

Chapter 55

Microblogs, Jasmine Revolution, and Civil Unrest: Reassessing the Emergence of Public Sphere and Civil Society in People's Republic of China

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ABSTRACT

Weibo provides an alternative channel for many Chinese citizens to obtain non-censored news contents and share their opinions on public affairs. In this book chapter, the authors employed Jürgen Habermas's concept of public sphere to examine how Chinese Weibo users (i.e., microbloggers) make the most use of this social medium to form a public sphere to contest omnipresent state power. Habermas's analytical framework helps to better comprehend the role of social media and its interactions with other stakeholders in Chinese politics. The role of social media in shaping this less controlled sphere of political deliberation and participation was examined using a case study approach. The authors analyzed the Chinese Jasmine Revolution to discuss the interrelations among social media, civil society, state power, economic development, political process, and democratization in China. The case study identified Weibo's essential role as a device to bypass existing government censorship, to mobilize users, and to empower Chinese Internet users to engage in political activities to foster its nascent civil society.

As China goes through a period of rapid economic growth, things are changing enormously. Suddenly you're getting new groups outside of the states that are simply the result of capitalist growth – businessmen, a middle-class, and educated people who are on Sina Weibo [the Chinese equivalent of Twitter]. (Francis Fukuyama, 2012, para. 26)

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As people get more educated and tech-savvy, these networks are not just localized phenomena but pathways for information on a national scale. The technology is facilitating the growth of a national consciousness that did not exist under the controlled media setting of the Communist regime. (Francis Fukuyama, 2012, para. 35)

INTRODUCTION

China is a country with 1.35 billion people that are composed of over 50 ethnicities (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2013). Many political leaders around the world have acknowledged the rise of China in recent decades (Shambaugh, 2013). The former Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew (2011), was quoted, “It is China’s intention to be the greatest power in the world” (para. 4). Economic indices have undoubtedly confirmed China’s status as a global economic powerhouse after its GDP of \$5.87 trillion surpassed Japan as the second-largest economy (Jacquez, 2012; Shambaugh, 2013). The economic miracle of China can be best described in its rapid GDP growth from \$263 billion in 1979, to \$1.2 trillion in 2000, and to \$7.2 trillion in 2011 (Rickards, 2014). Although the economic growth is expected to slow down between 2014 and 2019 to 6.8% (IBIS World, 2014), China remains to be one of the most robust economies in the world (Yao, 2014). China has also been cultivating its soft power to expand its influence in international politics through its Confucius Institute and mass media out-reach as far as Africa (Lee & Melissen, 2011; Li, 2009; Shambaugh, 2013).

Accompanying China’s rapid economic growth in the past decades, increasing social unrest and rights defense movement have occurred across China (Biao, 2012; *The Economist*, 2012). These protests have grown more organized, according to a report by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) (*The Economist*, 2012). Despite of the intentional aloofness of government media to create a façade of a harmonious society, angry protestors take advantage of the emergence of the Internet and social media (such as *Weibo*) in “enriching the modalities of activity in the rights defense movement, enhancing the mobilisation capacity of activists, and accelerating the systematisation of popular rights defence” (Biao, 2012, p. 29). Bondes and Schucher (2014) therefore envisioned such civil unrest is likely to increase the number of “online mass incidents” (p. 45) in China when Chinese citizens are mobilized to take part in political activities after decades of suppression. Contradictory to the “modern, harmonious, and creative high-income society” (p.3), that Chinese government would like to promote (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development /International Development Association or The World Bank, 2012), scholars have consistently noted that the last few years have seen the proliferation of grassroots protests, mass incidents, and rights defense activities across China to challenge government’s policies and legitimacy (Hung, 2010; Tong & Zhu, 2014; Also refer to *Boxun.com* for a detailed record of these incidents in China). These reports have shown that China, in spite of its economic success, is now faced with many urgent needs for social and political reforms to respond to these challenges from a nascent civil society. This book chapter aims to examine the role of *Weibo* in creating a public sphere to facilitate the formation and development of civil society in China. Using a case study of *Weibo*, the authors studied what this popular social media platform has accomplished to promote political engagement of Chinese citizens.

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