



**An Analysis of the Potential Democratizing Effects of Social Media:
A Chinese Experience**

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the democratizing potential of Chinese social media. The Chinese government's media restriction always lies at the key core of international criticism. The rise of Chinese social media, and citizen journalism in particular, has been regarded as the key battleground for China's future. However, the democratizing potential of Chinese social media in general and citizen journalism in particular stand in need of investigation in China's unique context. The same holds true for the cross-cultural applicability of a Western-style democratic path in the Chinese context. This paper analyzes China's current socioeconomic reality and ideological shifts, and agrees that these changes qualify China as a more liberal society. However, this study also suggests that collective traditions in Chinese society are still strong at both grassroots and authoritative levels. Therefore, it is mistaken to assume that China has been ideologically prepared for undertaking a reform at a structural level. In a similar vein, although Chinese social media, and citizen journalism in particular, is on the rise, demonstrating the power of breaking down both the technological and ideological barriers for deepening China's political transformation, its contribution to the dawn of democracy is not nearly as much as we have wished for. Over-anticipation, over-reliance and over-interference by the Chinese government may undermine its democratizing potential as a transformative tool and finally result in reversing the process of its growth and development.

Introduction

As one of the largest and most populous countries in the world, China possesses political and economic powers that are soaring remarkably. Taking advantage of the State's strong moves into the global market economy, China has achieved an economic growth to which history can hardly show any equal. However, it is worth noting that the impacts generated by China's rapid economic growth cannot be simply calculated within the framework of economy. China's opening-up policies that have been implemented in all aspects of social, economic, and political life fundamentally change and challenge its existing structures. One new challenge confronting Chinese government is the Chinese people's growing demand for greater media transparency. Admittedly, the media transparency in current China is still considerably limited; the Chinese government still strives to maintain its tight control over the free flow of information.

The rise of Chinese social media, and citizen journalism in particular, has significantly changed China's media and information landscape. Different from traditional media, social media is characterized by its "extending traditional social network online" and "sharing information" (Mou et al. 2013, 360). Chinese social media has been regarded as the "key battleground for China's future" (Zhao 2008, 341). Lagerkvist (2010) in particular regards Chinese citizen journalism as the "fourth wave of investigative journalism" rolling in over China (97). The core of citizen journalism lies in the idea of incorporating citizens into information production. Underlying this change is a significant shift from "top-down framing of issues and cueing of publics to more bottom-up personal involvement" (Bennett, Freelon and Wells 2009, 128,129). Taking advantage of this shift, online independent sources (Berger 2011, 361) that provide self-affirming information (Bennett et al. 2009, 128) grow in strength and importance.

This is a pivotal change in China where mainstream media is clearly censored and controlled by the government.

However, questions such as how social media can change Chinese society and what China's future holds in store stand in need of investigation in the unique context of Chinese society. I argue that although Chinese social media, and citizen journalism in particular is on the rise, demonstrating the power of breaking down both the technological and ideological barriers for deepening China's political transformation, its contribution to the dawn of democracy is not nearly as much as we have wished for. Moreover, over-anticipation, over-reliance and over-interference with it as a transformative tool may undermine its democratizing potentials and finally result in reversing the process of its growth and development.

Literature Review

The literature on Chinese social media heavily concentrates on its transformative potential of easing governmental censorship of the media, on the one hand, and facilitating democratization, on the other. Inasmuch as social media put information into broader circulation, discussion focuses on whether, or to what extent, this change will further undermine the established political hierarchy and thus democratize Chinese society. Two major narratives dominate the field.

According to the first narrative, communication technologies, and the Internet in particular, facilitate the rise of civic society generally and empower Chinese society (Yang, 2003). The increasing online activism, which is sparked by Chinese social media, serves to promote a "democratic rehearsal process" (Reese and Dai 2009, 230) that not only enhances professionalism in Chinese mainstream media industry but also has "revolutionary" (Yang, 2009)

influences on China's future. China's current online activism suggests a "revolutionary impulse" that may finally accelerate China's "long revolution" to achieving democracy (Yang, 2009; Lagerkvist, 2010).

The second narrative, on the other hand, expresses a relatively negative view of the potentialities of social media as a "revolutionary" force in China (Mou et al. 2013). Rather than claiming that Chinese social media significantly challenges the Chinese government, the second narrative notices that the Chinese government has adopted—even if with some lag—new strategies to deal with the shifting realities. The Chinese government always explores new methods of maintaining its control over the information flows, and thus the Internet and other technical innovations alike provoke "new, innovative and more pervasive" controls (Cook 2015; Xin 2013). Lagerkvist (2010) claims that Chinese government is quite "robust, confident and able to withstand the short-term instability"(281).

Such a distinction relates to concerns surrounding the political potential of Chinese social media not only as an informative tool of disseminating information but also a transformative facilitator of unlocking the Chinese information landscape. Human Right NGOs such as Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, and Reporters Without Borders also dramatize the confrontation between the Chinese government and Chinese people as the battle between authoritarianism and democracy. Nonetheless, what all these areas of studies do is presume a confrontational relationship between the Party-state and public, and excessively focus on analyzing the predeterminants of democracy in China based on the experience of Western-style political reform. However, the cross-cultural applicability of Western-style democratic path in Chinese context remains under-discussed and thus stands in need of further exploration.

First, Ideological Change; Second, Social Structural Change

The Chinese government's information restriction always lies at the core of international criticism. Yan (2008), and many scholars, media professionals, and political actors alike, consider the rise of social media, accompanied by the rise of individualism, as one of the "most important and profound changes in Chinese society over the past three decades" (as cited in Lagerkvist 2010, 75). According to the statistic released by Freedom House (2013), by January 2013, China had the largest number of Internet and mobile phone users, with an estimated 564 million and 986 million, respectively ("Throttling Dissent" 2013, 6). It is believed that the Internet significantly triggers people's desires to actively explore a full range of social activities; this can be illustrated from online forums, which always host a "surprising range of opinions" on political topics ("Throttling Dissent", 2013). In this sense, a significant body of academic literature on Chinese social media and online activism features the celebration of the political potentials of social media as the weapon to challenge China's "authoritarian" regime. Online Media analysis as such often uses the trope of "watchdog and grassroots" fighting an "oppressive political system and mass media censorship" (Lagerkvist 2010, 75) to describe the situation, and foresees that online activism as such will "inevitably" ("Throttling Dissent", 2013) result in political reform.

This part of drama does exist. Discourses emphasizing the transformative potentials of social media converge with a dominant scholarly theory in the West, which focuses on the causal relationship among new media diffusion, civic participation, and incremental political reform. Nevertheless, I argue that in the Chinese context, it is misleading to overemphasize the potentials of social media in fundamentally reinventing an established political hierarchy, because social media are, in Markham's terms, as "complicit as they are in

reproducing hierarchies” (Markham 2010, 90). Moreover, I argue that the most significant contribution of social media and online activism is to facilitate changes in ideological demission. There is no denying that social media challenges the established authorities. In China, the battle between social forces and political interests, and conflicts between “media consumers and freedom-seeking netizens” and “state legislators, Party ideologues and law enforcement agencies” (“Throttling Dissent,” 2013) continue to intensify as the voices calling for a freer and more open media become progressively louder. However, Lagerkvist (2010) claims that the major and most prominent contribution of Internet activism is not to encourage citizens to ride roughshod over the government but to facilitate the rise of individualism “against a tradition of collective subservience to principles and social norms of hierarchy, seniority, and gender” (75).

I agree with Lagerkvist in the sense that the ideological changes, to wit, from collectivism to individualism, will affect Chinese society at a more fundamental level because, as Stringham and Hummel (2010) have argued, a change in a society's ideas is the first step to a change in political practice. Similarly, John Adams (1856) further illustrates the relationship between ideological changes and social structural changes; he caution against the view of regarding the “effect and consequence” (172) as the real meaning of social reform. It does not mean, of course, the “effect and consequence” are not important; however, fixing our eyes on effects and over-anticipating good outcomes may finally spoil things by excessive enthusiasm. Yet this what we seem to do when analyzing Chinese social media; the discussion on political potentials of Chinese social media in democratizing a censored regime dominates the literature, with the bulk of the attention being on the battle between the government and the public.

However, debates centering on ideological changes in Chinese collective traditions in relation to political reform are still at the margin of discussion and oftentimes taken for granted.

It is far from enough to simply acknowledge that what is considered as democracy in one society might not be considered so in another. Issues such as the extent to which changes in ideological dimension within Chinese society have occurred, the level at which Chinese people's interpretation of Western-style libertarianism corresponds to that of the West, and more importantly, the degree to which these ideologies matter to Chinese people stand in need of full investigation.

In light of these reasons, it is useful to think about the ideological changes in Chinese society that have occurred in the past decades as the starting point of investigating Chinese social media and calculating its potential influences on China's future. There have been different analytical theories of ideological patterns, in which ideologies are interpreted in relation to different aspects of social or political realities. There is no agreement with which way is evidently better than the others, but I find Haslanger's theory is in particular useful, which emphasizes the relationship between ideologies and social structures. Typically ideologies are considered as a set of beliefs about social reality. This way of constructing ideology resembles Haslanger's notion (2006); however, Haslanger points out that "belief" cannot conceivably function here to define ideology, because it tends to be too "cognitive," individualistic, and not "sufficiently flexible" (Haslanger 2006). Instead of broadly adopting the term "belief," Haslanger incorporates the notion of "schema" from William Swell (1992) to define ideologies as a "problematic schema that partly constitute and sustain social structures" (Haslanger 2006).

Haslanger's pattern indicates two significant aspects about ideologies that are usually misinterpreted. First, ideologies constructed as such function both "individually" and "inter-subjectively," and do not speak of a "group consciousness" (Haslanger 2006). Second, ideologies can be both "pervasive" and "highly local," but they are not "paradigmatically true or

false”(Haslanger 2006). Haslanger’s notion gives great importance to carefully examining the ideological changes that have occurred in China, on the one hand, and to considering the applicability of Western ideologies in current China’s social and political realities, on the other. Since ideologies are not all of one piece, it is necessary to distinguish their subjects and avoid making hasty generalizations. More importantly, it is not necessary to make comparisons between different ideologies and conclude one better than the others; this is no small matter, because it is crucial to consider to what extent a “better” ideological system could fit the situation and conceivably function in a similar way as it does in other contexts. This calls attention to the cultural colonization, although to varying degrees, that may occur when academics and professionals study and represent other cultures and intend to use their work to make a difference (Haslanger, 2006).

Spivak’s critique about “representation” sheds additional light on addressing the risks that may occur when Western culture investigates other cultures. *Can the Subaltern Speak* is Spivak’s most well-known contribution to postcolonial studies, in which she expresses her concerns that neo-colonial imperatives of “political domination, economic exploitation, and cultural erasure” (Graves, n.d.) became increasingly dominant. Spivak’s concern over the model of investigating a different culture by Western standards has a more universal implication. Spivak addresses two different meanings of “representation,” the differences between which are frequently overlooked and intermixed: the representation as “speaking for” within the framework of politics, and the representation as “re-presentation” in the sphere of arts (70). To further explain the gap between these two layers of “representation,” Spivak incorporates the debate of representation as persuasion or as tropology. According to Spivak’s analysis, representation as political proxy belongs to the first group, while representation as figurative re-presentation

belongs to the second. Spivak cautions against the dangers of running these two senses of representation together. By arguing “representing them, the intellectuals represent themselves as transparent,” Spivak claims that representation is never innocent and it carries certain assumptions and purposes to support the interests of its producers (78). During the process of transforming from representation as re-presentation to representation as “speaking for,” descriptive orders about those represented change in many ways in order to fit certain values and understandings.

In light of these criticisms, part of what is happening in studies on Chinese social media is to presuppose not only a direction to democracy but also a path to achieve this democratic end. More often than not studies supporting such ideas presume a confrontational relationship between the Chinese government and the public that is non-negotiable. However, too often conclusions as such are drawn from “their” interpretation about the reality—what “they” hope is happening and what “they” expect to happen in the future.

Worth noting is that, although different discourses about ideologies are used to examine different dimensions of a society, ranging from economy to culture to politics, each way is somehow concerned with an aspect of the society. One substantial overlap among different definitions is to consider ideologies as abstracted meanings that people use to interpret social matters. In this way of understanding ideology, one could argue that all political and economic tendencies may entail an ideology. Thus, the first step of developing an account of ideologies in a given society would be an investigation of its broad social contexts—its structures and institutions, its political traditions, its culture, its economy, and also its people. In this regard, before analyzing China’s ideological changes and evaluating its political potentials in relation to

democratization, it is important to learn about China's unique social, political, and economic contexts that trigger radical changes in principles and opinion of the people.

Chinese Socioeconomic Reality and its Influences

a. Economic Boom, Inequality, and Social Disparity

China's late 20th and early 21st century saw a dramatic economic and political transformation. Deng's economic reform, termed *Gaigekaiifang*, brought significant changes in China's political, social and, in particular, economic systems. The market economy initiated since 1978 laid a solid groundwork for China's rapid economic growth over the past four decades. In the past decades, China has lifted millions of people out of poverty, making extraordinary achievements in poverty and hunger reduction. According to the World Bank, China has reduced its poverty population from 43% of the world's total poor population in 1981 to 13% in 2010 ("China's Poverty Reduction," 2010).

However, rapid economic growth is a double-edged sword. It substantially benefits the Chinese society, but simultaneously yields numerous negative consequences. Alongside the unprecedented economic performance, different kinds of social disparities among different geographic areas have been exacerbated; the same holds true for the income gap between the urban working and middle class, which has dramatically risen. China officially reported its Gini coefficient, which stood at 0.474 in 2012 ("Gini out of the bottle," 2013). In the past thirty decades, China's Gini coefficient stayed between 0.47 and 0.49, which indicated a relatively high level of inequality ("Gini out of the bottle," 2013). David Dollar, who once worked as the director of the World Bank's Country for China and Mongolia, in particular investigates the negative social outcomes generated by China's fast economic growth. Dollar (2007) cautions

that although the inequality is in many ways unavailable due to the nature of the capitalist market economy, the level of social inequality in China is excessively exacerbated. Specifically, income, health, and education disparities between urban-rural areas are identified by Dollar as the most concerning aspects.

The co-relationship between earning ability and education further exacerbates the income gap. According to Dollar, the wage returns to “one additional year of schooling” grew from 4% to 11% (Dollar, 2007). This growth indicates that people with higher education are more likely to get higher-paid jobs. Education level, therefore, is worsening the income gap, further widening the income gulf between the well-educated professionals and the less-educated grassroots workers. Interestingly, Dollar interprets this phenomenon in a relatively positive light. He argues that, although this tendency might result in higher level of inequality, in the long run it would reduce inequality as long as “there is reasonably good access to education” that would enable larger share of population to get educated (Dollar, 2007).

Nevertheless, according to the salary survey conducted by Institute for Mathematics and its Applications (IMA) in 2012, which is shown in the Table I, educational attainment and salary level demonstrate a significant relationship (Lawson 2012). The total compensation of people with a master degree or above is approximately three times as much as that of people without bachelor degrees. Put another way, the higher one’s education, the higher one’s income. Considering contemporary China’s economic satiation, it is predictable that this tendency will continue when China is further deeply integrating into the global market system. Just as predictable, the income gap between the highly educated and the less-educated population will continue to widen, and the social disparity between the rich and the poor will similarly continue

to increase. Thus, education disparity would in many ways worsen current situation and further exacerbate social inequalities.

ANNUAL SALARY	1ST QUARTILE	MEDIAN	MEAN	3RD QUARTILE
Less than a baccalaureate degree	7,600	60,000	97,364	145,000
Baccalaureate degree	18,000	90,500	140,853	200,000
Master's degree	71,000	150,000	282,761	327,500
TOTAL COMPENSATION				
Less than a baccalaureate degree	30,400	87,000	133,302	168,127
Baccalaureate degree	43,500	118,650	184,813	235,000
Master's degree	100,500	200,000	371,941	403,500

Table I: Salary and Compensation by level of Education
Source: IMA 2012 China Salary Survey

b. China as a Liberal Society: Ideological Change

The cumulative effects of China's socioeconomic and political transformations cannot be calculated only through an economic perspective; they also profoundly influence and in many ways challenge existing social values and ideological beliefs. Steel and Lynch (2013) examine the consequences of China's socioeconomic and political transformation for individual subjective well-being (SWB). SWB refers to a person's "cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life" (as cited. in Albuquerque, n.d.). As a collectivist country, factors pertaining to collectivism should have demonstrated more dominant influences on Chinese SWB.

Nevertheless, according to Steel and Lynch's study, contemporary China displays a visible trend in which individualistic factors have become more significant for Chinese SWB (Steel and Lynch, 2013). The most essential individualistic factors identified by Steel and Lynch include income, marital status, employment status, and health (Steel and Lynch, 2013). To put it another way, socioeconomic status is becoming a more important factor in how individual Chinese evaluate their status quo, and thus it is hardly surprising that those who have the highest social

status—“healthy, married, middle-aged individuals with high incomes”—report the highest SWB (Steel and Lynch, 2013).

China’s transformations that have occurred in both socioeconomic and ideological dimensions produce issues for intellectuals and policy reformers to debate about, and lead them to anticipate transformations on a more fundamental level. Inglehart (1997) has developed the grounded theory of post-materialism, in which he suggests that the value changes that occurred in China during the process of economic growth and social modernization would encourage the development of “more critical citizens who question traditional sources of authority, including government” (as cited in Norris 1999, 14). The post-materialist values, identified in general as the desires of satisfying an individual’s material needs, have more profound impacts on a society. Studies demonstrate that each successive generation in a given society demonstrates a visible decline in support for “traditional sources of political authority, including representative government, and established, hierarchical institutions such as the army, police, and church” (as cited in Norris 1999, 14).

Based on this concept, Inglehart further proposes the concept of self-expression values in his and Welzel’s World Value Survey (WVS), a global research project initiated since 1981 aiming at studying changing values and their impact on social and political life (World Value Survey). Self-expression by definition is a cluster of values including social toleration, life satisfaction, public expression and an aspiration to liberty (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Inglehart and Welzel (2005) regard self-expression values as “not just helpful but necessary” conditions for democracy (Bomhoff and Gu, 2012). According to Inglehart and Oyserman (2004), the growing economy will facilitate cultural shifts to “increased emphasis on individual freedom-focused values and reduced focus on traditional hierarchies” (5). These shifts are “conducive”

(Inglehart and Welzel, 2005, 7) to facilitate and sustain both established and new democracy. Inglehart and Welzel (2005) argue that the growing importance of self-expression values in a given society should have “a major impact on democratic institutions” (7), because values are “inherently relevant to the civil and political liberties” (6) that contribute to the emergence and flourishing of democracy. Citizens who are possessed with self-expression values demonstrate greater interests in democracy and also higher abilities in getting it. This is the conceptual base that Inglehart’s idea of Critical citizens draws upon.

In this way of examining China’s democratizing potentials, there is a reason to assume that democratization in China is not impossible. However, the liberal trend has not yet led to a noticeable democratic transition. This reflects a growing tension between Chinese realities and Western ideals regarding the path towards democracy, which is always a prominent site of contestation between the central leadership of the Party and other political reformers. It indicates that, although current China demonstrates a trend towards a more liberal society that adheres to the values of typical Western models, its political, legal, economic, social, and cultural systems are “not yet democracy” (Bomhoff and Gu 2012, 382) are still fundamentally different from that of full democracies. Furthermore, Bomhoff and Gu (2012) question the applicability of Western ideas and systems in Asians; they argue that

The path to democracy is rich in variety and possibility—it should not be signposted exclusively with the current western interpretation of self-expression...and [is] not necessary in conjunction with the wholesale adoption of western values and ideas (375, 382).

Norris (1999) notifies that, even in full democracies, public faithfulness in democratic values just functions as a “necessary, but not sufficient” condition for sustaining the long-term stabilities of

democracy (16). Therefore, it is mistaken to assume that China's ideological shifts towards liberalization, triggered by its socioeconomic reform, will be sufficiently powerful to break down structural barriers for continuing its democratization. More importantly, it is misleading to conclude that Chinese society has been ready for adopting a reform path that resembles that of the West. Bringing about a democratic reform would require major changes in political ideologies, but the fact that changes have happened so much in the past may not indicate that a movement to democratization is possible. Although Chinese society is becoming more liberal and individualistic, these changes, which are regarded as predeterminants of democracy by Western standards, have not yet led to a new space for democratization. In other words, the Western-style experience of democratization is not completely applicable in Chinese context, and thus it is incorrect to adhere to assumptions that what are considered as indispensable conditions for continuing a democratic process would yield the same optimistic outcomes in China.

c. China as a “Not-Yet Democracy”: Repressive Policy and the Internet Censorship

China's current socioeconomic realities not only have profound impacts on its people but also place the Chinese government under serious pressure to maintain its authority. The Chinese government's commitment to curtailing freedom of information should be understood in a Chinese context that contains different types of social and political complexities. It has been widely acknowledged that current Chinese society is experiencing a major shift from its political and social traditions. The Chinese government is facing many struggles. The uneven distribution of power, wealth, and other social resources alike among different geographical regions engenders a noticeable decline of life dissatisfaction. Continuing increase in social inequality

has intensified social conflicts and undermined social and political trust. Based on the survey conducted by Edelman in 2012, the Chinese government saw noticeable governmental trust decline by 13% in 2012 (“Government trust breakdown,” 2012). The increasing inequality also jeopardizes social stability and security in the long run. Cheong and Wu (2013) have proved that regional inequality is positively correlated with the crime rate. In this sense, it could be argued that China's widening gap in the distribution of wealth and power has created serious problems, which may plunge the government and Party officials into an internal crisis of legitimacy.

China’s “stability maintenance” and “stability about everything” policies represent the leading political ideology of the government in dealing with the challenges facing their authorities. Worth noting is that close monitoring of the public in the name of maintaining social stability has been deep-rooted in Chinese political life. The term “stability about everything,” or “stability maintenance” and “stability preservation” can be allegedly traced to Deng Xiaoping’s rule; the monitoring of the public and repression of perceived threats endured “hallmarks of CCP rule” (Cook 2015, 16) in Jiang Zeming’s leadership, and had a “dramatic explosion” (Cook 2015, 16) in Hu Jintao’s period. This concept, which was formed and popularized in the past, adapts to new conditions when it is implemented and propagandized in current General Secretary Xi Jinping’s leadership. Xi openly acknowledges that “we are currently engaged in a magnificent struggle that has many new historical characteristics; the challenges and difficulties we face are unprecedented” (Cook, 2015). Xi’s acknowledgement reflects the Chinese leadership’s major concern about its political legitimacy and the worrisome prospect of losing the loyalty of the public and even some of its own members. The Chinese government’s massive repressive policies speak of this anxiety.

Media censorship is but one of the main manifestations of Chinese government's "stability maintenance" policies. The condemnation of the way in which the Chinese government exerts sweeping controls over the media is near-unanimous, but what merits our equal attention is that, even in mature democracies, such as the United States, there exist boundaries between free speech and a free press. The differences of these two terms remained historically significant in professional journalism, yet too often these differences are in many ways overlooked, and these two concepts are uncritically adopted in different contexts. The United States' First Amendment in particular removes the differences between the freedom of speech and press, by stating that the speech and press, both of which are categorized under the umbrella of "expression," with little, if any, "hazard of missing significant doctrinal differences" ("First Amendment," n.d.). However, there indeed exist boundaries, in particular for revealing issues that would trigger concerns about national security. The well-known case of Edward Snowden, who leaked classified information from the National Security Agency to the mainstream media, can be seen as but one of the illustrations of this contentious boundary between the freedom of speech and press.

In other words, although the First Amendment technically elides the differences between free speech and free press, in effect there exist implicit exceptions. In this sense, it could be argued that the Chinese government's repressive policies serve to maintain and consolidate its one-party dominance, yet one cannot deny that repressive actions are also driven by concerns of social security and stability that are engendered by the ever-intensified social tensions. A full understanding of Chinese repressive policies in general and media censorship in particular requires us to disentangle the multilayered purposes that they serve.

The Party officials' anxieties about perceived threats presented by, to use Cook's terms, "technological advancement, the greater availability of financial resources amid a rapid growing economy, [and] the regime's rising insecurity in the face of a better-educated and more assertive citizenry" (Cook 2015, 16) lead to the implementation of administrative monitoring on a grand scale. China's major administrations responsible for implementing repressive policies include the state intelligence and police agencies, paramilitary forces, extralegal CCP-based entities, and the local administrative enforcers (Cook 2015,16). Social stability maintenance as the central policy for the Chinese government is also demonstrated from budgets that are invested in social security programs; it is believed that Chinese government's investment in stability maintenance may have surpassed its national defense budget in 2012 ("Throttling Dissent", 2013).

However, the Chinese government's repressive policies aiming at sustaining its dominance are in effect intensifying the conflicts both between the Party and the public and within internal Party dynamics. The Chinese government is now trapped in a dilemma that either continuing or easing its massive repressive policies may not yield the outcomes the Party desires. The Party's attempts to assert its legitimacy are simultaneously estranging its people and its own members, and the actions taken to sustain its dominance over the regime are in effect undermining its authority. A central quandary facing the Party is that "each act of repression generates the need for repression" (Cook 2015, 5). The Party's legitimacy and China's political and social stability facilitate as much as undercut each other; this conflict does exist.

Scholars, NGO representatives, political reformers, global bureaucrats, and media professionals alike invest great interest in analyzing the negative outcomes generated by the Chinese government's repressive actions. Too often their studies are accompanied by accusations

against China's one-Party rule and usually end in an explicit advocacy of political liberalization.

Yet, talk of democracy is always cheap and easy. Langlois (2008) in particular alerts that

The platitudes of democracy are very easy to articulate...By contrast, building institutions, effecting cultural change, providing justification for changing acting and thinking, education people, securing the material resources necessary for democracy, sustaining the impetus for reform in adverse conditions—these tasks and the many more that are necessary for genuine and lasting democratic change are hard tasks of the first order (2).

Criticisms which advocate democratization in China do not either recognize the difficulties of achieving democracy, on the one hand, nor fully explore the consequences, either positive or negative, that would follow after the easing of repression within the regime, on the other. The applicability of Western-style democracy in Chinese society remains open to debate, and this question needs to be theoretically studied and empirically calculated before being put into practice on a grand scale.

Media censorship is one of the most important constituting parts of Chinese government's repression practice. Media censoring, albeit varying in degree, can be found in many other countries, but China is constantly blasted for imposing overly strict censorship on press freedom. It could be argued that the Chinese government has granted the news media more critical latitude than ever before; however, Reporters Without Borders—the organization fighting for press freedom—still ranks China's press freedom in 173rd place among 179 countries, and states that: "Economic growth does not mean press freedom!" (Reporters Without Borders, 2013). Although the Chinese government declares over and over again that "currently China is one of the world's countries [that is] richest in freedom of speech and freedom of publication"

(as cited in Freedom of Expression, n.d.), it has to be admitted that the freedom of speech in China today—especially the freedom to criticize politically significant issues—is really a far way off.

Close monitoring of and tight control over the information flow have always been a hallmark of the rule of the Chinese Party-state. Just as it is necessary to understand China's repressive policies in terms of China's unique political, social, and economic contexts, so it is significantly important to study Chinese social media in Chinese contexts, which are rather different from that of the West with which most communication scholars are acquainted with. Given the host of political, social and cultural explanations about the distinctiveness of Chinese social media, to draw Chinese social media and Western media with the same broad brush would be inaccurate and unfair, an issue to which I wish to call attention.

Major administrative agencies involved in the implementation of media censorship are General Administration of Press and Publication (CAPP), China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), and The Central Propaganda Department (CPD) (CECC, 2006). Three major censorship methods are 1) "The Great Firewall of China," which disallows certain "entire Web site[s]" from operation; 2) "keyword blocking," which disallows users from posting contents that contain certain banned phrases; and 3) "hand censoring," by which censors read and remove contents that they find "objectionable" (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013). Even though Article 35 of the Chinese Constitution technically affords Chinese citizens the freedom of "speech, publication, assembly, association, procession and demonstration," the vague language about what contents are illegal to be covered, and the chilling effects caused by subversion charges and imprisonments for publishing and disseminating anti-government criticisms, tightly grab the media's throat (CN Const., art. 35). This hybrid nature of Chinese media industry, in

which market-oriented commercialization and Party-state interests coexist and intertwine, becomes the major challenge confronting Chinese mainstream media in its attempts to act out values of professional journalism.

There always exists a huge discrepancy between the official rhetoric of a free media and a censored reality; yet, the implementation of media censorship under Xi's leadership demonstrates a "dramatic" transformation (Cook 2015). The major catalyst for these changes is the advent of the Internet and rise of social media. Freedom House reveals in its annual report (2015) that the number of the Internet users in China has grown nearly tenfold in ten years, from 59 million in 2012 to 560 million in 2012 (Cook 2015). The emergence and popularity of innovative media platforms facilitate the production of user-generated content, which has fundamentally changed China's media and information landscape. It could be argued that technological achievements, the Internet in particular, challenge the existing social hierarchy by gradually breaking down the traditional communication system in which access to information was highly restricted.

The Chinese government is currently facing unprecedented challenges in maintaining its control over the information flow. The old communication system in which information distribution was organized institutionally by the Party-state can hardly function well when Chinese netizens—citizen of the Internet—the young generation in particular, form and articulate their own ideas about China's future. The Chinese government's efforts toward tightening its grip on social media and information flows under this new circumstance are thus characterized not only by its concrete repressive actions, which enable the leadership to constantly monitor and intervene when necessary, but also by a series of strategic political campaigns that serve to improve the government's reputation and reclaim the Party's legitimacy. These efforts with the

intention to “cue individual indication with values embodied by the Party” (Bennett et al. 2009, 127) reflect the Party officials’ highest anxiety that is triggered by their assessment that the political support has eroded not just for governmental institutions but also for the Party’s ideologies. This deep sense of insecurity generated by a perceived crisis of Party ideologies among Chinese people is best illustrated by the Party’s adoption of militant rhetoric, such as “ideological battleground” and “public opinion struggles” (Qian, 2013), to describe the situation in which Chinese collectivism and conservatism, embodied by the Party leadership, are openly competing with Western-style individualism and liberalism.

The Chinese government’s attempts at reclaiming its dominance over social media through intensified Internet censorship (Cook, 2015) further indicates that Chinese governmental officials, too, have perceived the potential political impacts (or “democratic” potential as many Western scholars prefer to say) of social media. The democratizing influences of social media are anticipated in two aspects: to challenge government’s control over the information flow by breaking down the technical barriers of accessing information; and to remove ideological barriers for continuing transformation by facilitating a shift in the norms and practice of civic engagement.

The increasing magnitude of the Internet, as well as people’s increasing curiosity about blocked issues, and their growing ability to seek for and circulate information, in many ways render futile the Chinese government’s attempts at controlling the free flow of information. More importantly, increasing online participation fundamentally alters the standard way of engaging in political and social life. According to the study conducted by Lagerkvist and Sundqvist (2012), for example, users of Sina weibo—one of the most popular and influential media platforms in China—not only take a great interest in discussing political issues but also tend to be highly

critical in their evaluation. Based on the data, approximately 70% of the investigated tweets concern the CCP's management performance in political issues of the day, and only 16% of them are "supportive" of the Party's rule (Lagerkvist & Sundqvist 2012). Scheufele (2002) argues that one's willingness to engage in political discussion is the "soul of democracy" (as cited in Mou et al. 2013, 361). Predictably, and not without reason, the Internet and social media have significantly affected the ways in which Chinese netizens engage in political and civic activities. Just as predictable, and also with reason, the Internet and social media will continue to facilitate the liberalization process in Chinese society by encouraging civic participation and changing the way of practicing citizenship.

Influences of the Internet and Social Media

It is indeed possible that these changes could serve as the emerging foundations of political transformation in China. Nevertheless, to what extent these changes will amount to a democratic reform is arguable. In this section, I will examine the perceived democratizing potentials of the Internet and social media respectively. I argue that it is mistaken to exaggerate the democratizing influences of the Internet, as a representative of technological advance, and Chinese social media, as a place fueling social activism. I caution that to overstress their democratizing influences on Chinese society is to create a romanticized version of Chinese reality that is abuzz with artificial activism; social collective actions aiming at bringing public good to Chinese society, which are planned based on a reality as such, may finally yield outcomes running counter to their desires.

Efforts to understand the impacts of the Internet on Chinese society have produced considerable differences. Amid the swirl of different arguments, the main debate centers on

whether technological achievements, such as the Internet, are able to serve as facilitators of liberalization by way of breaking down the technical barriers and providing equal access to information. This contention revolves around two poles. The first major narrative views the Internet and its potential of bringing a freer media environment to China in a relatively optimistic light. Scholars who articulate this idea claim that the Internet will have revolutionary effects on China's civic society (Mou et al. 2013). They argue that the Internet empowers society, and the increasing online activism will become the power broker of China's "long revolution" of achieving democracy (Yang, 2009). Yet, alongside the celebration, there remain skeptics and concerns about this overtly optimistic expectation. The second narrative, in this sense, demonstrates a relatively negative attitude towards the political potentials generated by the Internet, and all other new communication technologies it represents. Scholars who take this point of view see the Internet more as a boon to Chinese leadership, claiming that the Internet has become a powerful tool for the Party officials to continually control and manipulate the public through a series of repressive regulations and propaganda managements (Lagerkvist 2010, 16).

Although these two narratives are contradictory to each other, both agree that technological achievements have profound effects in shaping China's political future, either positive or negative. Social changes largely rely on the "directions that collective actions will happen" (Lagerkvist 2010, 26); technologies, in this sense, offer new possibilities for developing and organizing collective actions in a pattern that differs from the past. As argued above, the disagreement between cyber libertarians, who believe that new communication technologies would further facilitate and consolidate the emerging democracy in China, and skeptics, who caution that the new communications would also reinforce the existing power hierarchy, centers

on the question that whether or not, or to what extent, technology innovation, in and of itself, is able to serve as a power broker bringing about significant social changes in Chinese society. It is admitted that new communications technologies carry potentials of continuing liberalization and spurring democratization in Chinese society; however, I argue that the Internet *per se* can hardly grow out of the control of the Chinese government and facilitate a fundamental shift from a “not yet democracy” (Bomhoff and Gu 2012, 382) to a more democratic one.

Such a distinction reflects the debate about technological determinism in the Chinese context, which focuses on the extent to which technology *per se* will lead to substantial structural changes in Chinese society. Technologies as a form of human cultural activities indeed respond to particular social, cultural, and political needs. However, it is equally important to acknowledge that, although the evolution of technologies is driven by different purposes and needs, technology *per se* “has no self” (Lagerkvist 2010, 26). Based on Andrew Feenberg’s concept of instrumental theory (1991), technologies simply function as tools to serve the purposes of users, and thus they can be used to different political or social ends, which are determined by the person or the institution in control. Therefore, technologies are not inherently good or bad; the values ascribed to them are determined by the way they are used. The contentious relationship between political changes and the introduction of new technology is further elaborated by Saco (2002) who argues that

technologies cannot be treated as the neutral fix for democracy, nor, for that matter, as the deterministic ruination of democracy; rather they should be seen as issues that need to be themselves democratized precisely by politicalizing them (203).

Just as technological innovations may be used to break up the government monopoly on information, so can they be adopted by the government to support its monitoring and repressive

systems. According to the Freedom House, under Xi's leadership, the Party's multi-layered censoring system, including the security apparatus, have evolved in order to better resolve the Party's problems (Cook, 2005). Drawing evidence from Lagerkvist's and Saco's view about technologies as intrinsically neutral, the mushrooming of new communication technologies does not necessarily usher in democratization in China, since technologies per se, due to their inherently neutral nature, will not function to democratize the regime unless their users, who themselves have already politically engaged, apply them for achieving democratic ends.

Of course, there exist defensive responses. The relationship between media technologies and their social impacts is always one of the prominent sites of contestation. Criticisms against instrumental theory argue that this view of looking at technologies downplays the values of technologies as the medium of human actions. McLuhan (1967) claims against the view of considering media technologies simply as passive tools; rather, he argues that media technologies play a significantly active role in changing the nature of human connection and social association (Kelly, 2003). Croteau and Hoynes (2012), in a similar vein, address the social and political potentials of new media technologies. They argue that the Internet is "fundamentally changing the way we live" (312) by way of organizing new forms of social interactions. In Chinese context, opponents of technological determinism claim that the Internet, and all other innovative communication platforms combined, create an arena for average Chinese people to actively participate in social and political life, altering their roles from onlookers to performers. This positivity suggests an ideological shift necessary for continuing democratization.

However, I question the positivity presumed in this argument in terms of the nature of citizens' engagement with new media technologies. Technological achievements equalize

opportunities for people to access information, and having equal access to information indeed enables the public to gain more sophisticated appreciation and understanding about their public sphere and thus further sparks their aspirations of more actively engaging in civic and political life. In this way of calculating the effects of the Internet and other the new media technologies, one could argue that new social media technologies in many ways change the way people live. However, it is mistaken to overstate their significance for functioning as democratic and reformative tools. Markham (2010) suggests that it is incorrect to presume that people “want the Internet to encourage participation”; thus the Internet will not bring those who have “already turned away from public issues” back to public life (90). Having access and opportunities may encourage participation—one of the most important conditions for democratization, but there is no reason to assume that such change will occur.

Furthermore, the intrinsic differences between political potentials and social implications are oftentimes neglected, intentionally or not. However, there indeed exists a boundary between social and political frameworks, and uncritical adoptions of these two concepts may risk committing the fallacy of “casting in political terms what is instead a cultural phenomenon” (Markham 2010, 79). In other words, it could be misleading to consider particular cultural phenomena as indicators of political democratization when they are not taken up for political purposes, on the one hand, and do not achieve political ends, on the other. This can be illustrated by blogging, one of the most important manifestations of online interaction. Drawing his evidence from different pieces of research that investigate online cultural productions, Markham (2010) concludes that blogging as a form of cultural production is

characterized by field positions differentiated according to forms and volumes of symbolic capital and by collective misrecognition (although there is also evidence

of reflexivity) among bloggers and media analysts of the “rules of the game;” in particular, regarding what constitutes authority in the blogosphere (77-78).

Markham’s definition of blogging, and similarly interactive media platforms, indicates that not every online interaction is a form of political participation carried with clear political implications; rather, most online activities can be explained more readily by reference to the culture of narcissism (Markham 2010, 78), a theory proposed by Lasch (1979) that describes a self-centered culture of requiring constant self-fulfillment and external validation (as cited in Papacharissi 2010, 144). In this sense, user-generated content such as blogging is more commonly produced by users for the purposes of fulfilling their personal concerns of self-reflection and strong aspirations of enhancing self-esteem. Therefore, although new social media options such as blogging accelerate the proliferation of information, the proliferation is more “horizontal” instead of “hierarchical” (Markham 2010, 78). It indicates that, although the information proliferation in some ways remedies the situation in which information is unevenly distributed, its democratizing effects on the existing power hierarchy and its potentials of making substantial structural changes, within the political framework, are arguable.

That is not to say, of course, that social and political situations remain static with the introduction of new media technologies. The power of Chinese social media in challenging existing power structures, generated from online participation and activism, is evidently gaining strength and momentum. The big breakthrough in communication elevates the social identities of average Chinese people by offering them a new experience of civic engagement: people not only speak, but also make their voices heard by the world. This change has consequences, and the rise of citizen journalism is one of the most emblematic manifestations. Reese and Dai (2009) in particular examine the potentials of Chinese citizen journalism in encouraging social

participation and political discussion. “Social responsibility bloggers,” to use a term coined by Reese and Dai, feel obligated to use their personally-run news outlets, such as blogs, as intermediaries that “contain comments and information that could be considered serious discussion about solving public problems” (222).

Alongside the celebration of the success of Chinese social media, however, there exist skepticism about the criteria applied in accessing the democratizing effects generated by this new mode of online interaction, because different methodologies of measuring the cultural and political values of online media carry diverse political commitments and implications (Markham 2010, 89). One issue remaining open to debate is that whether online interaction itself is of political value. Proponents of the opinion that online interaction is of political value more often than not assume that political efficacy “logically follows from freedom of expression” (Markham 2010, 78), since the participation can be seen as one of the most important indicators of democracy. To put another way, interaction per se can be viewed as a political good. In Chinese context, the use of citizen journalism as a possible medium for fostering citizens’ participation in political and civic life falls under Western definition of public deliberation. Public deliberation refers to the form of public discussion that “seeks collective solutions to challenge social problem” (Blacksher, Erika, et al. 2012). The term “public” in this particular context refers to ordinary people who are historically excluded or marginalized outside the political decision-making process (Blacksher, Erika, et al 2012). In this regard, the essence of fostering public deliberation lays in the belief that citizens as “equal participants in civic life” are both capable of and legitimated in discussing important social issues (Blacksher, Erika, et al 2012). Reese and Dai (2009) further argue that Chinese citizen journalism, characterized by this deliberative

feature, will serve to promote the “democratic rehearsal process” that is required for building greater media transparency (230).

Skeptics about the view of seeing online interaction as the foundation of politicalized liberalization and democratization argue that interaction per se is of “no political value” if that interaction ends in itself. Markham (2010) claims that the “size of audience does not itself entail democratization” and that popularity “with a narrow elite audience is not necessarily anti-democracy” (89). It indicates that if interaction cannot lead to further political actions, its influences can hardly be categorized as political but rather as cultural and social. In the Chinese context, a further move to political action indicates the contest between governmental officials, who are still trying to maintain their absolute authorities, and Chinese people, who are asking for more freedom.

This gives additional urgency to the need to investigate the relationship between control and freedom in the Chinese context. Control and freedom are usually considered inversely proportional to each other: if the one increases, then the other one will naturally decrease. However, studies suggest that although the forces of control and powers of freedom are assumed to run in opposite direction, they are in effect “running parallel”(Lagerkvist 2010, 17) in the Chinese context: as one increases, the other one increases too. This can be illustrated by considering the conflicts between citizens’ ever-increasing ability to obtain information and the state’s continuing attempt to maintain its control over the free flow of information.

This reality sheds additional light on understanding Chinese social media and its political potentials. There is no reason to downplay the contribution of social media in unlocking China’s information landscape and in some ways freeing Chinese society. This is particularly the case for Chinese citizen journalism. Since the state-run media maintain their loyalty to the idea that their

political responsibilities require them to repeat the party line on behalf of a censoring government, citizen journalists in many ways substitute for a mainstream media when they take the social responsibility to speak the truth to hundreds of millions of people. However, debate remains open about the proper manner of assessing the political values of Chinese citizen journalism, on the one hand, and the correct way of taking advantage of its values, on the other.

Citizen Journalism as Democratizing Tool: A Chinese Experience

The emergence and development of Chinese citizen journalism has also drawn tremendous international attention both within and outside academia. Stephen Maing's *High Tech, Low Life* (2013) is a documentary film tackling issues of Chinese censorship and Chinese citizen journalism. It follows the journey of two of China's citizen journalists—Zola and Tiger Temple—who take interest in investigating and blogging about underreported social injustice issues. This film in particular focuses on how these two bloggers navigate censorship regulation in attempts to avoid the potential risk of political punishment. *High Tech, Low Life* won the CTVC Best Newcomer Documentary Grierson Award at the 41st British Documentary Awards; by virtue of the popularity of this film, these two citizen bloggers made their names known as China's first citizen journalists in the Western world ("*High Tech, Low Life*").

Alongside the huge success of Maing's documentary, there remain debates over the proactive manner in which Chinese social media and citizen journalism are discussed. The film calls attention to the trend in which Chinese citizen journalism is evaluated based only on its democratizing and liberalizing potential, the idea of which represents a typical Western ideal about how a political regime should work. Maing's documentary serves as an eye-opener for Western audience about Chinese society in general and Chinese media culture in particular.

Spivak's critique about the manners in which Western intellectuals represent other cultures applies to the cinematic representations in Maing's documentary. Spivak argues that the dominant discourses about other cultures in Western academia serve to support Western interests and benefit Western readers and writers. The others are described by and circulated among Western intellectuals. *High Tech, Low Life* is a Western feature film directed by an Asian-American director who aims at introducing Chinese censorship to a Western audience. Seemingly this is a film following the gaze of two Chinese citizen journalists, but the one who carries the camera and finally determines what stories should and should not be covered, and from what angle they should be addressed, is Maing—a New York-based filmmaker raised with Western idealistic concepts of liberty, freedom and democracy. Thus, it is inevitable, albeit somewhat understandable, that Maing could hardly liberate his film from stereotyped recognition. Maing's cinematic representations about two Chinese citizen bloggers carry his own assumptions in particular and represent Western ideologies in general, a problem that I would like to call attention to. I caution against this way of talking about Chinese social media in general and citizen journalism in particular. The positive potentials of social media have not even been realized yet, but at the same time the worst fears are overblown. Discussions as such dramatize the chilling effect of participating in political expression, and intensify conflicts between the Party-state and the public, while leaving real problems untouched and misdiagnosed.

One of a number of much-discussed critics of Chinese censorship is the political persecution of journalists who refuse to follow the Party rule and challenge the censorship. The most well-known, and probably the most notorious case is the imprisonment of Liu Xiaobo, the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize owner who was charged with “inciting subversion of state power” and sentenced to eleven years in prison (“The Nobel Peace Prize 2010”). In his documentary, Maing

repeatedly emphasizes the dangers and political pressures that Zola and Tiger Temple are encountering as they blogging sensitive issues to the public. From Maing's representations, Zola and Tiger's personal safety and freedom are considered to be under menacing threat, not just potentially but unassailably and inevitably. These issues reflect the most common, universal but surface-level comprehension about the Chinese government's repressive policies, which have been readily recognizable, or would be easily accepted, by Western audiences. However, obsessive focus on these well-known facts is a digression from the hard work of drawing careful differences and providing justifiable evidence that are expected to serve as demystifying functions.

This way of representing Chinese citizen journalism would be a disaster for China's continuing reform. First of all, critics continue to turn a blind eye to the intrinsic weakness of citizen journalism as a particular form of social media. Discourses of this approach leave the public on constant outrage against a censored government but do not caution them to be alert about user-generated content. Too often, it is taken for granted that key facilitators of Chinese citizen journalism are technical achievements while overlooking the fact that having access does not necessarily mean that people have the competence and motivation to take advantage of it (Bomhoff and Gu 2012, 711). This problem is well recognized when talking about citizen journalism but surprisingly ignored in the Chinese case. Second, discussions as such do not completely locate Chinese citizen journalism within a Chinese social context that is dramatically different from to that in which "the notion of citizen journalism emerged" (Berger 2011, 711). It is necessary to acknowledge that citizen journalism will take on different implications when it is practiced in China. Moreover, to locate Chinese citizenship exclusively in a Chinese context is also particularly important when regarding doing citizen journalism as a practice of citizenship.

Therefore, it is mistaken to romanticize and manipulate Chinese citizen journalism with Western idealistic concepts that may not function conceivably in Chinese society.

a. Journalism-centered Focus

When we think about journalism, we subconsciously assume it to be the process of representing social issues based on a number of principles, such as truthfulness, accuracy, and a respect for facts. These principles are commonly acknowledged as the basic media professional standards that are strictly followed by media professionals. As the practice of doing journalism becomes increasingly universal, citizen journalism stands out as a distinctive form of media, occupying a peculiar position between professional media and personal social network. In light of these developments, Reese and Dai (2009) assert that “being a journalist has become a more difficult boundary to define” (222).

There exist different ways of theorizing citizen journalism. Some scholars view citizen journalism as an umbrella concept that includes “any form of user-generated content or contribution to the debate that is taking place in the public sphere” (Barnes 2012, 17). Citizen journalism in this view suggests a broader sense of “inclusiveness” (Barnes 2012, 18), which is not a characteristic of traditional journalism, in which the editor’s role as gatekeeper is deemed crucial. The same point is also argued by Rosen (2008): “When the people formerly known as the audience employed the press tool they have in their possession to inform one another, that’s citizen journalism” (as cited in Berger 2011, 709). Contrary to this view, other scholars claim that not all content produced by citizens counts as journalism (Berger 2011, 709). Citizen journalism should be regarded only as an act of a citizen or group of citizens involved in the process of “collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating” news and other forms of

information (Barnes 2012, 16). Citizen journalism in this sense is a relatively narrow concept, referring to the practice with requirements of certain skills that the significant body of the public does not possess.

Discussion around citizen journalism includes focus on the definitional boundaries of journalism and the meaning of being a journalist. Debates center on whether, or to what extent, that “random acts of journalism” (Jenkins, 2006) practiced by untrained people can be regarded as journalism in its conventional meaning. Although differences exist, both ways of defining citizen journalism share one thing in common; That is, citizen journalism provides people without professional or formal training in journalism the opportunities to “use the tools of modern technology and the almost limitless reach of the Internet in order to create content that would otherwise not be revealed, as this kind of journalism goes far beyond the reach of professional journalism” (Barnes 2012, 16).

Worth noting is that citizen journalism has existed as an independent media agency outside traditional news institutions and professions long before the age of the Internet (Barnes 2012). However, before the advent of the Internet, citizen journalism was still exclusive for a privileged group who possessed both the desire and ability to be “self-contained operators” (Campbell 2014, 11). The majority of the public, instead, were still passively informed. It is only in recent years that the Internet, along with other modern communication technologies, offers ordinary people the opportunities to actively participate in civic life: they voice their opinions and concerns, and make their voices heard. The Internet and other new communication technologies deserve credit for that. However, I agree with Berger (2011) who argues that “random acts of journalism” do not constitute the actors as journalists and in particular they do

not “easily lend themselves to the subjective identity of being a citizen journalist in any ongoing consequential way for the person(s) concerned” (710).

This ambiguity of citizen journalism, accompanied with its duality of being both amateur and professional, triggers the debate about whether or not citizen journalism should adhere to the professional principles and ethical codes that are required in professional journalism. My answer to this question would be an emphatic “yes:” if we consider one’s blog simply as a personal diary, there would be no problem; however, if his or her blog is followed by hundreds of thousands people who regard this blog as a medium to learn about under-covered social issues, then the professionalism of reporting—the objectivity and truthfulness in particular—should be of central importance. Citizen journalists not only need to develop journalistic skills but also insights into the social consequences of their journalistic activities.

It has to be addressed that citizen journalism on average lacks the professionalism that is required if citizen bloggers claim their blogging as a form of journalism. Citizen journalists in general do not possess the social resources of the professional media. This lack of access to multiple resources would significantly affect the accuracy and objectivity of one’s reporting. One main manifestation would be the conspicuous absence of any checking and editing process comparable to that of professional journalism that serves to verify sources, update information and refine their writing into quality news. Confirmation and reconfirmation of information play pivotal roles in maintaining journalistic professionalism, such as objectivity, balance, and fairness. In the news article *Is There Credibility in Citizen Journalism?*, Chris Hogg incorporates arguments from Jack Kapica, a well-respected Canadian journalist with over forty years experience, and claims that editing and supervision plays a pivotal role in journalism (Hogg 2009). This statement reflects an emerging concern for considering citizen blogging as an act of

journalism. Media professionals and organizations are required to take responsibility for their news reporting; a news article can be published only when its information has been confirmed. The consequences of misinforming the public could be severe: media organizations may have to issue apologies for their erroneous information, and in some circumstances they may be sued for libel. However, either way of remedying the situation may not help them out of a crisis of professionalism and credibility. Citizen journalists, however, are in general free from troubles as such.

Additionally, citizen journalists lack professional training in doing journalism. This does not mean that citizen journalists without professional training cannot write well. Many people are able to write in a well-organized and elegant manner; however, journalism is considered more than writing. It is indeed correct that presentation is a significant constituting part of journalism, because a well-organized, and conventional form of journalistic writing (Hogg, 2009) will provide readers an identifiable framework to understanding what is happening. However, the essence lying at the heart of professional journalism is not simply to write. A professional journalist by Predergast's definition is a "trained professional who, in the defense, protection and advancement of the public's interest, uses media and communication platforms to pursue and report what is true with fairness, balance and accuracy and always in recognition of the principles, values and ethics of the profession of journalism" (as cited in Barnes 2012). In this sense, a professional journalist is trained to possess and be constantly aware of the principles, ethics and responsibilities that guide and sustain the practice of his or her profession. Bereft of this important editing process, and without sufficient knowledge and understanding about professional writing and journalism ethics, citizen journalism can hardly reach professional journalistic standards.

Another key problem lying at the heart of citizen journalism is that the motivations of citizen journalists grow out of their endeavors to report reality. In contrast to a professional journalism that assumes its responsibility of speaking mainstream social values, citizen journalism is more often than not driven by goals of making a difference at a more individualized level. Unlike traditional media in which contents are controlled by the ethics and responsibilities of professional journalism, citizen journalism is free from responsibility. In this sense, one could argue that professional media carries with it a certain political agenda that in some ways hinders its performance of speaking on behalf of the main public, but citizen journalism, too, is biased in the sense that its narrative carries with it the bloggers' personal opinions and values. Moreover, taking into consideration that citizen journalists' personal opinions and values are in many ways contestable, we need to be alert when reading citizen journalistic reporting as a way of learning about social realities. Barnes (2012) cautions that citizen journalists

write from their own experiences, their own lives, rather than seeing themselves as conduits of information in the public interest. They are not able to stand back from an issue and report the facts objectively, leaving the reader, listener or viewer to come to his or her own conclusions (19).

Therefore, it is possible, albeit not necessarily, that untrained citizen journalists may do more harm than good to society if their thoughts, opinions and ideas are interpreted as journalism to which the values of professionalism are ascribed.

The issue of neutrality is particularly important when citizen journalism is expected to serve as a substitution and even replacement for official journalism. This in particular matters if user-generated content is considered as the most trustworthy information source and citizen journalistic activities are considered as enablers of creating new spaces of citizenship. Based on

Spivak's critique of "representation," journalism by nature is an act of "re-presentation." Citizen journalism, however, slips over the boundary between these two senses of representation. Some citizen bloggers regard themselves more like the judges of an unjust society, and this role has in many ways taken precedence over their professional roles as journalists. This is particularly the case in China when taking into consideration its unique media environment of Internet censorship. Citizen journalists identify themselves as voluntary social observers. Citizen journalistic activities in this sense are not merely devoted to entertainment, recreation and gossip; they serve to bring larger focus to serious social problems. Therefore, rather than work as objective observers and storytellers, citizen journalists incline to, subconsciously or not, construct the subjects of their representation as spokesmen for themselves. Their representations of others advocate their values, respond to their concerns, and support their economic and political interests.

b. Citizenship-centered Focus

Except for the journalism-centered standard—one of the most important standards through which citizen journalism should be evaluated—that goes comparatively un-critiqued in discussions about Chinese journalism, citizenship in relation to citizen journalism in the Chinese context is also often taken for granted. A full deconstruction of citizen journalism requires us to develop a consciousness of practicing citizenship in relation to doing citizenship journalism. It is especially relevant to China, where the understanding of citizenship is different from that in which the concept of citizen journalism emerged. For these reasons, the Chinese people's experience of actualizing citizenship in relation to their engagements with citizen journalistic activities should not be presupposed without drawing careful distinctions.

It is crucial to recast the role of citizenship in relation to citizen journalism and locate citizenship inside a specific social context, in particular when regarding the practice of citizen journalism as a way of practicing citizenship. Campbell (2014) in particular addresses the importance of recognizing the citizen part of citizen journalism, because citizenship is not just simply a “label” in which ideas of “identity and virtue invest the concept of citizenship with power” (1). Moreover, in Faulks’ definition (2000), citizenship “is about human relationships”; as such:

It defies a simple, static definition that can be applied to all societies at all times. Instead, the idea of citizenship is inherently contested and contingent, always reflecting the particular set of relationships and types of governance found within any given society (as cited in Campbell 2014, 1)

Faulks’ definition indicates that citizenship has been constantly evolving in terms of social and political realities. Moreover, it indicates the necessity of looking at citizenship beyond the political framework. This is important, because citizen journalism, in and of itself, is considered an activity constructed and governed by certain social norms and cultural conventions.

This way of framing citizenship in relation to citizen journalism gives importance to recognizing the duality of citizenship as well as the distinctions between two dimensions. In the first dimension, citizenship can be seen as a “vertical relationship” between citizen and state that include people who “can exact the highest protection from the state and who owe it the most onerous duties” (Fleming, 1997). “Citizen” thus refers to the status of being recognized by custom and law that grants a person both the rights and the duties of citizenship (Fleming 1997). Citizenship in this view is closely associated with “geographical and political location” (Campbell 2014, 3), on the one hand, and rights and responsibilities, on the other.

In the second dimension, citizenship embodies a “horizontal relationship” among citizens, which develops “a community of people who share loyalties, civic allegiance, and national character” (Fleming, 1997). Citizenship in this sense echoes Faulk’s definition (2000), which emphasizes a “dynamic identity” that needs to be understood within “what social and political arrangements form the context in which it is practice” (Campbell 2014, 6). Based on this explanation, citizenship is not simply a legal status associated with the notion of the modern nation-state and existing exclusively within political framework; rather, it is socially contracted and culturally framed, and is subject to “localized contextual variations” (Campbell 2014, 6). Location, therefore, becomes even more important, because “location” in this view is not simply a concrete geographical enclosure but a conceptual frame in which political, cultural and social distinctiveness are definable.

Such a distinction raises the question of the dimension in which citizenship, in relation to citizen journalism, should be framed. I agree with Campbell (2014) that the focus of theorizing the citizenship in citizen journalism should not be on its legal status, which is granted by the law, but on its dynamics as influenced by a set of social complexities and cultural varieties. It is important to recognize the various contexts in which citizen journalism emerged and developed as well as the particular socioeconomic and political environments in which it is deployed, which will lay the groundwork for understanding the ways in which changes of relationships between political repression and social activism as a result of increasing media participation are happening.

More importantly, the focus on the socially constructed aspect of citizenship instead of on its legal principles has additional significance in Chinese context. As a legal term, citizen and citizenship are tightly connected with the law as well as the duties and rights under the law.

However, as concepts imported from the West, which speak of Western ideologies about how people and the government should be connected, “citizen” and “citizenship” in China do not carry the same political implications. Although the word “citizen” is legitimized by Chinese Constitution, *de facto* it is the term “people” rather than “citizen” that is frequently referred to by both governmental officials and ordinary people. In this sense, to deconstruct Chinese citizenship and citizen journalism as a concept that carries with it ideologies and values that are not convincingly applicable to Chinese realities would be problematic.

Efforts of theorizing citizenship as a social construction in relation to citizen journalism also produce considerable differences among intellectuals. There exist two grand paradigms, which are “conflicting and not easily reconciled” (Bennett et al. 2009, 128), that attempt to explain the different patterns of engagement and participation. One considers “journalism for citizenship” (Campbell 2014), and the other considers “journalism as citizenship” (Campbell 2014). The first set of theories is anchored in the norms of “informed citizen model,” in which citizens are supposed to be fully informed and aware of political realities (Schudson, 1998). The citizen in this model is the “dutiful citizen” (Campbell 2014, Bennett et al. 2009) who prefers to engage in traditional citizenship practices, and being informed is considered as one of these practices. Therefore, “journalism for citizenship” claims that

the apparent proliferation and diversity of new voices provided by the blogosphere and social media, voices of ordinary people outside of the institutional structures of both traditional political and media power, represents an enhancement of citizenship through increasing the amount and diversity of information available to citizens (Campbell 2014, 7).

Citizen journalism with the role of citizenship conceived in this manner considers citizens and journalists as two different distinctive identities that are mutually exclusive to each other.

Citizens as information receivers passively engage with information dissemination as a way to enact their citizenship; journalists, however, “serve” (Campbell 2014, 8) citizens by producing the information.

This model of theorizing citizenship in terms of citizen journalism provokes an outburst of criticisms. One of the major flaws of this pattern, if being applied in a Chinese context, as I consider, is to disaggregate the acts of enacting citizenship (being informed) and doing journalism (informing). This definitive separation of actualizing citizenship and doing journalism fails in two ways. First, it does not provide an up-to-date overview of citizens’ active engagements with the information dissemination in such times of change; second, it plunges professional journalists into a major crisis of self-identification when doing their profession is not considered as a commitment of actualizing citizenship.

This can be further illustrated by considering the relationship between citizen journalism and traditional media, which is always considered as irreconcilable “counter-positioning” (Berger 2009, 714). This is particularly the case in China where the term “official media” has become an umbrella concept that covers all professional media outlets; however, often it is neglected that the level of officialization of different media organizations actually differs a lot. Moreover, this broad way of defining the Chinese media de-humanizes and de-individualizes journalists working for traditional media institutions. Discourse as such omits acknowledgement of an important “overlap” (Berger 2009, 714) between professional journalists working for institutions and citizen journalists working outside mainstream media industry; that is, both of them are driven by “a consciousness of citizenship” (Berger 2009, 714). In addition, it fails to

recognize that there is a room for “collaboration” (Berger 2009, 714) between these two groups, and this is particularly important for China, where power rests tightly in institutions.

The second set of theories, “journalism as citizenship,” emphasizes changes in the nature of citizenship and civic participation, which are enabled by technological advancements. The changes of communication technologies led to changes in the norms and practice of citizenship. Among the resulting changes is that public communication and media formats flow “horizontally over digitally mediated networks” (Bennett et al. 2009, 127), and alternative news institutions with “personal motivating issues and causes” (Bennett et al. 2009, 127) generate new citizen motivations of self-actualizing. Unlike the first model in which citizens are passively informed, citizens under this definition not only consume information but also participate in the process of information production. Citizens in this model are called “actualizing citizens” (Campbell 2014, 10; Bennett et al. 2009, 128) who participate in political and civic life through social networks as a way of articulating their personal values. Actualizing citizens not only show increasing interest joining social networks but also demonstrate ever-stronger aspirations for truthfulness. Citizenship framed in this way focuses on “construction and maintenance of individual identities” (Campbell 2014, 10), on the one hand, and realization of the democratizing potentials by encouraging political participation, on the other.

Nevertheless, this view of citizenship as an on-going process of constructing individual identity, which is frequently referred to in citizen journalism, yields as much concern as enthusiasm. It could be argued that, since citizen journalism indeed helps evoke wider social discourses and participations, it carries political potential that is not necessarily demonstrated in substantial political changes occurring overnight but from the possibility that structural changes of existing political institutions and established public agenda will finally occur throughout a

society “on a daily basis” (Davies 2013, 82; Macgilchrist and Bohmig, 2012). This is especially relevant to countries, such as China, in which democracy is not mature and full-fledged. However, the political potentials of citizen journalism will be undermined if it is not operated in a way that fits the situation. I claim that this view in some ways overlooks the duality of citizenship: citizenship does not simply represent individual identity but also refers to collective identities correlated with nationality, ethnics, and etc. Individual and collective identities diverge, but also converge. Overemphasizing citizenship in this subjective dimension downplays the atomized aspects of citizenship in relation to journalistic practice as a deeply social experience. I argue that obsessive focus on individualism in citizen journalism may finally jeopardize the emerging democracy in China.

The risks of regarding citizen journalism overtly through the prism of self-actualization are evident. First of all, issues of trust and credibility persist in citizen journalism. The amateurism of citizen journalism may jeopardize its practice as a democratizing function in general. Just as professional journalism and establishment-controlled media are losing their credibility, so citizen journalism may lose its public trust if its news reporting, which is considered as a public demonstration of its engagement of journalistic practice, constantly and manifestly fails to meet professional standards. Moreover, if the “individualization, personalization, and ego-driven content” (Campbell 2014, 11) is represented in the form of journalism, and when the act of “venting frustration” (Campbell 2014, 11) is considered as advocating deliberation or discussion, citizen journalism may become a disturbing development. The public may gradually lose patience and faith in values represented by individuals they find not reliable and trustworthy, especially when these values fundamentally run counter to their social realities. Once the trust lost, it is hard to regain.

Another reason for arguing that an overemphasis on the self-actualizing dimension of citizenship may undermine the political potential of citizen journalism is that social stability may be endangered by citizens' irresponsible journalistic reporting. A plurality of voices contributes to encourage and sustain the emerging democracy, but it may also threaten social stability and coherence. For countries as China, the democratization process indicates a political transformation at the very fundamental level. For democratization to occur in China, the established social and political orders will be substantially changed and even overturned. A rapid and radical political transformation is very likely to plunge the whole society into disastrous crisis, and there is an uneasy equilibrium between the gain and the cost. The Internet, however, has already become a device for people who are suffering in an unfavorable status quo to foster widespread contempt against the established social order in the name of doing public good.

As argued above, China's hurtling economic boom during the past years has led to severe social disparities; predictably, and not without reason, the Internet offers people who have fallen behind opportunities to publically express their resentment and strong dissatisfaction against the government, and fulfill their psychological need of public attention (Wu 2011,105). This is particularly true for the young generation who are most significantly affected by the serious class divide. Wu cautions that many young people tend to resort to social disturbance as a way out of their miserable reality, hoping that the social chaos would "realign society and afford them opportunities to change their unfavorable status quo" (Wu 2011, 106). Citizen journalism, where there exists no accountability, is easily manipulated by people whose will and egos of engaging in citizen journalistic practice are questionable. Hao (2011) similarly argues that the young generation who are dissatisfied with the government's political performance create and disseminate Internet rumors to call on other netizens to "offer resistance" and even "stage

demonstration” against the authorities (131). Hao cautions that their anti-governmental discourses, most of which are built upon bias and deliberate defamation, would erode the existing social values system, such as social and political trust, and thus make it hard to keep social wheels greased.

It is dangerous if individual grudges against society are presented as serious political advocacy that carried with it the potential of bringing public good. Citizen journalism then may be manipulated as a device to deliberately outrage the public for personal gain. Discourse serving this purpose usually contains “ideological assertions” that function to gain “immediate, massive velocity” (Gerson 2015) in order to emotionally resonate the public, leaving them on constant high alert with resentments against social realities. Discourse as such offers a distorted, simplified version of reality while real problems remain obscured behind the haze. It has to be addressed that extreme rhetoric does not exist exclusively in citizen journalism; professional journalism, too, adopts this rhetorical strategy in order to resonate with the audience at a more fundamental level. Yet, professional journalists who are constantly aware of journalistic professionalism and ethical codes will not purposely misrepresent and distort the truth for personal gains, the practice of which will jeopardize the practice of their profession. This is not the case in citizen journalism, as argued above, and thus the potential risks of using citizen journalism as personal revenge against the society should not be underestimated.

Conclusion

Taking a more skeptical view of the negative impacts of citizen journalists’ efforts to bring press freedom and democracy to China, it can be seen that these efforts may ultimately result in the exact opposite of their desired outcomes. The growing tension between Western

ideals and Chinese realities indicates that Western ideals and experience of political reform do not conceivably work in a Chinese context. Although current socioeconomic reality and ideological changes qualify China as a more liberal society than it was in the recent past, its collective traditions are still strong at both grassroots and authoritative levels. It is mistaken to assume that China is ideologically prepared for undertaking structural-level reforms that fundamentally disagree with its traditional value system. The democratizing potential of Chinese social media in general and citizen journalism in particular therefore stand in need of investigation in China's unique context.

When it comes to Chinese social media, it is misleading to over-anticipate and over-interfere with it based on what we have learned from the West. Chinese social media indeed encourages participation, which gives a reason to assume that its democratic influences may finally amount to a political reform at a more fundamental level. In a similar vein, citizen journalism as a particular form of social media in some ways challenges the existing power hierarchy by equalizing the opportunities of civic engagement. There is every reason to assume that as Chinese citizens become more technologically savvy, their ability to seek and distribute information will surpass the government's ability to filter it. However, I caution against overstressing the democratizing influences of social media on reinventing existing structures or viewing them as democratic tools for deepening China's political transformation. Chinese social media in this view is often placed in a confrontational position against the establishment-controlled media, on the one hand, and praised as a weapon against a censored government, on the other. I caution against this way of defining Chinese social media, which exaggerates the chilling effects of political participation and intensifies social conflicts.

Easing of censorship and a transition to a more democratic government will be the most significant changes facing the Chinese government. However, changes as such do not necessarily usher in the downfall of the Party and do not have to be achieved at the cost of social stability. As the voices calling for a freer and more open media become progressively louder, the Chinese government will make—and, in fact, has already made—some concessions. In this regard, a stable political system and a more democratic government are not mutually exclusive options; they can be and should be pursued simultaneously through a more viable path towards development, liberty and governance.

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