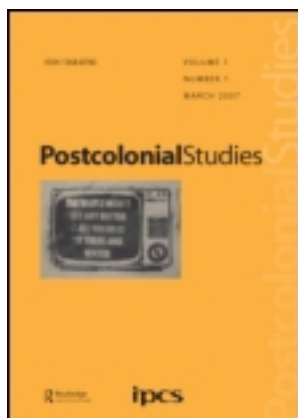


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Ivan Franceschini & Gianluigi Negro

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The ‘Jasmine Revolution’ in China: the limits of the cyber-utopia¹

IVAN FRANCESCHINI AND GIANLUIGI NEGRO

4 April 1976

On a spring Sunday in Beijing, while the city still licks wounds inflicted during the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, something strange is in the air. One might attribute the strangeness to the upcoming *Qingmingjie*, the traditional tomb-sweeping festival, but this would fail to explain the people who have crowded Tiananmen Square for the past few days. Here, they have laid wreaths at the feet of the Monument of the People’s Heroes to commemorate the late premier Zhou Enlai, who passed away in January. Over the weekend more than half a million people, mostly young workers, have stopped by the square to eulogize the deceased leader. They have been discussing current affairs and rousing the crowd, often going so far as to overtly criticize the ‘Gang of Four’ at the height of their power.² This provocation is too much for the authorities to tolerate, yet Beijing’s citizens are not willing to let go. The removal of the wreaths during the night incites violence which rapidly spreads to Taiyuan, Zhengzhou, Wuhan, Xi’an, Luoyang and Kaifeng, not to mention Nanjing, where the protest began in mid-March.³ Slogans painted on the sides of trains travelled from Nanjing, bringing news of the mobilization to the Chinese capital, prompting its people to act.⁴

16 November 1978

When the *People’s Daily* announces the reversal of the official verdict on the protests of 1976, hailing them ‘revolutionary acts by the masses against the Gang of Four’, throngs of big-character posters (*dazibao*) spring up on the roadside wall in Xidan, to the west of Tiananmen, while unofficial journals begin circulating in many cities.⁵ In these hand-crafted periodicals, people discuss new ideas in the realms of culture, society, politics and economics.⁶ This is the beginning of the ‘Democracy Wall Movement’, an intellectual spring that spans through the end of 1980. Then, in one of the infamous turnarounds so common in Chinese politics, the communist authorities—among them the very Deng Xiaoping who rode the disorders of 1976 to power—mark as counterrevolutionaries those activists using the wall to promote ideas, perceiving them as menaces to the legitimacy of the Party. Some pay a high price for their outspokenness, as was the case for Wei Jingsheng, an electrician condemned to 15 years in jail for having written pamphlets like ‘The Fifth Modernization’ and ‘Do We Want Democracy or a New Dictatorship?’⁷

5 December 1986

China has entered a new age of reforms and openness. Power is in the hands of progressive leaders like Hu Yaobang, the new General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the premier Zhao Ziyang. Still, many students and intellectuals believe this is not enough. The change seems to unfold too slowly, prices are out of control and, generally speaking, it is hard to envision a real fracture with the recent past. On that day, in a speech at the University of Science and Technology in Hefei, astrophysicist Fang Lizhi criticizes the reforms' slowness, incensing the spirits of students.⁸ Four days later, they take to the street to protest their inability to nominate candidates for the local People's Congress. Regardless of the fact that local authorities readily postponed the elections, throughout the following days marches of support take place in Wuhan, Shanghai and Beijing, while posters calling for freedom and democracy bloom in campuses all over the country. Despite receiving no mention in the official media, news spread swiftly on the waves of *Voice of America*, a radio station popular among young people trying to improve their English. Inevitably, repression follows. Protests are quelled through bureaucratic action and threats, while the following January, Hu Yaobang—who is blamed for the atmosphere of general permissiveness thought to facilitate the disorder—is forced to resign.

20 February 2011

A crowd assembles outside the McDonald's on Wangfujing street in Beijing, not far from Tiananmen Square. Most of the crowd consists of foreign journalists and police officers, but many shoppers are also there, their curiosity aroused by the unusual number of cameras outside the fast food outlet.⁹ These onlookers are not aware that in the past few days an anonymous notice has been circulating on Twitter and several Chinese-language websites hosted abroad, urging people to assemble at 2 pm that Sunday in Wangfujing and a selection of other avenues in 13 Chinese cities. The gatherers have no clue they are there to launch a 'Jasmine Revolution' (*molihua geming*).¹⁰ Had they known, they would have stayed at home, far away from Wangfujing. To the contrary, those 'in the know' happen to be the public security officials and the foreign media, who are there in force, waiting for something to happen. At one point, even the American ambassador appears among the crowd, sporting sunglasses and a leather jacket with a stars-and-stripes badge on the shoulder.¹¹ In the end, nothing significant happens, but the police still manage to detain at least three people, including one man who placed a jasmine flower near the McDonald's.¹² The following day, the mysterious organizers post an appeal online in which they ask Chinese citizens to take a 'collective stroll' (*jiti sanbu*) every weekend at chosen spots to continue to push for an end to official corruption, an independent judiciary and a government supervised by the people.¹³ The government reacts with a show of strength, arresting dozens of leading activists, beating up foreign journalists and reinforcing online censorship, all of this in the general silence of the traditional Chinese media.¹⁴ The Jasmine Revolution is crushed before it even begins.

These apparently disconnected episodes—only summarily outlined in this article—introduce a series of questions about the ‘revolutionary’ role of the internet as a tool for mass mobilization. On one side, they remind us of the limitations to the dominant narrative emphasizing the power of the internet.¹⁵ Plunged as we are into a ‘cyber-utopian’ discourse reinforced by the recent events in Iran, Egypt and Tunisia, we tend to forget the obvious fact that popular mobilization can very well happen without the internet, as can be seen in the Chinese mass movements of 1976, 1978 and 1986. Stories like those described above show that even without free media, independent unions, clandestine political organizations and, most of all, the internet, people were able to organize in creative ways, whether by painting messages on trains travelling between cities, putting up wall-posters (*dazibao*) in public places, printing underground publications or moving from one city to the next to propagate ideas and ‘connect’ (*chuanlian*). On the other hand, they reveal that even savvy use of the internet may not necessarily lead to mass mobilization, since the internet can also become a powerful tool for the government to prevent civil mobilization.

In this regard, China is an important case study. The study of the usage of the internet in China is a fundamental part of an ongoing global discussion that finds its two extremes in Clay Shirky, who strongly supports the politically-progressive functionality of the internet (a view commonly described as ‘cyber-utopian’), and the less-enthusiastic Evgeny Morozov, megaphone of those who hold a more sceptical view of the internet’s political role (a view commonly referred to as ‘cyber-realism’).¹⁶ More specifically, the existing literature on the impact of the internet in China can be divided into three main outlooks. The first outlook can be identified as optimistic and supports the general idea that the development of the internet in China actively empowers civil society.¹⁷ The supporters of this approach often quote the growing number of so-called ‘internet mass incidents’ (*wangluo quntixing shijian*), as well as transient phenomena like the establishment of the so-called ‘Chinese Netizen Party’, which will be described later in this article. The scholar Yang Guobin provided important contributions in this area, arguing in favour of a co-evolutionary Chinese civil society. According to Yang, ‘the Internet facilitates civil society activities by offering new possibilities for citizen participation’.¹⁸

The second outlook is more nuanced, but it generally adopts a more ‘pessimistic’ view regarding the role of the internet. Some of the scholars whose writings can be traced back to this view argue that the internet *de facto* is a tool to monitor and channel public opinion in China.¹⁹ Others emphasize the growing importance of online nationalism in China, the intrinsic fragmentation of the Chinese internet, and the predominance of entertainment over information.²⁰ Finally, the third outlook offers a more nuanced approach, pointing out the internet’s potential empowering opportunities for Chinese civil society and the continually evolving internet strategies adopted by the government.²¹

It is undeniable that the development of the internet in China is terrific both in terms of infrastructure investment and citizen involvement. Even though this process has already been studied extensively and with varying perspective, several issues regarding its impact on Chinese society remain open. This article will specifically delve into the conflicting nature of the internet in China’s political

context. It will argue that, in China, the internet can favour political change as much as it can assist the authorities in their struggle to maintain the status quo. The argument will be structured in two parts: first, we will outline the ‘cyber-utopian’ discourse in the Chinese context, underlining how the internet has been perceived as a powerful instrument for political change since the 1990s; second, we will describe the various strategies employed by the Chinese authorities in order to control the internet, specifically through modes of censorship, manipulation of information and judicial intimidation.

Seeds of ‘cyber-utopianism’ (with Chinese characteristics)

Cyber-utopian discourse—that which links new communication technologies to widespread political and social change—is deeply entrenched in the Chinese internet debate. The first email sent from China (dated 14 September 1987) captures the expectations which, at the time, surrounded the new tool and its ability to overcome national barriers, linking people and ideas across the globe. The inaugural email read, ‘Beyond the Great Wall, we can reach every corner in the world’ (*kuayue changcheng, women keyi daoda shijie de renhe yi ge jiaoluo*).²² In the late 1980s, the internet truly seemed to promise the world to a people who in the previous three decades had been forced to live in relative isolation within their own national borders. Back then, no one could have foreseen the stream of events to come in 1989, which, among other things, slowed the process of adopting the internet in China and delayed the country’s entrance into the World Wide Web for several years.²³ It was only in April of 1994 that China finally obtained approval from the United States to join the internet, becoming the seventy-seventh country to gain access.²⁴

In 1996, the internet became available to the urban middle class in China. Since then, its expansion has been unstoppable. According to official figures, at the end of June 2013 there were approximately 591 million internet users, up from the 620,000 in October of 1997, a penetration rate of 44.1 per cent.²⁵ When, in the first half of 2008, China surpassed the United States with its number of internet users, various commentators in the Chinese press reported the feat as a source of great pride, conveniently failing to mention that the penetration rate in China then was half that of the US.²⁶ Such triumphalism may have been warranted if we consider that Chinese users today include as many as 165 million people from the countryside.²⁷ This represents a major shift in the class composition of internet users in China, a change which, as Jack Linchuan Qiu emphasizes, is particularly evident in Chinese internet cafés. While in the 1990s such cafés were populated by an elite milieu of students and intellectuals, now their primary customers are migrant workers and other members of the various urban underclasses to emerge during the reforms.²⁸ Not surprisingly, this process of internet popularization prompted a wave of speculation on the role of new media in empowering the information ‘have-less’ in China.²⁹

Over the past few years, the development of new forms and outlets for expression on the internet—most prominently blogs and microblogs—have triggered a revolution in Chinese public life. The first Chinese-language blogs appeared as early as 2000, but gained momentum in China only around 2003,

thanks to bloggers like Muzimei, a young woman who used her blog to describe the details of her sex life.³⁰ Since then, blogs and other personal online spaces (*geren kongjian*) have spread among Chinese internet users. According to the most recent available data (June 2013), the Chinese internet counted 401 million blogs or personal online space and more than 330 million microblog accounts.³¹ Such tools are used not only to 'have fun' or to write about private matters. According to a report by the China Internet Network Information Centre, in 2008–2009 as many as 54.5 per cent of Chinese bloggers had written about 'social phenomena' (*shehui xianxiang*).³² Even if this eagerness to use blogs to comment on public affairs and social problems seems to have declined in the last couple of years, microblogs have since taken root as an alternative outlet to voice social concerns and launch popular campaigns.³³

With its blogs, microblogs and bulletin board systems, the internet has provided far more than an opportunity for Chinese citizens to voice their opinions. It has *factually* changed their participation in public life and involvement in politics. One of the earliest high-profile cases highlighting the potential role of the internet in Chinese politics took place in 2004, when a private citizen opened a new website specifically aimed at denouncing cases of official corruption.³⁴ In only a few years, he managed to expose the malfeasances of a series of local officials, gaining considerable attention from traditional media. In the years to follow, websites dedicated to the so-called 'supervision by the public opinion' (*yulun jiandu*) mushroomed in China, though they were still managed by individuals. Although several internet-related incidents had taken place in previous years, the real quantum leap in Chinese citizen online activism occurred in 2007, when a series of internet-related mobilizations landed on the front pages of every newspaper in China. In late May of 2007, citizens of Xiamen opposed to the imminent construction of a PX factory near a residential neighbourhood (*Xiamen PX shijian*) led a NIMBY—'Not In My Back-Yard'—protest organized via internet and mobile phone. Then, in June, a massive human trafficking network was exposed online, wherein young boys and disabled adults had been sold as slaves in 'black' brick kilns in the Chinese countryside (*heizhuanyao shijian*). And later in October, the Shanxi authorities' plan to embezzle State funding under the guise of creating a park to protect a species of tiger (*huananhu shijian*) that was already extinct was exposed on the internet as well.³⁵ With these incidents, online mobilization in China ceased to revolve around specific websites and individuals and Web users eventually became viewed as a collective entity, a so-called 'people of the internet' (*wangmin*).

Such cases spurred intense debate in the Chinese academic community and in the Chinese media. In 2008, scholars from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences coined a new term for Chinese internet users who care about current affairs and express their opinion on the internet: 'new opinion class' (*xin yijian jiecheng*).³⁶ In the past four years, this concept has become the focus of the cyber-utopian discourse in China.³⁷ The rhetoric has gone so far that in November of 2009, a columnist from the magazine *Fenghuang Zhoukan* critically remarked that in China the term 'people of the Web'—composed of the two characters 'Web' (*wang*) and 'people' (*min*)—seemed to have replaced the cardinal component of Maoist propaganda: the 'people' (*renmin*, in which *ren* is a

character which means ‘person’).³⁸ Hence, it is not surprising that in 2008, faith in the politically transformative power of the internet led a well-known Chinese democracy activist, Guo Quan, to announce the birth of a ‘Chinese Netizen Party’ (*Zhongguo wangmin dang*), an ephemeral entity organized around a constitution which was scarcely more than a statement of cyber-utopian faith. The constitution read,

2007 was a year of victory for Chinese netizens, as one-by-one they laid bare and denounced [various incidents] which deceived both the Chinese people and the world. This clearly illustrates that in the Internet Age, obscurantist policy no longer has its desired effect on The Netizen. The Chinese Netizens hereby rise up! We are determined to form the Chinese Netizen Party to serve not only as a symbol of the complete abandonment of fanaticism and blind assent, but also as a sign that China has entered the Internet Age and a revolutionary milestone in public opinion within Chinese society, that we have now risen.³⁹

It is exactly this kind of cyber-utopic belief in the power of the internet in China that permeates the international debate on the internet in China. As Yang Guobin noted, the most important development born from online activism in China is a sort of citizens’ ‘unofficial democracy’. According to his view,

online activism is a microcosm of China’s new citizen activism, and it is one of its most vibrant currents. In this sense, online activism marks the expansion of a grassroots, citizen democracy. It is an unofficial democracy because the initiative, both in thinking and action, comes from citizens. The expansion is evident both in consciousness and practice. In consciousness, the major developments are the rising awareness of citizenship rights among the Chinese people and the changing views of power and authority. [In practice, there is a] proliferation of forms of citizen participation in public affairs.⁴⁰

More recently, speaking at a conference in London, Google Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt reportedly said, ‘the rise of social media in China will lead to liberalization, and as more and more people go online, China’s government will be powerless to halt the changes’.⁴¹ Yet, even if it is hard to deny that the internet—in China and elsewhere—has created new political opportunities for citizens willing to stand up to the political power, it is important to remember that this is just half of the story.

Internet control 2.0: from censorship to manipulation

Reading stories of Chinese netizens triumphing over corrupt local officials, environmentally toxic companies and human traffickers, one gets the feeling that the Chinese authorities are in a position of weakness in their online interactions with citizens. Indeed, the assumption that the internet is a tool that empowers society at the expense of authoritarian states is a significant canon in the cyber-utopian faith, at least in its most naive formulations. Unfortunately, Chinese reality is far from being that simple. As many international scholars have pointed out, the CCP has been remarkably resilient in dealing with new media, employing

the internet in innovative ways to carry out 'ideological work' (*sixiang gongzuo*) and promote its own political agenda.⁴² From this point of view, focusing only on the issue of censorship is reductive, since it means overlooking other, more subtle strategies employed by the Chinese authorities to reinforce control over public discourse on the internet; in particular, strategies relying on the manipulation of information and judicial intimidation.

In spite of the proliferation of virtual private networks (VPNs), proxies and other tools that allow internet users in China to circumvent the so-called 'great firewall', censorship remains central to the tactics employed by the Chinese authorities. Some of the most popular international social networks and websites are inaccessible in China—Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to name only a few. Chinese users hardly miss them, as they can count on Chinese websites with similar or sometimes better functions. News stories detailing China's censorship are not uncommon. In fact, many have gone on to make international headlines over the past few years. The shutdown of *Bullog* (*Niubowang*)—a platform hosting blogs created by some of the most vocal Chinese intellectuals—made waves in January of 2009.⁴³ The online uprising in response to government plans to install the 'Green Dam' (*lǜbā*), a software that would prevent access to 'sensitive' websites on all personal computers sold in China, drew a great deal of media attention.⁴⁴ Following the disorder incited during the summer of 2009, the 10-month suspension of internet service in Xinjiang made waves, as did Google's decision to abandon the Chinese market in January of 2010.⁴⁵ Without belabouring the intricacies of these stories, the greater point here is to note that even in the 'harmonized' virtual space of the internet in China, censorship goes far beyond simply deleting critical comments directed at the Party-State. It is a savvy effort aimed at manipulating public discourse. This is particularly evident if we consider a recent study undertaken by Harvard scholars which highlights that, contrary to previous beliefs, 'posts with negative, even vitriolic, criticism of the state, its leaders, and its policies are not more likely to be censored. Instead, [...] the censorship program is aimed at curtailing collective action by silencing comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization, regardless of content.'⁴⁶

Manipulation is omnipresent in Chinese cyberspace. The Chinese authorities have been keen to ensure that official discourse remains well presented online through an impressive network of official websites, blogs and microblogs opened by government bodies and officials. Even the reclusive Standing Committee of the CCP Politburo opened a short-lived web portal in 2010, describing it as a 'direct line' for citizens to bring complaints to the attention of Chinese top leaders.⁴⁷ It is well known that the Chinese authorities have at their disposal an array of online commentators paid to publish posts and comments following a set of pre-established guidelines—guidelines often created by the government, employers or website managers. By some estimates, the central government can count on 250,000 to 300,000 of these online mercenaries, commonly referred to as the 'Fifty Cents Party' (*wumaodang*), a name based on the remuneration they allegedly receive for each post or comment they publish.⁴⁸ Even if their whereabouts and working arrangements remain largely mysterious, they are occasionally discussed in the Chinese media. For example, in January of 2010 the

official *Xinhua* agency reported that authorities in northern China's Gansu province were going to hire 650 online commentators, 'to channel public opinion'.⁴⁹ Among the requirements for the job were to have, 'a strong interest in the big events of the day, a reservoir of knowledge, the ability to assess and interpret social phenomena and the ability to write persuasive words to present a "correct" perspective over current affairs'.⁵⁰

While in some instances these commentators-for-hire publish unmistakable eulogies to the Chinese leadership, more often they are very subtle, spreading rumours and muddying the waters to prevent the diffusion of truths that may potentially disrupt social stability. Nevertheless, as the *Xinhua* report emphasized, the primary task of the Fifty Cents Party resides in the 'guidance of the public opinion' (*yulun daoxiang*), a concept which came to prominence in China in 2008, after the Chinese authorities failed to cover up a series of riots in Tibet, an event which proved disastrous for the international image of the Chinese leadership on the eve of the Beijing Olympics.⁵¹ This concept was stressed by president Hu Jintao on 20 June 2008, in a speech given during a visit to the editorial offices of the Party's mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*.⁵² In his speech, he stressed that the Chinese media must give absolute priority to 'improving the ability to channel public opinion', suggesting that it was necessary to carry out 'continuous reform and innovation' in propaganda work to keep up with the times and improve the authoritativeness, credibility and influence of 'public opinion channelling'. This, according to president Hu Jintao, would allow for a better understanding and mastery of the shifting media landscapes, stratification and structures from which to establish a contingent of professionals in charge of propaganda.⁵³

In other words, since 2008 the CCP's media policy has evolved from rough suppression of negative news coverage to more elaborate news-spinning operations favouring the leadership.⁵⁴ Far less sophisticated and more threatening is the authoritative habit of resorting to judicial intimidation to quell dissenting voices, both online and in real life. Until recently, the Chinese authorities have detained people who dared to raise their voices by administering, (1) a criminal sentence, possibly for slander or State sedition; or (2) a one- to three-year 're-education' sentence of forced labour (*laodong jiaoyang* or, more commonly, *laojiao*), an administrative decision left to the discretion of the police.⁵⁵ More recently, the Chinese government has resorted to detaining and publicly shaming critical internet personas, particularly those with strong social network momentum (referred to as the 'Big Vs'), by accusing them of fiscal fraud or even soliciting prostitutes.⁵⁶ Two such cases provide clear examples of the way the Chinese authorities use the law and the public security system to silence their online critics, using the 'killing the chicken to scare the monkeys' tactic.

On 6 March 2009, Wang Shuai, a young man from Lingbao County in Henan province, was arrested at his workplace in Shanghai by two local plainclothes police officers, accompanied by two other officers from his hometown.⁵⁷ Just a few weeks earlier, he published a post online in which he denounced the local Lingbao authorities for issuing a land requisition to the local farmers. After his arrest, Wang was immediately put in administrative detention, but neither his relatives nor friends were informed of his whereabouts. For the first few days,

Wang Shuai was detained in Shanghai, then he was moved to Lingbao by train, handcuffed to his berth in front of wary fellow passengers. In Lingbao, he spent four days in jail before being officially released due to lack of evidence, though in actuality his release only followed an informal agreement made between his family and the local authorities. It was only after the national media reported his story that the Henan vice-governor admitted publicly that Wang had been the victim of a 'mistake' by local police, and promised a congruous compensation.⁵⁸ In April of 2009, in response to a journalist's question, Wang said, 'At the beginning, I just wanted to help my county friends to do something, but as a result I ended up in jail. In retrospect, the very fact of having been able to come out from that jail is already lucky. It can be said that I have learned the lesson.'⁵⁹ And with him, many internet users learned a lesson as well.

The second case took place in 2011 and involved another young man, Ren Jianyu. After graduating from college in Chongqing in 2008, Ren Jianyu started a career as a village teacher in Pangshui County.⁶⁰ Over the next few years, he began blogging about the difficulties he faced handling village affairs. In 2011, Ren Jianyu had been discussing current issues online through various social networks, letting off steam with comments like, 'this society is so full of evil people while good people have bad luck. The mission of our generation is to eradicate the evil system and protect goodness.'⁶¹ Though he was careful to use a pseudonym, on 18 August 2011 he was arrested by the Pangshui police and on 23 September he was sentenced to two years of re-education for 'state sedition'. The only evidence produced by his accusers was his microblog comments. Ren tried to file for appeal but no lawyer dared to take his case until a few months after the downfall of Bo Xilai, the former Party secretary of Chongqing, a politician notorious for adopting an iron fist when dealing with organized crime and political dissent. Only then, a famous civil rights lawyer approached Ren and took up his case. Although he became the face of a campaign for the abolition of the labour re-education system, Ren was only released in November of 2012, after being confined for more than a year.

Conclusions

Based on the dynamics of online activism and government control outlined in this article, it is now possible to present some explanations for the failure of the Jasmine Revolution in China. As addressed in the introduction, China is not immune to grassroots movements of a political nature. In spite of a state machine as fearful and authoritarian as the present one, in the past decades mass mobilizations have been able to take off in China with remarkable participation. For this reason, the fact that almost no one heeded the call for a Jasmine Revolution cannot be dismissed as mere fear on behalf of citizens before a display of force by the Chinese authorities, nor can it be deemed proof that Chinese citizens are satisfied with the status quo. Though the success of internet mobilization efforts and the growth of so-called online mass incidents cannot be overlooked, the fact that the Jasmine mobilization was launched on the internet by anonymous organizers may have had much to do with the subsequent lack of popular support. Unlike gatherings in the past, it was not clear who called for

action, or what the intentions were. Of course, previous episodes of popular mobilization also developed in a disorganized fashion, but they grew from stable networks of people—intellectuals, students and workers—who knew and trusted one another. Furthermore, in those circumstances there were people who dared to expose themselves and, more importantly, present their ideas. In the case of the Jasmine Revolution, it was the cold impersonality and empty language of the internet that prevailed.

This article seeks to highlight the ambiguous role of the internet in China. The argument is structured in two parts: the first on the dynamics of internet activism, the second on the most deleterious aspects of internet control. Yet are these two phenomena so clear-cut? The answer, in the case of China, is no. There is a significant overlap between the emphasis on online activism in the Chinese public discourse and the government's ability to boost its legitimacy. While it is undeniable that in the past few years the Chinese authorities have had to submit to the demands of 'netizens' in various circumstances, the discourse on the power of the internet has also allowed the authorities to present themselves as open to criticism from below and responsive to the 'people's will' (*minyì*). It certainly is no coincidence that, as the aforementioned Harvard study pointed out, negative or even vitriolic online criticism of the state, its leaders and policies is not likely to be censored, while comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization, regardless of content, are promptly censored.⁶² At the same time, the internet has also allowed the Chinese government to manipulate the public discourse in order to maintain the status quo and avoid significant political change, sacrificing minor figures on the political scene in order to maintain the legitimacy of the entire system.

Rebecca MacKinnon put forward the idea of 'cybertarianism'—a more sophisticated form of authoritarianism which

permits [...] a great deal of give and take between government and citizens. Cybertarianism is much more deliberate and participatory than the authoritarianism of the last century. While one party or set of ruling elites remains in control, the internet facilitates a broad range of public discourse on matters of common concern. The result is that the average person with internet or mobile access has a much greater sense of freedom and even potential to influence government policies, than could ever have been possible in a pre-internet authoritarian regime.⁶³

As this article has highlighted, China fits the profile of a 'cybertarian' country perfectly. From this point of view, the failure of the Jasmine Revolution in China not only proved the analytical value of such a concept, but highlighted once again the limits of the cyber-utopia.

Notes

¹ The authors wish to acknowledge the many valuable suggestions made by the anonymous reviewers. They also wish to thank Professor Marinelli for his advice and his availability to host this paper in the present feature.

² Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun, 'The First Tiananmen Incident Revisited: Elite Politics and Crisis Management at the End of the Maoist Era', *Pacific Affairs*, 77(2), 2004, pp 211–235.

- ³ Jackie Sheehan, *Chinese Workers: A New History*, London: Routledge, 1998, p 149.
- ⁴ For these 'mobile billboards' in the 1976 protests Sheehan refers to Roger Garside, *Coming Alive: China after Mao*, London: André Deutsch, 1981, p 113; Keith Forster, 'The 1976 Ch'ingming Incident in Hangchow', *Issues and Studies*, 22(4), 1986, pp 13–33; Sebastian Heilmann, 'The Social Context of Mobilization in China: Factions, Work Units and Activists during the 1976 April Fifth Movement', *China Information*, 8(3), 1986, pp 1–19.
- ⁵ Kjeld Erik Brodsgaard, 'The Democracy Movement in China, 1978–1979: Opposition Movements, Wall-Poster Campaigns, and Underground Journals', *Asian Survey*, 21(7), 1981, pp 747–774.
- ⁶ Two must-reads about this 'cultural renaissance' of the 1980s in China are: Geremie Barmé and John Minford, *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1988; Geremie Barmé and Linda Jaivin, *New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices*, New York: Times Books, 1992.
- ⁷ Jingsheng Wei, *The Courage to Stand Alone: Letters from Prison and Other Writings*, New York: Penguin Books, 1998.
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