

## An Old Dance with New Moves: Modern China's Digital Civil Society

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At the beginning of every June, the VPNs in China flicker off.

Social media and video-sharing sites shut down: "System Maintenance"<sup>1</sup>.

This year, the microblogging platform Weibo, a Chinese variant of Twitter, removed its commenting function. The candle emoji—a sign of remembrance—disappeared. A man who had posted a bottle of wine (the word for which, *ba jiu*, sounds similar to the word for "89") with an activist message, found police at his door<sup>2</sup>.

2019 marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Protests, during which thousands of student protestors died and civilians were shot in the streets<sup>3</sup>. Yet China has done nearly everything in its power to erase the event from memory. In the three decades since June 4, 1989, the event has been effaced from history books and cyberspace alike<sup>4</sup>.

A simplistic read of the situation would label China's civil society nonexistent, squashed beneath layers of sophisticated censorship tools and government crackdowns. The aim of this essay is to offer a more nuanced analysis—to critically evaluate the future of political engagement by Chinese citizens online. Although the central government retains ultimate control over media and selectively quells protests, activism thrives between the cracks. The result is a civil society that is fragile, complex, deeply divided—yet very much alive.

In the first part of this essay, I will establish a theoretical framework in which to situate Chinese civil society. The essay will focus on mainland China; Hong Kong, though an interesting case study, has distinct historical roots that lie outside of my scope. My claim is that China's regulation of online political activity is not only an extension of its attitudes toward offline civic organizations, but the result of a history of centralized governance dating to Imperial times. In contrast to other scholars of civil society, who draw primarily from a Western historical tradition, I will ground my analysis firmly in a Chinese perspective.

As I trace the origins of Chinese civil society, three noteworthy features emerge: fragmentation, *guanxi* networks, and a sharp class divide. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has largely governed the online civic sphere with the same principles that it uses for its offline

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<sup>1</sup> Shu, Catherine, and Catherine Shu. "A Look at the Many Ways China Suppresses Online Discourse about the Tiananmen Square Protests." TechCrunch. June 03, 2019. Accessed June 19, 2019.

[https://techcrunch.com/2019/06/03/a-look-at-the-many-ways-china-suppresses-online-discourse-about-the-tiananmen-square-protests/?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer\\_us=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xLmNvbS8&guce\\_referrer\\_cs=-ikDtPK2kvsYadFQd4v79g](https://techcrunch.com/2019/06/03/a-look-at-the-many-ways-china-suppresses-online-discourse-about-the-tiananmen-square-protests/?guccounter=1&guce_referrer_us=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_cs=-ikDtPK2kvsYadFQd4v79g).

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert, David. "How China Is Wiping Memories of Tiananmen Square off the Internet." VICE News. June 04, 2019. Accessed June 19, 2019. [https://news.vice.com/en\\_us/article/7xge3b/chinese-dissidents-are-running-out-of-ways-to-remember-tiananmen-square](https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/7xge3b/chinese-dissidents-are-running-out-of-ways-to-remember-tiananmen-square).

<sup>3</sup> Lusher, Adam. "At Least 10,000 People Died in Tiananmen Square Massacre, Secret British Cable Alleges." The Independent. December 24, 2017. Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/tiananmen-square-massacre-death-toll-secret-cable-british-ambassador-1989-alan-donald-a8126461.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert, David. "How China Is Wiping Memories of Tiananmen Square off the Internet."

counterpart. Therefore, as civil society in China grew in tandem with the Internet, these three characteristics have in turn shaped citizens' political engagement online.

However, digital civil society has developed its own unique features—changing the calculus for social movements in noteworthy ways. In the second half of the essay, I describe the relationship between the CCP and civil society as a complex dance, a co-evolution in which technology has empowered both sides. Ultimately, neither side can fully extricate itself from the other.

## ***A Theoretical Framework for Chinese Civil Society***

### *The Origins of Civil Society in China*

To fully examine the rise of Chinese civil society, it is useful to first clarify the meaning of the term. By 'civil society,' I am referring to the space of citizen organization and expression that exists outside of government control. The literature typically divides civil society into four central components: "the public sphere, social organizations, popular protests, and individual autonomy<sup>5</sup>." By 'digital civil society' or 'online civil society,' then, I refer to the technology-mediated ability to express political opinion, form organizations, and participate in protests.

The term 'civil society' has European origins, bolstered by the vocabulary of Greek democracy. By Habermas' conception, it arose from tensions between public and private interests. Citizens interact in the public sphere—the *polis*—but bring their private interests from the *oikos*. The resulting marketplace of ideas is civil society: a "realm of commodity exchange and social labor governed by its own laws<sup>6</sup>."

Habermas and his contemporaries take a historical perspective, broadly drawing upon "a congeries of loosely contemporaneous phenomena in the early modern European past<sup>7</sup>." The motivating theory behind civil society is the (Western) idea that pluralism drives society forward. Bruce Sievers calls civil society "an enabling framework for democracy," whereby citizens, through becoming community members and civic actors, participate in shaping the social agenda. "One fact is a given. We are all members of civil society<sup>8</sup>."

Or perhaps, not so given. This historical analysis of civil society cannot be easily transplanted when considering China. Scholars have questioned, indeed, whether the term "civil society" should apply to countries whose philosophical traditions do not happen to include the values it espouses. For example, until its importation from the West, Imperial Chinese writings did not contain rhetoric about rights. Qing writers instead referred to human nature (*renqin*) or a moral mind (*renxing*), but neither is equivalent to the Western notion of

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<sup>5</sup> Tu, Fangjing. "WeChat and Civil Society in China." (*Communication and the Public* 1, no. 3 (2016): 343-50. doi:10.1177/2057047316667518), 344.

<sup>6</sup>Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. (Cambridge, Mass: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Rowe, William T. "The Problem of "Civil Society" in Late Imperial China." (*Modern China* 19, no. 2 (1993): 139-57. doi:10.1177/009770049301900203), 142.

<sup>8</sup> Sievers, Bruce R. *Civil Society, Philanthropy, and the Fate of the Commons*. (Medford, MA: Tufts University Press, 2010), 1.

unalienable rights<sup>9</sup>. It seems unjust, therefore, to judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree—that is, to have Western authors criticize non-Western cultures on a cultural basis that did not exist.

To rectify the Eurocentric bias, I give a new account of civil society grounded in Chinese history—and subsequently situate modern China’s civil society within this analysis. China has a long tradition of vibrant political activity. Its civil society took shape in local gatherings of the sharp-minded. Imperial China’s teahouses and wine-shops served a “catalytic function,” fostering debates on the day’s public issues<sup>10</sup>.” Citizen-run organizations maintained an active local scene. The *shantang* of the late Ming, or “societies for sharing goodness,” were charities initially founded in the wake of natural disasters<sup>11</sup>. However, they took on a life far beyond their founding incidents: as they became more widespread and powerful, *shantang* were “loci of criticism of government policy<sup>12</sup>.”

Crucially, Chinese civil society also developed under the influence of centuries-long centralized governance. Since the state’s *raison d’être* was mandated from Heaven<sup>13</sup>, it governed with a strongly interventionist style. The state’s relationship with civil society was a delicate dance; civil society’s very existence depended upon government supervision, and it could easily be snuffed out if it threatened the state’s view of harmony.

Indeed, Imperial Chinese government often used the tactic of subsuming civil society activities into the government. For example, the Song and later dynasties took on “the paternalistic obligations of the ruler to his people<sup>14</sup>,” setting up state-sponsored organizations to care for the elderly, impoverished, and disabled. The state even went so far as to sometimes draft talented local leaders into government service. Thus, individuals who otherwise would have been influential in civil society instead became bureaucratic officials. This system of bureaucratization “relied on local elites to help...implement a common agenda for promoting domestic order, an agenda that included social persuasion, surveillance and welfare<sup>15</sup>.” Ultimately, this attitude toward civil society is an important historical backdrop for understanding its modern-day status. As it turns out, modern-day China shares surprising similarities with its Imperial counterpart: the tactic of subsuming civil society under state control is not so much a relic of the past as it is a crucial piece of the Chinese Communist Party’s own toolkit.

### *Three Key Features of Civil Society*

China’s Imperial history illuminates the first of three key features of modern-day Chinese civil society: fragmentation, *guanxi* networks, and a sharp class divide. These features, I argue, connect China’s online and offline civil societies today.

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<sup>9</sup> Rowe, William T. "The Problem of "Civil Society" in Late Imperial China," 149.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, Joanna F. Handlin. "Benevolent Societies: The Reshaping of Charity During the Late Ming and Early Ching." (*The Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (1987): 309-37. doi:10.2307/2056017), 310.

<sup>12</sup> Rowe, William T. "The Problem of "Civil Society" in Late Imperial China," 144.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, Joanna F. Handlin. "Benevolent Societies," 310.

<sup>15</sup> Wong qtd. in “Guiheux, Gilles, and Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce, “Framing Social Movements in Contemporary China and Hong Kong.” in Guiheux, Gilles, and Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce. *Social Movements in China and Hong Kong: The Expansion of Protest Space*. (S.I.: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 16.

The first modern-day feature, fragmentation, has already been alluded to. Not unlike late Imperial China, today's CCP centralizes social welfare, thereby restricting the growth of NGO's and other civil society organizations<sup>16</sup>. Instead, "[o]ne of the largest contingents of social sector organizations in China are the government operated non-governmental organizations (GONGOs)<sup>17</sup>," which purportedly serve the public good but are managed by government agencies. Citizen-run organizations are comparatively weaker, as they require a long registry process through the Ministry of Civil Affairs<sup>18</sup>. Even "[w]orkers are banned from forming unions independent of the state-controlled 'All-China Federation of Trade Unions' (ACFTU)<sup>19</sup>." In the offline world, the consequence has been a civil society shaped by government influence, with only fragmented pockets that escape supervision. Online, the CCP has attempted to achieve a similar effect. The results—as this essay will eventually reveal—have been somewhat mixed.

The second key feature, *guanxi* networks, also mediate civil society's relationship to the government. *Guanxi*, or long-term interpersonal connections, describes a general umbrella of social norms characteristic to China. Members of society are embedded within a relatively rigid network of social expectations—for example, of following codes of trustworthiness (*xinyong*) or giving favors to those in particular social positions (*renqing*)<sup>20</sup>. In other words, *guanxi* describes a network of obligations between members of a community, often deeply connected to one's social position or status.

*Guanxi* became all the more prominent as China embraced a market economy after 1978: the government organized villages and communities into *danwei* (work units) or *shenchandui* (production teams), such that citizens' social roles were mediated by a "culture of organized dependency....negotiated by *guanxi* relations<sup>21</sup>." As a result of these well-defined social relations, citizens generally feel the strongest connection toward local officials, and, accordingly, organize protests on a local scale. These local protests were generally self-contained, and therefore acceptable to the central government. In stark contrast, the state had little tolerance for national movements—any threat to the central government's legitimacy "would immediately and relentlessly be repressed<sup>22</sup>."

The third feature of Chinese civil society is its sharp class divide. Reinforced in part by *guanxi*, which mandate a strong sense of social roles, divisions between classes create drastically different levels of access to civil society. Unsurprisingly, for instance, the elite have a disproportionate amount of influence in non-governmental organizations—a 2017 empirical study found that common "board appointments connect together a significant fraction of legal Chinese foundations into a single network<sup>23</sup>." More crucially, however, even the ability to

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<sup>16</sup> Nicholas, Jenna. "The Development of Civil Society in China." (Stanford Social Innovation Review: Informing and Inspiring Leaders of Social Change. October 1, 2012. Accessed June 19, 2019.

[https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the\\_development\\_of\\_civil\\_society\\_in\\_china#](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_development_of_civil_society_in_china#)), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>19</sup> Qi, Xiaoying. "Social Movements in China: Augmenting Mainstream Theory with Guanxi." (*Sociology* 51, no. 1 (2017): 111-26. doi:10.1177/0038038516656993), 115.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 113

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>23</sup> Ma, Ji, and Simon Dedeo. "State Power and Elite Autonomy in a Networked Civil Society: The Board Interlocking of Chinese Non-profits." (*Social Networks* 54 (2018): 291-302. doi:10.1016/j.socnet.2017.10.001), 299-300.

access knowledge is skewed on class lines. For instance, it is far easier and more common for the elite class to bypass the firewall with VPN's<sup>24</sup>—making information a privilege.

The next section examines the introduction of digital technology in China against this background. In the early stages, popular ideology “equated technology with empowerment<sup>25</sup>.” The Internet, a new, dynamic social realm of limitless possibilities, would inevitably democratize China. Not long after the Internet's introduction, however, China became one of the first countries in the world to implement national filtering systems—the now-famed “Great Firewall<sup>26</sup>.” The world, in its optimism for technology's democratization powers, seemed to have misplaced its bets on China.

Yet the Chinese government allows a substantial amount of political dissent to flourish online—discourse rich with “mockery, parody, jokes, humor, symbols, and creative visuals to make sophisticated political critiques on social media<sup>27</sup>.” In 2010 alone, 180,000 protests occurred in China<sup>28</sup>, and the incidence of protests is rising<sup>29</sup>. I will attempt to square the conception of China as the country of censorship and firewalls with the notion of social-media enhanced protests. Central to my argument is the idea that civil society and government tactics have co-evolved with technology. As civil society develops new technology-mediated mobilization techniques, so government develops new censorship tools—and civil society, in turn, creates new ways to evade said censorship.

## ***Pas de Deux: Digital Civil Society in the Cracks of Authoritarianism***

### *China's Networked Public Sphere*

This section describes a careful dance—between the Chinese government, which has implemented increasing measures of censorship, and civil society groups, for whom social media serves as a space to organize gatherings and spread criticism. Their dance is by no means a new one: it is the same dance as between the Ming and the *shantang* that threatened their power; it is the same dance as between the prominent local leaders and the imperial governments that drafted them into bureaucracy. China's attitudes towards its digital civil society is merely an old dance with new moves. It extends the same features that had been characteristic of its offline civil society—attempts to maneuver and subsume it—and it poses both new and analogous challenges.

A watershed moment in China's online political discourse came in 2011. On July 23, a high-speed train collision in the Zhejiang province killed 39 passengers and injured 200 others.

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<sup>24</sup> Wu, Jingsi Christina, and Kara S. Alaimo. "Social Media in Mainland China: Weak Democracy, Emergent Civil Society." *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, February 2018. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.509.

<sup>25</sup> Deibert, Ronald, and Rafal Rohozinski. "Beyond Denial: Introducing Next-generation Information Access Controls." in Deibert, Ronald, John Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski, and Jonathan Zittrain. *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Jingsi Christina Wu and Kara S. Alaimo, "Social Media in Mainland China."

<sup>28</sup> "Qi, Xiaoying. "Social Movements in China: Augmenting Mainstream Theory with Guanxi," 116

<sup>29</sup> "Why Protests Are so Common in China." *The Economist*. October 04, 2018. Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://www.economist.com/china/2018/10/04/why-protests-are-so-common-in-china>.

This event soon catalyzed a wave of social media protest—and powerfully exemplifies the Internet as a mobilizing agent. The Chinese government had initially blamed the crash on a lightning strike. Citizens later recorded video footage of officials moving the wrecked train cars from the crash site—an act seen as manipulation of the evidence<sup>30</sup>. Written posts on Sina Weibo, a popular microblogging site, openly criticized the government agency responsible for the crash. The movement soon spiraled beyond merely discussing the event, sparking a wider conversation about “similar deep-rooted social issues of which the accident was merely a manifestation<sup>31</sup>.”

The online response exemplifies social media’s catalytic role in mobilizing political discourse. As social media takes on a growing role in Chinese citizens’ lives, it has also become a critical piece in the success of organizations and protests. Yunkang Yang’s 2016 analysis of social movements in China notes that social media use correlates strongly with protest success; “the organizational effect of social media is embedded in the issue opportunity structure in China<sup>32</sup>.”

Yang’s analysis aligns with that of Helen Margetts, who posits that social media lowers the threshold of participation, thus enabling movements to grow faster. Margetts notes that typically, individuals with higher personal thresholds for joining protests may be reluctant because there few signals of viability; instead, they “join only at the later stages when the majority of potential participants have already joined in<sup>33</sup>.” The Internet increases the visibility of social movements; it allows citizens to realize that they are not alone in their suspicions that the government had mishandled the railway crash, and to swiftly demand reform. In the wake of the Weibo backlash, authorities changed their tune from blaming lightning to launching an official investigation. The resulting report found “serious design flaws in control equipment” and accused 54 officials of corruption. Authorities subsequently placed a temporary halt on new high-speed rail projects and implemented speed restrictions for trains<sup>34</sup>.

The events of the ‘7.23 Accident,’ as it was referred to online, are among the most prominent mobilizations in the Chinese networked public sphere. In the 8 years since the incident, social media in China has driven further political discourse. Applications such as WeChat broker connections between potential protestors, serving as “the channel for communicating protest information and for organizing offline protest” across a vast network of acquaintances<sup>35</sup>. Social media transforms fragmented movements into a single nationwide phenomenon—thus upending state attempts to fragment online civil society as it had done with offline ones.

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<sup>30</sup> Chin, Josh. "Weibo Watershed? Train Collision Anger Explodes Online." *The Wall Street Journal*. July 27, 2011. Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2011/07/26/weibo-watershed-train-collision-anger-explodes-online/>.

<sup>31</sup> Jingsi Christina Wu and Kara S. Alaimo, “Social Media in Mainland China.”

<sup>32</sup> Yang, Yunkang. "How Large-Scale Protests Succeed in China: The Story of Issue Opportunity Structure, Social Media, and Violence." (*International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 2895-914. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/4897/1685>), 2908.

<sup>33</sup> Margetts, Helen, Peter John, Scott A. Hale, and Taha Yasseri. (*Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 25.

<sup>34</sup> "China Bullet Train Crash 'caused by Design Flaws'." *BBC News*. December 28, 2011. Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-16345592>.

<sup>35</sup> Tu, Fangjing. "WeChat and Civil Society in China," 347.

WeChat in particular stands at the forefront of China's networked public sphere. Media scholar Lance Bennett notes that these "flexible social 'weak tie' networks" can enable dynamic expressions of identity. These identity groups constitute *connective action*, whereby social movements, no longer constrained by a particular organization structure, "transcend groups and constitute core organizations in their own right"<sup>36</sup>. As users share information through a personalized lens, individuals contribute their own identities to the collective<sup>37</sup>. Political labels take on personal meaning as they are shaped through stories and shared by trusted friends. WeChat uniquely exemplifies this effect in China. Unlike on Weibo, which has a public blog format, users primarily interact in smaller chat groups. The design enables users to express themselves in a far more intimate context<sup>38</sup>, thereby tapping into connective action.

However, these protests raise deeper questions for Chinese civil society. Why does the Chinese government allow such political acts to take place, given its propensity to monitor online activity? The Chinese online civil society is certainly no free *polis*, and yet its cyberspace enables a substantial amount of free expression and even social change. As it turns out, the platform is itself a political agent, and the process of organizing movements online must grapple with the socio-technical dynamic between man and machine<sup>39</sup>. As Stefania Milan notes, "Artifacts are inscribed with the visions of their designers and their representations of target users and intended uses." Even when a platform appears neutral, its very design prompts "a type of sociality based on predefined activities... Social media services have also assumed the role of policing and 'politicking their users'<sup>40</sup>."

This phenomenon is true of Facebook and Twitter—whose algorithms determine the political content that surfaces on your feed—but especially salient for WeChat, which is deeply embedded in the CCP's system of political control. The next sub-section of this paper examines the Party's response to the emergent digital civil society. I will argue that the relationship between the Chinese government and digital civil society is clearest when grounded in its social and historical context.

### *Empowerment and Entrenchment: State Response to Digital Civil Society*

Chinese civil society has traditionally developed in the cracks of the central government's grip. As the government evolved new tactics for controlling it, civil society counter-evolved. This cat and mouse game, this *pas de deux*, meant that there was never total suppression of civil society. In fact, the government had come to understand that some amount of criticism, particularly at the local level, worked in its favor. New tactics for managing civil society thus sought to transform social media from an avenue of empowerment to a mechanism of entrenching state power.

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<sup>36</sup> Bennett, W. Lance, and Alexandra Segerberg. "The Logic Of Connective Action." (*Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 739-68. doi:10.1080/1369118x.2012.670661), 744.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 744-5.

<sup>38</sup> Harwit, Eric. "WeChat: Social and Political Development of China's Dominant Messaging App." *Chinese Journal of Communication* 10, no. 3 (2016): 312-27. doi:10.1080/17544750.2016.1213757), 324.

<sup>39</sup> Milan, Stefania. "When Algorithms Shape Collective Action: Social Media and the Dynamics of Cloud Protesting." (*Social Media Society* 1, no. 2 (2015): 205630511562248. doi:10.1177/2056305115622481), 2.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 3.

For example, in 2006, as it became clear that the Internet was a growing space for civic organization and discourse, the National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference initiated their own blogs, encouraging citizens to bring discussions to government-run platforms<sup>41</sup>. This act was the first digital instance of a longstanding government attitude—that vocal community leadership should be subsumed into the its bureaucracy and given adequate supervision.

The policy follows the logic of analogous offline trends. In rural villages, for example, the central government has recently encouraged more competitive elections. Elections were seen as the safer alternative to demonstrating on the streets; “any potential radical social movement, therefore, can be turned into a constructive force to build an orderly society in rural China. Social protests thus constitute an essential process of state building and an instrument in the art of governance<sup>42</sup>.” Accordingly, the Chinese state has recognized that turning a blind eye to online protests—even, to some extent, allowing protests to be successful—is itself a political tool. By allowing disgruntled citizens to slowly “let off steam<sup>43</sup>,” a thousand small protests may diffuse tensions enough to prevent a single massive revolution.

Thus democracy and ‘civic engagement’ became the unofficial tactics of the Chinese Communist Party. Censorship in China often does not filter criticisms of “the government, its associated institutions, or its policies, as long as such criticisms do not lead to offline actions...and especially when they primarily target governments below the level of state authorities<sup>44</sup>.” The state is well aware that such criticisms are self-contained within local *guanxi* networks, and are therefore unlikely to pose a substantial national threat.

The state is even surprisingly light-handed in implementing its “Great Firewall.” Though the Chinese government certainly performs its fair share of deletions—one crackdown event in 2018 saw nearly 10,000 accounts removed from WeChat and Weibo in a single month<sup>45</sup>—a substantial amount of political content slips through the cracks. Google, Twitter, and Facebook are easily accessible via VPN. Some politically controversial websites will even load normally, with only a slightly slower Internet speed. Just enough information remains accessible to generate the illusion of a free Internet, yet these slight manipulations enable the Party to create an extensive system of self-censorship at minimal cost.

Margaret Roberts terms this inconsistency *porous censorship*—“frequently circumvented by savvy Internet users, accidentally evaded by citizens wasting time on the web, and rarely enforced with punishment<sup>46</sup>.” Yet the porousness is, as they say in the technology

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<sup>41</sup> Yu, Jianxing, and Jun Zhou. "Chinese Civil Society Research in Recent Years: A Critical Review." (*China Review* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 111-39. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23462219>), 127.

<sup>42</sup> He, Baogang. "Social Protests, Village Democracy and State Building in China: How Do Rural Social Protests Promote Village Democracy?" in Guiheux, Gilles, and Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce. *Social Movements in China and Hong Kong: The Expansion of Protest Space*. (S.l.: Amsterdam University Press, 2009.), 25.

<sup>43</sup> "Why Protests Are so Common in China."

<sup>44</sup> Jingsi Christina Wu and Kara S. Alaimo, "Social Media in Mainland China: Weak Democracy, Emergent Civil Society."

<sup>45</sup> Davis, Rebecca, and Rebecca Davis. "China Deletes Nearly 10,000 Social Media Accounts in Latest Crackdown." *Variety*. November 14, 2018. Accessed June 19, 2019. <https://variety.com/2018/digital/news/china-social-media-weibo-tencent-wechat-1203028104/>.

<sup>46</sup> Roberts, Margaret E. (*Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside Chinas Great Firewall*. Princeton University Press, 2018), 2.



world, a feature rather than a bug. Traditional forms of censorship (that is deleting and banning websites outright) are costly. Massive internet blockades are not only computationally inefficient, but also pose barriers to economic growth. “Communications technologies facilitate markets, create greater efficiencies, lead to innovation, and attract foreign direct investment<sup>47</sup>”—benefits that the state would prefer not to lose. Porous censorship is also simply better PR: it enables states to retain plausible deniability of free speech violations. Interventions simply mimic technical errors: slowed Internet, a 404 page<sup>48</sup>.

Porous strategies are also surprisingly effective. The several minutes to set up a VPN for Facebook causes users switch to WeChat. Twitter’s lagging load time leads users to post instead on Weibo. “Because information is widespread and has many substitutes, small impediments to reading information and even silly distractions can significantly affect users’ consumption of political information<sup>49</sup>.” The economics of information takes place at the level of a split second. Making information slightly more difficult to access (a tactic that Roberts calls *friction*<sup>50</sup>) thus causes users to naturally choose applications that load faster—and which happen to be tightly monitored by the CCP.

In 2014, WeChat and several other Chinese-based social media companies had signed an agreement to “identify and clear rumors on their applications<sup>51</sup>.” WeChat is a platform with its own heavy political baggage. Thus, while citizens may genuinely choose WeChat as a tool for mobilization, the state ensures that users realistically have few other options. Movements that do take place across the platform then, become subject to the CCP’s close watch.

The move to nudge users toward WeChat is simply a more sophisticated version of the state-run blogs and discussion forums of 2006. These tactics are themselves situated within a long history of monitoring and centralization—done not only by the Chinese Communist Party, but pursued over centuries of Imperial history.

The Chinese online civil society is a walled garden, over-pruned and over-plucked under the Communist Party’s careful watch. Perhaps the greatest casualty of a civil society that grew under such conditions is the vast class divides in accessing it. In seeking out pockets free from government control, civil society had been driven into corners that are accessible mostly by the elite: VPN-shielded social networks; WeChat circles small enough to escape government infiltration; charitable organizations led by the wealthy few. Accordingly, the social issues most likely to gain traction often represent the experiences of the comparatively privileged. It should not escape notice that the ‘7.23 Accident’ would likely have had a far less viral impact if its victims had not been “from China’s middle class, and could afford the sizable price for a speed-rail train ticket<sup>52</sup>.” As the government and civil society continue their centuries-long dance, the

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<sup>47</sup> Roberts, Margaret. *Censored*, 24.

<sup>48</sup> Masashi, Crete-Nishihata, Ronald J. Deibert, and Adam Senft. “Not by Technical Means Alone: The Multidisciplinary Challenge of Studying Information Controls.” (*IEEE Internet Computing* 17, no. 3 (May/June 2013): 34-41. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2265644](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2265644)), 6.

<sup>49</sup> Roberts, Margaret. *Censored*. 10.

<sup>50</sup> Roberts, Margaret. *Censored*. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Qtd. in Harwit, Eric. “WeChat: Social and Political Development of China’s Dominant Messaging App.”

<sup>52</sup> Jingsi Christina Wu and Kara S. Alaimo. “Social Media in Mainland China: Weak Democracy, Emergent Civil Society.”

strategy of porous censorship—and leaving only pores large enough for the well-off—constricts the supply of dancers.

Yet with every motion, there is a counter-motion; though the ‘7.23 Accident’ originated as a middle-class issue, it sparked discussion across all social classes. This moment of public crisis “brought people together from different social strata in voicing their grievances about the failures of China’s system<sup>53</sup>.” Despite the government’s attempts to fracture movements along social classes, the personalized nature of connective action allowed lower-class individuals to re-interpret middle class politics on their own terms. Technology in China may appear to step on civil society’s toes; in fact, the people have gained momentum to dance on.

## **Conclusion**

With the advent of digital networks, a new realm of civil society has opened in China. Political resistance in this realm is mixed—at times, resistance occurs surreptitiously, in the form of coded language and satire that escapes content filters<sup>54</sup>. At other times, acts of democracy are encouraged by the state to bolster its own perceived legitimacy<sup>55</sup>. Still other times, as with attempts to remember the Tiananmen Square Protests, activism is met with immediate police action. There is no easy characterization of the Chinese digital civil society.

The central government and the vocal citizens, locked in an endless *pas de deux*, have shaped a civil society marked by fragmentation, *guanxi* networks, and a sharp class divide. These features have translated from offline policies into analogous attempts to subsume digital civil society into government control.

But one thing is for certain: this dance is a duet, not a solo. The Chinese central government cannot quite snuff out the people’s political voices. Its tactics have even backfired. Attempts to keep protests local actually gave activists more opportunities to voice concerns to local officials and scholars. Local labor rights organizations, for example, have organized seminars that create a platform for grassroots workers to directly engage with policymakers<sup>56</sup>. In villages where the central government promoted open elections, the number of candidate nominations skyrocketed from a handful of Party-approved individuals to 959 candidates for 57 open seats<sup>57</sup>. As it turns out, the gaping loophole in using feigned democracy as social control is that, sometimes, feigned democracy results in actual democracy. When the state turns a blind eye to political speech, it creates opportunity for social rights groups and civilian thinkers to shape a new area of civil society.

Moreover, the particular nature of social technology makes the traditional techniques of fragmenting civil society far more difficult to sustain. Whereas outlawing citizen-led organizations had been an effective way of stifling in-person collective action, “connective

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Jingsi Christina Wu and Kara S. Alaimo. “Social Media in Mainland China: Weak Democracy, Emergent Civil Society.”

<sup>55</sup> He, Baogang. “Social Protests, Village Democracy and State Building in China,” 40.

<sup>56</sup> Gleiss, Marielle Stigum, Elin Sæther, and Kathinka Fürst. “Re-theorizing Civil Society in China: Agency and the Discursive Politics of Civil Society Engagement.” (*China Information* 33, no. 1 (2018): 3-22. doi:10.1177/0920203x18790395), 12.

<sup>57</sup> He, Baogang. Social Protests, Village Democracy and State Building in China,” 36.

action” formed through social media requires no brick-and-mortar institution. “Bodies are not practiced[,] but experienced<sup>58</sup>,” connective experiences, captured through digital technology, can thrive despite physical fragmentation. Even deleted posts cannot be fully erased, for, “before a post was deleted, it may have already gained enough attention<sup>59</sup>” to have delivered an impactful message.

There is even some hope for lessening divides between the privileged and marginalized. Social media have been known for “providing social support to China’s marginalized and underprivileged, such as online support groups for people living with HIV/AIDS.” The technology, fueled by powerful personal messages, has generated empathy between “those born in the 1980s and 1990s to parents who were first-generation migrant workers... and higher social classes<sup>60</sup>.” While it is true that many avenues of information online are available primarily to the privileged, other aspects of social media generate a unifying force.

Of course, it should be lost on no one that China’s censorship tactics remain powerful. The Internet is as much a democratizing force as it is a coercive and authoritarian one. When the VPN’s flicker off in June, it is a sober reminder that there is no fully escaping state power.

But in a networked, technological age, digital civil society has proven its existence equally inescapable.

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<sup>58</sup> Milan, Stefania. “When Algorithms Shape Collective Action,” 7.

<sup>59</sup> Tu, Fangjing. “WeChat and Civil Society in China,” 346.

<sup>60</sup> Wu, Jingsi Christina, and Kara S. Alaimo. “Social Media in Mainland China.”

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