The Politics of China's *Wei-Quan* Movement in the Internet Age[+]

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Abstract

The political use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) has emerged in a diverse and vibrant manner in the information age. Traditionally, the practices and governing logic of the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been less accommodating to the needs of civic engagement in public affairs. This has resulted in a general denial of public's right to know, right to participate, right to freedom of speech, and the right to hold the government to account. The upsurge of mass protest in China has, in this regard, become one of the most unintended political consequences of economic reform for the Communist leaders for past three decades. Whereas many of these popular incidents are spontaneous, loosely organized, and eventually short-lived, the remaining indicate, at least some coordination of action/movement. Empowered by modern ICTs, many rights-defence activists are capable of waging mass incidents and civic protests in modern-day China and pose a greater sociopolitical threat to the stability of the central government and the Chinese Communist regime as a whole. Indeed, the Chinese public has awakened not only to defend and assert their protected civil and legal rights stipulated in the PRC's Constitution, they are likely to challenge the existing legal and government systems provided their claims and assertions are not met.

Keywords: *wei-quan movement, Internet, China, information and communications technologies*

1. Introduction

China's politics are in transition. Observers and political commentators have generally focused on a variety of factors driving change, such as: the opening of the country to the outside world, continued deepening of economic reform, forces of globalization and regionalization, newer generations of

political leaders, increased pluralism of sources of information, and societal resistance and contestation from below. (Chu, Lo and Myers, 2004; Zheng, 2004; Nolan, 2004; Dickson, 2003) One recent development that may bring all of these factors together is the advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the People's Republic of China (PRC). (Hughes and Wacker, 2003; Chase and Mulvenon, 2002) At the core of the information technology (IT) revolution is the Internet. Although originally developed in the late 1960s for military and security reasons by the US, the Internet opened to all in 1992 when the US National Science Foundation lifted the limitations on its use. (Browne and Keeley, 2001) Since then, the Net has transformed global communication, commerce, politics and society in general. This paper elucidates the transformative impact of the Internet and ICTs on Chinese politics and citizen participation in civil affairs.

Globalization, largely backed by a market-oriented economic philosophy – liberation, privatization, and deregulation, has helped boost the significant growth and diffusion of Internet technology in both established democracies and many developing countries. (Giovannetti, Kagami and Tsuji, 2003) The information revolution has swept across the globe having not only a tremendous economic impact, but it also broadening the ordinary citizen's access to wider and alternative information. (Hachigian and Wu, 2003; Root, 2002: 118-119) This expansion of information awareness and speed of information flows has impelled academics and policy makers to ponder the social and political repercussions of the IT revolution upon authoritarian regimes where civil and political rights are poorly respected and protected, such as the PRC.

Traditional views of China consider popular public opinion to be under the strict control of the Party-State, usually manipulated from above and with publicly expressed opinions generally limited to official information sources and viewpoints. It is assumed that few dissenting and critical viewpoints exist among the populace on public and political affairs. However, it is increasingly clear that the interactivity and convenience of the new information technologies is beginning to draw closer the general public and changing the way people discuss current affairs, and the way of supervision by public opinion. It means Chinese citizens and Internet users can now engage in public affairs and express themselves more freely to a degree as never before in a country that usually prohibits mass gatherings and demonstrations.

The contemporary view does not go unchallenged by other political commentators. Traditionalists suggest that ICTs and associated Internet technologies may have the potential to serve as a catalyst for social and political changes, nonetheless in reality are only available to a small minority of the wealthy and professional population. (CNNIC, January 2010)[1] In other

words, Internet activism is likely to be dominated by an elite-based discourse. Furthermore, it is claimed that ICTs are constantly and closely monitored by PRC authorities as they aim to keep their socialist society's "virtual" environment "healthy" (*jiankang* 健康) and "orderly" (*youxu* 有序). (Wang, 2010) While elite-based activism is identified as part of the "digital divide" in China's emerging information society (Abbott, 2001: 115-128), cyber surveillance is dubbed "Internet censorship" in many authoritarian regimes such as the PRC. (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002) A few scholars also espouse the view that ICTs are being effectively utilized by China's Communist one-party state as an adept and sophisticated tool to strengthen its governing ideology and capability in the information age. (Hung, 2010)

The conflicting views of the potential impacts of the Internet and ICTs have not been lost on the CPP. Two years after the 1994 introduction of the Internet to China the CCP-controlled newspaper *Renmin Ribao* 人民日报 (People's Daily) pointed out that "…the value of the Internet so outweighs its potentially harmful aspects – pornography and politically destructive information – that the Chinese government has approved its opening to the public." (Lam, 2000: 54) Ever since China has been connected to cyberspace, the Internet-enabled *wei-quan* 维权 (rights defending or protection) movement has been on the rise as citizens' rights have awakened in the reform era. Accompanied by a growing number of Chinese Internet users (CNNIC, 15th July 2010)[2], *wei-quan* activists and lawyers are at the centre of China's current rights defending movements, as the principles of social justice and fairness are frequently attached to the booming *wei-quan* movements.

2. The Rise of *Wei-Quan* Movement in the Reform Era

The term *wei-quan* or "rights defence" emerged as a buzzword in Chinese media and politics in 2003. It has been typically used in the Chinese context to refer to the various actions that ordinary people and social activists have employed to defend their legal rights or the rights of others in China. Like many words in the Chinese political lexicon, the term *wei-quan* can be ambiguous and the *wei-quan* movement often appears much the same as the traditional democracy and human rights movement. Indeed, there are similarities between the rights protection movement and the democratization and human rights movement. Both are reactionary and may be potentially destabilizing to China's rapid economic growth nevertheless, there is a key difference that separates the two. The rights-protection movement basically accepts the legitimacy of the existing political system, but the democracy movement does not. Rather than pushing for democratic change, the *wei-quan* movement vigorously seeks to protect and improve the rights of citizens within China's constitutional constraints and legal framework with minimal

political requests. This although, does not mean that the *wei-quan* movement is wholly apolitical. The breadth of areas covered by *wei-quan* includes political, civil economic, social and cultural rights.

Chinese *wei-quan* movements are self-initiated and self-organized movements where ordinary citizens take action against (party) officials to protect their basic (human) rights and interests afforded them under PRC law. The rights-protection movement emerged in early 2000 and in a span of only three years had made its mark. The year 2003 is famously addressed as a "civil rights-protection year" (*gongmin wei-quan nian* 公民维权年) primarily because several notable *wei-quan* incidents took place that year. This paper now turns to examine three of these incidents.

One of the most prominent incidents was the case of Sun Zhigang 孙志刚. On 17th March 2003, Sun was mistakenly detained in a Guangzhou homeless shelter because he did not have the temporary resident permit that was required for all migrants who work or look for jobs outside of their hometown. Sun later died in police custody after allegedly being seriously beaten. The story initially broke on the web from a report on the *Nanfang Dushibao* 南方都市报 (Southern Metropolis News), a liberal news outlet owned by the Guangzhou-based Nanfang Media Group which is known for its outspoken editorial policy. Relayed through the Internet and widely discussed by cyber chatters, this story reached nationwide and elicited enormous public concern and debate. (Pan, 2004) The Internet has not only in this case contributed to the on- and off-line heated debates on public issues, but it also more broadly helped facilitate the eventual abolition of the two decades-old regulations on repatriating migrants and vagabonds. Clearly beyond mere debate and discussion, the Internet has allowed public expressions of sympathy with people who have fallen victim to varying sorts of social injustice, and has also helped further fuse long-standing citizen discontent and anxiety into joint civic engagement.

Sun's case effectively demonstrates the Net's political effect and shows that Internet users can partake in a civic movement that challenges the existing legal and governing systems of China, and contribute to the awakening of public concerns over their statutory rights. Besides, it manifests how Internet activists may be able to turn online uprisings and socio-legal events into a real world political agenda. Stories like this could be downplayed and rarely be covered in China's official media that still largely remain under editorial controls.

The BMW incident that took place in 2003 also stands out as another unique case in Chinese law and politics. In this case the vocal court of "virtual" public opinion prompted traditional media outlets to catch up and follow details of the latest developments. What would have been an ordinary traffic accident in China, where most car accidents are ignored or at best

mentioned in passing by the traditional news outlets, became a larger story due to online influences.

On 16th October 2003, in the northeastern rustbelt city of Harbin 哈尔滨, a wealthy woman, Su Xiuwen 苏秀文, drove her BMW into a crowd, killing Liu Zhongxia 刘忠霞, a peasant woman who was travelling on a rickety tractor. Twelve others were also injured. The Daoli 道里 District People's Court in Harbin ruled on 20th December that this was merely an "accidental traffic disturbance" caused by Su's negligence. Su was sentenced to two years' imprisonment suspended for three years. After news of the controversial verdict was posted on *Sina.com* (新浪网), one of the most popular commercial portal sites in China, the mainstream press and other Internet portals picked the story up with many setting up featured websites to cater for a surge in public demand for the latest developments. The high degree of public attention put government and party officials under heavy pressure to review or intervene. There have been similar situations with other legal cases. The Internet has served as an effective medium for whipping up collective public resentment against perceived unfair verdicts, and for voicing demands for further investigations or even retrials. (Hung, 2006: 137-173)

For some incidents action has not always began on the Internet, but that is where it has spread. The Weng'an 瓮安 incident is such example. This incident highlights the power of citizen action in battling for the right to freedom of speech and the right to hold officials to account. On 28th June 2008, over 30,000 people took to the streets in Weng'an County, Guizhou 贵州 Province, where they attacked the Party committee headquarters and government buildings, and set fire to a local police station. The demonstrators took action because they suspected that female undergraduate student Li Shufei 李树菲's drowning was not the result of suicide as two autopsy reports had concluded, but rather a case of foul play. Swirling around the case were rumours of rape, murder and a possible cover-up. Events began on June 22nd, when the victim's family made their concerns publicly known, and in protest refused to collect their daughter's body. Events soon escalated when the family sought to prevent the local police from forcefully handling the victim's body. A drive to collect signatures for a legal petition followed before events became violent at the public protests on June 28th.

This incident soon became hot news as word spread via SMS text messaging, blogs and Internet forums, such as *Qiangguo Luntan* 强国论坛, *Tian Ya* 天涯, and *Sina.com*. Prevailing Internet sentiments were more supportive of the suffering family than local authorities with numerous angry comments citing official corruption, rape, murder, and police inaction as the real reasons behind Li Shufei's death. Images, discussions and gossip arguing that the case a miscarriage of justice spread far, wide and fast across cyberspace and real-life backstreets, despite the fact that many critical posts

were swiftly deleted or filtered by web site administrators and did not appear for long on the Net.
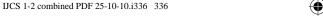
When conflicts between the public and police occur, Beijing authorities in general, and the public security department in particular, normally classify these kinds of incidents and events under the broad heading "mass incidents" (*qunzhong shijian* 群众事件). Knowing that mass incident reports need to be dismissed or quelled out of fundamental concerns for social and political stability, China's official media exercises caution carefully considering the extent to which they report where mass incidents take place, their actual cause, the scale of casualties and the impact as well as outcome of the mass conflicts.[3]

The causes for the rise of the Chinese *wei-quan* movement are multifold. Among other things, imbalanced economic growth and uneven distribution of wealth have particularly given rise to a range of social problems that could further undermine China's social and political stability. Although the market economy has expanded rapidly in socialist China for the past three decades,[4] concerns are being expressed about the distributional impacts of the economic growth processes. As the gains from steady high economic growth have been spread rather unevenly, some segments of the population have been left behind in relative and even absolute terms. This disparity is seen in rising and widening income inequality, geographic polarization and environmental deterioration, leading some to question the sustainability of China's high economic growth and the political legitimacy based on this growth. (Nolan, 2005: 1-2) Critics have usually highlighted the plight of rural migrants and the ever worsening social/class divide, incarnated as the "*choufu xintai* 仇富心态" (resenting the rich) mentality, or "having the 'red eyes' disease" (*hongyan bing* 红眼病) that has emerged in China's fast growing capitalist society. (Wu, 2009: 1038) These may ultimately tarnish China's economic power and hinder its future economic growth if the situation is not appropriately managed or improved.

In addition to rising inequalities, pervasive stories of corruption among government officials and party members have seriously eroded public trust in the Party-State, damaging the images of the CCP, harming the economy and threatening sociopolitical stability. Yet, while the issue of rampant corruption is of high concern in China, it is usually underreported, selectively reported, misreported, or even not reported at all, in the official press and/or mainstream media, primarily for political concerns. Generally, it is only after incidents of corruption are brought to a conclusion that they are publicized openly and extensively. Official campaigns in "combating corruption" (*fan fubai* 反腐败) have been frequently addressed and launched by senior Party and government leaders on several occasions, such as major political events like the 17th CCP National Congress (October 2007) and the 11th National

People's Congress (NPC) & the Chinese People's Consultative Conference (CPPCC) (March 2008). Often, in the face of state media cover-ups, news about corruption and graft may not be released by official sources firsthand. Instead the alternative news medium of cyberspace has been come to play the proactive role of a "virtual" watchdog to monitor and publicize corruption cases. (Bi, 2001: 429)

With the increased diffusion and usage of the Internet and digital media in China, mass incidents and corruption cases may not always be dismissed or go away quietly. The Sun Zhigang case, the BMW and Weng'an incidents, and other events, such as the SARS outbreak, have not only aroused a strong sense of public concern about the merits and necessity of good governance, but have also intensified collective anxiety and public pressure against the authorities concerned. Net users, as well as the general public, have been more willing to articulate their interests and concerns in the hope of making the government more attentive and responsive to citizen opinions when initiating and implementing policies. Chinese citizens, 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. Popular interests and agendas cannot be easily overlooked because ICTs are allowing ordinary people a wider policy platform than the through the state or traditional media, not only to vent their grievance/feelings, but also to organize themselves to (re)assert their rights in ways that were unavailable to past generations.

Amid China's muzzled media environment, there has been an exponential growth of the use of ICTs, and more importantly for this paper, a burgeoning mass of citizen journalists has come into play in China's social and political life. These Internet-based citizen journalists and cyber bloggers are opening up a new landscape of fresh fields of inquiry in almost every aspect of Chinese society. They often cover and/or relay what is being under-reported or misreported in the mainstream media via their use of multiple cyber postings on either websites or personal blogs. Many bloggers are dodging censors and providing an alternative or a dissenting voice for China's poor and disadvantaged by writing news and commentaries that the Beijing government would rather be left unreported. These civic journalists are beating a way through the "Great Firewall" (Deibert, 2002: 143-159; Walton, 2001)[5] to vent and broadcast, such subjects as: the accelerating gulf between the rich and poor, despair in rural society, corruption cases, and many real socioeconomic inequalities and injustices. Significant cracks have clearly emerged in the sophisticated censorship and surveillance project of China's Ministry of Public Security.

It can be argued that this civic journalism (also known as public journalism) has helped promote the rise of Chinese *wei-quan* movement. From time to time, civic journalism challenges the government's authoritative

interpretations and viewpoints on certain major issues, while its very existence proves that China has been unleashed from its old muzzle and chain in the media sector. Some citizen journalists and bloggers are raising public awareness of unjust, unlawful and corrupt cases; sometimes, they are chasing up officials and party leaders who have been reluctant or slow to act, and making them to be more accountable and responsive to citizens by means of collective online opinions and/or orchestrated offline actions.

The impressive growth of China's market economy and consumer society has in recent years also brought increased demands for further improvement in general living standards and the environment. Although Beijing has continuously promised to step up anti-corruption efforts, advance economic development, and work towards a harmonious society, there still exists a lack of government transparency, and the public is denied the right to participate, the right to freedom of speech, and the right to serve as a watchdog of government policies. The soaring number of mass incidents initiated by ordinary people (Li and Chen, 2009: 8), which includes popular personal bloggers and *wei-quan* activists, are a reflection of the awakening of people's rights consciousness. As this rights awareness increases and strengthens, more and more people are willing and skilled at engaging in various *wei-quan* movements. Ordinary citizens are becoming ever more empowered to take advantage of the power and convenience of ICTs to address their concerns and engage in public affairs debate. Furthermore, they are also able to step forward and take action to protect their rights by signing and collecting (online) petitions, organizing and staging public demonstrations, and filing judicial accusation. It is clear that the emergence of *wei-quan* consciousness and the subsequent *wei-quan* movements have been closely intertwined and it is likely that the people-power generated as a result is a force that the CCP will have to reckon with in the Internet age.
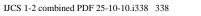
3. The Making and Power of the *Wei-Quan* Movement

As China has continuously opened to the outside world through three decades of reforms, many have witnessed the *wei-quan* movement shift from rhetoric to reality. Since the mid-1990s, the notion of *wei-quan* has also evolved significantly. Initially *wei-quan* was used by the Party-State solely to educate citizens in the operations of the law. It has nevertheless transformed into something greater as it is now used by individuals and groups for the active defence of their rights against the state and official interests and/or unlawful repression.

In cases of unlawful repression, unjust expropriation of property has become one of the most polemical social issues in reforming China. Forced evictions and demolition of property has often resulted in violent and at
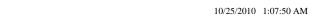
times, bloody, confrontation between (rural) residents and local government or government-backed property developers. Land expropriation in China and the system of compensation have been relentlessly criticized for unlawfully expropriating cultivated land from peasants or landlords against their will. Property owners are often forced to give up or abandon their land even when the legislation on the basis of which the property was expropriated is deemed/declared unlawful, or due to an unlawful decision owing to arbitrary action of government officials. Facing such coercive expropriation, often at the hands of corrupt local officials working in collusion with real estate developers, many villagers and landowners have been forced to take desperate measures to prevent their dispossession of the source of their livelihood.

Land expropriation is one of the primary "externalities of development" that have been responsible for the proliferation of rural conflicts in the past decades. (Zweig, 2000: 120-142) Increased access to information is also another likely factor in the increase. Lucien Bianco notes "… overall it appears that the Chinese countryside has seen more disturbances during the twenty years of reform than during the previous thirty." (2001: 245) Reports of rural violence and protest have increased since the 1990s and have often taken such forms of popular actions as: parades, public demonstrations and (online) petitioning. (Bernstein and Lu, 2003) It is important to highlight not only the growing numbers, but the more provocative nature of these incidents. The forms of action are "increasingly open disgruntlement" (Unger, 2002: 197) that in many heightened conflicts go far beyond "everyday resistance" (Scott, 1985). However, it must be said that although rural conflict and discontent is chronic and widespread across many provinces and regions, most incidents remain small in scale and pose limited political challenge to the regime's survival.

In addition to informal and/or unlawful protests, more formal legal acts of protest, in both the cities and rural areas are on the rise. Many of these are intimately associated with the assertion of rights consciousness and protection in the reform era. In fact, the *wei-quan* movement has been an integral part of China's long march to developing and implementing rule of law initiatives. (Peerenboom, 2002: 2)[6] Additionally, the rapid transition to a market economy and China's integration into the global economy have also been key to the development of an evolving legal consciousness in China. Although few would claim that China is today a country governed by "rule of law", most do however, acknowledge that the communist state "has moved a long way from the 'rule of man' governance approach of traditional China. Today, China is moving in the direction of a legal system that increasingly seeks to restrain the arbitrary exercise of state and private power, and provides the promise, if not the guarantee, for Chinese citizens and other actors to assert their rights and interests in reliance on law." (Horsley, 2006: 1)

Many political scientists have underlined the importance of China's movement towards rule of law, arguing that only the full implementation of rule of law will serve as a solid foundation for maintaining China's market economy and its political development towards a democratic future. (Zhao, 2006; Li, 2008) One such commentator, Larry Diamond, considers "rule of law, with an independent judiciary and other autonomous institutions of horizontal accountability" (2003: 319) key to China's economic future. In fact, to effectively advocate for citizens' rights and for the rule of law it is essential that the Chinese government rein in rampant corruption, excessive abuse of (political) power, financial and political scandals, soaring crime rates, growing income inequality and unbalanced regional development, and more importantly, strengthening the Party's legitimacy and authority. Many intellectuals and legal practitioners believe that overcoming the aforementioned problems would transform the CCP government, to make it a more open, transparent and effective one in the reform era, and further strengthen its legitimacy.

This current situation explains why more Chinese lawyers and legal scholars have become more active in assisting China's legal reform and safeguarding civil rights. These legal practitioners, and often human rights activists, are usually referred to as *wei-quan* lawyers and are indispensable to the grassroots rights protection movement. They give voices to those who are unable to speak and/or fight for themselves and also take on an important role as intermediaries between the victims of (human) rights abuses and the mechanisms of legal redress. Unlike traditional Chinese human rights and democracy activists, these *wei-quan* lawyers generally accept the political legitimacy of the CCP. They do not act as state functionaries, but advocate in their clients interests to realize the maximal rights and protections that citizens' are afforded under China's laws. (Fu and Cullen, 2008: 112) *Wei-quan* activists are not generally seeking to topple the communist government. (Scott, 1990; Chen, 2007: 254)[7] They have, instead, pressured the Party leaders and government officials through legal and extra-legal means such as stimulating strong sentiments of fairness and justice among the population. Another major difference between normal and *wei-quan* lawyers lies in their motivation to take on legal cases. For *wei-quan* lawyers, an "ulterior motive" has been suggested by some, who argue that broader goals can only be achieved in the long term, exist behind the cases that lawyers take. (Fu and Cullen, 2008: 116)[8]

Recently, as social inequalities and divisions have grown and rights consciousness broadened in Chinese society, some *wei-quan* lawyers have engaged in "collective" cases and major "sensitive" cases. These "collective" cases have involved more than ten people, while the "sensitive" ones have related to "land requisitioning and levying of taxes, building demolitions,

migrant enclaves, enterprise transformation, environmental pollution, and rural labourers." (Human Rights in China, 2007; The All-China Lawyers Association, 2006) They are considered "sensitive" because it is assumed that such issues pose a threat to China's sociopolitical stability if they are not coped with appropriately. Although, *wei-quan* lawyers may often lose their cases, they do, however, "help build a legal culture that could one day remodel the authoritarian elements within the OPS [One Party State]." (Fu and Cullen, 2008: 127)

Clearly, Chinese citizens have become notably more adept at using the law and new communications tools to assert and defend their rights and interests against the government and others. The *wei-quan* movement is inseparable from the exponential growth in the use of information and communications technologies. As Bimer and others argue, "Much of politics, from the highly democratic to the rigidly authoritarian, is fundamentally communicative and informational in nature, and the internet is central to changes in the environment of communication and informational that is of historical proportions." (Bimber, Stohl and Flanagin, 2009: 72) The Internet era has ushered in an awakening of the ordinary Chinese citizenry's rights defence as part of the broader resistance to unlawful and unjust discriminatory practices committed by Chinese officials. ICTs, mostly the Internet, SMS and other related information technologies, have opened up a new space where discussion and critique of state policies can take place. This has made the concept of the rule of law, and in particular, *wei-quan*, probable and meaningful in the information age. The Internet plays a crucial role in both facilitating and shaping *wei-quan* activities.

As has been emphasized, *wei-quan* activists are not generally in conflict with broader state agendas. They incorporate officially promoted social and political values, such as building a harmonious society and ensuring recognized statutory principles are defended in under the authoritarian regime. The combination of public pressure and widespread attention allows *wei-quan* activists to exert influence bring pressure to bear on those who are in power but fail to live up to their obligations. Citizens of modern Chinese society may not simply insist that the regime address their social, economic and political demands through official mechanisms. If this were the case, they would certainly demand adequate institutions to allow them to proactively voice themselves in the first place. Engaging through the Internet and social media like online discussion forums, blogs, instant messaging systems, facebook, QQ, Twitter, and other Internet communications systems allows more people to better articulate their (policy) interests and proactively set their own agenda. They can express grievances, discuss and debate public policies, and organize themselves into social movements to mobilize and coordinate collective action when needed. Aggressive activists have even taken stances against

(local) government officials and party leaders, rallying in protest against them. (Guo, 2001: 422-439) The number and scope of *wei-quan* movements have been without a doubt rising in recent years. Social activists, lawyers, savvy Internet users, and ordinary citizens are actively guarding their own welfare, as well as the welfare of those disadvantaged and more vulnerable to their rights being transgressed. They are pressing authorities to (re)adjust, revise, or abolish official policies, seeking compensation for injustice and requesting that unjust decisions be annulled or reversed. It can be said that the autonomous *wei-quan* movement is *per se* a concrete application of the rule of law in the Internet age.

The CCP's general reaction to the rights defence movement has been ambivalent. On the one hand, the central government in Beijing expresses serious concerns over the (rural) poor and recognizes and calls for the urgent construction of an "all-round well-off society" (*quanmian xiaokang shehui* 全面小康社会) and a "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) underpinned by the principles of rule of law and *wei-quan*. The CCP government understands well that bloggers and citizen journalists also play an important role as a "virtual" pressure valve in China. The stories and comments of online writers and citizen journalists are seen to alleviate unstable forces and social tensions that could significantly undercut the legitimacy of the CCP if this popular pressure were not properly channelled, released, or dealt with. In other words, the online world, to some extent, is a space for the release of people's frustrations and discontent that the existing system cannot effectively deal with. Currently lacking the same formal and effective mechanisms as more open systems, such as an independent judiciary or national popular vote, China's authoritarian political system cannot appropriately manage and release any potential and/or existing social anxiety, outcry and unrest.

On the other hand, government officials, particularly those at lower levels (the city and rural areas), have cracked down and attempted to silence these rights movements based on the presumption that all social movements undermine social stability, dampen official progress towards building a harmonious society, challenge the political order, hinder economic growth, and eventually weaken the governing legitimacy of the CCP. Local government has been politically cautious about the scale, intensity, and any important attributes attached to the emergence of *wei-quan* movements. For CCP officials, the consequences of the *wei-quan* movements have been paradoxically liberating and challenging for the capacity and authority of the Chinese government(s) at all levels. It is a liberating force as society has been further de-politicized and de-regulated. However, it is also a challenging force for the incumbent government as the authority of the Party-State and capacities of the people's government are being undermined by rising popular

demands and actions. These forces of challenge and liberation force have definite political implications for China's state-society relations in the Internet age. The bottom-up force derived by the dynamic *wei-quan* movements may facilitate and reinforce a favourable social basis of the twin effects in the Chinese context: an increasingly vibrant civil society and middle class.[9]

4. Conclusion: The Politics of *Wei-Quan* in Changing State-Society Relations

Coupled with the widened public horizontal communication brought by the ICTs, the rise of the *wei-quan* movement is energizing civil engagement and the fledgling middle-class. Both are making important contributions to China's development by serving as the foundation for a healthy and dynamic civil society. The rise of the *wei-quan* movement is in part facilitated and bolstered by the comparative ease and convenience promised by new media that allow unprecedented access to multiple sources of news and information. Nonetheless, this does not mean that Chinese authorities have given free rein to Net-savvy Chinese and activists to using ICTs to wage any and all social movements and/or freely surf and comment in the cyberspace. The government has, instead, attempted to shape what is called a "healthy and orderly" online environment. This is being done mainly through the employment of Internet firewalls, cyber regulations and policing, the imposition of physical/mental threats and arrests to contain public Internet use, and the promotion of self-censorship among Netizens and Internet entrepreneurs, so as to maintain a "virtual" public space that does not breach the political foundation of the Party-State.[10]

Meanwhile, the Internet and computer-mediated communications make news, alternative and dissenting information and opinions relatively accessible from and among the grass-roots level in China. This horizontal communication system challenges light-minded and complacent assertions made by authoritarian governments about their "success stories" in managing and controlling information flow – both on- and off-line. Internet users and social activists now enjoy the same relative ease of (horizontal) communication as that that is performed through top-down propaganda channels by governments, such as electronic versions of state-owned media coverage and the E-government projects. (Shambaugh, 2007: 25-58; Brady, 2008) In other words, with ICTs Chinese people can now speak and consult more freely among themselves, discuss/debate public issues more easily, engage official, centralized mainstream generators of news and opinions, and create more favourable social conditions with public opinion support for *wei-quan* movements.

Realizing the power of ICTs the Chinese government has always remained vigilant over the control of the Internet and other mobile technologies. The

great fear is that new media will be widely exploited by politically-defiant and technology-savvy Netizens and journalists. The CPP government is concerned that with free access to these technologies newly-empowered citizens will launch (orchestrated) social protests/movements against the Party-State, since they can now disseminate reactionary news, opinions, and information in a rapid and effective way. Faced with this threat, Chinese authorities have been impelled to strengthen the authoritarian regime. To do so they have intensified their grip on control over information flow and opinion manipulation, information channelling, the correction of mainstream media and cyberspace (Wu, 2009: 146; Zhao, 2008: 35-36), and have also attempted to minimize the negative impact of social gatherings and social movements on the CCP's ruling leadership.

It is certainly difficult, if not impossible, for civil society to fully grow in an authoritarian political milieu. Under such conditions, the state usually stifles civil society while it is still in an incipient stage. For example, the authoritarian government has prevented indigenous communities or civic groups from organizing on sufficient scale to defend their interests. The Internet and mobile communications technologies have the potential to awaken and bolster citizen consciousness of rights protection since these new communications technologies help facilitate civil discussion and participation in public affairs and advance public awareness of social justice and civil/political rights. (Zheng, 2008)

With rising expectations and public demands for continual improvement in quality of life and protection of social, economic, and political rights, the citizens of transitional China may not merely require the regime to address their demands just through (state-owned) mass media. They also want adequate channels to proactively articulate their demands in the first place. This bottom-up force of *wei-quan*, or pressure derived from a general public empowered by ICTs, may facilitate and reinforce a favourable social basis for the twin effects of an increasingly dynamic civil society and *wei-quan* movement. The deepened reforms and rapid economic growth over the past three decades have brought increased formal legal rights and paved the way ordinary citizens to realize the importance of proactively claiming their legal rights and protections. Considering the discrepancy between officially stated legal rights and government violations against constitutionally recognized and protected human rights, there exist rising opportunities for *wei-quan* movements and incidents to emerge and develop in authoritarian China. This is akin to what O'Brien and Li refer to as "rightful resistance" which they describe as: "a form of popular contention that operates near the boundary of authorized channels, employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to cub the exercise of power, hinges on locating and exploiting divisions within the state, and replies on mobilizing support from the wider public." (2006: 2)

In conclusion, the role of the Internet, SMS, and other ICTs serve as a catalyst and facilitator in awakening citizen consciousness of civil rights in China. An autonomous *wei-quan* movement has sprung up as many independent civil rights campaigners and activists have adopted sophisticated communications technology to educate ordinary people about their basic rights and to rally support for the (domestic) rights defence movement and its activists. These campaigners and activists are making the government more accountable and responsive to the rising power of grassroots *wei-quan* activists and groups. As China continues to deepen its economic reform and open-door policy, pluralized socioeconomic interests are jointly taken up in the growing civic-oriented agendas, and may accordingly restrict the CCP's autonomy and governing capacity in solely determining the policy orientation, content and delivery. Where there is continually imbalanced economic development, polarized social class structure, and rampant government corruption there is also a substantial rise in the prevalence of *wei-quan* activism in the information age. This will not only have socioeconomic consequences, but also certainly will have far-reaching influence on and implications for China's changing state-society relations and political prospects as well.

Notes

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1. According to China's quasi-official Internet Information Center, the young, educated and urban professionals and students living mostly coastal cities and provinces constitute the majority of the Chinese Internet users. See China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, January 2010).
2. According to the most recent Survey by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the number of net citizens in China has reached 420 million by the end of June 2010, with the Internet penetration rate 31.8 per cent. See the 26th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, China Internet Network Information Center, 15th July 2010.

3. The mantra of paramount Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping has said, "stability above all else" (稳定压倒一切). This has been the highest article of faith at all levels of government. Those who protest or petition to the authorities – no matter the cause – can according in principle be accused of breaching stability, and subject to legal repression.

4. Arguably China's development model stands out as a successful model of a socialist transition economy, with its economic boom bringing about an increase in GDP per capita by 8.8 times from 1978 to 2005, and an annual growth rate of about 9 per cent or so in the recent years. See National Bureau of Statistics of People of Republic of China (中华人民共和国国家统计局), *China Statistical Yearbook 2009* (中国统计年鉴 2009).

5. It is also referred to as "The Golden Shield Project" (*Jindun Gongcheng* 金盾工程). See more discussions at Deibert (2002: 143-159); Walton (2001).

6. Drawing on his earlier business and legal experiences in China, Randall Peerenboom formulate a new theory of the rule of law to explain the changes of Chinese legal system in the period since the post-Mao reforms. He defines rule of law as "a system in which law is able to impose meaningful restraints on the state and individual members of the ruling elite." See Peerenboom (2002: 2).

7. It is interesting to note that some scholars argue that ordinary people in China sometimes manage to engage in resistance while somehow remaining submissive. James Scott, for example, calls this strategy "everyday forms of resistance. Similarly, Xi Chen refers this protest tactics as "protest opportunism" as he argues that Chinese protesters "operate close to authorized channels and to take dramatic actions to demonstrate their obedience." See Scott (1990); Chen (2007: 254).

8. The ulterior motive may be referring to the gender equality promotion, ending one-party state, and the promotion of social and racial justice. See Fu and Cullen (2008: 112).

9. See further discussions at Yang (2009).

10. Through the sophisticated establishment of cyber great firewall and a number of filtering online programs and surveillance devices, the CCP intends to constrain the seemingly unfettered democratizing forces of ICT, and ultimately restrict any political impact of the Internet and new information technologies. See also Chase and Mulvenon (2002).

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