



Why the Internet (still) has not brought about a “Weibo Revolution” in China

By Yuezhi Zhao

October 1, 2014 marked 65 years since the founding of the People’s Republic of China. For the past 35 of those years, China has transformed itself by integrating into the global market system and embracing the newest information technologies. These same information technologies – especially transnational satellite television in the 1990s and social media in the early 2010s – are seen as helping bring about dramatic changes in other parts of the world, namely, the “Twitter Revolutions” that were part of the Arab Spring.

With the flurry of images of mass demonstrations in Hong Kong protesting the Chinese National Peoples’ Congress’ limiting of their choice in Hong Kong’s 2017 leadership elections, the question arises: to what extent new information technologies are playing a role in this “Umbrella Revolution.” Are they fueling calls for political change, and will that ignite a “Twitter Revolution” in mainland China?

Modern China Goes Online

The ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has not resisted these technologies despite their potentially destabilizing power. In fact, it has made information technology a strategic priority in order to promote business investment and social modernization. Chinese telecommunications and IT firms such as China Mobile and Huawei have grown rapidly, and China-based Internet companies Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent have become formidable global IT powerhouses. Meanwhile, Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of Twitter) and WeChat have fed the obsession of China’s massive online population with the latest IT gadgets and social media platforms. As of June 2014, China’s the online population had grown to 632 million, the world’s largest, with an Internet penetration rate of 46.9%.

Meanwhile, forces outside and within China have tried to capitalize on the power of information technologies to encourage regime change. For example, U.S.-based and anti-CCP websites such as Boxu.com and the Chinese-language websites of the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* have made it their mission to provide the Chinese public with alternatives to state-controlled media, even as Western IT companies such as Cisco helped the Chinese government build its infamous “Great Fire Wall of China” to filter out unwanted information flows into China. In addition, anti-censorship software has been developed to assist technology-savvy Chinese netizens to evade censorship. And Hilary Clinton, while serving as U.S. Secretary of the State (2009-13), targeted her “Internet freedom” campaign at China. Inside China, liberal intellectuals and prominent bloggers including journalists at *Southern Weekend*, a media



outlet that is party-controlled but liberally-oriented, have been vocal and persistent in advocating for freedom of the press, the rule of law, and constitutionalism. In Hong Kong, it is clear that pro-democracy forces are closely linked with transnational communication networks.

For China watchers in the West, the country's political trajectory must seem perplexing, especially for those whose political imaginations remain shaped by the iconic "man vs. tank" image from 1989 and the desire to see a "big bang" transition to Western-style liberal democracy. What explains why China has not had some version of a "Twitter Revolution"?

Social Media in the Chinese Context

One reason is that the CCP is increasingly adept at harnessing information technologies, including social media platforms, to reestablish its legitimacy among the Chinese population. Instead of being undermined by an information technology revolution, the Chinese state seems to have gained the upper-hand in taming it to sustain its rule and boost its legitimacy.

A second reason is that social media by itself is not enough to bring about such profound change. Egyptians used mobile phones and Internet services such as Facebook and Twitter to organize protests against Mubarak in the initial phase of Arab Spring. But they also used other forms of social mobilization and communication: the self-organization activities of established groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, middle-class students and women; labour mobilization; and traditional forms of communication, such as flyers.

Third, we need to take a longer historical view of social change in China. That means not focusing only on the post-Mao era (i.e. after 1976), and appreciating the legacies of the 1949 Chinese Communist Revolution. The Revolution was bloody and nationalistic, but it was also a genuine social revolution with land reform, freedom from foreign domination, and freedom from exploitation by domestic imperialists, landlords and 'bureaucratic capitalists.' Today, the CCP, despite signs of its decay and widespread corruption, is still a formidable political organization with deep social penetration.

Fourth, although post-Mao economic reforms are capitalistic, they are undertaken using the official rhetoric of building "socialism with Chinese characteristics," even though this may sound hollow, tortured, even self-contradictory. Bo Xilai, the now jailed former CCP Chongqing boss, re-articulated the CCP's communist ideology and reclaimed its "red" historical legacies in order to win popular support in pursuit of his political ambitions. And President Xi Jinping, after coming to power in late 2012, quickly reaffirmed the reform era's continuity with the Mao era, characterizing the former as part of China's search for a "socialist path."



There is no parallel in other countries for the CCP's securing of the "commanding heights" of the ideological realm and its management of the structure and content of China's media and Internet system. There is no doubt that censorship and negative campaigns have helped contain the liberal democratic imagination in China. At the same time, the CCP's pro-active ideological work has instilled a sense of national purpose and even a moral direction for a population caught in a process of dramatic social change. Such ideological frameworks have included realizing the "four modernizations" in the early reform period, Deng Xiaoping's more pragmatic goal of building a "well-off society," and Xi Jinping's grander and more recent objective of fulfilling the "China Dream." Few people buy the ideological basis of these campaigns, but we should not dismiss their effectiveness as technologies of governance.

A fifth reason that information technologies in China have not led to a "Weibo revolution" has to do with the actual political, ideological, and cultural content of online communication in China. For example, the Internet in China is actually highly commercialized and entertainment-driven. When it comes to the more political and ideological content, we must recognize that China's intellectuals and urban middle class followers, because they usually speak in the language of the Western media, have been disproportionately visible to the Western public. Therefore, their messages have been amplified at the expense of a fuller spectrum of Chinese voices and a more complex web of social communication practices, in both their online and offline dimensions.

China, the West, and the Left

China's intellectual and ideological landscape has undergone a significant transformation in recent decades. Along with the rise of an academic "new left" and its challenge to Western liberal democratic ideology, neo-Maoism and other leftist critiques of the reform program at the grassroots level have also emerged. Many of these critiques have been advanced on behalf of China's most disadvantaged working classes or other disenfranchised social groups such as displaced farmers. In fact, contrary to Western assumptions that the voices that get censored are generally pro-Western and pro-capitalist, radical neo-Maoist websites and the broader online left, including nascent working class communication forums, have also often been the targets of CCP censorship. This was most obvious in early 2012, when the CCP was dealing with the profound political crisis triggered by Bo Xilai's downfall. In some instances the CCP's censorship regime curtailed some of the most powerful anti-American and anti-imperialist online voices. One notable example was *Silent Contest*, a PLA documentary warning of American efforts to bring about an East bloc-style regime change in China, that debuted on the Chinese Internet in late 2013 and was blocked by the Chinese state's Internet censors.

Such actions are part of China's broader "stability maintenance" regime, which now reportedly has a larger budget than its national defense spending. Nevertheless,



China's various social forces have struggled for social justice with or without the Internet. The CCP has made adjustments at almost every step. For example, pro-market reformers' ambitious program of urbanization and rural land privatization has been subjected to a visible process of redefinition because of the rural population's resistance and divisions among the elite. Instead of a "big bang" revolution led by students and urban intellectuals, the post-1989 period has been characterized by the micro-politics of everyday social struggles. These struggles have been waged by laid-off state enterprise workers in China's industrial heartlands, exploited migrant workers, and farmers protesting against land grabs and environmental degradation.

The more the West is seen as exploiting these struggles, promoting democracy, or trying to contain China, the more the Chinese population will rally behind the CCP-led state. Just as some have tried to compel the CCP to fulfill its promise of "serving the people" by reigning in corrupt local officials and cracking down on exploitative business owners, nationalistic social forces are urging the CCP to uphold its promise to defend China's national interest. It is not just the CCP that fans the flames of Chinese nationalism; overseas Chinese rallied in front of CNN's New York office to protest its anti-China biases as early as 2008, and former American ambassador Jon Huntsman got "caught" attending at a potential "Jasmine revolution" site in Beijing in 2011 by Chinese netizens. More recently, the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" strategy has provoked a new level of nationalist vigilance in China.

Looking into China's Online Future

Rather than an East European or Arab style "Weibo Revolution" from the bottom up or outside in, one of the most spectacular and engrossing recent Chinese political dramas turned out to be the Weibo-transmitted trial of Bo Xilai in August 2013. In 2014, the world has witnessed the heavily mediated crackdown on online rumor mongers, media celebrities, and above all, corrupted officials as prominent as former CCP Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang. Among other things, the micro-blogged Bo Xilai trial event demonstrates how the CCP has been able to not only survive yet another divisive internal power struggle, but also harness the power of the newest and most popular social media platform to sustain its rule. Since it came to power in 2012, the Xi Jinping leadership has not only revived Mao's "mass line" and carried out a massive anti-corruption campaign to reestablish the CCP's credibility among the Chinese public, but also put great emphasis on strengthening the party-state's governmental capabilities.

Just as the CCP learned lessons from the collapse of Eastern bloc governments and authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, it has also benefited ideologically from the 2008 global financial crisis that originated on Wall Street. Liberal democracy may still be the political "holy grail" for many Chinese, but the financial crisis exposed neoliberal financial capitalism's excesses and the crisis-ridden nature of the global market system. Just as news about the 2008 financial crisis, the Occupy



Movement, and the Snowden revelations have confirmed long-standing critiques of the limits of capitalism and American-style democracy, the political instabilities and social upheavals in post-“Twitter Revolution” countries such as Egypt also demonstrated that regime change alone does not necessarily bring real social progress, or democracy in any substantive sense. Consequently, the more the CCP is able to keep the Chinese economy going and sustain its rule in the name of building Chinese socialism, the lesser the appeal of capitalism and liberal democracy.

In short, the explosive growth of information technology in China has not resulted in a Chinese-style “Twitter revolution,” or the “Weibo Revolution.” As the Xi Jinping leadership consolidates its power and tries to rally the Chinese population behind its search for a national developmental path that integrates political, economic, social, cultural, and ecological dimensions, it seems that liberal democracy will continue to evade China. This is not to say that the CCP will not face serious challenges to its rule in the years to come. It will, and the ongoing crisis in Hong Kong is one such challenge, but it is not likely to follow the democratization trajectory that historically we have come to expect.