

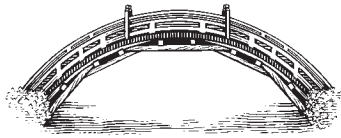
BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Guobin Yang

*The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*

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## Culture and Politics in China's Internet

*Randy Kluver*

Political leaders, activists, and academics have all shared a common expectation regarding China's relationship to the Internet. Given the explosive growth of the number of users, China's innovative use of technology, and the tension between the "Internet wants to be free" technology and China's highly controlled political and social sector, the scene is a set for a classic "battle royale" between state control and a newly empowered citizenry led by issue advocates and Internet campaigns. Guobin Yang's highly interesting and informed look at this battle brings together a number of narratives, including the role of transnational activists, utopian realism, and the style of contention online. His focus, however, is primarily on the role of netizens and civic associations in using the Internet to launch campaigns for justice, to challenge the rules and authority of central and local governments, and to push for greater openness in Chinese society.

Given the large interest in China's relationship to the Internet, of course, there are a number of works that address this issue, including Michael Chase and James Mulvenon's *You've Got Dissent: Chinese Dissident Use of the Internet and Beijing's Counter-Strategies*, Christopher Hughes and Gudrun Wacker's *China and the Internet: Politics of the Digital Leap Forward*, and Zixue Tai's *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society*.<sup>1</sup> Yang's contribution is to weave together strands of the argument that has been made piecemeal by a number of other authors and to take a more nuanced perspective regarding the promise of the Internet.

Indeed, at a time when observers in the West have largely lowered their expectations for Internet-driven political change, there remains a certain confidence that the Internet will indeed transform China, much as earlier advocates argued that trade would lead to a more open society. As evidence for this, one need look no further than the blurb by Governor Howard Dean on the cover of Yang's book: "The ultimate instrument of individual empowerment is remaking one of the most controlling societies on earth."

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Chase and James Mulvenon, *You've Got Dissent: Chinese Dissident Use of the Internet and Beijing's Counter-Strategies* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2002); Christopher R. Hughes and Gudrun Wacker, *China and the Internet: Politics of the Digital Leap Forward* (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Zixue Tai, *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

The problem is that Governor Dean's enthusiasm perhaps is more a projection of his own desires than a reflection of the reality of social life in China.

Yang, for his part, acknowledges the role of the Internet in empowering individuals and activists but, to his credit, understands that there is much more ambiguity than is often acknowledged regarding the long-term social and political consequences of the Internet. What he does do is pull together multiple data points in such a way as to better articulate the capacity of new information technologies for accelerating social and political change. There are multiple narratives at play within Chinese cyberspace, including the use of the Internet by individuals to challenge governmental policies, to redress local or central governmental officials, and to build new forms of social alliances. But in addition to these positive trends, the Internet in China also has contributed to increased social bullying (such as through the "human flesh search engine" phenomenon), fraud, and disinformation. Yang very carefully sorts through these multiple narratives and attempts to locate the role of the Internet in a time of already rapid and extensive social and political change. This story, moreover, is difficult to tell: During the most rapid economic growth and social change in history, how does one isolate the role of one variable, even—or, rather, especially—when that variable is the Internet? China's political and social makeover began long before 1994, when the Internet was introduced to China, and includes factors that seem far removed from the still largely elite-driven Internet use.

Yang's work is organized predominantly around the issue of "contention." Although in so delimiting his focus Yang of course does not tell the entire story of the Internet in China, this approach does, however, allow him to look at a wide range of issues that drive debate on the Internet's impact. Yang also brings to light an often overlooked phenomenon driving this issue: the "business of contention," or the profit motive, that drives popular websites and forums to allow just enough contention to make things interesting but not enough to bring about governmental closure. By raising the reality of this phenomenon for public discussion, Yang helps to de-romanticize the issues of control surrounding the Internet. In some ways, this is the most valuable part of the book in that it brings to public light an obvious, yet still ignored, factor driving the growth of the Internet's popularity in China.

The lessons that Yang derives from his extensive and thorough study should in fact inform not just scholars interested in new media technologies but the negotiation between citizenry, technologies, and states more generally. Yang argues that the technology allows citizens more tools with which to negotiate political power, but that this technology is only valuable insofar

as the citizens creatively generate specific strategies to wrest some control from the state. Moreover, technology is deployed in a cultural milieu that provides the scripts, rituals, values, and symbols that can then be used to enact challenges to the state. In other words, technology's contribution to citizen activism and empowerment is quite limited and would be ineffectual without the larger cultural contribution. Yang demonstrates this by showing how online challenges, such as sloganeering, *dazibao*, and the like, are really just another venue for historically modeled challenges to the state.<sup>2</sup>

In the perennial debate over whether the Internet will “democratize” China, Yang takes a middle ground. On the one hand, he clearly believes that the data demonstrates that the Internet has introduced a new and valuable element into Chinese civil society, empowering citizens in opposition to the state. But he does not go so far as to see a direct connection between the rise of information technologies and a full-blown democratic revolution. What he does envision is the expansion of what he calls an “unofficial democracy,” or real citizens gaining autonomy over their own lives. Although the Internet might not radically shake the governing structure, Yang argues that by empowering citizens to take charge in areas that by default have been the domain of the state—and thereby providing a collective reality to those citizens—the Internet does in fact introduce a new cultural and social revolution into Chinese society rather than a political revolution.

In sum, Guobin Yang's work is a very welcome addition to the burgeoning body of literature examining the role of the Internet both in China and in Asia more generally. By focusing on multiple narratives, and especially on conflicting narratives, Yang is able to bring a more sophisticated, and yet still optimistic, perspective to the discussion. Moreover, by grounding his analysis of the Internet in a firm understanding of Chinese political culture and history, he avoids the trap of making hasty conclusions from a limited set of data. His book will not be the final statement on the social and political impact of the Internet in China, given that the technology and the society in which it is embedded are both changing far too rapidly for any final verdict. Nonetheless, Yang's *The Power of the Internet in China* is definitely one of the best volumes for understanding the consequences of the Internet thus far, as well as for illuminating larger cultural dynamics present in online activity.

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<sup>2</sup> *Dazibao* (or big character posters) are a type of political commentary traditionally made by posting a written essay onto a public wall. They were used extensively in a number of previous political campaigns. Currently, many people use the term to refer to online political commentary.

## A Revolutionary Technology for an Evolutionary Cause

*Xu Wu*

If, as many communication scholars have confessed, studying the Internet culture and online activities is like shooting a moving target, then observing China's cybersphere is much like shooting thousands of moving targets on a high-speed bullet train. Following this metaphor, Yang's recent book *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* hits multiple targets spot on, and with an astounding bang.

In tackling the often-mentioned yet rarely fully explored subject of online activism in China, Yang formulates a straightforward model—the multidimensional dynamics of online activism—and sails with ease and authority through a series of dichotomous paradigms, such as continuity and rupture, tradition and innovation, control and resistance, style and content, business and politics, and central government and general masses. He defines online activism rather broadly as “any form of Internet-based collective action that promotes, contests, or resists change” (p. 3). Primarily derived from and largely driven by five competing forces of state power, culture, market, civil society, and transnationalism, China's online activism, according to Yang, is “a response to the grievances, injustices, and anxieties caused by the structural transformation of Chinese society” (p. 7). In other words, citizen activism is both the catalyst and the outcome of China's historical transformation. It is the symptom of a disease, on the one hand, and it is also the prescription to cure it, on the other.

### *The Contributions*

Several key findings in this book add to an understanding of the dynamics and nascent landscape of China's online activism. First, the contentious issues and the activists' approaches toward solving those problems have diversified. As many of the cases in the book vividly demonstrate, the contentious genie is now out of the bottle, vying vigorously for attention both online and offline. Not only individuals but also various newly founded special interest groups—or even the whole nation to a certain degree—are struggling for recognition, searching for identity, and looking for protection.

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Second, the style matters. As a scholar with deep learning of cultural theories and Chinese literature, Yang streamlined the evolution and innovation of online contention styles. For one fascinating example, Hu Ge's "Steamed Bun" parody maximized the power of a Flash movie and the power of sarcasm. Indeed, the shift from the "revolutionary style of epic imaginary, apocalyptic tones, and prescriptive ideals" (p. 92) to a more playful, more lighthearted, yet more persuasive digital contention style is nothing trivial or superficial. It marked a watershed transition in China's collective nerve. Here, Yang's argument is incisive and convincing: "To be sure, nothing can be more defiant than life-threatening heroism in the face of repressive power. Yet it is also true that in earlier movements, that sense of defiance was often mixed with an authoritarian mentality that masked a reverence for the same authority under challenge" (p. 101).

In this respect, the moderate style of online contention not only signifies a modern approach; more important for present-day China, moderate also means mature.

Third, it is business, stupid! In chapter 5, Yang sheds light on the marketing perspective of digital contention in China. Squeezed by the economic bottom-line and the super-powerful party line, China's online activism has zigzagged to the frontline of the eye-ball attracting business. The marriage between economic action and social activism, though "quite unprecedented in the history of popular contention in modern China" (p. 122), is neither unethical nor unhealthy. In fact, an argument can be made that this type of "manufactured contention" is a win-win-win situation for the parties involved: the commercial online portals received surging Web traffic, the online activists received all kinds of social capital, and the government received a cost-effective pressure-reducing valve or an emergency alert system.

Fourth, unlike many studies of China's cybersphere, Yang's work treats overseas Chinese online activities and mainland China's cybersphere as an inseparable whole. Being an early and avid participant in the formation of China's cybersphere himself, Yang possesses a unique and privileged view of China's cybersphere from both sides. Admittedly, his online ethnography and participatory observations, mingled with his personal experiences, greatly enrich the originality and credibility of his account. After reading this book, readers will possess a close-up view of the trees, a bird's-eye view of the forest, and a decent long-range shot of the background mountains.

### *The Contentions*

A thoughtful book such as this one, particularly a book on China's digital contention and contentious issues, provokes additional thoughts among its readers. The following are my comments on the central theme of the book and a couple of suggestions on topics worthy of future exploration or further discussion.

One of the most frequently used words in this book is revolution. Indeed, the conclusion chapter of this book is titled "China's long revolution." The major underlying logic of Yang's revolution sequence is that online activism is emblematic of contemporary China's communication revolution, and communication revolution leads to cultural revolution, then to social revolution, and eventually to political revolution. As Yang enthusiastically states in the very last paragraph, "the effervescence of online activism, as part of China's new citizen activism, indicates the palpable revival of the revolutionary impulse in Chinese society. The power of the Internet lies in revealing this impulse and in signaling the probable coming of another revolution" (p. 226). However, I didn't feel that "revolutionary impulse" after reading the book. Instead, much evidence in the book points to an alternative path that has been tacitly agreed on by the majority of online activists and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) central government. That alternative path is a social and political "evolution" rather than a "revolution."

No communication technology is more revolutionary than the Internet. Its in-born characteristics of decentralization and democratization despise any control and authority. Had the Internet landed in China not in 1994 but ten years earlier in 1984, China's modern history, probably even the world's modern history, would have been rewritten. But things did not develop in this way. As Yang acknowledged, the student movement in 1989 clearly marked the end of China's "revolutionary chapter," and I would argue it also marked the beginning of China's "entrepreneur chapter." When the most revolutionary communication technology entered the country, China was suffering a "revolution fatigue" or even a "revolution-phobia syndrome." Twenty years after that fateful night in Tiananmen Square, the majority of Chinese people and their leaders now seem to share one ironclad consensus: evolution is better than revolution. This common mind-set explains the central government's unreserved enthusiasm toward online technology, as well as the preference of various activist groups for negotiation rather than confrontation. Certainly, omnipresent censorship and political pressures contribute to this cooperative relationship, but these factors are only secondary.

Yang noted that although the central leadership “will not tolerate activities that directly challenge its legitimacy,” it may “tolerate and even encourage grassroots protests that target local leadership and local practices” (p. 34). One might wonder about the rationale behind the CCP leaders’ maneuver. In fact, the subsequent legal or administrative reactions from the central government to many cases—the online exposure of local officials’ corruption (tainted milk scandal), abuse of power (the death of Sun Zhigang incident), cronyism (the “nail house” incident), and incompetence (South China tiger “discovery” incident mentioned in Yang’s book)—have increased the central government’s legitimacy. In recent years, the CCP leadership has showcased a considerable degree of flexibility and adaptability while handling different types of emergency issues. The effervescence of online activism is just one proof of this new leadership style and increasing openness. Rather than sticking to the traditional governing pattern of setting an agenda from the top down, the central government has treated the online sphere as a testing ground for the agenda-setting, agenda-building, and agenda-seeking processes. It is fair to say that in many of Yang’s online activism cases, the government is not only the censor but also a watchful security guard, an engaging audience, and in the case of cyber-nationalism sometimes even an invisible cheerleader.

If the above-mentioned national mentality and leadership pattern stand, Yang’s revolutionary storyline will require two modifications. First, the June Fourth student movement in 1989, though a landmark event in China’s modern history, may not be a proper starting point or an adequate frame of reference for citizen activism online. Simply put, the player, the stage, the script, and even the audience are categorically different. Frequently revisiting that period clouds rather than clarifies our understanding of reality. As Yang notes, the digital contention applied a prosaic side characterized by a matter-of-fact approach and a self-conscious avoidance of heroic grandeur. This change of style reflects the changes in social mood, in China’s development stage, and in the self-identity of Chinese netizens. Second, the other side of the same coin is that the government’s invisible hand to a large degree enables, and even encourages, the spread of citizen activism online. Therefore, the power of the Internet in China partially comes from the confidence of the government and its dedication to catching up with the information revolution. Early this year, the Chinese government’s laid-back approach to Google’s threat to leave China revealed this new balance of power. The central government is thus part of this activism, not the enemy of it.

Also, Yang apparently downplayed the role and significant impact of China’s cyber-nationalism movement over the past decade. Though he listed



“popular nationalism” as the top issue among seven categories of online activism, the discussion of this subject is insufficient. Considering the fact that in 2005 one anti-Japan online petition collected over 40 million signatories, cyber-nationalism should be regarded as one of the most, if not the most, important developments in China’s online citizen activism. Although perhaps not conforming to the predisposition of technology determinists, such nationalism nonetheless showcases the most powerful aspect of online activism.

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## The Power of the Internet in China: Looking Beyond People’s Power

*Evgeny Morozov*

To say that the world’s attention is fixed on the Chinese Internet is to understate the case. From alleged cyberattacks on Western technology companies to the powerful Green Dam censorship technology that was supposed to be installed on every computer sold in China to the country’s sprawling network of rehabilitation centers for Internet and gaming addicts, there is a palpable sense of universal fascination with China’s Internet culture.

Guobin Yang’s book *The Power of the Internet in China* provides a meticulously researched account of one small corner of this digital metropolis, namely the world of activists, NGOs, and other representatives of what he calls the “e-civil society.” To gain a better grasp of how the Internet has transformed their activities, Yang spent several years on mailing lists, conducted several surveys, followed many important online conversations in popular Internet forums, and kept a blog of his own. Even seasoned observers of the Chinese Internet are likely to find a lot of rich and refreshing detail in every chapter.

His intimate knowledge of this space is on full display when he describes spontaneous activist campaigns that have become a staple of the Chinese Internet: carriers of hepatitis B demanding the end to antidiscrimination practices, consumer rights advocates fighting to rid Chinese department stores of counterfeit goods, and bloggers raising money to help save the life of the mother of one of their peers.

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Yang believes that the country's Internet culture is unique: "the large-scale and spontaneous online collective action (*wangluo shijian*) so common in China today happens much less often and on a much smaller scale elsewhere" (p. 119). It is the effervescent, carnivalesque, and ultimately contested character of China's Internet culture—stemming from popular struggles that originate in the offline world—that Yang finds least appreciated by the academic and journalistic communities. Instead, they have been captivated by "two misleading images of the Chinese Internet": one of control and the other of entertainment (p. 1). Through a series of colorful case studies and thorough empirical research, Yang strives to sketch a more refined third image: that of online activism.

Yang conceptualizes online activism as the product of dynamic interactions between five distinct factors: state power, culture, the market, civil society, and transnationalism. This makes for a neat analytical framework, which Yang puts to good use to argue that Chinese citizens "have expanded culture, community, and political participation in the information age" (p. 3).

Yang's five-pronged model leaves very little maneuver space for the state: it can either shape (e.g., constrain) or adjust to online activism. When Yang asserts that "state power constrains the forms and issues of contention, but instead of preventing it from happening, it forces activists to be more creative and artful" (p. 7), he greatly understates the more proactive ways in which the Chinese government has been embracing technology. Even if one grants that the exercise of state power breeds more creativity among activists, there must surely be other points of intersection between state power and the Internet that lie outside of Yang's narrowly defined framework.

In addition to control, entertainment, and activism, Yang fails to consider a fourth possible perspective of the Chinese Internet: that of the state harnessing the power of the Internet to modernize itself and prolong its rule. Yang mostly glosses over the fact that the Chinese authorities are actively using the Internet for their own purposes: to create and disseminate political propaganda, to learn more about the threats facing the regime and address them in real-time, to bolster the government's legitimacy by promoting a particular nationalistic narrative with the help of loyalist bloggers, and to solicit tips about corruption.

Given the marginal place that state power occupies in Yang's analysis, it is not clear what conclusions one should draw from the success of online activism campaigns. Did they succeed because the government found their objectives to be in tune with its own plans? Or was the government caught off guard, unable to mount an effective defense?

What should we make of the success of Zola, one of China's first and most famous citizen journalists, who made his way from Hunan to Chongqing to report on the "nail house episode," an anecdote much celebrated by Yang? The nail house episode took place between March and April 2007, as Chinese netizens rallied behind the owners of a shabby house slated for demolition by private developers. Zola played a key role in bringing the case to national attention, displaying "a sense of playfulness and irreverence" that "exemplif[ies] the new style of online activism" (p. 94).

What Yang does not mention is that Zola was much less successful in his subsequent missions: when he went to report on an ant farm protest in Shenyang in November 2007, he was detained, possibly beaten up, and made to report on everyone he met since arriving in the city. The authorities may have been more lenient to him in the nail house incident, as they wanted to generate a greater national debate over new property laws that were about to go into effect. Such divergence in official reactions to cases of online activism sheds a somewhat different light on its effectiveness.

Yang rightfully chides both sides of the debate over whether the Internet will democratize China but fails to provide a persuasive answer of his own. The kind of online activism campaigns that he so vividly describes in the book seem to transform their participants more than they transform the targets of their activism. But will the culture of irreverence and profanity, the "growing rights consciousness," and the "palpable revival of the revolutionary impulse in Chinese society" result in the establishment of strong democratic institutions (p. 226)? Yang seems to believe so, and the book's last sentence captures the optimism that underpins his belief in the power of online activism: "as civic engagements in unofficial democracy expand, the distance to an officially institutionalized democracy shortens" (p. 226). Such a hopeful belief rests on several assumptions, namely that (1) acts of online activism constitute and enhance civic engagement, (2) the Internet has created spaces conducive to more contention and the emergence of "unofficial democracy," and (3) these two developments—enhanced civic engagement over the Internet and more venues for contention—could make the transition to institutionalized democracy faster and smoother. All three of these assumptions need more thorough examination.

First, even though Yang rejects the popular view of the Chinese Internet as being dominated by entertainment, he does not specify just how prevalent online activism is on the Chinese Internet. Is it a mass phenomenon or just a niche? Yang obviously believes the former but does not quantify his views. Whatever its conceptual shortcomings, the popular view of the Chinese

Internet as a 24/7 hedonistic playground might still contain a grain of truth: should we not at least be mildly worried about the problem of potential “citizen disengagement” when at least half of the World of Warcraft’s 11 million players come from China? Viewing online activism through the prism of contention, Yang sets the bar for participation too low: humor, jokes, fundraising, signing of online petitions, and blog commentary are all presented as equally potent forms of activism. Yet, an alternative reading of the situation—where humor and jokes would be treated as signs of cynicism and complete disengagement from the political process—is certainly feasible.

Second, it’s not at all obvious that online activism creates new spaces and opportunities for “unofficial democracy,” whatever Yang means by this fuzzy term. Yang seems to view all acts of contention as inherently “democratizing,” whereby all self-organized networks that contest the power of the state are harbingers of “democratization.” This is yet another of those instances where a more thorough investigation of the Internet’s impact on state power would help to sharpen Yang’s argument. He himself mentions at least two forces—nationalists and hackers—that have been greatly empowered by the Internet, but it is not at all clear what such empowerment entails for democratization.

To these two forces we can also add the phenomenon of “human flesh search engines,” one of the most salient features of the Chinese Internet culture today, whereby netizens collaborate to out individuals that they think have misbehaved—be it corrupt state officials or political and social deviants who exhibit just a bit too much irreverence and play. Often, such hunts border on vigilantism and almost inevitably result in egregious violations of privacy. One would be hard pressed to see how the rise of human flesh search engines, which fits Yang’s conceptualization of “online activism” but goes unmentioned in the book, would contribute to democratization.

Finally, even if one accepts that online activism can strengthen civic engagement and create new platforms for practicing “unofficial democracy,” this may not necessarily shorten “the distance to an officially institutionalized democracy” (p. 226). Yang does not offer a clear vision for how exactly a transition to such kind of democracy would occur, but it is obvious that online activism—and the Internet more broadly—would play a significant positive role in the process.

However, one does not need to lose faith in the power of online activism to see that the Internet could also supply the government with a trove of real-time intelligence data about emerging threats, especially in remote regions that were previously hard to monitor from Beijing. Allowing the netizens to identify and complain about problems facing the regime—especially

local corruption—may only bolster the regime’s resilience and prolong its longevity. Similarly, the fact that China’s youthful nationalists or hackers have developed aggressive online strategies may only bolster the legitimacy of the central government. Could the nonstate groups be helping to accomplish objectives that the government may not be able to accomplish on its own? Is it at all possible that the mounting national discourse on the Chinese Internet would strengthen the nationalistic undercurrent within the Chinese government? Such questions remain unanswered in Yang’s book.

The power of the Internet in China cannot be understood without a thorough analysis of how the Internet has modernized and empowered the country’s state institutions. Online activism does play a growing role in China’s Internet culture, but its rise must be examined in the context of an ongoing transformation of both state power and citizen-state relations.

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## The Limited Power of the Chinese People over the Internet

*Juntao Wang*

Given that both political contention and the development of the Internet in China have become hot issues for debate in academia today, Guobin Yang’s book *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* is a very timely work. Yang explores how Chinese activists are using the Internet in the realm of political contention. This review will focus on one aspect of the phenomenon, which, although perhaps not Yang’s own focus, will interest many people: what role will the Internet play in terms of political contention and regime change in China?

Driven by 30 years of incredibly rapid economic growth, China is undergoing a great transformation. In the midst of this change, including rapid development of the Internet, the political regime has remained the country’s fundamental problem. How has the development of the Internet affected Chinese politics? Some experts argue that Chinese people enjoy much more freedom today, even though such freedom is still limited and unreliable compared to democratic countries in the West. Others, pointing to

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major human rights and government corruption cases, argue that the Chinese government is as authoritarian and oppressive as ever. Yang's work is a good place to examine these disagreements, though these are not his focus.

Yang shows that online activists in China are quite vigorous in defending their interests and in resisting state oppression. These activists have been so successful in developing new strategies, mechanisms, organizations, and projects on the Internet that political contention seems to be entering into a new stage in China, especially compared to the student movement in the 1980s. The power of the Internet in the realm of political contention, Yang argues, reflects the power of people to increase social awareness of citizens' rights, restrain government control, demand greater transparency in government, and facilitate civic action more effectively in defending their own interests. Yang believes that Chinese cyber activities are becoming a form of "unofficial democracy" and will eventually speed up the process of democratization through the process of institutionalization.

I have no doubt that the Internet provides people with new means for protesting government wrongdoing. But is China experiencing the dawning of a new era of political contention, one powered by the Internet? Put differently, how powerful is the Internet in shaping political contention in China? More specifically, does the Internet change power relations between the ruler and the ruled in China, and what role can online activists be expected to play in making political change? These questions test the limits of power that Chinese citizens actually have with the Internet.

In any political power structure, a specific power is always limited and balanced by other powers or factors; some such powers are institutionalized whereas others are informal. To know the effectiveness of a given power, its limits in the power structure must be known. Cases of the successful use of a power, such as of the Internet, are not sufficient for understanding the role that this power plays in political contention. We need to also look into cases in which people failed to reach their goals, in which people could not even raise their concerns. By comparing the successful cases with those that failed, we can better understand the impact of the Internet in political contention in China.

Two such cases come to mind immediately: the SARS crisis in 2003 and the Xinjiang riots in 2009. In the case of SARS, people did not trust information provided by the government and were eager to read "rumors" on the Internet. But after a number of citizens were arrested for spreading unofficial information, people mostly stopped discussing the issue—this censorship occurred not only on major websites but also in formal email groups

(though individuals continued to disseminate rumors through other means). While in the case of SARS the regime demonstrated its power by employing the security force to reign in people power on the Internet, in the case of the Xinjiang riots the authorities simply severed all Internet connections between Xinjiang and the outside world. No information, including dissident opinions, could be read in cyberspace.

Though extreme, these two examples are not the worst stories regarding the politicization of the use of the internet in China. Even a quick review of politics in China today shows that Chinese cyber activists, fearing persecution, avoid discussing many issues or raising many facts regarding justice and basic human rights. Most cyber activists smartly do not dare cross the lines set by the authorities, especially by the public security department. Thus, cyber activists—like journalists, lawyers, and other activists—confront limits in using the Internet for political contention. Any political contention against the state will fail if the authorities are set against it; in the worst-case scenarios, people cannot even begin the game of political contention. In the realm of the Internet, the authorities hold absolute dominance over the power of people.

Thus, in order to understand the power of the Internet it is necessary to know more about the government. Why does the government tolerate cyber activities in some areas of political contention but not in others? How does the government stop activities it does not like? If we do not have a more complicated understanding of the government's control over cyberspace, we tend to overestimate the power of the Internet in China. Even very tough dictators must demonstrate a minimum level of rational response to the demands of the ruled, but a positive response from the authorities cannot be reliably expected and is certainly not mandatory.

In fact, the role the Internet plays in political change is as a means of communication and nothing more. In any substantial political change, the final step is always a move by the authorities—such as court verdicts, policy changes, personnel arrangements, institutional settlements, and regime transformation. Ensuring that the last move be the outcome hoped for by Internet activists involves many forms of group action. In addition to cyber activists, there are other groups behind the scenes: journalists, lawyers, government officials, legislative representatives, court judges, social associations, and public opinion leaders. These other groups are no less important than the cyber activists in producing substantial outcomes. Street protests, bloody conflicts in the countryside, lobbying the government, and secret deals in entertainment venues (such as hotels, restaurants, golf courses, private parties, and bathhouses) are

very familiar to Chinese political players. If we examine some of these cases in meticulous detail, we can draw a complete picture of both the larger process behind the occurrence of political change and the role of the Internet as but one among many factors in bringing this change about.

The power of the Internet is an exciting concept in part because it raises the possibility that the Internet in China will finally change, or even has been changing, the undemocratic regime. I agree with Guobin Yang's view that the Internet in many ways facilitates such a process in China. However, all the regime changes from undemocratic to democratic involve fundamental changes in power structures through some kind of political revolution, accompanied by large-scale street protests, military involvement or coups, factional clashes within the ruling core, and mobilization of major social groups through networking and organizing offline. Always the crucial step is drafting or amending the constitution. Although playing a significant role as part of the whole event, the Internet cannot altogether replace these other means.

It is necessary to understand the online game that is being played between the authorities and the opposition; this will help us understand more about the role of the Internet in regime change. A regime is more likely to be changed not by those who wait for the regime to change by accident but by those who take active steps to bring about such change. Throughout history those who want regime change—whether in successful or unsuccessful cases of regime transition—are a very small part of the population. But their activities are important in understanding the dynamics of political transition.

Last, it is helpful to compare the role of the Internet in political contention in China with the corresponding role in democratic countries. Chinese activists rely more heavily on the Internet for political contention than activists do in democracies. Does this mean that Chinese activists have developed a more advanced form of political contention? It is my view that such reliance on the Internet indicates an abnormal social and political environment resulting from the rigid control maintained by the Chinese regime. If people in China were free to choose, they would prefer to raise issues through street protests or the media—for these methods are undeniably more effective in creating political change.



## The Limited Power of the Internet in China

*David Bachman*

With *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online*, Guobin Yang has written an important, provocative academic work on the Internet and contention in China. The book thus joins a growing literature on the Internet in China, and represents perhaps the best study to date on this dynamic medium.

Yang sees the Internet as a fundamental focus of contention in China, with this contention reshaping Chinese society and politics. From online groups of activists, he argues, identities are constituted, communities created, and moral concerns articulated. The Internet and its use by activists is creating a cultural and social revolution in China, and leading to what Yang calls unofficial democracy. Ultimately, he sees democratic governance in China.

Yang is, not surprisingly, strongly vested in the positions all too briefly summarized above. And though no one has documented the case as fully as he has, Yang's view is shared by well-informed observers.<sup>1</sup> He is a partisan of the Internet as a profound source of change (and a reflection of changes in China) and optimistic about the role that Internet contention will play in promoting further change. But such optimism may not be warranted and more critical perspectives need to be considered.

Yang has a tendency to dismiss or minimize critical views about the Internet in China. Thus, he does not see "flaming" as a particularly significant issue; he also discounts worries that the Internet will be captured by commercialization and that Chinese Internet users are mostly using the Internet for games and "infotainment." He may be correct, but there are other perspectives on these and other issues, which I will sketch out below.

One can wonder, for example, about whether a community is forming or whether multiple different communities are forming on the Internet in China (and in Chinese society more generally). Studies based on Western populations in social and cognitive psychology and related disciplines strongly argue that people seek out information that confirms their preexisting sets of beliefs. Data (information) that seems to run counter to their beliefs

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Richard Baum, "Political Implications of China's Information Revolution: The Media, the Minders, and the Message," in *China's Changing Political Landscape*, ed. Cheng Li (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2008), 161–84.

is reinterpreted in ways that force it to fit the reader's overall structure of thought. Similarly, people look for sources of information that fit more closely with their world-views, and seek out people who generally think along the same lines. Thus, even though Chinese netizens have access to much greater levels of information than ten or fifteen years ago, it is not clear that this access to information is quite as momentous as many think, because individual mental maps are resistant to change. Moreover, with Internet access, Chinese are confronted with a classic signals-to-noise problem. Given the vast array of sites, information, and options available online, what does the ordinary Chinese Internet user choose to look at, and for how long before she or he makes another choice?

An issue that might complicate Yang's views (and those of all other writers on the Internet in China) is how use of the Internet changes over individual lifespans. The most sophisticated Chinese Internet users have now been online for close to fifteen years. Yang discusses the joy many Chinese felt when they first went online and became connected. But do these users still feel that way? After fifteen years, has the Internet become a normal part of life, even if one that individuals may have less time for because of age, relationships, parenthood, job demands, and so on? Does it still have the potential to alter and shape consciousness in the way Yang saw it doing in earlier years? With ever greater numbers of options in terms of consumption and leisure, is the Internet as provocative as it was ten years ago? Of course, only a third of the Chinese population is online, so there will be a huge number of people who will still perhaps feel the sense of joy of connection in coming years. But arguably the best educated, most prosperous, and the younger generation in cities have now been online for quite awhile. To the extent that these people are the ones most likely to use the Internet extensively, and will likely shape it more than those who have not yet come online, one might take a more skeptical view of the power of the Internet.

Yang focuses on particularly contentious online cases, and over the course of ten years he identified (or collected information on) 70 or so. Yet these seven cases a year on average pale in comparison to the tens of thousands of cases of protests offline. In fact, one of the most disappointing aspects of the book is that it does not present a series of mechanisms by which online contention moves offline and into the material world. Yang notes that newspapers and conventional media sometimes pick up on hotly discussed topics online. He mentions, for example, the case of the Xiamen PX (paraxylene) factory, where online contention led to large numbers of people "taking a stroll" in the area where the construction was to take

place, which helped block the project in Xiamen. Yet two years later the project was on again, but located 60 miles away. While online activism blocked construction near Xiamen, it did not block construction at the new location. The online and offline protest appears to be something of a “not in my backyard” type of development. To be sure, this is more than developers and local officials had to face before, but the protest simply deflected the environmental costs of the project to other parts of Fujian.<sup>2</sup> It seems safe to assume that online contention cannot by itself bring about fundamental changes in China; rather, such contention has to connect with, and learn how to be used by, those engaged in actual demonstrations, protests, and other forms of confrontation with those in authority. Yang, however, does not postulate more than a few *ad hoc* ways in which online and offline contention have been connected in the past. This issue becomes particularly salient in chapter 7 when Yang discusses the desire of Chinese online actors to build a moral community in cyberspace. But Yang’s analysis of their discourse suggests that there is absolutely no discussion of how to bring about moral regeneration or a moral community in contemporary Chinese society. Yang sees this discussion as “utopian realism.” But without actual pathways to bring about moral regeneration, is this nothing more than empty talk?

The Xiamen case, like many of those discussed in the book, raises an issue that Yang does not address. His cases are generally individual cases. They can and do generate a great deal of Internet discussion. But the dynamic here is not unlike that of access to courts and the right to sue in China: the process reinforces a focus on the specific individual case. It individualizes the conflict most of the time, rather than making it more general. Obviously, specific cases of injustice, with tangible human manifestations, more easily (and safely) generate passionate discussion online in China than do more general claims. It is not hard to imagine that there are hundreds of millions of cases of injustice that could generate moral outrage online in China. But one can wonder, how long will a particular netizen engage in the voicing of moral outrage before boredom or burn-out sets in? Can and will this form of contention be sustainable?

Finally, in his conclusion, Yang makes an argument about the truly democratic nature of the Internet and the ongoing democratization of society. He argues that “common people have become publishers, editors, writers, and artists, rather than just consumers, audience and readers....The enormous

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Jacobs, “Chinese Chemical Plant Moves After Outcry,” *New York Times*, January 15, 2009.

common potential of the common people is released” (p. 216). First, it is not clear to me that Yang has demonstrated that it is in fact the common people who are the subjects of his book. Actually, he does not tell the reader much about who the users of the Internet in China are. Second, this also sounds an awful lot like Mao Zedong in the Great Leap Forward, and in particular Mao’s call for the ordinary people to smash the experts, try new things, write poetry, and not be hide-bound by tradition. The Great Leap was not a voluntary activity, and it created the greatest disaster in modern Chinese history. But Yang’s view of the Internet as absolutely leveling and absolutely democratic at the expense of expertise and of deserved or earned authority should strike some fear in the hearts of Chinese and those who care about them.

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**Author’s Response:  
The Growing Power of Internet Activism in China**

*Guobin Yang*

**T**he thesis of my book is that online activism is dynamic and strong in China, that it has grown in tandem with political control, and that this paradoxical relationship between online activism and political control results from the peculiar mix of political, social, cultural, and economic conditions under which online activism in China takes place.

My analytical approach rests on two axes. The synchronic axis consists of the key institutional determinants, namely, the state, market, contentious culture, and civil society (local and global). Positioning online activism on this axis is to view it in relation to its multiple institutional fields. The other axis is diachronic. The assumption is that online activism is a historical development whose significance and limits can only be fully grasped in a specific context (hence, for example, my use of the student movement in 1989 as a reference point). The intersection of these two axes means that the cultural, social, and political transformations associated with the Internet revolution are simultaneous and intertwined, not sequential.

It is hard to overstate the centrality of history and culture in my study. Randy Kluver and Xu Wu rightly point to these dimensions. Wu sees online

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activism as “both the catalyst and the reflection of historical transformations.” Kluver points out that the use of the Internet in my story is informed by cultural conventions. He notes perceptively that my book does not draw any direct connection between the Internet and a democratic revolution but instead allows for multiple and even conflicting narratives.

### *Regime Change*

Having pointed out the book’s analytical approach, let me now respond to the main issues raised by the reviewers in this roundtable. Juntao Wang is concerned with the direct link between the Internet and regime change. To his credit, he acknowledges that this link is not my main concern. Wang argues that the Chinese state maintains absolute power over the people, that the Internet is insufficient for creating political change, and that regime change must come through a political revolution, “accompanied by large-scale street protests, military involvement or coups, faction clashes within the ruling core, and mobilization of major social groups through networking and organizing offline.”

The Internet alone certainly cannot lead to regime change. Claims to the contrary are instances of the technological determinism that I explicitly reject. Yet Wang may have overestimated Chinese state power and underestimated the popular struggles linked to the Internet. His two examples of government control of information do not support his argument. During the SARS crisis in 2003, it was precisely the information flows on the Internet (and on mobile phones) that forced the Chinese government to open up the media, thereby creating a short period of media transparency about the SARS epidemic. During the Xinjiang riots in 2009, the Chinese government cut off the Internet in parts of the area. Wang takes this as an instance of the government’s supreme power, but it shows just as clearly the government’s fear of the power of the Internet.

Wang argues that journalists, lawyers, government officials, social associations, and other such groups are important agents of change. I agree with him and my book does not argue otherwise. In fact, various parts of the book, especially chapter 6 on civic associations, demonstrate that the other social groups that Wang sees as separate from cyber activists are cyber activists of sorts themselves, because they too use the Internet for activism.

Wang’s view that regime change must come through a political revolution is understandable, because that is how regime change has historically happened. Yet he leaves no room for the possibility that new modes of communication

might alter the classical conditions of a political revolution. Another reason why Wang places little hope on online activism as a catalyst of change is because he does not see change as an evolutionary process. As I try to suggest in the book's conclusion, the revolutionary impact of online activism comes from its gradual and cumulative effect. The moderate features of online activism attest to the evolutionary nature of political change in China.

### *State Power*

Evgeny Morozov and Wu raise questions about the relationship between state power and online activism. Wu suggests that the Chinese government may not be an enemy of online activism and may sometimes tacitly support it (as in the case of cyber nationalism). Morozov wonders whether online campaigns succeeded "because the government found their objectives to be in tune with its own plans." He sees a failure in my book to consider how the Chinese state harnesses the power of the Internet "to modernize itself and prolong its rule."

Although I focus on the use of the Internet by citizens, the issue of how the government employs this technology for its own purposes is not neglected. In delineating the evolution of the Chinese Internet-control regime, I stress that in the third and current stage, government control efforts have become more proactive. These proactive strategies include initiatives to guide and forge public opinion by promoting government-run websites and employing "internet commentators" (pp. 49–51). To emphasize this point, the conclusion returns to the issue of "soft management" strategies and their effectiveness as a new mode of productive power (pp. 222–23).

More problematic in Morozov's critique is the unexamined assumption that the interests of the state and its citizens are necessarily opposed. To Morozov, it is fine for citizens to use the Internet to challenge government officials, but when government agencies use the Internet to deal with corruption, it becomes a problem, because presumably the government and citizens do not share the same interests and goals. This assumption applies poorly to state-society relations in China (or East Asia for that matter), because it precludes the possibility of overlapping interests, layered social relations, and common goals between state and society (such as modernization). These complexities of state-society relations are the legacies of a difficult modern history of fighting imperialism, foreign invasions, and civil wars. One cannot deduce that the power of online activism is limited simply because its goals sometimes happen to accord with the state's.

Finally, it is worth reiterating that the Chinese government is not a homogeneous entity, a point I stress at several points, especially in chapter 2. Policy contradictions and intra-agency and central-local conflicts are common and provide opportunities for activism. Wu notes that the power of the Internet in China may partially come from the government's "dedication to catching up with the information revolution." My analysis points to the contradictions between this dedication and the government's efforts to control the Internet. When activists invoke state policies in making contentious claims, they are taking advantage of these contradictions. More space could certainly be devoted to online nationalism, but I am not sure further discussion would modify my argument in any way. As much as government authorities may tacitly support online nationalism, they are aware that citizens often use these occasions to make other complaints.

*"Dark" Matters, Etc.*

David Bachman and Evgeny Morozov are rightly concerned about the negative and "dark" aspects of Chinese Internet culture, but their concerns are abstract rather than historically grounded. Morozov worries about citizen disengagement "when at least half of the *World of Warcraft's* 11 million players come from China." He frets about the phenomenon of the so-called "human flesh search engine," which he thinks goes unmentioned in my book.

At least two major cases in my book—the "South China tiger incident" in chapter 5 and the "selling my body to save mom" incident in chapter 7—may be categorized as cases of human flesh search, even though I do not use that term. I believe the term is the invention of mass media hype and that it masks more than illuminates the phenomenon. It serves a similar function as the media discourse about "Internet verbal violence" (better known as flaming in English), which I critique on p. 183. In both cases, the Chinese mass media rejects these practices. This media discourse is then used by the state to justify its control of the Internet. Thus, any simplistic rejection of "human flesh search" or flaming would run the risk of serving the official discourse about control. Treating these incidents as cases of online collective action rather than using the value-laden term "human flesh search" avoids these pitfalls, without precluding an exploration of the ethical and moral issues involved, especially privacy and trust.

*World of Warcraft* enjoys an enormous following in China. The game's fans make up the largest online community operated by China's leading search engine Baidu. In the past year alone, two influential incidents of online

activism started in this gaming community. In one case, an anonymous message titled “Jia Junpeng, your mother wants you to go home to eat” went viral soon after it was posted. Why? Part of the reason is that members of the community were frustrated with the delayed release of the game, a delay caused by conflicts of interests between government licensing agencies. The incident is thus a case of online consumer activism. But the story did not end there. Around the same time, blogger-activist Guo Baofeng was detained by police. Inspired by the “Jia Junpeng” posting, fellow bloggers who campaigned for his release sent postcards with the phrase “Guo Baofeng, your mother wants you to go home to eat” to the police station where Guo was detained. Guo credited this postcard movement for his release.

My point is that gaming, and online play in general, should not be dismissed abstractly as a base of “citizen disengagement,” but should be viewed in its social context. In China, playful online activities have been an important source of critical political discourse.

David Bachman would like an account of the mechanisms by which online contention moves offline and into the material world, arguing that “online contention cannot by itself bring about fundamental changes in China.” I never make such a claim in my book. Bachman overstates the dichotomy between the online and the “material” worlds and fails to see that my analysis of the conditions and dynamics of online activism entails what he thinks of as mechanisms or pathways. One example of such dynamics (or such a mechanism), which comes across in my case study in chapter 7, is courageous social actors who, encouraged by community members, take action offline and then become bridges between the online and offline realms. Overlooking my analysis of the moral discourse and action generated in online communities, Bachman fails to see that online communities are precisely the kind of pathways that he finds missing.

Bachman suggests that my focus on individual cases of activism “individualizes the conflict.” If he means that individual cases are presented in isolation rather than as examples of a general phenomenon, I would have to disagree. Chapter 1 not only provides a detailed treatment of online activism as a general social phenomenon but also links such activism explicitly to structural conditions. The case studies in subsequent chapters are illustrations of the general phenomenon in concrete social processes and institutional contexts. Or Bachman may mean that individual cases do not raise “more general claims.” Are democracy and human emancipation such general claims? If so, then Bachman is right, but he is wrong to seek such general claims when activists themselves shun them. As I argue at length in my book,



a distinctive feature of online activism is precisely its avoidance of general and abstract claims in favor of concrete and moderate goals.

Bachman also questions how meaningful the expansion of access to information might be for Chinese citizens. He does not believe that it is “quite as momentous as many think,” because “individual mental maps are resistant to change.” Instead of starting from the abstract and hypothetical claim that “individual mental maps are resistant to change” and then deducing that Chinese netizens do not make good use of the Internet, I look at real practices. Admittedly, *The Power of the Internet in China* does not explore the full spectrum of Chinese Internet culture, but that is not the book’s objective.

Bachman’s ahistorical tendency is most evident in the final passage of his essay. Here he claims that the Internet in my story is “absolutely leveling and absolutely democratic at the expense of expertise and of deserved or earned authority.” This gravely worries him, because it recalls Mao during the Great Leap Forward, “in particular Mao’s call for the ordinary people to smash the experts, try new things, write poetry, and not be hidebound by tradition.” In comparing people’s embracing of the Internet to Maoist populism in the Great Leap Forward, Bachman is making a great leap of his own. Such a leap sheds little light on the meaning of the Internet and may even harm netizens’ causes by encouraging a fear of populism.

Far from asserting the “absolutely leveling and absolutely democratic” power of the Internet, my study is about how citizens achieve empowerment relative to the dominant social strata. If I stress the importance of the common people becoming publishers, editors, and writers and emphasize the value of new modes of communication in helping them to reach this goal, it is because at this historical juncture, in that particular society, and in comparison with “experts” and “deserved or earned authority,” ordinary citizens have the least chance of becoming publishers, editors, and writers. They have the least amount of resources to voice their views and defend their interests. For any society with a pretension to social justice and citizen participation, it is essential to equip citizens with the tools of communication and cultural production.

### *Conclusion*

The publication of my book in June 2009 coincided with a case of online activism in China. Early that month, the press broke the news that, beginning on July 1 of that year, China’s Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) would require all computers sold in China to pre-install a filtering

software called “Green Dam Youth Escort.” This initiative allegedly aimed to protect minors from pornography, yet computer specialists soon discovered that the software also filtered key words considered politically sensitive in China. The news triggered strong opposition from Chinese netizens and many other quarters. In response, MIIT suspended the project.

In the meantime, other important incidents of online activism have occurred besides the Green Dam incident and the Jia Junpeng case I mentioned earlier. Newer technologies, such as microblogging, are catching on. Likewise, new efforts to control the Internet are being mounted. The paradoxical trend of growing online activism and increasing Internet control, which is the focus of my book, thus persists. How will this trend unfold? Where might it lead? The best guide to the future is still a historically grounded understanding of the changing mix of political, social, cultural, and economic conditions under which online activism takes place. As Randy Kluver puts it, such an understanding helps to avoid “the trap of making hasty conclusions.” ◆