

Online Activism by Smart Mobs and Political Change in Southern China*

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This article attempts to explain how the online activism of citizens armed with the Internet ("netizens") is changing the political process in southern China. It poses two sets of questions. The first question it asks is, what are the characteristics of online activism in China? Despite the control over the Internet exercised by the Chinese government, netizens have been generating public opinion and expanding issue areas online. How has this been possible? Second, what is the power of online activism as a force for social and political change? What influences has the Internet had on the process of political change in southern China despite the government's tight control, and in what way does digital political participation lead to new political discourse and change in society? The characteristics of this activism will be examined through an analysis of the three most controversial examples of online activism in recent years: a protest against a miscarriage of justice, the exposure of an example of the abuse of power and corruption by local officials, and two examples of Internet activism that led to the securing of political and civil liberties. The paper applies the concept of smart mobs to show how Chinese netizens have been changing the political process through their online political activism. Online activism has expanded the political and civil freedoms of the people to the

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extent that a sort of liberal democracy (in contrast to electoral democracy) is in the making in southern China.

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China scholars have attempted to explore the political impact of the Internet in the context of state-society relations.¹ Their focus is on how the state and society are affected by the Internet but there are contradictory arguments about which of these has been empowered by it. In some areas, the Internet has empowered the state but not society, whereas in other areas, it has empowered society but not the state.² Sometimes, the Internet can empower both the state and society.

Arguing that the state has been empowered by the Internet, some scholars point out that governments anywhere can regulate the Internet, both by controlling its underlying code and by shaping the legal environment in which it operates. The government can build various surveillance techniques into the Internet and thus achieve effective censorship. These scholars argue that the Internet is likely to consolidate China's authoritarian regime rather than undermine it as China's Internet filtering regime is the most sophisticated of its kind in the world.³ These studies create the mis-

¹For further details, see Zixue Tai, *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Guobin Yang, "Contention in Cyberspace," in *Popular Protest in China*, ed. Kevin J. O'Brien (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 126-43; Guobin Yang, "The Co-evolution of the Internet and Civil Society in China," *Asian Survey* 43, no. 3 (May-June 2003): 405-22; Guobin Yang, "The Internet and Civil Society in China: A Preliminary Assessment," *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 36 (August 2003): 453-75; Guobin Yang, "Civil Society in China: A Dynamic Field of Study," *China Review International* 9, no. 1 (2002): 1-16; Jonathan Sullivan and Lei Xie, "Environmental Activism, Social Networks and the Internet," *China Quarterly*, no. 198 (June 2009): 422-32.

²Regarding these arguments, see Yongnian Zheng, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 8-10; Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 26-28.

³Lawrence Lessig, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 57-60; Gudrun Wacker, "The Internet and Censorship in China," in *China and Internet: Politics of the Digital Leap Forward*, ed. Christopher R. Hughes and Gudrun Wacker (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 58-82; Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas, *Open Networks*,

conception that because of government control, Chinese Internet users do nothing but play. The real struggles of the Chinese people are thus ignored, and the radical nature of Chinese Internet culture is dismissed.

Others claim that society is empowered by the Internet. One popular argument is that the Internet will reduce the ideational and organizational monopoly of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Eric Harwit and Duncan Clark point to the potential for independent group formation via newly available information technology. Empirical evidence also supports the argument that the Internet empowers society. For example, Guobin Yang finds that the Internet empowers civil society in China in three different ways. First, the social uses of the Internet have fostered public debate and problem circulation. The Internet has demonstrated its potential to play a supervisory role in Chinese politics. Second, the Internet has shaped social organizations by expanding old principles of association, facilitating the activities of existing organizations, and creating a new associational form—the virtual community. And third, the Internet has introduced new elements into the dynamics of protest.⁴ However, no previous studies on this subject have examined the Internet's influence on "political change" in China by thoroughly analyzing concrete examples.

As of December 2011, there were about 500 million Internet users in China, the most users in any country in the world. More than 250 million Chinese use *weibo* (微博, microblogs, Chinese versions of Twitter), making China one of the strongest information powerhouses in the world.⁵ It would be difficult to understand social and political change in China without appreciating mass protests organized online.

Closed Regime: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003), 136.

⁴Eric Harwit and Duncan Clark, "Shaping the Internet in China: Evolution of Political Control over Network Infrastructure and Content," *Asian Survey* 41, no. 3 (May-June 2001): 377-408; Yang, "The Internet and Civil Society in China," 453-75.

⁵China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), "Di 29 ci Zhongguo hulianwangluo fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao" (The 29th statistical report on the development of the Internet in China), January 2012, <http://www.cnnic.cn/research/bgxz/tjbg/201201/P020120116330880247967.pdf>.

We need a better grasp of the "cyber politics" of expanding online discourse and the capacity of the Internet to advance free speech, political participation, and social change. We also need to know more about the implications of the state's efforts to control what people can see, say, and do online. These issues are crucial to our understanding of China and Chinese society and the role of the Internet under an authoritarian, one-party regime.⁶

This article poses two sets of questions. First, how do citizens armed with the Internet ("netizens") and civil society groups resist and challenge Internet control? What are the characteristics of "online activism" in China? Despite control over the Internet by the Chinese government, netizens have been generating public opinion and expanding issue areas online. How has this been possible? Second, what is the power of online activism as a force for social and political change? What influences has the Internet had on the process of political change in southern China in particular, despite the government's strict control over the Internet? And in what way does digital political participation bring about new political discourse and change in society?

I attempt to explain how the online activism of citizens armed with the Internet is changing the political process in southern China. I examine the characteristics of this activism by analyzing the three most controversial examples of online activism in recent years: a protest against a miscarriage of justice; the exposure of a case of abuse of power and corruption by local officials; and two examples of Internet activism that led to the securing of political and civil liberties. I apply the concept of the *smart mob* to show how Chinese netizens have been changing the political process through their online political activism. Smart mobs are the actors who participate in online activism.

This article makes two arguments. First, that the Internet is useful in expanding areas in the social process in which citizens can participate

⁶Xiao Qiang, "The Battle for the Chinese Internet," *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (April 2011): 47.

and in diversifying the channels through which they participate. The degree of Chinese government control over online discussions depends upon the political implications of the issues being discussed. According to the level of governmental control, certain issues become public in cyberspace, while others disappear. This difference in the level of governmental control creates a fissure through which people can bring certain issues to the public forum and expand their areas of activity.

Second, online activism by smart mobs is promoting political change in southern China. Since the CCP's one-party rule remains strong, we are unlikely to witness any radical reform of the political system along the lines of the Arab Spring in China for the foreseeable future. However, the Chinese political process has clearly changed in recent years, in the sense that digital political participation has been expanding and people have secured more civil liberties. Also, smart mobs, as they are known in the West, have begun to emerge in southern China.

This study is a unique contribution to the analysis of this topic, as it uses concrete examples to demonstrate how online activism by smart mobs in southern China promotes change in the political process. Online activism has expanded the political and civil freedoms of the people to the extent that a sort of *liberal democracy* is in the making. At the end of this article, we can safely claim that smart mobs, armed with the Internet, have begun to build *liberal democracy* (but not *electoral democracy*) in southern China through effective online activism.

Characteristics of Online Activism

Types of Online Activism

In China, online public opinion is shaped through *weibo*, Internet forums (論壇), BBS (bulletin board systems), blogs, MSN, and other news sites. Online activities comprise posting comments on news items, posting messages on Internet forums, text messaging, establishing a blog, establishing a campaign site, creating Internet petitions and demonstrations, and organizing offline gatherings through the

Internet.⁷ Numerous rights-defense websites are set up by individuals and voluntary groups, giving rise to a new term in Chinese: *online rights defense*. As in other countries, citizen reporters (公民記者) have appeared in China. Using blogs as their main channel of communication, they take it upon themselves to cover significant social issues ignored by the official media.⁸

The main types of online activism in China are as follows.⁹ Internet forums such as Tianya (天涯論壇), Qiangguo (強國論壇), Zhonghuawang (中華網論壇), and Tengxun (騰訊社區) are some of the most influential online forums in which public opinion is generated. Netizens post articles of interest on these forums and comment on them.¹⁰ People's Net (Renminwang, 人民網) established the basis for "online social space"¹¹ by establishing the Qiangguo Forum in 1999. Since then, online protests have rapidly increased and their forms have diversified.

One new online activity is *renrou sousuo* (人肉搜索, human flesh search). This is not simply a people search, but an online posting of comprehensive data about a certain individual, including photos and biographical details like schools attended, addresses, contact information, and family, based on in-depth research. Accordingly, *renrou sousuo* is often called the Internet witch-hunt or a cyber people's court. *Renrou sousuo*

⁷Zhang Shuhua, *Wangluo minyi yu gonggong juece: quanli he quanli de duihua* (Internet public opinion and public policy decisions: the dialogue between rights and power) (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2010), 22; Xu Jing, "Xinmeiti huanjing xia yulun jiandu de jieqouhua tezheng chutan" (Elementary investigation into structural characteristics of public opinion supervision under new media circumstances), in *Zhongguo wangluo chuanbo yanjiu* (Studies on computer-mediated communication in China), ed. Chao Naipeng (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2011), 113; Sheng Dalin, *Wangzhan shouye: yijian lingxiu shi zengyang liancheng de?* (Homepages of Website: how to train up an opinion leader?) (Beijing: People's Daily Press, 2009).

⁸Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*, 30.

⁹Online activism refers to contentious activities associated with the use of the Internet and other new communication technologies. It can be based more or less on the Internet. In addition, the Internet is increasingly integrated with conventional forms of locality-specific protest. See *ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰Xu, "Xinmeiti huanjing xia yulun jiandu de jieqouhua tezheng chutan," 113.

¹¹"Online social sphere" signifies a sphere in which issues raised on BBSs develop into public issues, major issues are actively discussed, and public opinion formed in order to put pressure on the state.

enables ordinary citizens to express their opinions freely, influencing the current of public opinion. This activity has been criticized, however, for violating privacy.¹²

Weibo, or micro- or mini-blogs, has been a leader of public opinion in China since 2010. It is also called the Chinese Twitter.¹³ In the wake of the success of the Sina Weibo (新浪微博) service, set up by Sina.com in September 2009, other portal sites such as Baidu (百度) and Wangyi (網易) have also set up *weibo* services. Chinese *weibo* is a social networking service (such as Twitter and Facebook) with Chinese characteristics.

Other leading Chinese *weibo* services include Tengxun Weibo (騰訊 微博) and Baidu Tieba (百度貼吧); Sina Weibo leads the field with the largest number of users, with Tengxun Weibo in second place. Due to its capacity to transmit information everywhere instantaneously, *weibo* is now seen as a major means of information dissemination and public opinion production. For example, after a local police bureau chief's "corruption diary" was posted on *weibo* in November 2010, it was made public through Tianya Luntan, an Internet discussion forum, stirring up widespread interest. Within three days of the initial posting, a million netizens had read this diary and more than three thousand comments had been posted.¹⁴

As for the differences between the forums, *renrou sousuo*, and *weibo*, forums play an important role in offering a detailed introduction to a specific issue, sharing the information through in-depth discussion, and helping to form public opinion. *Renrou sousuo* is a powerful search engine for exposing hidden truths. *Weibo*, on the other hand, is good at disseminating

¹²Yin Jun, ed., *Cong yulun xuanxiao dao lixing huigui: dui wangluo renrou sousuo de duowei yanjiu* (From public opinion disturbance to return to reason: multi-dimensional research on internet human flesh search) (Chengdu: Sichuan University Press, 2009), 2-12; Li Jianzhong, Chen Hua, and Ma Chunling, eds., *Shoudu wangluo wenhua fazhan baogao, 2009-2010* (Annual report on the development of cyber culture in the capital city, 2009-2010) (Beijing: People's Press, 2010), 200-1.

¹³Twitter, the model for weibo, was created in the United States in 2006. In China, people are forbidden to use Twitter and Facebook.

¹⁴"China Stirred Up by a Local Police Bureau Chief's Corruption Diary," *Dong-A Ilbo*, November 16, 2010; Yin Yungong, ed., *Zhongguo xinmeiti fazhan baogao (2011)* (Report on the development of new media in China [2011]) (Beijing: Social Science Academic Press, 2011), 47.

short messages to large numbers of people. These three types of online activism tend to function collectively in forming online public opinion.

Weibo is much stronger than forums or *renrou sousuo* in terms of its ability to form online public opinion. The speed and nationwide coverage of *weibo* means that it is capable of forming a nationwide coalition on a particular issue. *Weibo* thus challenges government control of the Internet. Because it transmits texts and videos instantly to innumerable people, it is practically impossible for the government to censor and delete this information as it appears. Accordingly, the *People's Daily* (人民日報), the official newspaper of the CCP, has published many editorials and articles arguing for tighter control over *weibo* for the sake of social stability.¹⁵ The city authorities of Beijing announced in December 2011 that they would require *weibo* users to use their real names.¹⁶ This is clearly aimed at blocking the posting of politically sensitive content, thus tightening control over public opinion on the Internet.

Expansion of Issue Areas Online

In the mid-1990s, Chinese leaders saw the Internet primarily as a new economic tool—one that they could use for transmitting party policies to citizens—not as an arena for political contention or an everyday means of communication. They believe that information technology (IT) can give them both modernization and enhanced powers of central control and stability.¹⁷ According to a government white paper published in 2010, rapid, nationwide expansion of the Internet and mobile-device penetration is a strategic priority. The development of a vibrant, indigenous Internet and telecommunication sector is considered critical for China's long-term global economic competitiveness.¹⁸

¹⁵Park Min-hee, "China Facing Censorship Aimed at the Revolution of Two Hundred Million Weibo," *Hankyoreh*, August 28, 2011.

¹⁶"Beijingshi weiboke fazhan guanli ruogan guiding" (Rules on the development and management of *weibo*), *Beijing wanbao* (Beijing evening paper) (Beijing), December 16, 2011.

¹⁷Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*, 54.

¹⁸Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, *The Internet in China*, June 8, 2010, http://english.gov.cn/2010-06/08/content_1622956.htm.

However, over the last decade, the Internet has become a space in which the political and social complaints of individuals and groups can be transformed into public issues. The number of websites purporting to protect citizens' rights and keep watch for injustice and official corruption has rapidly increased. In particular, as group activism initiated online emerged as a major factor in social unrest in the latter part of the last decade, the Chinese government began tightening control over the Internet. In March 2009, after a video of the government's armed suppression of the 2008 Tibetan unrest was posted on YouTube, access to that site was blocked. Since August that year, all computers sold in China are required to have software installed that can block certain websites.¹⁹

Despite these regulations and controls, however, netizens have continued to generate public opinion and expand issue areas online. How has this been possible? First, online activism responds to issue-specific political opportunities in China, and the issues of concern to online activists reflect such political negotiations. In Chinese politics, there are many different issues with a clear hierarchy, and the state is more tolerant of some issues than others. Thus, popular contention faces issue-specific opportunities. Issues that directly challenge the legitimacy of the party-state are hardly ever tolerated. For example, the formation of independent political parties rarely enters into public discussion in Chinese cyberspace. Such discussions are strictly censored. Conversely, issues that do not challenge state legitimacy may be tolerated. Issues that are more politically tolerated and that resonate with the public are more likely to enter the

¹⁹Tania Branigan, "Timeline: Chinese Internet Censorship over the Last Year," *Guardian*, January 14, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jan/14/china-internet>. According to Henry L. Hu, Internet service providers (ISPs) have played an important role in China's Internet regulation regime. They can be roughly divided into two categories based on business scale: backbone ISPs and last-mile ISPs. ISPs in both categories are responsible for blocking and filtering online content using a system of hardware and software known as the "great firewall." Chinese ISPs are far from neutral, because the backbone carriers are all state-owned enterprises. Henry L. Hu, "The Political Economy of Governing ISPs in China: Perspectives of Net Neutrality and Vertical Integration," *China Quarterly* 207 (September 2011): 523-24, 529; Rebecca MacKinnon, "China's Networked Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (April 2011): 38-42.

public sphere and become contentious events.²⁰

Second, online space is somewhere in which government control competes with citizens' online activism. The boundary between legal and illegal expression is always shifting. The fact that discussion of previously taboo issues is increasingly permitted proves that the boundary between what is allowed and what is not shifts according to the changing political environment. Chinese netizens create online public opinion by discussing issues tolerated by the government publicly and nationally, while remaining silent on politically sensitive issues. In the end, netizens do have political influence, putting pressure on the government to amend unreasonable laws and regulations and to change its policies within the boundary of *rightful resistance*,²¹ that is, legal resistance. Online competition between the state and civil society is like a tug-of-war. The state exercises control over online space in order to use it for its own purposes, while citizens respond with online activism in an effort to turn it into a space in which they can enjoy freedom of expression.

As for what issues are allowed and what is censored, topics such as reform of the political system, independence for minority ethnic groups, and criticism of high-ranking central government officials are banned and therefore cannot enter public space online. However, Chinese netizens have been opening up new issue areas, from the civil rights of underprivileged or ordinary citizens to abuse of power and corruption by local officials and criticism of government policies. Due to the different levels of control that the government exercises over different issues, the boundary between legal and illegal opposition varies according to the issue.²²

²⁰Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*, 44, 55. For more information on the dynamic and complex nature of Chinese Internet control and the wide variety of strategies adopted by Chinese netizens to counter it, see Peter Marolt, "Grassroots Agency in a Civil Sphere? Rethinking Internet Control in China," in *Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating, and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival*, ed. David Kurt Herold and Peter Marolt (London: Routledge, 2011), 53-67.

²¹For the concept of "rightful resistance" and some concrete examples, see Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²²Despite censorship, Chinese bloggers routinely uncover corruption, help solve social

Digital Political Participation and Smart Mobs

The Chinese state has undoubtedly been under pressure from online activists to change its policy decisions in line with public opinion. In China, as in other countries, digital political participation has led to the emergence of "smart mobs." Noting the worldwide trend toward digital participation in politics, Howard Rheingold has put forward theories about the activism of emerging smart mobs. Smart mobs are the agents of digital participation in politics, the masses that participate in demonstrations, armed with a computer and the Internet. They are mobs that are fully aware that their participation in a movement has a common goal, and their political participation has a huge influence on offline politics. Smart mobs expand the area of political participation by increasing its size. They also change the existing political system by actively challenging and responding to mainstream offline agendas.²³

Smart mobs are the actors who participate in online activism, a new form of popular contention in China. In some cases, the Internet serves to mobilize street protest. More often, protest takes place online. The most common forms include online petitions, the hosting of campaign websites, and large-scale verbal protests. The most radical form of protest is perhaps the hacking of websites. These forms of contention may be found in blogs, Internet bulletin boards, online communities, and podcast and YouTube-type web sites.²⁴

problems, and even pressure state officials to change policy. In some domains, the CCP seems comfortable allowing bloggers free rein to comment on, or even castigate, official actions. This applies to issues where the agenda is set by the mainstream media, such as coverage of corruption, energy issues, and environmental protection. When they get ahead of the official agenda or push into areas where the CCP is wary, however, bloggers create a pressure cooker effect that increases social tensions. On issues where the central government is ambivalent or unwilling to allow extensive mainstream discussion, the blogosphere can serve as a potent force for spreading sensitive information, attracting international media attention, or even coordinating domestic protests. Jonathan Hassid, "Safety Valve or Pressure Cooker? Blogs in Chinese Political Life," *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (April 2012): 212-30.

²³For the concept of "Smart Mobs," see Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (Cambridge: Perseus, 2002), 174-82.

²⁴Guobin Yang, "Online Activism," *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 3 (July 2009): 33.

Smart mobs can call for a combination of online organization and on-the-ground public demonstrations, as occurred during the 2007 protests against the paraxylene (PX) plant in Xiamen. More often, smart mobs remain within the realm of the Internet alone. Smart mobs can also call for change through a variety of online activities. The remaining three cases discussed in this paper—the "hide-and-seek" incident, the case of the Wenzhou Officials Overseas Inspection Team, and the 2011 high-speed rail collision incident—are all examples of successful protests that were organized online.

Below, I examine cases in which smart mobs (1) successfully challenged mainstream offline agendas by bringing events that could otherwise have been covered up into the public sphere via online spaces; (2) contributed to expanding political participation by participating in collective action on issues in which they were interested; and (3) had a major impact on offline politics by pressing the authorities to change judicial decisions and public policies. From these cases, we can conclude that despite tight governmental control over the Internet in China, smart mobs are emerging through online activism just as they are in the West. Now let us turn to concrete examples.

The 2009 Hide-and-Seek Incident

The "hide-and-seek" (躲貓貓) incident of 2009 was a case in which online public opinion exposed and rectified a miscarriage of justice. In that year, the term "hide-and-seek"—used by police to explain the death of a prisoner—became the most popular term used by Chinese netizens. The incident may be summarized as follows. On February 12, 2009, Li Qiaoming (李喬明), aged twenty-four, died in police custody in Jinning (晉寧) County, Yunnan (雲南) Province. According to the Jinning Police Bureau, he died as a result of colliding with a wall while playing hide-and-seek with other inmates. When an article about this incident was posted online, thousands of netizens responded, raising questions about the police explanation of Li's death. Meanwhile, the term "hide-and-seek" became widespread online, meaning to fake innocence. The incident became a major topic on such sites as Baidu, Sina.com, and Tianya.

Netizens continued to dig up details about the man's death and to blame the local authorities. Faced with clamor from an unconvinced public, the Yunnan government decided to set up an investigation committee comprised of five netizens, three journalists, and four staff members from the public security and prosecutor's offices. This committee visited the prison where the incident happened and published a report, which was branded a white-wash by netizens. Instead, an online committee investigated the truth of the incident and looked into the background of the members of the official investigation committee through *renrou sousuo*. These netizens revealed that the so-called investigators were, in reality, journalists linked to the authorities. As a result, the Yunnan authorities were pressured to launch another investigation which revealed that Li had died from police beatings. The deputy commissioner of the police department of Jinning County was dismissed and Li's family received 350,000 *yuan* in damages.²⁵

In this case, online public opinion was effective in raising questions about the abuse of power by the authorities and the fairness of the judicial system. It then successfully pressured the authorities to act by turning this questioning into a major public issue. This is evidenced by the fact that the term hide-and-seek became a synonym for abuse of power by the state and judicial authorities. The lively online discussion that took place in this case also encouraged ordinary citizens to take an interest in their right to know and to express their ideas. The online discussions developed into questioning of the rationality of the judicial system and official transparency. Finally, the incident proved that the rights of the weak, which are ignored by the mainstream media, can be protected by generating public opinion online. This was the first time in Yunnan, or even China as a whole, that netizens were able to participate in an official investigation, thus providing maximum transparency. Since this event, people have begun to pay more attention to the influence of online public opinion.²⁶

²⁵Zhang, *Wangluo minyi yu gonggong juece*, 179-92; Deng Zhao'an and Zhang Tao, *Zhongguoshi wangluo wenzheng* (Chinese style inquiry into politics in networks) (Guangzhou: South Daily Press, 2010), 27-31.

²⁶The Deng Yujiao incident of 2009 was another example of online public opinion prompting

The Wenzhou Officials Overseas Inspection Team Incident, 2008

In November 2008, the activities of the Officials Overseas Inspection Team of Wenzhou (温州) in Zhejiang (浙江) Province became a major issue in cyberspace. This incident began with criticism of corrupt local officials and moved on to demands for *transparency in public expenditure*, eventually succeeding in the institutionalization of the *discretionary fund* (三公經費).²⁷ This is an example of online activism producing offline policy change (the opening of the discretionary fund to public scrutiny) in a way that could enhance political efficacy.

On November 26, 2008, a photograph of an itemized list of expenditure incurred by a Wenzhou Officials Overseas Inspection Team in the United States was uploaded to the Tianya website after the list was found on a Shanghai Metro train. The image was instantly shared on other sites, attracting about ninety thousand viewers and more than seven hundred comments within a very short time of the initial posting. Transparency in public expenditure instantly became a national issue. The overseas inspection team in question consisted of twenty-three high-ranking officials from the city of Wenzhou who travelled to the United States to study the more advanced administrative skills used by government offices there. However, the expenditure list revealed that the team had spent only five days conducting official business during their twenty-one-day visit. They toured ten major U.S. cities, including Los Angeles, Las Vegas, New York, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco. They stayed in a hotel that charged US\$700 a night in Las Vegas. The story was taken up by the offline press and broadcasting stations who transformed it into a national issue.²⁸ Unlike

the revision of a judicial decision, thus enabling the victim to obtain justice. For details, see Zeng Qingxiang and Li Wei, *Quntixing shijian: xinxi chuanbo yu zhengfu yingdui* (Group events: information dissemination and government countermeasures) (Beijing: China Book Press, 2010), 180-81; "Guanyu Deng Yujiao de mingyun, weihe funü hefa quanyi" (Deng Yujiao's fate and the protection of women's legal rights), *Xibu nüxing wang* (West Women), June 12, 2009; Deng and Zhang, *Zhongguoshi wangluo wenzheng*, 24-27.

²⁷The term "discretionary funds" here means funds for official trips, buying and maintaining official automobiles, hosting official receptions, etc.

²⁸For further details, see Ye Hao, *Zhengque yingdui wangluo shijian* (Appropriate response on the Internet incident) (Nanjing: Jiangsu University Press, 2009), 38-54.

the Internet sites, conventional media could not report on the issue until they had confirmed its veracity.²⁹

As a result of this incident, netizens began discussing the norms a society should have regarding public expenditure and effective ways of supervising it. The *People's Daily Online* ran an op-ed piece entitled, "Leader! What Did You Inspect in Las Vegas?" on December 3, 2008.³⁰ For the first time at national level, this article raised the issue of the need to supervise the spending of public funds. This incident drew both the on- and offline media's attention to transparency in public finance and the corruption of government officials.

Online discussion of the supervision of public finance had a great deal of influence in that it resulted in legislation governing the Ministry of Finance's public budget and the discretionary fund, which had previously been taboo subjects. Both the mainstream and Internet media in China raised the question of waste in government offices, including the use of discretionary funds, again in 2011. In particular, an online conversation between Premier Wen Jiabao (溫家寶) and netizens on Xinhua Net (新華網) had the immediate effect of prompting the government to open up the state budget to public view. In March 2011, the State Council announced that the ninety-eight offices of the central government would open their discretionary fund budgets to the public by June that year. On April 5, the Ministry of Finance published its budget on its website for the first time.³¹ Also, the Chinese government announced that, starting on January 1, 2012, it would require all transactions related to the spending of discretionary funds to be carried out by credit card in order to prevent the abuse of public funds and corruption.³² All these developments are evidence that online public opinion has been effective in making public expenditure more trans-

²⁹Yin, ed., *Zhongguo xinmeiti fazhan baogao*, 46.

³⁰Ye, *Zhengque yingdui wangluo shijian*, 43.

³¹"Guowuyuan jueding 6 yuefen gongkai zhongyang bufen sangong jingfei" (The State Council decides that the central government should open its discretionary fund budget to public by June 2011), *Xinhua*, March 23, 2011; "The Chinese Ministry of Finance Publishes Its Budget for the First Time," *Joongang Daily*, April 5, 2011.

³²"Credit-cards-only Rule to Fight Graft," *South China Morning Post*, December 10, 2011.

parent. Online discussions that have transformed certain incidents into public issues have forced the Chinese government to accept public opinion and make compromises with its people.³³

The 2011 High-speed Rail Collision

The most searched-for news item on Baidu in 2011 was the high-speed rail collision that took place in Wenzhou (温州) on July 23, 2011.³⁴ This accident started as a social issue, with the main concern being public safety. However, as the cause of the accident became clear and people saw how the government was handling it, netizens started to criticize government policies and demand political reform, turning it into a political issue. They criticized the delay in investigating the cause of the accident, the clumsy handling of the accident by the government, and the Ministry of Railways' management of the Chinese railway system as a whole. In order to prevent this criticism of the Ministry of Railways from escalating into criticism of the central leadership of the CCP, the Chinese government attempted to control the Chinese media by issuing press guidelines.

This fight over public opinion between the central government which was trying to control the media and ordinary citizens who were demanding their right to political criticism ended in a victory for smart mobs armed with the Internet. The rail crash made people realize the virtues of *weibo*, namely, its capacity for prompt reporting. *Weibo* provides space for freedom of expression and it is a leader of public opinion that can influence offline politics.

First, *weibo* made government control of the media ineffective through its capacity to report the collision promptly. No full reports were carried by

³³Another example is the anti-corruption movement that took place in the southern Chinese village of Wukan, Guangdong Province, in 2011. The movement ended peacefully with an agreement that granted the villagers their immediate requests. The success of this movement owed a great deal to public opinion generated online and the interest of the overseas media. Nongcun laoshi (pseudonym), "Wukan shijian tuoxie weibo bushi minzhu" (The Wukan compromise is not undemocratic), *Tianya luntan* (Tianya Forum), December 23, 2011.

³⁴Shen Yang, "Baidu xinwen fabu 2011 niandu resou cibang: dongche shigu jubangshou" (The most searched news on Baidu in 2011 was the high-speed rail collision incident), *People's Net*, December 23, 2011.

Chinese broadcasters on the day of the accident, July 23. While weibo was reporting the accident in real time and about twenty-six million comments were being posted, the offline media simply repeated the official version of the accident.³⁵ *Weibo* users posted images of the irresponsible disposal of the wrecked carriages as well as the expensive luxury watch on the wrist of the minister of railways, triggering netizens' anger.³⁶ With this incident, weibo emerged as an alternative news medium that can report real-time events while offline media remain quiet.

Second, while newspapers and broadcasting stations were controlled by the government through press guidelines, *weibo*, as a free open space, led online public opinion. Professional journalists could express thoughts through *weibo* which they could not write or broadcast through the offline media. Wang Qinglei (王青雷), a program director for China Central Television (CCTV), published reports on *weibo* after he had been suspended from his job.³⁷ Wang became a leader of public opinion, which was critical of government policies and the officials responsible for them. This kind of spirited reporting through *weibo* transformed the issue from a social into a political one. Chinese intellectuals criticized the irresponsible behavior of officials and went so far as to demand the direct election of members of the National People's Congress and CCP officials. Hundreds of comments critical of Premier Wen Jiabao were posted online daily.³⁸ Online critics demanded that the premier take responsibility and change

³⁵"Mounting Criticism Against the Chinese Government's Blackout of Rail Collision Tragedy," *Joongang Daily*, August 1, 2011.

³⁶Simon Rabinovitch, "China Blames Signaling Error for Crash," *Financial Times*, July 28, 2011; David Bandurski, "China's High-Speed Politics," *International Herald Tribune*, July 28, 2011.

³⁷*Joongang Daily*, "Mounting Criticism Against the Chinese Government's Blackout"; "Chinese Press to Publish on Rail Collision Despite Government Press Ban," *Dong-A Ilbo*, August 1, 2011. A reporter for CCTV criticized Premier Wen Jiabao, who visited the site of the accident, to his face, asking "if the authorities clean up the site of the accident within a few days, how can we expect transparency from the official inspection?"

³⁸"Chinese Intellectuals in the Vanguard of Political Reform," *Dong-A Ilbo*, August 3, 2011; "Has Chinese Rail Collision Tragedy Triggered Desire for Political Reform?" *Joongang Daily*, August 2, 2011; "Mounting Criticism Against the Chinese Government's Blackout of Rail Collision Tragedy," *Joongang Daily*, August 1, 2011.

the way officials respond to accidents. Considering that criticizing state leaders had up to then been taboo in China, this was an extremely unusual development.

Third, Internet public opinion provided the offline media with an environment in which they could resist official press guidelines. Conscious of their readers and sensitive to Internet public opinion, a few newspapers resisted government control over the press. Demands for the right to know and freedom of expression began online and brought changes to the offline media. On July 29, the CCP's Central Propaganda Department (中央宣傳部) issued guidelines which called for all media, including newspapers, magazines, and websites, to reduce the level of reporting regarding the high-speed rail collision. The guidelines banned all reports and comments other than positive news provided by the authorities.³⁹ Although most media outlets followed these guidelines, a few newspapers, including the *Southern Metropolis Daily* (南方都市報) and the *Economic Observer* (經濟觀察報), ran special coverage of the accident.⁴⁰ This coverage even included statements that the authorities' arrogant and bureaucratic handling of the accident did not meet the people's need for democracy, a criticism that was widespread online.⁴¹ Reporting of this accident proved that the Chinese government no longer had full control over the traditional media, let alone the Internet.⁴² It also confirmed that although the Chinese government allowed criticism of a social nature, it had no intention of showing the same level of

³⁹Sharon LaFraniere, "Media Blackout in China After Wreck," *New York Times*, July 31, 2011; Park Min-hee, "Chinese Press Ban as Public Sentiment Worsens on Rail Collision Tragedy," *Hankyoreh*, July 31, 2011.

⁴⁰"Tamade 'qiji' !!" (Damn this "miracle"!!), *Nanfang dushibao* (Southern Metropolis Daily) (Guangzhou), July 31, 2011; "Wenzhou meiyou qiji" (Wenzhou, there was no miracle), *Jingji guanchabao* (Economic Observer Newspaper) (Beijing), August 1, 2011; "Mounting Criticism against the Chinese Government's Blackout of Rail Collision Tragedy," *Joongang Daily*, August 1, 2011.

⁴¹"Suoyouren doushi yulun heliu shang de chuan" (We are all ships on the current of public opinion), *Huanqiu shibao* (Global Times) (Beijing), July 28, 2011.

⁴²Interaction between the Internet and the mass media serves to challenge state control over the traditional mass media. For further details, see Lijun Tang and Helen Sampson, "The Interaction between Mass Media and the Internet in Non-Democratic States: The Case of China," *Media, Culture & Society* 34, no. 4 (May 2012): 457-71.

tolerance toward these issues once they had morphed into political ones.

Fourth, online public opinion brought about a fundamental change in policies related to high-speed rail. As expressions of public opinion by smart mobs critical of current policies grew stronger, the Chinese government changed its plan to settle the matter quickly. On August 10, 2011, the State Council announced that it had decided to lower the speed limit on the high-speed rail network, to delay the opening of a recently completed new line, and to suspend temporarily the approval of new high-speed rail projects. This was in accordance with angry public demands for safety before speed.⁴³

The development of events after the collision is a good example of how the government has sometimes changed its policies in accordance with online public opinion. This was possible because citizens had the knowledge and the space to express it freely on *weibo*. This development shows that smart mobs have won their fight against powerful press control by the state. This kind of pressure on the government from online public opinion is a radically new political phenomenon in China.

The 2007 Xiamen PX Affair

The 2007 protest in Xiamen (廈門), Fujian (福建) Province, over a PX (paraxylyene) plant is another example of the influence of online public opinion on government policies. Citizens used digital political participation to protest against a government policy that was threatening their health. As smart mobs armed with the Internet won their fight, turning public opinion against the local government, the central and local authorities had to cancel a joint plan to build a PX chemical plant in Xiamen. As one commentator declared, "The Xiamen anti-PX protest is now considered a milestone of citizen mobilization. The city government listened to public opinion and adjusted its decision accordingly. This was a first in China and a very encouraging sign."⁴⁴

⁴³Jang Sejung, "Brakes on the Acceleration of the Chinese Rail System," *Joongang Daily*, August 12, 2011.

⁴⁴Qiang, "The Battle for the Chinese Internet," 57.

During the process of negotiation between citizens and governments, each side fights to sway public opinion against the other. In this case, the government started by banning media reports about the plans for a PX plant. For example, an entire issue of the *Fenghuang Weekly* (鳳凰週刊) was confiscated for running articles on the subject. An article about it in the May 29, 2007, issue of the *Southern Metropolis Daily* was censored.⁴⁵ In these circumstances, how was it that the citizens of Xiamen were able to bring this issue, about which the local media kept silent, to the forum of public discussion and eventually achieve their goal?

First, faced with lack of coverage in the local media, protestors raised the issue in the national media and in online forums in an effort to stir up public opinion. Zhao Yufen (趙玉芬), a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and a chemistry professor at Xiamen University, had the issue put on the CPPCC agenda.⁴⁶ A proposal to transfer the PX project to another site, signed by 105 CPPCC members, including Zhao, was submitted at the meeting. *Zhongguo jingyingbao* (中國經營報, China Business News) was the first to publish news of this proposal. The issue was also raised by a well-known journalist, Lian Yue (連岳), in his blog. Lian drew the public's attention to the implications of the project for citizens' rights and environmental protection.⁴⁷ Citizens of Xiamen raised the issues of pollution and health hazards through such well-known sites as Xiaoyushequ (小魚社區), as well as through the Xiamen University BBS, emails, the QQ free instant messaging service, and cell phone text messaging.⁴⁸ Online space became a public arena in which in-

⁴⁵Zhi Ling (pseudonym), "Duanxin bandao Xiamen baiyi gongcheng shi ouran shijian" (It was an exceptional turn of events that text messages caused the ten-billion Xiamen project to crumble), *Dongfang zaobao* (East Daily) (Shanghai), May 31, 2007; Lan Yun, "Xiamen PX duanxin shijian baodao shimo" (Report on the Xiamen PX text message incident: From beginning to end), *Nanfangwang* (Southcn.com), December 25, 2008.

⁴⁶The Government had kept the project secret until it was disclosed by Zhao Yufen. See Xie Liangbing, "Xiamen PX shijian: xinmeiti shidai de minyi biaoda" (The Xiamen PX incident: the expression of public opinion in the age of new media), *Zhongguo xinwen zhouban* (China Newsweek) (Beijing), June 11, 2007.

⁴⁷Xu, "Xinmeiti huanjing xia yulun jiandu de jie gouhua tezheng chutan," 115.

⁴⁸Zeng and Li, *Quntixing shijian*, 131-61.

formation about the Xiamen PX affair was exchanged and discussed.

Second, citizens organized a protest march on June 1, 2007, using blogs and cell phone text messages. Text messages containing information on the health hazards of the PX plant together with the date and time of the mass demonstration spread rapidly among the citizens of Xiamen. On June 1 and 2, the peaceful march attracted the largest number of citizens of any demonstration in the history of the city.⁴⁹ This is an example of the use of online activism to successfully organize collective action by citizens. Without the online space, this kind of organized response to the Xiamen PX project might not have been possible.

Third, online public opinion was able to put pressure on the local government to change its policy. After conducting a public opinion poll, the Xiamen city government realized that it was facing a major crisis. As a result, on December 25, 2007, the city government acknowledged that PX could cause cancer and announced that the plant would be transferred to another site.⁵⁰ This was achieved as a result of a combination of online activism and the offline mass demonstration.

Growing rights consciousness is matched by the proliferation of forums in which citizens can participate in public affairs. The Xiamen PX affair is an example of citizens' resistance and participation. It combines participation with opposition and joins online with offline action. It illustrates the power of digital political participation to change offline politics. Citizens protested against the building of a chemical plant near a residential area through online forums and organized a street demonstration online. Citizens' participation in decisions affecting their quality of life is a basic requirement for a democratic society.⁵¹ Even the state-run Xinhua News Agency (新華通信) concluded that although the PX plant affair would probably not become a landmark, it would help boost the participation of ordinary Chinese people in policy making."⁵²

⁴⁹Xie, "Xiamen PX shijian."

⁵⁰Zeng and Li, *Quntixing shijian*, 131-61.

⁵¹For the civil protest and participation, see Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*, 225.

⁵²"Common Chinese Have More Say in Policy Making," *Xinhua Net*, January 3, 2008.

The success achieved in Xiamen undoubtedly influenced the closing of the Dalian (大連) PX plant in August 2011. Where blogs had played a big role in Xiamen, *weibo* was more important in Dalian.⁵³ In both cases, smart mobs succeeded in making their demands known and organizing mass protests through the Internet.

Online Activism and Change in the Political Process

Can the Internet promote "political change" in China, turning it into a more open society and changing its system into a more democratic one? Can we assume that Chinese authoritarianism will crumble just as the Iron Curtain crumbled two decades ago? The Internet is a new and unexplored political realm where both the state and society try to expand their respective political spaces. The Chinese government worries about the undesirable political consequences of the free flow of information facilitated by the Internet. Optimists point out the almost unlimited potential of the Internet to generate liberating effects.⁵⁴ Guobin Yang argues that "the Internet has brought about a social revolution, because the ordinary people assume an unprecedented role as agents of change and because new social formations are among its most profound outcomes."⁵⁵

Pessimists view the Internet in China as merely a tool for governmental control. The Internet does seem to have become an effective instrument of control for the CCP. Rebecca MacKinnon asserts that it is unwise to

⁵³For further details of the Dailan PX Affair, see Park Min-hee, "Chinese Government Decides to Close Chemical Factory Due to Protest by Twelve Thousand Dalian Citizens," *Hankyoreh*, August 15, 2011.

⁵⁴Xiaoling Zhang and Yongnian Zheng, eds., *China's Information and Communications Technology Revolution: Social Changes and State Responses* (London: Routledge, 2009), 2, 4.

⁵⁵Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*, 213. However, Yongnian Zheng points out that rising levels of online activism in China cannot automatically be interpreted as a sign of impending democratization. One must examine what kind of online activism is succeeding and what kind is failing. The success or failure of online activism in China depends on its scope and focus, and Zheng argues that some online activism can actually serve to bolster regime legitimacy. Zheng, *Technological Empowerment*, 164-65.

make the assumption that the Internet will lead to rapid democratization in China or in other repressive regimes.⁵⁶ Jonathan Hassid argues that the power of online opinion is undisputed in individual cases, but the overall effect of blog discourse on Chinese political life is unclear.⁵⁷ Previous studies on this subject indicate that the Internet will not lead to rapid political change and the collapse of China's authoritarian regime, even though it has empowered society.

However, as the circulation of online information increases, and as online public opinion has greater influence in society, reform is slowly taking place in the Chinese political process. What changes are happening in Chinese politics in this age of information? Democracy can be defined in two different ways. First, it is a political system in which major public officials are elected regularly through free competition, based on a multi-party system. This is called *electoral democracy*.⁵⁸ Second, democracy is a system that guarantees people's comprehensive participation in politics and their political and civil freedom, including freedom of speech and the press, assembly, association, and thought. These are the characteristics of *liberal democracy*. Democracy requires regular free competitive elections and the securing of people's comprehensive participation in politics and their political and civil liberties.

The Chinese ruling elite have so far criticized Western-style electoral democracy, arguing instead for Chinese-style democracy (中國式民主) that would allow people to participate in politics in a different way.⁵⁹

⁵⁶Rebecca MacKinnon, "China's Networked Authoritarianism," 33.

⁵⁷Hassid, "Safety Valve or Pressure Cooker?" 212-30.

⁵⁸For the distinction between electoral democracy and liberal democracy, see Larry Diamond and Ramon H. Myers, eds., *Elections and Democracy in Greater China* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2001), 2-3; Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 9-10.

⁵⁹Yu Keping, "Minzhu shi gongheguo de shengming" (Democracy is the life of a republic), *Renminwang* (People's Net), November 12, 2007; Wang Shaoguang, "Fansi xiandai minzhu zhidu" (Reflections on the system of modern democracy), *Shehui kexuebao* (Social Sciences Weekly) (Shanghai), July 21, 2010; Wu Jianmin, "Zhongguo xuyao shemeyang de minzhu" (What kind of democracy does China need?), *Renminwang* (People's Net), February 4, 2008.

Also, the elite has shown a preference for political stability through institutionalized political reform over political democratization. As the Chinese government does not allow for the eventual collapse of one-party rule as a result of electoral democracy, discussion of this issue is not permitted online.

Above village level, there is no *electoral democracy* in China. However, some characteristics of *liberal democracy* have entered the political process, in that people have begun to participate in the process and their political and civil liberties have expanded through online activism. There has been no reform of one-party rule by the CCP, but the political process has begun changing in southern China.

In order to explain China's process of gradual political change it is necessary to employ a new analytical perspective that incorporates China's uniqueness. The process of disintegration undergone by an authoritarian system can differ from one case to another, depending on the government's level of social control and the national circumstances. The Soviet and East European socialist systems experienced rapid and uncontrollable political change after adopting *electoral democracy*. In China, on the other hand, the CCP has been able to maintain its social control and is experiencing a gradual and quiet change in its political processes. It is thus useful to delve into the ongoing struggle between political control and civil freedom—both online and offline.

Why are the cases chosen above relevant to explaining the democratization—from the perspective of *liberal democracy*—of political processes in southern China? The protection of citizens' political and civil liberties are the main features of liberal democracy, which is based upon the protection of (1) legal rights, (2) the right to monitor the government and its public financial expenditures, and (3) the right to know and the right to express one's opinions.

Online activism by smart mobs in southern China illustrates the spread of liberal democracy in the following ways. First, as the "hide-and-seek" protest of 2009 demonstrates, it is possible to reverse a judicial decision, thus protecting legal rights, once online opinion and activism have exposed the true nature of the incident.

Second, the case of the Wenzhou Officials Overseas Inspection Team raised the issue of *transparency in public expenditure*. Netizens' efforts to enforce their right to monitor the government and public expenditure led to the government's decision in 2011 to open its discretionary spending to public scrutiny. Online public opinion induced political change by expanding the people's right to know and influencing policy making.

The cases of the 2011 high-speed rail collision and the 2007 Xiamen PX plant were selected as examples of netizens expanding their right to know and their right to express their opinions through rapid and effective online activism, thus resulting in both online and offline collective action. The protestors in these cases were able to change government policy so as to protect the health and safety of the public. Netizens' forceful criticism of the way the government handled the rail crash, as well as their criticism of Premier Wen Jiabao and the Ministry of Railways, led to an increase in the freedom of the press. The change in the way the government handled the crash and the radical changes in its policies concerning high-speed rail signal the success of online activism. The Xiamen PX affair was an example of a collective protest organized online forcing the central and local governments to change their policy decisions to protect citizens' interests. Collective action initiated online, like the peaceful protest march, shows that freedom of assembly and association can begin in online space.

These examples of how online activism can bring about change in the political process can be summarized as follows. First, the Internet provides a *digital public sphere* in China where citizens can discuss public affairs. Habermas's public sphere theory is very useful in interpreting China's present dynamics. Habermas assumes that civil participation through communication in public affairs is critical for a democracy. The public sphere is a place where ordinary citizens spontaneously gather together for rational-critical deliberation about public affairs free from commercial and state constraints. The issues discussed in the Chinese online public sphere, which includes various message boards and *weibo*, include social justice and morality, state performance, corruption of government officials, and

the lives of ordinary people.⁶⁰ The examples discussed in this paper, of netizens leading public opinion in online space, signal the beginning of liberal democracy.

Second, issue areas are expanding in online space. People now discuss a variety of issues online, from private affairs to political matters. Before 2005, online activities were limited mainly to protecting the rights of the weakest members of society. However, since then, online activism has expanded to the protection of civil rights and political issues (such as the exposure of official corruption and the supervision of public expenditure). The Internet has enabled the organization of social discontent and the rapid circulation of information, and this has turned hidden acts of social injustice into public issues. This expansion of areas of interest to citizens reflects an increase in digital political participation and the securing of people's political and civil liberties.

Third, the Internet became a means of promoting digital political participation, and this in turn has increased its influence on politics. Habermas's public sphere theory has been widely used to understand and analyze the role of communication in cyberspace. Andrew Chadwick, considering Habermas's idea of a public sphere, elaborates on electronic community networks, virtual political communities, and a possible shift from citizen political debate in the public sphere to the formal political process of the government.⁶¹

In China, it is no exaggeration to say that citizens' Internet politics is now in existence, in that public issues that have been addressed online are significantly discussed in the National People's Congress or the State Council. Also, as the number of instances of people's civil liberties being secured through digital political participation has increased, the political

⁶⁰Helen Sun, *Internet Policy in China: A Field Study of Internet Cafés* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010), 161-62. Private people coming together to talk about public issues, most of the time political in nature, needed a place to be close to each other to talk face to face. Thus coffee houses, pubs salons, clubs, or other public places became the physical and architectural carriers of these conversations in industrial society. *Ibid.*, 161.

⁶¹Andrew Chadwick, *Internet Politics: State, Citizen, and New Communication Technologies* (New York: Oxford University, 2006), 89.

impact of netizens has become more palpable. Movements for the protection of civil rights as well as the expansion of freedom of the press and freedom of assembly and association are emerging in southern China.

As a new sphere in which people exercise their freedom of expression, online space in China is allowing people to prepare for gradual political change. Due to the Internet's fast-growing influence, even the party leadership now has to pay attention to the deluge of public comment. If the government is eager to acquire more legitimacy, but is anxious to avoid the introduction of democracy, it should listen extensively to views expressed on the Internet.⁶²

During the tug-of-war between the state and civil society in online space, civil society has gained ground. The Internet is changing the state's way of governing from one of oppression to one of *persuasion and compromise*. In this sense, liberal democracy has been maturing in online space. Online activism by smart mobs has been developing an unofficial democracy that is uninvited by Chinese politics.⁶³

Conclusion

This study is distinct from the extant literature in that it shows how Chinese smart mobs armed with the concept of liberal democracy are engaged in online activism and in attempting to change the political process. I have tried to shed light on the effects of the proliferation of the Internet on the democratization of political processes in China. Online activism in China operates under a political system that prohibits electoral democracy whilst allowing limited political participation, and which also enforces strict state controls over the Internet. These restrictions mean that smart mobs in China have to revolve around online activism, which promotes

⁶²Zhang and Zheng, eds., *China's Information and Communications Technology Revolution*, 4.

⁶³For the concept of "unofficial democracy," see Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China*, 223.

political and civil freedom and remains engaged in rightful resistance. The successes achieved by the online activism of smart mobs show that although there has been no move toward electoral democracy in China, there has been discernible change in political processes leading to the expansion of *liberal democracy*.

Despite the strict control over the Internet exercised by the Chinese government, smart mobs have indeed been smart in finding ways to express their opinions and protect their interests. As citizens' awareness of their rights has increased, they have participated more in the discussion of public affairs in cyberspace. Online activism reflects people's aspiration for basic civil rights and their demands that assurances about government transparency and the right to participate in political decisions are honored. Under pressure from online public opinion, the Chinese government has begun to make compromises with its people and change its policies. The political process is beginning to change, as digital political participation increases and more online collective action aimed at protecting citizens' rights and liberty succeed.

The Internet has become a means of connecting and mobilizing people on a national level in China. The Chinese government is very wary of netizens' ability to generate national public opinion about specific issues and to organize collective activities. The affair of the Wenzhou Officials Overseas Inspection Team and the high-speed rail crash were transformed from local to national issues online. Netizens all over the country were able to make their criticisms of the government known by viewing, sharing, and commenting on these issues. Through these online activities, national public opinion about the transparency of public expenditure and the government's responsibility for the high-speed rail accident emerged. If sentiments like these are transformed into collective activity all over the country, it is possible that uncontrollable social unrest will break out. The fact that the Chinese government tightened its regulation of the Internet in 2011 shows both the power of the Internet and how difficult it is to control.

The Chinese government is waging a *guerilla war of public opinion* against an invisible online enemy. It is difficult to exercise preemptive control over or negotiate with disparate individuals lurking in cyberspace,

as their identities and locations remain unknown unless they choose to reveal them. The Chinese government finds it very difficult to conduct this online guerilla war against an invisible enemy. When conditions for reforming the existing system in China mature, it is possible that the power of online public opinion could unexpectedly facilitate radical and rapid political change. Nobody predicted the 2011 Arab Spring until it happened.

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