

Web 2.0 and Political Engagement in China

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Published online: 28 July 2015

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Abstract This article examines civic and political engagement in contemporary China by three recent cases where activists and citizens take full advantage of interactive information technologies and Web 2.0 tools to overcome obstacles and mobilize for public goods. The cases show how activists act strategically to mobilize mass-based support and use various technologies to ensure monetary transaction, resource allocation, public monitoring, and large-scale inter-organizational coordination. In addition, they also demonstrate how ordinary Chinese citizens take part in innovative civic initiatives, act upon their own decisions, and eventually contribute to the change of a failed policy and the solution to a public problem. Different forms of online mass political engagement have introduced new dynamism to public affairs in China, enhanced social autonomy, and thus can have accumulative impact on the asymmetric power relationship between the authoritarian state and society.

Résumé Cet article étudie l'engagement civique et politique dans la Chine contemporaine par trois cas récents où des militants et des citoyens tirent pleinement parti des technologies de l'information interactives et des outils du web 2.0 pour surmonter les obstacles et se mobiliser pour les biens publics. Ces cas montrent comment les militants agissent de façon stratégique pour mobiliser un soutien de masse et utiliser différentes technologies pour assurer la transaction monétaire,

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l'affectation des ressources, le contrôle public et une coordination interorganisationnelle à grande échelle. Ils montrent, de plus, comment de simples citoyens chinois prennent part à des initiatives citoyennes innovantes, agissent selon leurs propres décisions et contribuent finalement à modifier l'échec de la politique et la solution à un problème public. Différentes formes de participation politique de masse en ligne ont introduit une nouvelle dynamique aux affaires publiques en Chine, une plus grande autonomie sociale et peuvent donc avoir des répercussions cumulatives sur le rapport de force asymétrique entre l'État autoritaire et la société.

Zusammenfassung Dieser Beitrag untersucht das bürgerliche und politische Engagement im heutigen China anhand von drei jüngsten Beispielen, bei denen Aktivisten und Bürger interaktive Informationstechnologien und Web-2.0-Tools zu ihrem Vorteil nutzen, um Hindernisse zu überkommen und sich für öffentliche Güter zu mobilisieren. Die Beispiele zeigen, wie Aktivisten strategisch vorgehen, um die Unterstützung der Massen zu mobilisieren, und wie sie verschiedene Technologien nutzen, um finanzielle Transaktionen, die Ressourcenverteilung, die öffentliche Überwachung und eine umfangreiche Koordinierung zwischen Organisationen zu gewährleisten. Darüber hinaus zeigen die Beispiele, wie gewöhnliche chinesische Bürger an innovativen Bürgerinitiativen teilnehmen, eigenständig handeln und schließlich zur Änderung einer fehlgeschlagenen Politik und zur Lösung eines öffentlichen Problems beitragen. Verschiedene Formen des politischen Engagements der Massen haben in China zu einer neuen Dynamik in öffentlichen Angelegenheiten geführt und die soziale Autonomie erhöht, wodurch sie die asymmetrische Machtbeziehung zwischen dem autoritären Staat und der Gesellschaft verstärkt beeinflussen können.

Resumen El presente artículo examina el compromiso cívico y político en la China contemporánea mediante tres casos recientes en los que los activistas y los ciudadanos aprovechan plenamente las tecnologías interactivas de información y las herramientas Web 2.0 para superar obstáculos y movilizar bienes públicos. Los casos muestran cómo los activistas actúan estratégicamente para movilizar apoyo de masas y utilizan diversas tecnologías para garantizar las transacciones monetarias, la asignación de recursos, la monitorización pública y la coordinación entre organizaciones a gran escala. Asimismo, también demuestran cómo los ciudadanos chinos corrientes participan en iniciativas cívicas innovadoras, actúan según sus propias decisiones y contribuyen eventualmente al cambio de una política fallida y a la solución a un problema público. Diferentes formas de compromiso político de masas online han introducido nuevo dinamismo en los asuntos públicos en China, han mejorado la autonomía social y de este modo pueden tener un impacto acumulativo sobre la relación de poder asimétrica entre el estado autoritario y la sociedad.

Keywords Political engagement · Policy advocacy · Civil society · Web 2.0 · China

Introduction

By the year of 2014, China's population of web users has reached 649 million (CINIC 2015, p. 25), over twice that of the United States (279 million) or India (243 million).¹ Internet penetration in China (46 %) measure by the ratio of web users to total national population has exceeded the average of all developing countries (42 %), though still falling behind that of America (87 %) and other OECD members.² Despite the Great Fire Wall enforced by the Chinese state to block and censor foreign websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, and Google, local versions of interactive websites for social networking, sharing video clips, searching, and custom-to-custom trading have flourished and gained millions of registered fans. With affordable smart phones and Wi-Fi access, online interactive activities have become an integral part of Chinese netizens' daily lives, not only the young and educated but also a significant portion of the working class (Qiu 2010; CINIC 2015, pp. 31–35).³

This article examines civic engagement in China in the context of a fast growing population of active netizens (CINIC 2015, pp. 25–26) and Web 2.0—online portals that are essentially participatory, interactive, collaborative, and instantaneous (O'Reilly 2007). It focuses on how social leaders and netizens use various information and communication technologies (ICTs) made available by Web 2.0 sites to overcome specific political barriers, mobilize broad participation, and ensure public accountability in the processes of advocating for the public good. At a time, when scholars have questioned “clustering many concepts into one” and “overstretching” of the term “civic engagement” (Berger 2009, p. 335), publishing a special volume on civic engagement in the Chinese context requires academic boldness. Conventional knowledge suggests that there would be inadequate civic engagement under authoritarianism because this entire political system is built on doctrines repressing citizens' civil rights and social autonomy. However, this article (together with the rest of the volume) illustrates meaningful civic and political actions taken by ordinary Chinese citizens not only for fair treatment of themselves but also to introduce changes for the benefit of the general public.

With in-depth comparative case analysis, this article contributes to the scholarly debate on civic engagement in China in three aspects. First, this research thrusts into the most challenging component of civic engagement in China, namely political engagement. Three full-fledged cases are carefully selected to elaborate three distinctive types of political engagement emerging in China: policy monitoring and critiquing, activism for basic rights, and direct participation in service delivery and governance. The number of cases is sufficient for initial stage research to outline causal mechanisms (Collier 1993). Second, the article emphasizes and examines the

¹ <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users-by-country/>, accessed 20 June 2015.

² Ibid.

³ According to the 35th Statistical Report by CNNIC published in January 2015, 78.1 % netizens are in the age group of 10–39, 67.4 % with middle school and above education, and 63.5 % are middle income and above.

broad scope of participation in recent cases of political engagement facilitated by Web 2.0 technologies. It notes that online mass incidents targeting political matters are surfacing across professional backgrounds and socio-economic fault lines. The spotlight is on the large amount of anonymous netizens who together have made a difference, although activist leadership is instrumental in general. Finally, this research goes beyond narrative analysis and traces the actions, processes, and outcomes of political engagement. It will show that netizens have not only exposed social problems and pursued bottom-up solutions but more importantly also have invented methods to make their actions publicly accountable and decision making transparent. Such increasingly multi-layered and broad-based activism and policy advocacy indicate the deepening and maturing of political engagement in China, which is different from either victimhood-driven protests or elite-led political dissident movement.

The article consists of five main sections and a conclusion. The literature review is followed by three sections of case studies based on publicly available materials, online sources, and personal interviews from 2012 to 2014.⁴ For each case, particular attention is paid to explain how Chinese netizens, social leaders, and civil society groups use Web 2.0 tools to evade political risks, encourage wide participation, and more importantly establish rules of self-governance. In the comparative analysis section, the cases are considered together to discern advantages introduced by Web 2.0 and then juxtaposed with one another to further explore how various factors affect the processes of mobilization and activism. In the conclusion, the long-term accumulative impact of mass-based activism, advocacy, and public participation on Chinese politics is discussed.

Debating the Politics of the Internet and Civic Engagement in China

The Internet and web-based ICTs have been a source of inquiry for political scientists since these technologies were in their infancy. The first generation of political studies regarding globalized communication and the Internet emphasized their demonstrative and discursive power, which appeared at the time innately against power centralization and abuse, thus promoting individual liberty and democratic values (Wilhelm 1990). However, the tide has turned since then and there arises a gradual disenchantment of the liberal democratic vindication of the digital era (Norris 2001; Sunstein 2001, 2007; Hindman 2009; Morozov 2011; Schwarz 2014). Empirical studies show that the Internet has limited capacity to transform existing stratified patterns of political participation and representation so to dismantle the salient power asymmetries in societies (Schlozman et al. 2010).

Entering the age of Web 2.0, social scientists have identified new mechanisms by which the Internet can have impact on society and politics. Compared with Web 1.0, user-generated content is a crucial feature of Web 2.0 that transforms ordinary individuals from passive receivers to the main producers of information on the

⁴ We have compiled a folder of web images related to all three cases, many of which no longer can be found on the Internet. They can be made available for research purpose upon request.

Internet (Boyd 2002; Boyd and Ellison 2007; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, pp. 60–61). Sharing some features with its antecedents, Web 2.0 surfing is a “qualitatively different experience” because the web user must actually *do* something with the technologies to make the website alive (Birdsall 2007). It is precisely through this *doing* part Web 2.0 platform could turn a regular web user into a participant in a public campaign with highly personalized experience and knowledge (Lievrouw 2014). In addition, recent advancements in geoweb and spatial media that integrate geographic informational system (GIS) technologies on a Web 2.0 site have opened new tools for the activist community and new opportunities for ordinary web users to “transpose narrative descriptions of events or conditions into (mostly quantitative) forms stored in a special database or represented cartographically” and “become an integral component of the knowledge production process” (Elwood and Leszczynski 2013, p. 548). By participating in the “mapping out” process of a social event, individual netizens together produce a collective narrative based on reliable first-hand data and information, which can be further used to legitimize their claims and activism (Rinner et al. 2008; Elwood et al. 2012; Kawasaki et al. 2013; Molaei 2015). Two recent political events, the 2008 Obama Presidential Campaign and the Arab Spring demonstrations from December 2010 to mid-2012, have affirmed scholarly hunches and showed the world how interactive ICTs and social networking sites could play a critical role in generating information, shaping and moderating public opinion, and facilitating social mobilization for political goals, particularly among young people (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011; Howard et al. 2011; Aouragh and Alexander 2011; Vesnic-Alujevic 2012; Howard and Hussain 2013; Wolfsfeld et al. 2013; Alexander and Aouragh 2014; Maamari and El Zein 2014).

Academic research on the political relevance of the Internet in China largely mirrors the main trends in general presented above yet is more unsettled when predicting its impact on state-society relations. Depicted as the prime counter-example of the “Dictator’s Dilemma in the time of Web 2.0” (Morozov 2011; Chen 2014), the Chinese state has established sophisticated censorship measures with a range of tactics and even maneuvered the virtual space to its own advantage (Bamman et al. 2012; Fu et al. 2013; King et al. 2013; MacKinnon 2009, 2011; Sullivan 2013; Zheng 2008, pp.160–165). However, Chinese netizens have amply displayed their wit and courage in resisting the state’s complete control over the Internet. A “blog revolution” (Esarey and Qiang 2008) by netizens has thrived with creative usages of political satire, code-words, visual files, implicit criticism (Gong and Yang 2010; Leibold 2011; Lu and Qiu 2013), and turned the Internet sometimes into “the center of political contestation” (Yang 2014). For example, the Guo Meimei scandal exploded on the Internet in the summer of 2011 and led to nationwide public critique of the corruption and malfunction of China’s official public philanthropy institution—the Red Cross Society.

Moreover, there are signs that deliberative and civic discussions can take place on the Internet in spite of incidents of *Egao* (devastation) and “human fresh search” that abused individual privacy (MacKinnon 2008). In the cases of a popular TV talent show—*Super Girl*, a tragic high-speed rail accident in Wenzhou, and a government-backed proposal to build a coal power plant in Haimen, scholars

documented that Chinese netizens were able to move beyond entertainment, gossip, and simple blaming of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and engage in serious exchanges of technical problems, policy obstacles, and different political opinions (Bondes and Schucher 2014; Tong and Zuo 2014; Wu 2014).

One who has little doubt that the Internet offers “a new channel for expression” in China may still question whether it is sufficient to “promote political openness, transparency and accountability” and “empower the society” in relation to the CCP state (Zheng and Wu 2005). One way to address this question is to connect creative web usage with another significant social change in China since the late 1990s: the “associational revolution” (Wang and He 2004) and rapid rise of grassroots non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Hildebrandt 2013; Teets 2014; Wu 2013). As a civic culture and a community of grassroots, NGOs are gradually taking roots in the Chinese society, and the Internet has fostered new resources for social activism (Yang 2003, 2009). Particularly in the field of environmental protection, NGOs have used the Internet extensively to raise public awareness, receive pollution grievances, and conduct policy advocacy (Yang and Calhoun 2007). In recent years, small-scale, narrowly focused, yet highly efficient social groups such as outdoor sports clubs have mushroomed in various places as a result of Web 2.0 communications. What is worth noting about these social groups is that they have established self-governing rules and implemented self-initiated missions to solve particular social problems such as sending support to poor rural schools (Zhang 2014).

Drawing on the insights from the above literature of the socio-political effects of the Internet in general and in China particularly, this article contests the thin interpretation of civic engagement in China that claims it remains largely in the discursive realm and heavily constrained by the state, with limited participation and dispersed effects (Ho and Edmonds 2008; Leibold 2011; Thornton 2012; Unger and Chan 2008). This article instead argues that civic engagement in China is expanding and deepening even in the most challenging area where citizens act together to criticize policies and state behaviors and to solve public problems with self-governance mechanisms. By examining three cases of political engagement with some elements of “online mass incidents” (Tong and Zuo 2014), this research put forward the observation that different calls of activism, policy critiquing, and participation in public affairs have emerged from virtual spaces, and large numbers of Chinese citizens have responded to such calls by collecting and sharing first-hand evidence, making material contributions and participating directly in public service delivery. More importantly, both the organizers and participants have become aware of the issue of public accountability and taken actions to address it using various Web 2.0 tools. Therefore, not merely the frequency or scope but the sophisticated and reflective processes and improved ways for self-governance and public monitoring indicate the maturing of social activism and political engagement in China.

It is crucial to note that in the following three cases netizens’ actions are directed at self-help, self-rule, and self-capacity building. In this sense, civic engagement in China contains the essential elements of the term defined in a democracy: active citizenship. It means individuals taking an active and proactive, instead of merely

reactive, role in public affairs. In Putnam's (1993) original conclusion on democracy building in post-World War II Italy, it is not associations and NGOs per se that matter but individual citizens' *participation* in various social lives that boosts their skills in attending political matters, which in turn would make democratic institutions perform as they are designed. Skocpol's (2003) explanation of the decline of civic engagement in America is the shift from compassionate communities with vibrant associational lives to managerial governance over the non-profit sector.

A note of clarification is in order. The term "mass incident" in academic writings on Chinese politics has a particular contentious connotation. It is often used interchangeably with "collective incident," or "group incident" (*quntixing shijian*), and commonly understood as large-scale spontaneous cases of social contention marked by protests, vandalism, and other public acts against the authorities in the Chinese political context. Some of such incidents fall under the category of "rightful resistance," with groups of policy victims using lawful means to pursue compensation and fair treatment (O'Brien and Li 2006). Others bear clear traits of the "Chinese revolutionary tradition" and remain highly isolated to release locally rooted social unrest (Perry 2007). However, the mass incidents originating from Web 2.0 studied in this article differ from both of the above two categories because they are essentially driven by not victimhood or grievances but proactive initiatives that identify the cause of and offer a solution to a social problem or policy failure. The participants of this type of mass incident are not direct victims of a policy or social problem but concerned citizens who want to contribute to the public good. While challenging and even opposing governmental policies and decisions, the online mass incidents studied here also differ from dissident movements or anti-regime political activism (Goldman 2005, Fu and Cullen 2011, Teng 2012). Their immediate goal is not to delegitimize or overthrow the CCP's rule but to achieve specific change of policy and solve the existing problem. The regime's legitimacy ultimately may suffer due to the exposure of policy failure, but it is inaccurate to argue that each case of Web 2.0 political activism and mass incident is directed at fundamental political change in China.

The difficulty for the study of the rise of civic, non-contentious politics in China is not just conceptual but also empirical, which is to discern the mutually embedded boundaries, both physical and mental (Migdal 2004), between the state and society. The real challenge is to locate where the real tension and struggle are behind various names, documents, and programs of service delivery, donation, and public education (Deng 2010; Wu 2013, pp. 90–91). Politics is even more elusive in the virtual world. Governmental branches, officials, party cadres, state media, and quasi-state agencies all compete for public attention in micro-blogging spaces and on social networking sites. The cases presented in the next three sections are self-organized citizens' initiatives, which are different from various kinds of "public consultation," "participatory budgeting," and "public deliberation" initiated, designed, and enforced by various governmental agencies in China in recent years (Zhao 2010; He 2011; Korolev 2014).

Micro-blog Relay of Military Vehicle Snapshots

From February to May 2013, one of the most popular events on China's Internet was a self-driven relay of snapshot images of luxury military vehicles and their misuse. Professor Yu Jianrong, a scholar from the Chinese Academy of Social Science, was the *de facto* leader of this “new social media movement.”⁵ Posting photos of military vehicles and commenting on the problems in the Chinese military became so popular at the time that all mainstream media followed online discussions and intensely published on the topic. In less than two months after the first snapshot post, the central authority announced new regulatory measures regarding military and government-owned vehicles.

Professor Yu, a popular public intellectual known for his scholarship on rural policies, became a “super-netizen” with approximately 1.85 million followers soon after he opened a Sina Weibo account in 2011.⁶ Sina Weibo is an expanded version of Twitter and the most popular micro-blog site in China.⁷ In early February 2013, a netizen randomly posted a picture of a luxury military car on Sina Weibo and contacted Yu by “@ Principle” asking him to guess the price of the car. The “@ Principle” is a common function in social media that generates a specific notification to the receiver and creates a direct channel of communication between individual micro-bloggers. Yu re-posted this particular picture on his micro-blog with his guess. The post and Yu's guess, which was far below the perceived market price, drew many netizens' attention instantly. Netizens began to take first-hand snapshots of luxury cars with military plates and ask Yu to guess the price. Yu would selectively re-post some pictures and purposefully guess incorrectly to the degree of being laughable, or make a joke about the image, which received good responses and turned the whole posting-commenting-sharing into a mockery of over-spending by the Chinese military. For example, he “guessed” a fourth generation Land Rover (market value of 1 million RMB) just worth 1000 RMB. Replying to another post, he “mistakenly” called a luxury Audi car “QQ”—a domestic economic brand mostly used by lower-middle income families. Once a netizen posted an image and wrote: “Professor Yu, please identify the car that is fulfilling emergency task near a kindergarten, [Volkswagen] Jetta or Santana?” Although it was in fact a luxury car with military plate, Yu responded: “How can a broken Santana show off?” In another post, a netizen commented on a picture of a military vehicle parked in front of a park, from which a family stepped out: “Saturday, Sunny, and XX Park. I guess you are not here to conduct any military tasks.” Yu then responded by making a pun: “If it is to send the general's wife and

⁵ The authors were on the same panel with Yu at an academic conference in Beijing on 4 December 2012 when he gave a presentation on the online campaigns he had led in recent years. He conceptualized these campaigns as the “new media social movement.”

⁶ The total number of Yu's followers on Sina micro-blog (<http://weibo.com/yujianrong?topnav=1&wvr=5&topsug=1>) fluctuates over time. Yu at times complained that Sina.com used technological barriers to stop more netizens following his account.

⁷ Sina Weibo had attracted 66 million active daily users as of March 2014 (<http://tech.sina.com.cn/z/weiboipo/index.shtml>, accessed 10 August 2014).

child to the park, of course such is military task. Even if it is to send the [general's] chauffer's wife and child to the park, such is still official duty. Domestic helpers in a general's household are considered governmental officials at the seventh rank."

Unexpectedly, the initial snapshot posts incited wide participation by ordinary citizens. Yu wrote in a post on 8 February, only several days after the very first re-posting of the military vehicle, that he was asked through his micro-blog several hundred times every day to guess the price of military vehicles (An 2013). Numerous pictures appeared on various online portals, and the relay became not only centered around Yu's micro-blog but also considerably widespread. More super-netizens with millions of follower also joined the relay. Specific websites designated to present collections of the most popular posts related to military vehicles emerged even during the Spring Festival national holidays that year (Li 2013a).⁸

Mass media followed soon. *South China Morning Post*, a Hong Kong-based English newspaper with extensive coverage on China, first picked up the snapshot relay on 15 February (Li 2013a). Three days later, *People's Daily*, the official propaganda organ of the Chinese government, published a commentary and expanded the criticism to include all government-owned cars, stating that these cars were often spotted at "places of interest, private schools, funeral homes and even vineyards" (Ji 2013). Professor Yu immediately noted on his micro-blog that the *People's Daily* report showed the "agenda-setting power" of public opinion in the age of new social media, which further boosted netizens' enthusiasm to continue the snapshot relay. News reporting on military cars increased dramatically in late February and peaked in March (Fig. 1). A consensus of public opinion emerged and summarized the widespread problem as "private usage of public vehicles" (*gongche siyong*) (Lu and Zong 2013). Public discussions triggered by the snapshots further developed and examined the root causes of the problem such as poor regulatory enforcement at local levels and the lack of public monitoring of military and governmental spending (Li 2013b; Xiao 2013).

Although it is difficult to locate confirmable evidence attributing the snapshot relay directly to the formation of new regulations concerning military vehicles, there is enough for the public to think so. Months before the public become interested in military vehicles, the General Staff Department of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) announced that there would be new regulation of military vehicles plate in 2013, without confirming the exact date. During the peak time of the snapshot relay, the Ministry of Defense held on a press conference on 28 February, and a journalist specifically mentioned the relay and asked when the PLA would begin to use new vehicle plates. In response, the spokesperson publicly acknowledged that the military authority was aware of the public criticism and announced that the PLA would begin to use new plates on 1 May 2013.⁹ The snapshot relay might have exerted pressured on the authorities to publicly release the exact date of adopting new military plates, and even pushed

⁸ One example is the site <http://photo.cnhubei.com/2013/0217/47097.shtml>, accessed 20 June 2015.

⁹ http://www.mod.gov.cn/affair/2013-02/28/content_4439577.htm, accessed 20 June 2015.

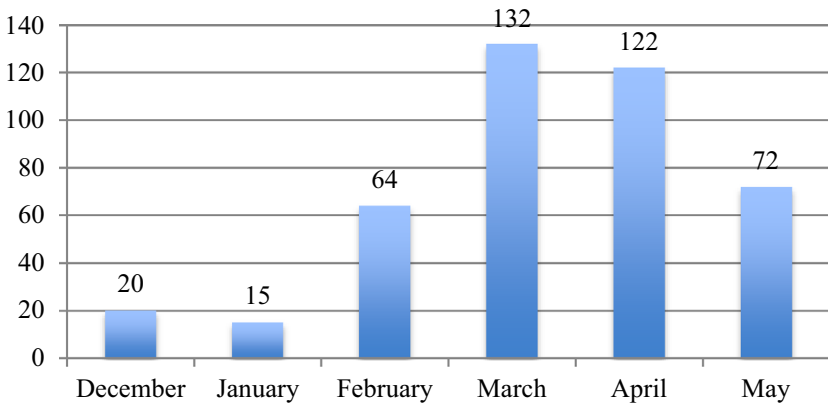


Fig. 1 Number of newspaper reports related to military vehicles (December 2012 to May 2013). Note: Keyword search “junche” (military vehicle in Chinese) of headlines via WiseNews and CNKI (a major database of Chinese newspapers, academic journals, and periodicals)

the date earlier than originally planned.¹⁰ It could also have had some specific input on the 2013 military vehicle regulation, for example, brands like Mercedes Benz and BMW, most frequently spotted by netizens and posted online, would no longer be permitted to register for military use.¹¹

This Weibo snapshot relay is a classic example of online mass incident combined with policy advocacy. The “@ Principle” of the micro-blog space was the key Web 2.0 function that facilitated social mobilization, broad participation, risk sharing, policy discussion, and public opinion formation in this case. It first offered a rare opportunity for ordinary netizens to reach out to social elites and people more resourceful, such as Yu Jianrong. In turn, the interactive nature of micro-blogging and posting increased Yu’s capacity to obtain reliable information and lead public discussion. Yu’s responsive re-posts and his wide readership encouraged more ordinary netizens to join the snapshot relay. Seeing their snapshots re-posted by Yu spread on the Internet and even cited in mainstream media had a positive effect on netizens’ self-efficacy, and produced incentives for them to continue monitor the development of the relay and its impact. Via the “@ Principle,” millions of originally unrelated micro-blog users got connected, and they in turned transformed the elusive micro-blog space into an, in a sense, unlimited and direct venue for massive amount of evidence to emerge which shaped up the public opinion on the problem.

Most striking in this case is that many netizens were able to quickly grasp Yu’s policy views beneath jokes and random pictures and collaborated with him without any explicit slogan or mobilization rules. The actual content of each snapshot post in this case was mostly a straightforward image with very brief text stating location and time. Each post and attached comment is less of a separate discursive unit but a

¹⁰ It is common for the PLA to replace military plates for better vehicle management, which had occurred six times before 2013, and each time was in the second half of the calendar year.

¹¹ Note 11.

constituting part of one common public action. Yu's micro-blog and the "@ Yu Jianrong" function linked fragmented information together and turned them into something big and meaningful. By posting a snapshot of a military vehicle online or sending it to Yu, a netizen is not merely self-expressing but taking a step further to join in the implicit collective criticism of a policy failure and a case of corruption. In the virtual world, an individual post alone can easily get lost in an ocean of information. However, in this case, amidst ambiguity and humor, images and comments flushed in and got connected, and the shared concern became one loud voice.

The Meal Delivery Party and Political Activism for Political Prisoners

Since late 2012, fundraising initiatives for the families of political prisoners have emerged on the Chinese Internet. The organizers and active participants of these activities referred to their cause as "meal delivery" (*song fan*) and themselves as members of the Meal Delivery Party (*song fan dang*, MDP). The first of these fundraising activities was conducted by a well-known blogger and human rights advocate Rou Tang Seng (online pseudo-name in Chinese). The MDP generated a total of 3.05 million RMB in donations from 28 March to 24 October 2013 when the main e-business outlet for the cause was forced to close.¹² Throughout their publications and activities, the MDP explicitly and implicitly promoted public awareness of the issue of political prisoner.

On 20 July 2012, Xiao Yong, a long-time human rights activist who had advocated for the commemoration of the 1989 Tiananmen Protest and assistance to petitioners, was accused of economic crimes and sentenced for 18 months in prison. After Xiao's trial, Rou Tang Seng wrote a short piece on his Sina Weibo space on 22 August: "I don't know Xiao, but I know that he has lost his freedom because of his opinion. I hope someone can support his family together with me." This request was the first attempt in China at public fundraising for political prisoner. Rou Tang Seng later asked those who wanted to donate money to contact him privately for bank account information through "inbox mail"—an embedded tool for personal communication on Sina Weibo. In the end, Rou Tang Seng received 152,495 RMB from 1001 netizens. Given the sensitivity of the topic, the success surprised everyone.

By late March 2013, Rou Tang Seng moved to Taobao.com to collect donations mainly due to the heavy workload of replying to individual donors, arranging bank

¹² An internal audit report was once put online by the MDP but soon disappeared, presumably due to censorship. According to the report we read, 1 million RMB of the donations were used for disaster relief of the Ya'an earthquake in April 2013 whereas the remaining amount was sent to the families of various political prisoners. The authors have not been able to conduct an interview with Rou Tang Seng or any members of the MDP, but in November 2013, the first author spoke with an activist residing in Hong Kong who has worked with the MDP. The interviewee prefers to remain anonymous for this article. According to this interviewee, funds were sent to the families of Xiao Yong, Tang Jitian, Wang Dengzhao, and even more prominent political prisoners or activists under house arrest at the time such as Chen Guangcheng and Gao Zhisheng.

transaction details and ensuring transparency and accountability of all donations.¹³ Launched in 2003, Taobao, Chinese and expanded version of eBay, is a leading custom-to-custom e-commerce platform with more than 231 million active users and 11.3 billion transactions per year (Alibaba Group 2014).¹⁴ Taobao offers “meal delivery” activism sufficient tools to ensure safe, reliable, and traceable online transactions. Rou Tang Seng’s “meat shop” at Taobao was opened on 28 March 2013 and immediately “sold” his own “articles” for 120,000 RMB. The “articles” contained only two words: “Thank you.” The shop later auctioned personal goods from social celebrities, super-netizens, and public intellectuals and even the opportunities to have dinner with them, presumably inspired by the famous bidding for “lunch with Warren Buffet” on eBay.com.

Another problem for “meal delivery” activism that troubled the MDP was that all activities were centered on Rou Tang Seng. In response, the MDP began a new experiment on Taobao.com in April 2013. Based on commercial incentives, MDP started a “meat shop alliance” and invited online shop owners to join and use the “meal delivery” branding for free in exchange for a small down payment and a certain percentage of profits as donations. By joining this alliance, the online shops can benefit from generating additional revenue from buyers who are sympathetic to the cause of political prisoners’ rights and welfare; MDP also gains by receiving more donations and raising awareness of its cause among ordinary online shoppers. Some of the alliance member shops even sold promotional products, such as T-shirts and mugs with the “meal delivery” logo.

With the establishment of the “meat shop alliance,” the MDP successfully expanded the channels of fundraising and embedded them in normal online businesses. This transition made the mission of advocating for political prisoners’ rights and welfare considerably elusive yet more widely spread. The advantages of this elusive form of activism became more evident after the original “meat shop” was permanently closed by Taobao.com on 24th October 2013.¹⁵ Despite this clear warning from the state, many members of the “meat shop alliance” continue to run businesses as usual at Taobao, generating sustainable donations for the MDP and the families they intend to help.

The “meal delivery” activity is a textbook example of political activism that targets one core problem of the CCP regime: the lack of institutional building to protect civil and political rights. From the very start, it faced serious political obstacles. Establishing a “party” in any form, virtual or real, is extremely sensitive in the country (Goldman 2005). Any kind of dissident intellectual-led activism has been harshly controlled in China since 1989. Public fundraising is also highly restricted by the law. Recent reform of the Civil Affairs sector and rules regulating

¹³ According to the “Meal Delivery Party Papers” published online from approximately March 2013 to May 2013 (<http://blog.sina.com.cn/u/1657239733>), Rou Tang Seng had to make additional efforts to publicize the management of donations when using an ordinary personal bank account to receive donations. To raise fundraising for Xiao Yong’s family, Rou Tang Seng wrote more than 5000 Sina Weibo inbox mails to communicate with different netizens to ensure who donated what amount of money.

¹⁴ <http://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1577552/000119312514184994/d709111df1.htm>, accessed 10 September 2014.

¹⁵ Note 15.

private foundations and charities makes it nearly impossible for any grassroots NGOs to request donations from the public, not to mention informal groups (Wu and Chan 2012). Thus, the miraculous survival and success of the MDP requires some explanation. To overcome the political restrictions, Rou Tang Seng and the MDP first took full advantage of the Sina Weibo space and the social networks it generated. With “inbox mail,” Rou Tang Seng’s blog readers were able to respond to his calls for donations and safely make an actual payment. Unusual and even debatable tactics were applied by the MDP to depoliticize their activism, and netizens responded swiftly and made the phrase “meal delivery” popular. For example, Rou Tang Seng at one point asked his female fans to send him pictures of their bare feet and legs so that he could re-post them on his micro-blog. Many netizens responded and made his micro-blog an instant online sensation. The pictures portrayed “meal delivery” activism vulgar and apolitical, which not only sheltered both the MDP and their followers from censorship for a period of time, but also popularized the idea on the Internet very quickly so to increase the cost of a possible crackdown.

The Taobao e-commerce platform provided a completely new field for MDP activists to flex their political muscle and for ordinary citizens to participate in extremely sensitive political activism. Managing money is a major difficulty for activists and could backfire and damage the entire activist enterprise. “Meal delivery,” however, is all about money. Only with the reliable and traceable functions provided by Taobao, “meal delivery” activism can make the donation process operational and to a large extent transparent to donors and the public. By opening the “meat shop” online, the MDP invented a new way for sympathetic citizens to participate and act. The “meat shop alliance” further spread the cause and embedded it in more elusive networks of online businesses, which re-structured the activism process and made it less hierarchical and multi-centered. Public participation, as a result, became even less risky and more voluntarily driven. In this case, ordinary citizens in China acted politically not by casting their votes as in democracies or by fleeing on their feet as in Eastern Europe during the Cold War but by opening their wallets and giving donations according to their wishes.

The Yiyun Interactive Map for Disaster Relief

An interactive online map of disaster relief needs was launched by a group of ICT professionals, NGO staff, and technologically sophisticated netizens soon after the Ya’an Earthquake in southwest Sichuan province on 20 April 2013. The group was led by Hacker Eagle (*Heike Laoying*, online pseudo-name), a former hacker and currently active participant in non-governmental disaster relief activities.¹⁶ The mapping site is named “yiyun”, meaning “cloud technology for public interest” in Chinese. After the Ya’an earthquake and the first success of interactive mapping,

¹⁶ Hacker Eagle was the founder of China Eagle Union, a civilian, non-state hackers’ group, which has ceased all hacking activities by the time of this article. We interviewed him during the Quality Public Welfare Service Summit held by the Huaxia Public Interests and Services Center in Hangzhou, 17–18 December 2012.

Hacker Eagle and his team expanded the site and made it a participatory GIS platform, map.iyiyun.com, for civil society groups. More than 100 interactive maps have since been created on the site for various types of social service and public participation.

As in many other fields of public affairs, the Chinese state dominates disaster rescue and relief and controls public participation in the sector (Teets 2009; Chen 2011). This strict institutional environment changed only after the devastating Sichuan Earthquake on 12 May 2008, partially because individual citizens and grassroots NGOs acted instantly and offered significant contribution to the overall earthquake relief. Particularly in the most remote areas, NGOs delivered relief goods to the population in need more effectively than the state because of pre-existing working relationships and networks (Peng 2012). Between 2008 and 2013, a non-governmental sector in disaster relief grew noticeably by both the number of NGOs and the scope of rescue missions conducted. A group of specialized NGOs with relief expertise and sufficient resources has emerged, such as Huaxia Public Interests and Services Center, YouChange Disaster Response Center, One Foundation United Disaster Relief, and Humanitarian Relief Network of Fuping Foundation (Peng 2012).

For relief NGOs, there existed a double constraint for their further development. In a highly complex, uncertain, and continuously changing post-disaster environment, NGO relief missions in China are not only challenged by mobilizing resources and delivery relief, but also further hindered by the regulatory restrictions of public donations and inter-organizational collective action. For example, during the Yushu earthquake relief period in April 2010, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the State Council, and other related ministries collectively issued an Administrative Measure and ordered all public donations to charities or NGOs be submitted to Qinghai provincial government before any further usage of the funds.¹⁷ Additionally, the Chinese authority has been highly alert to any inter-organizational coordination and NGO cross-regional cooperation since the birth of NGOs (Deng 2010; Wu and Chan 2012; Zhu and Lai 2014).

Before the creation of Yiyun, Chinese civil society organizations used various other information exchange tools, such as QQ group, BBS, and micro-blog, but all fell short when coordinating cross-regional relief work and handling large amounts of money and materials from the public. When the Ya'an earthquake struck in April 2013, Hacker Eagle led his fellow ICT specialists affiliated with various relief NGOs to experiment using the participatory GIS for information exchange and relief coordination. The group also considered that with an interactive and instant map accessible to the public, relief demands could be met without any intermediate organizations. If successful, the interactive map could reduce huge administrative burdens borne by NGOs.

On the Yiyun mapping site, anyone who knows about a specific demand or supply of relief assistance, for example, drinking water, blankets, power generators

¹⁷ “Administrative, Operational and Implementation Measures of the Donations for Earthquake Relief in Qinghai Yushu,” available at <http://news.163.com/10/0803/00/6D4EHAUA0001124J.html>, accessed 15 September 2014.

or medicine, and the methods of delivery can access the map and upload the relevant information. After receiving unsorted data from the public, the ICT team who maintains the website on a volunteer basis would verify the data by making inquiries offline and update changes online accordingly (Ren 2013). This part of the work is vital to the whole process of delivering relief goods and can be traced by various marks and notes on the website. If anyone would like to follow up on a particular request, they can contact the Yiyun ICT support team, and a notation of “someone has taken charge of this issue” would be added to the original note on the map. After the relief goods are delivered, the Yiyun ICT team would be notified and notation of “mission completed” would be added. Figure 2 provides one example of using the Yiyun map to connect the supply and demand of power generators in Lushan County, the epicenter of the Ya’an earthquake. In total, 535 similar requests for assistance were made through the Yiyun map by either victims, NGOs, volunteers, or relief specialists. All funds and goods were transferred directly from donors to earthquake-affected populations, which leaves the relief NGOs exempted from any potential political charges of managerial fraud.



Fig. 2 A Screenshot of the Yiyun Interactive Map for Ya’an Earthquake Disaster Relief (10 August 2014). Translation of the inserted note: [Topic]: Lack of power generators, tag: needs, materials, source of information: Huaxia Joint Disaster Relief Information Platform, status of the information: mission accomplished, [information] submission time: 2013-04-26, description: verified at 19:31 on 26th [of April], lack of power generators. After trying hard, we got the village’s phone contact 13308162498 (villager’s name is Wen Xuanbin based on the pronunciation): The road to the village was accessible starting from the day before yesterday. The village had around three hundred households with about 1100 people. 3–4 people were dead (because of the earthquake), while the others were mainly slightly injured. Goods were sent in these days (including bottle water, instant noodles, cookies, chips). Today they further got 500 bottles of milk, 30 catties of water, and 2 catties of oil. They no longer needed water, as there had already been too much. The village now was short of electricity, so they needed seven power generators. [26th 19:20] [Verifier: Travel]

Relief NGO's application of participatory mapping technology has almost revolutionized non-governmental disaster relief in China. The Yiyun site first can serve as an information collector and disseminator for the public and the relief NGO community. Second, it offers a direct venue with various options for ordinary citizens, experts, and relief NGOs to participate in relief efforts. Anyone who could access the site can choose to submit relevant information, mark precise geographic locations, and make inquiries or follow-up on a request. One can be part of a relief effort beyond being physically at the site. Furthermore, the interactive map makes the whole process of a specific relief mission and the related facilitation work better managed and transparent. Actions by the original information provider, the ICT and support team, rescue specialists, and relief delivery team are all documented on the interactive map. Thus, these actions are under invisible but existent public monitoring, which is an enhanced element in self-governance of NGOs. Last not least, the NGO community effectively overcame political restrictions and coordinated large-scale interorganizational missions without establishing a formal organization. The interactive mapping platform provided a non-hierarchical, flexible, yet highly synthesized mechanism for all relief NGOs and volunteer groups.

After the success of Ya'an, Yiyun website hosts over 100 interactive mapping portals for various NGOs to call for broad public participation in information supply. For example, the site contains interactive mapping for disaster relief for Typhoon Fitow in early October 2013, the most recent Yunan Zhaotong Earthquake in August 2014, and a map of locations for free food for the homeless.¹⁸ In addition, more NGOs are now learning about participatory GIS technologies, and adopting the Ya'an strategy of inter-organizational coordination and resource sharing. For example, the Greenovation Hub, a well-known environmental NGO based in Guangzhou and Beijing, launched its "web GIS map of drinkable water" to encourage public participation and civil society coordination in monitoring water quality in rural China and providing drinkable water for schools and villages.¹⁹ This study has not found any report on government crack downs on these participatory GIS applications requesting public response to special social problems. In this sense, the experiment of Yiyun has carved out a new route for NGOs to combine resources and broadly stage coordinated action under a common cause.

Web 2.0 and Political Engagement Enhanced: A Comparative Discussion

Activism and political engagement in China and other non-democratic countries face common fundamental challenges such as restriction of information dissemination, lack of institutionalized channels for participation, low levels of political efficacy among citizens and public accountability among NGOs and potential state

¹⁸ These maps are available at <http://map.iyiyun.com/96.html>, <http://map.iyiyun.com/441.html> and <http://map.iyiyun.com/290.html#publish>, accessed 15 September 2014.

¹⁹ http://www.ghub.org/water/?page_id=18, accessed 15 September 2014.

repression. Compared with activism and social mobilization in pre-Internet and Web 1.0 context, the interactive and instantaneous character of Web 2.0 and interactive ICTs can offer help for activists and active netizens to better overcome these obstacles (Table 1). The three cases examined above show that even in China, activists can mobilize mass public participation for political causes by acting strategically and taking full advantages of newly available ICTs. The new tools of social media, e-business, and participatory mapping offer netizens many options to act beyond expressing opinions, such as re-posting a message, collecting evidence, and uploading it onto the web, making a private donation, participating in an offline mission, or even becoming part of the organizing team of a campaign. Texts, voice messages, photos, and other forms of first-hand information submitted by fellow citizens, peers, or acquaintances are more intelligible and often more preferable than official data in the eyes of the public. The traceable and participatory features offered by Web 2.0 sites also have made the processes of activism and policy advocacy without formal institutional mechanisms of public monitoring.

Comparing the three cases with each other leads to more detailed patterns concerning how activists and netizens have used specific Web 2.0 technologies to overcome various political obstacles and reach their goals. On the one hand, in all cases, social leaders achieved the goal of introducing and popularizing new topics and ideas to the public, and netizens responded with great enthusiasm and took various actions beyond expressing their views. Because the cases directly target policy problems and break political restrictions, they all faced potential repression from the government. It was not only the large amount of turn-out across all walks of life but also the instant, flexible, and self-growing nature of micro-blog posting, online shops, and participatory mapping that reduced the political risk by making any severe punishment potentially “witnessable” by an uncertain but most likely large number of citizens. Open entry, free exit, and partial anonymity on Web 2.0 make it less demanding for regular citizens to participate in activism.²⁰ Meanwhile, the elusive discursive environment of Web 2.0 provides activist leaders more room to deploy de-politicizing tactics to bypass political redlines. These tactics include, yet not limited to, humor and visual evidence in the vehicle snapshot case, vulgarization and commercialization in “meal delivery” activism, and coordination without an organization and transferring funds without NGOs in the disaster relief case.

On the other hand, the three cases differed not only in the content of activism and issue focus but also in the obstacles each faces. For both the “meal delivery” and disaster relief cases, the activism needed to mobilize material resources beyond collecting reliable information. Rou Tang Seng and the MDP overcame the difficulty of managing money with the support of the Taobao e-commerce platform, and made the reporting of donations instant, transparent, and traceable. The Taobao e-business system, neutral from political influences, released information and made public accountability possible. In the case of the Yiyun map, the rules of monetary

²⁰ We are aware of the most recent policy changes in Internet regulation in China that may lead to significant decrease of anonymity and protection of privacy. The Regulation for Internet User Name Management that includes explicit rules of real name registration went into force on 1 March 2015.

Table 1 General implications of Web 2.0 for political engagement

Challenges for civic engagement	Web 1.0	Web 2.0
Restriction and high cost of information sharing	Faster and wider; Textual information; Via computer	Interactive and user-generating; Text, visual, auidial, transactional, and geographical information; Via computer, cell phone, and mobile devices
Cost of social organizing and coordination	Cheaper and faster; Centered around social leaders/key organizations	Instantaneous; Horizontal mobilization; Flexible virtual environment; Cross-sector coordination without organization
Lack of institutional channels for participation	Discursive action; Facilitation of offline action	More options of online actions; Open entry and exit; Easier to connect online with offline actions
Low levels of self-efficacy and public accountability	More channels for self-expression	More mechanisms for public monitoring; Higher level of transparency; Instant feedback and display of outcome
High political risk	Lowering risk by wider audience	Sharing risk by mass and instant participation and evidence-based claims; Various de-politicizing tactics; More options to evade regulatory obstacles

and material transaction were implemented more consistently because the mechanism of directly connecting people in need with people with resources was so clear with little intermediation involved. Relief NGOs achieved the goal of large-scale rescue and donation delivery by coordination without a formal organization, which helped to evade potential retribution of violating social organization regulations.

Because putting snapshots online requires least technological facilitation and involves no material transactions, this mode of mass-based policy critiquing is more replicable and has become a most popular way for Chinese public to expose social grievances, complaints, and specific policy recommendation. After the military vehicle case, Professor Yu led a number of other online mass campaigns such as to help the homeless and to stop abducting children with very similar methods, all of which were broadly participated and led to policy outcomes. Moreover, millions of Chinese have switched to free cell phone-based apps developed by third parties, such as China Air Quality Index, SimpleAQI, and WorldAir instead of relying on the Air Quality Index data released by state agencies, to assess local air pollution. They also share and publish such independent data on Web 2.0. The widespread display of public distrust in official pollution data has generated pressure on the

government. As one of the state responses, Premier Li Keqiang finally declared “a war on pollution” and made pollution reduction a priority for the government in early 2014 (Reuters 2014).

Conclusion

This article offers an empirical study of bottom-up and widespread political activism, policy advocacy, and public participation in China. During the processes of such society initiated political engagement, activists and citizens have used Web 2.0 tool strategically to disseminate information, collect evidence, broaden participation, and mobilize and relocate resources. More importantly, they have established rules and mechanisms to better manage activism and participation with enhanced transparency and public accountability. Thus, the outcomes are more convincing. The three cases studied in the article do not stand alone, but unleashed a wave of new political activism and public participation in China as discussed in the article. They represent three main and most popular forms of political engagement originating from the Internet and evolving into mass incidents.

Mass politics in post-1989 China has been largely marked by infuriated rural farmers and the urban poor who have been direct victims of local-level policy implementation and political corruption. However, what we can summarize from the three cases is a different scene: Citizens act before becoming the victims of fraud policies or social problems. Instead of self-immolation, hunger strikes, or camping near the “letter and visit” offices for months and years, more and more activists and citizens in China have recognized the advantages of Web 2.0, the power of knowledge production and sharing and the effective strategies of advocacy. The deep meaning of this netizen activism and political engagement is not necessarily tied to, nor should be measured by, whether it has a direct impact on the CCP rule, but that Chinese society has found effective ways to strengthen autonomy, enhance public accountability, and introduce changes even in some of the most sensitive areas without anti-regime slogans or radical means. Paralleling to public protests and other forms of contentious politics, a different route of proactive policy advocacy, self-driven public participation, and political activism has emerged with the potential to change the landscape of mass politics and modify the power asymmetry between the state and society in China.

Acknowledgments An earlier version of the paper was presented at RSIS Luncheon Seminar on 18 March 2015. We thank Cairtriona Helena Heintz, Pascal Vennesson, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

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