change, as well as the Internet events that made the history of the SMTH
BBS. This posting can be retrieved from
https://bbs.sjtu.edu.cn/bbsanc,path,%2Fgroups%2FGROUP_2%2FHeBei%2FDA3CC85
FE%2FD90CF9FCB%2FD6CF758EB%2FDB8AEC46A%2FA4434E6B0.html

with red being the color of the communist party, suggested its connection to patriotism and nationalism. They launched a series of attacks on government-related websites in Indonesia, Taiwan, the United States, and Japan from 1996 to 2001. The group became inactive after 2001's "Hainan Island incident"[19] and finally announced its dissolution in 2004. As an important component and an extremely active group of online activism in the early stage of the Chinese Internet, these activists and their hacktivism didn't get any words from the official newspaper, while a large number of articles in *People's Daily* appeared about these serious diplomatic crises, and the hacktivism from Chinese netizens was reported widely by western media[20]. Despite the ignorance of hacking actions, the netizens' strong reactions that led to heated discussions did get mentioned in 2001 in the case of the US – China aircraft crash. Under a section title "fully reflect public opinion: let the netizens speak," the article[21] described that "from April 1 8 pm to April 12 morning, the number of postings about 'aircraft crash' kept in Qiangguo (Strong Nation) forum of People's Daily online is more than hundred thousand…the netizens sent a large number of e-mails to People's Daily to strongly condemn the hegemonic act of the US government and to express their patriotism." This first-time positive description of online activities was actually used to support the advocacy of the critical role of People's Daily Online in major national events as a channel for the public to speak out.

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[19] Hainan Island incident refers to an aircraft collision between U.S. and China in 2001.
[20] Examples include "Cyber 'Vandals' Target Indonesia" by Wired, "Chinese protesters attack Indonesia through Net" by BBC, "Kosovo cyber-war intensifies: Chinese hackers targeting U.S. sites, government says" by CNN and "Chinese and American hackers declare 'cyberwar'" by The Guardian.
[21] "People's Daily Online: With the Major Events," published on April 14, 2001on the page of "Computer, Internet, Communication" by Liao Hong.

The "Nandan Mine Accident" in 2001 is the first activism case that the journalists and netizens used for online exposure and discussion to expose a corruption-caused disaster in which the local officials attempted to cover up the death of 81 workers in a mine accident. All of the twelve relevant articles in *People's Daily* are issue-centered. These reports, just like the other issue-centered articles have a certain style-set, emphasizing the effort of the central government to supervise the investigations, praising the timely action taken by the government leader, and reporting the severe punishment of the person (e.g., in this case it refers to the mine owner and the local officials) deemed responsible for the accident. Only one of these twelve articles ambiguously mentioned the role of public opinion in this case in urging the investigation, without pointing out the origin and the source of these opinions.

The case of Sun Zhigang[22], one of the most influential online activism cases in 2003, also attracted strong attention from official media. However, among its five relevant articles in *People's Daily*, none of them mentioned the outrage and the discussion online, not to mention Internet activists' efforts to gain public and political attention to the injustice in this case and their query on the rationale of the Custody and Repatriation system. Like its treatment in the reports of the "Nandan Mina Accident," the official newspaper only used one sentence to describe that the Sun Zhigang case had become the focus of "public opinion." Later in the same year, the Huang Jing case[23],

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[22] Sun Zhigang is a graphic designer working in Guangzhou. He was found dead of a hemorrhage and heart attack while in police custody. This incident generated thousands of discussion online and the questions to Custody and Repatriation policy. As the result of this incident, the government announced the abolishment of the abusive Custody and Repatriation system during late 2003.
[23] Huang Jing is a primary school teacher who was found dead in her dormitory and her boyfriend, Jiang Junwu, an official with the local taxation administration, admitted to

which also generated sustained online activism, combined with media attention and legal activism as the Sun Zhigang case did, did not get any reports from the official newspaper. The analysis of these issue-centered official reports on the above cases shows that cases promoted by Internet activism had started to attract the attention of the official newspaper as early as 2001 on the issue-level but not on the attribute-level, which means that the official reports did not reflect the content or concerns generated from the online discussions. Instead, these official articles follow their own political agenda and writing style, largely understating and even ignoring the role of the Internet in these reported cases.

5.3. From "Issue-centered" to "Discussion-centered": Internet Discussion Matters

The official newspaper's first open response to netizens' questions online is in the BMW case in early 2004. In this case, the Internet discussions were mentioned and cited in one of the official reports as an example of public opinion. In the article "Harbin – the reinvestigation of BMW Accident Case," the journalist summarized the online discussions into five questions, and said that in response to the online criticism, the government formed a judicial panel to look into the possibility of improper prevention of justice (Jiang, 2004). These discussion-centered official reports emphasized the public pressure as a push for reinvestigation, the negative impact brought by the lack of information transparency in law enforcement, and the possible corruption in the judiciary, which actually reflected the major points of online discussions. On the other hand, the threat brought by the using of the Internet and mobile devices in activism cases was also

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attempting to have sex with Huang, but denied raping or murdering her. This case was considered to facilitate the reform of the forensic expertise system starting in 2005.

mentioned for the first time by official reports on the 2005 Anti-Japan Demonstration, in which the use of the Internet and mobile phones as a tool for gathering crowds for protest is repeatedly mentioned as illegal actions.

Internet-enhanced environmental demonstration started and quickly became a major activism category in 2005. The official report on this category is very selective though. Among the three environmental cases in 2005[24], two were reported by the official newspaper. These articles include both "issue-centered" and "discussion-centered" responses and reflect at least partial opinions from environmental activists and netizens, particularly in the case of the Nujiang Dam controversy. The four discussion-centered official articles on this topic include the viewpoints from both sides, including interviews with the environmental expert and the corporate executives about the debate around whether the hydropower development is appropriate for the Nujiang system. In the Harbin chemical plant explosion case, although the official newspaper reported the accident in a timely way and emphasized the water pollution problem as the netizens expected, it evaded mentioning the change of the government's announcements before and after the discussions and rumors were spread online. In regard to the later environmental protests and online activism, the larger-scale environmental activism, including the Xiamen protest against the building of a paraxylene (PX) plant in 2007[25] and a nationwide PM 2.5 campaign in 2011, are reported in detail by the official newspaper, with the emphasis on discussing relevant policies and environmental

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[24] These three cases include the controversy on the building of Nujiang Dam, the contamination of Songhua River after the explosion of a chemical plant, and the Dong Zhou protest against building a new power plant by infilling the bay.

[25] An environmental protest by local residents in Xiamen against the building of a PX plant. After the street demonstration organized by cell phone, the government was forced to relocate the plant to Zhangzhou.

problems. However, the smaller-scale environmental protests, such as the anti-maglev campaign in 2008, the Zhoushan protest against the building of a chemical plant in 2008, and the Haimen protest against expanding a power plant in 2011, were less likely to get the attention of the official newspaper.

When cultural activism and social moral topics broke out in 2006, Internet-based actions, including cultural jamming, blog debates, and human flesh search engine (HFSE) were widely used by netizens, which immediately caught the traditional media's attention. The official newspaper responded to most of these cases and used a lot of space to criticize the negative effect of Internet-based actions, instead of focusing on the issue itself. These criticisms increased the visibility of netizens and their online activities in the public agenda. Cited paragraphs from bulletin boards, blogs, and weibo became common in official reports, though almost always citations were used to support the official point of view. In 2006, the number of discussion-centered responses exceeded the number of issue-centered responses for the first time, suggesting that the influence of online activism on the government agenda had turned from issue level to attribute level.

The number of discussion-centered articles continued to grow. These types of articles appeared in all the cases selected from *People's Daily* in 2007. The "Starbucks in Forbidden City" debate was an Internet-generated debate and successfully set a discussion agenda for the official newspaper. Internet-based investigation also generated the "Southern China tiger photo" case, which the official articles described as a result of "the lack of integrity in the society" and "the chase of underlying interest by the local government."(Su, 2007) With the specific focus on each case, the underlying causes of the accident or the phenomenon were discussed and analyzed through the official

channel, which sometimes resulted in follow-up comments on relevant policies or regulations, for example in the Chongqing Demolition case one of the articles discussed the property law to be implemented.

Two new categories of online activism emerged in 2008, which generated more interactions between netizens and the government. The first category was a series of activism cases asking for investigations on food safety problems, including the Sanlu milk scandal[26]. In this case, not only did the official newspaper cite online discussions to show public opinion, it also invited the officials in charge to answer the netizens' questions regarding the investigation results in a virtual interview set up by *People's Daily* online. The year 2008 also saw the start of a series of cases about online exposure of corruption, including the Zhou Jiugeng scandal[27], the government delegation scandal[28], and the official sexual harassment scandal[29]. The human flesh search engine (HFSE) and cultural jamming were effectively used in these cases, but this time the netizens' activities in anti-corruption were highly praised by the official media, compared to the discussions on HFSE by *People's Daily* in 2006.

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[26] In July 2008, after sixteen infants in Gansu Province were diagnosed with kidney stones, the milk products from 21 companies, including Sanlu Group, were found to be adulterated with melamine. The issue raised concerns about food safety and political corruption in China.

[27] Zhou Jiugeng was the director of Nanjing's property bureau. He was put in prison after the exposure of his luxury lifestyle by netizens.

[28] A group of officials from Wenzhou and Xinyu were punished after a set of lavish travel expenses for their trip to Las Vegas was posted on the Internet.

[29] A Shenzhen's marine affairs bureau official was fired after a video of him molesting an 11-year-old girl appeared on the Internet.

An obvious trend after 2009 was that discussion-centered and Internet-centered articles replaced issue-centered articles. In the Qian Yunhui case[30] in 2010, instead of criticizing netizens' guesses as rumor, as in previous cases, the official reports responded to each major assumption raised by netizens by providing a detailed report of the investigation. In the articles responding to the Zhou Senfeng case[31], the official media pointed out that, instead of targeting individuals, online activism actually called attention to the problem of the mechanisms for information disclosure by the local government and public opinion feedback. The official media also positively discussed for the first time the emotional expressions by netizens in activism cases, describing them as a form of "respect to the life, persistence to kindness" in the Wang Yue case[32]. From these cases, we can see the increasing effort of official media to arrange their discussions consistent with the Internet agenda over time, though only on the cases selected for reports.

5.4. "Internet-centered": Framing of Internet Activism in the Official Newspaper

From the year 2006, the use of the Internet in activism cases started to draw the attention of the official newspaper, and thus many articles turned attention from the issue itself to the Internet behavior, attempting to supervise, monitor, or understand these unexpected Internet activities. From 2006 to 2011, although there was little change in the

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[30] Qian Yunhui is a village head who died in a controversial traffic accident. In this case, the Chinese Internet activists organized their own investigation of the crime scene.
[31] Zhou Senfeng was promoted to be the youngest mayor in China in 2011, which drew skepticism from netizens who doubted his qualifications and questioned the covert procedures involved in his appointment.
[32] A two-year-old girl who was run over by two vehicles and ignored by 18 passers-by. She was eventually helped by a female rubbish scavenger and died eight days later.

number of Internet-centered articles in the official newspaper, the framing of the Internet and Internet activism was continually changing.

In the year 2006, among the ten Internet-centered articles, nine focused on the downside of Internet activism. They criticized Egao – a form of cultural jamming – as a form of Internet infringement, a negative cultural value and the spokesperson of marginalized culture. The marginalized culture was further defined in one of the official articles as a problematic culture within society (Chen, 2006), which shows the strong denial by the elite and mainstream cultural circles of this Internet activism culture. Blogging, which was introduced to Chinese netizens around 2002, was first mentioned in official reports because of "uncouth" blogger behavior. The official articles also censured the Internet actions taken by grassroots netizens in some cases, calling these "online arrest warrant" and "human flesh search engine" Internet violence. Underlying these severe criticisms was the formation of a potential government agenda - considering the negative effect of netizens' activities, the Internet needed supervision. The major treatments mentioned in these official articles included restricting the use of the Internet as activism tools, strengthening the management and supervision of the Internet service provider, and drawing up new regulations for Internet use. The traditional new media were also criticized for dereliction of duty in bringing these online issues to the public agenda.

The four Internet-centered articles in 2007 show a transition in the official newspaper's framing of the Internet. Two of the articles were in accordance with the criticism in 2006, while the other two started to look into the relationship between the activism cases and the misconduct of officials. In the Brick Slave scandal, the governor in

Shanxi province where the scandal happened summarized the lesson from this incident as

"the ignorance of online opinion by the local officials resulted in the delay of

investigation and government reaction." (Ji, 2007) In one of the Internet-centered articles,

the Internet was said to be the "direct channel to collect public opinion", and also

suggested that the party and government officials at all levels needed to learn about the

Internet to better guide public opinion and gain the initiative (Ji, 2007).

From 2006 to 2008, a change occurred in the official newspaper's framing of the

Internet. The positive role of Internet activism in solving public issues was highlighted in

2008's Internet-centered articles. The netizens' activity online was given a new name,

"citizen participation," and because of the Internet, "citizen, an unfamiliar word for

Chinese people, is now getting closer to our life." (Shi & Bai, 2008) Netizens were also

praised for being "effective in promoting the socialism democratic construction." (Shi &

Bai, 2008) Furthermore, in the official articles in 2008, Internet activism was described as

an important component of political life for citizens, having the potential to influence the

political environment in China (He, 2008; Li & Zhang, 2008). This change from

derogatory framing to praise can be understood as a response to the report of the

seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party, held in October 2007, which

asked for strengthening citizen's political participation in a well-organized manner. The

positive framing of the Internet reflected this guiding principle. All Internet-centered

articles in 2008 emphasized that the participation of Internet or new technology users in

political life should be in order and in control, which is "the fundamental of Chinese

socialism democratic ecology."(Li, 2008) With this guidance, three articles also started to

discuss the necessity of establishing Internet regulations and building up netizens' self-constraint.

The rise of anti-corruption activism in late 2008 led the theme of Internet-centered articles in 2009. In an article about the corruption case of Zhou Jiugen, the local Discipline Inspection Commission, for the first time, officially appreciated the help and participation of netizens in disclosing the corrupt officials (Shen, 2009). The official newspaper started to frame the Internet as the helper, collaborator, and supervising tool for the government. According to several Internet-centered articles, netizens' participation in political decision-making and building a healthy interaction between netizens and the government was the core work of communist officials (Liu, 2009). The official newspaper provided further directions that included "(under the supervision of the Internet) the government needs to reply quickly, increase information transparency, and seek active interactions with netizens"; "provide a faster and sincere reply to the public, … use public supervision as the chance to tackle social problems" and called this the "technique of governing" in an Internet era (Chen, 2009; Lu, 2009) The official newspaper also had a new interpretation of activism culture. In the article "The social culture ecology of hot words is worth paying attention to," after a detailed account of the backgrounds and the origins of several Egao cases, the article made a rare comment calling this phenomenon the prelude of "stars shining of Chinese thinking and academic circle." (Lv & Zhao, 2009)

In 2010, while Internet-centered articles continued to affirm citizen participation as essential in political decision-making, building the "Internet governing techniques" had become the focus of framing. Through analyzing several activism cases, the

government media found that the Internet actually could "resolve possible conflicts between cadres and the masses." (Xu, 2010) It then provided more detailed guidelines to improve the skills of coping with Internet activism, such as "golden four hours rule" (Li, 2010), which suggested an effective response time for officials and relevant government departments in unexpected activism cases. Furthermore, the official newspaper also made requests, asking government officials to take more initiative in Internet politics, which included strategies to build up the reputation of official forums, get mainstream discourse into cyberspace, and institutionalize Internet opinion into the government system (Wang, 2010& Wu, 2010). The once criticized activism culture was also re-analyzed and was finally considered as a kind of expression of public opinion (Fang, 2010). On the other hand, the official media for the first time proposed differences between "Internet opinion" and "public opinion," which became one of the framing themes for articles in 2011.

With a more sophisticated treatment of the Internet, the official articles started to critique Internet opinion as only partially reflecting public opinion, saying it had many limitations including the authenticity of online speech. Among the fourteen Internet-centered articles in the year 2011, ten discussed Internet management, including strengthening the discourse power of government in cyberspace, encouraging opening officials' social media accounts, and advocating the Internet real-name system. Regarding government problems, such as a lack of government credibility as reflected in Internet opinion, these official articles also responded positively. They called for more transparency and changing governance approaches, as well as suggesting the mediator role of traditional media and the discipline of Internet users themselves. The well-

controlled interaction between Internet political discourse and government reactions was also described as "the valve of social grievance and the lubricants between the public and officials." (Shan, 2011) These multi-faceted discussions and responses from the official newspaper to the Internet and Internet activism showed a more active and confident role of the government in dealing with rapidly developing Internet activities. Their strategy and treatment of these Internet struggles was clear and firm. One of the articles asserted that "the right choice (of strategy) is to combine supervision and use, and to reach the effective control of the Internet through making use of it. " (Wang & Zhang, 2011)

5.5. Interaction between Netizens and Government: A Bottom-up Agenda Setting versus a Tightened Internet Control

From the data collected in this study, we did find a bottom-up agenda-setting effect from online activism on the political agenda represented by the official newspaper, in articles on both the issue level and attribute level. Particularly from 2000 to 2011, the number of activism cases brought to the mainstream public sphere grew, peaking in 2009. Starting from 2007, more than half of the Internet-generated or Internet-supported activism cases had reports or discussions in the official newspaper, which means that the Internet had become an important alternative to the traditional media for public agenda building. The continuous growth of activism in form and scope generated constant pressure that finally brought about change in government behavior and strategy. The most obvious change was that the government's attitude toward Internet activism went from ignorance to selective attention, which indicated that some of the topics generated by the periphery public sphere successfully reached the center public sphere. The

expanding discussions on specific cases also made the issues generated through activism enter the political agenda.

The main limitation of this bottom-up agenda setting is that it is highly selective. Many factors may affect the chances of an online activism case being selected by official media, such as the scale of the demonstration, the timing and location of the activism, the person or groups involved, the tactic used by netizens, etc. Since each activism case has its specific characteristics within a dynamic political environment, even the protests with similar causes and scale may get different treatment from the government. From the current data, we found that the general category of activism case did not determine whether or not a case would be reported by government media. We can only say that some categories, such as anti-corruption related activism cases, increased the chance to be reported, particularly after 2008. The category can, however, be a determining factor in the issue *not* being reported by in official media. One category in our index never got a reply from the official newspaper—the call to release dissidents in detention and activism asking for an immediate democratic revolution.

Regarding the activism cases that have been selected, it also took several years for the official newspaper to go from picking up only the issue to report to discussing the features of the case of concern to the netizens. In a few cases, online "rumors" even got responses through official media reports. Being reported by the official newspaper usually means that a case has gotten the attention of the central government, resulted in the corresponding investigations, which could be organized by the local or central government, and had been properly settled. In addition, through analyzing these official articles, we found that besides solving the case itself, this constant bottom-up agenda

setting changed government behavior, at least initiating a process for larger change. These changes include but are not limited to: the official articles repeatedly emphasized improving information transparency to meet the public's right to know and made anti-corruption a lasting and recognized Internet campaign. In some cases, the netizens' opinion successfully pushed back the government's initiatives to tighten Internet management (e.g., the Green Dam Youth Escort and Microblog real-name policy); and the government has significantly improved the communication channel between officials and the public.

Compared to case-related reports, the development of online activism itself also drew attention from official media. These Internet-centered articles, without any doubt, began with negative reports in 2006. A significant turning point then emerged in 2008 when the official media started to acknowledge the legitimacy of Internet activism by framing them as activities beneficial to national stability by assisting the party in solving conflicts between the political elites and the public. This shift, on one hand, eased the nearly uncontrolled situation in which the public was more likely to turn to the Internet to look for justice and ask for collective action. On the other hand, it reclaimed the party's leadership through making this activism form a component of the "public opinion supervision system" that is defined by and serves the ruling party. Despite its political intention, the change of the rhetoric by this most authoritative newspaper on Internet activism gave positive signals to the public to make them feel that their voices could be heard and believe that there was a channel connecting the periphery public sphere and the center public sphere, which could create more political opportunities for grassroots activists.

Along with changing the framing of Internet activism, the Chinese government also actively reshaped and redefined the boundaries of political discourse. According to the Internet-centered articles in *People's Daily* after 2009, the government asserted the positive role of the Internet in uncovering social problems and collecting public opinion, but also highlighted an agenda for more governmental participation and better monitoring of Internet activities. Actually, the agenda on building more effective management and regulation of Internet use emerged in the official newspaper as early as 2006, and after that, the government never gave up the effort to find ways to tighten up the Internet activities to bring them back under control, which they called "well-organized political participation" or "healthy interaction between the netizens and the government." Among the many strategies and treatments, bringing thousands of official accounts to the social media platforms and expanding the government agencies' influence on the Internet did achieve beneficial results, according to the articles from the official newspaper.

In short, the current chapter examined the bottom-up agenda setting effect to explore a gradual process by which Internet activism affected government behavior over time. During these repeated confrontations with the government, Chinese netizens indeed opened up some extra space for political discourse, opportunities to enter the mainstream public sphere, and some policy changes based on cases and issues. Their struggles, however, also resulted in tightened governmental management of the Internet. This strategic "management," instead of strict censorship or mandatory control, can better describe the status quo of the Chinese government's Internet policy, a "combination of supervision and use." Although the official newspaper showed the result of this bottom-up agenda setting, it provided very limited information on how it happened. The process

of transferring the Internet agenda to the center public sphere and to finally generate a

political or policy change was much more complicated than the current data can present.

The process usually involves various agents or agencies that define the issue, translate the

message, organize the online gathering, and lead the emotional mobilization in the

different stages of the activism. These agencies, combining with the political

opportunities that appear at the right time, are the real components of the "channel"

connecting the periphery public sphere and the center public sphere. The next chapter

will use two case studies to further investigate the mechanism of this channel to build a

better understanding of the game between Chinese netizens and the government.

Chapter 6

The Forming of Activism Sphere and Strategies in Two Rural Activism Cases:

A Comparative Study

6.1. Taishi versus Wukan: Case Selection

Located near the Pearl River estuary, Taishi is a small village, with 2000 residents, in Guangdong province in southern China. In the summer of 2005, 400 villagers submitted an impeachment motion to the district civil affairs bureau, requesting the dismissal of the elected village chief, Chen Jinsheng, on the grounds that he and his cronies used black-box operations to pocket the land-selling funds that should go to the collective welfare. Six years later, in Wukan, another village of Guangdong province, the residents had several protests and marches in front of city hall because the village's party committee was suspected of selling the collectively owned land without permission from and giving the appropriate compensation to villagers. Both protests led to violent conflict between armed police and the rallying villagers.

We choose these two cases for comparative study for three reasons. First, both cases are ignited by the same land grab problem in rural China. In most rural areas in China, the collective, usually based on village, is still the owner of rural land. However, in practice, the higher level – the administrative officials of the village or the township (Ho, 2005) control the use of rural land, instead of the villager or villagers' group. The "sell" or "rent" of the rural land is usually operated by the cadres of the administrative villages to make huge profits. Without proper procedures like public hearings with villagers and consensus about compensation, when a land deal happens, individual

villagers often experience disenfranchisement (He et al. 2009). Villagers who try to

appeal to upper government for fair compensation are sometimes arrested and detained

because the village cadres, city government officials, investors, and developers usually

form a coalition. As the vulnerable group in this confrontation, villagers use protests,

violent conflicts, and mass incidents to defend their land rights (He & Xue, 2014). Taishi

and Wukan are only two among hundreds of such cases every year all over China.

Second, Taishi and Wukan are both small villages along the coast in the same

province. The economic growth and rapid urbanization during the past several years in

China have increased the demand for industrial land and enforced land rental by private

enterprises in these rural areas, particularly the places with convenient transportation

locations. As they have very similar geographic locations, these two villages have a

similar clan culture[33], administration system, politics, and economic model.

In addition, among the other rural incidents, theses two are both regarded as

milestones of Chinese Internet activism, as they successfully obtained the central

government's attention (both have commentary articles in the official newspaper

People's Daily). They opened up a channel for Chinese village residents, one of the most

marginalized groups in the Internet era, to bring their voice into the mainstream public

sphere. The role of the Internet in this process should not be underestimated.

Data collected for analysis include a Memorandum of Taishi incident, which is a

collection of activists' articles and online conversations from blogs and forum

discussions on Yannan BBS (bulletin board). Yannan BBS was the major platform for the

online discussion in the Taishi incident. It was censored and was forced to close after this

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[33] A village in southern China is usually made up of a few patrilineal and patrilocal groups of people with a common surname sharing a common ancestor.

case. For the Wukan case, as it took place six years later and used the most popular social media microblog, we have the opportunity to retrieve first-hand data directly from the microblog account of the villagers and activists. The media reports, academic records, and scattered discussions online are also reviewed as references for accounts.

6.2. Taishi Mode: The Activism Sphere Led by Outsider Activists

Although the Chinese Communist Party's constitution gave peasants important status, recent historical events have left them behind. The transition from a planned economy to a socialist market economy, rapid urbanization, and a digital revolution have made peasants the most "underrepresented and least-wired group" in many aspects of Chinese social life (Zhao, 2007). The Taishi incident and the Wukan incident, therefore, were both considered turning points for contemporary Chinese peasants. The protests by the marginalized groups in these two cases succeeded in getting national and international attention and generated pressure on the local government. What set them apart from thousands of similar cases was the Internet. In both cases, the Internet and emerging communication technologies played a vital role in gathering and disseminating information for the villagers. The Internet proved to be an essential tool in providing a virtual space that could generate nationwide discussions, overcome geographical barriers and censorship for activists, and help the villagers seek assistance from different agencies. With the Internet, the villagers could make their stories heard much more effectively, which was the key to making these two incidents more influential than similar cases.

In the Taishi incident, the early intervention by a group of journalists, rights activists, scholars, and rights lawyers started the formation of an activism sphere. At the very beginning, these people provided villagers with advice and joined the gathering as observers. They posted their observations online, the stories of the struggling villagers, and also their own experiences when facing the local government's obstruction. These articles were quickly circulated over the Internet and helped get support from a broad group of netizens. After the first clash with the police, the rights lawyers who provided legal advice for the original impeachment motion became the lawyers for the arrested villagers. The lawyers used the Internet to give daily updates on the progress of the case, making the Internet an alternative media for the public to follow. An independent documentary film was also made during this time by a scholar wanting to record the process of mobilization and gathering, as well as the unusual characteristics emerging in this incident. Because of these intermediators' backgrounds as university professors, deputies of the government, journalists of major newspapers, and lawyers, this activism sphere linked the daily events happening in the Taishi village to the mainstream sphere.

The role of journalists in Chinese activism is usually bipolar. In some cases, their investigations help bring to light the problem or truth of a covered issue, while in other cases, the media are the spokespeople of the government, or they simply keep silent. This contradiction lies between professional journalism and enforced "party spirit" in China. In the Taishi incident, the earliest report is from *Nanfang Nongcunbao* (*Southern Rural News*), which is based on a journalist's firsthand interview and observation, providing opinions from both sides and neutral accounts. After the issue became an activism case involving a hunger strike and police detentions, these traditional media were reticent

about reporting the facts. Until the end of the incident, the local official newspaper, *Panyu Ribao* (*Panyu Daily*), to coordinate with governmental action, published several articles criticizing Taishi villagers' activities, defining it as "illegal gathering" and "an event seriously endanger social stability and being hated by the cadres and the masses."

In spite of these government-approved reports, in the Taishi incident journalists actually played a more active role as agent connecting the villagers and the outside world. The journalist was the first person the village leader looked to for help when their proposal was returned by the local bureau of civil administration, and the police-villager conflict happened. Lv Banglie, a rights activist, described the way he was introduced to Taishi villagers in his article "Accompanied the American journalist to visit Taishi:"

> I know the story of Taishi in late July when I visited Guangzhou for personal issue. In a dinner with local journalists and scholars, a journalist from *Guangzhou Daily* told me that, Feng and other villagers in Taishi are going to submit a motion to recall their village leader, they need help on the procedure and have some other questions. I agree to help answer the questions as I can. And then the journalist made a call, let us communicate … so we knew each other and then became friend.

Through the journalist, the villager got to know the rights activist, and then the activist brought the western journalist to report the incident. An activism space through the networking of activists and journalists built up rapidly.

Activists in this incident played a crucial role by making the Internet an alternative media. The 51 articles about this incident include two types: (1) factual description and updates of the incident, and (2) editorial comments on this event. The

activists who posted these online articles wrote down all major activities of the villagers,

including the self-organized seminar on law information at the beginning, clashes with

the armed policemen, the hunger strike by villagers, the process of resubmitting the

petition, and formation of the election committee. These news-style articles emphasized

the first-hand conversations with the villagers and observations from the perspective of

activists. Comparing to the official newspaper reports (showing in Table 4), they

appeared in a more timely fashion. Continuously reporting on progress attracted constant

attention, which is an important way to make this activism sphere sustainable.

Table 4. Comparison of newspaper reports and activist-generated articles based on the

timeline of Taishi incident.

Timeline of Taishi Incident	Newspaper Reports	Activists Generated Articles
Jul 29-31, early stage Jul 29, Villagers submited the impeachment motion		
Jul 30, the publicity of "open letter to Taishi villagers"		
Jul 31, legal literacy seminars to villagers		(Jul 31), The manuscript of Feng's speech "open letter to Taishi villagers"
Aug 3- Sep 12, second phase Aug 3- Aug 16 villager's defending on finance office Aug 16, first clash with police	(Aug 2) Southern Rural News "Taishi Villagers's tried to depose their party chief"	(Aug 19) "Guangzhou suburbs has bloody conflict, the government used riot police beat villagers who asked for reelection of the village leader" by Liang Chengbo
		(Aug 26) "The latest progress in Taishi" by Guo Feixiong
Aug 29, the motion was denied by the civil affairs office of local government		
Aug 31, villagers' hunger strike		(Aug 31) "80 Taishi villagers hunger strike in front of the government, demanding democratic elections" by Guo Feixiong
Sep 5, villagers resubmit the motion		(Sep 1) " The female villagers' smart answer to officers fishing question" by Lv Banglie (Sep 2) "The latest updates on hunger strike" by Lv Banglie (Sep 7) "Centenarians handed identification card – recoding the Taichi recall signature verification process" by Lv Banglie (Sep 8) "582 villagers identified by District Civil Affairs Bureau – an update of Taishi" by Guo Feixiong
Sep 9, government announced the pass of the motio		(Sep 9) "The recall motion was passed"
Sep 12-29 third phase Sep 12, riot police went to village to arrest villagers	(Sep 12) Southern Metropolis Daily "Investigating the recalling in Taishi"	(Sep 14) "The Taishi situation suddenly changed" partially reproduced from Hong Kong journalist's report
Sep 16, election of committee members for the recall action	(Sep 15) Panyu Daily "Action following the law" (Sep 15) Panyu Daily "Briefing on Taishi recent progress"	(Sep 16) "Witness Taishi election" by Huang Weilong (Sep 16) "Taishi dismissal election committee was established, seven candidates (designated by local government) were all sacked"
Sep 30, the motion failed	(Sep 30) Panyu Daily "Taishi villagers withdraw the motion"	

The activists-generated commentary, the second type of article, shows how an activism sphere was expanded online. Written by lawyers, economists, researchers, human rights activists, and freelance writers, these commentaries cover a broad range of topics, including general opinion on political democracy, civil disobedience, political transition in China, villager autonomy, and detailed laws and regulations that can be applied in this case. These articles severely criticize law enforcement based on the one Party system, the lack of an independent judiciary, media and free speech, and local government's use of armed police. Wen Kejian, a freelance writer, kept interviewing lawyers and experts in different phases of the incident and posted their opinions online, which also expanded the activism sphere to offline groups. These activist-generated articles, including the incident updates and commentaries, filled the gaps that were made by the mainstream media and provided timely information to the public.

In addition to using online postings and networking to expand the activism sphere and its influence, activists used an Internet petition in this case to get attention from the central government. Ai Xiaoming, a former professor of comparative literature at Sun Yat-sen university in Guangzhou, initiated this cyber petition for Premier Wen Jiabao, who happened to visit Guangdong during this period. In the open letter, she told the story of elderly women in Taishi village during the clash with the police, asking for the intervention of the higher authority. Because of the belief in the power of the Internet, she put the open letter online and asked for netizens to help spread it. Ai is also the producer of an independent documentary film on Taishi incidents, in which, through participatory observation (Peng & Pernin, 2010), she highlighted the prominence of women in pushing forward the development of the recall campaign, successfully giving the voice of another

marginalized group and bringing their stories and images to the public. Ai is among a group of people who experienced the Cultural Revolution when they were young and witnessed the public torture of political rivals and class enemies that sometimes included their own family members. The doubt about the system had been planted in her mind for a long time, and guided her gradually to become an activist for public intelligence and women's rights (Zhao, 2017).

The rights defense lawyer Guo Feixiong was the key person to transform the villagers' protest to a lawsuit and guide the villagers' strategy. In one of his commentaries, he framed the Taishi campaign as "the pioneer in pursuing political democracy and justice by villagers from the rich rural in southern China and the rise of a Gandhi's nonviolence confrontation among the Chinese grassroots groups[34]." He suggested the villagers follow the rule of law and adhere to nonviolent actions. The objective of this strategy, as described in his later interview, is "to open up a new form of social revolution, a form that can result in gradual peaceful revolution with minimal side effects and expense." (Xiao, S. 2005) This nonviolent strategy actually obtained support and sympathy from the general public, who were more concerned about economic stability than immediate political change. Translating the villagers' request to a legal case provided the disorganized rural activism opportunities to enter the center sphere through a formal channel.

In short, the activism sphere of the Taishi incident was formed on three levels. At the core were the activists who got physically involved to guide the villagers and

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[34] This content was mentioned in the penultimate paragraph of Guo Feixiong's "Guangzhou Panyu: Taishi election led to conflict," which was published on Aug 19, 2005 and collected in the Memorandum. It called the Taishi case the model of Chinese farmer's resistance and has significant meanings.

continuously update their progress. The second circle held the authors of commentary articles and people who provided opinions online or offline. They each picked up some topics from this incident and provided their points of view, which extended the discussions and expanded the activism sphere. The outermost circle of this activism sphere held the general netizens who came together because of reading stories online. The netizens were farthest from the incident in regard to the degree of involvement and contribution, but they were easy to gather and mobilize online to show their support by clicking, signing the petitions, and posting a couple of sentences. The participation of general netizens made the sphere grow quickly and brought this marginalized issue to become a popular topic.

6.3. Activism Sphere in Wukan: the Extension of Villagers' Voluntary Organization

The construction of the activism sphere in the Wukan incident is a different story. It can be traced back to an online group called "Wukan hot-blood youth group," which was founded two years before the incident. It is a group of younger villagers with ages ranging from 14 to 39, gathering together to discuss actions against the illegal land sales and the unreasonable compensation system in their village. Many of them worked away from their village as a result of the trend toward migrant workers that gradually formed from the late 1990s because of the unbalanced development of the economy in urban and rural areas and the decreased demand for field cultivation. Because of their experience working outside the village, in cities, they saw different treatments of land sales and the huge gap in the compensation return between Wukan and the other villages. They created a group chat on QQ (an instant message application), and started to share files and

materials obtained from various channels regarding the land sales in Wukan in the past few years to look for evidence of illegal operations by the village cadres. From June 2009 to April 2011, they organized 11 [35] petitions to the provincial government. These QQ-based small-scale petition activities did not get feedback, but through these online collaborations, the core of the activism sphere for Wukan was established. Several members of this group then went back to their hometown during early 2011 to educate and mobilize villagers. At this time, the Wukan incident familiar to the public was kicked off.

From September to December of 2011, the Wukan villagers set up a new council led by the prestigious old villager Lin and organized three street demonstrations asking for an investigation of the land selling scandal. Their large-scale and well-organized demonstration gained government's immediate promise of a follow-up investigation and problem solving, but that was followed by armed police repression. During the clash, several villagers were arrested, and one council leader died during police detention. Within this intense period, the members of Wukan hot-blooded youth group transferred their role to recorder and information disseminator, particularly during the time when the news of Wukan was censored. Their social media accounts were among the very limited sources for the outside world to learn about progress in Wukan. Using the village fund, they also purchased equipment to produce an independent documentary, "Wukan! Wukan!" documenting the collisions between police and villagers.

The microblog quickly became the major platform for building the online activism sphere for the Wukan incident. An increasing number of Wukan young villagers

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[35] The only place that mentioned the exact number of petitions that the Wukan hot-blood youth group started is in their documentary film "Wukan! Wukan!"

set up microblog accounts to update outsiders on the progress of their protest. They usually used "WK + name" to show their identification as insiders. Wukan's younger generation had a very strong sense of strategically using media platforms, which distinguished the Wukan incident from the Taishi incident, and many other rural protests in China as well.

Zhang Jianxing, one of the leaders for Wukan hot-blood youth group, is among the earliest group of Wukaner who used the Internet (mainly on microblog) to inform the outside world about their protest. His postings on microblog mostly focused on the progress of their actions, with some pictures of the scene. Sometimes he replied to netizens' questions and explained the argument about Wukan. As a person involved, he often mentioned personal feelings and pressures about the situation in his writings. He expressed concerns on his microblog's influence and the many followers of his account. This concern was echoed in a later interview in which he claimed that working with media and responding to online reactions were difficult but important for advocating their cause. In addition, he reposted other stories about unfair encounters by other people who also used microblogs to seek help, and developed some kind of network between these vulnerable groups.

Compared with the Taishi incident, these Wukan villagers had completely taken up the roles themselves of journalists, scholars, and activists in making the Internet an alternative media for their protest. They published the updates and detailed descriptions earlier than any media, produced videos from their own perspectives, and provided insider stories that the outsider observers found difficult to obtain, making their own voices heard and broadly circulated on social media during the crisis. These Wukan-

prefix accounts linked and reposted to each other. They naturally built a "microblog sphere" on Wukan from December 2011 until the end of the village election in March 2012. On the other side, they had limited interactions with their followers, and focused more on the truthfulness of their experiences and emotional expressions rather than content and opinion.

As a scholar and activist on elections, Xiong Wei (microblog account: New enlightenment Xiong Wei) was among the few outside activists who was welcomed and accepted by the villagers so as to appear in the core level of this activism sphere. He entered Wukan on December 22, 2011, and stayed with villagers until March 1, 2012, when the village committee election succeeded. His major activities in Wukan, as suggested by his microblog, include updating people about village events, particularly the elections, helping villagers to prepare and implement the election, discussing Wukan situations with netizens, and initiating several campaigns to help Wukan villagers (building a public library and writing couplets for villagers). Compared to Wukan villagers' online postings, Xiong focused more on factual content. His primary concentration was the election, and his point was also consistent with most outsider observers that "establishing a good electoral system is more important than solve an independent case.[36]" Therefore, most of his microblog interactions were with the other scholars and activists. From his microblog, we can see the expansion of the activism sphere to the second level through online opinion leaders who already had thousands of followers.

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[36] Xiong posted this content on his December 25 (2011) microblog.

Besides expanding the activism sphere online, Wukan villagers also actively sought help from foreign journalists after seeing that the news of their actions was blocked at the local level. More than 20 foreign journalists, including journalists from Taiwan and Hong Kong, surmounted the block set by the government and entered Wukan village. They also became the "alternative media" for the Wukan incident. Being considered as a powerful channel to "let the outside world know what happened in our village[37]," which could also generate pressures on the higher authority because of global publicity, these foreign and regional journalists were highly welcomed by the villagers. Through the video and online blog records, the villagers not only provided adequate information for news reporting, they also escorted their arrivals, arranged accommodations, and kept vigil to ensure their safety. Zhang jianxing mentioned several times in his postings appreciating the reports by Hong Kong journalists, and showed his personal connections built with them through this incident.

6.4. From "the Prelude to Political Reform" to "a Depoliticizing Movement"

In the Taishi incident, as we discussed above, the core activism sphere consisted of outsider activists. Without the voice from villagers, the activism sphere was dominated by scholars, lawyers, and activists. Most of them considered the Taishi incident as one case among many others that could push for political reform and speed up the process of democratization. Forming an activism sphere was a strategy to bring the problem of the marginalized group to the attention of people in the center sphere. They used specific tactics, such as online petitions, legal campaigns, inviting foreign journalists, nonviolent

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[37] Zhang posted this content on his December 19 (2010) microblog.

movements, or producing documentary films, as well as their own networks to multiply the impact of the incident. This activism sphere also developed rapidly online through the continuous postings and updates from the activists and dissemination of content by netizens. The participation of the ordinary netizen was convenient, with low political risk. As a result, both the size of the sphere and the speed of its expansion could generate pressure on and get attention from the government.

On the other hand, although the Taishi incident originated with land disputes, none of the collected articles discussed this cause or any policies related to it. Instead, these articles emphasized the protest as a result of the awakening of the democratic consciousness of Chinese peasants, the arrogant local government, and the signal of a necessary political transition nationwide. These views were more likely to get responses and gain resonance among activists who had been fighting for a democratic government for many years. These activists considered the Taishi incident as an emblem and gave specific significance to this rural protest, which went far beyond the villagers' original objective.

In the Wukan case, the villagers controlled the activism sphere and chose a distinct strategy. In Zhang Jianxing's microblog, there was a message following one of his postings from a netizen named "Fremcesm." The follower sent a message saying that "it is not important who will be elected in this election, the most essential thing is the representation of a democratic and fair procedure during the process." This idea was firmly declined by Zhang, who quoted it in a later posting and argued that "the most importance (for us) is to elect a capable man to governance the village, the democracy is for the result." This is not the only disagreement between the villagers and the netizens.

In fact, in this activism, the villagers made a great effort to depoliticize their demonstration and objective, which made them independent of outsider observers, journalists, scholars, lawyers, and activists.

While embracing the arrival of foreign journalists, villagers were also concerned about how they reported on the village. "Is it beneficial for us" or "what is their real purpose" are among the questions they kept asking the foreign journalists (Zhang, 2013). On his December 19 microblog, Zhang Jianxin posted a picture of an announcement taped on the wall of the village, using both Chinese and English: "…Please positive reports, to avoid the "uprising" and other words, we are not revolt, we support the Communist Party, our love of country." Similar contents were posted and reposted by the other WuKan microbloggers, reasserting their stand in supporting the Communist Party instead of challenging it. The message successfully reached the foreign journalists, as Rachel Beitare, a Beijing-based Israeli journalist, said in an interview:

> …Unlike the people in Egypt or Libya, in Wukan they clearly and repeatedly say they do not wish to overthrow the government and that they trust the Communist Party. How sincere they are in saying this remains for us to speculate, but that is the message they want to get out.

Just like the Taishi incident, the Wukan protest also attracted the attention of scholars, lawyers, and activists. Professor Ai xiaoming sneaked into Wukan when it was cut off by the local government, and as she did in Taishi village, conducted interviews for a documentary film, "Wukan Three Days." However, for Wukan villagers, these

outsiders were much less welcome than in Taishi. They were considered to have "ulterior

motives" and make "more trouble than help[38]" for the situation in Wukan.

As the spokesman of Wukan, Zhang also mentioned in his blogs how they

declined the suggestions of getting help from a lawyer. Zhang claimed that a lawyer

could not create effective channels in this kind of case. They may need the help from

lawyers, but only for consulting about legal knowledge. This firm and sophisticated

judgment of their situation might have been generated from learning the result of

previous cases, including the Taishi incident. As a result, the role of the lawyer in the

Wukan case was relatively insignificant.

Wukan villagers, particularly the younger generation, were very clear about the

benefit and risk of information publicity about their actions and tried to control it by

managing their social media content and taking the initiative to communicate with

foreign journalists. They also proactively and carefully selected their collaborators. They

were not passive and helpless victims; instead, they strategically established their own

activism sphere while also avoiding political risk.

6.5. Different Strategies, Different Outcomes?

The Taishi incident and the Wukan incident, as two significant rural protests and

online activism cases, share the similar land dispute, cadre corruption, and the problem of

democratic election at the grassroots level. Although they happened in different periods,

both incidents started with the same actions - the petition and collective demonstration by

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[38] The words is cited from a long blog posted by Zhang Jianxing on January 14th, 2012 to explain their attitude to outsider helpers with the title "regarding netizens, media, scholars, and lawyers, I have something to say."

villagers. Even the first responses from the local government were the same. Armed police, arrest, and detention were used to prevent and intimidate villagers' actions, though they failed. But after that, the villagers' strategies and government treatment in these two cases started to move to different tracks, and the results of these two incidents were different. Taishi villagers finally revoked their motion and lost the opportunity to re-elect the village's communist leader. In Wukan, the village received special attention from higher authority, and successfully held election for village committee using secret ballots. The villagers who had been named previously by local government as troublemakers were all elected as committee members. What factor determines this turning point in the Wukan case, making it a different story from the Taishi protest? How did formation of the activism sphere affect the government's attitudes and then the result of the protests? It is difficult to generate an unconditional answer without first considering the macro political environment and the specific political opportunities available for each case.

The political system in China has been gradually becoming more multilayered and decentralized over the past decades, which has resulted in the growing autonomy of China's subnational unit, specifically the provinces (Jia & Lin, 1994). In this sense, the local levels of the state sometimes have their own particular interests and so might have played a pivotal role in determining protest outcomes. At the same time, within the past several years, the central government has developed a more sophisticated approach and a proactive attitude to Internet unrest, with a constant emphasis on social stability. This gap between the central government and the local government provided opportunities for moderate contentions that could successfully generate nationwide influence in a short

period. The Wukan incident, as a more recent case, obviously benefitted more from this gap. In addition, the changed leadership of the province was also considered to have a profound impact on the outcomes of grassroots protests, as the authorities' willingness to quietly, quickly, and peacefully resolve social unrest provided more political opportunity for protesters.

The different strategies used in the two cases could also be compared as influential factors leading to the different outcomes. In the Taishi case, the group of activists, scholars, and lawyers acted as the spokesman, adviser, and translator for the villagers, and made the case part of a larger political movement. Their methods actually targeted the central government and the political system rather than the local authority. In Yannan BBS, the main discussion board of the Taishi incident, the critics of the government, particularly the central government, and the praise of the Taishi protest as a revolutionary turning point for democratic development made up nearly half of the postings (70 in154), while only 19 in 154 postings discussed the difficulties and possible solutions for Taishi villagers. Guided by these motivations, the actions are less likely to be tolerated by both the central and local governments.

In the Wukan case, the villagers made the decisions and chose the strategy by themselves. In spite of their limitations expressing opinions online, they made clear the objective of their actions, which was the re-election of the village leader and the return of their land. The villagers framed the problem by positioning themselves against corrupt local cadres who violated the center's policies while at the same time restating their firm support of the central government and the Party. They also took advantage of information tools to draw substantial public attention in major foreign media outlets, and spread their

story all over the Chinese language cyber space, even under strict censorship. These reports by the foreign media put pressure on the higher-ranking government and also circumvented the common information-control strategy of local government. Even though the Wukan villagers used foreign media to enlarge their public influence, they carefully controlled the extent of risk from this approach. The critical tactics adopted by Wukan village that greatly increased the chance of getting positive governmental responses were twofold: narrowing down the problem to local claims and bypassing government information blocking to make their story internationally known.

Finally, through examining the formation of activism spheres in two rural protests, this study considers the building of a cyber sphere an important strategy for activists. Besides adding a new perspective on public sphere studies, this study also explored the possible relationship between activists' activities in the public sphere and the outcomes of the activism, which may also enrich the current literature on online activism and rural protests. It is worth mentioning that both modes may not be easily adapted to cases taking place in other areas. The development of activism depends on the combination of several factors, including the political opportunities presented in the specific time when the case happened and whether the villagers chose an appropriate strategy for their circumstance, as well as whether these strategies can be well implemented.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Why and how, under the most sophisticated censorship system, has online activism managed to thrive for more than seventeen years in China? How do online activists and the Chinese government react to each other? If these activism cases did not destabilize the authoritarian rule, what are the outcomes of these struggles? With seventeen years of Internet development in China, this was an interesting moment to look back and through a longitudinal study seek answers to the above questions. This dissertation aims to provide new insight into the ongoing debates about the Internet's power against authoritarian governmental control, offering an alternative interpretation to understand the relationship between Internet activism and government strategy. I started by examining the evolution of online activism from its introduction in 1994 to 2011. Within these seventeen years, the modes, objects, and strategies of online activism changed constantly. I built a new activism index, including articles from the official newspaper, *People's Daily,* on each case. I also analyzed these articles and explored the patterns of governmental reaction, treatment, and strategy to these online contentions in different periods. Chapter 6 selected comparable cases that occurred at different times to further explore the mechanism and factors that mediate the interplay between activism and government.

7.1. Factors Affecting Online Activism

The development of technology is the first obvious factor that determined the formation of these online collective actions. Implemented by the Chinese government as an essential part of its economic development, the update of Internet technology and its social media applications in China is also in sync with the western world. As a result, every time a new use for the Internet was introduced to the public, it boosted the innovation of new strategies and tactics by netizens. The technology itself is a neutral platform, but in the context of an authoritarian country, it rapidly provided powerful tools for citizens as an alternative channel apart from the one voice of the Communist Party.

During the early stages of Internet development in China, by providing separate and localized virtual chat rooms, the Internet was mainly used to exchange information that rarely appeared in official media. The expansion of online forums and the further penetration of Internet facilities such as personal computers and Internet Cafés in the early 2000s accelerated the use of the Internet as a mobilization tool, although mobilization at this time was limited to anonymous online activities. From 2003, along with the popularity of blogs and the rise of opinion leaders online, Internet activism led by elites grew.

The platform for information dissemination then became more diverse in terms of both speed and content, providing the basis for the formation of HSFE, Egao culture, and Internet memes. The launch of Microblog in late 2009 integrated the speed, content, interaction, and other new features in one platform and thus generated a new wave of innovations for online activism. From this point of view, the development of applications influences the way netizens participated in activism cases. When a new application was

adopted, new forms of activism would emerge, sometimes accompanied by a sudden increase in activism cases.

Besides the technology factor, the citizens' growing awareness of legal rights and individual rights is one of the reasons that the target and the form of online activism differ in different time periods. This change started in the early 1980s, particularly after the Party turned the focus to economic reform and modernity. The market-oriented reforms brought an awareness of individual rights and various forms of rights assertion behavior. Chinese individuals started to link the self with a set of rights or entitlements instead of merely as part of a social group. By 2010,,a growing number of individuals were generating political contentions to defend their personal interests and rights (Yan, 2010). This trend was reflected in online activism as diverse types of activism, such as the rights defense movement, replaced the earlier nationalism cases. The rights consciousness not only increases the categories of activism, but also changes the forms of resistance. Rapid economic development has provided a more hospitable environment for activists, while legal reform has opened a legitimate political arena for them. As a result, while early activism favored direct and confrontational methods, such as street demonstrations and clashes with police, later activism relied increasingly on legal means, pursuing rights through the court.

In many ways the newly established censorship and strategies by the government are a response to the online activities that have already taken place. The government's response influences netizens' choice of strategies and tactics. Censorship is always the first barrier activists need to surpass, particularly the short-term censorship set up after a specific case to block the flow of information. In response to the machine filters adopted

by corporations to meet the government's demand for "self-censorship" on the Internet, netizens quickly developed coping strategies, such as using homonyms to replace censored words, publishing the censored article as an image document, and creating specific slang (part of Egao culture, such as "River Crab," a euphemism for censorship). Another important factor in netizens' change of strategy is the government's reactions to and treatment of previous cases. A more tolerant governmental attitude toward the last case may generate a more vigorous, straightforward, or aggressive strategy by activists for the next case. If repeatedly suppressed, netizens seek alternative channels.

7.2. Central Government's Strategic Change

The central government's treatment of activism, according to the official newspaper, *People's Daily*, has gone through three stages of change. Before 2001, the online activities in the sporadic campus incidents and most nationalism cases were never mentioned in official reports. From the reports of this period, it is obvious the government took it for granted that the use of the Internet by citizens, just as their use of other media, would not have a substantial impact. The eruption of Internet activism from 2003 set the issue agenda for some cases, particularly the one that caused nationwide attention in the official newspaper. The year 2006 is another turning point from which the official newspaper's articles reflected a change in the central government's attitude and strategy. Faced with the unexpected prevalence of Internet contentious culture and the unconventional way of protest, the official newspaper first criticized it with a condescending tone. In just one year, however, the government seemed to change strategy to make online activism part of its self-defined "political participation of the

citizens," to increase the legitimacy of the regime. This tolerance and compromise from the government was reflected in the high frequency of anti-corruption cases in 2008.

The launch of Microblog, as discussed in Chapter 3, has further flattened the gap between journalists, rights activists, legal professionals, and netizens, which greatly facilitates the formation of Internet protest. On the other hand, Microblog also brought government agencies into the same space. Official newspapers started to emphasize building Internet governing techniques, considering that most of its subscribers were officials from all levels of government. According to a report by RFA, as of July 2010, 59 government departments had opened Microblog accounts (Gao, 2017). The first Microblog account by the Ministry of the State Council is from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and opened in April 2011 (Zhao & Li, 2014). In *People's Daily*'s "Government affair index report" of 2014, there were 130,103 microblog accounts verified as belonging to the government and government employees. (Wang & Zhu, 2017) The main purpose of these government microblogs is to release official information, then interact with netizens, and provide service. The appearance of large numbers of government microblogging accounts brought the real-world political structure to cyberspace. Combined with strategies such as hiring a large group of Internet commentators (usually called "Fifty Cent Army") and continuing suppression of the activities of Internet opinion leaders, these official microblog accounts can catch and influence public opinion faster, greatly reducing the length of time and the expansion of online protest. In other words, the ecosystem of Chinese Internet contentions has changed since 2009. This change gave the government more confidence in Internet management.

From the time line in figure 7, we can see that the government's sophisticated strategy is built from long-time interaction with those Internet contentions, moderate or radical; however, it still did not prevent the occurrence of new events. The data collected in this study suggest a trend toward a greater number of activism cases after 2009. There also emerged some significant cases in different categories during this time, such as the PM 2.5 campaign (environmental movement), the Independent candidate for People's Congress campaign (democratic movement), and the Chen Guangcheng case (dissident). In all these cases, the microblog proved to be a highly efficient and also sustainable mobilizing platform.

Figure 7. The emergence of major activism repertoires and the change of official newspaper reports from 1994 to 2011

Emergence of Platform and Applications	Emergence of Activism Repertoires		Official Newspaper reports
Email Campus BBS	Campus incidents	1994	
			No reports on online activities
Nation wide BBS Instant messenger Internet Cafe	Cyber Nationalism - Hacking	2000	Online activities mentioned to support government advocacy
Blog	Media professionals, legal professionals, and activists are involved deeply	2003	Reports on activism cases only about the issue
	Right defense movement formed		Reports on activism cases started to discuss the underlying causes and mentioned the Internet discussions
Forming of blogosphere	HFSE emerged	2006	Reports on activism cases started to focus on netizens' behavior.
	Environmental movement formed		----Emphasize the downsides of Internet activism
	Internet Satire and meme get popular		----Online activities was named "citizen participation"
	Anti-corruption cases occurred frequently		----Call for a healthy interaction between netizens and the government
Microblog	Microblog –based campaign formed	2009	----Affirm the essential of citizen participation and ask for Internet governing techniques
			----Focus on Internet management, differentiate Internet opinion from public opinion

7.3. Interpreting the Dynamic Interplay

Considering the interplay between Internet activism and the central government as a dynamic process, instead of only considering it under the framework of authoritarian repression or democratic movement, could help better understand the ebb and flow of the activism cases and the strategies by the government, as well as the status quo. Each case is a negotiation between the public and the authorities for the power and space to pursue rights for individual citizens or the group. The result of a single activism case usually has several meanings: settled the request in the case, opened the negotiable space for other

citizens in similar situations, and accumulated the experiences for subsequent contentions. The most important features of Chinese Internet activism from the longitudinal perspective, however, are their flexibility, network building, and self-adjustment:

Flexibility - From 1994, the new applications and use of the Internet (and mobile devices) were continuously developed and co-existed, forming various points of intersection and nodes for netizens' communication and mobilization. In this situation, online activism became increasingly difficult to stop, as when one mode was interrupted, activists would move to the next. This flexibility was also reflected in the content. Unfavorable discussions removed by the government could reappear in other forms and even become symbolic in the collective memory.

Network Building - The network formed and expanded following these activism cases is actually the fundamental element that can constantly generate pressure on the government and threaten the current political structure. Behind an activism case are multilayer networks in operation. An environmental protest is usually built on a network of NGOs. A rights defense movement already has a network of rights defense lawyers. Rights activists and opinion leaders connect with each other on microblog. The most vulnerable individual fighters in activism cases can also build their own networks. In 2009, the immigrant worker Zhang Haichao, to apply for work injury compensation, required chest surgery to prove his deadly lung situation. After his own case was settled, more than 1000 immigrant workers who have the same pneumoconiosis contacted him and asked for his help. He then became the agent for their lawsuits and launched a website to guide these workers to defend their rights (Yang, 2013). In this sense, these

online activists have a relationship with each other and are generating long-term grassroots movements based on their different categories.

The diffusion of activism nationwide based on the campaigns of these networks is another major threat to the central government. Chinese citizens learned from successful social mobilization through the Internet and social media, and increasingly adopted similar strategies and tactics elsewhere. For instance, after the unexpected success of the Xiamen PX case, residents went out for "walks" in Shanghai to protest against the construction of the maglev train. In 2011, residents in Dalian again successfully protested against another PX plant project. And in the summer of 2012, similar protests in Shifang, Sichuan province took place against a copper alloy factory. The proliferation of the strategy of "take a walk" or "collective strolling" is the outcome of the availability of information and the lower barriers to organize brought by the technologies.

Self-adjustment – Online activism is collective intelligence, and therefore, it has a strong self-improvement function. Besides its ability to alter strategies and tactics depending on the political circumstances when the contention took place, the activism will also make adjustments based on the memories of the last related cases, such as the Taishi case and the Wukan case, discussed in Chapter 5. The rumor that had a negative effect in the earlier case would be denounced in the later cases. In the early case, the traditional media usually involved as a reporter or investigator, while in some later cases, such as the Yihuang demolition cases (2010), the activists had learned to use media to frame their stories and bypass the local government.
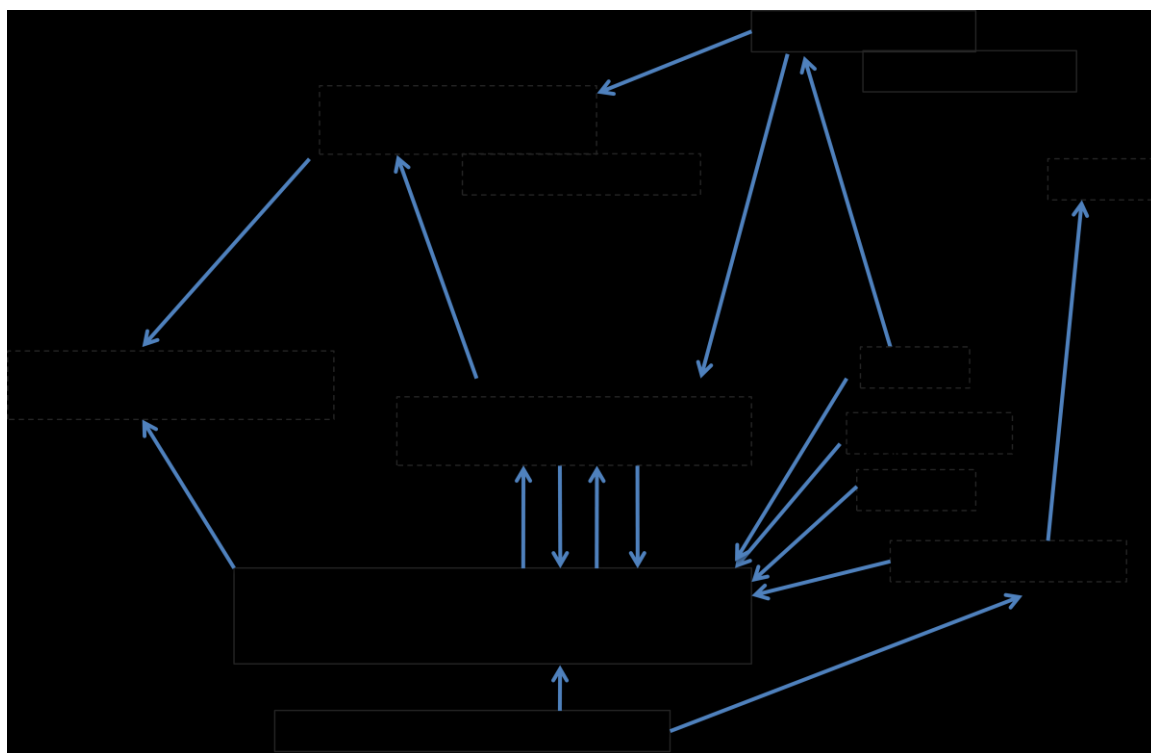
The dynamic interplay, if we focus on single cases, is determined by the mechanisms that channel the public opinion formed online to the center sphere, where the

decisions of change are made. Mechanisms, described by Elster (2007), are "frequently occurring and easily recognizable causal patterns that are triggered under generally unknown conditions or with indeterminate consequences" (p. 36). Built on case studies in the project, figure 8 shows a model for understanding the process of developing an online activism case, or in other words, suggests the ecosystem of online activism in China. The boxes with dotted lines represent the mechanisms that played a critical role between the activism and the central government in influencing whether the online activism could attract a wide range of attention, whether the appeal online could be the top issue on the political agenda, and the outcome of the activism cases. Not all of these mechanisms will appear in every case, but every case will have some of them.

In conventional wisdom, the contentions that take place under authoritarian rule are often directed at the authoritarian regime. Because of this assumption, many studies underestimate the grassroots activism in authoritarian countries, if the activism did not lead to revolutionary political outcomes. In fact, in China's case, most of the online activism cases do not target the central government and Chinese Communist Party (as shown by the solid line boxes in figure 8). In most cases, they just sought the attention of the central government to help their confrontation with local governments and other government agencies. These local governments and authority agents became the most important mechanism in this ecosystem, largely the outcome of the decentralization reform by the Chinese government in recent years (Hess, 2013). On the opposite side of centralization, decentralization refers to the distribution of "responsibility for planning, management and resource raising and allocation" from the central government to the lower levels of government (Work, 2002). This specific structure creates opportunities

and encourages localized contentions aimed at local officials, which can make the activism fragmented and parochial. And in the situation where a local government uses repression toward the protests, the central government's involvement and willingness to blame the local officials can otherwise enhance the protest's legitimacy.

Figure 8. The involved social sections in an activism case and their relationship – the ecosystem of Chinese online activism

With the help of media professionals, rights activists, scholars, legal professionals, and NGOs, online activism has definitely created a "counter-public sphere" or "periphery sphere" in different cases in their confrontation with the "center sphere," dominated by

official media and the government mouthpiece. As such cases have accumulated, these "counter-public spheres" have become closer to and overlapped with the general public sphere because of the formation of an activism network, the engagement of the mainstream media, and the intervention of the government. In this sense, the government's tolerance is not only because the Internet can be a "safety valve" when tensions build over uncovered corruption and social problems. In fact, in many ways, the Party is unable to take a more intensive crackdown to ban all online contentions.

One of the reasons, as mentioned above, is that most activism cases do not target the central government, or aim to change the polity. What they are discussing most is the problem of the system. That means their contentions are conducted under the premise that they accept the legitimacy of the existing political system.

The second reason is the undergoing political reform by the Chinese government. The grassroots movement in some cases has become the lever between the central government and the local government, as discussed above. Internet activism does not always stand on the opposite side of the Party, and gradually, the government, particularly the central government, has shared interest with these activists and need the activism activities to give impetus to the transformation. Finally, the result of this dynamic interplay is not the victory of any side, but a transitory balance as a result of the most recent negotiation.

In short, the Chinese Internet has its specific characteristics. Simply considering the role of the Internet in China as the inherent instrument by the central government to enhance authoritarian rule or a power that can eventually bring a democratic society, from the western view, could lead to an incomplete conclusion. Current study suggests

that the political impact of Internet activism, after 17 years of development, has formed a dynamic balance between the online contentions and the authoritarian regime. This dynamic is generated between citizens constantly seeking spaces to negotiate rights and the central government's management to avoid threats to its ruling position. Focusing on the ecosystem of individual cases, the dynamic also includes the uncertainty of the involvement – who will be involved, to what extent, and in what way - and the capability of each mechanism. Every Internet activism case in China is not a solitary event. Each case involves wrestling between all the social actors that can be mobilized and the government's control power, and each activism case has links to previous ones, which is the politics of Chinese online activism. The development of different repertoires, strategies, and tactics in activism, and the changes in government attitude and treatment are the result of this dynamic relationship. This transitory balance will be challenged by the emergence of new applications, the occurrence of new incidents, and also economic development.

Theoretically, if we look back to the center/periphery public sphere by Habermas and compare it to this ecosystem of Chinese online activism, the similarities and differences are both apparent. Although Habermas's delineation of public sphere was abstracted based on the historical context of Britain, France, and Germany from eighteen centuries to the present, it precisely depicts what is happening in the public space in China:

The great issues of the last decades …were broached by intellectuals, concerned citizens, radical professionals, self-proclaimed "advocates," … Moving in from this outermost periphery, such issues force their way into newspapers and interested

associations… through their controversial presentation in the media do such topics reach the larger public and subsequently gain a place on the "public agenda." (Habermas, 1996, p381)

In Habermas's ideal model, the center and periphery of the public sphere are equal concepts connected by communicative powers arising from interactions, transforming public opinion into political power. As a result, a topic generated from the periphery "makes its way via the surprising election of marginal candidates or radical parties, expanded platforms of established parties, important court decisions, and so on, into the core of the political system and there receives formal consideration." (P. 381) This natural course, however, turns into a more obscure and indirect process in the case of China. In the Chinese public sphere, the confrontation between the periphery and the center is much more intense. The arousal of this peripheral power is actually beyond the expectation of the government at least during the first couple of years. The use of the Internet and other new media technologies contributed to this awakening and facilitated the formation of civic interactions and deliberations outside the circle of the center sphere. The need to grasp more communicative power and the eagerness to change resulted in waves of contentious actions in a short period. This intense confrontation was gradually eased when an increasing number of organizations, associations, and individual agencies engaged in this periphery/center system. This process of change indicates the establishment of a more sophisticated public sphere in the Chinese context.

Finally, this study, as above discussion uncovered, suggests an alternative explanation to the growing debate on the political outcome of Internet use in authoritarian regimes, and building an ecosystem of online activism fills the theoretical gap from

online formation of public opinion to the realization of authoritarian deliberation. While this structure provides the higher authorities more choices in dealing with the grassroots unrest, it also encourages the mobilization of possible social actors that could generate unpredictable pressures on both central and local governments. Within this system, the Chinese government and the protesters are continuously seeking strategies beneficial to their actions, yet democratization, while not the purpose for either side in most cases, has inadvertently become one of the outcomes of this interplay.

7.4. Beyond the Time Frame, Selection Bias, and Content Analysis: Limitations and Future Studies

Using a timeframe that ends in the year 2011 for this analysis of Internet activism and its interactions with Chinese government may raise questions as to current research results. In 2012, Chinese leadership changed from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping. Since 2012, President Xi has brought sweeping changes to media and civil society freedom in China, stepping up a campaign aimed at cracking down on online opinion leaders (big V in microblog) while at the same time launching the largest anti-corruption campaign in the history of Communist China. With far-reaching implications of Xi's campaigns, questions ought to be asked: have these steps by the government changed the balance established by the previous cases? Has the nature of online activism changed in the Xi era and are there different or more agencies involved in the interaction? A full assessment of the approach by President Xi and his supporters to win the support of the urban and middle-class social media-using public (Roberts, 2014) is far beyond the scope of this

project, but there is some obvious evidence of a potential shift in the development of online activism.

First, the crackdown on high-profile microbloggers, human rights lawyers, and civil activists will further facilitate the change in the appearance of online activism. Although the decline of activism led by activists or legal professionals started before 2010, these opinion leaders' role in driving political discussion online and fostering protest is still critical. Second, the anti-corruption campaign and its fruitful outcome sent a positive message to the public and alarmed the authorities in various levels of government, which might significantly lower the occurrence of online activism in some categories we summarized in the current study. Third, along with these two campaigns are the microblog's political death (Hatton, 2015) and the great migration of users from microblog to WeChat, a cell-phone based social media application. Different from microblog, WeChat focuses on instant message and information circulation among acquaintances. The nature of WeChat maximizes the effectiveness of interpersonal communication while also making information spreading less effective among strangers (compared to microblog). This change of preference by Chinese users may suggest new conditions for Chinese activists to form a public sphere and adopt new tools, as well as a new strategic shift in media management by the government.

When building the activism index, we included domestic records, international reports, and independent institute reports to ensure the integrity of the entire case lists. This method, however, cannot avoid selection bias, as the materials this list relies on all come from lists selected with other biases. Without a strict quantitative approach to define the scope and the scale of the collective action online, the list is more likely a
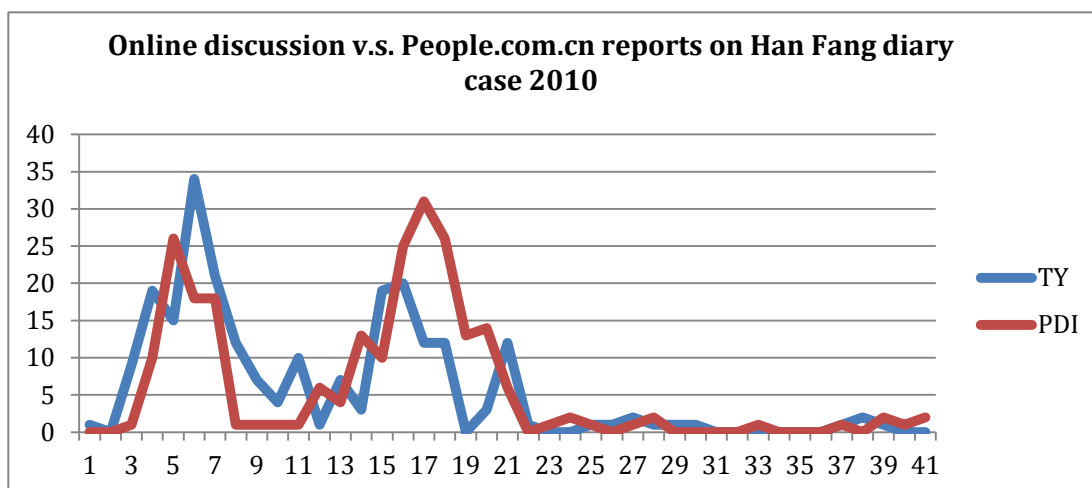
collection of the most influential cases that were picked using different criteria. The *New York Times* tends to cover the events related to dissidents and censorship, including cases that get little attention from ordinary netizens. The domestic annual reports, since the editors defined online activism as online public opinion, focus on social and cultural issues, usually using media exposure as reference. Similarly, the current choice of *People's Daily* in studying the government agenda and attitude, because of its specific affiliation and long-term reputation as the official voice, may also bring some incomplete information. *People's Daily* is one of several official media established by the Communist Party. The other official media include *Chinese Central Television (CCTV)*, *Xinhua News*, *Reference News* and *Global News* that target the public, and *Qiushi*, *Guangming Daily*, *Economic Daily* and *People's Liberation Army Daily* that mainly target Party members. Among these, *CCTV* is also particularly active in reporting on heated discussions and incidents online/offline in recent years. In addition, People.com.cn as the Internet portal of *People's Daily* has definitely covered a broader range of content than the printed version in regard to Internet activities by citizens.

People.com.cn's articles on the activism cases are mainly from media affiliated with the local newspaper industry. Through selectively publishing the reports from other media, People.com.cn maintained its dominant position in monitoring and guiding public opinion. As a preliminary test for future studies, figure 9 shows three comparisons between online discussion (TY: tianya.cn, one of the most popular Internet forums in China) and People.com.cn's news stories (PDI) on the same event regarding the posting dates and the frequency. Although the three cases belong to different categories, the graphics still show a strong progressive effect on the interaction between online

discussions and this official Internet portal, which includes two pattern changes. The first is the change in lag time, and the second is the change in the volume of the postings/report on both sides at the peak of attention to the topic. A time series analysis may better explain the changes observed from this type of data, and the result could add more layers of evidence to current dynamic interaction analysis.

Figure 9. Comparison between online discussion and People.com.cn reports on three activism cases over time

Online discussion v.s. People.com.cn reports on Han Fang diary case 2010

In sum, future studies need first to solve the limitations of the current study by expanding the time frame of the case analysis to take in the Xi Jinping era to see whether the change of leadership is an influential variable in this dynamic relationship. While expanding the event database in a more delicate way, specific attention needs to be paid to the counterparty's material selection. The Internet brought new strategies to citizens' protests, but it also brought new models for governing. The correlation previously found between online discussion and official newspaper reports now could be more easily and quickly observed between the Big V (opinion leader) and the official account in microblog. On one hand, this makes the interaction between the activism and the government more visible, while on the other hand, it calls for improving the research design to include more approaches to measure government's reactions and real strategies.

In addition, current analysis relies mostly on content produced by netizens and official media. These content analyses, however, could not adequately explain the conditions and subjective factors influencing how Chinese leaders choose to react or not, or decide the extent the central government should become involved. As a result, the

"highly selective process" that was highlighted in Chapter 5 remains unsolved. In this direction, interviews with insiders including officials, journalists, Internet company employees, and activists can provide insights into the decision process by the Party leaders from different levels regarding Internet activism.

Last but not least, back to the original purpose of this project, a cross-national comparative work would be a vital next step in the research agenda. As the world's largest authoritarian regime, China has the most characteristics of an authoritarian country, which makes both media control techniques and civil movement a possible model for other authoritarian countries' government and citizens. By focusing on China, the current study contributes to the literature on Internet development in authoritarian countries by theorizing government control and Internet resistance as a dynamic process. This dynamic process, after long-term interplay, could enable gradual democratization within the authoritarian system as a compromise for both sides to achieve a provisional balance. Based on the work done here, the comparative study could evaluate this claim in other authoritarian contexts, and then extend the research to further explore the conditions that can break the balance, as happened in 2011 in the Middle East, and the possibility of such events happening in other regions in the future.

Appendix A

Coding Sheet for the Three Types of Activism-related Articles on *People's Daily*

Issue-centered articles	Coding (1)	If the article has the primary focus on one of below listings: a. Describing the occurrence and course of the incident/accident that triggered the online activism; b. Describing the process of the investigation of the incident/accident; c. Describing the offline action related to the online activism; d. Reporting the outcome of the incident/accident or the investigation.
	Examples:	"Harbin – Reinvestigate the BMW accident case" "South China Tiger found in Shanxi"
Discussion-centered articles	Coding (2)	If the article has the primary focus on one of below listings: a. Discussing underlying political/social/cultural causes of the incident/accident; b. Discussing the problem of related officials in dealing with the incident/accident;

		c. Discussing the development or modification of relevant policy/regulation; d. Discussing the significance of the incident/accident; e. Presenting the netizens' comments on the incident/accident.
	Examples:	"Yu Youjun: The ignorance of the cadres caused the Black Brick Kiln case" "The implementation of property law in Octorber 1, 2007, the experts' comments on "Housing Rights"""
Internet-centered articles	Coding (3)	If the articles have a primary focus on one of the below: a. Discussing the netizens' behavior during the online activism; b. Discussing the role of the Internet in the online activism; c. Discussing Internet management after the current cases.
	Examples:	"Online speech need regulation" "Who is speaking online? The two opinion spheres"

Appendix B

Chinese Internet activism cases from 1994-2011

Incidents

Case Name	Time (Year)
Thallium poisoning case of Zhu Ling	1995
Baodiao movement	1996
Responses to riots of Indonesia	1998
U.S bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade	1999
Li Denghui case	1999
"Qiu Qingfeng" incident	2000
Arrest of Hung Qi "6.4" web	2000
Aircraft crash	2001
Anti-Japan movement	2001
Nandan Mine accident	2001
Arrested netizen	2002
Provisional Regulations on Internet publishing	2002
Huang Jing case	2003
Sun Zhigang case	2003
SARS	2003
Sun Dawu Trial	2003
Liu Yong Trial	2003
Li Siyi case	2003
Mu Zimei p	2003
University anti-Japanese protest	2003
Huang Yong Case	2003
BMW hit case	2004
Ma Jiajue case	2004
Du Daobin arrested case	2004
NYT Journalist arrested case	2004
Petition of freedom of expression	2004
Advocate of Japan hate	2004
Liu Xiaobo	2004
Southern Media Group trial	2004
Niu Niu Movie case	2004
Anti-Japan movement	2005
Taishi Village incident	2005

Wang Binyu & death penalty system	2005
Xinchang environmental protest	2005
Blogging to challenge form of expression	2005
Yahoo provided dissidents information	2005
Shi Tao arrested	2005
Editor dismissed case	2005
Jilin chemical plant explosion	2005
Controversy on Nujiang Dam	2005
Dong Zhou demonstration	2005
Hu Ge Egao	2006
Cat abuse case	2006
Debate between Han & Bai	2006
Mao's portrait case	2006
Tong Xu Men	2006
Toy factory workers on strike	2006
Public letter to campaign against censorship	2006
Intellectuals protests website closing	2006
Public opinion on extermination of dogs	2006
"Rogue foreign teacher"	2006
Pengshui Poem case	2006
Pengyu case	2006
Shenzhen prostitute parade case	2006
Hunt wild animals license	2006
Starbucks in Forbidden City	2007
Chongqing Demolition case	2007
Chinese slave scandal	2007
Xiamen protest against PX plant	2007
"Southern China tiger photo" case	2007
Jiang Yan Suicide case	2007
"Sansan Qiqi" case	2007
Wei Wenhua case	2008
Anti-maglev	2008
Tibet unrest	2008
Boycott western campaign	2008
Zhoushan residents protest	2008
"Tanjing falling off" case	2008
Wenchuan Earthquake	2008
Wang Qianyuan case	2008
Fan Meizhong case	2008

Yang Jia attack police case	2008
Weng'an riot	2008
Chinese gymnastics team "age gate"	2008
"Police beat student" case	2008
Shanxin dam break	2008
"Sanlu" formula scandal	2008
Officials sexual harassment scandal	2008
The government delegation scandal	2008
Zhou Jiugeng scandal	2008
Charter 08	2008
The arrest of Liu Xiaobo	2008
Luo Caixia case	2009
Student sudden death case "Hide and Seek"	2009
Deng Yujiao incident	2009
Hangzhou racing case	2009
Investigation on earthquake victim students	2009
Fan Yu disposal	2009
Green Dam Youth Escort	2009
Shaoguan incident	2009
Ürümqi riots	2009
Shishou incident	2009
Migrant worker Zhang Haichao	2009
Jia Junpeng case	2009
Tonggang Group incident	2009
Hangzhou Porsche accident	2009
Xishui sex trial	2009
Shang Hai police entrapment case	2009
29 year mayor	2009
Self-immolation incident in Cheng Du	2009
Campaign against censorship using humor	2009
"Doctor plays the game during working" case	2009
Sex diary of Han Feng	2010
Google quits China	2010
Strike at Honda factory	2010
The injustice of Zhao Zuohai	2010
Support Cantonese campaign	2010
Fraud educational background case	2010
Yihuang self-immolation incident	2010
Woman falls incident	2010
Li Gang incident	2010

Yao Jiaxin murder case	2010
Tibetan language protest	2010
Mishan self-immolation incident	2010
Anti-Japanese demonstrations	2010
Journalist Yan Bingguang	2010
Shanghai fire	2010
Riot in construction site	2010
School bus overload accident	2010
Qian Yunhui case	2010
PM 2.5 campaign	2011
"Take picture to rescue trafficked children" campaign	2011
Chen Guangchen case	2011
Chinese pro-democracy protests	2011
Train ticket real-name	2011
Zhumadian crush accident	2011
Independent candidate for People's Congress campaign	2011
Guo Meimei case	2011
Protest against "dog meat festival"	2011
Wenzhou train collision	2011
Official raped teacher case	2011
"Five bars" discussion	2011
Dalian PX protest	2011
Self-immolation protests by Tibetans	2011
Haining protest anti sewage	2011
Gutter oil case	2011
Death of Wang Yue	2011
The death of village head	2011
Anti-Taobao alliance attack case	2011
Wukan incident	2011
Zhengning kindergarden school bus accident	2011
Puyang school bus accident	2011
Haimen protest	2011
Fengxian school bus accident	2011
Microblog real-name policy	2011

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