The Liberating Potential of the Web?:
The Ambivalent Power of the Internet in Chinese Democratisation

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To what extent does the internet contribute to democratisation in China? This thesis tests competing answers to this question. It does so by critically bridging the views that frame the internet as a revolutionary force (or an inherently liberating power) and the views that dismiss its potential to democratise authoritarian states. The study contributes to the academic discourse on the liberating potential of the internet. Specifically, does the internet act as a revolutionary power which can guarantee a transition to democracy in China or bring about fundamental, unprecedented democratic processes? And if it does not, then, how does the internet promote and, at the same time, hamper democratisation in China? To better understand such mechanisms, it is necessary to examine the dynamic power competition between the government and the people over ideological control/independence.

For its main case study, the thesis examines how the proliferation of the internet in China triggers fears of the government about the so-called Westernisation. This concern has emerged since 2011 and reached a peak in 2014. Being embedded in the Chinese context and analysed from its historical evolution, this concern about Westernisation suggests that the government is in fact worrying about its legitimacy and control over ideology.

Focussing on this case study and using a methodology of comparative historical analysis, the thesis argues that the role of the internet in fostering democracy in China is not revolutionary but essentially an ambivalent one. Firstly, since Chinese democratisation began in the 1980s before the proliferation of cyberspace, the internet is not a necessary condition for the occurrence of democratisation in China and therefore should not be regarded as a revolutionary power. In addition, the thesis finds that the liberating potential of the internet is limited to its facilitation of existing democratic processes. Moreover, even with this progress, the internet can also be used to delay such democratic developments, as we can see with the Chinese government’s effective counter policies. This means that the internet is not only unlikely to cause a transition to a democratic system in China, but also that its liberating potential is severely limited – if not an actual barrier to democratisation.
Declaration

This thesis comprises only my original work towards the Degree of Master of Arts (Thesis Only), and due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used.

This thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length, exclusive of bibliography, as approved by the Research Higher Degrees Committee.

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Introduction

On 23 July 2011, 40 people were killed and almost 200 injured when two bullet trains collided in the suburb of Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province, China. When the Chinese government attempted to downplay or even cover up this accident, they did not expect that a traffic accident would cause a massive crisis of confidence. The officials involved did not deal with the emergency properly: the search and rescue work was hurried, the press briefing was delayed, and the official media were muted. After the government’s responses to the emergency were unmasked online, Chinese people became outraged by the carelessness and irresponsibility of the authorities.

At the same time, the internet exacerbated the issue by amplifying public scepticism. When the mass media were muted and government departments were unresponsive, Chinese netizens played an active role in promoting the rescue and subsequent investigation of the accident. The incident was first reported by victims using Sina Weibo, the new Twitter-like social media platform. Netizens were concerned about the rescue of the injured and questioned the causes of the accident. They also criticised the stumbling response of the railway ministry online and so, facing increasing public pressure in cyberspace, the government could no longer play down the event. Apologies were made and a formal report was released demanding that 54 officials be punished (BBC 28 Dec 2011).

In August 2016, a video called ‘Step over our body if you want to turn China into this’ went viral on Weibo. This nationalist video warned Chinese audiences that the US was inciting a so-called ‘colour revolution’ in China. This video which has drawn international attention on Chinese nationalism was only part of a campaign on Weibo. This online campaign used the hashtag “#be alert of the colour revolution” and was socially influential: by January 2017 it had been viewed 830,000,000 times and commented on 350,000 times.

Interestingly, this hashtag topic, though established by a media website named Dujia Web (www.dooo.cc), was led by the Weibo account of the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League. CCCYL is an official department whose views are commonly thought to be

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1 This thesis does not draw a sharp distinction between the Chinese government (the PRC), the party-state, and the Communist Party of China (CPC). Although they refer to different conceptions in the domestic politics of China, in this thesis, the terms are used interchangeably, broadly referring to the central government of China that holds the highest administrative power.
representative of the official attitude. The CCCYL’s posts claim that there is an American strategy afoot to spread dissent and inflame popular grievances in cyberspace and to incite social conflicts.

The Wenzhou train collision and the government’s social media campaigns together show the interesting interactions online that are taking place between the Chinese government and the people. The train collision highlights how the people have been empowered to check the rule of the government, while the claims about a colour revolution are the efforts of the government to offset its legitimacy crisis by using the internet. Namely, the internet facilitates some democratic processes in China on one hand, while on the other, it provides the government with the tools to retard such processes: what the internet gives, it also takes away.

The theoretical foundation

These examples of the people’s empowerment and the emerging crisis of the Chinese government are not exceptional. Rather, they are common problems that many non-democratic governments are facing because of the growing power of netizens. Whether it is the 2009 Iran election protests or the democratic revolutions that occurred in the ‘Arab Spring’ (2011), the role of the internet in sparking political changes continues to be an intriguing, and yet unsolved question. Scholars debate whether the internet is an inherently liberating power – a power that is destined to lead to revolutions and revolutionise the spread of democracy in authoritarian states. This discussion has been labelled by Madeline Carr (2016) the ‘Shirky/Morozov debate’.

By studying the Chinese government’s ‘Westernisation’ fears, which arguably emerged as a response to the legitimacy crisis it faces, this thesis joins in this debate. On the broad question about the liberating potential of the internet, this thesis asks whether the internet could guarantee a change to a liberal democratic regime, and to what extent the internet contributes to the development of democratisation.

The so-called ‘Shirky/Morozov debate’ consists of two competing arguments (Shirky 2011; Gladwell & Shirky 2011; Morozov 2011, 2012; MacKinnon 2011; 2012). Optimists, like Clay Shirky, argue that changes driven by the internet will result in ‘a net improvement for democracy’ (Gladwell & Shirky 2011). But this position is criticised by cyber-pessimists, or cyber-realists. Malcolm Gladwell (Gladwell & Shirky 2011, p. 153), argues that, to make a real, innovative difference, the internet ‘has to solve a problem that was actually a problem in
the first place’. That is, the internet can prove its revolutionary power only when it causes or solves a problem (1) which matters to democracy and (2) which cannot appear or be solved without it. Other cyber-realists propose to consider the efforts of the government in containing the democratisation. Authoritarian regimes have learned how to quickly suppress challenges to their authority driven by the internet (Morozov 2009, 2011; MacKinnon 2011; 2012; Rahimi 2011). As such, the internet can be both a tool of liberation and of repression – ‘an extension of state power’ (MacKinnon 2012, p. 201).

However, both utopian and dystopian scholars tend to oversimplify the reality in several ways. First, the utopian-dystopian divide oversimplifies the relationship between the government and the people, considering that citizens’ empowerment will logically lead to regime change. However, people who are empowered to check the government may not necessarily choose or have the ability to engage in revolutions. The existing explanations about the internet’s liberating power fail to point out the key mechanisms through which the internet can lead the government to lose popular support. Second, a review of the historical situation before the information age will lead to a more specific and concrete understanding of the role of the internet in promoting democracy.

Therefore, the thesis aims to critically bridge the cyber-optimists’ and cyber-realists’ views. More than simply taking a middle way, this research contends that the two opposed arguments are not fatally irreconcilable or completely contradictory. However, to harmonise them, it is necessary to explain why the internet can or cannot facilitate democracy.

Research question and argument: examining and explaining the internet's liberating potential

The thesis asks the extent to which the presence of the internet promotes democratisation in China. The research question integrates two focuses. Firstly, it tests whether or not the internet is an inherently liberating power, or a revolutionary force in democratisation. If the internet is not going to guarantee a democratic transition, then, secondly, how should its role be interpreted and through what causal mechanisms the internet works to promote and, at the same time, retard democratisation in China. In the Chinese context, these mechanisms have to do with the complicated relationship between the government and the people.

The internet is not an inherently liberating power, but is playing more complicated and ambivalent roles in China’s democratisation. Not only because this technology does not bring about any unprecedented democratic process which is dependent solely on its presence, but
also because it cannot automatically create or guarantee democracy in China. The democratic processes of China have already existed in Chinese society before the proliferation of cyberspace. The liberating role of the internet is to augment these democratic processes. However, even with some pro-democratic changes, the internet cannot guarantee a transition toward liberal democracy in China. This is because the Chinese government has also developed effective counter policies to negate such changes.

In terms of the causal mechanisms through which the internet functions, in the Chinese context, the democratic processes are characterised by structural shifts between the government’s power to control ideology and the people’s agency or ability to be free from such control. The dynamics explains why the Chinese government cares about public opinion and fears Westernisation. In China, one of the sources of legitimacy lies in the government control over ideology. This control is defined broadly: losing it, the government loses the support of people and its legitimacy, the foundation of the regime.

The process of people in pushing back the state’s ideological constraints took place after the 1978 economic reform (Chapter 2), implying that the internet is not the necessary condition for causing such a process. By studying the 1980s, four factors are identified as pro-democratic factors which had already promoted the democratic processes of China. These factors include (1) the commercialisation of the media; (2) the appearance of a public sphere where public opinion and dissent are formed and exchanged; (3) the rise of pro-democracy activists; and (4) the mobilisation of political protests. Developments in the former three factors will damage the advantage of the government in guiding public opinion, and therefore increase the people’s freedom from ideological control. Development in the fourth factor indicates the people’s capability to turn dissent into action, and therefore the possibility of the government losing popular support. Activism also troubles the government by violating social stability which has become another source of legitimacy since 1989. Therefore, if the internet promotes the development of these four factors, it would facilitate China’s democratic processes.

Likewise, if the government could constrain the soaring impact from the four factors, the impact of the internet on democratisation could be controlled within the political system of China. And the Chinese government has done so effectively. For the goal of controlling people’s ideology, internet censorship has been reinforced to regulate netizens’ freedom of expression in the cyber-public sphere. Specifically, the government limits the freedom of
private internet content providers and of opinion leaders to set the public agenda. Furthermore, using online propaganda and e-government platforms, the Chinese authorities have adapted to the emerging changes of cyberspace and are able to ease grassroots tensions and repair its legitimacy.

In online activism, although the internet endows people with the ability to organise and mobilise collective action, it is still a rare phenomenon regarding the offline protest which is facilitated or organised online and may threaten the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Even if such a case appears, it would be extremely unlikely to succeed. This is because, apart from the traditional executive power, the internet also offers the Chinese government the tools to frustrate people’s democratic efforts. The internet cannot guarantee regime change in China due to the agency and the resilience of the party-state.

**China’s Westernisation fears as a case study**

The thesis presents a case study and comparative historical analysis in terms of methodology. There has been a tendency for the Chinese government to express concerns about being subverted by the US using the internet during 2011-7 (particularly after 2014). Historically, this concern was referred to as peaceful evolution, which had not been stressed by the Chinese leadership since 1995. Hence, this research is interested in how this concern reappears and how it, as a reflection of the government’s fears about its declining legitimacy, relates to the democratic power of the internet.

The Chinese government’s fears about Westernisation is a suitable case for discussing the liberating potential of the internet. First, China’s situation is partly in common with other non-democratic countries: political participation in China was once underdeveloped and citizens were muted in expression. Therefore, theories about the dynamics of the Iran protests and the Arab Spring can be applicable to China. At the same time, every country is characterised by its own social, political, and historical-cultural context. A notable feature of the Chinese context is that the internet has not caused a revolution but stimulated uncertainty towards the government’s legitimacy. Also, China’s central government has proved strongly resilient in adapting to threats caused by the Internet.

Second, this case embodies the views of both the cyber optimists and realists, and can therefore bridge them. On one hand, the government’s reoccurring anxieties about Westernisation reveal that the internet can to some extent empower people, and thus exacerbate potential crises of legitimacy. As a response, the government has highlighted the
threat of Westernisation, appealing to its people to maintain belief in the CPC. On the other hand, China’s internet politics also shows that the increasing power of the people has been constrained by the government. The rise of the conspiracy theory about Westernisation in cyberspace could be one of the government’s efforts to impose such constraints. Effective counteractions of the government would negate optimistic view that cyberspace inherently benefits democracy.

However, it is still uncertain how Chinese officials’ concerns about Westernisation – i.e., what the government believes – can relate to the democratic processes which are truly taking place in China. To clarify this correlation, it is necessary to study the peaceful evolution in the history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Using the methodology of comparative historical analysis, this thesis compares the current situation with that of the 1980s – a decade when concerns about peaceful evolution mounted and when China experienced significant democratic changes. This comparison finds that, like in the 1980s, the reoccurring anxieties about Westernisation in the 2010s are one of the indicators of the Communist Party of China (CPC)’s emerging crisis of legitimacy caused by the internet facilitating China’s democratic processes. More importantly, as the democratic processes have already appeared in Chinese society, the internet is not a revolutionary force changing the spread democracy. Instead, the exact role of the internet is to augment those factors which promote these processes.

Apart from the main case, this thesis employs some other incidents in China which support the arguments or aid the examination of causal mechanisms. Specifically, the thesis will examine the Wenzhou train collision (2011) in Chapter 3 to argue that the Chinese government has lost its advantage in guiding public opinion in cyberspace, and this loss of control may bring about legitimacy crises. Chapter 4 will review the government’s suppression of the Chinese Jasmine Revolution (2011). This incident explains how rapidly and overwhelmingly the government could defeat online political activism and what the tools are available to the state to realise such repression.

Chapter outlines

This thesis consists of four chapters. The first chapter discusses the conceptual framework of the thesis, and situates this research in the debate between cyber-optimists and cyber-realists on the role of the internet.

Chapter 2 argues that the spread of democracy is not dependent on the presence of the internet. The democratic process of the PRC began during the 1980s – before the internet.
This chapter also examines China’s history and the notion of peaceful evolution, clarifying that such concerns arise when there are crises of legitimacy and democratic developments occurring. The historical review will identify four factors which would promote democratisation in China.

Introducing the reoccurring government concern about Westernisation, Chapter 3 argues that the internet can to some extent promote China’s democratic processes by augmenting the four factors identified in Chapter 2. The internet provides a ‘cyber-public sphere’ which enhances people’s democratic awareness and impacts the policy-agenda through the spread of public opinion. The essential challenge of the government is related to its loss of advantage in ‘guiding public opinion’ – an advantage which has partly shifted into private online media and opinion leaders’ hands. Second, the internet has demonstrated its capacity as a tool to mobilise activism.

As argued in Chapter 4 discusses the effective strategies developed by the government to retard those democratic changes caused by the public use of the internet. Such a phenomenon shows that the internet is unlikely to lead to a drastic transition to liberal democracy in China, and, again, is not an inherently liberating power.
Chapter One

The analytical framework: the liberating potential of the internet

There are two competing theoretical viewpoints concerning the role of the internet in promoting democracy in non-democratic countries. Some researchers regard the internet as a revolutionary tool, and one that will see democracy sooner or later realised in non-democratic countries. But such optimistic arguments have been criticised by many academics who label themselves ‘cyber realists’. Cyber realists tend to be more suspicious of the supposed revolutionary power of the internet, and they point to the resilience and adaptability of non-democratic governments. Although the academic discussion is more complex, this utopian-dystopian divide helps to identify the two extremes on the spectrum which answers the liberating potential of the internet. (or ‘helps to identify the two extremes in the field of examining the liberating potential of the internet’.)

Instead of simply choose an intermediate and ‘safer’ position, this thesis aims to bridge these two extreme positions by examining the Chinese government’s fear about the regime being changed by anti-government Chinese with the support of foreign states (also referred to as concerns about ‘Westernisation’). This research raises the question concerning the liberating potential of the internet - i.e. to what extent does the internet facilitate the process of democracy, or, democratisation, in China? Inquiring this, the thesis not only critically investigates the utopian hypothesis which sees cyberspace as a revolutionary, liberating power, but more importantly explains through what causal mechanisms this technology works or fails to play such a role.

The research argues that the internet is not a revolutionary force in the process of democratisation in China; however, it has a limited role in facilitating the democratic processes through shifting the balance of power between the government and its people. Embedded in the Chinese context, this argument has a threefold implication: (1) The internet is not revolutionary because the democratic processes in China are not initiated by its presence but are existing ones. (2) The role of the internet is to facilitate those existing democratic processes by augmenting the factors that erode the state’s control over ideology and legitimacy. (3) Even so, the internet can also be used to delay such democratic developments, as we can see with the Chinese government’s effective counter policies. This
means that the internet is not only unlikely to cause a transition to a democratic system in China, but also that its liberating potential is severely limited.

In what follows, I will first outline the two competing perspectives about this issue in the existing literature, and then introduce the analytical framework of this thesis. Reviewing the literature, I propose to understand China’s democratisation from the struggle between the Chinese government and the people over ideology, and to review the historical development of democratisation in China before the advent of the internet so as to understand the role of the internet more accurately.

1.1 Optimistic arguments regarding the pro-democratic power of the internet

The optimists and some scholars who take an intermediate road highlight the causal mechanisms in explaining how democracy is promoted by the internet. Such mechanisms can be divided in two groups: (1) how the internet mobilises citizens to engage in political activism, and (2) how citizens develop the awareness of democracy and become more politically engaged.

1.1.1 The internet’s role in mediated mobilisation

The internet’s advantages in transmitting information and establishing interpersonal connections can be translated into the power to organise and mobilise political actions (Earl et al. 2010; Eaton 2013; Yang 2009a; Lievrouw 2011; McCaughey & Ayers 2013; etc.). Scholars who share this research interest focus on one of the direct causes of, and a popular path to, the emergence of democratic system, namely, the revolution. Their potent point is that the internet can transform the organisation and mobilisation of activists, a causal mechanism that is termed ‘mediated mobilisation’. Specifically, in revolutions, the internet contributes to building social connections, decreasing activists’ reliance on existing organisations and resources, and enhancing grassroots engagement.

Online activism refers to ‘a politically motivated movement relying on the internet’ (Vegh 2003, cited in Eaton 2013). Guobin Yang (2009a) defines activism as contentious activities not only in political but also in cultural and social sense. Naming as online activism, these contentious activities can be internet-supported or directly take place in cyberspace (Yang 2009a; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2009). In the former case, the internet facilitates the traditional tools of social movement, while in the latter case, new forms of activism come to exist solely because of the internet. A more accurate classification comes from Earl et al.
(2010), who introduce four types of online activism, including brochure-ware activism (transmitting information during social protests, the internet as the news board), online facilitation of offline activism, online participation, and online organising activism. Due to different types of online activism, scholars disagree about whether the internet promotes democratic changes or not. Where activities that are organised, or happen within cyberspace are concerned, the internet is more often considered to exert a fundamental influence on activism; scholars who consider the internet a kind of news board tend to assert that the internet has a limited impact on democracy (Earl et al. 2010, p. 432). Therefore, in exploring the revolutionary potential of the internet we shall skip over those arguments that focus on the internet simply broadcasting information during political protests, because in such contexts, the internet does not transform political activism.²

To bring about fundamental social transformations, cyberspace needs to be more than simply an alternative news source. Some researchers have pointed out that the revolutionary potential of the internet lies in the mechanism of ‘mediated mobilisation’ – i.e., the online organisation and mobilisation – especially where offline collective action is called for (Lievrouw 2011, p. 6).

Mediated mobilisation is bestowed by the capacity of the internet to connect people (Rheingold 2000; Earl et al. 2010; Rahimi 2011). Firstly, modern technology enables people to have easy access to the internet at low cost and with a low access threshold, leading to a large base of internet users in cyberspace. Secondly, as the internet has largely overcome distance barriers and reduced the time costs of communication, people can build up connections with other members of society spontaneously and instantly (Rahimi 2011). Thirdly, the relative anonymity provided by the internet encourages citizens to express their viewpoints. Consequently, these merits encourage individuals to participate in collective actions, facilitate organisers’ mobilisation efforts, and make online activism distinctive.

For participants, i.e. individuals who participate online activism, the internet allows them to become more conveniently organised and take part in (political) collective actions. First, cyberspace can reach many people and gain trust among them. Given its easy access and vast reach, the internet is the backbone of massive social networks. Each network in cyberspace has the potential to reach an infinite number of further networks, making it a ‘network of

² It should be noted that although the role of the internet as a news board does not fundamentally transform activism, it is extremely important in shaping the cyber-public sphere and public opinion.
networks’ (Rheingold 2000). Furthermore, receivers of information within a certain network are likely to believe in the information, for people trust information coming from a known source (Castells 2009, cited in Eaton 2013).

Second, the internet connects strangers who share interests. People find their ‘comrades’ (Parker 2014) in cyberspace. People can form groups based on their common interests and values, fight for the same political goals, and act to redress shared grievances regardless of who they are or where they live (Howard & Hussain 2011). For those who connect with each other for political purposes, social media contribute to integrating resources and producing social capital (Howard & Hussain, 2011). Thus, cyberspace becomes a social space of interaction in which political protests take place (Lievrouw 2011; Rahimi 2011).

Thirdly, people using social media are more likely to participate in collective action. In collective actions, there exists a problem of ‘public goods’. That is, people may hesitate to engage in certain actions because they face expensive costs in doing so. For instance, participants in political activism may experience difficulties regarding geographical distance or personal skills, and face the threat of potential punishment by the rulers (Tufekci & Wilson 2012). The internet has partly solved these difficulties. First, as mentioned, it conveniently builds social connections and reduces the threshold for participation. Second, expressions published online are relatively more immune to censorship than articles published through conventional mass media outlets (Howard & Hussain 2013). Consequently, people are encouraged to participate in political actions through social media.

For organisers, online activism is less dependent on established political institutions and resources (Lievrouw 2011). Traditional social movements require more input of resources, particularly because of the existence of free riders- i.e., individuals who benefit from public goods without contributing to their associated costs (Pasour 1981). The free-rider problem makes collective action expensive (Earl et al. 2010). But online activism is by itself cost-efficient. It does not cost much to gain access to cyberspace. Namely, on one hand, there might be less free-riders in cyberspace, because participation is less expensive for all; on the other hand, organisers do not need to input many resources to mobilise participants through the internet. Additionally, binding people with common interests in cyberspace, political

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3 Defined by the OECD, social capital could be understood as ‘networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups’ (Brian 2007, p. 103).
protests may appear spontaneously and rely less on existing institutions. Therefore, the internet greatly emancipates activism from the constraints of organisations and resources.

In addition, online activism is in many respects ‘unconventional’. Conventional activism is rational, strategically and deliberately designed, and hierarchically organised, while online activism favours radical, creative, expressive, or disruptive actions (Lievrouw 2011, p. 152-4). Two features of online activism are worth stressing. First, via cyberspace, the impact of a revolution within a country can transcend territorial boundaries. Netizens are globally connected citizens (MacKinnon 2012). Today’s social movements tend to become transnational campaigns. Studying the protest mobilisation during the Arab Spring, Howard and Hussain (2013, p. 124) identify an ‘international buy-in phase’ of activism during which social media work to ‘draw in international governments, global diasporas, and overseas news agencies’.

Second, online social movements are decentralised and anti-hierarchical (Lievrouw 2011, p. 55). In his study on the Facebook page (‘We Are All Khaled Said’) that eventually led to the nationwide campaign in Egypt, Eaton (2013, p. 17) notes that Egyptian citizens’ demonstration on the street was a leaderless movement without a clear organisational structure or strategy. It was not the founders who established and managed the Facebook page that decided when to demonstrate on streets. The revolution erupted almost accidentally after a former Egyptian police officer in the US posted a video on YouTube and called for demonstration (Eaton 2013, pp. 9-10). To conclude, cyberspace has revolutionised traditional activism in terms of organisation, manifestation, and its reliance on social capital and organisational resources.

1.1.2 The internet’s role in the long term

In addition to fuelling activism in the short term, the internet also influences the relationship between the state and society in the long run. In this dimension, scholars advance two causal mechanisms about how the internet promotes democracy: the internet’s role (1) as alternative media, and (2) in promoting the development of civil society and public sphere.

First, the internet provides a platform for alternative media (Couldry & Curran 2003; Lievrouw 2011) besides the official information sources. In authoritarian states, the traditional state-society relationship is highly centralised. The government not only discourages individual participation by punishing dissidents, but also ‘controls the communicative infrastructure’, making it hard for people to coordinate protests or to express
dissent (Tufekci & Wilson 2012). Citizens are less aware of public affairs and less capable of taking part in public affairs. However, ‘as older spaces of dissent were increasingly choked off by the introduction of a new press law that restricted freedom of expression, the new technology (the internet) appeared as an alternative and safe place to express dissent’ (Rahimi 2011, p. 165). By providing new sources of information that are less likely to be controlled by authority (Tufekci & Wilson 2012), the internet makes citizens more politically informed and engaged.

Second, the development of private-owned digital platforms promotes the development of the public sphere and civil society (MacKinnon 2012). Civil society refers to ‘a self-generating and self-supporting community of people who share a normative order and volunteer to organize political, economic, or cultural activities that are independent of the state’ (Diamond 1994, cited in Howard & Hussain 2013). Scholars believe a flourishing civil society is crucial for democracy (Howard & Hussain 2011; 2013; Shirky 2011). Clay Shirky (2011) explicitly states that the liberating role of social media lies mainly in their supporting civil society and the public sphere. By comparing the success and failure of revolutions in different Arab Spring countries, Howard and Hussain (2013) conclude that countries with a more wired civil society—that is, societies that are more integrated through technology resources—are more likely to have successful uprisings.

Through its role as alternative media and impact on public sphere, cyberspace activities create pressure for the authorities. First, with the rise of the internet, the authorities have lost their advantage in controlling the distribution of information and ideology. The internet multiplies the players and the sources of information in policy-making, and it amplifies the number and influence of voices and interest groups (Westcott 2008). As such, the public opinion of citizens is increasingly valuable in terms of setting the agenda of public policies (Wang S 2008). On the other hand, due to the massive amount of information transmitted online, governments must deal with a larger amount of information in less time. As will be further discussed later, this causes troubles for the government in its attempt to deal with online rumours and manage crises.

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4 Shirky (2011, p. 2) also states that changes in this regard happen over years and decades rather than weeks or months. Therefore, the internet’s role in cultivating civil society and the public sphere refers to its long-term impact.
1.2 Scepticism: the cyber realists’ view

Although it is widely believed that these mechanisms (the mediated mobilisation, the alternative media, and the public sphere and civil society) reflect the pro-democratic power of the internet, some scholars question whether the internet can achieve liberal democracy. Evgeny Morozov and Malcolm Gladwell are typical sceptics in this regard. The realistic standpoint, as clarified by Morozov (2012), is not to deny the potential of cyberspace to enhance democracy, nor to suggest that the authorities are always successful; rather, it is to doubt the logic that the internet is inherently beneficial to democracy and able to undermine dictatorships. In other words, cyber realists admit the liberating potential of cyberspace, but question whether internet technologies can lead to the democratisation of non-democratic states in a straightforward or absolute way.

First, Cyber realists point out that every country represents a particular context and optimists’ theories do not always apply to non-democratic contexts. For example, optimists believe that with civil society developing in cyberspace, it will promote democracy. But they ignore that, in some countries, the civil society in cyberspace would be hated and repressed by the authorities who will use the internet to contain its development (Morozov 2012). Optimists praise the role of civil society in enhancing people’s power of rule, but they fail to discuss the significance of government repression. The internet can be used by different forces (the government and the people), and its effectiveness may differ in different contexts/countries.

Second, realists doubt whether the internet indeed plays such an effective role in mobilising activists and ‘emancipating’ people’s awareness. Gladwell (2011) notes that central governments are able to undermine the organisation of online activism. As an example, when activists appeal for a protest through the internet, the broadcasting of the call is often dependent on the impact of this caller. This call can be decisively defeated if another more influential voice – the pro-government party – reasonably persuades people not to participate, or if the government straightforwardly blocks the spread of information. Encountering such setbacks, civil-rights movements cannot succeed (Gladwell 2010). The theory is that, cyberspace empowers the strong and disempowers the weak (Morozov 2012, p. xvii). Non-governmental organisations and individuals can be empowered by the internet, but this is just one possibility. Another possible scenario is that the government reinforces the official voice by utilising the internet.
Third, Stepanova (2011) doubts whether the democracy brought by the internet could be long-lasting. He notes that even though the internet accelerates the outbreak of social protests, whether the internet can sustain such social movements is another story. Even though people can overthrow government rule with the help of social media, they still need to solve problems of post-revolutionary state-building in terms of laws and political institutions to maintain the democratic system. That is to say, regime change is only a start.

The weakness of the optimistic viewpoints is that they adhere to the popular perspective and overlook the role of state power. They do not foresee how the internet can effectively be applied by governments to offset democratic efforts in the form of propaganda, surveillance, and censorship. Morozov speaks from his own experience. He observed that the governments in the former Soviet region started to experiment with censorship, and some even began ‘engaging with new media, paying bloggers to spread propaganda and troll social networking sites looking for new information on those in the opposition’ (Morozov 2012, pp. xiv-xv). In summary, the literature mentioned above suggests that the internet is not an inherent liberating power.

1.3 Between utopians and realists: democracy, ideology, legitimacy, and history

1.3.1 Bridging the two extremes

This thesis intends to harmonise the cyber-optimists’ and realists’ positions through a study of the internet politics of China. It should be noted that many scholars have criticised this dichotomy fashion. Arguing the internet either empowers people or empowers authoritarian rule, both approaches seem to install agency in technology but underplay that of technology users (Carr 2016). Such either/or logic, as Guobin Yang (2009b) criticises, oversimplifies the complex relationship between technology and society, and omits other important variables. Therefore, it may mislead people to fall into technological determinism.

The thesis joins the academic attempts to overcome technological determinism. Instead of simply standing in-between the two extreme views, this thesis aspires to bridge them, or place them in communication with each other. This thesis contends that utopian views and dystopian views are not necessarily incompatible. The internet can be used to ‘enhance or undermine state power, in a multitude of ways and simultaneously’ (Carr 2016, p. 5). Examining the nuanced relationship between the government and people, and introducing a historical perspective, this research tries to provide a plausible explanation about how
democratic processes are facilitated and, at the same time, hampered in the information age. Before discussing the two analytical frameworks, I will first explain why they are under-researched in the existing literature.

First, both cyber-optimists and cyber-realists tend to oversimplify the relationship between the state and the people in non-democratic countries, but this relationship is complicated and subtle. In the literature, citizens are described as the absolute opponents of the authoritarian government, who seeks to overthrow it once they embrace democratic values (e.g., Morozov 2011; 2012; Gladwell & Shirky 2011; Stepanova 2011). But the logic that ‘citizens’ empowerment causes revolutions’ is both counterfactual and unclear. One the one hand, this logic is untrue. There are some nuanced differences between people’s increasing awareness and capability in political participation and their decision to overthrow the government. Taking China as an example, even if people enjoy political participation, human rights, and legal justice, they may not pursue a revolution and fight for the Western political system.5 Likewise, for the sake of enhancing the regime’s legitimacy, the government may tolerate or even encourage citizens’ ‘checks and balance’ to a moderate degree.

On the other hand, the logic that citizens’ empowerment leads to revolution is unclear. Even with those feasible mechanisms such as the mediated mobilisation, the civil society and public sphere, and the alternative media, it is still unclear why empowered citizens would fight against the authorities. Or, with people being more politically informed and engaged, what type of advantage does the government lose which would fundamentally undermine the regime’s security? This ambiguity is due to some important missing variables upon which the authoritarian governments build their rule and which, by harming them, citizens would become more inclined to act against the government. As will be discussed, this thesis examines the significant role of legitimacy, popular support, and the state’s ideological control to clarify the logic of the internet’s liberating power.

Second, taking a historical perspective will improve arguments for or against the revolutionary power of the internet. To argue that the internet makes a real and innovative difference in promoting democracy, it is necessary to show that it has created or solved an important problem which would not have appeared or remained unsolved without its presence. Historical analysis is important in this respect: it specifies what is new, what has remained

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5 Some scholars even point out that China’s middle class does not necessarily support democratisation (Chen & Lu 2011; Chen 2013) and shows the intention to maintain the political order (Cai 2005).
unchanged, and whether the changes are important enough to fundamentally shift democracy promotion. The thesis is going to compare China’s democratisation in the pre-internet era (if there was any) to that in the internet age so as to see the liberating potential of cyberspace more accurately. This comparative historical perspective is understudied in the literature which focuses on the extent to which the internet promotes democracy in China. Without such comparisons and clarifications, even though the internet may contribute to democracy today, it is still inexact to call it a revolutionary force.

1.3.2 Explaining the mechanisms of democracy: the struggle over ideology

As stated, in non-democratic countries, the government and the people are not necessarily in absolute antagonism. Causal mechanisms that explain how the internet promotes democracy fail to express the inner logic of why these mechanisms work; but it can be argued that these have to do with the legitimacy and popular support which the government fears to lose and the internet may take away. Therefore, the study of the internet’s role in determining China’s democratic process should spell out the causal mechanisms that explain how the legitimacy of the Chinese government has been influenced.

This thesis proposes the dynamic power structure between the government and the people struggling for ideological control/independence to conceptualise the rise and fall of democratic processes and legitimacy crises of the government. This ‘struggle over ideology’ describes the ‘tug of war’ between the government’s efforts to exert and maintain ideological control and the people’s agency to think and believe alternatively and their capacity to turn dissent into political collective actions.

A regime’s legitimacy relates to ‘whether a given rulership is believed to be based on good title by most men subject to it’ (Friedrich 1963, cited in Stillman 1974, p. 34). The CPC expresses the same meaning more straightforwardly. The CPC’s legitimacy ‘lies in history and popular support from the people’, said Wang Qishan, one of the leadership of the Politburo Standing (Ruan 2015). In this sense, ‘legitimacy’ is closely related to people’s beliefs in the political system (Malesevic 2013), and ideology is one of the major sources of legitimacy (Gilley 2008; Malesevic 2013), especially for the Chinese government (Holbig & Gilley 2010).6

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6 Except for ideology, scholars also point to various sources of the CPC’s legitimacy, including anti-corruption (Holmes 1993, 2015), nationalism (Holbig & Gilley 2010), economic growth (Holbig & Gilley 2010), social
Here we read ideology inclusively: on the one side, ideology represents the legitimating tool of a dominant class (the state); on the other side, it can refer to a set of ideas which justify the goals and means of social action (Eagleton 1991). Whenever ideological control is referred to, ideology is discussed in terms of the values and ideas used by the ruling party to consolidate the regime’s power. The control of ideology involves naturalising ‘beliefs and values congenial to’ the dominant power, ‘excluding rival forms of thought’, masking or suppressing social conflicts (Eagleton 1991, pp. 5-6). However, apart from the mainstream ideology of the government, there could be sets of alternative values in society. When people’s self-interests and ideational pursuits cannot be satisfied by the current state of governance, they may resort to political protests, driven by some ‘factual and moral propositions’ (Seliger 1979, p. 1). One ideology can contradict another, and incline followers to undermine the regime which is legitimated by the latter ideology. Within China’s political context, the destabilising or the alternative ideologies points to Western values – especially the principles of democracy and liberty.

Hence, speaking of the CPC’s fear of losing ideological control, there are at least two implications. First, the CPC has concerns about people’s distrust toward the government, and so tries to universalise pro-party values and neutralise destabilising social conflicts. Second, the CPC seeks to deter the development of Western values in Chinese society. But when ‘Westernisation concerns of the CPC’ is discussed in this thesis, it is broadly treated as the reflection of the CPC’s fear of losing legitimacy and ideological control. This is because the CPC may claim that both people’s distrust and the spreading of democratic values are signs of Westernisation (see Chapter 2).

The liberating role of the internet includes its use in augmenting China’s existing pro-democratic factors – those which challenge the ideological control of the government. Reviewing the past, the thesis identifies four factors that have appeared in the 1980s and promoted the democratic processes in China; these include (1) media reform (the alternative media), (2) the growing impact of public sphere, (3) the rise of pro-democratic activists, and (4) political activism. I clarify here that these factors have material roots, such as the 1989 economic reform, or citizens’ access to cyberspace. But this thesis is more interested in the four non-material factors.

stability (Gilley 2006). However, the approaches that the internet impacts on the CPC’s legitimacy, which is the focus of our discussion, are more often in connection with the state’s ideology and social order.
This research will explain the pro-democratic factors and the struggle over ideology from two dimensions: ideological control itself, and collective actions. In the first dimension, the Chinese government fears losing ideological control and popular support as its legitimacy is built on them. The commercialisation of the media, the development of the public sphere, and the rise of activists are three key factors in this respect. These three factors have eroded the Chinese government’s monopoly over information dissemination and its advantage in guiding public opinion.

The second dimension concerns people’s capability to turn their grievances and dissent into political actions. Supported by ideology, people ‘posit, explain and justify ends and means of organised social action, and especially political action’ (Seliger 1979, p. 1). Therefore, for the Chinese government, political activism is a result and an indicator of its loss of ideological control and of legitimacy crises. The government is concerned by activism also because of the consideration on social stability. Social disorder can impair people’s trust in the regime, and thus undermine its ideological control. However, the awakening of people’s political awareness and the growth of their ideological independence is one story; whether they can be mobilised into collective action is another story. Therefore, citizens enhanced capability for activism is the fourth factor that can be used to test the liberating role of the internet.

Overall, the internet is not the revolutionary power for democracy if the democratic processes of China began before the advent of the internet. Secondly, the internet could facilitate China’s democratic processes if this technology augments the four pro-democratic factors and erodes the Chinese government’s control over people’s ideology.

1.3.3 Back to the past

Bringing the history dimension in will provide a more comprehensive perspective for understanding the extent to which the internet facilitates democracy. This thesis compares the China of the 2010s with China in 1980s in terms of the Chinese government’s concerns about Westernisation, the development of democratisation, and the causal mechanism and factors which cause such development in each period.

First, to compare its concerns about Westernisation, the thesis argues that the Chinese government’s worries about Westernisation in the 2010s are a replay of its concerns about peaceful evolution during the Cold War. This research is inspired by this social phenomenon in the 2010s, which describes China’s concern about ‘hostile foreign forces’ attempting to erode people’s ideology and violate social stability using cyberspace, first appeared after
2011 and peaked around 2014-6. But the CPC’s concerns about peaceful evolution existed all throughout the Cold War, meaning that the current crises for the government is a repeating problem of democracy in China. Namely, even on the basis that the problem of Westernisation matters to democracy promotion and is caused by cyberspace, the internet does not fundamentally transform the promotion of democracy. The choice of a comparative period (the 1980s) is based on a brief review of the historical process of the PRC’s fears about peaceful evolution. The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident is the climactic event that occurred during this period, and it represents an ideal case study for examining the ‘Westernisation crisis’ by identified the Chinese government.

Second, by studying the democratic processes that took place in Chinese society in the 1980s, this thesis is pursuing two aims. First, this review answers how the government’s perception of the Westernisation (i.e. what the government believes) relates to democratic processes (i.e., what has happened in society). The story of the 1980s shows that the Chinese government was concerned about Westernisation because it recognised truly existing crises in terms of legitimacy, ideology and social order which were caused by the development of democratisation in Chinese society. Therefore, declaring the risk of foreign subversion is one of the reactions of the government in response to those legitimacy crises. Secondly, China’s democratic development in the 1980s helps to identify the factors which promote democracy. These pro-democratic factors contribute to explaining how the rule of the people develops in China through the struggle between the government for ideological control and the people for ideological independence.

Third, the thesis then will test if these pro-democratic factors that appeared in the 1980s also existed in the 2010s. If so, this thesis can not only explain the reoccurrence of the government’s Westernisation anxiety, but also clarify that through what mechanisms the internet facilitates democracy. More importantly, because both the mechanisms and variables which facilitate China’s democratic processes remain consistent in the information age as in the past, this thesis doubly confirms that the internet does not create democracy; rather, it only continues the existing democratic processes and perhaps augments those pro-democratic factors.
1.4 Conclusion

This thesis considers the divergence between cyber-optimists and realists over the liberating potential of the internet and tries to bridge them. Some scholars posit that the internet catalyses democracy by facilitating activism and by spreading democratic values and encouraging political participation. However, as cyber realists insist, such promising signs do not guarantee the success of democratic movements in non-democratic countries. This is because a strong, centralised government can also use the internet to control democratic debate and overturn efforts to spread democracy.

China presents a good case study to harmonise cyber optimistic and realistic views since the insights of both are embodied in its internet politics. This also means that neither side can explain the situation in China in a convincing manner. First, both sides of the technological determinism fashion tend to oversimplify the nuanced and complex tension between the Chinese government and the people. Additionally, a comparative historical perspective helps to identify what has been changed before and after the presence of the internet and therefore clarify the extent to which cyberspace contributes to democratisation.

Therefore, the analytical framework of this thesis is based on two propositions. First, the thesis holds that the internet promotes China’s democratic processes through strengthening those factors which help people to diminish the state’s ideological control. Second, a historical case study is advanced to determine whether the internet has made important and original progresses. The next three chapters will apply this analytical framework to examine whether the internet is a revolutionary force or not, and the extent to which the internet promotes democratisation in China.
Chapter Two

Westernisation and China in the 1980s: Why the internet is not revolutionary

This chapter studies the government’s perception of Westernisation and the democratic processes in China before the internet age in three sections. The first section introduces the contours and historical dynamics of China’s anxiety about peaceful evolution (another formula of Westernisation). The second and third sections examine the relationship between the risk of Westernisation perceived by the Chinese leadership and the democratic processes which were actually taking place. The second section studies the 1989 Tiananmen Square episode. This political protest was by itself an important democratic movement and the decisive trigger of the government’s rising fear of peaceful evolution. The third section studies the pro-democratic social changes that occurred in the 1980s. It was the development of democratisation and the tendency of losing legitimacy and ideological control which caused this fear to rise. Therefore, the historical context of the 1980s helps to understand the causal mechanisms and variables which could promote China’s development of democratisation.

This historical analysis argues, first, the Chinese government’s fear about Westernisation has been an important problem associated with the developments of democracy. Second, the internet has not played a revolutionary role in promoting democracy in China, for it was and is not a necessary condition for the appearance of such democratic processes in China nor the government’s fear of Westernisation. Rather, this fear had already been sparked during the Cold War, and China’s democratisation initiated in the 1980s.

2.1 The conceptualisation and historical process of peaceful evolution in China

The historical course of China’s fear of peaceful evolution shows that this fear has never been novel. But the fact that these concerns reappear after a long dormant period (1996 – 2011) is an interesting phenomenon that requires explaining. Second, by studying how peaceful evolution is conceptualised in the Chinese context, this thesis proposes that this concern reflects the CPC’s fears and uncertainty about losing legitimacy and about the democratisation which is happening in Chinese society.
2.1.1 The recurrent conspiracy of peaceful evolution

Before the advent of the information age, China had experienced two waves of fear about Western-supported democratisation. One was during 1958-1964, when the concern initially emerged, and the other was around 1989, when it reached a peak.

Under Mao Zedong’s reign (1949-1976), the anxiety about peaceful evolution appeared soon after this concept was initiated in the US in 1958. The strategy of ‘peaceful evolution’ was initially an anti-Communist foreign policy approach designed by the US during the Cold War. The Chinese government at that time saw it as a scheme against all Communist countries, including socialist China. Chinese scholars claim that this approach was influenced by the ideas of Dean Acheson and John Foster Dulles. Acheson expressed his desire to ideologically change China through ‘the democratic individualism of China’, which China interpreted as attempts to sabotage its social basis (Mao Zedong’s formulation) for American imperialist gain (Zhao 2004, p. 237). Dulles raised the idea of waging political and psychological warfare towards the socialist bloc (Xu 2008), and asserted that the people, especially intellectuals and young generations in these countries were potential allies whose hope for ultimate liberation could (and should) be nourished (Zhao 2004).

Mao responded promptly after he learned about this theory proposed by Dulles. In 1958, Mao revealed his intention to organise a conference for cadres of the CPC to discuss the ‘present international situation’. The conference was subsequently held in 1959, when Mao printed and distributed speeches of Dulles, and stated that any peaceful evolution strategy was not only targeting the Soviet Union, but was against all socialist countries (Fen 1992). Mao’s attention then shifted to countering the revisionist communism of Soviet Union, emphasising class struggle, anti-revisionism, and cautiously selecting a party successor (Ge 2004; Kang 2009).

The second period of high vigilance towards Westernisation occurred around 1989, at the end of Deng Xiaoping’s rule (1978-1989) and the beginning of Jiang Zemin’s administration (1989-2002). The Tiananmen Square Protest was the most critical event, pushing this fear to an unprecedented level. Hence, the thesis will study this event in the next two sections.

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7 According to the literature on the American peaceful evolution, this strategy broadly includes the containment strategy of George Kennan (Ge 2004; Zou 2007; Lin 2009; Kang 2009; He 2014), the emancipation strategy of the Eisenhower Administration (Xu 2000; He 2014) and a series of policy documents- NSC5505/1 (1955), NSC5607 (1956, about cultural policies), NSC5608/1 (1956, targeting Soviet Union and Eastern Europe), NSC5505 and NSC5808/1 (targeting Poland), the NSC5811/1 (1958, targeting Eastern Europe), and NSC5805/1 (1958, towards Yugoslavia) (Xu 2008).

Hu Jintao (2002-2012) showed little interest in peaceful evolution during most of his administration. He seldom mentioned American efforts to impart democracy on the Chinese people.8 A turning point appeared in 2012, when Hu referred to ‘peaceful evolution’ in a speech for the first time during his 8-year term. It was also around this year that the conspiracy theory about a colour revolution began to appear.

Historically speaking, this Chinese theory about the risk of peaceful evolution appeared right after the counterpart American foreign strategy towards promoting democracy was raised in the 1950s. And it peaked around the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989. This fear experienced a period of long dormancy (1996-2011) before being restated by Hu in 2012. The variable of the internet did not exist during the 1950s and the 1980s, which implies that the existence of the internet is not a necessary condition for the emergence of this fear. On the other hand, the post-2011 period saw a reprise of this conspiracy theory, with a new emphasis on the significance of cyberspace.

2.1.2 The Chinese conceptualisation of peaceful evolution

It is important to understand the meaning of peaceful evolution from the point of view of the Chinese government. For many Western observers, China’s fear of peaceful evolution may be puzzling. The Chinese side has claimed that a variety of policy tools are used by the US to conduct subversion. Those tools range from ‘dark conspiracies involving the alleged plotters of the ‘counterrevolutionary rebellion’ to the broad spectrum of cultural, social and economic exchanges with the outside world’ (Yahuda 1992, p. 134). Considering that this American strategy turned out to be European-focused, the fear of China seems to be a sign of paranoia or a siege mentality among the CPC (Shambaugh 1996). This thesis claims that this concern about peaceful evolution is not completely illusory, however. Though it is unclear (and

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8 I traced Hu’s discourse as well. Prior to 2012, none of the alternative specifications of ‘peaceful evolution’ was found, including ‘Westernisation’ and ‘disintegration’, ‘bourgeois liberalisation’, ‘colour revolution’, nor did terms such as ‘hostile foreign forces’ and (ideological) ‘infiltration’/ ‘erosion’. 

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beyond the focus of this thesis) whether or on what level the US has been involved, the regime crisis which defines the risk of Westernisation is usually held to truly exist. This argument will first be supported by the Chinese conceptualisation of peaceful evolution, and will then become more concrete after examining the Tiananmen Square incident.

The term ‘peaceful evolution’ (or ‘Westernisation’) has been re-contextualised in China with its meaning deviating from the American foreign policy. Every Chinese leader has developed theories on countering peaceful evolution, thereby breeding a body of literature which examines the anti-peaceful-evolution theories of the leaders. The leaders’ discourse and those academic studies shed light on how peaceful evolution is conceptualised by China.

In Chinese scholarship, peaceful evolution is commonly defined as US-led forces using non-violent measures to erode China’s socialist ideology and overthrow the leadership of the CPC. In this definition, there are three important features: non-violence, foreign support, and regime security. It is the feature about regime security – i.e., changing the leadership of the CPC and transforming China’s political system into the Western-style liberal democracy – which decisively defines Westernisation. Two consistent dimensions describe how the regime crisis of peaceful evolution is evaluated, namely, the dimensions of ideological orthodoxy and social stability. Any attempts in terms of (1) eroding the ideology of Chinese people or (2) supporting or encouraging collective action against the government has the suspicion of conducting peaceful evolution. Therefore, peaceful evolution is broadly defined. Ideologically, the Chinese government evaluates its popular support from the trend of public opinion. Secondly, political protest urging for democracy or political reform is the form of Westernisation that is of most serious concern. The government often claims that such political protests are supported by foreign governments or organisations.

In brief, this thesis reads peaceful evolution (or Westernisation) as a piece of Chinese lexicon (i.e. as used in the Chinese context) rather than of American foreign strategy. When the term is discussed, the emphasis is not on the intent and capability of the US to effect political change in China, but rather what it indicates about China’s domestic ruling problems. That is, the conspiracy theory of peaceful evolution reflects the actual challenges of legitimacy of the CPC which are often caused by domestic forces pushing towards the development democracy.

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9 This definition is a summary of around 38 Chinese academic papers.
2.2 The democracy movement in 1989 and the rising fears of peaceful evolution

During the 1980s and the early 1990s, the Chinese government exhibited the fiercest level of fear about peaceful evolution. The Tiananmen Square Protest (also known as the ‘June Fourth Incident’ in China) in 1989 is a symbolic event. This event was a milestone in China’s democratic movement, and at the same time, elicited the most intense expressions of the Chinese government about the risk of Westernisation. Therefore, this movement, together with its incubation period (the 1980s), provides an ideal episode in the PRC’s history to examine these anxieties about peaceful evolution and their correlation with democratic developments.

2.2.1 The Tiananmen Square Demonstration in 1989 as a democracy movement

From April to June 1989, Chinese students demonstrated at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, which was the largest, longest and best organised political protest at that time (Liu 1990; Shi 1990). Initiated by students, the demonstration rapidly developed into a nationwide movement involving intellectuals and millions of ordinary Chinese. This event was by itself the most prominent pro-democratic movement in the history of the PRC.

Primarily, students pushed for political reform, something that the CPC viewed as anti-establishment. This demonstration straightforwardly upheld the slogan of freedom and democracy. At the outset, the demonstration was about mourning the death of Hu Yaobang, a pro-democratic reformist in China’s leadership. Among their early requirements, students demanded that the CPC respected and admitted Hu’s political ideas of ‘democracy, freedom, magnanimity and harmony’ (Rich 1989, p. 168). Soon, the commemorative activities shifted to broad political discussions, asking for free press, free association, political democracy, and opposing official corruption (Zhao 2004, p. 148).

Second, this demonstration was an entirely bottom-up collective action which had successfully mobilised people from different social classes. As Zuo and Benford (1995, p. 131) put it, this ‘Democracy Movement (the Tiananmen Square demonstration) represented a genuinely grassroots attempt to reform the Chinese state’. Urban citizens got involved after the students started hunger strike in May. On May 17th, more than a million Beijing residents demonstrated on the streets to express their concerns about the students’ hunger strike (Zhao

10 Hu Yaobang himself is a reformist; he was dismissed in 1987 for his lenience in dealing with student movements in 1986. His dismissal and death in 1989 disappointed people who once hoped that democratic reform would happen in a top-down manner.
Citizens also spontaneously organised rescue teams to help students who fainted. Intellectuals stood out and supported the students in May. In their May 17 Declaration, intellectuals like Yan Jiaqi, Bao Zunxin and Li Nanyou praised the student hunger strike as ‘a great patriotic democracy movement to bury dictatorship and the monarchic system in China’ (Chinese Law & Government 1990, p. 61). Various unofficial organisations worked to coordinate people’s participation in the protests (Shi 1990), such as the Federation of Beijing Autonomous College Student Union-Interim which led students in Beijing, the Federation of Foreign-Province Autonomous College Student Unions which worked with the former (Zuo & Benford 1995), and the Beijing University Teachers’ Support Group. Some senior leaders openly opposed a military response, and many middle-level cadres even joined the protests (Shi 1990). The extensive support of some officials, teachers, intellectuals and ordinary citizens manifested the democratic nature and successful mobilisation of this protest.

The 1989 Democracy Movement posed material threat to the Socialist regime. The political demands that were proposed, as well as the scale and endurance of this movement all represented a direct attack on the legitimacy of the CPC. The situation in May 1989 even convinced some observers that the downfall of the government was imminent (Shi 1990).

2.2.2 The CPC’s response: anxiety peaks over peaceful evolution

The government ascribed the causes of the Tiananmen Square crisis to a US-led foreign conspiracy. Therefore, 1989 to 1991 witnessed the fiercest expressions of the CPC about the threat of Westernisation. In fact, Deng Xiaoping, the actual leader of China in 1980s, did not outwardly describe it as ‘peaceful evolution’ until 1989, before which he used the phrase ‘bourgeois liberalisation’ to describe it. But Deng directly referred to ‘peaceful evolution’ twice after the Tiananmen incident. Speaking with an American-Chinese scholar, Deng straightforwardly expressed his belief that the US and other Western countries were to be blamed. It was ‘a war without gunpowder’, said Deng, ‘the capitalist countries want to defeat socialism’; ‘in the past, they used weapons… and now they conduct peaceful evolution’ (Deng 1989). In November, Deng made a speech entitled ‘Uphold Socialism and Prevent Peaceful Evolution’ where he reused the metaphor of ‘the Third World War without gunpowder’.

From Deng’s speeches, one can better understand the regime’s logic in interpreting Westernisation. Being an attempt of peaceful evolution, the democratic protest should be
considered negatively because it caused disorder and was a conspiracy of the US. In the famous ‘26 April Editorial’, the government referred to the student demonstration as a sign of ‘turmoil’ (*People’s Daily* 26 April 1989). ‘This identification (of turmoil) is accurate’, said Deng (1989), ‘for the situation later developed into counterrevolutionary rebellion’. And this was by nature a conspiracy of peaceful evolution: ‘a handful of villains, mixed in young students and the masses’, attempted to subvert the state power and the party’s rule and ‘establish a capitalist republic which would be a complete vassal of the West’ (Deng 1989). The Chinese leadership accused Western countries, especially the US, of instigating the turmoil. These ‘capitalist enemies’ ‘provided the so-called democrats and the so-called opposition, who are *de facto* scum of the Chinese nation, with encouragement and convenience’, and therefore caused the chaos (Deng 1989).

The government’s responses to this heightened risk of peaceful evolution can be viewed from domestic and international aspects. Inside the country, to justify its repression and its refusal of political reform, the government stressed that China’s economic development is dependent on stability maintenance (*weiwen*). Deng’s theory generalised that, ‘in essence, socialism is about liberating and developing the productive forces’ and China in the primary stage of Socialism ‘must unswervingly take economic development as the central task’ (Wen 2007). In achieving this goal, the Chinese government proclaimed that it is essential to stick with the leadership of the CPC and the socialist path.11 But the students’ pro-democracy movement aimed at overthrowing them. The ‘turmoil’ of the Tiananmen Square incident also violated the social stability which was, as claimed by the CPC, the foundation of economic development. ‘In chaos we cannot establish socialism’, Deng stated that seven times in his speeches 1982-92. He also expressed that ‘China cannot afford/ is not allowed to/ has no tolerance to any disorder’ (Deng 1989) (at least five times).12 After 1989, stability maintenance became the top priority of the CPC, which explains why social stability (and activism) was one of the dimensions through which it evaluated the danger of Westernisation in the internet age.

Diplomatically, fears about Westernisation led to China’s tougher standing in foreign relations. When meeting with Nixon in October 1989, Deng Xiaoping plainly criticised the

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11 The official line in this regard is generalised as the ‘Four Cardinal Principles’ – the principle of upholding the socialist path, the people’s democratic dictatorship, the leadership of the CPC, Mao Zedong’s Thought and Marxism-Leninism.

12 The thesis studied Deng’s speeches from 1982 to 1990, compiled in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping (Volume 3)*.
US for becoming too deeply involved in the student movement. More generally, Deng expressed the insistence of China that sovereignty ought to prevail over human rights. ‘People support human rights, but we should not forget the rights of nation (sovereignty)’ (Deng, 1989). And about the criticism and sanctions handed down by Western countries in response to the repression of students, the CPC considered these acts as violations and a meddling in China’s internal affairs. ‘China will never accept other countries to interfere in internal affairs’, Deng (1990) claimed. The Tiananmen Square Protest is the only occasion when the Chinese government resorted to a diplomatic approach to counteract its mistrust about Westernisation. This in turn underpins that the 1989 case was the climax of the CPC’s concerns about the threat of peaceful evolution.

The 1989 student movement at Tiananmen Square was by itself a significant democratic movement; it also led to the government’s soaring fear about peaceful evolution as a response of this legitimacy crisis. Hence, this thesis suggests viewing the rising concern about Westernisation as indicating genuine challenges of legitimacy and democratic processes in China.

2.3. The four factors promoting the democratic processes in the 1980s

The Tiananmen Square Democracy Movement and the CPC’s legitimacy challenges were rooted in the democratic progresses achieved after 1978. As these democratic developments began in the 1980s without the internet, the internet’s role as a revolutionary engine for democracy is therefore negated. At the same time, by studying why and how the student movements took place, one can understand the causal mechanisms and variables which could facilitate the development of democratisation in China.

2.3.1 The reform and opening-up as the material basis of social changes in the 1980s

The reform and opening-up policies initiated in 1978 were a turning point in many aspects for modern China. Chinese society experienced a sharp twist in terms of the political environment and policy priority after the reform was launched. On one hand, as the reform was an experimental initiative, China’s employment of a market economy generated severe changes in the political landscape and economy. Western countries condemned China and introduced economic sanctions. Under these circumstances, Deng claimed that the US needs to improve bilateral relationships, and that China ‘will not beg for cancelling the sanctions’ (Deng 1989). As the saying goes: to cross the river by feeling the stones.
social problems. One the other hand, the country experienced a series of pro-democracy changes as a result of the 1978 reforms. With the policies and slogans such as ‘reform and opening-up’ and ‘emancipating the mind’ were raised, Chinese society underwent four important developments. These developments were central in facilitating China’s democratic processes, and decisively led to the outburst of the 1989 legitimacy crisis. We stress here that the mentioned economic reforms provided the material roots and foundation which triggered these social changes in China. However, it is not the focus of the following discussion.

The following paragraphs briefly introduce the social problems which accompanied China’s economic take-off: corruption, official profiteering, and inflation. These problems proved to be the direct cause of people’s demands for democratic reform. With the shift from a planned economy to a market one (1985), the state no longer controlled the price of production. These price reforms, for the first time, bestowed cadres of the PRC with the opportunity to use their political power to make huge private profits. So-called ‘official profiteering’ describes the phenomenon whereby family members of officials who established factories bought products from the producer at a low price and resold them in the open market (Shi 1990). The loosening of state control over prices generated inflation in the late 1980s, the victims of which were ordinary citizens who lived on fixed salaries. As for officials, who were also paid fixed salaries, the inflation motivated them to engage in widespread corruption (Shi 1990).

The emerging inequalities in Chinese society aroused people’s discontent and grievances. With people’s living standards increasing following the early success of the economic reforms, they viewed the ensuing developments with high expectations. Therefore, when citizens realised that they were not the beneficiaries but rather the victims of this changes (Shi 1990; Zuo & Benford 1995), they reacted with much anger and disappointment. These social problems were not manifestations of a democratic movement themselves, but they proved to be the catalyst for people’s pro-democratic appeals. The reason for students obtaining support from different classes in 1989 was that their requirements for democracy and anti-corruption resonated with the shared experiences of most Chinese (Zuo & Benford 1995, p. 143). In the following sections, the thesis will introduce four important developments in Chinese society that appeared because of the economic reforms. They set underway the democratic movements that took shape in China in the 1980s and, as a combination, they explain how the Tiananmen Square movement was able to take place.
The government’s loss of ideological control and democratic processes: four aspects

Under the slogan of ‘emancipating people’s minds’, ideological control in China was relaxed to an unprecedented degree. Both the officials and ordinary people were freer to receive outside cultural influence. But the relaxed political environment in the 1980s had created enormous confusion in Chinese society about what was the bottom line of openness and Westernisation (Chen & Deng 1995, p. 70). For instance, people considered that now that the market reform had been employed, perhaps political reform was around the corner too. Widespread ‘capitalist thought’ challenged the orthodoxy of Marxism as the mainstream ideology of China, and therefore brought about people’s increasing ability to think and act alternatively. Specifically, the government’s loss of ideological control was reflected in (and to some extent caused by) the development of the following four factors.

A. The commercialisation of the media

One of the important products of the market economy was the commercialisation of media, which started to undermine the government’s efforts toward maintaining a ‘unified ideology’. Before the relevant reforms, media outlets in China were dominated by the state-owned propaganda system in which media served as the instrument of upholding communist ideology (Lee 1994; Winfield & Peng 2005; Esarey & Xiao 2011). With the market reforms and decentralised control of information, a growing number of official media became self-supported and advertising-dependent. Driven by the pressure of attracting finance and audiences, media were encouraged to expose the news before the government banned such reports (Shirk 2011). As such, Chinese media experienced profound reforms during the period 1979-1989, as a result of which they were no longer entirely dependent on state power, but also complied with market mechanisms. Chinese journalists started to serve both the state and their audiences (Chu 1994).

The media reforms contained two pro-democratic aspects. First, the reforms entailed increasing diversity in terms of political views (Lee 1994; Winfield & Peng 2005). It also provided alternative channels to disseminate Western thoughts. The era of a unified voice nationwide came to an end. And these media (mostly private but sometimes the official media) provide a limited public sphere for public discussion.

Second, a group of journalists were by themselves the liberal activists demanding for political rights. Some marketized media were severely criticised or even forced to close after they
provided a sphere for dissidents’ discussions (Jernow 1994, pp. 6-8). Journalists then strived for more freedom of the press and freedom of expression. Most journalists, including an editor of People’s Daily, protested through passive resistance: they refused or delayed the propaganda directives (Jernow 1994). Despite the Chinese government conducted some campaigns to thwart their efforts (Lee 1994), Chinese journalists started to see themselves as independent agents rather than ‘party puppets’ (Jernow 1994).

B. The appearance of pro-democratic activists

In the 1980s, with their minds ‘emancipated’, a group of pro-democratic activists emerged in Chinese society. They included students, intellectuals, artists, journalists and even some senior officials who favoured political reform or were dissatisfied with the social problems caused by the economic reforms. They had helped to spread Western values (i.e. an alternative ideology) and to liberate people’s minds from the unified, mainstream ideology. Their efforts here will be presented in the following paragraphs while introducing the development of a public sphere.

These liberals and activists were responsible for promoting the growth of an infant civil society. In Yu Keping’s (2003, p. 1) definition, civil society refers to ‘the total of civil organisations or civil relations except for the state’, wherein the NGOs, citizens’ social associations, interest groups, and spontaneous organised movements are the essential components. Therefore, the development of Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and student communities in the 1980s represented the sprouting of China’s civil society. Data shows that China experienced great improvements in this period. In the first year of the reform (1978), 200,000 NGOs were established, most of which were student associations (Edele 2005, p. 6). Chinese activists established human rights organisations (like the China Human Rights League) which requested the US to ‘care about human rights in China’ (Wang 2014; Sun 2015). Not surprisingly, this was later criticised by Chinese officials and establishment scholars as a coalition of international and domestic hostile forces (e.g., Sun 2015; Wang C 2008).

C. Spreading Western thoughts in the public sphere

The efforts of students, intellectuals, journalists and artists were reflected in public discussions in that age. The public sphere for civil society to communicate included the publication of the marketized press, study groups in universities, the academic discussions,
and literary and art circles. The most influential Western thoughts in the 1980s were liberalism and individualism (Yang 2017; Wang 2014).

Welcoming the spring breeze of Western learning, college students and young intellectuals passionately discussed individualism and humanitarianism via private media and political forums. Through the press, Chinese young generations in the 1980s were talking about individualist topics like ‘what is the meaning of life’ and ‘how life should be designed’ in print press (Wang 2014). This trend of individualism was believed to involve a betrayal of collectivism, the view that individuals should make sacrifices for the common interests of the collective. The more they debated, the more students were frustrated about the contradictions between self-realisation and social inequality. Via academic study groups, students exchanged their political insights, grievance, and patriotism (Zuo & Benford 1995; Yang 2017). These mini study groups later served as breeding grounds in which ideas turned into collective actions during the student movements.

In academia, where the Westernisation trend was more drastic, liberal scholars openly opposed socialism through their theoretical discussions. Due to its weakening ideological hold, people could reinterpret Marxism in the 1980s (Chen & Deng 1995, p. 70). Some intellectuals proposed that China should apply ‘wholesale Westernisation’ – copy the US economically, politically and culturally. Some advocated for ‘greater academic freedom and diminished party controls’ (Cohen 1987, p. 96). As such, some academic discussions turned to questioning China’s political system and the leadership of the CPC.

Anti-establishment discourse also appeared in the arenas of music, literature and films as well. The documentary River Elegy (He Shang) criticised traditional Chinese civilisation for leading to ‘conservatism, ignorance and backwardness’, and held that China must learn from the West (Zhao 2001). The fever of rock and roll songs in the 1980s was another product of the Westernisation trend. Young Chinese singers such as Cui Jian were described as ‘lively’ and ‘Westernised’ (Chow 1993, p. 147). Their songs were filled with complicated emotions – such as anger and grievances about social problems, puzzlement and distress about the future, and longing for a Western lifestyle and freedom.

D. Frequently occurring political protests

The 1980s also witnessed widespread and frequently-occurring political protests, mainly student movements. The most important one was the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protest. As mentioned, its endurance, scale, and political demands meant that this event greatly affected
the CPC’s legitimacy. Before this incident, students’ movements had already become a ‘trend’ of Chinese society. There were around 1,000 student movements between 1978 and 1989; only in the year 1988 there was 274 popular incidents led by students (Zhang 2009).

One of the influential protests was the 1986 student movement. From November to December, more than 10,000 students demonstrated on streets of Hefei (Anhui province), Shanghai, Beijing, and other cities. The most important topic for this movement was democracy. Students in Hefei protested ‘the manipulation of election in the local People’s Congress’; and when the news of Hefei spread to Beijing and Shanghai, students there started to uphold the political demand for more democratic reforms (Zhao 2004, p. 139). This demonstration was forced to an end with the ‘anti-bourgeois liberalisation campaign’ in 1886-7 and the resignation of Hu Yaobang (Zhao 2004).

Much evidence shows that the central government was concerned about, but unable to stop these pro-democratic changes in Chinese society before 1989. Deng’s warnings about ‘bourgeois liberalisation’ reflected his rising concerns in this regard (Li W 2008). Reviewing the archive of his speeches, it emerges that Deng used this term 65 times between 1982 and 1990. Efforts were taken by Deng to reframe the borders for the economic reform. He raised the Four Cardinal Principles which particularly require China to insist on the CPC’s leadership and the socialist path. Before 1989, the central government also conducted two waves of counter policies to prevent China from Westernisation. One was the ‘anti-spiritual pollution campaign’ in 1983, and the other was the ‘anti-bourgeois liberalisation campaign’ in 1987, directed at liberal journalists (Jernow 1994). But the ‘bourgeois liberalisation’ still seemed to be a strong trend of ideology. The government’s worries about Westernisation accumulated throughout the 1980s as democratic ideas and activism swelled among citizens, until this trend erupted with the democracy movement that took place in front of the Tiananmen Square.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has presented two arguments. First, the fear of the Chinese government about Westernisation can be read as an indicator of democratic progresses and the CPC’s response to real legitimacy challenges. The peaceful evolution is about the uncertainty of the

15 Deng believed the ideological trend of liberalisation was a domestic reflection of the peaceful evolution strategy (Lin 2009).
government regarding its regime security. And embedded in its historical context (the 1980s), this uncertainty could reflect a genuine legitimacy crisis caused by the development of democratisation in Chinese society.

The second argument, however, is that the internet is not a necessary condition for the widespread shift to democracy in China; therefore, even if it might strengthen the existing democratic processes or reinvoke the government’s anxieties about Westernisation, it should not be seen as a revolutionary force leading to the transformation of democracy in China. To be a revolutionary engine for democracy, the internet would have to generate an outcome which is important, and could only be achieved by using this technology. The problem of Westernisation is importantly related to democracy by indicating its developments, but it is not a problem caused by the internet. The growth of democratic processes, initiated in the 1980s, is also not the unique creation of the internet.

However, there remain questions regarding why the Chinese leaders’ concerns about Westernisation reappeared after a long dormant period (1996-2011), whether this phenomenon is caused by China’s democratic processes, and what role the internet plays in its reoccurrence. In this regard, the historical review presented here provides valuable information about what causal mechanisms and variables may contribute to the democratic progresses in China. In general, this chapter finds that the enlightenment of citizens and the relative weakening of ideological control under the government could explain how democratisation developed in China and why peaceful evolution seemingly peaked in 1989. Four secondary factors seem to be essential for the ‘new enlightenment movement’ of the 1980s. These include (1) the birth of alternative information channels relatively independent from the government control (the media reform); (2) the development of the public sphere in which opinions could be shared, and dissent expressed; (3) the rise of liberal activists who aspire to promote democracy; and (4) frequently appearing collective political actions. As examined in the next chapter, these factors were strengthened in the internet age.
Chapter Three

‘Cyber colour revolution’ in the 2010s: explaining the liberating role of the internet

The internet is not a revolutionary force to the spread of democracy in China, though it has certainly led to the Chinese government’s recurring fear about ‘Westernisation’. The term ‘peaceful evolution’ had more or less disappeared from the official discourse for years before it was again mentioned by a Chinese leader in 2012. Its reappearance alongside discussions about the internet is an intriguing phenomenon, and raises the question whether such cyber-related concerns reflect a progression of democratisation in Chinese society – mirroring the situation in the 1980s – and if so, what role the internet has played in this process.

This chapter argues that the internet has indeed complemented the democratic progresses of the 1980s. That is, it has strengthened the four pro-democratic factors which promote people’s independence from the government’s control of ideology. (1) Cyberspace amplifies alternative voices, bypassing official lines of communication and creating a cyber-public sphere in which public opinion and opposition can foment. (2) Cyberspace media reforms have taken a great leap and (3) liberal opinion leaders have gained more voices and ability to guide public opinion. Thus, the government finds it more-and-more difficult to maintain its traditional dominance in terms of ideology. In terms of activism, (4) the internet provides a platform for organising and mobilising collective actions. Online activism challenges the CPC’s priority of ‘social stability’ and may damage popular support for the regime. Before examining these liberating possibilities of the internet, however, this chapter will first introduce the conspiracy theory of a ‘cyber colour revolution’ which has spread in government, intellectual and grassroots circles between 2011 and 2017.

3.1 The looming anxiety about the ‘cyber colour revolution’

The period 2011-2017 saw a surging anxiety among the Chinese authorities about the rise of internet-based or supported anti-government expressions and activities supported or sponsored by Western states (the US in particular). These activities are collectively referred to as a sign of the coming ‘colour revolution’, named after the series of revolutions that
occurred in the former Soviet Union in the early 2000s. The Chinese authorities not only straightforwardly warn against this colour revolution but also encourage similar expressions from the society.

The thesis draws on Simon Shen’s (2007) model of the structure of Chinese society as divided into the ‘top’, ‘bottom’, and ‘intermediary’ levels. The top level refers to the party-state, and represents the official discourse. This level includes leaders’ speeches, documents and policies from relevant ministers and departments, and reports and editorials of official media. The bottom group refers to the grassroots or citizens (netizens). Grassroots opinions can be observed from various social media (e.g. the comments section in Weibo), discussions on Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs), and comments sections of media websites. The intermediary level provides a two-way link between the ‘top’ and the ‘bottom’ (Shen 2007, p. 13). In the information age, the intermediary level not only includes establishment intellectuals (Gu, 1998), but also non-establishment elites and organisations who act as liberal opinion leaders.

The complicated interactions among the three levels construct a ‘tug of war’ between the pro-government camp and the anti-government liberals or dissidents fighting for popular support. There are subgroups within the bottom and intermediary levels who argue for different political values. For instance, liberal opinion leaders’ inflammatory insights often trigger the ideological concern of the Chinese government, which depends on establishment scholars to undo citizens’ negative impressions of the regime. This top-intermediary-bottom structure, i.e. China’s diverse society (Shen 2007), helps to understand the problematic relationship between the government, pro-democratic stakeholders, and ordinary people, which is the focus of this thesis.

As this introduction of the case study aims at articulating the Chinese concern about Westernisation, here it will solely examine those opinions which support the existence of colour revolution threats. For instance, for the intermediary level, here I will only present views of establishment intellectuals who speak in favour of the CPC’s governance. As they usually work for the state, their views can be regard as semi-official for their ability to shape

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16 The Arab Spring of 2011 is considered by China as a component of the colour revolutions as well.

17 The ‘unwritten within the establishment’ principle is that intellectuals’ public expression should be in line with the party’s rule and proper procedures (Gu 1998). Non-establishment intellectuals are those who do not obey this principle, usually hold liberal and pro-Westernisation thoughts. They are sometimes identified dissidents, and are currently termed as public intellectuals (Gong Zhi) – a network buzzword in China.
decision-making. Unravelling expressions about the risk of colour revolution at the bottom and intermediary levels, the thesis points out that the Chinese government supports and encourages such expressions.

3.1.1 The grassroots level: the flame war between the Fifty Cent Party and the American Cent Party

The claims about subversion by the US government initially appeared from the bottom level. The flame wars between the so-called Fifty Cent Party (Wu Mao Dang) and the American Cent Party (Mei Fen Dang) are among the earliest manifestations of this. The Fifty Cent Party broadly refers to network commentators speaking for the Chinese government, while the American Cent Party supports American values and a democratic system. Early debates between the two parties consisted of conflicts online, and featured in several blog articles such as Xia Xiaoqiang’s ‘Discuss America with the Wu Mao Dang’ (2011) and Chen Yilun’s response article ‘Discuss America with the Mei Fen Dang’ (2012). On the forum of the People’s Daily newspaper, netizens criticised commercial online media – Ifeng News, Tencent, NetEase, and Sohu – for their political leaning and spreading of anti-government and pro-American information. Ifeng is one of the leading commercial media outlets, while the latter three are China’s major web portals.

The existence of paid commentators, i.e. the American Cent Party, remained as (grassroots) gossip until 2016\(^\text{18}\) when one official Weibo account openly claimed that they might be real. In June 2016, a picture allegedly exposing the salary of the American Cent Party spread virally online. The picture revealed the user IDs of a suspected American Cent Party team, the members’ ranks within the team, team members’ salary and payment methods (Wang 2016). The official Weibo account of the Central Committee of the Communist Young League (CCCYL) engaged in the online discussion. In one article named ‘Is the Public Opinion Bonus True?’ published by this organisation, the author discussed the credibility of this allegation. The conclusion of the essay is that, though there is no direct evidence proving that the salary table is real, all the investigated suspects have shown a tendency to oppose the party-state; that some of them have even forged relations with other ‘infamous’ dissidents; and that their ranks in the team suggested a rigorous and reasonable division of labour (Yu

\(^{18}\) Despite there being English articles which have argued for the validity of the Fifty Cent Party, as yet no academic discussion has touched on the existence of the American Cent Party.
The CCCYL then cautiously confirmed that the American Cent Party is very likely real.

The attitude of the CCCYL can be understood as one of the manifestations of the government’s concerns about Westernisation. And this article is one of the many actions the Chinese government undertook in 2016, and we will see others occurring at the top level too. Although the CCCYL is relatively independent of the CPC, its discourse is normally understood by ordinary Chinese and Western observers to reflect the official attitude. This thesis argues that, via publishing this article, the official party was purposely sending a sign: that the government is aware of and will not tolerate anti-party expressions in cyberspace.

3.1.2 The intermediary level: theories about cyber ideological war

Intermediary-level expressions are represented by theories proposed by hawkish scholars and pro-party opinion leaders. The first typical manifestation is Dai Xu’s (2014) theory of ‘cyber public opinion war’. This hawkish scholar, from the National Defence University, proclaimed the existence of ‘the fifth column’ – the lurking US-sponsored Chinese spies aiming to subvert the regime – arguing that it is the ‘principal enemy against the political security of China’ (Dai 2014). The so-called ‘fourth world war’ 19, as Dai formulated, involves the American ideological warfare being carried out in cyberspace; it concerns the hostile forces frequently attacking and distorting the government via critiques and false rumours (ibid.). Dai also accused some Chinese internet content providers of misleading the public. They do so, added Dai, because they serve for foreign interests, since most of such companies have foreign financial backgrounds.

Another famous theory comes from Zhou Xiaoping’s viral video called ‘American Cultural Cold War’. In his 2014 video and article titled ‘the Nine Moves of the American Cultural Cold War against China’, Zhou alleged that cyberspace is becoming ‘a chaotic field of public opinion and the battlefield of ideology’. To name some alleged American tools in the video, Zhou claimed that the American Cent Party is eroding people’s outlook on China by defaming its moral idols and history, spreading the theory that China is about to collapse, and cooking up rumours to destroy the credibility of the Chinese authorities.

Interestingly, both theories received official acceptance to a certain degree. Daixu’s article was reported and reproduced by major media outlets in China such as Ifeng News and Sohou.

19 Dai refers to Deng Xiaoping’s view that the peaceful evolution is the US’s attempt to initiate a Third World War without gunpowder. Hence, he names the war in cyberspace the Fourth World War.
The source of publication provided by Ifeng News was the *People's Liberation Army Daily*, the official media outlet of the Chinese army, and one of the three surviving mouthpieces even during the Cultural Revolution era. Because of his close relationship with the government and military, Dai’s theory became popular in Chinese political BBSs for a time and is believed by many nationalist Chinese. His theories attracted more than 3 million followers and dozens of fan clubs, claiming to defend against the ideological infiltration of the internet collectively.

Zhou’s video and script were broadcasted by a wide range of media outlets, including official media like *CCTV, Guangming Online, People’s Daily*, and *China Daily*. CCCYL even cited Zhou’s clips in their posts when arguing for the existence of the cyber colour revolution. Importantly, Zhou was praised by Xi Jinping, the current president of China. In the 2015 Literary and Art Workers Symposium, Xi encouraged Zhou Xiaoping to ‘carry out more positive creations’ after shaking hands with him (Zhou 2014). Xi’s acknowledgement added an unusual meaning to Zhou’s theory: it made observers believe that the Chinese government approved Zhou’s viewpoints. For example, Edward Wong (2014), the journalist, interpreted Xi’s support as a sign of the surging anti-Western sentiment among the senior CPC leaders. Chinese liberal opinion leaders also bitterly attacked Zhou’s discourse. ‘The verbal war between Zhou Xiaoping’s supporters and opponents seemed to be the liberals’ sarcasm against Zhou’s opinions’, a public opinion report commented, ‘but it *de facto* indicated the deep ideological divergences in contemporary China’ (CNNIC 2014).

The situation of the intermediary level shows that the CPC worries about ideological divergences. The government believes that opinion leaders are powerful in guiding public opinion. Therefore, it chooses to implicitly and explicitly approve of the patriotic ideas which warn about the threat of a colour revolution. Spreading via official media, these theories read more like official attitudes. Two conclusions can be safely inferred from this: first, the Chinese government is aware of the legitimacy crisis caused by the ideological divergences; and second, this crisis is entangled with the people’s use of the internet.

### 3.1.3 The government level: discourse of the Chinese leaders and the official media

The anxiety about a possible colour revolution was more explicitly reflected in the discourse and policies of the Chinese government. Such a concern officially appeared in 2012 when

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20 Only rhetorical manifestations of leaders’ speeches and official media coverage are presented here, for the policy adjustments will be the emphases of the next two chapters.
Hu Jintao, the then Chinese president, alleged that ‘international hostile forces were orchestrating the Westernisation and disintegration conspiracy against China’ (Hu 2012). This formulation was the first time that Hu, after his nine-year reign, openly stated a concern about so-called peaceful evolution (Sun 2012).

From 2013 onwards, Xi Jinping started using the phrase ‘colour revolution’ in his speeches. Xi said in 2014: ‘The rise of China has caused concern, anxiety and even resentment of Western countries. The latter party are exerting increasing efforts to Westernise and polarise China and are actively scheming the colour revolution against China.’ (Xi 2014) At the same time, Xi (2014) said that China is facing a national security threat involving unprecedented internal and external factors. One of these threats, identified by Xi, is ‘splittism’, or behaviours which damage the integrity of China’s sovereignty and territory. To avoid splittism, Xi claimed, China has to ‘firmly combat against the splitting, erosion, and sabotage from the foreign hostile forces’ (Xi 2014).

Cyberspace was considered both a site of trouble making and a solution to the security problem:

> Cyberspace and information security are the new comprehensive challenges we face, which involves national security and social stability … We are facing the realistic and prominent problem regarding how to reinforce the legal construction and public opinion guidance in cyberspace to ensure the information communication order of cyberspace and the social stability as well. (Xi 2013)

As the text notes, the unfavourable situation of the Chinese government relates to unfriendly public opinion driven by online communications. The solution of the government was to guide online opinion and enact legislation covering cyberspace activities. Xi therefore demanded that propaganda departments throughout China should exert a more active influence. Relevant official organs should ‘guide people to distinguish between right and wrong’, and let them ‘understand contemporary China and the outside world more comprehensively and objectively’, said Xi in a propaganda conference held in 2013. This formulation of the ‘outside world’ and ‘right and wrong’ again alluded to his distrust in Westernisation in cyberspace.

At the same time, Xi raised the idea of ‘the order of cyberspace’ to regulate internet content. The idea of ‘order of cyberspace’ was derived from ‘the order of society (social stability). This idea reflects China’s conceptualisation of cyber security or information security (Cai
And the pro-government camp considers that the contemporary political participation of citizens in cyberspace has the problems of irrationality and disorder (Jin 2011; Song 2013). As will be seen in Chapter 4, censorship of the internet has been applied as the solution to this ‘disorder of the internet political participation’ (Zhang 2007). To justify internet censorship, Xi said to the Washington Post (Tharoor 2015), ‘freedom is the purpose of order, order the guarantee for freedom’.

The upsurge of the Westernisation concern can also be observed from official media publications. Edward Wong (2014) calculated that in 2014, there were at least 42 articles in the People’s Daily blaming the domestic problems of China on the interference of Western/foreign forces – three times the number of similar articles published in 2013. In June 2015, the People’s Daily published a full page, including five editorials from pro-government scholars, discussing a possible colour revolution. As the BBC (Su 2015) observed, ‘the CPC had rarely issued articles as collectively and sharply as these’. Afterwards, at least eight articles about the colour revolution were published by official media around October 2015. Those editorials discussed the aftermath of the Syrian revolution. Those media, such as the People’s Daily, Guangming Daily, and the Red Flag Manuscript, are the most famous and orthodox mouthpieces of the government. In these articles, Chinese scholars delivered a consistent argument: looking at the disastrous political scene of the Middle East after the colour revolutions in those Arab Spring countries provides China with the lesson that democracy cannot be transplanted randomly. The phenomenon that official media publish editorials frequently with opinions highly consistent signifies that the government is genuinely worried about a colour revolution and Westernisation.

Overall, the idea of a cyber colour revolution has become epidemic at every level of Chinese society. The belief that Westernisation is occurring reappeared in China among Chinese netizens and intellectuals after 2011. The government also tacitly supported such views. The concerns of the Chinese government about this topic were frequently expressed after 2013, peaked in 2014, and exerted the widest social influence in 2016. Looking at the official

21 The Chinese government understands information as the content and data transmitted online (Cai 2015). Content security is discussed from the perspective of information security. In addition, network security refers to the security of hardware and the network space. These two concepts later blend into an integral and broader concept of ‘cybersecurity’.

22 Song Chao (2013, p.18) concludes the three folds about the disorder of online participation: (1) netizens do not agree with the authority of the government in the process of participation and violate the social order set by the laws of China; (2) netizens cannot make rational judgements and decisions; (3) netizens participate beyond what is allowed by China’s political system.
expressions we can confirm the twin sources of the government’s fears. First, the government is worried that negative news, criticism and rumours about the regime would erode its public support. Second, it fears that if the Chinese people come to hold less trust in the mainstream ideology, this can lead to the outburst of anti-establishment social movements such as the Arab Spring in Middle East. Therefore, the government holds that cyberspace law and order matter.

3.2 The proliferation of the internet and growing online participation in China

As in the 1980s, in response to its partial loss of ideological control and legitimacy, the government warned against peaceful evolution. But this time the internet was involved – not only as an element of the claims of the government about Westernisation, but more importantly, as a facilitating element in China’s existing democratic processes. Like the democratisation in the 1980s, China’s internet development and democratisation in cyberspace in the twenty-first century was rooted in its economic growth and the rise of the middle class. Four factors (the reform of media, the development of a public sphere, the rise and growing impact of pro-democratic individuals and perhaps organisations, and political activism) have been identified in the former chapter which have contributed to China’s democratisation since the 1980s. These factors provide the causal mechanisms explaining how the internet promotes democratic processes and challenges the legitimacy of the Chinese regime.

Since getting connected in 1994, China has become ‘a country of the internet’ more and more each year. From 2011 to 2017, the number of internet users increased from 500 million in 2011 (38.3% of the total population) to 731 million in 2016 (53.2% of the total population) (China Internet Network Information Centre [CNNIC] 2012, 2017; see Appendix 1). By the end of 2014, China’s news market and public opinion have been influenced by ‘WeChat, Weibo and news apps’ (两微一端, liangwei yiduan23) (POOPD 2014; CNNIC 2016a). The proliferation of ‘WeChat, Weibo and news apps’ means that the formation of online public opinion is dependent on people’s use of these applications. Chinese netizens increasingly rely on mobile applications (apps) to obtain news and information. This trend is particularly strong among social media users (see Appendix 1). Weibo and WeChat became China’s leading social media platforms around 2011 and 2013, and the CPC judges its ideological

23 Literally ‘two weis, one duan’ which refers to Wechat (Weixin in Chinese), Weibo & ‘duan’ which refers to Apps in general.
control and popular support based on citizens’ activities on the two platforms. This thesis therefore introduces the two platforms in Appendix 2.

Internet developments accelerate online political participation. In a broad definition, political participation here refers to the activity of private citizens that are aimed at influencing government decision-making (Huntington & Nelson 1976, p. 3). The proliferation of the internet enables Chinese citizens to be more engaged in public affairs than in the pre-internet era.

Historically, between the establishment of the PRC (1949) and the initial stage of economic reforms (the 1980s), people’s political awareness was relatively underdeveloped (Jin 2011). Political participation was largely passive, or only mobilised by external and superior forces – for instance, by official organisations, the so-called ‘ideological education’, and the ‘modelling effect’ of party-members (Jin 2011, pp. 32-34). After the 1978 economic reforms, China’s political participation was relatively enhanced: it became more constructive, independent, pluralist and rational (Jin 2011; Liang & Qiu 2004). But political engagement at this stage was still immature.

As we enter the era of internet politics, participation becomes more developed. The topics and scale of online participation are broader and larger than in the past. People’s engagement becomes more direct and spontaneous (Li B 2008). As a Chinese scholar summarises, there are two broad modes of online participation: ‘rightful participation’ involves online discussion of public affairs and democratic supervision, while ‘illegal participation’ leads to mass disturbances (Jin 2011, p. 36). We will not distinguish between legal and illegal participation here; but this classification points to the two dimensions of the government’s concerns. The first dimension is related to the long-term effect of the internet in creating an online public sphere public opinion and dissent can foment and spread. The second dimension refers to people’s ability to transform ‘alternative ideologies’ into political action.

3.3 The cyber public sphere and the difficulty of the CPC in guiding public opinion

This section focuses on the impact of the internet on the online public sphere and public opinion. In the long run, the internet has empowered three pro-democratic factors, namely, the public sphere (public opinion), media reform, and opinion leaders.
3.3.1 Moving toward a cyber public sphere

Online participation breeds the growth of civil society and the public sphere (Xiong 2011; He 2012). Civil society is the problematic relation between the private and the public (Seligman 1995, p. 5). A public sphere is a part of civil society but governed by its own laws (Habermas 1991). Castells (2008) conceptualises the public sphere a space of communication of ideas and projects that emerge from society and are addressed to the decision makers, through which the government and civil society interact and build relationship. Although there might be divergent views about the definition of civil society in China, it is certain that China is moving towards a civil society. Yu Keping, who defines civil society in China as the ‘total of civil organisations or civil relations except for the state’ (Yu 2003, p. 1) puts: ‘with the development of market-oriented economy and democratic politics, Chinese civil society has rapidly risen, and play an increasingly significant role in the political, economic and social life in China’ (Yu 2006, p. 120).

The ‘overriding feature of China’s online civil society’ is the birth of a cyber public sphere’ (Shen & Breslin 2010, p. 5). Scholars agree that a cyber public sphere has appeared in China, though it is still in the primary stages of development (Yang 2007; He 2012; Xiong 2011). ‘The creation of the internet space in China encourages the involvement of laymen, making it a truly public sphere’ (Shen & Breslin 2010, p. 5). Xiong Guangqing (2011) alleges that the public sphere is more developed in cyber space than that in conventional spaces. A good example of this type of public sphere is Weibo’s public square, introduced in Appendix 2.

The developments of cyber public sphere and citizens’ political participation in cyberspace are particularly witnessed by the growing number of ‘cyber public opinion incidents’ since 2003. In China, such incidents refer to those heatedly discussed issues which shape public opinion and may put pressure on policy-makers or damage the prestige of the government. The year 2003 has been referred to as ‘the first year of the cyber-public sphere’, 2007 the ‘year of cyber public opinion’, and 2011 ‘the microblogging year on government affairs’ (He 2012; Song 2013). The Sun Zhigang incident (2003), the Xiamen’s PX project incidents (2007), the Deng Yujiao incident (2009), the ‘hide and seek’ incident (2009), and the Wei Zexi incident (2016) are some of the significant incidents that have triggered netizens’ heated discussions which have put pressure on the authorities.

As for how the growing public sphere benefits democratisation, it can be argued that it emancipates and empowers people in terms of their ability to educate and express themselves
about government policy, and thus participate in political process. Regarding emancipation, citizens, now have more channels through which to express their ideas and protect their rights than in the past, and thus can ‘supervise’ democratic processes (He 2012). By discussing public affairs, they develop their awareness of political matters, which is one of the essential elements that enhances citizens’ engagement (Liang & Qui 2004).

Regarding empowerment, the development of the public sphere impacts on policy agenda-setting through the influence of public opinion (Xiong 2011, p. 44). Agenda setting refers to ‘the process of prioritising public issues according to their importance’ (Wang S 2008, p. 57), and this covers media agendas (issues concentrate by media), policy agendas (considerations of policy makers) and public agendas (issues of public interest and visibility in society) in China. With the development of the online public sphere, public agenda, which was once beyond the reach of influence of the people, has become increasingly important.

### 3.3.2 The mechanism: striving to guide public opinion

Public opinion always impacts on agenda-setting and decision-making. Here the important questions should be why cyber public opinion is special and why the Chinese government treat cyber public opinion as a severe challenge to the legitimacy of the regime. Here I seek to answer these questions through two interrelated arguments. First, the government and official media lose their exclusive advantage in setting the public agenda; and second, with other voices involved and the channel of public discussion opened, many hidden and emerging problems would be exposed, making the government difficult to handle these problems without risking its legitimacy.

First, the Chinese government has partly lost its relative advantage in guiding public opinion, particularly if viewed in comparative historical perspective. The government no longer has monopoly over the production and dissemination of information, strictly referring to the sources of news and information. Although this situation had begun after the marketization of media, the introduction of online websites and social media has raised the alternative news sources to a higher level. Private internet content providers keep reporting on social conflicts, and individuals can act as self-media or information sources themselves through internet platforms. Compared with the traditional mass media, cyberspace is real-time, cross-regional, interactive, relatively anonymous, and was relatively uncensored until recent years (Liu 2001;
Zhang 2007; Shirk 2011; Wang 2012; Xiong 2012). These features favoured the demise of the government’s information monopoly.

Another comparative disadvantage is that the government can no longer completely ensure that information circulating in the public sphere is in line with the regime’s interests. In providing a platform for alternative voices, the internet acts as alternative media and information sources. In fact, ‘the internet has become the only platform for alternative messages to be circulated and reconstructed in China in a bottom-up manner.’ (Shen & Breslin 2010, p. 5). Public discussions existed before, but were more isolated due to geographical barriers. The far-reaching approach of speaking via mass media is largely dominated by, or rigorously censored by, the state. Although the marketization of media after 1978 started to change the situation, citizens’ lack of channels for expression was not solved before internet use became more widespread. Considering the growing amount of available information, the speed of communication, and the variety of information sources (Shirk 2011), public opinion (or even dissent) forms much more quickly and fiercely now than in the past. And due to the long-time lack of channels for political participation and discussion, Chinese netizens are enthusiastic about sharing opinions and participating in public affairs. This type of dynamic always makes online debates fierce, sometimes becoming a carnival, with netizens vigorously expressing their emotions and exchanging polarised views.

Because of its decreasing advantage, the government believes itself that it is losing its ability to guide public opinion and set the public agenda – i.e., to determine what issues become visible to ordinary people, and influence how they should think about them. Because public concerns can influence policy-making, the government, media, and opinion leaders have an interest in guiding what topics citizens become concerned with. And setting the public agenda relates to the choices of what stories are told and strategies of storytelling.

The official party itself describes the difficulty in guiding public opinion as China splitting into ‘two public opinion fields’. One field is the official or mainstream field, and the other is the ‘civil public opinion field’, including the private-owned media and internet public

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24 Loose censorship is said in comparison with traditional mass media. Nearly every article published by the press should be censored by the editor, and this is why the official side appeals to bring editors back for those online reports. According to Shirk (2011), ‘the most dramatic effect of the Internet is how fast it can spread information, which in turn helps skirt official censorship’ (p. 2). This was even truer when internet censorship was not mature in China (before 2014).

25 The theory was initially proposed by Nan Zhenzhong, the former editor-in-chief of Xinhua News Agency, in 2003, and was widely accepted by scholars and the authorities in recent years.
sphere (Zhao 2014). The subtext of this official viewpoint is that there was previously only one field – the official and the mainstream one. Likewise, referring to agenda setting, Wang Shaoguang (2006) argues that the media agenda and the official counterpart were highly consistent before the digital age. But the flourishing of online media somehow broke up the dominance of media agenda and their role as a ‘trumpet’ for the official view. Instead, online media and opinion leaders start to act in independent roles in agenda-setting through public agenda- i.e., guiding people’s opinions of social controversies.

Second, online public opinion impacts on agenda setting by exposing issues which used to be covered or neglected by the official outlets, and then forcing the authorities to respond. More often, cyberspace does not create new social contradictions, but only brings them onto the stage. To name a few, these social contradictions include tensions between officials and citizens, economic inequality, legal injustice, as well as a government’s breach of duty concerning public security issues. Chinese authorities used to resort to mass communication to sway the public by filtering information and forbidding the distribution of destabilising information (Zhang 2007). But in the cyber public sphere, private content providers, opinion leaders, and netizens can frequently force the neglected issues into the public agenda (Wang 2006). Hence, Zhu Huaxin calls netizens a *de facto* pressure group in China today (He 2012).

For instance, in disasters, accidents and social controversies, if the government is reluctant to tell the truth, it is often swayed by the efforts of ‘careful netizens’ to expose it. As examined below, the public opinion of the ‘7.23 Wenzhou train collision’ represents a case like this. Once unmasked, if not dealt with properly, those events are likely to give rise to citizens’ grievances, and even generate devastating mass movements. (Indeed, we only have to recollect the student movements in 1989.) Here, the Chinese authorities risk sacrificing their legitimacy and popular support.

The government is relatively less powerful in controlling ideology and guiding public opinion in the information age. It is interesting to consider to whom this power of ‘guiding public opinion’ has been redistributed. Answering this question also helps to understand the logic of the CPC’s counter policies in response to internet-driven democratic processes (to be discussed in Chapter 4). In information age, the internet content providers (ICPs) and online opinion leaders are becoming increasingly powerful in influencing the public agenda.
3.3.3 The media reform represented by internet content providers

The flourish of internet content providers acting as alternative voices is in fact the development of media commercialisation which had appeared after the 1978 economic reform (see Chapter 2). After the 1990s, the media development trend led to the flourishing of privately-owned media. It laid the foundation of the profit-oriented atmosphere of today’s internet media ecology (Shirk 2011). Online media engaged in fierce competition for audiences and advertising revenue (Poell, Kloet & Zeng 2014), and chasing for web traffic (Yang, 2009), they became interested in eye-catching social contradictions and political scandals, while also providing ‘an unprecedented space for protest’ (Shirk 2011, p. 4).

The proliferation of Weibo, WeChat, and news apps reinforces the role of cyberspace as a public sphere and its importance as the birthplace of public opinion. Social media and mobile apps have become the major information sources covering social conflicts and contradictions (POOPD 2015). A considerable proportion of recent breaking news was initially disclosed by Weibo users, and then developed into one of the so-called ‘public opinion incidents’ described above (Li & Liu 2014). According to data from the People’s Daily, among the 500 incidents reported in 2015 which were generated heated debated and expressions of public opinion, 44.4% were first exposed on the internet, and 12.8% of them were from the sources of Weibo, WeChat, and news apps (POOPD 2015).

3.3.4 Online opinion leaders: leading the concerns of netizens

Besides private news websites and social media, opinion leaders have become the second non-government group to acquire new power in setting the public agenda. To some extent, they play an even more significant role than students and intellectuals did in the 1980s in spreading alternative ideologies, picking the topics for online discussion, and mobilising collective action. This is because their insights are more extensively heard via the communication tool of the internet.

The internet opinion leaders are the intellectuals and online celebrities who express concern about social and public affairs, and who can reach a wide range of audiences; they could be scholars, experts, media personnel, elites from different industries and sometimes organisations (Zhu, Liu & Shan 2013). They play an active role in the social network of the internet, providing information and opinions that exert impact on others (Cao & Zhang 2016).
Normally, key opinion leaders in China exert influence on Weibo (as the Big Vs\textsuperscript{26}), WeChat (by operating a public account) and other major internet communities (e.g. Tianya, Zhihu, and Douban).

The power of opinion leaders can be explained by the two-step theory flow of communication formulated by Lazarsfeld (Zhu, Liu & Shan 2013; Fei & Wang 2016). The theory suggests that influence stemming from the mass media first reaches opinion leaders, who pass their ideas onto a larger population over whom they exert influence (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1966).

In a digital society where information traffic implies power, opinion leaders occupy a superior position in such a hierarchy. They are either skilful in online expression, or at the top of information sources which ensure that they release information that has high credibility (Zeng & Huang 2012). Therefore, cyber celebrities are powerful in terms of spreading information and disseminating value (Cao & Zhang 2016).

Considering these traits, opinion leaders are capable in setting the policy agenda through guiding online discussions (Zhu, Liu & Shan 2013; Zeng & Huang 2012). The proliferation of Weibo and WeChat reinforces the power of Chinese opinion leaders (as to how topics are put forward for public discussion on Weibo, refer to Appendix 2). Social capital is maximised by interconnectivity, simple operation and fast spread of information facilitated by social media (Fei & Wang 2016). After the internet becomes one of the major sources of breaking news (POOPD 2016), scholars found that the outbreak and tone of public opinion have become entangled with the opinions and interests of internet celebrities. Grassroots netizens believe that they determine what topics are discussed in the cyber-public sphere and how certain issues are thought about; but only those topics that are of interest to opinion leaders can be intensively discussed by the public and thus impact on the policy responses of the government (Zeng & Huang 2012, p. 116). Therefore, the political tendency of opinion leaders – whether they are pro-government or pro-democracy – has been a concern to the Chinese government. Chapter 4 will come back to this issue.

\textbf{3.3.5 The government’s legitimacy challenge and the case of the ‘7.23 Wenzhou train collision’}

Here we briefly review the CPC’s challenge: the Chinese authorities are forced to change their traditional skilled approach to maintaining their ideological reign and legitimacy. This

\textsuperscript{26} Big Vs’ are accounts of popular Weibo users that have been given special ‘verified’ status by the forums host, Sina. Normally accounts with more than 500,000 followers are called Big Vs.
challenge is caused by (1) the birth of an online public sphere which largely expands popular political discussion, while the government’s advantage in guiding public opinion has been partly reattributed to (2) the internet content providers (media) and (3) opinion leaders. The development of these factors encourages the power balance to move in a direction which benefits people’s independence of ideological control.

The government’s challenge has three respects. First, socio-political discussions online encourage netizens to think critically about the state’s power. Second, the internet unmasks hidden social problems, helps to reveal truth, and forces the government to respond. Third, by exchanging views about these problems, people also put pressure on the agenda-setting by putting forward online public opinions. In each circumstance, the government can no longer continue its old methods of appeasing people. Failing to deal with these problems, the government loses legitimacy.

We use the incident of the ‘7.23 Wenzhou train collision’ to understand how the legitimacy of regime can be challenged through the cyber-public sphere. The case showcases the increasing role of netizens and opinion leaders in this alternative field of public opinion. It also indicates how the traditional Chinese bureaucratism was inadaptable to deal with online public opinion and why it becomes harder for the government to mask social conflicts in its attempts to hold onto ideological control.

In 2011, two high-speed trains collided and caused 40 deaths and around 200 injuries. Due to the inappropriate crisis management of the Ministry of Railways (the department which was responsible for railway incidents) and that of other relevant departments, the incident caused a certain degree of public mistrust in the government. The official statement was not released until one day after the fatal incident, leaving a vacuum period for public panic and anger to spread (Shao 2015). Second, the relevant departments were ambiguous about the cause of the incident, first blaming it on a lightning storm, and then on a false signal and staff failure to notice the error. Third, after only five hours of rescue work, at 3:00am on the 24th, July, the government claimed that there was no sign of life on, and buried the front of the train. However, at 5:00pm on the same day, a two-year girl was found alive. Facing questions during the press conference, the spokesman of the Ministry of Railways, Wang Yongping, gave an inappropriate remark: ‘The girl’s rescue is a miracle of life, and whether you believe (the explanation) or not, I believe it’. Fourth, the official media were silenced. Xinhua News
Agency and People’s Daily did not report the issue in detail; other major official media even did not highlight the event in their headlines on the 24 July (Wan 2012).

By contrast, Weibo users first reported the incident and pushed the government to respond. Just four minutes after the collision, a Weibo user first posted the disaster. Other netizens then paid close attention to the rescue process. Netizens were soon disappointed about the slow reaction of the government departments. They also questioned the short and hasty rescue process and mocked Wang Yongping’s irresponsible ‘I-believe-it’ phrase. The phrase became one of the most popular memes of the year. The most important effort was their demand for truth: netizens pushed the official party to release the cause of the incident, their reasons for burying the front car, and the number and names of victims.

In the aftermath of buzzing criticism, netizens ‘highly praised the quality of foreign high-speed train’ and ‘compared China’s accident prevention responsibility systems with that of the Western countries’ (Wan 2012, p. 8). For the CPC, this comparison by itself sounds like a claim supporting Western ideology and political system. Another focus was the severe corruption of China. Such emphases echoed the official concern about that the public use of the internet might bring about legitimacy problems. A Reuters report (Wong 2011) remarked that the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s trip to Wenzhou was a sign of ‘how worried the Communist Party is about losing its credibility, which could fan challenges to its rule’.

The 7.23 Wenzhou train collision incident is a victory of people setting the policy-agenda. It not only manifested the power of public opinion, but also warned the authorities about how outdated their traditional information strategies were. Due to netizens’ efforts and insistence, the central government could not underplay the incident. The State Council established a special team to investigate the incident, with the final report being released at the end of 2011. The report pointed out who the primary responsible officials were and outlined their punishments. In response to netizens’ concerns about corruption, the central government investigated and charged some senior officials, including Liu Zhijun (the Minister of Railways) and Zhang Shuguang (the Secretary for Transport). And it all happened under netizens’ spotlight.

3.4 Online activism: the fourth pro-democratic factor

The CPC also worries that public opinion may act as a cradle of collective action. If the Chinese authorities cannot find out, appease, or solve popular grievances properly, they are
likely to face an outbreak of social protests. Therefore, the fourth pro-democratic factor tests whether the internet makes activism more realisable.

As discussed in Chapter 1, people’s use of the internet creates a new mode of collective action, known as online activism. Compared with discussions in the cyber public sphere, online activism leads to short-term but fiercer impact. First, four types of online activism will be introduced. By providing empirical cases for each type, the purpose is to claim that, with all types of online activism that have appeared in China’s internet society, the internet bestows people with the capability to put ideas into action. And the Chinese government can hardly ignore the potential power of online activism. This section continues to clarify that some types of activism represent a greater crisis for the legitimacy of the government than others. Third, rumour, as an important part of the government’s fear of losing ideological control, is a special form collective action and better understood in the light of the government’s concerns about stability maintenance.

Referring to the typology of online activism structured by Earl et al (2010), the thesis talks about four types of activism in cyberspace: broadcasting protest information online; participating in activism in cyberspace (i.e., online participation); using the internet to facilitate offline activism (i.e., online facilitation); and organising whole activities in cyberspace (i.e., online organising). All the four types of online activism have corresponding empirical cases in China.

Broadcasting information about ongoing protests, this type of activism expands the influence of offline activism. But it resembles the function of the internet in forming public opinion, since no collective action is engendered. Therefore, although plenty of cases belong to this type, we will not pay much attention to it, for the impact and the mechanism of influence has been sufficiently discussed in the previous section.

The case of Sun Zhigang (2003) is a typical example of an online participation event. Sun was a graduate student and migrant worker who died in an asylum of Guangzhou. Because he had not obtained a temporary residence permit in Guangzhou and therefore was legally considered an ‘illegal migrant’, Sun’s detention was implemented under the so-called custody and repatriation system. In practice, this regulation gave the local public security bureaus ‘unchecked power to detain urban beggars and vagrants and to repatriate them forcibly to
their place of registered residence’ (Hand 2006, p. 120). After Sun’s death was reported, this incident ignited discussions in online chat rooms and forums. Netizens deeply sympathised with Sun’s experience and were irritated by the detention system. Via internet outlets, legal workers and scholars led the discussion, unmasking the hidden legal problem and organising several legal petitions (Hand 2006, p. 124). Eventually, with several petitions presented to the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, the custody and repatriation system was replaced by a new measure whereby the voluntary aids were provided and coercive measures forbidden. The Sun Zhigang case opened the gate for ordinary people to use the internet and legally urge for central government reforms. As the process involved citizens’ online petitions, it is a case of an online participation event.

In terms of the online facilitation of activism, which is about the role of the internet in promoting people’s participation in ongoing protests that are organised in the physical world, the 2014 Hong Kong pro-democracy protests is representative case. The action referred to as ‘Occupy the Central’ was raised and organised by several civil groups, while more citizens participated in it after the event was reported through the internet and mass media.

As for online organising activism, a recent case is when Chinese netizens initiated a ‘meme war’ (or War of Biaoqingbao) on Facebook to protest Taiwan’s proposition of independence. The entire ‘meme war’ took place in the arena of cyberspace. Online mobilisation has also led to offline collective actions. In Xiamen’s PX protest (2007), citizens expressed their concerns about a petrochemical project (the paraxylene project) launched by the government leading to the ruin of the city environment. They initiated a protest via the internet, calling for a peaceful ‘collective stroll’ around the building ground of the planned project. The ‘stroll’ ended up with compromise of the local government who announced it would suspend the project, which it later terminated altogether.

Chinese online activism requires a sophisticated understanding. One the one hand, online activism in China does not appear as frequently as incidents which generate online public opinion (see the data presented in Chapter 4). Using the internet to spread protest information is a bit more common, while the other three types are rather rare. On the other hand, what is a problem for the Chinese government is not only the quantity but the destructive potential of online activism. The concern of the government has to do with citizens’ increasing capability

27 According to Keith Hand (2006), this regulation was always implemented with coercive measures to manage the flow of migrant workers for the consideration of protecting social order.
in starting activism. Collective actions on political, social, environmental, and nationalistic issues strongly suggest that the internet has been an efficient tool for organising and mobilising collective actions. Not only the government, but also other interested parties are amazed by online activism’s spontaneous occurrence, large scale, great social influence, the relative convenience for citizens to organise, and the difficulty of the government to predict, suppress, and control influence each time.

The leading consideration for the Chinese government to pursue hyper vigilance over online activism has to do with the social order. First, the social order has become the leading concern of the government ever since the collective actions undertaken in 1989. Based on the status of social order, the CPC evaluates its legitimacy and popular support. Second, frequent occurrences of social movements manifest the government’s failure to maintain ideological control over the public. In specific protests, the central government is also troubled by (1) the spreading of false rumours online that cause further panic or riots and (2) online discussions that, usually led by opinion leaders, ascribe the root of specific problems to China’s non-democratic political system.

For the rulers of China, nearly all collective actions are unwelcome, but some suggest greater danger than others. The second task of this section is to specify this type of activism which perceived as greater threat of the government’s legitimacy. Two dimensions contribute to this identification: whether such online activism takes place in the physical world, and whether the theme of the issue is ‘legitimacy-sensitive’.

The first dimension concerns the arena where the collective action takes place. Online activism with an offline basis represents a severer problem for the rulers. Firstly, the change of regime is meaningful only when a revolution happens in the real world. Secondly, activism happening offline often represents a severer threat to the social order. This is not to deny the importance of activism such as online petitions and polling. But as to its social impact and contribution to democracy, broadcasting protest information and online participation are better understood in terms of their long-term impact on brewing dissent and cultivating awareness of political participation, rather than from the point of view of social (in)stability, in which case instant and destructive impact is entailed. To sum up, the Chinese

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28 Regime change can also be achieved by a coup, led by other senior officials or the military. But this thesis only discusses the possibility of revolution, a bottom-up manner of regime change.
government is more likely to be concerned about physical activism which is facilitated or organised by cyberspace.

Discussing the theme of collective actions (the second dimension), our identification of activism that endangers the CPC’s legitimacy can be more specific. There are two types of activism that are legitimacy-sensitive. The first type concerns whether there are (anti-establishment) political demands associated with the relevant action. Yang Guobin's definition of online political activism accurately explains why this type of activism threatens regime legitimacy - because it focuses on ‘human rights, political reform and other issues that touch directly on how China is governed, by whom, and on what basis’ (Yang 2009c, p. 33-4). For instance, the Hong Kong pro-democracy demonstration in 2014 protested for a general election, and therefore was considered by the central government a challenge to how China is governed.

However, some non-political activism is also a threat to the government’s legitimacy. The second type of activism regards protests that involve vital social contradictions, which essentially injure the prestige of the authorities or disturb the social order. One additional criterion involves seeing whether violence and arrests are involved in suppressing the protest. In the Shifang Protest (2012), which was a response to fears about a copper plant programme causing environmental and health problems, thousands of residents of Shifang, Sichuan province, demonstrated on the streets and in front of government buildings. Usually, the Chinese authorities hold a mild attitude towards environmental activism, such as their attitude in the anti-PX protest of Xiamen. But during the Shifang protests, violent confrontations happened, making the case more sensitive and destructive for the official party. As reported, ‘police used tear gas to disperse crowds’ after demonstrators lobbed bricks at government offices and attacked police vehicles (Branigan 2012). 27 citizens were arrested as ‘suspected criminals’ (Blanchard 2012). There were two other interesting points about this incident, namely that the protest was initiated by students, and that, in its open letter, the local government urged students not to be ‘used’ by hostile foreign forces with ‘ulterior motives’ (Sina 2 July 2012). Comparing it with the demonstration in front of Tiananmen, the similarity shows that the ecosystem of protests in China has some consistency.

In brief, the Chinese authorities are especially concerned about online activism which happens offline with themes that threaten the regime’s legitimacy. A legitimacy-sensitive protest involves (1) political activism which directly questions the type of government or the
current ruler(s) of China or (2) demonstrations caused by vital social contradictions which disturb the social order. It is on this basis that Chapter 4 will evaluate how much the Chinese regime is threatened by internet-driven collective actions.

Our third task introduces a special type of collective action, namely online rumours. Rumours are one of the important sources of online dissent, but they are better understood within the framework of collective action and stability maintenance. A rumour here means false news, misinformation, or speculative commentary on topics such as dubious health claims, made-up science, and conjecture about political figures (Ng 2015). Many falsehoods filtered and censored online are not destabilising or politically sensitive (Ng 2015), but are still considered a threat to regime security. Some scholars have convincingly argued that this is because rumour is a form of social protest (Hu 2009).

China’s rumours are born in an environment in which people lack channels of expression and the official line is distrusted by citizens. A historical study of Mao’s reign suggests that official control over information contributes to rumours as an outlet for political resistance (Smith 2006; 2008). When media outlets were dominated by the propaganda system (before 1978), people lacked confidence in the credibility of the official mouthpiece.

This credibility gap has been preserved in the contemporary era of online censorship. There is even a belief that the authorities would not censor information if there was nothing to hide, which results in the phenomenon of people preferring to believe rumours rather than government’s words (Liu 2013). Therefore, rumour is a type of implicit collective action of the people, representing their rebellion through speech and criticism of officials’ credibility (Ng 2015). Conversely, the government’s campaign against rumours, more than just eliminating falsehoods, is an attempt to reconstruct the credibility and legitimacy of the regime.

Online rumour has been introduced here for it is important in the thesis. It has appeared in the CPC’s accusations of Westernisation occurring in the cyber-public sphere, and will be frequently mentioned when discussing the counter policies of the government (Chapter 4). The Chinese government identifies online rumours as one of the main drawbacks of the internet since they are used by anti-government forces. The CPC’s campaign against online rumours also manifests how broadly political security and social stability are defined in China.
3.5 Conclusion

The chapter argues that the internet enhances democratisation in China’s, mainly by strengthening the factors which promote people’s independence from the ideological control of the state. The first part of the chapter introduces China’s recurring conspiracy theory about Westernisation. Different from the fear of peaceful evolution during the Cold War, the concerns of 2011-2017 have much to do with cyberspace. The second part of the chapter tries to explain why this fear reappears. Drawing on the findings of Chapter 2, the Westernisation fears indicate actual democratic developments in China and the government’s legitimacy crises. Therefore, by explaining this reoccurring concern, the chapter is examining how the internet facilitates democratisation. Specifically, it is examining how the public use of the internet weakens the ideological control of the government over the people and therefore brings about challenges to its legitimacy of rule.

Each of the factors which led to the democratic processes as well as the challenges of the government concerning its legitimacy and ideological control in 1980s are augmented by cyberspace. First, the flourishing of a cyber public sphere cultivates citizens’ awareness and political participation. Because of the growth of this sphere, the government also loses its traditional advantages in disseminating information and guiding public opinion. Part of such power has been reallocated to the internet media and opinion leaders, which are the second and third pro-democratic factors. Consequently, the Chinese government is now facing a public (‘netizens’) that thinks critically and more independently, and whose ideological outlook is harder to control. The fourth factor involves the realisation of political protests. The development of online activism suggests that the internet makes people capable of mobilising collective action more conveniently and on a larger scale. In particular, the internet-driven protests which happen offline and push for political demands or cause ‘negative social influence’ can be destructive to the ruling party’s legitimacy.

With these pro-democratic social changes presented, we once again confirm that the internet does not revolutionise the spread of democracy. The great similarity between the 1980s and 2010s in terms of the growth of democratic processes highlights that none of the pro-democratic factors discussed is an original contribution of the internet. At the same time, the internet continues the democratic processes and augments those pro-democratic factors which have appeared since the beginning of economic reforms. This suggests that the internet can facilitate democratisation, though in a relative and not decisive way. However, it remains an
open question whether the development of democracy in China in the information age will ultimately result in regime change. To answer this question, we have to examine the agency of the government. This is the task of the following chapter.
Chapter Four

Adaption and resilience: the government’s counter responses

Although the internet has empowered citizens, by giving some the ability to keep the state power in check, the Chinese government has developed effective countermeasures to keep such developments within its control. This chapter employs the ‘carrot and stick’ metaphor in explaining the CPC’s efforts to overcome the challenges to its legitimacy posed by the internet. A subtle boundary has been set by the government differentiating what should be appeased (the carrot part) and what should be suppressed (the stick part). The government’s appeasing efforts include establishing e-government platforms and utilising social media to construct benign interactions with people. Its repressive policies include internet content censorship and the suppression of possible online political activism. By enumerating these counter policies, the chapter argues that, despite people’s empowerment, the liberating potential of the internet is severely limited; and it is unlikely that China moves towards a democratic system solely, or, mainly because of the public use of the internet.

4.1 A subtle border between ‘right and wrong’

Citizens’ online participation is regulated within an ambiguous boundary. Criticism and activities within the border will be tolerated by the government when its ‘carrot’ strategy is employed, but whatever crosses the line is suppressed by the ‘stick’ strategy. Xi (2013) noted that the Chinese people need be guided to ‘distinguish between right and wrong’, and that the official media should ‘defend the territory’ (the voice of the official media in cyberspace). Pro-government Chinese scholars also consistently divide citizens’ political participation online into legal and illegal ones (Jin 2011). Such views indicate that there is a border within China’s political system which works to divide ‘the right and wrong’ of ideologies and behaviours. The accurate shape of this border cannot be spelled out exactly for in practice it is always in flux (Ng 2015). But China’s laws and regulations about its internet censorship provide valuable markers for sketching this vague border.

As of August 2017, the website of Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) has listed 41 legal and executive documents, based on which the administration regulates the ‘order of cyberspace’. These regulations sketch out what is forbidden in cyberspace. In order to narrow
down the list of principles to those concerned with regime security, which is our main interest, I have divided them into political and non-political categories (Table 4-1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political concerns</th>
<th>Non-political concerns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>harming national security or divulging state secrets</td>
<td>propagating feudal superstition, obscenity, sex, gambling, violence, murder, horror or inciting crime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>violating the national, social or collective interest, or the lawful rights and interests of citizens</td>
<td>brazenly humiliating other persons or concocting facts to slander other persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>engaging in unlawful or criminal activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inciting resistance, destroying the implementation of the Constitution, laws and administrative regulations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inciting subversion of state power, toppling the socialist system</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inciting separatism or destroying national unity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inciting ethnic hatred, ethnic discrimination or destroying ethnic unity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concocting or distorting facts, disseminating rumours, disordering social order</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>harming the prestige of state organs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other matters violating the Constitution, laws and administrative regulations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4-1 The ‘order of cyberspace’ based on laws

Regarding the list political concerns, the government forbids online activities which erode the state’s ideological control or violate social order. Emphasising ideological unity and seeking to ensure popular support, the government bans activities ‘violating national interests’, ‘harming the prestige of official organs’, those which incite ‘ethnic hatred’ or ‘distort facts’, and so forth. In stressing social stability, any activities that involve inciting resistance, subversion, separatism or other criminal conduct are forbidden. In regard to such activities, the Chinese authorities respond with repression using countermeasures that correspond to the

Reference of the translation:
two dimensions. For other pressures resulting from online public opinion, the government tends to ease tensions with ordinary people.

4.2 The government’s carrot strategy

Just as the public can use the internet to achieve certain political goals, the internet can equally be used by the government to ease social contradictions and rebuild its own credibility. This includes to reasonably meet the demands of citizens and to build its positive interactions with citizens. These measures are termed ‘compromise policies’, or the ‘carrot’ strategy. Some may see these government compromises as signifying the emerging internet-driven democratic developments; and it is true that it is, and has been explained in Chapter 3. Here, though, our question is whether or not the internet can make a great progress in promoting democracy or can even cause a transition toward liberal democracy, rather than slightly and relatively empowers the people. Then through building positive interactions with people and repairing its legitimacy, the government in fact reduces the possibility of changing the political system to a democratic one.

The shift in the use of the internet for propaganda purposes is principally manifested in macro-policy-making, where the Chinese central government underlines its importance in seeking to assert its dominance in guiding public opinion. Xi Jinping, the President of China since 2012, has demanded the propaganda department to defend the territory of official public opinion many times. His ‘theory of the internet public opinion’ (Gong 2016) is best summarised in the so-called ‘April 19 speech’. At a 2016 conference about network security and information, Xi addressed three key points about ‘the role of the internet in directing and representing public opinion’ (Xi 2016). First, as ‘our leaders and cadres go where people go’, Chinese officials must learn to use the internet and discover what public opinion is saying there. Second, officials should tolerate citizens’ harsh-sounding criticism. Third, the authorities should ‘strengthen the management of cyberspace according to the law, construct the content circulating in cyberspace (creating pro-government information), and reinforce the positive publicity (of the government) online’ (Xi 2016).

4.2.1 The three practices of the carrot strategy

The introduction of the government’s ‘carrot strategy’ focusing on three practices. First, the Chinese authorities try to update their strategy in coping with emergencies. Second, initiatives are taken to establish e-government platforms which aim to relieve the pressure of
The Chinese government firstly updates its approach to control public sentiment in the context of natural and social emergencies. The ‘7.23 Wenzhou train collision’ has taught Chinese authorities that their emergency response system cannot keep up with the speed of information transmission in cyberspace. For instance, the ‘spokesman’ system, a feature of the bureaucratic communication model used in the mass media age, turns out to be tedious and inefficient. The traditional media take much longer to produce and censor a report before releasing it to the public. But in cyberspace, information that is released and discussed by netizens is real-time. If the official media cannot report the news timely, the ‘public opinion field’ would be occupied by non-government actors. Additionally, in the period when the authoritative voice of the government is missing, public discussion may be led by rumours. Once believed by netizens, those falsehoods would be extremely hard to clarify.

To properly deal with such natural and social emergencies, the government must act fast. The party’s advisers frequently refer to the ‘3T principles’ of Michael Regester to teach officials how to deal with emergencies; the three principles are ‘tell your own tale’, ‘tell it fast’, and ‘tell it all’ (cited in Wang 2011, p. 15). The Public Opinion Office of the People’s Daily (POOPD) proposes the principle of ‘the golden four hours’ (People’s Daily 2 Feb 2010). It suggests that the official party only has four hours after an issue breaks to clarify the truth and arrange responses before public emotions begin to get out of control. This principle narrowed the (traditional 24-hour) window of media reporting to adapt to the fast spread of information in cyberspace.

On the other hand, the Chinese authorities are required to be more transparent. In 2011, the State Council issued the policy document ‘Open Government Affairs and Strengthening Government Services’ (关于深化政务公开加强政务服务的意见), which stressed the necessity of openness in the face of emergencies and hotspot issues concerned by the public. During the July 2012 Beijing flood, the Beijing local government, for the first time in the PRC’s history, released the names and details of 77 victims (POOPD 2012).

As to the second effort, the government has established e-government platforms to conduct online interactive politics (Zhang 2015). Such initiatives try to soften the public grievances and transform them into a much controllable form of political participation. By doing so, the government improves its own reputation as well. Drawing on Wang Shaoguang’s (2008, p.
69) view, the e-government platform belongs to the ‘outside access’ model of agenda setting – i.e., citizens submit ‘suggestions on public affairs in the form of a letter to central decision makers’. Compared with the online public opinion which straightforwardly puts pressure on the government to respond (the ‘popular-pressure’ model by Wang), the outside access model involves a relatively lower degree of public involvement in the agenda-setting process, and thus poses less pressure on the government regarding negative public opinion. In the outside access model, agenda initiators communicate with the government through ‘presenting the facts and reasoning out’, while in the popular-pressure model, they have to mobilise the public and citizens are highly engaged (Wang S 2008, p. 71). Considering its interest in controlling ideology and maintaining social order, the Chinese government prefers the outside access approach, which involves less pressure. Therefore, by establishing official outlets for popular expression, the government aims to transform the disordered, sizzling discussions that take place in the cyber public sphere into a milder and more controllable form of expression through e-government platforms.

Various e-government platforms have been established even before 2011. In 2006, the State Council of the PRC opened its official website (gov.cn), with an interaction column established for netizens to raise questions and discuss policies with the government. Another e-government platform of the same level is the ‘local leader message board’ of the People’s Daily. Since 2008, the former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao has visited the gov.cn interactive platform every year, discussing policies and answering questions from netizens.

Compared with the popular-pressure model, e-government platforms are more institutionalised. For instance, for the local leader message boards opened up by People’s Daily, the central government has put forward policies which require the local governments to respond to messages submitted by citizens in a timely manner. 19 out of 34 provinces which provide this service have released their own regulations which clarify the responsibilities, processing times, and the incentives for local officials in coping with citizens’ suggestions on this board (Zhang 2015). In Huizhou, the local government has to reply to citizens’ messages on the platform ‘Huimin Online’. Career assessment of Huizhou officials is related to their performance in online interactive politics (POOPD 2012).

The third effort of the government is to engage in new forms of interactive politics using social media and mobile apps. By doing so, more direct connections between the government and grassroots netizens have been created. Compared with the messaging boards on official
websites, social media interactions are more responsive and have a lower entrance level – i.e. users are not required to put forward detailed identity information to post a message (Zhang 2015). The government effects of using these emerging internet platforms can be viewed from the following three aspects.

First, the government is rapidly moving and expanding the public service to social media platforms. As a consequence, the government’s ability to deal with online public opinion is growing (POOPD 2012). After it was launched, Weibo attracted numerous party-state organs and government institutions. The government service accounts (政务账号) soon became the trendiest approach for official-grassroots interaction (POOPD 2010; 2011; 2012). By September 2011, there were around 12,000 government service accounts on Weibo, while in 2012 the number was above 50,000 (ibid.). By the end of 2016, verified government accounts on Weibo reached 164,522, 125,098 of which represented official organs, and 39,424 accounts of government officials (CNNIC 2017).

Second, the e-government service always advances with time. When Today’s Headline (今日头条) became the leading mobile news app, a variety of official departments opened 34,083 accounts by the end of 2016; the total number was still only 4,021 in 2015 (CNNIC 2017).

Third, these e-government service accounts keep updating their approaches of interaction, making the government more agreeable and favourable to netizens. In 2011, official microblogging was only occasionally updated and seldom was new content created (Li 2011). Official organs did not interact with followers, but rather used social media as a quick platform for releasing policy and news. However, the situation is gradually changing and official accounts start to be more interactive. For instance, during the ‘July 2012 Beijing flood’, netizens who needed help tweeted ‘@Beijing Released’ (Beijing Information Office) and ‘@Safe Beijing’ (the Beijing Public Security Bureau) besides calling the police. The two departments then helped with arranging rescues according to people's location.

For another instance, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League (CCCYL) successfully builds connection with audiences by immersing itself in internet culture. The official account of the CCCYL insists on discussing the trendiest topics on the web. In order to cater to netizens’ tastes, the official organ nicknames itself ‘tuantuan’ (CYL in Chinese is

30 It should be noted that not only the central commune but also its numerous local branches of the Communist Youth League serve for the regime’s legitimacy and are playing roles in propaganda.
referred to as gong qing tuan; doubling the last character in one’s name usually sounds more cordial). Whether in posts or in articles, the CCCYL purposely uses a vivid and informal tone. Such expressions were rare in the official discourse before. The CCCYL also uses memes and network catchwords skillfully. As such, the CCCYL reduces the distance between itself and its audience. In what follows, using the case of the CCCYL, the chapter attempts to examine how social media provides an equally beneficial communication tool which the government can also use to universalise ideas which reflect or support its interests.

4.2.2 The creative propaganda of the CCCYL in warning of a colour revolution

The CCCYL’s Weibo account has played a leading role in the online campaign to combat against a colour evolution in 2016 using the hashtag “#be alert of the colour revolution#”. This hashtag was established by ‘www.dooo.cc’ (Dujia Web) in July 2016, and as at January 2017 it had been viewed 0.83 billion times and commented on 350 thousand times. The videos used by the CCCYL are most often produced by the Dujia Web, the advocator of the hashtag. This suggests that the two parties involved had cooperated in promoting this online campaign, or even that this website might be operating with government support. Is the online campaign a truly voluntary mass movement or one supported by the government? Whether the link exists or not, the CCCYL’s active engagement with this online-organised activism signifies a creative and pre-emptive propaganda tactic on the part of the Chinese government. This initiative suggests that the Chinese government can obtain some advantages by using the internet to combat against Westernisation. But if so, how does the government use the internet and what are its benefits?

First, to actively engage in this online discussion, the CCCYL acts as an opinion leader who supports the government’s interests. The CCCYL’s Weibo account had 4,598,772 followers before 14 January 2017. This implies that this account can reach a large number of Weibo users. Conducting a search of the keyword ‘colour revolution’ reveals that the CCCYL had published 25 Weibo posts discussing this topic before January 2017, with 22 posts published between July and December 2016 with the hashtag #be alert of colour revolution#. Under this topic, the most viewed and commented-on posts were released by the CCCYL. For example, the video ‘Step over our body if you want to turn China into this!’ (2016) was popular, receiving 32,000 comments, 56,000 likes, and being forwarded 60,000 times. It also attracted

31 The timing is more referenceable, for it is close to the campaign started in the middle of 2016.
32 On Weibo, under one hashtag, the posts are listed by heats (the amount of total comments, reposts and likes).
international concerns about China’s nationalist expressions in cyberspace. A hip-hop music video which stated that ‘China is not afraid of ideological revolution’ (2016) attracted more than 13,000 comments, 34,000 likes, and was reposted around 26,000 times. Nearly all the most popular Weibo posts were released by the CCCYL.

Second, this propaganda tactic contributes to relieving the pressure placed on the government by social movements. By claiming that some protests were the product of a US conspiracy, netizens who were not directly involved in the incident were led to understand this event from the standpoint of a patriot. For instance, the video ‘We will be there if there is a war: everyone is responsible for resisting the colour revolution’ (2016) summarises the approaches of the US in plotting a colour revolution. It focuses on the ability of the US-supported liberals to organise people’s collective actions. First, it is claimed that the US is inciting mass incidents and the finger is specifically pointed at human rights lawyers. Second, foreign NGOs are supposed to represent the social foundation of a colour revolution. In the video, Wang Yu, an arrested human rights lawyer, confesses to receiving training from a NGO about methods of attacking and demonising the Chinese government. Third, the American Embassy is said to be involved in integrating the forces of street politics. The video refers to the appearance of Jon Huntsman, the American Ambassador to China (2009-2011), in the Chinese Jasmine Revolution protest. Netizens receiving these claims may consider dissent a form of ideological erosion, and social protests as a form of foreign instigation – conducted by pro-US Chinese (the so-called ‘American agents’) under the instruction of the US. This tendency of belief has been reflected in the comments section of each post released by the CCCYL.

To sum up, with e-government platforms and political service accounts on social media, the government is rewarded with a greater ability to shape public opinion. The internet can also be used by the government to ease contradictions between the ruler and the people, to ‘recapture’ its lost position in the field of public opinion, and to restore the government’s legitimacy. In this way, the risk of regime change is reduced.

4.3 The government’s stick strategy

In response to those activities that the government is unwilling to countenance, containment is the general attitude. The discussion about the government’s stick strategy will follow the two dimensions discussed in the preceding chapters - the ideological control itself and the
political activism as an indicator of such control. First, apart from merely striving to guide public opinion, the Chinese government also tightens internet censorship to prevent dissent and destabilising information from circulating. Second, apart from explaining that some protests reflect Western interference in propaganda, the state also uses its traditional executive power and the tools provided by the internet to repress potential online political activism.

4.3.1 Using censorship to regulate public opinion

Internet censorship in China is achieved using technical, legal and administrative tools (for a detailed introduction of the Chinese censorship, see Appendix 3). China’s network architecture can be divided into three tiers: the backbone networks and major internet service providers (ISPs), the private ISPs and internet content providers (ICPs), and individual users. Each tier is affected by – and must obey – the government's censorship of content. The technical filtering takes place at the backbone level and at the tier of private IPCs’. But here we focus on the legal reinforcement and administrative tools implemented after 2011, and especially after 2014. In many senses, 2013-2014 witnessed the height of government internet censorship in China. In the legislative arena, for example, 21 new documents out of the total 41 regulations concerned with internet censorship were released after 2014. The administrative tools have become more active after 2013, including the rectification projects and self-censorship of enterprises.

Adopting iron-fisted policies on the flow of information, the Chinese government has alleviated the pressure of public opinion to a large degree. This is not to say that problems like rumours and dissent are no longer issues for the CPC. But the Chinese online society is moving toward the ‘order of cyberspace’ – a concept which has long been stressed by Xi Jinping. The following two sections introduce the government’s efforts to regulate opinion leaders and internet content providers. As discussed in Chapter 3, in the information age, with the government losing its comparative advantage in terms of guiding public opinion, such power is reallocated to these two parties.

4.3.1.1 Containing opinion leaders

As mentioned, opinion leaders are the rising ‘power class’ of cyberspace. Because of their ability to reach a large audience, they exert influence by broadcasting opinions and

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33 This is because the rising concern about cyber colour revolution appeared in 2011 and peaked after 2014.

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determining the trend of topics discussed online. Recognising that liberal opinion leaders and anti-party dissidents were gaining a stronger voice in the cyber-public sphere, the Chinese government took actions to contain this trend from developing further. I will first explain why the government is so worried about many liberal opinion leaders and then discuss the government’s counter operations targeting liberal opinion leaders and pro-party opinion leaders, respectively. Finally, the effectiveness of those measures will be analysed.

Opinion leaders in general show an interest in politics and social conflicts. Cao and Zhang (2016) have studied the leading issues of concern to 1,886 opinion leaders. In their findings, among the top 150 topics that were discussed by opinion leaders in 2015, politics (events of national and social importance) was the most popular category, representing 37% of the total topics discussed, while social conflicts and livelihood issues ranked third at 17%.

Before 2013, liberal opinion leaders were active on social media. The government was therefore concerned about cyberspace would be occupied by anti-establishment, pro-democratic liberals. The POOPD tracked the discussions of China’s active opinion leaders of 2012. The report found that 54% of the intellectuals whose views were analysed were pro-democracy activists (the liberals or ‘the right-leaning’ in Chinese) and only 18% were left wing and strongly supported Communism (POOPD 2013). Termed ‘public intellectuals’ (Gongzhi), a piece of internet slang, these liberal opinion leaders constitute the group of intellectuals and activists that are of the most concern to the authorities, for they spread democratic values, encourage political change, criticise China’s human rights status, and are in some way dissidents within the current political system of China. Their values are likely to deviate from, if not ruin, the efforts of the CPC to maintain its ideology and construct institutional confidence in Socialism.

The government is also troubled by the fact that public intellectuals can be sources of rumours. Voices and views of public intellectuals sometimes distort or exaggerate the facts in order to attract public attention. One of the most famous public intellectuals, Qin Huohuo, was arrested in 2013 for ‘spreading false online rumours on Weibo’ and ‘inciting public dissatisfaction with the government’ (Custer 2013; Cao 2014). Qin had spread false rumours about four celebrities who worked within the system. He also claimed that ‘the government had paid more than 200 million yuan ($32.7 million) in compensation for a foreign passenger who died’ in the Wenzhou train accident (Cao 2014). The amount of compensation was much higher than that of a Chinese victim, suggesting that the government mistreated its people.
For the government, there are many others like Qin Huohuo who are public intellectuals and rumour-makers, and its concern is that the falsehoods they spread can exacerbate social antagonisms.

Therefore, in 2013, the Chinese authorities started to regulate opinion leaders, their primary target being those public intellectuals. The government proposed a code of conduct to regulate opinion leaders’ behaviour, arrested some public intellectuals, and shut down their accounts. First, on the macro level, the government has proposed ‘seven bottom lines’ as a code of conduct in cyberspace. On 10 August, the CAC published this charter in a forum to promote the social responsibility of internet celebrities. This principle covers the bottom lines of legislation, the socialist system, China’s national interest, the legitimate interests of citizens, public order, morality, and the credibility of information.

Second, several rectification operations (an important administrative approach of censorship, see Appendix 3) were implemented. Later in August, the Ministry of Public Security launched a campaign to combat against criminals who organise, fabricate, and disseminate rumours. As reported by The Economist (31 August 2013), a few microbloggers were arrested and charged with spreading false rumours and creating disturbance. These crackdown actions were followed by the arrest of Charles Xue (also known as Xue Manzi), a Chinese-American internet celebrity and investor, accused of sexual misdeeds. Xue was famous for criticising the government and posting sensitive materials online. Western media asserted that the charge of Xue’s sexual behaviour was a hidden action to stifle online commentary (Barboza 2013; Buckley 2013). Third, around November of the same year, Sina punished more than 100,000 Weibo accounts for their violation of ‘the seven bottom lines’ (Mozur 2013).

The rectification operation of 2013 muted public intellectuals to some degree. The POOPD (2013) traced 100 active opinion leaders after the proposition of ‘seven bottom lines’ was passed. The institution found that Big Vs (opinion leaders on Weibo) published 10% less posts on Weibo between 10 August and 10 October compared with the prior two-month period. Similar suppressive measures toward liberal public celebrities continued in the following years. Nearly every year, hundreds of thousands of politically sensitive accounts were suspended, shut down, and punished.

Apart from public intellectuals, the government also warned pro-party scholars and officials. These figures are also opinion leaders in China’s cyberspace because of their social influence.
and voice. The government believes this group of people should naturally support the regime, though sometimes they do not. In academia, certain slogans were raised expressing the determination of establishment scholars to speak up for the party-state. In the middle of 2014, Zhang Yingwei, the official of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, accused the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS), one of China’s top think-tanks under the direction of the CPC, of being ‘infiltrated by foreign forces’ (Wan 2014; Tiezzi 2014). Then, Wang Weiguang, the Dean of the CASS, claimed at a conference that the Chinese academy should not become a ‘loose league of freelancers’ where scholars can speak and write as they please, like those Big Vs and public intellectuals; rather, the Academy should act as ‘an important frontline for the party’s propaganda and ideology’ (Li 2014). Likewise, the CPC demanded self-discipline and loyalty from party members and civil servants. When a local deputy director of the Public Security Bureau in Shandong Province criticised the ‘one country, two systems’ policy of China in his WeChat friend circle, he was punished for his inappropriate criticism of the government policy and violating the party’s code of discipline (People’s Daily, 18 Dec 2015). After that, officials were warned that publicly ‘blaming the central government’ is forbidden.

These official measures have led to the successful regulation of online commentary, as seen in the changing reputation of public intellectuals. Here we refer to the Annual Reports of Online Public Opinion (POOPD 2011-2016) to trace the effect of containing opinion leaders. In the 2011 report, opinion leaders flourished in the gap between official lines of communication and the traditional mass media, and were tolerated by the party-state (POOPD 2011, p. 13). But by 2012, ‘public intellectual’ was already gradually becoming a derogatory term (POOPD 2012, p. 5). With the government strengthening its control over the internet in 2013 and the Big Vs heavily defeated, the voice against the government was ‘apparently decreased’ (POOPD 2013, p. 1). In 2014, the government put intensified pressure on Weibo. The misfortunes of opinion leaders led grassroots netizens away from Weibo and restrained their expressions (POOPD 2014), leading them to speak with higher caution. The year 2015 saw a weakening of the influence of opinion leaders as well as that of the Big Vs in response to major public events (POOPD 2015). It was less common to read the belief that ‘every social contradiction could be ascribed to the fault of Chinese political system’ (ibid.). With negative comments about government decisions drastically reducing, in 2016, the report...

34 The ‘friend circle’ feature of WeChat (朋友圈) allow users to make public posts are visible to all of one’s contacts in the app.
declared that the huge social influence of the public intellectuals was fading away (POOPD 2016).

4.3.1.2 The regulation of internet content providers

Apart from influential individuals, the Chinese authorities have regulated the behaviour of internet content providers (ICPs) as well. The emerging trend of WeChat, Weibo, and news applications has raised the challenges of the internet for the government to a new high. Driven by its interests of attracting readers, and due to the lack of government regulation, these platforms were once the hotbed of rumours and dissent. To restrain the conduct of the ICPs, the government then launched a series campaigns mainly focusing on news information services provided by ICPs, the public accounts of WeChat, and individuals’ use of these ICPs.

There are two reasons which lead the market-oriented ICPs stray from the official line reflecting government interests. First, as introduced in Chapter 3, the behaviour of private ICPs is governed by market rules and the strong incentive to attract audiences. The profits of internet providers are determined by their ability to attract user traffic (numbers of followers, views, follow-up comments, reposts) and to promote higher user stickiness. Striving for such goals, ICPs pay more attention to social conflicts and politically sensitive topics. They also frequently share different insights about particular topics than the official media and therefore play as alternative voices.

Second, ICPs were loosely regulated before 2014. Technically speaking, as the second tier of Chinese censorship, private ICPs must promise to comply with China’s content management rules (the so called self-censorship). Pursuing weak self-censorship is a gamble for private internet platforms, since they face financial penalties and even being shut down. But some platforms choose not to rigorously implement the government’s censorship requirements. Primarily, as noted in the first point, the profits can be considerable if ICPs report controversial issues and conduct loose censorship, for they can attract large audiences and advertising revenue. Second, apart from the incentive of profits, ICPs dare to do so, for they can exploit the advantage of censorship regulations being ambiguous. Laws around cyberspace are designed to be vague, leaving room for interpretation and manipulation (Liang & Lu 2010). Finally, there was always a lag between the legislation and the emergence of internet platforms. For instance, WeChat appeared in 2011, but the first regulation targeting this platform was not implemented until 2014. ICPs can continue to apply weak censorship if the central government does not notice or target them.
Weak self-censorship was a feasible strategy until the enhancement of censorship laws in 2014 when the government started several campaigns against specific internet platforms. Seven of the ten existing regulatory documents were published by the CAC after 2014, and all of them were aimed at managing ICPs and their information provision services. These regulations are all-embracing, covering instant messaging, mobile applications, forums, news media, and live streaming. The remaining three regulations cover netizens’ behaviour when using these internet platforms. The series of regulations on ICPs have three emphases: news information services, rumours disseminated through public accounts of WeChat, and individuals’ use of ICPs.

First, the official party focused on news information services provided by ICPs. In May 2017, the CAC updated the Internet News Information Service Management Regulations, demanding that internet websites ‘are not permitted to conduct internet news information service activities without a licence or in excess of the scope of licence’ (Article 5). Western media services (such as BBC, New York Times and The Voice of German) consider this regulation to particularly target joint ventures, cooperative enterprises, and foreign-funded enterprises. Two months before the release of this regulation, the Beijing Office of the CAC questioned and criticised the coverage provided by Tencent, Souhu, Sina, Netease, and Ifeng News, and demanded rectifications (CAC Beijing 2017). As mentioned in Chapter 3, these companies were accused by netizens and establishment scholars for reporting with a ‘political tendency’ and maintaining foreign financial relationships.

An independent regulatory document was released explaining the government’s questioning and interviewing of internet companies – i.e., the admonishment talk hold by the relevant departments (usually the CAC local offices) with the responsible person(s) of this company. The Provisions on Admonishment Meetings with Internet News Information Services (2015), commonly known as the ‘Ten Interviews’, describes the circumstances under which a company will be questioned and consequences that it faced for failing to meet the censorship requirements of the authorities. An information provider faces a warning meeting if it does not ‘promptly address unlawful information’ or ‘promptly put in place oversight and management’ where the circumstances are serious (Article 4-4; 4-5). If their orders are not

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35 The translation draws on https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2017/05/02/internet-news-information-service-management-regulations-2/

The news is defined as reporting and comments on politics, economic, military matters, foreign affairs, other such social public affairs, and sudden social incidents.
respected, the internet business ‘will be given a warning, a fine, or an order to stop operations for internal rectification’, or even have their licences cancelled (Article 7).

Second, the government dealt with rumours on WeChat. With the Big Vs facing increasing censorship, WeChat replaced Weibo as the most popular social media platform and source of information in 2014 (POOPD 2014). Due to the lack of well-focused censoring measures, WeChat was for a period an effective tool for generating and spreading discussions of sensitive topics, rumours, and anti-government discourse.

Provisional Regulations for the Development and Management of Instant Messaging Tools and Public Information Services (2014) is also referred to as the ‘Provisions on WeChat’. This is because it was designed to regulate the activities around public accounts of WeChat releasing and disseminating information to audiences. Before this policy was rolled out, low entrance requirements and loose censorship of expression provided critical advantages to private bloggers on WeChat. Public accounts now need a licence to publish information, like other formal information providers. Besides, information agents on WeChat should obtain legal certification for providing news information. Only accounts of news agencies and websites are allowed to release and reproduce news of current affairs; non-newsagents with a licence for news provision can only reproduce such information, while other accounts are no longer allowed to publish or repost political news.

Third, the Chinese government reinforced control over individual behaviour on internet platforms. A significant manifestation of this is the real-name system. Following the principle of ‘a real name backstage, and a freely-chosen name on stage’ (CAC 2016), the real-name system requires users to provide a phone number and SMS verification to register an account. This is because in order to apply for a phone number, Chinese citizens have to provide their real identity information. Early in 2012, a pilot version of the real-name system was applied to Weibo users in Beijing, but did not expand to other provinces in the following years. However, with the release and implementation of the ‘Internet User Account Name Management Regulation’ (CAC 2015), compulsory identity verification was gradually introduced nationwide. In the middle of 2017, users of Baidu (the most-used search engine of China), Zhihu (the Chinese Quora), Weibo, and other web communities found that they could no longer use the services of these platforms if they refused to verify their phone numbers. According to the official discourse, the initiative was intended to encourage the responsible online expression of netizens. For those who use social media to promote democracy or
combat against the current rulers, this is a plain warning: they are clearly told that the
government is monitoring their speech and online activities.

In brief, the Chinese government reinforced internet censorship after 2014. Liberal opinion
leaders were then to a large extent repressed and muted. Since the series of rectification
projects, private internet platforms have been disciplined by the government and can no
longer employ loose self-censorship. Other liberals and ordinary people, seeing the sufferings
of Big Vs – whose accounts were closed and who may be arrested in person - and using the
renewed ICPs which now apply strict self-censorship, are also ‘educated’ to be politically
prudent in their daily activities in cyberspace.

4.3.2 Online activism greatly constrained

Online activism turns out to be under the tight control of the Chinese government. In theory,
cyberspace helps to mobilise collective action by building social connections and reducing
the reliance of activism on existing organisations and resources (see Chapter 1). But in the
Chinese context, this capability has been constrained greatly. First, according to the available
data from the POOPD’s Annual Report on Public Opinion (2008-2016), online-driven
incidents which have posed an actual threat to the CPC’s legitimacy are rare. Second, even
though online political protests can be smoothly planned in cyberspace, it is extremely hard
for them to succeed in the physical world. This can be seen from the government’s repression
of the Chinese Jasmine Revolution.

4.3.2.1 The frequency and impact of China’s online activism (2008-2016)

Studying the events most discussed by netizens from 2008 to 2016, this thesis finds that the
number of incidents that belong to the category of online activism is small. In Chapter 3, we
also identified a type of online activism which leads to stronger crises of legitimacy (below
referred to as ‘legitimacy-sensitive online activism’). This type directs to those internet-
organised or internet-facilitated offline activism which (1) aims to challenge the authority of
the Chinese rulers and political system and (2) reveals major social contradictions which
injure the prestige of the rulers or violate social stability.

Using the data provided by the Annual Reports on Public Opinion (ARPO) from 2008 to
2016 (POOPD) this researcher has identified the 180 incidents which were most frequently
discussed by netizens across a nine-year period. The ARPO report lists the top 20 events
which were heatedly debated each year, and which generated the greatest social impact on the
government in terms of public opinion (the public opinion incidents). 36 Investigating the 180 public opinion incidents, we are interested in the total number of online collective actions, and especially pay attention to legitimacy-sensitive online activism.

As for the online collective actions in general, there are two general findings. First, online activism has not been a fashion in the past nine years. Among the 180 hotly-discussed incidents, a mere 18 events (10%) belonged to the category of online activism. 37 Collective actions of any type (social, political, cultural, environmental or nationalistic) are unwelcome in China. As King, Pan and Roberts (2013) have found, the intent of Chinese internet censorship is indeed to prevent collective social and political action. This is because, for the Chinese government, activism potentially endangers the social order, which has become a major source of concern for the government and its legitimacy since 1989.

Second, compared with other uninvited protests, environmental confrontations (3 cases, 17%) and nationalist actions (4 cases, 22%) appeared to be less sensitive. Especially for cyber-nationalism, although it does not always imply a pro-regime position (Shen & Breslin 2010), this type of action is in general opposed to Westernisation and pro-democratic activities.

In the case of legitimacy-sensitive online activism which roused concerns about regime security, we present the following three findings. First, the number of cases of legitimacy-sensitive online activism is particularly small (numbering eight in total). Only five cases in total involved offline collective actions which were facilitated or organised through the internet and which were about politics or social conflicts. Only three events occurred between 2011 and 2017 were legitimacy-sensitive online (Sifang protest in 2013, Hong Kong protests in 2014, Taiwan’s Sunflower Student Movement in 2014).

Second, among the 180 most discussed events, no online political activism took place in mainland China. 38 The two political incidents promoting democracy happened in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Even so, the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong and Taiwan raised the official fear about peaceful evolution to a new high. The 2011 Chinese Jasmine Revolution might be an exception. This event was strictly banned from online searching, and was

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36 The series of reports provides an index system for evaluating the weight of an incident and assesses the pressure of public opinion associated with it.

37 Three of them are offline protests only with information broadcasted in cyberspace but without any further facilitation involved. Using the internet as a news board means they are not important in the dimension of the internet’s role in online activism, for this type does not change the form of activism. Strictly speaking, there were only 15 out of 180 incidents that were online collective actions.

38 The Shifang protest was about social conflicts rather than political concerns.
therefore unable to be listed in the yearly 20 public opinion incidents which are measured by the traffic of information. However, this incident, along with the Hong Kong and Taiwan issues, was frequently referred to by the official as major evidence of regime-change attempts led by hostile foreign forces.

Third, the data also suggests that the carrot-and-stick strategies employed by the government after 2014 may be effective. Examining the time-frame of these events, it emerges that the rate of legitimacy-sensitive activism was decreasing. 50% of activism in this type (numbering four cases) happened before 2011, with two events in 2012, two in 2014, and none after 2014. As a reference, there was an emerging trend of online participations replacing physical protests in the post-2014 period. Online participation (in the cyberspace arena of collective action) is considered a milder example of collective action in terms of its impact on social stability. Additionally, 2016 gave rise to Chinese cyber-nationalism or patriotism: Weibo users protest against the arbitration of South China Sea dispute, the online boycott against Zhao Wei’s film casting a supporter of Taiwan independence, and the meme war protest against Taiwan independence on Facebook. The three nationalist collective actions happened in close proximity (within one year) and were characterised by netizens’ support for the Chinese authorities.

The threat of online activism does not seem to have been a severe problem for the Chinese government. Even though some cases exist, most of the incidents appear mild to the government for they belong to the categories of environment, nationalism, and other online activism, instead of being legitimacy-sensitive. Legitimacy-sensitive online activism is very rare and is evidently waning each year.

4.3.2.2 How online activism is repressed: the case of the 2011 Chinese Jasmine Revolution

The failure of the 2011 Chinese Jasmine Revolution reveals how a democratic protest can be fleetly defeated by the government. This case shows that even when a political protest is organised online, it is extremely difficult for it to succeed in reality due to the high vigilance and iron-fisted suppression of the CPC.

The Chinese Jasmine revolution or 2011 Chinese pro-democracy protests is an example of political collective action which is highly sensitive to the legitimacy of the CPC. This incident refers to the mobilisation and (failed) public assemblies in more than 10 cities of China, starting from 20 February 2011. The call for action was inspired by the Middle East
unsprings. The purpose of this movement was political and pro-democratic. The proposal for action clarified that the revolution aimed to counter authoritarianism which ‘was the root of current social contradictions of China’, and its requirements included ‘realising judicial independence, launching political reform, ending the one-party dictatorship, and establishing constitutional democracy’ (Boxun, 23 Feb 2011). In later appeals, the sponsor added demands for releasing detained dissidents and publishing details of government assets (VOA Chinese 10 Mar 2011).

The appearance of this protest showcases that the function of the internet in mediated mobilisation is also feasible in China. This event perfectly fit the model of online organised political activism. First, the entire movement was organised online. The initial call for action appeared on a tree hole page of Twitter, and was later reported by Boxun.com on February 17th (Boxun 4 April 2011) The entire movement did not depend on elaborate preparations or established organisational relationships. The initiator did not even need to be present at the city centres where the movements were planned.

Second, the mobilisation process shares the unconventional features of online activism discussed in Chapter 1 such as cost-efficiency and decentralisation. The organisation was cost effective: the sponsor was saved from the trouble of recruitment, training, preparation of rallies and so forth. The participator also did not need to invest much. Presence was the only requirement in the calls for action. Participants could shout out slogan39, have a silent stroll, go shopping, or simply stand around to watch (Boxun 24 Feb 2011). In addition, like the Egyptian uprisings, the Chinese case was characterised by decentralisation and randomness. The details surrounding the initiator of the event are mysterious.40 As Boxun explained on 24 February, 2011: we can say there is a sponsor, or there is not; we can only say that the call issued on Twitter was merely a test, but it is the overreaction of Chinese rulers that contributed to the effect on February 20.

However, even with the fact that the internet could promote political activism in China, what is more important is that the Chinese Jasmine Revolution turned out to be a failure. At the first of the planned demonstrations in Beijing, around 200 people showed up in front of the McDonalds in Wangfujing, and most of them were attracted by foreign journalists and their cameras (Dyer, Hille & Waldmeir 2011; Swartz 2011). In both Beijing and Shanghai,

39 The slogan was reported as ‘We want food, we want work, we want housing, we want fairness’ (Daily Mail 21 Feb 2011; Boxun, 24 Feb 2011).
40 Liu Gang claimed himself the initiator, while some media reported Wang Juntao was the leader.
journalists, onlookers, and true participants were swiftly dispersed by police (Daily Mail 20 Feb 2011). A few activists were arrested. From February to March, the anonymous online organiser continued calling for demonstrations every weekend. Yet week after week, no one came (Swartz 2011).

The failure of the protest provides a valuable point of reference for studying the CPC’s measures to suppress online activism. The first measure concerns the use of traditional executive power by the Chinese government. As mentioned just now, on the day of the demonstration, the government resorted to violence through the police to disperse the crowds. Several major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai strengthened police force on street. Wangfujing, the shopping centre where the ‘stroll’ was supposed to happen in Beijing, was described as having ‘police but no protesters’ (Branigan 2011a). The government also preventively detained some suspected activists the before the protest day. As reported by Time (Ramzy 2011), ‘the government rounded up lawyers, activists and dissidents’. Some were warned beforehand not to join the demonstration, or ‘under soft detention at home or elsewhere’ (Branigan 2011b).

In the second measure, in order to suppress online activism, the government can utilise the technological tool of the internet to contain the mobilisation process. Technically, the Chinese government can attack the website of the initiator to block up information transmission. Boxun (2011) alleged its website was attacked by hackers, and accused the China Ministry of National Security was the manipulator. The media then moved to a blog (boxunblog.com) to release further information and reports. Additionally, the content censorship was strengthened. For a few months, Chinese words containing ‘Jasmine’ were blocked in search engines – and this even included Chinese ‘Jasmine tea’ and a folk song.

Third, the ‘official public opinion field’ in cyberspace may be used as a vehicle of propaganda to influence people’s opinions about a certain protest. The strategy of propaganda can vary according to the specific case. For the case of Chinese Jasmine Revolution, the central government downplayed the event. The author searched all news reports on Chinese Jasmine Revolution in Baidu, the most popular Chinese search engine which strictly applied censorship. Excluding similar and irrelevant items, only two reports published in 2011 were available through this search engine. Those pages were all released by the official media nearly one month after the first rally. One report on China Daily criticised the Western media for making up stories on the scale of the protest by using false or modified photos (Nong
Another result was an editorial from the *People’s Daily* (Ding 2013) claiming that 'stability (not revolution) is what Chinese people truly want'. Chinese scholars stressed that revolution in the Middle East was impossible to replicate in China because China lacked the necessary motivation for revolution. Interestingly, several years later, when this event could no longer cause instability, the official propaganda started to recollect on this issue. In the official line, the term ‘Chinese Jasmine Revolution’ was frequently mentioned as one of the attempts of the US to provoke peaceful evolution in China (e.g., Yang 2014; Tian 2014).

Examining the case of the Chinese Jasmine Revolution, the author has tried to show how the Chinese government can silence a protest rapidly and effectively. Apart from the violence and executive power which the state apparatus has traditionally wielded, the government can now also use the technological tools of the internet (hacker attacks and censorship) as well as online propaganda to contain a democratic movement. Therefore, although the internet provides liberals with advantages in allowing them to mobilise protests, it also serves the state power by allowing it to offset such advantages.

Summarising, this chapter has argued that the internet-related democratic developments in China are constrained by the government’s use of this technology. In China, the internet cannot guarantee regime change and its liberating power is severely limited, because for all the challenges it faces triggered by cyberspace, including rumours and dissent in the cyber public sphere and advanced online collective actions, the Chinese government has proved its resilience in offsetting them.

The government’s countermeasures can be divided into carrot and stick approaches. On the one hand, the Chinese government adopts e-government platforms, as well as cyber propaganda in order to appease tensions and repair its legitimacy. On the other hand, for those activities that directly damage the state’s reputation and social stability, the Chinese government responds by adopting a more repressive attitude and stronger policies. Such policies include enhancing internet censorship and containing citizens’ ability to realise online political activism. To be clear, though, the chapter is not claiming that challenges concerning legitimacy no longer exist for the Chinese government. Rather, it argues that the shifting power structure of ideological control between the state and people has been rebalanced in favour of the government due to those effective countermeasures.
Conclusion

There are two extreme poles in the debate about the liberating potential of the internet, and in this thesis, I have attempted to bridge them. Between the argument that the internet is a revolutionary force in the process of democratisation on one hand, and the view that the internet plays little or no part in spurring or facilitating democratic movements, there lies a spectrum; and so, as this thesis argues, the question one should ask is not whether or not but to what extent can the internet promote democracy.

I have attempted to partially answer this question by studying how the internet relates to developments leading to democratisation and how such facilitation is limited by the government’s use of this technology in China. In particular, the study of the Chinese government’s concerns about Westernisation provides a useful case for understanding the role of the internet in promoting democracy. The government’s peaking fear over the peaceful evolution in 1989 turned out to be one of the responses of the CPC to its crises of legitimacy and the growing democratic movements that began to shimmer after the 1978 economic reforms. Likewise, the Chinese government has repeatedly made an association between the internet and the growing threat of a colour revolution since 2011.

In the light of such events, it is interesting to ask about the reasons for China’s repeated concerns about Westernisation, and specifically the role of the internet in provoking them. We might also ask about the implications of such recurring events and what they indicate about the progress of democracy in the country. By examining these questions, this thesis thus seeks to address a wider issue about the connection between the internet and the promotion of democracy.

The liberating potential of the internet

In answering the question about the liberating potential of the internet, this thesis argues that the internet does not directly cause China’s developments of democratisation and cannot guarantee a transition to liberal democracy. Therefore, it is not an inherently liberating power. Its liberating role is to augment the existing democratic processes through eroding the ideological control of the government over the people; but this role is severely limited by the effective counter-policies of the state.
Referring to the Chinese context, the thesis examines the problematic relationship between the government and the people in regard to democratisation. The developments of democracy in China are entangled with the government’s efforts to control ideology (to universalise certain values and maintain popular support) and the people's ability to think and act independently. Thinking about the ‘top-intermediary-bottom’ structure of China’s diverse society (Shen 2007), this dynamic is characterised by the struggle between the pro-government camp and the anti-party liberals competing for the people’s trust and support.

As for the role of the internet in this dynamic structure: first, this thesis argues that the internet has not revolutionised the democratic processes in China, for it has neither created nor fundamentally transformed this relationship between the government and the people. That decade witnessed (1) the widespread discussion of liberalism and individualism among intellectuals and students; (2) the commercialisation of the media, which provided: (3) a limited sphere for open political debates; and (4) student movements demanding political reform (political activism). Those four pro-democratic factors constituted China’s democratic processes in the 1980s. And these processes took place independently of the use of the internet, and thus demonstrate that the internet is not a necessary condition for the promotion of democracy in China.

Rather, the ‘liberating’ role of the internet is found in its supporting and strengthening of those factors that facilitate China’s democratic processes. Each of the pro-democratic factors develops with the use of cyberspace. Compared to the 1980s, the flourishing cyber-public sphere (the first factor), provides a much broader forum in which public opinion and dissenting views can be formed and exchanged. Thus, two powerful groups emerge that share the traditional advantage of the government in guiding public opinion. These are the internet content providers (working as the alternative media, which is second pro-democratic factor) and opinion leaders (the third factor). Because of these three factors, the government finds it is increasingly difficult to control the people or secure their support. The fourth factor is related to the convenience provided by the internet in mobilising collective action. All types of online activism have proven able to take place in China.

Finally, it must be asked why – even with such democratic developments taking – it still appears unlikely that the internet will increase the possibility of regime change in China. As argued in this thesis, the reason is that the Chinese government has applied various strategies to neutralise the challenges to its legitimacy brought about by these democratic processes. In
order to win the public’s favour for the official party, the government selectively complies to ‘reasonable requests’ of netizens. At the same time, citizens’ internet participation that is considered ‘illegal’ is confronted with suppression.

However – as noted above – in arguing that the internet does not guarantee democracy, this thesis is not claiming that it can play no role at all in promoting it, nor that the government will always maintain its dominance. In the following, I will expand on this point to more clearly express the core argument of this thesis.

**What the internet brings to democracy, the internet takes away**

The internet is an emerging factor that has been thrown into the mix of existing democratic processes. It can break the balance of power between the government and people, since this balance often begins to shift when the civil camp (grassroots and influential liberals) gain a comparative advantage in cyberspace. Liberals, people who support and promote democracy, may celebrate this approach toward democracy at this stage; but such shifts can be easily suspended when the government adapts itself to the rules of cyberspace and skillfully utilises the internet to constrain democratic developments. This gives rise to a dynamic and interactive process of shifts-and-rebalancing.

If we apply this dynamic process to the Chinese context, around 2003-2013, the non-government camp obtained greater advantage in cyberspace.\(^{41}\) First, the internet provided citizens with a public forum in which to discuss politics on an unprecedented scale. Due to the lack of legislation, at that time, online censorship was much weaker than that in the ‘physical’ world. Long suppressed in their ability to express themselves, Chinese netizens enthusiastically joined in online discussions. Second, for the liberals, internet participation implies opportunities. In cyberspace, the state power was relatively weak, but social connections are easily built there, and mobilisation is more cost-efficient. By leading discussions, dissidents can change people’s perceptions of the government and the existing political system. Third, private news websites and social media continue the media reform. Pursuing the traffic of information, and in order to attract audiences, these platforms were inclined to apply self-censorship loosely, report on controversial social conflicts, and encourage anti-establishment discourse.

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\(^{41}\) Scholars usually believe that China’s fast development of internet democracy was symbolised by the Sun Zhigang incident in 2003 and a series of other public opinion incidents after that (e.g., Shen & Breslin 2010; Xiong 2011; He 2012).
Those changes of ordinary people, liberals, and internet platforms have caused troubles for the Chinese government in terms of negative public opinion, the spread of alternative ideologies, and the possibility of cyber-facilitated or cyber-organised political collective action. First, facing people who think critically and dig deeply into facts, and discuss politics enthusiastically, it becomes much harder for the government to hide its mistakes and other destabilising information. The failure to appease netizens can cause the government to lose its popular support. Second, with dissidents promoting Western values, selling a democratic system, and possibly defaming the government through false rumours, the Chinese government is troubled by anti-government ideologies spread in cyberspace. Third, the internet increases individuals’ ability to turn grievances and alternative ideologies into anti-government collective action.

However, the internet equally provides tools for the government to overcome these challenges and consolidate its political and ideological control. In China, the comparative advantage of citizens in cyberspace has been gradually reversing since 2013. The first tool relates to bringing the government into cyberspace and easing the contradictions between the government and the people. By building e-government platforms and forcing officials to interact with people via social media, the party-state is granted new and effective approaches for easing the intensity of public opinion and presenting an image of good governance.

Secondly, the internet has become a tool for disseminating propaganda in cyberspace. China’s current leadership strongly stresses that pro-party media and opinion leaders should ‘defend their territory’ in guiding public opinion. Using social media, some official institutions appear to have accommodated themselves well to internet culture and as a result attracted many new supporters. Similarly, the government uses the internet to educate the public about patriotism. For instance, Fuxing Road Studio, which is operated under International Department Central Committee of the CPC, produced a series of cartoon videos introducing China’s foreign policies, leadership, and policy-making processes in a form which caters to the preferences of Chinese netizens.

Thirdly, the internet has become a tool of censorship for the Chinese government. The Great Firewall provides technological means of filtering information and tracking the IP addresses of those who share it. The government has strengthened legislation around the internet since 2014. Administratively, the CPC urges the internet companies to apply much stricter self-censorship and has conducted a series of rectification campaigns. The real-name system
plainly warns Chinese netizens that their online expressions are monitored by the government. All these censorship efforts help China to move forward the ‘order of cyberspace’, an ideal situation in which people’s expressions and activities in cyberspace reflect the interests of China’s current political system. On special occasions, such as during social conflicts and before the outburst of political protests, internet censorship helps the government to block information and frustrate collective actions (such as the case of the 2011 Chinese Jasmine Revolution).

When the internet is able to serve both the state and the civil side, the government may make better use of this tool due to its dominance in terms of traditional administrative power. When the government becomes well-adapted to the ecosystem of cyberspace and employs effective policies to offset the development of democracy, the balance of power which once tilted in favour of the people would return to equilibrium. And although at this stage the balance of power may has favoured the people more compared to the past, the regime is still in control and maintains legitimacy.

**The struggle continues**

By pointing out that the internet serves both supporters of democracy and the government, this thesis is not arguing that the government will always maintain dominance. But neither does it argue that democracy activists have a unique tool. The tension between the Chinese government and the grassroots is ongoing. On the one hand, since the internet is not a necessary condition for the emergence of democracy, there might appear other sources of democracy which could disrupt the state-people power balance, playing the role of the economic reform in the 1980s or the role of the internet in the 2010s.

On the other hand, even in cyberspace, the fight against government control will not stop; for as mentioned, the process of shifts-and-rebalancing is a dynamic one. As a recent case shows, when the government blocked online discussions about children being abused in a kindergarten, Chinese netizens pushed for more extensive attention to be given to the issue through a variety of online protests. On 22 November 2017, one of the Red Yellow Blue kindergartens was accused of abusing kids. Some parents alleged that staff of the kindergarten in Beijing had injected and fed unknown tablets to children and may have corporally punished them – and even sexually assaulted them. This issue, identified by the government as sensitive and counterfactual, was then blocked on the net.
However, in the first few days after the event provoked a public outcry, many public accounts of WeChat discussed it. Even though some articles were deleted later, these public articles made the allegations widely known and discussed throughout Chinese society. The extensive concerns of Chinese netizens continued to develop in various online forums and in private chats and friend circles on WeChat.

Second, on Weibo, no matter how many posts and comments netizens devoted to this topic, it was never listed on the top 50 trending topics of Weibo. Netizens even found that their discussions were removed, and their accounts blocked by Weibo. Angry Weibo users started to comment ‘red, yellow, blue’ under top 50 trending topics. Because the characters of red, yellow, blue in Chinese language (红黄蓝) had been blocked, netizens use colour emojis instead. This online activism happened spontaneously. In this way, netizens tried to resist the government censorship and hoped it could attract more public attention to this event.

Moving forward to ‘the order of cyberspace’, the Chinese internet society is day-by-day coming to resemble society offline. People’s behaviours are restricted by laws and administrative management as strictly as they are offline. Although the internet is no longer an exceptional arena (i.e. relatively free from government ideological control), this does not mean that people will obey the government’s coercive rules blindly. The censorship of anti-government expression on Weibo and forums does not mean that liberals do not talk about these issues in private group-chatting using WeChat and other apps. With one word blocked, Chinese citizens can always find the alternative expressions and approaches to continue to discuss issues. All these interesting dynamics reveal that the struggle between the government and civil society continues.

Those who are interested in promoting democracy via the internet should temper their optimism but not give up hope. Instead of trusting to the democratic ‘magic’ of the internet, it is more important to pay attention to the interactions between the government and the people.
Appendix

Appendix 1 - The development of China’s internet

The growth of the Chinese internet can be observed in statistical reports. This appendix introduces the scale and structure of Chinese internet users, and the internet development trends in China. The following data is based mainly on the Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, released biannually by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC).

Since getting connected in 1994, China’s internet usage has experienced large scale and rapid development. As China’s reappearing fear of Westernisation grew between 2011 and 2017, this section will focus on this period – particularly on three years. 2011, when this fear appeared in civil discussions, 2014 when it was officially acknowledged and expressed, and 2016 when the campaign against the ‘colour revolution’ was conducted on Weibo.

China’s internet users have increased steadfastly year by year. In 2011, they expanded to more than 500 million, occupying 38.3% of the total population (CNNIC 2012). In comparison, only 8% of the population had access to the internet in 2005. In 2014, the total number of internet users was 649 million, with an internet penetration at 47.9% (CNNIC 2015). By the end of 2016, the total number jumped to 731 million, meaning that 53.2% Chinese citizens were internet users (CNNIC 2017). In well-developed regions, the rate was even higher. In Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong province, internet penetration was above 74%. The average weekly online time of Chinese internet users rose from 18.7 hours in 2011 to 26.5 hours in 2016 (CNNIC 2012, 2017). The data shows that China has become ‘a country of the internet’.

Compared to the scale of users, the structure of Chinese netizens is relatively stable. A typical Chinese netizen is a secondary educated student or freelancer in his/her 20s or 30s. Between 2011 and 2016, more than 60% of users were in secondary education (junior high school, senior high school, or counterparts) (CNNIC 2012-2017). Though this proportion was dropping, the rate increased in the low-education group instead of the senior one. Netizens with a bachelor degree or above remained around 11% (ibid.). The young generation (10-29) was the major component of Chinese internet users. The ratio of people aged 30 to 39 years old was also significant (ibid.). The 2016 data shows that around 30% of netizens were 20-29
years old, 20.2% were 10-19, and 23.2% were in their 30s. In terms of occupational structure, students, freelancers, and employees constituted the largest segment, accounting for 25%, 22.7%, and 11.9% respectively (CNNIC 2017). Regarding factors such as age, occupations, and education, typical Chinese internet users may be anti-establishment. Therefore, in official discourse and Chinese academia, the government often worries that internet users speak irrationally and are easily irritated.

The trendiest developments of the internet in China are referred to as ‘WeChat, Weibo and news apps’ (两微一端, liangwei yiduan) (POOPD 2014; CNNIC 2016a). This term first appeared in 2014 and describes the formation of online public opinion, where public opinion is formed by people's usage of WeChat, Weibo and news applications. Mobile internet users have grown drastically since 2011 and reached 695 million by the end of 2016 (CNNIC 2017). By 2016, 95.1% of the total number of internet users are mobile internet users (CNNIC 2017) and 78.9% of mobile internet users use mobile Netnews (CNNIC 2016a). In a survey studying the use of apps, 35% of participants who read news online stated they preferred to use mobile news apps, with 40.9% using news websites, and 31.3% of participants choosing social media (CNNIC 2016b). Social media users have shown a greater preference to use ‘WeChat, Weibo, and news apps’ to obtain information. According to a 2016 Tencent report, WeChat users were more inclined to use mobile apps (55.4%) and social media (40.4%) to read news, a percentage much higher than using websites (20.6%), TV (8.0%), or newspapers (1.5%).

The sample size is 40443, excluding non-WeChat users.
Appendix 2 - Weibo and WeChat: China’s two most significant social media platforms

Social media platforms have become the main channels for the distribution of information (POOPD 2015, 2016). This appendix outlines the features and political impact of two of the most important social media platforms of China, Weibo and WeChat. In describing the two platforms, I aim to create greater understanding of the ecosystem of China’s internet politics.

Weibo and public opinion

Sina Weibo (hereafter referred to as Weibo) has successfully kept its position as one of the leading social media platforms of China. Sina launched the beta version of Weibo in 2009. By 2011, it had attracted 195 million users (POOPD 2012), rising to 390 million monthly active users in 2016 (Quest Mobile 2016). Weibo is a counterpart to Twitter, where users’ home pages are composed of personalised subscriptions and information is organised by hashtags. In the 2015 China Social Application User Report, 15% of participants consider Weibo as their main means to acquire information, approximately the same number as the total proportion of all other social media (CNNIC 2016b). Instead of being simply viewed as a ‘vertical community of interests’ (CNNIC 2016b), it is more accurately a comprehensive social platform where information is distributed and public opinion formed.

The advantage of Weibo as a cradle of public opinion is highlighted by its communicative functions. Firstly, Weibo is convenient and fast. Weibo posts were limited to 140 Chinese characters, although it currently allows 2000-character posts. The disorganised and fragmented nature of Weibo often results in posts from users that are not necessarily well informed and the rapid sharing of information (Li & Liu 2014).

Secondly, Weibo enables the geometric growth of information and makes communication faster. Users’ social connections are based on the relationship of following and being followed. By posting and reposting, every user is both the creator and distributor of information. Before the proliferation of Weibo, users were scattered in different BBSs and online communities (such as Douban, Tianya, Baidu Tieba). Spreading information cross platforms was more time-consuming and these earlier forums barely had the same user volume (300 million) to aggregate, debate, and integrate opinion. Following the distribution
mechanism and popularity of Weibo, the production, transmission and reproduction of information and opinion became more efficient.

Thirdly, Weibo has established a virtual public square where ‘trending topics’ are paid special attention. A list of ‘top 50 trending topics’ indicates the issues most discussed by Weibo users which is updated in real-time. This virtual square constructs a *de facto* public square for political participation. Netizens are encouraged to interact with each other and such activities are observable. Opening the ‘square’ of each hashtag topic, posts and comments can be listed by popularity. One can enter popular posts to view comments and enter every comment to observe and participate in conversations with the netizen who post it. Additionally, Weibo provides a hot topic page – parallel to the personalised homepage - which is another shortcut for users to keep pace with trending topics.

Considering these features, Weibo became a battlefield and a ‘market’ for the parties who have vested interests to guide public opinion. Though not always the case, it is possible to hype a trending topic and set the tone of discussion. In usual situations, once released, the news which attracts popular attention (issues listed in the top 50 trending topics) after reposted by Big Vs and then debated by Weibo users. Being listed on the 50 trending-topics requires large volume of reposts, comments and likes. Therefore, hyping an issue is normally achieved by the promotion of self-motivated or profit-motivated Big Vs. For instance, marketing accounts are a special type of Big Vs running by promoting products and opinions. Becoming a trending topic means greater views. With greater viewership, interested parties can employ the internet commentators to ‘occupy’ hot posts and comments. This is because popular posts and comments would be listed first and therefore have greater opportunity to be viewed by audiences. This approach is more commonly seen in business affairs and the profits for Big Vs in promoting a topic is an open secret. Overall, the public square of Weibo has become a market, where Big Vs and interested parties are the sellers of opinion and ordinary Weibo users are the buyers.

From the government perspective, the mobilisation of public opinion brings about both challenges and chances to maintain the control of society (Jonathan 2013). Weibo challenges the government by producing rumours and mobilising of collective actions. It is a more important challenge that the government cannot completely control the process which public opinion forms but can only join this process. As discussed in Chapter 4, even though the government could constrain people’s online expression and usage of social media, it still
needs to make certain compromises to comply with the ‘market rule’ in guiding public opinion.

**WeChat and rumours**

Tencent WeChat (hereafter referred to as WeChat) is another popular social media platform that arouses concern from the government. Launched in 2010, WeChat is in design an instant messaging application and has become the primary app of China. By 2016, there were 889 million monthly active users and 10 million public accounts on the platform (Tencent 2017). As a messaging tool, WeChat possesses higher usage than Weibo. 94% of WeChat users use it daily; 61% of them open the app more than 10 times per day and 30% of them open it more than 30 times (Tencent 2017).

WeChat is seen by the government as ‘specialising’ in making and spreading rumours and sensitive (or destabilising) information. The first reason for this is that WeChat used to be a censorship vacuum. During 2012 and 2013, when Weibo was hammered by rigorous scrutiny, WeChat, which lacked systematic censorship, became a Weibo replacement in terms of destabilising discussion (Ng 2015).

Secondly, the public accounts feature of WeChat makes it a hub of information. Both public and official accounts are subscription platforms of WeChat containing blogging and media features. They function as Weibo Big Vs by absorbing numerous WeChat subscribers for blogging services. Data shows that 57.8% users see public accounts as one of their main incentives to use this app (CNNIC 2016b); the major motivation (74.2% in 2015) is to follow public accounts to acquire information and news (Tencent 2016).

Public accounts contain a considerable proportion of private bloggers who do not have to speak for government interests. In 2014, WeChat had 5.8 million public accounts, most of which were run by private organisations, media, and individuals (POOPD 2014). This has led to the flourish of grassroots media or self-media – i.e., the information providers run by non-corporate entities (Ng 2015). Compared to traditional state-owned or corporate-owned media, ‘self-media’ lack professional training and apply loose self-censorship. When news looks like rumour and rumour looks like news (Hu 2011), rumours spread.

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43 As a comparison, there are around 2000 newspapers and 1,000 journals in China (POOPD 2012).
Rumours and politically-sensitive information are troublesome for the government as they spread fast and widely via the public and private channels of WeChat. WeChat is a private space (one-to-one chat and group chat) with media and public features (public accounts and ‘friend circle’\(^{44}\)). In general, content on one’s WeChat is decided by private choices – one’s choice of friends and subscriptions. WeChat covers 889 million monthly active users, enabling information to reach an infinite number of further networks. These receivers of information potentially ‘choose to further disseminate it to his/her personal network’ (Castells 2009).

By contrast, blocking or clarifying rumours is difficult. First, even though an article is deleted, it continues to be transmitted in the form of a screenshot. Text can be filtered by keyword blocking, but filtering video and pictures is much harder. Second, after vast broadcasting, it is hard to trace the primary rumourmongers. Third, because information is spread by personal choices, the declaration to clarify the falsehoods can often not reach the same audience.

Other than spreading rumours, WeChat also contributes to organising collective action. For the same reasons for rumour distribution, preventing the spread of information of the event from diffusing can extremely hard during a protest due to the way WeChat functions. Unlike mobilisation on Weibo which is spontaneous, WeChat can be a tool for social organisation (Ng 2015).

In summary, both Weibo and WeChat are emerging, powerful social media in shaping the public opinion of Chinese citizens. Although functioning differently, they have both brought about problems to the rule of the Chinese government. Therefore, the government has not only joined this competition for shaping public agenda but started to regulate these platforms since 2013 (as shown in Chapter 4).

\(^{44}\) The ‘friend circle’ feature of WeChat (朋友圈) allow users to make public posts are visible to all of one’s contacts in the app.
Appendix 3 - The contour of censorship: the technical, legal, and administrative tools

This section introduces China’s internet censorship system of technical, legal and administrative tools. There are different perspectives to classify the system of censorship. Officially, it is articulated as a combination of ‘legislative, administrative management, self-regulation of industry, and technical support (the Decision on Strengthening the Party’s Ruling Ability, 2004). Li Yonggang (2009) dichotomises Chinese censorship into legislative measures and rectification projects. Li Xiaoyu (2014) notices the censorship system has both institutionalised and non-institutionalised aspects. The institutionalised mechanism contains three chronological stages: previous examination (前期审批), monitoring in progress (过程监控), and subsequent punishment (事后追责). The non-institutionalised aspect is featured by an agent mode (the self-regulation of enterprises and market regulation), a campaign mode (rectifications by project 专项整治), and social supervision. China is currently more engaged with non-institutionalised measures (Li 2014).

Technical tools. The technical tool of filtering internet content is termed ‘The Great Firewall of China’ (GFW in short). The technologies for the GFW can be traced back to the Golden Shield Project, proposed in 1993 and approved in 1998 (Liang & Lu 2010). Although it was among many information projects of China and originally designed to be used by police to prevent crimes and protect the security of citizens (Li 2009), the project was accused by Western scholars of attempting to reinforce authoritarian power. Greg Walton (2001) gave it the name of ‘Great Firewall of China’ (Li 2009). Walton believed the Golden Shield was a massive architecture of surveillance, with the aim to integrate a gigantic online database with an all-encompassing surveillance network (Walton 2001, p. 5). The functional mechanism of the Gold Shield Project (and the GWF at large) continues to be opaque. As the Chinese government does not publish the operating mechanism of the Great Firewall, the following description is based on researchers’ empirical experiments. However, its main function is seen as censoring and controlling both domestic and global internet information (Dowell 2006, cited in Liang & Lu 2010).

Filtering based on technical tools takes place primarily at the first and second tier of China’s network architecture. This architecture has three tiers. First, China’s network infrastructure is...
controlled by the central government and rented by nine major internet service providers (ISP) who comply with content censorship. The nine agencies are permitted to establish backbone networks which go through international getaways located in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (Liang & Lu 2010). Private ISPs and internet content providers (ICP) in the second tier are based in one of these backbone networks. Every provider must promise to go through examination procedures and promise to install filters (Li 2009; Liang & Lu 2010). The third tier consists of users of internet services. The GFW is believed to operate within major and private internet service providers and state-owned backbone network (Human Rights Watch 2006).

At the first tier, filtering is achieved by access denial and keyword blocking. Major ISPs leave room for censorship in information structure (Li 2014). To deny the access, there are two (suspected) methods: blocking the internet protocol (IP) address and kidnapping the Domain Name System (DNS) (Ding n.d.). In the IP address approach, the Great Firewall is presumed to have a black list of IP address (with permanent and temporary sections). Ding Xuan (n.d.) suggests: once the packet which directs to a forbidden IP address is found, it will be directly discard by the GFW nodes. In this kind of blocking, a request for a filtered Web page returns a network timeout (Open Net Initiative 2005). The approach of DSN kidnapping involves blocking or manipulating the DNS servers. Because domain names need to be translated by DNS servers provided by major IPSs, the request of visiting with domain name will be sent to the major service provider which examines whether to block the URL or not (Clayton 2005). The blocked domain name will be redirected to a false IP address and the attempt of visiting the website is consequently defeated.

In the keyword blocking approach, China’s backbone technologies for routing are supported by Cisco with packet filtering capability (Open Net Initiative 2005). When a user requests a banned keyword, the user will be disconnected or interrupted by receiving an internet reset command (ibid.; Fallow 2008). However, this type of filtering has limited effect, for people can use analogies, metaphors and satire with the same meaning to bypass blocking (King, Pan & Roberts 2013). Therefore, manual filtration is combined to manage content blocking.

At the second tier of Chinese network architecture, private content and service providers are subject to keyword filtering. This is the agent mode or self-censorship of businesses (Li 2014; Open Net Initiative 2005). The Open Net Initiative (2005) confirms that Chinese search engines, such as Baidu, are filtering online content containing sensitive keywords. Various
versions of ‘bad word’ lists of Chinese internet platforms have been found. Such lists contain words blacklisted from use on that platform. Examples include lists for Netease (a portal website), Renren (Facebook alike social media), and China Central Television (CCTV). Phrases on the blacklist change over time. According to a ‘bad word’ list obtained by the Washington Post (2006), 218 out of the 236 items were related to politics or current affairs (MacKinnon 2008).

Legislation. China is one of the countries with the largest amount of laws and regulation on the internet (Li 2009). Among the 41 legal documents listed by the CAC, there are four laws, ten administrative regulations, eight departmental regulations, five judicial interpretations, ten regulatory documents, and four policy documents. Fourteen departments are involved in cyber-governance (Li 2009). Their regulatory functions are now under the coordination of the CAC which is authorised by the State Council of the PRC to manage information and content in cyberspace and supervise law enforcement (SCPRC 2014).

One of the features of these legal documents is their vagueness. Although official documents clarify that criminal activities, resistance, and subversion of state power are forbidden, no explanatory items followed to define these terms. In claiming that ‘other matters violating the Constitution, laws and administrative regulations’ are illegal, this article of law gives the implementer the power to interpret whether a certain activity should be punished. The ambiguity of expression leaves the impression that a wide range of topics are considered sensitive or controversial by the government (Open Net Initiative 2005). Based on the analysis of other scholars, Liang and Lu (2010) conclude that this vagueness was a deliberate ploy by the Chinese government to leave room for interpretation and manipulation.

Administrative measures. Chinese censorship has the respect of administrative measures, most of which subject to the ‘non-institutionalised censorship’ as termed by Li Xiaoyu (2014). He introduces three types of these administrative forms: the internet police, the rectification projects, and the self-censorship of enterprises. Early in 2000, it was reported that China had hired more than 300,000 people as internet police (Liang & Lu 2010). The Ministry of Public Security established ‘virtual police’ of cyberspace in eight pilot cities (Li 2009). Since 2015, the virtual police mechanism has been applied to 50 provinces and cities (BBC 31 May 2015).

Secondly, rectification by project or ‘special operations’ is another administrative tool of the Chinese government to enhance censorship. The rectification projects refer to operations or ‘campaigns’ taken by supervision departments as needed based on their judgement on the
social problem and citizens’ requirements. Such a campaign mode (Li 2009; Liu 2010) is based on executive power of the government and has Chinese-characteristics. The targets of any campaign may vary over situations. For example, special operations against illegal performance of internet cafés in 2002, several nation-wide rectification projects against obscene information in 2004-06 and in 2014 (named as ‘Cleaning the Internet’), a project focused on internet financial risk in 2016, and the operation to regulate netizens’ manner of commenting in 2016.

Finally, Chinese censorship is composed of an accountability mechanism and the self-censorship of enterprises – i.e., the marketing mode of censorship (Li 2010). As stated before, Chinese internet companies must accommodate censorship requirements to gain the licence to connect. Failing to do so can result in financial penalties, rectification and even closure of the business. Therefore, enterprises conduct self-censorship to avoid economic and administrative loss.

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46 Another type of self-censorship is the social supervision. Citizens can report inappropriate and illegal online activities to the internet police.
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