

Impact of Internet on Chinese Authoritarian Rule During SARS
and Falun Gong Incidents

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INTRODUCTION

The booming of the Internet business in China makes clear to all that China now is one of the biggest Internet consuming markets. Besides its economic significance, this trend arouses a big concern on its political implications. As what Hughes says, “The study of Chinese politics can no longer be considered complete without an understanding of the social impact of the ICTs. (Hughes 2003a, 1) With the increasing of the Internet popularization in China, the study concerning the social and political impact of this new technology on the authoritarian state has grown accordingly. Though few books were published on this topic (e.g., Chase and Mulvenon 2002; Hughes 2003a), a huge number of articles from different perspective have been done on the political implications of Internet in China. Large parts of the literature examine the relationship between the Internet and Chinese political democratization, which covers the political participation (e.g. Hung 2003, 1-38), Chinese dissent use of the Internet (Chase and Mulvenon 2002) and state-society relations (e.g., Bman 1998, 255-72; Yang 2003, 453-75). Some concentrate on the strategic implications to the government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Shie 2004, 523-40). Others discuss the implication of the Internet to management (Hughes 2003b, 818-24). These arguments can be differentiated by their predictions to the future of Chinese politics under the influence of Internet. Optimistic arguments emphasize the enlarged civil society, the possible political liberty and transparency of the governmental administration brought by the Internet. Pessimistic ones view the Internet as a tool for the CCP’s authoritarian control. Some of them argue that it will be a threat to Chinese government since dissents will utilize the Internet to protest. Some scholars are standing in the middle and state that the implication of Internet to Chinese politics should be understood in particular historical context. The same technology has different social implications under different historical and social

conditions (Yang 2003, 455). Persuaded by this point of view, this paper selects two cases happened in the Internet era of China to explore the political implication of Internet to Chinese politics. This case selection is based on the consideration of some similar implications from these two issues.

Two big challenges to Chinese regime had emerged since the end of the 20th century, which have far-reaching implications to Chinese politics. The Falun Gong protest since 1999 is regarded as one of the biggest internal threats to the Chinese authoritarian regime. But it's the suppression of Falun Gong by the CCP government captured extensive attention of the international scholarship. As another internal crisis, SARS outbreak brought a lot of sociopolitical problems of the Chinese government to the front. It "presents a fascinating case study of what has and has not changed in state-society relations"(Gries and Rosen 2004).

At first sight, both of the two issues happened during the transition of Chinese leadership as not only crises but also tests to China's new fourth generation leadership. This leadership transition is considered as the most orderly transfer of CCP power ever. The new leadership has pledged to devote more resources to China's poor and unemployed populations, and is expected to change Chinese society in the future decade. Whether the new generation would adhere to Jiang Zemin's suppression policy on Falun Gong or sing another song is the concern of any observer. As to the SARS outbreak, the ability to manage it through without impairing China's reputation and economic development is very crucial to the image of the new generation leadership.

Secondly, Chinese government drew wrong conclusion of the reassertion of authority from these two crises. Some officials and scholars think SARS revealed one of the advantages of authoritarian regime that only the CCP can deal with the SARS outbreak collectively and

powerfully. Driven by this idea as well as some traditions in the history, Chinese government thinks the reassertion of authority is necessary to deal with these two issues. They centralized some policies that sponsored the freedom of civil society to some extent.

Furthermore, both of these two issues emerged at first as apolitical issues but later became political issues, even as political crises to Chinese authoritarian. Falun Gong event first aroused attentions as a religion or Qigong, then it transformed into a political challenge to Chinese government. The SARS outbreak emerged as a public security issue and then as a political issue.

Since both of them happened in the Internet era of China, none of them could stand away from the influences of the Internet, which is a popular communication tool in current China. The Internet played a significant role in these two issues. Moreover, the using of Internet by Chinese government showed us contrasting ways in these two crises. In the anti-Falun Gong campaign, Internet is employed by the Chinese government passively as a defense to Falun Gong's propaganda. During the SARS outbreak, in the early stages, the government blocked the information related to this strange epidemic. They realized later that the Internet offered an efficient platform to ameliorate the social unrest. Then Chinese government picked up this weapon actively and built up a nationalism Internet environment in China.

It is obvious that both cases are entangled with a broad range of societal and political issues. Considering the sensitivity of Falun Gong topic in China, most of the studies on Falun Gong issue are done by overseas scholars and international organizations, such as the Amnesty International (2000) and the Human Rights Watch in New York (2002). They focus on Chinese government's suppression policy and human rights problem. Some articles discuss the state-society relations in China through examining the religion policy of the CCP (e.g. Potter 2003, 317-37; Leung 2002, 761-84). Some scholars emphasize its negative impact on the reform

of the rule of law in China (e.g., Keith and Lin 2003, 623-42). Others explore the broad social implications brought by this issue (e.g., Chan 2004, 665-83). It shows scholars have unanimous opinions on the negative impact of Falun Gong issue on Chinese authoritarian regime. Since the SARS outbreak happened more recently, the postmortem discussions can be found in some roundtable symposia and articles published during SARS outbreak (Koh, Plant and Lee 2003, U.S. G. P. O. 2003a). These books and articles are mainly discussing the implication to the public security policy of China and lessons to other countries. Articles talking about the political implications of SARS are centered on the studies of the speech freedom and government transparency in China (U.S. G. P. O. 2003b). As to the impact of Internet in those two issues, few works have been done to analyze the political implications of Internet in these specific historical contexts in a comparative way. This paper is an attempt in this field. It tries to examine the impact of Internet to China's authoritarian rule through exploring its role in the SARS outbreak and Falun Gong event. Considering the timing of the emergences of these two cases, the main sources used by this paper are coming from some instant articles published in the main journals during and after the incidents. Some online source and data are also taken into account.

In the context of the Internet prevalence in China, this paper discusses the role of Internet in the SARS outbreak and Falun Gong emergence and the strategies of Chinese government in these two events. It continues to analyze the political implications to Chinese authoritarian rule through examining the Internet using in these two cases both in the government aspect and civil society side. Then it comes to the conclusion. The Internet is a double-edged sword, which brings the political democratization as well as the challenge to the Chinese authoritarian regime. However, by no means, Internet can bring democracy by itself. The bridge between the information and activities should be built up to enhance the democratization in China. It is

admitted that the popularization of Internet in China is a challenge to Chinese authoritarian rule. But rather than be a threat, the internet ameliorates other threats to Chinese political system and makes Chinese government administration effective. Internet works not as an invisible threat to Chinese authoritarian regime, but a tool used by Chinese government to assist their authoritarian rule.

INTERNET AND CENSORSHIP IN CHINA

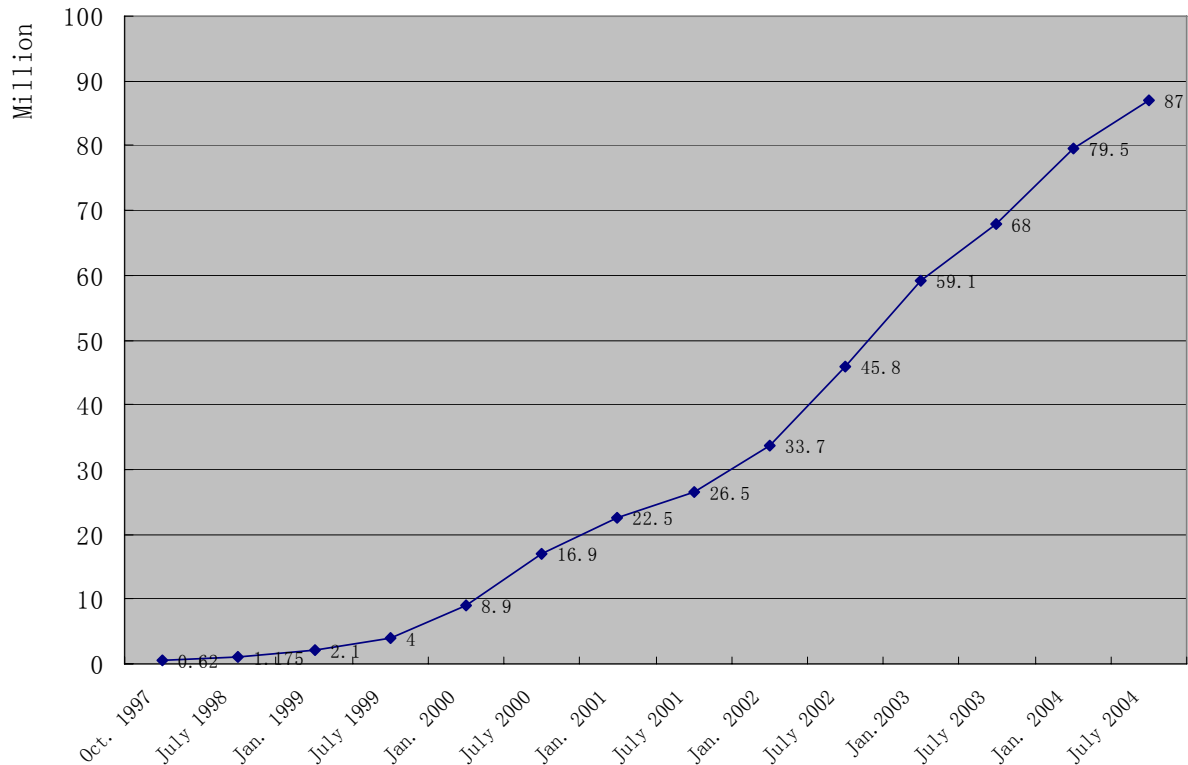
The Internet is designed around 1969 in the United States originally to allow the exchange of packets of bits between computers. For a long time, the use of the Internet is restricted to the exchange of scientific data between scientists and secure information within government. Then electronic mail and bulletin boards became increasingly popular among those with access to it. It was only in the 1990s that it has become a popular means of communication. Typically, when we talk about the state of Internet in China, two scenarios come into the picture. The first one is the revolutionary Internet scenario, in which Internet exists everywhere and represents the high technique development in China. The second one is a regulated Internet, even stifled Internet scenario where government controls the Internet with a heavy hand. The following part will cover these two scenarios by discussing the state of Internet use and government censorship in China.

Internet Use in China

The Internet connectivity in China was officially established in 1994. Since then, the growth of the Internet use has been phenomenal. In 1994, there were only about 10,000 Netizens in China. The China Internet Network Information Center organized in 1997 offers good information on the development of the Netizens in China through surveys conducted from 1997

to 2004¹. The rapid growth can be seen from the following graph. Internet users had reached 2.1 million by December 1998 and 87 million by December 2003.²

Figure 1. Development of Internet in China, 1997–2004



The growth of the Netizens came with the emergence of a certain Internet culture in China. Numerous Internet companies were founded in those years which had driven a so-called Internet Bubble Economy in China. Since 1999, Internet Companies had spread all over the big cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Those companies absorbed a large number of urban labor force including college graduates and some overseas graduates. It is a fashion in those days

¹ The China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) is founded in June 3rd, 1997. It is a non-profit management and service organization. It is under the supervision of the Chinese Academy of Science and the Ministry of Information and Infrastructure (MII).

² CNNIC defines Chinese Internet users as Chinese citizens who use the Internet for at Least an hour per week. Some scholars also use Netizen to call the Internet users. All the information on China's Internet Development in this paper comes from the 14 survey reports of the CNNIC since December 1997. Except for December 1997 and July 1998, there were two surveys each year in January and July, which surveyed the data by June and December in the former year respectively. More information can be found in the website of CNNIC: <http://www.cnnic.net.cn>.

for someone to have knowledge of Internet and work for the Internet business. Some overseas graduates from the Silicon Valley in the United States came back to China and became the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in the Internet company. During a certain period, the Internet Corporation was considered by the college student as the first choice after their graduation. It seems the Internet gained its position at one night in China.

The usage of Internet in China can be divided into two different ways as two-way communication and one-way communication. The two-way communication includes the information exchanges via E-mail, Internet chat rooms as well as bulletin boards. The one-way communication rely on the E-mail, website and web based journals. Both of these two communication ways have blossomed in China since late 1990s and imposed huge influences on Chinese society.

Online chat rooms run by large online media companies, such as SINA, SOHU, and NETEASE attracted tens of thousands of users at almost any given time of the day. A big market with millions of Internet users encouraged the developing of instant message service. Tencent Company is a successful case. Tencent's instant messaging service platform, "QQ," was formally launched in Feb 1999. After years of strong business growth, on July 16, 2004, Tencent Holdings Limited went public on the main board of Hong Kong Stock Exchange³. This huge Chinese Internet market also attracted big multinational corporations to introduce their instant message service into China. The Messenger developed by the Microsoft became very popular software for Netizens, particularly for those having good education background. On the other hand, the development of information infrastructure in China speeded up the popularization of Internet in ordinary Chinese household. Starting from a very low base, the information infrastructure system

³ The website of Tencent: <http://www.tencent.com>.

had achieved a surprising progress since the late 1990s. By the end of 1998, a high-speed national grid of information superhighways was already in place, linking together all provinces and major cities. The national grid facilitated the countrywide communication among citizens. More amazingly, Chinese Internet users have increased to 31.1 million by the December of 2003. Some estimate that China will overtake countries such as Germany, Britain and South Korea to become the world's third largest broadband market as soon as the year 2006, trailing only the United States and Japan (e.g., Dai 2003, 17).

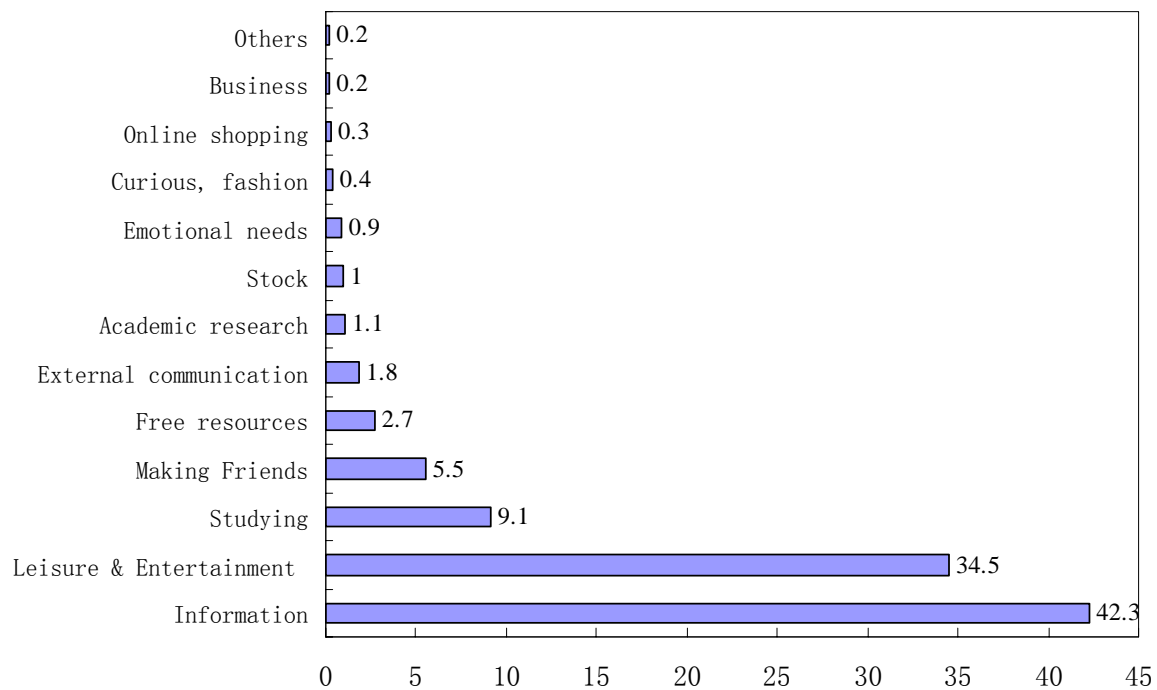
A significant phenomenon in this development is the Internet popularization in universities. In September of 2000, the first Internet Exchange Center of DRAGONTAP was founded in Qinghua University, next in Beijing University. Through the DRAGIBTAP, the Chinese Internet was connected with some international academic website⁴. This development implicated some liberal political factors in Chinese society since the universities are deemed as the place of free speech and debate in China, especially in Beijing University and Qinghua University. The bulletin boards of these two universities, the Beida Unknown BBS (Beida Wei Ming BBS), Yi Ta Hu Tu BBS and Shui Mu Qing Hua BBS became the main battleground on political issues, including Falun Gong and SARS.

However, evidences show that the Internet in China did not exert its great potential as what scholars expect. Historically speaking, when China was in the so-called Internet Bubble Economy in the beginning of the 21-century, the target of the Internet company is not online business, nor free speech field. The main concern for them is the click ratio which is related with advertisement income. On the other hand, the main purpose of Internet surfing for ordinary people is different from the Western countries. The data collected in the surveys revealed the

⁴ "Memorabilia of Internet Development in China, 2000-2001", Zhong Guo Hu Lian Wang Fazhan Dashi Ji, from CCNIC's website.

behavioral pattern of Chinese Netizen. As showing in the following figure, the first purpose of Internet surfing for the users is to obtain information⁵. The second choice is for leisure and entertainment. The big difference from western countries is the online shopping and E-business. Only .3 percent of the interviewees chose online shopping as their main purposes of the Internet surfing. Communication only takes up 1.8 percent, that is to say only a small part of people use Internet as a communication tool with others.

Figure 2. The Main Purpose of Internet Use



The Role of Government

The Chinese authoritarian government plays an important role in the development of the information and communication technologies in China. Historically speaking, government policies and programs to promote ICTs in the context of general scientific and technological modernization were initiated in China in the mid-1980s. The so-called “863” program includes

⁵ All the information is translated from The 14th Chinese Internet Report, July 2004, CNNIC. (Zhong Guo Hulianwang Xinxi Zhong Xin Di Shisi Ci Hulianwang Diaocha Baogao).

the goal of promoting excellence in scientific research and the building of a national capacity in high technologies that can compete with the western industrialized countries. Under this context, leading universities and institutions gained abundant funds to the ICTs research. Attracted by the economic, scientific, and educational potential of this modern communication medium, the Deng leadership formulated plans to connect China with the Internet, which was envisioned as becoming integral to the functioning of a modern economy. Government officials expected that their investment in computers, modems, and high-speed connections would permit China to share information freely and enable the country to fully join in the worldwide sharing of information and high technology (Bman 1998, 263). The closest one is the Tenth Five-Year Plan, which makes the informatisation of the national economy and society a strategic priority.

Besides these national supported projects and policy priority on Internet development, the Chinese government founded an individual organization, the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) to manage Internet addresses, domain names and network resource directories and provide related information services. It is administratively operated by the Computers Network Information Center of the Chinese Academy of Science (CAS), but also reports to the Ministry of Information Industry.

It is undeniable that the prevalence of Internet in China has been assisted by Chinese government through official encouragement and policy supports.

Internet Censorship

However, the moderate policy of Chinese government to the Internet had declined since mid-1995. In 1995, the development of the Internet was placed under the control of four government agencies. These four major agencies are responsible for the control of the complete international Internet traffic in China. They are maintained by the Chinese State Education

Commission (SEC), the Chinese Academy of Science (CAS), the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication (MPT), and the Ministry of Electronics Industry (MEI). All these four networks belong directly to the State Council and report to the Party Central Committee. Besides these four networks, other state agencies are also involved in the administration of the Internet. The security agencies have set up special departments throughout the country for monitoring the Internet. According to the report by the Reporters Without Borders Organization, whether state or privately-owned, news sites such as sina.com.cn, xinhuanet.com, yahoo.com.cn and tom.com have set up arrays of filters that enable them to systematically screen out messages containing words banned by the authorities. The moderators of discussion forums have the job of ridding the site of messages that do not conform to the rules set by the authorities on news content. Sites can also exclude an Internet user deemed as “not politically correct” or too vulgar. Finally, teams have been established within the public security department to monitor “subversive” elements using the Internet in China. It is estimated that approximately 30,000 persons are employed in this gigantic apparatus of monitoring and censorship.⁶

Numerous regulations were introduced by the Chinese government to control the Internet. On 1 February 1996, the former Premier Li Peng signed China’s first Internet regulations, the “Provisional Directive on the Management of International Connections by Computer Information Networks in The PRC”⁷. Since then, there has been at least one new regulation passed each year to adapt to the changing Internet controlling needs.

Western researchers have documented in detail the multiple methods through which Internet activity is restricted in China (Rand 2002). Generally speaking, the Chinese government implemented a number of measures in its attempts to assert its authority over the spread and use

⁶ “Living Dangerously on the Net”, Reporters Without Borders, <http://www.rsf.org>.

⁷ See website of the CNNIC.

of the Internet. The main measures include: organizing the infrastructure controlling the Internet Service providers (ISPs) and Internet Content Providers (ICPs), flooding the Net with approved sites, blocking or censoring of Internet content, regulating public Internet outlets, and encouraging self-censorship or punishing those who do not have self-censorship system (Shie 2004, 532). Among those measures, the most far-reaching control is the requirement that each and every web-user, whether individual or service provider or sponsor of electronic bulletin boards or chat rooms, is responsible for their actions online and for any content they access and Send. They actualized this regulation by tracking user's IP addresses.

Besides these official regulations and laws on Internet controls, the information from insiders shows that the CCP have some unofficial ways to carry out its censorship on Internet. For example, since 2000, the Central Publicity Department of CCP (formerly Propaganda Department) has changed to make announcements of speech control by telephone or oral announcement, which has the special Chinese name known as the Tong Qi Hui or Chun Feng Hui. The differences between these two different meetings lie on the different aims. The former one is used to set the basic tone to the reports on incoming affairs. The later one is to deliver the new regulation on specific issues. No document will be solicited in these two meetings, which is thought as one advantage of this kind of speech control.

Based on the discussion above, two general scenarios are presented in China's Internet actuality. The development and censorship coexist. When the Chinese citizen extolled the revolutionary Internet, they are experiencing the strict censorship at the same time.

THE ROLE OF INTERNET IN FALUN GONG INCIDENT AND SARS OUTBREAK

As two momentous incidents happened in the Internet ear of China, the Falun Gong event and the SARS outbreak were influenced by this popular communication tool. Nevertheless, they are

not affected passively by the Internet. One of the significant characteristics is the Internet is utilized by the main actors in these two incidents to facilitate their purposes, including Falun Gong Organization, Chinese Government and Chinese citizen. The following part will discuss the Internet use in these two incidents in the two-way and one-way communication means including the strategies from both civil society and government sides.

The Internet in Falun Gong Incident

Li Hongzhi, a civil servant, founded Falun Gong in 1992. At first glance, the organization appears similar to hundreds of groups in China that practice qigong, a traditional system of exercise and healing. Falun Gong came to national and global attention first on April 25, 1999, when around 10,000 Falun Gong practitioners gathered outside the Zhongnanhai. However, what surprised the Chinese government and the CCP is not the demonstration itself, but the underground organization revealed by this incident. By all accounts, the Chinese government had no foreknowledge of the demonstration, which was coordinated through the use of the Internet and wireless telephone. The 4.25 Incident aroused the attention of Chinese government to notice the influences of Internet usage by dissenters.

For Falun Gong, email is perhaps the most vital communication medium offered by the Internet. When Li Hongzhi moved to the United States, Falun Gong set up email lists to facilitate communication between followers in the United States, and between followers outside China and inside China. The movement reportedly used email to coordinate the April 1999 gathering outside Zhongnanhai Chinese government and the CCP headquarters in Beijing. Falun Gong also reportedly used email to set up a secret press conference in Beijing to tell the world about police beating s of detained members (Echholm 1999). After Li's moving into the United States, all of his new articles have been disseminated via the group's primary email list to the most possible

large range of his followers. As a two-way communication medium, email plays the crucial role in Falun Gong's organizations, information delivery and leading by Master Li. Besides Email, Falun Gong followers use multiple Internet chatting software includes Tencent QQ, MSN and Yahoo! Messenger to disseminate their information on conferences, articles and news.

Website is a one-way communication medium, which is utilized by Falun Gong very efficiently. Falun Gong has an extensive and highly organized network of global web sites. After Li Hongzhi arrived in the United States, he met with overseas Chinese who are followers of Falun Gong and knowledgeable about website design. After the first website was posted, Falun Gong's online presence increased rapidly. The main site is www.falundafa.org, which includes 19 different language versions. It is updated frequently, well organized, contain messages from Li Hongzhi, calendars of conferences, events, new items, audio downloads and other related introductions.

Another one-way communication medium utilized by Falun Gong is the E-magazine, Minghui Website⁸. The Minghui Website has 9 different language versions. The contents include the latest Li's articles⁹, open forum, personal learning experience, news and media report etc.

Once the Chinese government realized the strong power of the Internet in the Falun Gong incident, the various corresponding strategies were deployed to control the Internet and assist the anti-Falun Gong movement in China. Depending on its strong propaganda infrastructure, the Chinese government started its anti-Falun Gong Cult movement in the cyberspace. Compared with Falun Gong organization, the Chinese government mainly used the one-way communication via website and E-magazines. However, its using of Internet is more extensive and organized than the Falun Gong organization. A number of special websites came into existence to reveal

⁸ See <http://www.clearwisdom.net> for detail.

⁹ The latest one is on Oct.15, 2004.

the “truth of Falun Gong”¹⁰. For example, the Zhengqing Net is an anti-Falun Gong website and operates under the name of He Zuoxiu, who is the academician of the CAS and also known as the husband of sisters with Luo Gan. The later is condemned by Falun Gong followers as one of the main executioners during the Falun Gong persecution. This point matches the information from the insider which indicates that the Zhengqing Net belongs to the 6.10 Office headed by Luo Gan and founded in June 10, 1999 after Falun Gong’s Zhongnanhai Demonstration in April that year. The content of Zhengqing Net includes theoretical critiques, bulletin board, victim statements and audio download. Another anti-Falun Gong website is Mingjing Net¹¹, which belongs to the China Internet Information Center. This bilingual website has much broader coverage than the former on anti-Falun Gong propaganda.

Besides the face to face website counterwork, the Chinese government controls the Internet through governmental censorship via Internet blocking and monitoring. For example, *Yahoo! Messenger* is online Internet chatting software. In its Chinese version, there is a special keyword list file, sfilter.txt that is used by the government to block or monitor information related to the listed keywords¹².

No strong evidence indicates who the attacker was. But since 1999, serious attacks against to Minghui Website’s bulletin boards and chat rooms, and repeated efforts to flood its mailbox forced its administrators changed its communication methods in order to avoid the attacks to the original communication medium. On July 27, 2000, a message with the title “Notice to Overseass Practitioners from the Minghui Editors” announced that the old editorial mailbox,

¹⁰ These special websites include: <http://www.zhengqing.net.cn>, <http://www.mingjing.org.cn>, <http://www.sunrays.cc>, <http://www.zhihui.com.cn>, <http://www.anticult.org>.

¹¹ <http://www.mingjing.org.cn>. The name of Mingjing is in response to Minghui, which is the name for Falun Gong website.

¹² See <http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/articles/2004/10/22/53726.html>.

eng_editor@minghui.ca was to be replaced by a new address as eng_article@minghui.org.¹³

During the period when both of these two mailboxes were not available, the Falun Gong practitioners were instructed to send their articles “to the various local dafa associations and ask those in charge to submit them...to the Minghui editors.” Practitioners were also encouraged to “periodically compress Minghui essays and documents into ZIP files and send them to the many readers in China and other regions where it is not convenient for them to access the Minghui site.”¹⁴ Furthermore, in response to the Internet blocking from the government, the Falun Gong website provide some websites which offer tips or tools to overcome Internet blocking and encourages followers to visit them¹⁵.

It is evident that a smokeless war between Falun Gong group and the Chinese government is going in the Internet field. The main question left is: whether the Internet helps to boost the formation of the Chinese civil society and press freedom or in the opposite direction, that is to say, does the Internet become a threat to the Chinese regime or assist the authoritarian rule? The following analyses on another case maybe will help to answer this question.

The Internet in SARS Outbreak

Although it goes without saying that the Internet played a significant role in the SARS outbreak during 2003, the state of the Internet using by the government and citizens displayed different characteristics during the early stages, and later stages.

Internet contributes to the disclosure of the epidemic extent and the number of fatalities in the early stages of the SARS crisis. News of the disease reached the Chinese public in Guangdong through a short-text message, sent to mobile phones in Guangzhou around noon on Feb. 8. Urged

¹³ See <http://www.clearwisdom.net>.

¹⁴ See <http://www.clearwisdom.net>.

¹⁵ These websites include: <https://www1.zhonghua999.com>, <https://www2.zhonghua999.com>, <https://www3.zhonghua999.com>, <http://www.dongtaiwang.com>, <http://www.wujie.net>.

by the proliferation of the messages among citizen, on Feb. 11, the media silence was broken. The Guangzhou Daily reported that the virus had infected 305 people and that five had died. But on Feb. 23, Zhang's propaganda bureau, arguing that too much criticism could influence "stability"; the media ban was imposed again. The government considered it necessary to keep a lid on dissent and the flow of what it considered bad news to prevent social unrest and maintain an image of stability to encourage foreign investment (Wozniak 2003). Thus, during the official information blackout in the early stages, rumors and information about the disease circulated rapidly through e-mail, online chat rooms, and short message text (SMS) telephone networks. Citizens exchanged information with each other and relied on the Internet to get the latest infection number rather than listening to the official number from the government. Different versions of the folk prescriptions to the epidemic were prevailing in the chat rooms and bulletin boards. During this period, the government gave the information control a higher priority to sustain the social unrest which could be brought by the rumors on the Internet. In February 2003, Politburo member and Minister of Public Security Zhou Yongkang, instructed the Guangdong Public Security Bureau on the role it should play in handling the outbreak. Acting on those orders, Guangdong government "strengthened supervision and control of harmful information online, and prevented dissemination of rumors in a timely way" (Lawrence 2003a) They also asked officials from major websites in Guangdong to strengthen self-discipline and play a role in ensuring that positive news was given about the outbreak.

Things changed on April 20, when the government admitted to a cover-up and revised the number of infections up by nine times. The Chinese leaders realized that "under-reporting won't serve China's interests because, among other problems, it would only produce a higher death rate." (Lawrence 2003b) Since then, the party machinery immediately encouraged more open

reporting and ordered officials at all levels to be honest and forthright with the conditions in their localities. However, the government still came into a dilemma at this point. The serious situation of the epidemic as well as the pressures from both international community and domestic voices required the government relax its information control. Meanwhile, the fear that the information would be out of control constrained the government's complete information open policy. Thus, the government deployed an active strategy to utilize the Internet. On the one hand, it regained the Internet battleground lost at the early stages to release the infection number and introduce scientific preventive methods. Some popular websites such as Sina.com.cn and Sohu.com invited experts to the online chat rooms to answer questions and clarify doubts from the Netizens. They also gave useful advices on exercising, diet and transportation during the SARS period. On the other hand, the government used the Internet to launch a "People's War against SARS"¹⁶. The Publicized Department emphasized the importance of the Three Represents, and demanded that propaganda units emphasize the unfolding of the "great national spirit" in the struggle against and victory over SARS.¹⁷

Another noteworthy point in SARS crisis is that in some extent, the Chinese government assisted the Internet popularization in this period though this prevalence increased the difficulty to bring the use of Internet into its control. In Beijing, in order to decrease the possibility of infection, all the middle schools were permitted to dismiss their students and let them study at home under the supervision of parents during the peaking period. As the consequences, the online education became a helpful method and encouraged the popularization of the Internet using. At the same time, since most of the entertainment places were closed, people who used to the traditional leisure manner turned to the Internet to have fun. All of these facts stimulated the

¹⁶ Xinhua News Agency, May 1, 2003, <http://www.people.com.cn>.

¹⁷ Xinhua News Agency, April 25, 2003.

high mushrooming of the Internet surfing in the SARS period.

Meanwhile, online discussions on SARS moved from the medical to the political. Many BBS postings applauded President Hu and Premier Wen Jiabao for their decision to admit the official bungling and deception. Yet many postings saw the sacked officials as scapegoats, doubting that they alone were responsible for the cover-up. These discussions brought a free atmosphere to the BBS, especially to some university BBS, such as Beida Unknown BBS and Shuimu Qinghua BBS. But these discussions were still under the censorship of the Chinese government.

Compared with its role in the Falun Gong incident, the Internet had assisted the Chinese government's effort to deal with the internal crisis in a large part. Rather than passive response, the Chinese government utilized the Internet actively to facilitate their administration.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS TO CHINESE AUTHORITARIAN RULE

The Internet is considered as a mean of communication, which has the potential to revolutionize political activity far more profoundly than the telephone or television ever did. The connection between the Internet and political change in China is the main concern of this paper. Falun Gong event and SARS outbreak presented two good cases to explore this connection in the specific historical context. This part will discuss the political implications of the Internet in these two cases at the aspects of political culture, leadership, and democratization.

Political Culture

Internet in the Falun Gong event and SARS outbreak reveals the political culture of Chinese authoritarian regime in several ways. The foremost character of the Chinese political culture displayed in the cases is the Chinese leadership's long-standing idea to give the social stability the highest priority. Historically speaking, from the Chinese feudal imperial system to the contemporary Chinese government, the social unrest is a big concern for all the leaders of the

regime. Social stability is one of the criteria to evaluate a government's performance. In contemporary China, for the sake of stability is also an explanation to the Chinese government's policies on some issues. In the Internet era, sustaining the social stability becomes one reason of Chinese government's censorship. For example, in the Falun Gong event, some Falun Gong practitioners were arrested by police named as disseminating the counter-government speech via Internet to disturb the social order and destroy the social stability. In SARS case, China's failure to report SARS in a timely and accurate fashion was apparently due to the desire to maintain "stability" during a period of leadership transition (Fewsmith 2003). Be afraid of the social disorder, the CCP directed the Guangdong officials to strengthen the control of online speech. This kind of political culture implicated by the suppressed Internet policy indicates the low democratic political culture in China. From other aspect, the stability of the society is also cherished by the Chinese people. Considering the tragedy of the ten-year Culture Revolutionary, the Chinese people suffered from the social disorder that makes them fear any social unrest. Thus, this kind of mass political culture in some extent facilitates the Chinese government's Internet control policy since it makes the control possible and acceptable.

The other political culture implied by the Internet use in the two incidents is the face saving tradition. For Chinese leaders, the face of a nation is very important, even than the practical interests. In order to save face, the CCP suppressed the freedom of speech on Falun Gong prosecution and the SARS epidemic situation. But the rationale is the more you want to save face through political coercion, the more you will destroy your reputation and lose your face. In the era of Internet, no secret can be kept for all. Just as what Jiang Yanyong said, who is a retired doctor in the 301 PLA Hospital and was the first person disclosing the epidemic situation to the outside: "The CCP should not be afraid of any reports from any media. The different opinions

should be permitted. Otherwise it is because something is going wrong there.” (Yu 2003)

Leadership in the Internet Era

It is said that Internet afforded a unique way which offers the possibility of direct two-way interaction between citizens and leadership. How to use the Internet effectively is a challenge to the leadership in China.

An interesting point in Falun Gong’s counter movement is that they condemn the so-called Jiang Zemin Group¹⁸ and the CCP, but not the Chinese government. Volumes of articles from Falun Gong website and their slogans condemned the personal Jiang and the CCP under Jiang’s leading. They blame that Jiang should be punished for his cruel persecution of Falun Gong and favored former Premier Zhu Rongji who is said has mild attitude to them. At the same time, they welcome the new government headed by Hu and Wen and expect it would have some changes on the Falun Gong policy from Jiang Group. The bulletin boards and chat rooms in the website of Falun Gong are full of extensive articles criticizing Jiang and the CCP.

In the SARS outbreak, the leadership’s decision to keep secret was criticized in the early stages of the epidemic in the bulletin boards and chat rooms. In contrasting to the Falun Gong event, the new leadership strategically admitted its fault in dealing with this emergent crisis publicly and regained the lost trust from the people. More important, they realized the importance of the role of Internet and utilized it to communicate with citizens. By doing so, the leadership had built up a new image of leadership who was open, enlightened and willing to communicate with the mass. This endeavor helped the new generation leadership to gain trust from its people and govern effectively. Actually, this effort is said to be one of the new characteristics of the Hu leadership. For example, on December 23, 2003, Li Zhaoxing, the

¹⁸ The so-called Jiang Group includes Jiang Zemin, Liu Huaqing, Luo Gan and Zhou Yongkang.

Minister of Foreign Affairs, had an online conversation with Netizens via the Xinhua Net. The conversation had lasted for nearly two hours. More than 2,000 questions were put forward by Netizens and covered a broad range of political issues. This is the first time the high level officials communicated with the citizens via the Internet and is said impossible during the former generation leadership¹⁹.

One of the lessons from these two events happened in the Internet era is Chinese people are much better informed today than in the past about gaps between official pronouncements and the on-the-ground reality. They are glued to their TV sets and computers, paying close attention to what their leaders are saying and doing (Shirk 2003). Only the government that is willing to communicate with his people and dare to admit his fault can gain the trust from the people and govern effectively. Internet as an effective communication tool, in some extent can increase the government's ability to govern effectively.

Democratization

According to the theories linking the Internet and democracy, the penetration of communication and information technologies in a country is correlated with that country's level of democracy (Kedzie 1997). Internet is expected by the optimists to bring fortune to Chinese democratization by changing the Chinese governance, speech freedom and civil society. But examination of these three spheres shows that the liberal political change is constrained by the regulation of the cyberspaces.

Admittedly, access to information via Internet in some extent drove Chinese government transform their governance into more transparent, responsible to mass voice. During the emergent situations, such as Falun Gong event and SARS outbreak, the Internet played an

¹⁹ <http://xinhuanet.com>.

important role to drive the Chinese government initiate some strategies to communicate with the mass and listen to their voices. During those periods, some initiatives of Online Government construction contributed to the positive governance reform.

It is no doubt that the Internet is the place with most free speech. During the Falun Gong incident, though the speech of both sides of Falun Gong and the CCP were somewhat jaundiced, the tit-for-tat discussion between the CCP and the civil society came into existence. At least, the condemnation of Jiang Group and the CCP at least offered the ordinary people a chance to listen to different voices. Many observers see the SARS crisis as a potential turning point in China's progress towards more free online speech. The discussions on the epidemic, the condemnation to the officials who kept the secrets at the early stages are the signals of a free speech space in Internet. One survey found that more than 65 percent of Internet users in China already feel the Internet provides more opportunity to criticize the government (Worf 2002).

However, information can not bring democracy by itself. The question is whether the information can be used to organize a civil society. That is to say, a bridge between the information and the activities need to be built up. Actually, in current China, the Internet has provides new spaces for public sphere activities. A case of this attempt is a new phenomenon called Flash Mob (Kuai Shan Dang)²⁰. They use forwarded email to coordinate a quick action in the public sphere. The interesting thing is they have self-censorship to forbid the following topics: crime-related topic, politics-related topic, and other “controversial topics” (politics, social issues, etc.) Although the Flash Mob is an apolitical organization in China, it is a signal that the Internet has the potential to form organizations.

Nongovernmental organizations independent from the CCP government maybe are the most

²⁰ The definition of the Flash Mob from website of The Word Spy is: A large group of people who gather in a usually predetermined location, perform some brief action, and then quickly disperse. [Http://www.wordspy.com](http://www.wordspy.com).

powerful drive in this process. They can play a positive role in fostering an environment in which Chinese users are able and willing to share and receive information. If a balanced, uncensored online forum is created, NGOs can use it to provide reliable information not provided by the Chinese government on issues of concern to people in China, such as the epidemic situation, the impact of the World Trade Organization on China, government corruption and economic modernization. Such issues include topics related to rights but are not the usual topics of focus for human rights NGOs. NGOs should continue to monitor and publicize abuses in China, since such information is unlikely to come from government-approved sources, but they can improve trust and balance what they present by also recognizing positive changes in China's rights record, particularly in the years since Deng Xiaoping's modernization efforts. NGOs should be aware that excessive criticism of the government, no matter how shocking its human rights abuses, will only increase distrust and reduce the potential for dialogue. In addition, if the Global Internet Freedom Act becomes law, NGOs should monitor the Office of Global Internet Freedom to ensure that it allows expression of a wide diversity of views and does not degenerate into a propaganda tool for the U.S. government

Furthermore, dissidents may use the Internet to communicate with each other and to disseminate information, but the real question is whether greater freedom of information will lead citizens to take the substantial risks involved in organized opposition to the government. The Rand study found that dissident use of the Internet was not enough to truly challenge the Chinese government and that at least because the current administration's approaches to counter dissidents' use of the Internet have been successful (Chase and Mulvenon 2002).

CONCLUSION

This paper began with a review of the state of the Internet in China during the Falun Gong

event and SARS outbreak. It has shown that Internet played very significant roles in these two issues. In the Falun Gong incident, Internet became a battleground for Falun Gong group and the CCP government. Without Internet, the organization and coordination among the Falun Gong practitioners are absolutely impossible, especially after the government's ban in 1999. In this event, the government took up this powerful tool passively since it happened only after the importance of Internet in the Falun Gong activities was realized. The tit-for-tat was going in the cyberspace. No matter how jaundiced the website are, different voices were heard. Furthermore, the Chinese government utilized the Internet very strategically and in some extent, the Internet assist government's control of public opinions. In the SARS outbreak, Internet helped breaking the media silence on the epidemic reports in the earlier stages. Later, the Internet helped the government to build up the image of a responsible, transparent new government which assisted the authoritarian of the CCP in China. As a double-edged sword, Internet brings China the fortune to the democracy also the challenges to the regime. Optimists argue that the Internet popularization will inevitably bring the democratization and political liberalization in China. Opining differently, some scholars indicate the challenges brought by the Internet, such as the credit gap between the government and the citizen and the difficulty to control the harmful information.

This paper argues it is hard to predict the long-term implication of Internet to Chinese democratization process. The Internet will not bring democracy to China by itself because it is neither inherently revolutionary nor liberal. The real impetus for political change must come from political action within the population although the Internet could be a vehicle to speed this change once it begins. The bridge between information and activities needs to be built up.

The Chinese political culture that emphasizes social stability helps Chinese government

implement information control in an information exploration era. Furthermore, Chinese authoritarian regime is not so rigid to restrain any information access, but flexibly changed their strategies and utilized this new weapon to sustain its authoritarian rule. Rather than be a threat, the internet ameliorates other threats to Chinese political system and makes Chinese government administration effective. Internet works not as an invisible threat to Chinese authoritarian regime, but a tool used by Chinese government to assist their authoritarian rule.

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