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# THE POWER OF THE INTERNET IN CHINA

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■ GUOBIN YANG ■

# THE POWER OF THE INTERNET IN CHINA

■ CITIZEN ACTIVISM ONLINE ■

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*For Lan and Yufeng*





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# THE POWER OF THE INTERNET IN CHINA



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## ■ INTRODUCTION ■

**O**f all the aspects of Chinese Internet culture, the most important and yet least understood is its contentious character. Media stories and survey reports have perpetuated two misleading images of the Chinese Internet: one of control and the other of entertainment. These two images create the misconception that because of governmental Internet control, Chinese Internet users do nothing but play. The real struggles of the Chinese people are thus ignored, and the radical nature of Chinese Internet culture is dismissed. Yet, not only is Internet entertainment not apolitical, but political control itself is an arena of struggle. Contention about all other domains of Chinese life fills the Chinese cyberspace and surges out of it. Is it still possible to understand social change in China without understanding the popular struggles linked to the Internet?

This book is about these Internet-related struggles, which I will call online activism. My thesis is that online activism derives its forms and dynamics from a broad spectrum of converging and contending forces, technological, cultural, social, and economic, as well as political. It must therefore be understood as the result of the interaction of multiple forces. The dynamics are multidimensional. For this reason, analyzing online activism will both reveal the new forms, dynamics, and consequences of popular contention in the age of the Internet and will shed light on general patterns and dynamics of change in contemporary China. I show how Chinese people have created a world of carnival, community, and contention in and through cyberspace and how in this process they have transformed personhood, society, and politics. This book is about people's power in the Internet age.

China achieved full-function connectivity to the Internet in 1994. By June 2008, the number of Internet users had reached 253 million. In over ten years, about a quarter of the urban population had gained Internet access. In both work and leisure, people depend on it more and more. The result is the rise of a dynamic Chinese Internet culture. This is a creative culture full of humor, play, and irreverence. It is also participatory and contentious. Its bulletin-board systems (BBSs), online communities, and blogs are among the most active in the global cybersphere. Fully a quarter of all Chinese Internet users frequent BBS forums. The most unorthodox, imaginative, and subversive ideas can be found in Chinese cyberspace. Authority of all kinds is subject to doubt and ridicule. Ordinary people engage in a broad range of political action and find a new sense of self, community, and empowerment. All this forms a sharp contrast to the official newspapers and television channels, where power and authority continue to be narrated in drab tones and visualized in pompous images, so as to be worshipped. And all this Internet culture is burgeoning under conditions of increasing political control.

Scholarly works have explored many aspects of this Internet culture. There are important studies of Internet control, e-government, cybernationalism, and online participation. Some analysts have argued, for example, that Internet control has been tightening in China. Others have studied the formation of online literary communities. Still others have explored Internet-based political action. Yet these different aspects remain disconnected in current studies. The power, dynamics, and contradictions of Chinese Internet culture remain clouded. Why is popular contention occurring under conditions of growing control? How do netizens and civil-society groups resist and challenge Internet control? What cultural forms do online activism take on? How do people build online communities? What is the role of Internet businesses in all this? What is the power of online activism as a force of social change?

These questions cannot be answered separately and in isolation from broader social and historical processes. The creativity, community, contention, and control in Chinese cyberspace are interrelated features. Online community is both a social basis and an outcome of contention. Contention challenges control and adapts to it. Popular contention and the search for community are processes of human agency and creativity. And of course, Chinese Internet culture is not just about the Internet. It mirrors larger trends. The creativity, community, contention, and control in Chinese cyberspace are evident in other areas of contemporary life. The Internet revolution parallels the expansion of culture, community, and citizen activism beyond cyberspace. I show how Chinese citizens, within the limits of objective social

conditions, have expanded culture, community, and political participation in the information age. Collectively, these efforts make up China's new citizen activism. The story I tell is about the interfacing of this new citizen activism with the Internet. It is a story of social change told through the lens of online activism.

### Online Activism: A Tale of Identity and Contention

Online activism refers to contentious activities associated with the use of the Internet and other new communication technologies. It can be based more or less on the Internet. On the one hand, the Internet is increasingly integrated with conventional forms of locality-specific protest. For example, it is used to mobilize offline protest events. In many cases, however, contention takes place *in* cyberspace. It may spill offline, but its central stage of action is the Internet. Contention is a matter of degree. Among the less contentious activities are the social and political discussions and debates that take place online daily. More contentious action includes Web campaigns, signature petitions, outright verbal protests, and online direct action such as virtual sit-ins and hacktivism.

Activism is often taken to mean contentious political activities. Yet contention is not limited to the political realm. Activism can take cultural and social forms without being any less contentious.<sup>1</sup> Many cultural and social activities in modern Chinese history were just as political as political movements were. The “misty poetry” movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s was a literary movement, yet it was politically subversive. Such is also the case with Cui Jian's rock-and-roll music.<sup>2</sup> Nor does activism necessarily have explicitly political goals. Often, people engage in cultural contention to express or oppose values, morality, lifestyles, and identities.

One of the fascinating aspects about online activism in China is precisely its ambiguous nature. Sometimes it takes the form of protest; at other times, it borders on dissent but is not clearly so. In the words of Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, it is “boundary spanning.”<sup>3</sup> It crosses between the legitimate and the illegitimate. At still other times, online discussions are not meant to be political but may be interpreted as such by government authorities. Thus, following the broad conceptualization of activism in recent social-movement scholarship, I understand online activism to be any form of Internet-based collective action that promotes, contests, or resists change.

Online activism in China touches on all imaginable issues, from consumer-rights defense to sexual orientation, from protests against harms

inflicted on vulnerable individuals and disadvantaged groups to the expression and assertion of new lifestyles and identities. These issues fall roughly into two types. One consists of struggles for recognition and against discrimination. As I will discuss in detail in chapter 1, this type is about identity politics. The other type involves struggles against oppression and exploitation rooted in grave material grievances. These two types of struggles resemble the “protests against discrimination” and “protests of desperation” among the workers studied by Ching Kwan Lee.<sup>4</sup> Yet while for Lee, the protests against discrimination are mainly rooted in material grievances about wage nonpayment, the struggles for recognition in online activism also focus significantly on nonmaterial concerns. Of course, this is an analytical distinction. In reality, most cases of activism involve overlapping concerns and claims, both material and nonmaterial. There is no pure division between material interests and nonmaterial concerns.

The story of Zhang Xianzhu and other hepatitis-B carriers is emblematic of Chinese online struggles for recognition.<sup>5</sup> On November 10, 2003, Zhang Xianzhu, a member of a BBS forum run by hepatitis-B carriers, sued the Human Resources Department of Wuhu’s municipal government in the province of Anhui for discrimination in its recruitment of civil servants. Aged twenty-five, Zhang was first out of thirty candidates competing for one civil-service position. But on September 20, 2003, after three months of ordeal, Zhang received a notice from the Human Resources Department that he was not eligible for hiring because his physical exam results showed that he was a hepatitis-B carrier. Devastated, Zhang shared his story with members of the hepatitis-B forum. He received immediate emotional and moral support. He took forum members’ advice and took his case to court. The BBS forum launched a campaign to aid Zhang’s cause. The moderator of its newly opened “rights-defense forum” found a well-known professor of law from Sichuan University to appear as Zhang’s defense lawyer. Other members contacted newspapers and television stations to seek media coverage of Zhang’s case. The forum also set up a bank account for people to donate money for Zhang. On April 2, 2004, the local court ruled that the Human Resources Department did not have cause to cancel Zhang’s candidacy. On April 19, 2004, the intermediate court rejected the appeal of the Human Resources Department. This court ruling marked the victory of the first-ever legal action against hepatitis-B discrimination in job placement, and it had far-reaching reverberations. In August 2004, the Ministry of Personnel and Ministry of Health removed articles about hepatitis-B from the national “Physical Exam Criteria for Civil Servants Recruitment,” making hepatitis-B carriers eligible for civil-service jobs. The victory of the case showed that

people could use the Internet not only to provide and seek social support but also to mobilize and organize collective action. Since then, the hepatitis-B carriers' antidiscrimination campaign has grown into a full-blown national movement. The movement still relies heavily on the Internet, but the social networks that have evolved from the Internet forums have become an important social basis.

The exposure and contention about slave labor in the illegally operating kilns in the province of Shanxi is a story of struggles against oppression.<sup>6</sup> On May 19, 2007, the Henan television station aired a short program about the kidnapping of young boys for slave labor in the illegally operating brick kilns in Shanxi and the horrible experiences of parents trying to find their missing children. The program received attention in the province of Henan, and follow-up stories were aired in the following weeks. In Shanxi, newspapers covered the story too. Yet it was not until early June that the issue gained national media publicity, leading to the direct intervention of the central government. The transformation of this story from local news to a national issue happened because of an open letter a woman published anonymously online. The letter appeared on June 6 in the "Great River Net" (*dahe wang*), the official Web hub of Henan. By June 18, it had attracted 300,000 hits. As soon as it appeared, the letter was crossposted to Tianya.cn, one of the most popular and influential online communities in China. There it attracted an even larger number of hits for the same period: 580,000. Numerous responses were posted. Netizens expressed shock at this case of twenty-first-century slavery. They demanded the punishment of both local kiln owners and the police and government personnel who helped them cover up the case. Many people proposed specific avenues of action: building QQ-based mass-mailing lists to keep the communication going,<sup>7</sup> establishing emergency citizen organizations to raise funds to help the parents and their abducted children, contacting international media and religious organizations to expose the affair, calling for government intervention, and so forth. In the middle of these protestations and mobilization, national newspapers, television stations, and Web hubs began to cover the case extensively, and the central government dispatched officials to Shanxi to investigate. The wave of popular contention subsided in early July with the prosecution of the key suspects.

These are just two of the many stories I will tell in the following pages. These stories are about real people and their experiences. Their experiences hinge one way or another on the Internet and other new information technologies, but they are not confined there: they often spill offline into the streets. These people are an extremely diverse and motley crowd. They

are activists, dissidents, lurkers, gamers, hackers, and bloggers. They are environmentalists, nationalists, whistleblowers, feminists, and idealistic utopians. They are high-school students, college graduates, white-collar professionals, homeowners, pet owners, consumer activists, and just plain and simple *wangmin*—netizens. Although there are significantly fewer active participants from the rural population, rural representation cannot be summarily dismissed. As of December 2007, over 52 million (7.1 percent) members of the rural population were online. The increase in the number of Internet users in rural areas far outpaces that in urban areas, indicating that the Internet is undergoing rapid diffusion in rural China.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, rural representation sometimes happens in other ways too, such as through the mediation of wired urbanites, many of whom join online activism about rural social issues. Readers may still remember the touching image of the eighty-year-old peasant woman Feng Zhen in the village of Taishi, which was widely circulated on the Internet in 2005. Holding a megaphone and with an upraised fist, Feng was pictured delivering a speech to fellow villagers who were petitioning to impeach their village head.<sup>9</sup> Like powerful television images, these indirect representations have direct consequences in mobilizing online publics when they enter circulation in the Internet networks.

### Multi-Interactionism: An Analytical Approach

Why has online activism been on the rise? What are its main forms and dynamics?

Existing work contains many useful insights. Many studies reveal the institutions, practices, and architecture of the political control of the Internet in China.<sup>10</sup> Others have explored the practices of e-government, namely, the use of the Internet and other new information technologies to promote transparency and enhance governance.<sup>11</sup> Many have examined different aspects of the political, social, and cultural uses of the Internet, SMS (short message service), and mobile phones, revealing the expansion of intellectual and public discourse,<sup>12</sup> the formation of online literary communities,<sup>13</sup> the expression of social conflicts and the empowering of marginalized groups such as migrant workers,<sup>14</sup> the rise of cybernationalism,<sup>15</sup> and the effect of political liberalization.<sup>16</sup> Although many of these works touch on various issues related to online activism such as Internet control and public expression, a systematic, in-depth study focusing specifically on online activism is still lacking. Online activism has not been subject to theoretical explanation.



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