



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

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Creemers, R.J.E.H.; Price, M.; Stremlau, N.

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## Cyber-Leninism: The Political Culture of the Chinese Internet

Rogier Creemers

Oh steam whistle! Oh Lenin!<sup>1</sup>

Computers don't do what you want them to do, but what you tell them to do.<sup>2</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

In March 2000, Bill Clinton laid a challenge at the door of China's rulers. Optimistically assessing the catalyst that communications technology could be for liberty in China, he famously likened cracking down on the Internet to nailing Jello to the wall (Clinton 2000). Clinton's sanguinity was exemplary for a zeitgeist characterized by techno-optimism and a firm belief in the ineluctable progress of liberal democracy and market capitalism. Information communication technologies (ICTs) and new media would become a panacea for political strife and contradiction, while the economic potential of the Internet promised a new era of economic welfare and entrepreneurialism. Moreover, Clinton's statement evinced a libertarian belief, deeply held in the technological community, that the Internet's transnational nature effectively rendered it uncontrollable by national governments. In the decade-and-a-half since, there has been ample cause for moderating these ideas. Internet giants, such as Apple, Google, and Amazon, or the glorified taxi service Uber, are now routinely castigated for their creative engagement with tax authorities worldwide, the low salaries they pay bottom-level employees and the extent to which they monitor users' behavior. Not every internet user is a civil democratic citizen; the Internet has become a recruiting, communication, and propaganda tool for despicable organizations such as so-called Islamic State. Perhaps most importantly,

<sup>1</sup> Lu Xun's satirical rendition of Communist poetry (Lu, cited in Mitter 2005, p. 233).

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous.

the Snowden revelations have shattered the myth that a democratic government would not use the tools available to it to expand its capabilities, often through a discourse of securitization.

The allure of the democratization discourse has also strongly influenced hopes and expectations for the Internet in China. Social movements, activism, and the development of civil society became the leading themes in the field of Chinese Internet study, often with an unspoken assumption that these would be the fountainheads of an ineluctable stream of political progress. Much of this work was inspired by Chinese dissidents and liberals, such as Ai Weiwei and Liu Xiaobo, the latter describing the Internet as “God’s present to China” (Liu 2009). Yet this romanticized conception of the Internet obfuscated many of its less democratic elements. Chinese liberal voices were merely one part of a broader spectrum of participants that also included patriotic hackers, ethnic nationalists, and dark-red Maoists. The government, in particular, often remained a black box: a locus of abstract power that sought to oppose its dictatorial will on a to-be-liberated citizenry. It is (often at the same time) portrayed as a formidable oppressor and a paper tiger that must inevitably bend to the tides of history. Possibly in order to avoid the accusation of abetting authoritarianism, questions of legitimate authority (as opposed to legitimization) have been kept at arm’s length, with most attention directed to the tactics that governmental actors used to counter social activities. It is, perhaps, therefore no surprise that few studies have sought to elucidate the government’s point of view, even if merely to identify the logic that animates local notions of governmentality and its interaction with the effects of internet use. Yet, as Bruce Gilley suggests, the state remains the dominant actor in the Chinese sociopolitical order and a state-centered approach is indispensable in understanding how new media and information technologies will interact within the Chinese context.

There is another, methodological point that further explains the paucity of analyses of Chinese governmental approaches to Internet governance. What news is there to be learnt by examining China’s brand of authoritarianism? Is it not typical of all nondemocratic governments, or indeed of all governments, that they seek to censor and manage information? Isn’t ideology superseded by brutal, but simple, calculations of power and interest? At a certain level of abstraction, these claims may be valid, yet they do not enlighten us about the particular and subjective elements that give meaning to the political system. It is not incorrect that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seeks to maintain its hold on power through using the internet as a platform for legitimization, but the issue of how the notion of legitimacy is understood and interpreted requires a deeper knowledge of China’s political experience and history,

including the way political objectives are defined and operationalized, and the way the bureaucracy works. In the end, to discuss how the internet is perceived and governed in the Chinese context, we must be able to understand the assumptions, motives, fears, and aspirations of the individuals staffing the political system. Still, against the Scylla of a Procrustean approach that leaves little space for cultural specificity stands the Charybdis of cultural exclusivity. Nothing in this chapter should be construed as a claim that the Chinese case is exceptional or unique. Apart from the empirical validity of any such claim, it would exclude the Chinese case from analysis rather than open it up for comparative scrutiny or as a contribution to a more global picture. Instead, this chapter seeks to explore the particularities of China's political culture, discuss how they might shape ideas on the role of the internet in contemporary Chinese society, and present them as one possible path for the development of the Internet, with its own idiosyncrasies as well as points of overlap with the other cases presented in this book.

In particular, this chapter will attempt to discuss how the Internet was introduced in a specific, historically developed, political-cultural context, which shaped the parameters for its development. In other words, while previous observers have often sought to describe how the Internet would change China, it aims to discuss how China has changed the Internet, particularly with respect to questions of political discourse and organization. Of course, China's Internet has become as flourishing a platform for commercial activity and social engagement as that anywhere else in the world. Politically, however, it has been shaped by a tension that has characterized Chinese governance for centuries: the oscillation between centralization, hierarchy, and order on the one hand, and decentralization, rebellion, and disorder on the other. This chapter first discusses how the elements of this dialectic process developed during imperial times, and how the subsequent Leninist state reinterpreted and added to it. Second, it explores how the reform process changed this political culture. Next, it discusses how the advent of the Internet brought both challenges and opportunities for the party leadership, before exploring the implications of China's cyber-Leninism for its future.

### *BELIEF SYSTEMS IN CHINESE POLITICAL CULTURE*

In the same way that notions of free speech and access to information have profound roots in the European political culture of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, some of the central elements of Chinese views on Internet governance originate from the political culture of the late empire. The politically dominant worldview at that time was state Confucianism, a system

in which the emperor governed a bureaucratic administration through ritual, demonstrative virtue, discipline, and obedience. The ultimate Confucian objective was harmony, which could only be achieved if all members of the social organism understood and performed their duties correctly, and cultivated their virtue. To that end, officials were appointed through a meritocratic system of civil examinations, which tested their comprehension of the canon of Confucian classics.

Yet, while Confucianism was the dominant culture of a genteel political elite, it was counterbalanced by a set of popular cultural elements, shaped by Daoist and Buddhist mysticism, which stood diametrically opposed to most of its fundamental tenets. Where Confucianism required hierarchy and obedience, popular culture romanticized the fraternity of secret societies and individual heroism. Confucianism mostly eschewed the supernatural, but religious sects, sorcery, and magic were part and parcel of its popular counterpart. Lucian Pye describes these as the two poles of a political-cultural spectrum, whose tensions have historically animated the nature of political contestation (Pye 1988, p. 165). In other words, rather than a pendulum between different policy options, identified as left-wing or right-wing for example, the dynamic of Chinese politics might be better imagined as a piston alternating between centralization, orthodoxy, and order on the one hand, and decentralization, heterodoxy, and rebellion on the other. Yet at various times, these two cultures have overlapped. Not unlike the acceptance, or even expectation, of eccentricity or the adoption of bohemian lifestyles in the British aristocracy, individual members of the Confucian gentry would seek scholarly inspiration in Buddhist or Daoist work or adopt hermitical lifestyles. Successful leaders of uprisings, on the other hand, would be quick to discard their rebellious roots and take on the Confucian garb of imperial rule.

The Confucian quest to forestall the delusion and confusion of the people by witchcraft and heterodox sects goes some way to explain the norms and actions by which the state sought to regulate the public word. State control over printing, which had become a fully fledged industry by the time of the Song dynasty (AD 960–1279), provides an illustrative example. First, both the Imperial Court and local governments were active producers of print materials, ranging from the calendars and almanacs that were essential in an agricultural society to authorized editions of the Confucian classics and approved commentaries needed for preparation for the examinations. A new dynasty would also be expected to compile the orthodox history of the preceding dynasty.<sup>3</sup> Local governments published gazetteers, but also engaged

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the CCP has undertaken to finish compiling the history of the Qing.

in commercial printing, publishing literature upholding Confucian values. The Qing government in particular was very active in patronizing the compilation of dictionaries, encyclopedias, and literary compendia (on the largest of these projects, the *Siku Quanshu*, see Guy 1987). Illustrating the close connection between these efforts and orthodoxy, the Tongzhi emperor (1861–75) ordered the establishment of printing houses in provinces affected by the Taiping rebellion, in order to replace works lost during the uprising (Rawski 1979). Also, the government employed criers to travel from village to village, reminding the populace of their moral obligations and narrating instructive tales. Secondly, general and specific censorship rules were imposed. While a Song-era pre-publication review system was rapidly abandoned after it fell into disuse, the legal codes made explicit reference to “devilish books and writings” (*yaoyan yaoshu*), the production of which was made a capital offense (Vittinghoff 2002, p. 325). The government had a monopoly over calendars and almanacs, while “licentious” literature and the publication of sensitive government information were also circumscribed (Mote 2003, p. 927). The early Qing era saw repeated waves of literary censorship, particularly targeted at works subversive to the new, non-Han, dynasty, although it must be added that the efficaciousness of such campaigns in the provinces is dubious.

Two millennia of a remarkably constant political and institutional structure came to an end at the end of the nineteenth century. While previous dynastic changes had little effect on the architecture of the Chinese state, the end of the Qing dynasty was characterized by successive clashes with modernizing European powers and, perhaps most humiliatingly, Japan. This caused an intellectual crisis in a country that had until then considered itself to be the center of the civilized world, spurring a search for a new orthodoxy. This upended the traditional tensions between the center and the periphery that had animated Chinese political culture; elite and popular cultures, despite their differences, agreed on the fundamental elements of the imperial system: the worldly and religious power of the Emperor, and the pursuit of harmony and perfection. As the old order disintegrated, successive waves of reformers, often still raised within the Confucian tradition, sought recipes for national deliverance. Some claimed that a purified version of Confucianism would reinvigorate the Chinese nation, although, in a phenomenal bout of cultural patricide, the majority held Confucianism responsible for China’s corruption and backwardness and looked abroad for new ideas. One of these was Marxism, which was attractive to many modernizing intellectuals as it provided both a credible explanation of China’s plight at the hands of imperial powers and a promise of restoration and glory.

Yet, as the Republican project failed and political authority fragmented among provincial warlords during the 1910s and 1920s, the search for a new orthodoxy primarily became a quest for organizational efficacy, rather than substantive progress. Both the Guomindang (GMD) and the CCP sought inspiration, and received assistance from, the Soviet Union through the Comintern, and were structured along Leninist lines (Dickson 1997). Some aspects of the imperial Confucian tradition, as well as popular political culture, were quite congenial to the Leninist project that the GMD would attempt and the CCP would perfect. Both Confucianism and Leninism are predicated on the belief that legitimate rule is an intellectual effort that can only be performed by those understanding orthodoxy well enough to lead the faceless masses. The Confucian inheritance, as well as both the GMD and CCP projects, eschew value pluralism, the idea that different legitimate values or interests may be incommensurable, assuming instead that all virtuous preferences can, in the end, be harmonized. Confucian notions of hierarchical obedience and filial piety resonated with Leninist notions of party discipline, and the Utopian Leninist promise of progress to a worker's paradise devoid of class struggle can, with a little good will, be compared to imperial notions of harmony. In both Confucianism and Leninism, the primary political challenge was disciplinary: bridging the divide between the center and the locality, in order to ensure that the center's will is implemented across the land.

Leninism also brought appreciable innovations and, unsurprisingly, tensions. First and foremost, its communitarian ethics notwithstanding, self-cultivation in Confucian terms was largely an individual project of intellectual and moral inquiry, not a disciplinary inculcation of a rigid ideology or belief system. The Chinese empire has never known an equivalent of the Catholic Church, with an inflexible theology, substantial political influence, separate hierarchy and administration, and its Inquisition. Instead, during various periods, intellectual exploration flourished. In the late Ming period, for instance, an active printing industry produced wildly diverging interpretations of the Confucian canon, often laced with Daoist or Buddhist elements. In contrast, the Leninist doctrine of democratic centralism would come to see self-cultivation not as a personal project, but an organizational necessity as exploration was replaced with indoctrination. Secondly, with regard to legitimate rule, Confucianism externalized and abstracted ideas concerning virtue and the common good into the concept of "Heaven" (*Tian* 天). Legitimacy was conferred on a dynasty by a "Mandate of Heaven" (*Tianming* 天命), which would be withdrawn if an emperor failed to rule virtuously. On the one hand, this legitimized rebellion against tyranny or, at least, was invoked as such *ex post* by the newly enthroned leaders of a successful uprising. On

the other hand, it provided a rhetorically objective standard against which rulers' behavior could be evaluated. This fostered an enduring Chinese political tradition of virtuous officials remonstrating negligent or delinquent monarchs. No such super-authority existed in Leninism, where it is the center of the vanguard party that possesses the fundamental truths and insights necessary for governance, which must gain and maintain the levers of power necessary to propel society towards eternal sunrise. Democratic centralism provides little room for loyal opposition once the party line has been determined. Lastly, Confucianism was imbued with a particular kind of conservatism: it did not seek to overthrow China's sociopolitical order, rather to ensure that the individual rulers and officials themselves were morally up to the task. Leninism, on the other hand, introduced the notion of progress, as it sought to mobilize and organize society as a whole in pursuit of wholesale revolution along a historically determined path forward.

Both the GMD and, later, the CCP set up remarkably similar structures to govern public communication. Both created propaganda departments, in charge of all important media outlets and tasked with spreading the Party's message to the rank-and-file, as well as the population. However, although the forms were similar, they developed substantively different ideological programs. The GMD, taking nominal command of the Chinese republic at the end of the 1920s, developed a syncretic system mixing elements of Confucianism, Christianity, nationalism, and authoritarianism, which it called the "New Life Movement." The CCP, on the other hand, forced into an underground existence as a rebel movement in the barren mountains around Yan'an, in northern China, adopted a more rigorously Socialist project of class struggle, land reform, and, most of all, thought control.

It was during this formative period, during World War II, that a pattern for CCP engagement with intellectuals was established. The immediate catalyst was the arrival in Yan'an, the CCP's headquarters, of a number of young urban idealists, such as the writers Wang Shiwei and Ding Ling, enamored with the Communist cause and the romanticism of sacrifice for the revolution. Yet the increasingly rigid Party hierarchy, together with the meticulous sumptuary rules they found, grated against their egalitarian predilections. In good Confucian tradition, they decided to remonstrate, using large-character posters (*dazibao*) in public spaces. Retribution was swift. Mao organized a Party Forum on Literature and Art, where Wang Shiwei in particular was lambasted for acting as a traitor to the Communist cause. Writers should, instead, serve the Party and the masses, maintain a close connection with the center's political line and act as "spiritual engineers" to create a new kind of progressive citizen (Mao 1942). The subsequent purge and rectification became a



cauldron for the development of enduring ideological and governance tactics and tools, many of which are still used and referenced today. It also resulted in the ruthless elimination of Mao's political opponents. Wang Shiwei himself was summarily executed on trumped up charges of Trotskyist espionage as Yan'an came under GMD attack in 1947.

This cycle would, with slight variations, play over repeatedly in the People's Republic. Political circumstances would create opportunities for criticism and debate; intellectuals would come forward with energetic participation; the leadership would, after some initial dawdling, silence the debate; intellectual leaders would be sanctioned, and a conservative backlash would follow. Never would intellectual risings result in enduring liberalization. The Hundred Flowers movement and the subsequent Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1956–7, the Democracy Wall movement of 1979, the protests of 1986, the subsequent Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization campaign of 1986 and the tragic events in Tiananmen Square of June 1989 have all been iterations of this pattern. To a certain degree, one could argue that the evolution of internet use and governance, particularly after the Beijing Olympics, again follows this script, albeit in slow motion.

Over that period of time, however, the self-perception and nature of the party-state underwent profound change. The first three decades after the establishment of the People's Republic were characterized by an often violent struggle to define the new regime and its policy orientation. The mercurial romantic Mao sought to bring China to a state of permanent revolution. Throughout his life, Mao kept an anti-establishmentarian streak, even as he became the establishment. By the mid-1960s, he had come to distrust the Party apparatus to such an extent that that Cultural Revolution was unleashed as an attack on an entrenched bureaucracy. Leaders such as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, on the other hand, sought to construct a more institutionalized form of governance, with a meticulously planned economy and hierarchical administration, inspired by the Soviet example. In other words, the CCP contained conflicting elements that harked back to both poles of imperial political culture, overlaid with Leninist notions of progress and internal discipline.

#### *THE DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL CULTURE AFTER MAO*

After Mao's death, support for violent class struggle and permanent revolution crumbled rapidly and Deng Xiaoping restructured the party-state in a manner reminiscent of the Confucian approach. The Party bureaucracy was strengthened, more constant norms of political life were instituted, and, most importantly, the people were ejected from participation in politics. In return,

the state started progressively to withdraw from many aspects of citizens' private lives. A society tired of the constant upheavals of the Mao era and yearning for order and stability complied with surprising speed and obedience. This had a considerable impact on the position and social standing of intellectuals. Where Mao had instinctively distrusted scholarship, preferring the spontaneity of the masses, Deng recognized that expertise was as important as political loyalty. More leeway was now permitted in research, particularly in the natural sciences, and opportunities for policy debate and input widened. Yet ambivalence remained, as this enhanced space remained conditional on support for the Leninist Party system and fealty to the party line, and dependent on the fluctuations of politics.

In discursive terms, many of the symbols and tropes of Maoism remained, albeit in a less intensive form. Near-superhuman heroes, such as Lei Feng, remained part and parcel of propaganda efforts, but were increasingly ignored by a public more interested in pop music and video games. The personality cult of the genius Great Helmsman was recast in intellectual terms: the legitimizing narrative of the CCP relied, and relies, for a large part on its claim to possess the correct, scientific wisdom to drive progress. Consequently, whereas British monarchs' visible legacies are the names of parks, squares, and their initials on pillar-boxes, every leader since Mao has sought to add his own theoretical contribution to the Party's body of accreted ideological statements. However vague or vapid, these have been celebrated as major advances in the human understanding of objective laws of social development. The near-magical element of Maoist sloganeering, which purported that great achievements were possible simply through the triumph of the will, still resonates in today's claims to realize the Chinese Dream and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Some elements of the Chinese information order have deeper historical roots. The drive to create a new, enlightened citizenry, which was a central element of GMD and Maoist ideology, is still pursued through a "Socialist core value system" that in both form and content resembles the Kangxi Emperor's Sacred Edict and its predecessors. Intellectuals continue to use allegorical references to well-known figures from the past, often Confucian officials, in criticizing the present. The law scholar He Weifang, for instance, closed his Weibo account by posting a picture of Tao Yuanming, a fifth-century poet who resigned from government service out of disgust with the corruption of the Jin court he served (SCMP 2013). The ruthless crackdown against Falun Gong echoes the way in which dynasties sought to eradicate heterodox sects.

These elements are mobilized at a time when the limitations of both Leninism and imperial political cultures are becoming clear. First, the pursuit

of harmony has tyrannized Chinese political culture. The idea of monism, that all legitimate values, preferences, and interests can not only be harmoniously combined but, moreover, be combined in a manner that will resolve contradictions in society, remains a foundational touchstone in Party ideology and discourse. Loyal opposition and recognition of the irreconcilability of different purposes are rejected. The definition of harmony and the question of how to achieve it have evolved between different stages of Party rule. During the Maoist era, it was held that harmony (or Communism) could only be reached after the violent eradication of all remnants of bourgeois suppression. Claiming that thirty years of class struggle had succeeded in removing most pre-revolutionary feudal dregs, the new Dengist regime proposed a broader vision of modernity, aimed at being as inoffensive as possible. This was a sanitized, clinical, and often inane vision of modernity, consisting of gleaming skyscrapers and bullet trains that, while impressive, was mostly bereft of human individualism. The party-state still sponsors works of art, films, and television programs to propagate this vision, most notably around Chinese New Year and the anniversaries of important political events. Yet these are rarely attractive beyond their immediate spectacle value; investment in these projects is high. More problematic in the political context, disagreement is still often viewed through the prism of disobedience. Drafters of policy documents, even at the highest level, still take pains first to demonstrate that a particular policy is designed to conform to the spirit of a leader's speech or a previous decree. Further, even though the space for debate on political matters was greater during the Deng era, its boundaries were unlimited and shifted with the political winds. Particularly those on the periphery of the party system, such as activist lawyers and academics, have found themselves on the other side of the boundary of permissibility without having changed their position.

Second, the perfectionist element of political and intellectual culture tends to see social issues as problems that can, and must, be solved. The technical side of Party ideology, developed by Mao in the late 1930s, is based on the notion that every historical era is characterized by a chief contradiction, which causes all other contradictions. Social progress is therefore generated by resolving all subordinate contradictions and, in the end, the chief contradiction. In turn, this reflected an intellectual current of patriotic worrying with its roots in the modernization movement of the late Qing. Deng Xiaoping's exhortation to "seek truth from facts" (*shishi qiushi* 实事求是) (Schoenhals 1991) was a pragmatic exhortation to look towards numbers to guide policy solutions, rather than ideological exegesis. However, as China grew less poor and less backward, it transpired that development not only solved problems, but generated new ones. Moreover, as economic and social relationships grew

more complex, it became concurrently more difficult to find unequivocal win-win answers to policy questions.

Third, the essence of the Party's Leninist system is that it is purposive: its prime function is to achieve a single, defined future goal. This is easiest when the status quo is one of destitution or clear danger, as was the case in the first decades of the People's Republic. The mission was to construct a powerful Socialist state and economy, in defiance of hostile foreign nations. After the death of Stalin, this also included the Soviet Union. However, growing welfare has undermined this dynamism. An interesting parallel is perhaps the development of the pharmaceutical industry. Leninism relates to politics like emergency surgery relates to a healthy lifestyle. It is a form of political organization designed to deal effectively with a crisis and pursue single-minded objectives. It is less able to function in a situation where there is no clear immediate purpose or where various different possibilities and risks need to be balanced. In other words, Leninism might have played an important role in bringing an ailing China from the ruins of war and division, but is less well equipped to preside over a mature political order in which different interests, objectives, and processes must constantly be balanced. Put differently, the irony of a successful Leninist system is that it renders itself superfluous. However, just as the pharmaceutical industry has responded to increasing levels of general health by medicalizing ever-more trivial afflictions and mental conditions, the party-state has sought to imbue new challenges with the same sense of threat and urgency as in the national crises it faced in the past. For instance, the maintenance of sufficient ideological accomplishments among cadres under Xi Jinping has been seen as a matter of "life and death" for the Party.<sup>4</sup> Leninism has created a pathological need for an enemy to fight against and a mission to struggle for. However, the popular unity necessary for this is increasingly challenged by rising living standards, which reduce the attraction of mobilization and social change, and by the realities of commerce and market capitalism, which drive individualized preferences and identity-based commercialism. As a result, the Party's call must compete ever more with the distractions that a modern and prosperous market economy provides.

These tensions, partly pre-existing and partly the result of the profound social and economic changes that China has undergone, explain the contradictory nature of Party discourse. It has extolled the wisdom of the masses while raising barriers to public speech, and has excluded the masses from the political process while calling upon them to join an "historical struggle." It seeks to

<sup>4</sup> This is, of course, not a tactic limited to the Chinese government. It merits remembering, for instance, that objectionable but minor satraps are often rapidly dubbed "the new Hitler."

claim credit for China's undeniable process, while attempting to create a sense of crisis that requires further, Party-led progress. It portrays its enemies as both a lethal risk and paper tigers that can be vanquished with ease, and depicts its mission as a labor of struggle that nevertheless is entirely feasible on the basis of Party pronouncements. These contradictions, the logical consequences of the first principles of China's political culture, have emerged regardless of the actual quality and performance of the administration. The CCP's failure to resist corruption and abuse within its ranks merely exacerbates the perceived hypocrisy and resulting social cynicism. This is reflected in the continuing influence of the historical traumas of the late 1980s: Tiananmen and the collapse of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe. The former remains an enduring warning of the possible consequences of visible splits within the Party, while the latter demonstrated that regime change could come swiftly and unexpectedly. Both highlighted the pernicious role of intervention by amorphously named "foreign hostile forces." However strong the Party's hold on power may be, a predominant concern of the leadership is it might have overlooked new ways for opposition to coalesce. Its response has been to increase control, which has become a goal in itself (Minzner and Wang 2015).

#### *THE EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL CONTROL OVER THE INTERNET*

It is difficult to overestimate the importance that the internet has had in transcending many of the barriers to communication that the party-state has erected. Starting with urban, educated elites and expanding to all strata of society, affordable tools of mass information generation, distribution, and reception are now in the hands of Chinese citizens. Internet technology broke down the regional and sectoral fragmentation of traditional media (which had been a deliberate effort to prevent cross-boundary opposition) and the licensing obligations that kept alternative voices out of public discourse. The speed with which information circulates online vitiated the ability of censorship authorities to develop unified responses to viral news. The online sphere fostered public intellectuals, sometimes with tens of millions of followers, whose influence vastly exceeded that of Party media.

Yet the leadership had, from the earliest advent of personal telecommunications, been wary of their organizational potential. One particular spur to action came when Falun Gong members formed a human chain around the Party's headquarters in Zhongnanhai that was organized by mobile phone and e-mail. In response, the roots were laid for what is now one of the most advanced and intricate surveillance mechanisms worldwide. As the Internet became a

publicly accessible information and communication platform, there was no debate about whether it should fall under government supervision, only about how such control would be implemented in practice. Over time, different strategies have been employed. Websites, like other media outlets, are required to register with propaganda authorities; Party-led industrial associations promulgate self-regulatory documents and, as the user base has grown, individual censorship duties have been outsourced to the Internet companies.

These measures notwithstanding, Internet use skyrocketed in the 2000s (Creemers 2016) and netizens found increasingly intricate ways to satirize, organize, and publicize. This was partly due to the fact that propaganda authorities mainly saw the Internet as merely a novel platform for the publication of traditional processes of persuasion and content control. They had not anticipated the enormous expansion of user-generated content, in particular through social media, but also through the “self-media” (*zimeiti* 自媒体), that convenient production and editing software had enabled. Technology authorities, on the other hand, did not see content management as a priority. As a result, the traditional strength of the propaganda bureaucracy in managing the publication and dissemination of information was deeply eroded, as viral tweets and blog posts sped across China before the censors had even pulled on their proverbial boots. A particular illustration of the new power of technology came in the form of built-in cameras in smartphones, which made it possible to produce powerful images and distribute them in real-time. Many cases of local corruption and social problems were exposed in this manner. One symbolic incident was the Wenzhou rail crash of 2011, where individuals uploaded photos on Weibo which allegedly showed attempts to bury the wrecked carriages, even as rescue efforts were still ongoing (Bondes and Schucher 2014). Yet already during this high tide of online communication, which reached a symbolic zenith with the Wenzhou rail crash of 2011, there was brewing a counter-oscillation towards discipline and order. Even as liberal-leaning intellectuals claimed that the government would be unable to control the social forces that had been unleashed online, that government became ever more determined to prove them wrong.

As a reaction to the liberal stance, a growing chorus of pro-control voices called for greater self-confidence and “cultural self-awareness” in influential Party media, such as *Red Flag Manuscripts*, while various Party and state bodies initiated research projects to formulate counter policies to an online sphere that was increasingly seen as out of control.<sup>5</sup> Initial restructuring measures

<sup>5</sup> Such projects often resulted in cadre training materials or policy recommendations for stricter ideological guidance (*zouxiang wenhua zijue*).

were taken within the propaganda administration from 2011 onwards, including the establishment of the State Internet Information Office (SIIO), a specialized body tasked with managing online content, and the dedication of a plenary Central Committee session to the important role of culture in fostering national self-consciousness in October 2011 (Central Committee 2011). Yet the SIIO was largely a department of the State Council Information Office, the government spokesperson, without its own staff, and the sixth plenum of the seventeenth Party Congress still referred to the Internet only superficially. The administration of Xi Jinping, which came to power in November 2012, dealt with the Internet much more energetically. Most importantly, the SIIO was given enhanced powers and an independent staff, and its new director and vice-director, Lu Wei and Ren Xianliang, became the most visible faces of the new propaganda-and-control offensive.

To a certain degree, the authorities availed themselves of the traditional media control toolkit that the Party had developed over the years. New ethical rules for online celebrities and ordinary users, the “Seven Baselines,” were laid down first (People’s Daily 2013). The most influential online voices were approached individually, at first in an effort to co-opt them, later through more coercive means. A media campaign across official channels sought to soften the ground for the inevitable crackdown, by presenting the stricter approach as a remedy for the various risks and dangers the Internet harbored. The authorities also took a more direct approach in managing Internet use: the previous system in which censorship duties were largely outsourced to Internet companies was supplemented with new rules that directly targeted individual behavior online and demonstrated an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the online communication ecology (Creemers 2015). The dynamism of public social media, for instance, was countered by rules that imposed prison sentences for publishing particular kinds of undesired content if it was retweeted 500 times or more (Supreme People’s Court 2013). Moves towards a more effective real-name registration system were taken to ensure culprits were identifiable.

Yet, gradually, the reconfiguration of Internet governance also revealed a fundamental shift in attitudes towards technology. Where previous propaganda administrators had primarily seen technology as a source of risk, Lu and Ren sought to harness its potential for their own purposes, including its use as a propaganda platform. Whereas previously private Internet companies were kept at arm’s length, government departments and officials, as well as official media at all levels, are now encouraged to use the platforms these enterprises provide to connect better to a populace that has left traditional media behind. The corporations operating these platforms have

themselves been brought into decision-making structures and are often touted abroad as national champions of China's innovation and development agenda. However, propaganda is now only one part of a much broader agenda to restructure the Party's governing framework through technology. Illustratively, the SIIO, whose English name was changed to Cyberspace Administration of China in 2014, became the host department for the office of a new Central Committee leading group, the Central Leading Group for Cybersecurity and Informatization. This combined the previously separate bureaucracies responsible for propaganda, technological innovation and development, and security. In particular the technology administration had, over the previous years, produced ambitious plans for "informatization" (*xinxihua*): the introduction of ICTs in all aspects of social and economic life, in order to enhance efficiency and the delivery of public services, support urbanization and economic growth, but also to be better able to monitor "social thinking trends."

The potential ramifications of this plan are mind-boggling. As it is now mandatory that user accounts for online services and mobile phone subscriptions are registered on the basis of real-name information, it will be technologically possible to mine the vast amount of data that will be generated through user activities in increasingly sophisticated and granular ways. Yet the plan does not stop there. It is connected to new forms of social management based on camera surveillance and monitoring by on-the-ground teams. China's Internet has been referred to as a Panopticon, Jeremy Bentham's conception of a circular prison in which a central, invisible watchman can observe the inmates, who have no means to perceive whether or not they are being watched at a given point in time and so are driven continuously to conformity (Bentham 1843). Yet technological potential is causing this static mode of governance to evolve into what Branden Hookway calls a "panspectron," which entails a much more dynamic approach not only to information-gathering, but also to processing and analyzing that information in order to intervene in social and economic processes (Hookway 2000).

This signals an important shift in the tactical arsenal that the Party has at its disposal. The problem of coercion damaging the Party's image and causing a domestic and international backlash is overcome by modifying the space for action, and subtly employing less prominent means, including technology and code, either to nudge individuals towards compliance or to make it impossible for them to engage in undesired activities. These powers are primarily seen, and utilized, as a tool to prevent organized opposition and dissent. Control has developed a logic of its own, connected to the Party's essential program that it, and it alone, has the legitimate authority to govern China. However, these



powers are also utilized as part of a broader project of socioeconomic reform, raising questions about the purpose of such control within a broader strategy of national development.

#### WHITHER CHINA'S POLITICAL CULTURE IN THE DIGITAL ERA?

The powerful levers of social management will allow the Party to manage the inevitable tensions between its perfectionist narrative and the messiness of everyday life. The citizenry's autonomy to raise topics or expose painful truths has largely been constrained, and these are channeled into controlled paths that ensure key decisions about publication and response remain within the Party. The authorities are therefore again able to prioritize certain claims over others, marginalize particular interests and groups, and recast critical narratives into forms that are consistent with the Leninist ideal to maintain the dominant voice in the public sphere. For instance, the tension between the manufactured satisfaction of Socialism and the manufactured dissatisfaction of the market economy is, at least rhetorically, resolved by portraying consumer complaints as a call for government protection of consumer rights, without addressing the foundational iniquities of the system.

One interesting illustration of this tension is found in defamation law. So long as all media were controlled by the party-state, defamation law functioned as an alternative form of supervision over individual news outlets as much as it provided legal protection for individuals' rights to reputation. Now, the internet permits individual Chinese citizens to slander or insult each other without any immediate relevant political connection. Yet to define defamation doctrine clearly would entail a public commitment to a jurisprudential delineation of acceptable speech, something the leadership has strenuously avoided. As a solution, judges are left relatively free to employ the necessary tools to solve the problems before them, as binding precedent does not exist in Chinese law. Some judges have, for instance, actually cited the US case of *New York Times v. Sullivan*<sup>6</sup> in verdicts. This practice ensures that defamation cases can be dealt with in a manner conducive to generating procedural legitimacy, as well as that the broader system of undefined and vague boundaries can continue to exist.

These trends allow for increasing ways to stabilize the system, and to manipulate rules, norms, and computer code in such a way that citizens are nudged into rationally acting out the leadership's will. Where Confucian officials had to rely on persuasion and acceptance to inspire action, technology makes consent superfluous. Still, one central tension of the Leninist system

<sup>6</sup> *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*, 376 U.S. 254 (1964).

remains: its need for an enemy and a mission. Whether and to what extent Chinese officials and citizens believe in or support Leninist ideology is an open and complex question. However, the rhetorical demands of obedience require declaring dedication to the Party's plan and vociferously struggling against its enemies. However, doing so may politicize issues that would otherwise not have gained prominence, and antagonize individuals who might otherwise have remained peaceful. The fanatical focus on security and controllability is thus, to some extent, self-exacerbating. A further challenge is the guardsman's problem. The internet has also been used as a tool to impose stricter control over officials in departments and localities. They are now required to publish various kinds of information that is not only useful for the local populace, but also for their Beijing overseers. The Party's anticorruption watchdog has gone so far as to develop a mobile phone app to report venality directly to the central authorities, bypassing the often-treacherous path of having to travel physically to Beijing to present a petition in person. The internal Party system will have to adjust to this new mode of control and there is a continuous risk that the few senior officials in control of the system pose a political danger of their own, not unlike the previous head of internal security, Zhou Yongkang.

These developments give cause for reflection, also outside China. In the same manner that Internet and digital technology have mercilessly exposed the hypocrisies and tensions within the liberal-democratic order, they have revealed the dysfunction and contradictions of the Sino-Leninist project. In both cases the response has been the enthusiastic embrace of more technology. In the West, the silicon mantra of techno-optimism, data-driven solutions and disruption remains current, despite damning criticism. In China, where such criticism is quickly circumscribed, ICTs are marshaled to induce the discipline and compliance that has eluded the system for so long. Everywhere, big data analysis is now being proposed as a legitimate means to tackle harms generated by political and commercial interests. It is a painful awakening to find that the libertarian ethos underpinning much of the evolution of technology has fostered systems that enable more total control over individual lives than at any time in the past. Not unlike Leninism, technology designers often consciously or unconsciously impose particular preferred lifestyles onto individuals, equally denying them autonomy and individuality. However, as Isaiah Berlin warned:

Once I take this view, I am in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture them in the name, and on behalf, of their "real" selves, in the secure knowledge that whatever is the true goal of man (happiness, performance of duty, wisdom, a just society, self-fulfillment) must be identical with his freedom – the free choice of his "true", albeit often submerged and inarticulate, self. (Berlin 2004, original 1958, p. 180)

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