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Chinese voices behind 'The Great Firewall': exploring the emergence of civil society in the wake of the digital revolution in China

Rose Scarfe-James

The advent of the digital revolution has brought about a change in the nature of political engagement in China. The Internet and digital technologies have broadened the horizons of China's net citizens and despite rigorous censorship and intervention on the part of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); voices are being heard from behind the 'Great Firewall'. With more than 500 million Internet users, Chinese citizens are a huge online presence, consequences of which include an explosion in blogging culture, cyber vigilantism and user-generated media content. It is clear that the Internet has empowered Chinese citizens in both the online and offline spheres. These developments have prompted scholars to contemplate whether there is a form of civil society developing in China in the wake of the digital revolution. However a culturally attuned conception of civil society must be developed in order to discuss an emerging Chinese civil society with any meaningful outcomes.

The impact of the digital revolution on Western democracies is clear and measurable, whereas its effect on China is rather more difficult to pin down. Some scholars offer bold claims about the potential impacts, claiming 'the Internet bestows upon civil society a selection of fundamentally new communication strategies that have the capacity to transform […] more traditional approaches to political behaviour'.[1] However, most scholars are more moderate in their observations; China is an authoritarian state in the grip of the Chinese Communist Party and the prospects of the digital revolution have not always been welcome. There has undoubtedly been an opening of public discourses and consequently this has meant a rise in potential opportunities for political engagement on the part of net citizens or 'netizens'[2] as they have been called. Whether this change constitutes the formation or strengthening of civil society is yet to be seen. In order to investigate these concepts and effects, this article explores the prospects for civil society, including issues surrounding voice and empowerment, in the context of the digital revolution through three key themes: civil society in the context of China and 'The West'; the Internet, the CCP and its 'Netizens', and finally social unrest and the digital age.

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[1] G.D. Rawnsley, 'The Media, Internet and Governance in China' in (eds) Y. Zheng & J. Fewsmith, *China's Opening Society: The Non-State Sector and Governance* (London, 2008), 126.
[2] A. Esaray & X. Qiang, 'Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere: Below the Radar', *Asian Survey*, 48 (2008), 753.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE CONTEXT OF CHINA AND 'THE WEST'

Before assessing the prospects for Chinese civil society we must first look to interrogate the idea of a civil society itself. What characteristics represent a strong civil society and does China possess them? The concept of a civil society is familiar to a Western academic audience, conjuring images of participation and community, but as Howell and Pearce point out 'some scholars [have] questioned the applicability of such a concept, which had its roots in the European Enlightenment, to a society and culture so different as China'.[3] Indeed this lasting association with European politics, and by extension liberal democracy, may prove to be an inappropriate measure for China's relationship with the concepts of civil society and the digital revolution.

Peterson and Van Til's article usefully identifies a set of criteria which can be used to assess the strength of civil society in a given setting. They outline civil society as characterised by 'open, public decision making for all community members' and 'strong, active, vibrant, diverse community-based groups that […] seek to promote the common good'.[4] The implication here is also that a strong civil society allows its citizens to speak, to have their voices heard, but can this be applied to China? Are Chinese voices being heard? The Peterson and Van Til approach is undoubtedly a Western lens but it is nonetheless useful as a basic working model of the idea of civil society. Under this definition, an analysis of China's civil society could be rather short lived, particularly in relation to the CCP's control of the Internet, which will be discussed in further detail later. Therefore, it is safe to assume that a broader, more culturally attuned idea of civil society must be engaged with in order to discuss the case of China with any meaningful outcomes.

To pursue this more culturally attuned conception of civil society, we must place it in the historical context of China; only then can we assess the ways in which it has developed and the particular influence of the digital revolution upon this development. As Des Forges put it, it is vital to 'take the idea of civil society out of its modern Western context and place it in the larger context of Chinese history'. He goes on to suggest that the 'Chinese have long appreciated the values of moral community and public welfare, which are valuable complements to current Western ideas of liberal democracy and private enterprise'.[5] Indeed,

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[3] J. Howell & J. Pearce, 'The Case of China' in their *Civil Society and Development: A Critical Exploration.* (London, 2001), 124.
[4] T. J. Peterson and J. Van Til, 'Defining Characteristics of Civil Society', *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law*, 6.2 (2004). Available: <http://www.icnl.org/research/journal/vol6iss2/art_5.htm> [Accessed 19.11.12]
[5] R.V. Des Forges, 'States, Societies and Civil Societies in Chinese History' in T. Brook and B. Michael Frolic (eds.) *Civil Society in China* (New York, 1997), 68.

referring back to our earlier criteria, the ideas of 'community' and the 'common good'[6] resonate strongly with the culture of Confucianism, upon which China is partly founded. However, as China moved away from the ideas of Confucianism and towards Chinese Communism, these concepts of freely associating community have become harder for citizens to fulfil. In light of this, there are clear historical precedents for a Chinese sympathy with the values of civil society.

Scholars have also pointed out the role of *dazibao* (big character posters) which were the 'medium of choice for expressing political dissent' in the pre-digital period.[7] These large posters were placed in prominent areas and allowed citizens to openly criticise the state with a certain element of anonymity. In fact the practise created a voice for citizens in the pre-digital period similar to that currently being cultivated by the Internet. As Sheng puts it '*dazibao* reach a relatively wide audience at minimum costs and provide some anonymity for the writer. Because of these unique characteristics *dazibao* represents one of the few effective vestiges of free speech that may be used to voice political dissent in China'.[8] This could easily be a contemporary description of the impact of the digital revolution; it has created a space for Chinese voices. These posters were subsequently banned as the CCP became uncomfortable with their critical messages; however, the digital revolution has gone some way to reviving these lost avenues of political engagement which once existed in China.

Not only is the concept of civil society inherently Western, it is also fundamentally linked with the liberal democratic model; a model to which China clearly does not subscribe. Therefore, discussions of China in relation to civil society are often vastly preoccupied with China's prospects for democratisation and the part that the digital revolution will play in this process. MacKinnon explicitly links these two ideas in the context of the emergence of the Internet in China: 'the Internet may also be enabling the development of "civil society" and public discourse around policy that could make gradual evolution toward democracy more likely over the long run'.[9] In fact, many scholars would argue that a democratic state and a strong civil society are inextricably linked and without one there is no hope of the other. By this measure China is neither democratic nor in possession of a developed civil society; it could be argued, however, that elements of a civil society are currently *developing* in China. In addition, scholars such as Thornton have questioned the 'pervasive myth […] the Internet is a powerful force for democracy', and the 'deeply held suspicion that attempts to restrict full

[6] Peterson & Van Til, 'The Defining Characteristics of Civil Society'.
[7] Esaray & Qiang, 'Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere', 761.
[8] H. Sheng, 'Big Character Posters in China: A Historical Survey' *Journal of Chinese Law*, 4 (1990), 234.
[9] R. MacKinnon, 'Flatter World and Thicker Walls? Blogs, Censorship and Civic Discourse in China', *Public Choice*, 134 (2008), 34.

access to the web slow inevitable progress towards political liberalization'.[10] She goes on to comment that 'the link between democracy, political liberalization, and the Internet is tenuous at best'.[11] If this link is far from concrete, as Thornton suggests, then there is infinitely more room for discussing the development of civil society in China without needing to continually refer to the likelihood of its eventual democratisation.

THE INTERNET: THE CCP AND ITS 'NETIZENS'

In light of these discussions about the nature of civil society, we can now begin to consider the impact which the digital revolution may be having on its development. Discussions of the digital revolution have become synonymous with the Internet. This is certainly the largest component of the new digital age but it is not the only one. Alongside the Internet there is also the rise of digital film and photography which has expanded the public's capability to capture, and more importantly share, images. Therefore with reference to the term 'digital revolution', this article will discuss both the rise of the Internet and associated technologies, such as social media and digital imagery. The Internet is at the core of the digital revolution but all of these technologies have the potential to offer advances in the development of civil society and citizen empowerment.

As previously noted, the ways in which the Chinese Communist Party restricts civil society are many and varied; strict government regulation of NGO activity, media censorship, Internet filtering and the widespread presence of so-called 'cybercops' being just a few of these concerns. Of these elements, the CCP's monitoring and censorship of the Internet will be our main area of scrutiny. The OpenNet Initiative, which assesses the extent to which different countries and regions offer open access to the Internet, has called the regime in China 'one of the most pervasive and sophisticated regimes of Internet filtering and information control in the world'. [12] This is demonstrated by the sheer number of aforementioned 'cybercops'. Up to 30,000 full time cybercops operate in China to 'selectively block foreign news sites and terminate domestic sites publishing politically sensitive information'.[13] In spite of this, the state and its citizens have both taken advantage of the benefits that the digital revolution has to offer.

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[10] P. Thornton, 'Censorship and Surveillance in Chinese Cyberspace: Beyond the 'Great Firewall'' in (eds) P. Gries & S. Rosen, *Chinese Politics: State, Society and the Market* (New York, 2010), 182.
[11] *Ibid*.
[12] OpenNet Initiative, *Country Profile: China* (Online, 2012). Available: <http://opennet.net/research/profiles/china-including-hong-kong>, 1 [Accessed 3.12.12]
[13] J. Chung, 'Comparing Online Activities in China and South Korea: The Internet and the Political Regime' *Asian Survey*, 48 (2008), 735.

China's phenomenal economic growth is a fantastic example of the unique way China can make seemingly incongruous ideas compatible with its own brand of socialism. The success of China's market reform strategy is in itself remarkable but perhaps more so is the construction of a "market economy with Chinese characteristics". This hybrid system represents the way in which China has managed to glean the powerful political and economic benefits of a system (capitalism) which it publicly distances itself from. The CCP has embraced the Internet with just this selective vision, intending to utilise it for its own ends. It quickly became obvious to Chinese leadership that the rise of the Internet and associated technologies should not be ignored simply due to fears of Western encroachment. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt from the *People's Daily,* the official paper of the Chinese State: 'as long as we use more ways of properly looking at the Internet, we can make use of the best parts, we can go for the good and stay away from the bad and we use it for our purposes, then we can turn it around on them'.[14] Given the inherent nationalist bias of the paper, this ominous reference to 'them' presumably refers to a perceived Western opposition.

The CCP are not the only ones who recognised the transformative potential of the Internet; grand predictions were made about the impact that the digital revolution could have in China. Among these is the now well-known piece by *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristof, in which he mused that 'the Chinese communist party […] may finally have met its match - the Internet […] the Chinese leadership is digging the Communist Party's grave, by giving the Chinese people broadband'.[15] This prediction has not come to fruition as of yet, despite Chinese net users measured at 513 million, far outstripping numbers in the United States.[16] Therefore the idea of the Internet being 'associated with democratic political communication'[17] is put under direct scrutiny once again. Despite the bleak picture of censorship painted by commentators such as Kristof, the Internet has proved to be a vibrant community in which 'it is misleading to imagine that Chinese netizens have been paralyzed or silenced by the operation of Chinese censors'.[18] Despite this vast number of internet users it must also be noted that most people in China still do not have access to the internet, amounting to a penetration rate of less than 40%.[19]

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[14] MacKinnon, 'Flatter World and Thicker Walls?', 33.
[15] N. Kristof, 'Death by a Thousand Blogs' in *The New York Times* (Online, 2005) Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/24/opinion/24kristoff.html?_r=0> [Accessed 3.12.12]
[16] China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), *The 29th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*, 13. Available: <http://www1.cnnic.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201209/P020120904421720687608.pdf> [Accessed: 28.2.13]
[17] Rawnsley, 'The Media, Internet and Governance in China', 126.
[18] Thornton, *Beyond the 'Great Firewall',* 194
[19] CNNIC, *The 29th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*, 13.

Chinese netizens have utilised the Internet in a number of ways; one of the most prominent phenomenon is blogging. The sheer numbers of blogs and bloggers are striking, with 309 million users of the Chinese blogging site *Weibo* as of the end of December 2012.[20] So, what are these 300+ million users blogging and reading about? Unlike in the West, where many blogs have specialist topics or interests, most blogs in China vary in content and tend to reflect bloggers' personal thoughts and feelings on a variety of subjects. Bloggers do, however, use their online sphere to express criticisms, and Esaray and Qiang find that 'blogging has provided citizens of the People's Republic with a medium for making sophisticated critiques of the regime without encountering harsh repression'.[21] Through tactical use of language which bypasses the strict filters of the Internet censors, netizens have been able to question their government in a way that would be impossible in traditional print media. This is expressed by the netizens gathered at the 'first ever Chinese bloggers' conference in Shanghai', blogs are described as a place to 'speak the truth and hear the truth' and as a way to 'share information freely'.[22] Chinese bloggers clearly feel that the Internet has enhanced possibilities for open discourse in China.

A prime example of the way blogging has been used to voice carefully-worded political resistance is the case of Huang Laoxie. Huang wrote an extensive blog post which criticized 'the ineffectiveness and rubber-stamp tendencies of China's largest representative bodies'. If impressions of the 'Great Firewall' are to be believed, this is surely the type of content which censors would seize upon immediately.[23] In reality, Huang's clever use of diverting language meant that he could phrase the criticism in a way which made it difficult for censors to deem it subversive. For example, he preceded his criticism with the following disclaimer 'This site has a lot of content that is not factually reliable. My intention is to trick you and tease you'.[24] The awareness of censorship shown on Huang's part, and on the part of netizens who undoubtedly understood his thinly veiled message, shows how 'publics and counter-publics in Chinese cyberspace remain fully cognizant of the censorship and surveillance to which they are subjected on the web'.[25] This is just one example of many which show netizens working alongside the strict censorship guidelines while still voicing their concerns.

It is therefore clear that the Internet has fostered avenues of political engagement that would be impossible in other forms, such as print media. While using the Western framework of

[20] CNNIC, *The 31st Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* (Online, 2013) Available: http://www1.cnnic.cn/AU/MediaC/rdxw/hotnews/201302/t20130222_38848.htm [Accessed 28.2.13]
[21] Esaray & Qiang, 'Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere', 752.
[22] MacKinnon, 'Flatter World and Thicker Walls?', 42.
[23] Esaray & Qiang, 'Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere', 762.
[24] *Ibid*., 763.
[25] Thornton, 'Censorship and Surveillance in Chinese Cyberspace', 190.

civil society outlined earlier, these developments represent limited progress toward the ideal of 'open, public decision making for all community members'[26], particularly given the low internet penetration rate we discussed earlier, although this is rising all the time. However, as Esaray and Qiang point out, 'unlike Westerners, who commonly compare freedom of speech in China to freedom of speech in democracies, Chinese bloggers compare their present freedom to the more restricted environment they encountered in the past'.[27] This is perhaps the more 'culturally attuned' idea of civil society which was alluded to earlier; in these terms there have been significant steps forward for Chinese netizens in realising a more active, vocal and empowered role in their political sphere.

SOCIAL UNREST AND THE DIGITAL AGE

So far we have discussed the online ramifications of increased political engagement, but what are the offline consequences? One of the key characteristics of a developed civil society is the right to organise and protest; a right which the CCP does not allow. The effect of the digital revolution on the way citizens raise their concerns verbally has been profound, but what is the effect on the way citizens raise their concerns in a physical sense (that is, through protest, social unrest and civil action)? This section will explore its impact in two forms: the effect that the Internet has had in bringing about social unrest, and the role it plays in recording and disseminating the results of social unrest. These effects will be investigated through two compelling case studies: the 2009 Urumqi riots in Xinjiang province, and the emergence of the *renrou sousuo yinqing* phenomenon*,* literally, and somewhat morbidly, translated as the 'human flesh search engine' effect.[28] The CCP's reaction to these events will also be explored.

In 2009, riots exploded in Urumqi between Han Chinese and Uighur Muslim Chinese in the aftermath of a brawl between workers from both groups at a toy factory.[29] This was one in a sequence of clashes between the two groups; however this was the most violent yet - leaving up to 140 dead and 1,400 in police custody. There was an immense online reaction to the unfolding violence: 'pictures, videos and updates from Urumqi poured onto social networking and image sharing websites such as Twitter, YouTube and Flickr'.[30] In response to this the CCP shut down internet access almost immediately and removed details of the unrest from

[26] Peterson & Van Til, 'Defining Characteristics of Civil Society'.
[27] Esaray and Qiang, 'Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere', 770.
[28] Thornton, 'Censorship and Surveillance in Chinese Cyberspace', 191.
[29] Anon., 'Riots Engulf Chinese Uiguhr City', *BBC News* (Online, 2009) Available: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/8137824.stm> [Accessed 4.12.12]
[30] Anon., 'China riots: Twitter and YouTube frustrate "censorship attempts"'. *Telegraph Online* (2009). Available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/5756766/China-riots-Twitter-and YouTube-frustrate-censorship-attempts.html#> [Accessed 3.12.12]

websites, while the official response to the rioting was to blame exiled Uighur separatists.[31] There is historical precedence for this type of behaviour from the CCP; access to Bulletin Board Services[32] 'was suspended in 1997 after Deng Xiao-Ping's death, as a precaution to prevent anything inappropriate being said online'.[33] The internet blackout and obvious propaganda which followed the Urumqi riots was rejected by many Chinese netizens and so they set about flooding the internet with their images, videos and stories. Despite the internet blackout, this information seeped into the wider international sphere.

As this blackout period began it became clear that web users outside of China were making a concerted effort to store and archive these stories[34], ensuring that the experiences of those on the ground were shared by the international community. The reposting of stories and pictures on servers outside China, effectively logging them beyond the reach of the CCP, gave the voices of those in Urumqi power and volume. In this case, the global connections created by the Internet allowed those outside the country, particularly in 'The West', to draw on their own perceptions of civil society, free speech and protest, and apply them to China. Interestingly, the CCP did not cut off coverage of the riots entirely. Quite the opposite in fact; foreign journalists were invited to cover the story.[35] However, it quickly became clear that 'journalists were confined to the city of Urumqi and permitted to cover violence instigated by Uighur citizens only'.[36] In light of this, capturing voices and stories at their source from those involved becomes all the more important.

This dissemination of information was fuelled by public disgust at the violence, the heavy-handed police intervention in the rioting and the subsequent effort to cover-up these interventions; the response being to utilise digital media and the Internet to disseminate the real story of the riots. There is also an interesting clash here between online and offline media as the *Telegraph* article points out: 'state-run China Central Television (CCTV) showed its first images of the violence just before midday Monday - more than 12 hours after the footage began circulating on the Internet'.[37] However, any hope of this citizen-generated information informing domestic media is halted by central government legislation, which forbids state media from referencing user-generated online content and is designed to 'put constraints on

[31] B. Blanchard, 'China tightens Web screws after Xinjiang riot'. *Reuters* (2009). Available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/07/06/us-china-xinjiang-Internet-idUSTRE5651K420090706> [Accessed 3.12.12]
[32] BBS was an early type of public internet forum.
[33] S. Li, 'The Online Public Space and Popular Ethos in China', *Media, Culture and Society*, 32 (2010), 69.
[34] Anon., 'China Riots', *Telegraph Online*
[35] Anon., 'Riots in Xinjiang: Is China Fraying?', *The Economist* (2009) Available at: <http://www.economist.com/node/13988479> [Accessed 26.2.12]
[36] OpenNet, *Country Profile: China*, 274.
[37] Anon., 'China Riots', *Telegraph Online*

the publishing industry and news media to separate the online and offline public discussion space'.[38] It is clear to see from the events surrounding the Urumqi riots, the effect which the digital revolution has had on the dissemination of information relating to social unrest.

The digital revolution has not only affected the way in which events are reported but has also begun to bring about cases of civil action in and of itself. The so-called 'human flesh search engine' is a fairly recent phenomenon, in which 'thousands of volunteer cyber-vigilantes unite to expose the personal details of perceived evildoers and publish them on the Web'.[39] This practice exudes a sense of social justice, as netizens seek to right perceived wrongs in their society. Although the first victims of this public shaming were of little political significance, netizens have gone on to tackle political figures such as the then Party Secretary of the Shenzhen Maritime Administration, Lin Jiaxiang. His conduct in a restaurant (he grabbed a young girl by the neck and allegedly attempted to molest her) and his subsequent arrogant outburst in his own defence, were captured on video and posted on YouTube. The online reaction to this was explosive; he was quickly identified, reported, and subsequently fired, with a promise that he would also be 'severely punished'.[40] The power exerted here by an angry Chinese online community is clearly demonstrated.

In the West, where privacy laws are rigorous and the publication of personal details without permission is illegal, these demonstrations of public agency can seem to be 'the online equivalent of lynch mobs'.[41] Nevertheless, in the Chinese context, despite some fairly extreme cases, these expressions allow netizens to actively hold to account those that govern them. Civil society is traditionally an important check on the accountability of those in power; the Internet is currently supporting this process in China. Li, by contrast, is less convinced by this theory. His views on the state of China's online public sphere are rather more pessimistic: 'the online sphere was transformed from a site encouraging civic virtue to a market place encouraging sensational performance and voyeuristic peeping'.[42] It seems clear from these case studies, however, that the Internet is offering netizens more than the opportunity for 'voyeuristic peeping'. The digital revolution has advanced citizens' possibilities for voicing their concerns, which is a key requirement of civil society, in both online and offline scenarios. Digital mobilisation following the social unrest in Urumqi allowed a light to be shone on the injustices perpetrated there. Mobilisation is the key here: the digital revolution in

[38] Li, 'The Online Public Space and Popular Ethos in China', 71.
[39] C. O'Brien, 'The Human Flesh Search Engine', *Forbes* (Online, 2008) Available: <http://www.forbes.com/2008/11/21/human-flesh-search-tech-identity08-cx_cb_1121obrien.html> [Accessed 4.12.12]
[40] Thornton, 'Censorship and Surveillance in Chinese Cyberspace', 192.
[41] O'Brien, 'Human Flesh Search Engine', *Forbes*
[42] Li, 'The Online Public Space and Popular Ethos in China', 73.

these cases has allowed for citizens to mobilise both physically and intellectually against perceived wrongdoing in both the public and political spheres. The huge numbers of people taking part online in these mobilisations also offers a certain amount of protection from government pressure.

CONCLUSION

Any analysis of Chinese society through a strictly Western lens of civil society would be fairly futile. Rigid conceptions of civil society which are linked only to the likelihood of democratisation fail to appreciate the subtleties of the Chinese public sphere. They also ignore pre-existing qualities of Chinese society which resemble Western democratic norms. This article has sought to create an idea of civil society which draws on these existing definitions, while integrating uniquely Chinese concepts; this has proven to be a much more rewarding approach. Using a collaborative definition such as this reveals the ways in which the digital revolution has most definitely enhanced prospects for the empowerment of citizens, both online and offline. Despite extensive and pervasive censoring, the online sphere in China has much to offer its netizens. The world of blogging has allowed previously unprecedented levels of self-expression and even politically sensitive views can be voiced if done so with care.

Western critics are often quick to dismiss this freedom because of the undisputable control which the CCP exerts over the Internet. Although much of this criticism is justified, it often overlooks the progress that this freedom represents in a Chinese context. This freedom is also expressed in the reaction to and creation of, social unrest and civil action respectively. In these spheres, the digital revolution has allowed the Chinese public to hold their leaders and each other to an enhanced level of accountability – a trait which even Western critics must surely appreciate. All of these concepts combine to create a picture of Chinese civil society which is certainly much richer, more diverse and more able to hold its leaders to account, thanks to the advent of the digital revolution.

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