

China's Sociopolitical Development under the Fifth Generation Leadership: Perspective from the *Wei-Quan* Movement in the Internet Era

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I. Introduction

In the early decades of the 20th century, making China a strong (*qiang*, 強) and wealthy (*fu*, 富) state was the top priority of the newly established republican government. In Mao's China, the "Great Leap Forward" (*da yue jin*, 大躍進) of the late 1950s epitomized Mao's ambition to speed up the process of modernization, specifically industrialization. He conceived of this as a nationwide mobilization to construct a massive steel and iron sector, as the strategic industry in the national development of a communist society. Nevertheless, Mao did not succeed in hauling China out of its still desperate backwardness. Instead, following the disastrous Cultural Revolution (文化大革命), a series of government measures were implemented during Deng Xiaoping's reign, known as the "Second Revolution." (第二次革命)

Deng's successors, Jiang Zemin and the current President, Hu Jintao, have also addressed the theme of national development, with different national strategies that reflect the information age. Chinese strategies have focused more on implementing a scientific outlook on development, with the aim of laying a good foundation for China to stride towards an information society.

When information and communications technologies (ICTs) converge on the political environment in most authoritarian and developing countries, they allow the general public the possibility of gaining more latitude in expressing opinions and disseminating alternative information. Communist China is particularly significant in this respect. Here, the (mass) media was traditionally incorporated into the governing mechanism to tactically serve as tools of propaganda (*xuan chuan*, 宣傳) and thought work (*sixiang gongzou*, 思想工作), and for purposes of agenda-setting (*yulun daoxiang*, 輿論導向) in mostly major policies. Entering the Internet age, the state is seen as determined to assure its economic growth and competitiveness in such an increasingly globalized context, where information largely drives global, regional and

domestic economy.

The central government in Beijing keenly advocates and supports the development of information and network technology. However, at the same time, it persistently attempts to minimize the undesirable socio-political effects that ICTs have brought about, since they were introduced in the early 1990s. The social and political impacts of the Internet have certainly caused the Beijing government unease, as it usually undermines its long-held monopoly over the flow of information and on the dissemination of news. The Party-State has accordingly adopted a variety of strategies to harness it, limit the impact of this new information technology to an acceptable degree, and hopefully use it to the government's benefits, in areas like electronic commerce (e-commerce, 電子商務) and electronic government (e-government, 電子政務).

Notwithstanding, one has also seen the rise of independent public opinion ever since the early 1990s, thanks to China's continuous economic reform and the introduction of modern information and mobile technologies. As several scholarly works have suggested, the power of the Web has already presented the Chinese authorities with unforeseen and unprecedented challenges, which are currently contributing to undermining the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) information control and exposing the party and government's misconduct – instances of official corruption, social and economic problems, as well as injustice. Against this backdrop, this article is to address China's sociopolitical development and challenges under the current and new fifth generation leaders through the perspective of the so-called *wei-quan* movements in the Internet era. The rise of *wei-quan* movement is explored in the sense that has not only facilitated and empowered by the new media but it has also impacted Chinese state-society relations now and in the decades ahead.

II. Emerging Mass Incidents in China in the Internet Era

To begin with, I argue that the Internet and micro-blogging (微博) have been fostering a horizontal system of communications, and offering a more efficient conduit for the horizontal exchange and dissemination of information. The notion of “public opinion supervision” (*yulun jiandu*, 輿論監督) is often seen as a refreshing and positive force to exposing official corruption and social problems, as well as injustice. This is also due to the enhancement of general awareness of the safeguarding of citizen's rights, better known as *wei-quan* (維權) consciousness in the Internet age. Collective labor disputes in state-owned or collective-owned enterprises, private enterprises, over land requisition and subsequent relocation, as well as over other social disturbances and riots, have in one way or another been triggered by specific economic grievances, rapid socio-economic transformation, and the poor

quality of (local) governance.

Nowadays, 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. As the country 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 thereby restrict the CCP's autonomy and governing capacity in solely determining policy orientation, content and delivery. Chinese citizens, instead of blindly accepting the government's (development) agendas, are now being awakened and better empowered to set their own policy agendas both in cyberspace and in physical life. Citizens of modern Chinese society may not simply insist that the regime address their social, economic and political demands through official mechanisms. In fact, they would demand the creation of adequate institutions to allow them to proactively voice themselves in the first place. Accordingly, engaging through the Internet and social media like blogs and micro-blogs allows more Chinese people to better articulate their (policy) interests and proactively set their own agenda. Through these mediums, they could express grievances, discuss and debate public policies, and organize themselves into social movements to mobilize and coordinate collective action when needed.

Yet, since the disruptive action of citizen resistance, in particular coordinated action of a political nature, is not tolerated by the Chinese government, more preventive or even preemptive measures for the Party-State seem necessary and pressing for effective governance, in the face of increasing cases of "mass incidents" (*quntixing shijian*, 群體事件) and "public order disturbances" (*raoluan gonggong zhixu fazui*, 擾亂公共秩序犯罪). 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". Knowing that mass incident reports usually need to be dismissed or quelled out of fundamental concerns for social and political stability, China's official and party media frequently 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. It is simply because that the mantra of paramount Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping has said, "stability above all else" (*wending yadao yiqie*, 穩定壓倒一切). 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 – may therefore in principle be accused of breaching stability, and subject to legal repression.

III. The Rise of *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 nonetheless transformed into something greater as it is now used by individuals and/or groups for the active defense of their rights against the state and official interests and/or unlawful repression.

In cases of unlawful repression, land development projects accompanying unjust expropriation of property has become one of the most polemical social issues in current Chinese society. 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.

It can be argued that land expropriation is one of the primary “externalities of development” that have been responsible for the proliferation of rural conflicts in the past decades. Increased access to information is also another likely factor in the increase. 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. It is important to highlight not only the growing numbers, but the more provocative nature of these incidents. However, it must be said that although rural conflict and discontent is chronic and widespread across many provinces and regions, most incidents remain relatively small in scale and pose limited political challenge to the communist 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 Internet era. In fact, the *wei-quan* movement has been *per se* an integral part of China’s long march

to developing and implementing rule of law initiatives. Moreover, China's rapid transition to a market economy and the increased integration into the global economy has also been the 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 (social) actors and groups to assert their rights and interests in reliance on law.

The causes for the rise of the Chinese *wei-quan* movement are actually multi-fold. Among other things, imbalanced economic development 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 now and the future. Even though the market economy has expanded rapidly in socialist China for the past three decades, concerns are being increasingly 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 more importantly, environmental deterioration, leading some to question the sustainability of China's high economic growth and the political legitimacy based on this growth model (中國模式).

To be specific, critics have usually highlighted the plight of rural migrants and the ever worsening social and class divide, incarnated as the "*choufu xintai*," (resenting the rich, 仇富心態) mentality, or "having the 'red eyes' disease" (*hongyan bing*, 紅眼病) that has emerged in China's fast growing capitalist society. These may ultimately tarnish China's economic power and hinder its future economic growth if the situation is not appropriately tackled or improved.

In addition to rising inequalities, pervasive cases 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 or mainstream media, primarily for political concerns. From time to time, 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*, 反腐敗) 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 2012 National People’s Congress (NPC, 全國人民代表大會) & the Chinese People’s Consultative Conference (CPPCC, 中國人民政治協商會議). 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. 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.

IV. The Importance of the New Media (Internet) in China’s *Wei-Quan* Era

As a matter of fact, the notable Sun Zhigang case (孫志剛事件) in 2003, SARS incident (非典事件) in 2003, the BMW incident (寶馬事件) in 2003, Songhua River pollution incident (松花江污染事件) in 2005, Shanxi Black Brick Kiln case (山西黑磚窯事件) in 2007, Sanlu milk scandal (三鹿毒奶粉事件) in 2008, Xiamen PX plant incident (廈門PX廠事件) in 2008, Weng’an incident (甕安事件) in 2008, Deng Yujiao incident (鄧玉嬌事件) in 2009, Li Gang incident (我爸是李剛事件) in 2010, Wenzhou train crash incident (溫州動車事件) in 2011, The Wukan incident (烏坎事件) in 2012, the most recent one - Shifang incident (什邡) in 2012, and many more other events, 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, (micro-) bloggers, as well as the general public, have been more willing to articulate their interests and concerns in the serious hope for 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 and/or preferences 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 and 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, a burgeoning mass of citizen journalists (*gongmin jizhe*, 公民記者) has come into play in China’s social and

political life. These Internet-based citizen journalists and cyber (micro-)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 utilization 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 of China", officially known as the Golden Shield Project (*jindun gongcheng*, 金盾工程), 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 seem to 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 regarded 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 overall economic and social development, and work towards a harmonious society (*hexie shehui*, 和諧社會), there still exists a lack of government transparency, and the public is generally denied the right to fully participate, the right to genuine freedom of speech, and the ultimate right to serve as a meaningful watchdog of government policies. The soaring number of mass incidents initiated by ordinary people, 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.

The CCP's general reaction to the rights defense 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*, 全面小康社會) and a "harmonious society" underpinned by the principles of rule of law. The CCP government understands well that (micro-)bloggers and citizen journalists also play an important role as a "virtual" pressure valve in China provided their (online) contributions and opinions do not cross the official bottom lines. The stories and comments of online writers and citizen journalists are to some extent seen to alleviate unstable forces and social tensions that could undercut the governing legitimacy of the CCP if this popular pressure were not properly channeled, released, or dealt with. In other words, the online world, to some degree, 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 a true independent judiciary or national popular vote, China's authoritarian political system cannot fundamentally manage and release massive potential and existing social anxiety, outcry and unrest.

On the other hand, some government officials, particularly those at lower levels (the city and rural areas), have usually set too great a store on gross domestic product growth figures, which could lead to the usual and relentless crackdown on rights movements. The rationale on the crackdown is that all social movements could undermine social stability and political order, and thereby, hinder economic growth, when local officials aim to create a high GDP growth. In Chinese politics, usually the GDP growth rate is ultimately crucial to (local) officials' performance assessment and consequent promotion. As a result, local government has been politically cautious about the scale, intensity, and any important attributes attached to the emergence of *wei-quan* and social movements. For CCP officials, the consequences of the all sorts of 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* and social movements may facilitate and reinforce a favorable social basis of the twin effects in the Chinese context: an increasingly vibrant civil society and middle class.

V. Concluding Remarks

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 freely surf and comment in the cyberspace. The government has, instead, attempted to shape what is called a "healthy and orderly" (*jiankang youxu*, 健康有序) online environment. This is being done mainly through the employment of Great Firewall of China, 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.

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 is performed through top-down propaganda channels by governments, such as electronic versions of state-owned media coverage and the E-government projects. 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 favorable social conditions with public opinion support

for *wei-quan* movements.

Realizing the power of ICTs and micro-blogging 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 (civic) journalists. The CPP government is more concerned that with free access to these technologies newly-empowered citizens will launch (orchestrated) social protests and movements against the Party-State, since they could now better disseminate reactionary news, opinions, and information in a more rapid and effective way. Faced with this threat, Chinese authorities have been impelled to strengthen the authoritarian regime as a result. To do so they have intensified their grip on control over information flow and opinion manipulation, information channeling, the correction of mainstream media and cyberspace, 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. Without doubt the new media has 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.

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 favorable 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 many social and mass incidents to emerge and develop in authoritarian China.

In conclusion, the role of the Internet, SMS, micro-blogging, social media, 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 defense movement and its activists. These campaigners and activists are arguably making the government more accountable and responsive to the rising power of grassroots *wei-quan* activists and groups. As China's fifth generation leaders vow to continue 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.