

Neither Revolution Nor Inertia: Social Media Activism Under the Constraints of an Authoritarian Regime

Research Summary for Summer 2021

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Edited by Michelle Wang. Original version retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/26/opinion/beijing-free-speech-america.html>

Introduction

The increasingly robust discussion on digital authoritarianism demonstrates the interplay of social media, political activism, and government surveillance in the 21st century. The ways in which authoritarian governments control social media have serious implications for political mobilization, opinion shaping, and other political outcomes in the contemporary context. The China model relies heavily on “digital authoritarianism,” a process in which authoritarian governments utilize online tools for domestic censorship, user surveillance, and political distortion (Polyakova and Meserole 2019). The Singapore model presents an interesting case. Unlike China, Singapore is a competitive political system in which democratic elections exist in conjunction with authoritarian rule. While the city-state is more liberal towards foreign media, in the sense that it allows citizens to access information from the West, it is still one in which the state controls online discourse.

Over the last five years, both countries have taken draconian measures to secure the coercive capacity of the government against dissenters. As a result, opposition parties and activists find it increasingly difficult to carve out a legitimized space for social change. Considering the high degree of censorship in authoritarian countries, how do activist groups utilize social media to promote political reform in relation to public opinion and citizen participation? What is the government’s response to these groups and how effective is it? Through the investigation the contemporary research on social media control in authoritarian societies, this paper analyzes how various NGOs in China and opposition parties in Singapore navigate social media to shape political attitudes and produce social change as well as the major trends that provide the framework for the emergence of social media activism in the 21st century.

The Rise of Social Media in Politics

In the mid 2000s, many observers saw the potential of the internet to challenge authoritarian regimes, hoping that it would give rise to “techno democracy” (Wang 2019, 54). Observers stressed the “democratising potential of self-directed communication,” as users were able to spread information across vast geographical barriers (Soon et al. 2016, 91). With the subsequent rise of social media, dreamers of this utopian society began to have more grounds for optimism as social media enabled individuals to engage in peer-to-peer interactions on a larger scale and,

therefore, mobilize viral communications and garner support for social causes. As a result, many assumed that the decentralized nature of social media could potentially redirect power dynamics, thereby challenging the dominant control of authoritarian states (Soon et al. 2016). However, these prospects were brought to an anticlimactic end when it became evident that autocratic regimes were equally skilled at mobilizing online networks to dominate and control public opinion (Wang 2019). It is the case that many authoritarian regimes are enabled by social media through the use confrontational tactics to erase traces of popular discontent (Wang 2019).

The China Model: Digital Authoritarianism

In 2018, after President Xi eliminated the two-term limit for the presidency, he was able to extend his power and reach in the apparatus of centralized digital authoritarianism in order to exert maximum control over civil society (Qiang 2019). In the following years, the CCP has placed significant emphasis on the idea of “internet sovereignty,” that is, asserting the dominance of the authority of national governments in regulating web content (Qiang 2019, 54). In the name of “safeguarding national security” (Wang 2019, 120) and promoting civic solidarity, the Chinese government has created aggressive surveillance measures to crackdown on freedom in the cyberspace. For instance, China adopted its first ever cybersecurity law, which forces internet companies to collect and disclose user information to state officials on request (Qiang 2019). Because officials could now track politically sensitive chat messages written by Chinese users, they were able to silence “antiregime speech” by arresting the so-called “online rumor mongers” (Wang 2019, 55). Moreover, there have been numerous attempts to limit access to foreign content, many of which are deemed “dangerous sites” by the CCP (Qiang 2019, 55-56). In addition to tightening the Great Firewall, the CCP has blocked over 1,300 domain names, including YouTube, Google, Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter. Consequently, President Xi Jinping’s unilateral decision to crackdown on internet discourse has serious implications for activists and other social actors attempting to foster change in China.

A few questions follow from this analysis: How can social media activism survive under such oppressive conditions? How can activists in China do social good without inciting an uprising? The short answer is that it will require a change in way of thinking. According to Wang (2019), it will require learning the “art of restraint” and navigating the “middle ground” (35). The

following sections investigate the major findings of the contemporary literature surrounding the notion of “nonconfrontational activism” and its conceptual variations (Wang 2019). With an analytical view to the evolving relationship between the Chinese state and civil society, this essay discusses the ways in which grassroots NGOs and activists have adopted non-confrontational strategies to produce social change, and the challenges they continue to face in a repressive environment.

A Literature Review on Nonconfrontational Activism and its Conceptual Variations

Throughout the course of history, practitioners of nonconfrontational activism have intentionally attracted little attention (Wang 2019). They are anonymous and remain largely in the periphery, if their existence is reckoned with at all. From a conceptual viewpoint, nonconfrontational activism is closely associated with nonresistance, and it is often tangential to academic discussions on social action, despite its prevalence in oppressive regimes (Wang 2019).

In 1985, James C. Scott published *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, which finally gave due recognition to “invisible agents” and credit to the notion of “calculated conformity” (Wang 2019, 37). In his book, Scott describes “calculated conformity” as the avoidance from direct confrontation or conflict with authority figures (Wang 2019). In the context of Western democratic societies, it is possible to resist and rebel with impunity. In particular, the ideology of individualism and the “rights culture” make room for contentious expression in society. In illiberal countries like China, by contrast, open defiance is not the norm, but rather, the exception, and individuals do not necessarily have the freedom to enjoy the civic advantages characteristic of Western democracies (Wang 2019). However, the 2010s saw the emergence of rapidly increasing literature on social action alternatives within an authoritarian context.

In her book, *Civil Society under Authoritarianism: The China Model*, Jessica Teets (2014) advocates for a new model of social contention called “consultative authoritarianism.” In her view, the dichotomy of civil society groups and autocratic regimes may, in the first instance, appear to conflict with one another. On one hand, social groups can gather reliable information about the levels of satisfaction of citizens that the state cannot access through formal institutions.

These groups are able to satisfy these demands via “social innovation” (Teets 2014, 2), thereby enhancing governance and satisfaction within the regime. On the other hand, these groups increasingly demand citizen participation and activism which may result in democratic political ideals of transparency and accountability within the government. In her view, this presents a significant challenge to the nature of authoritarian regimes, which is opaque and highly centralized (Teets 2014, 2).

In order to maximize the benefits of civil society while at the same time mitigating the risks, Teets offers a new model that provides the framework for state-civil society relations. Consultative authoritarianism allows for the formation of an “autonomous civil society,” while employing more indirect mechanisms of state control (Teets 2014, 2). Teets claims that authoritarian regimes generally lack the formal channels for obtaining citizen feedback about policies and, therefore, are unaware of the grievances that may eventually threaten regime stability. By allowing civil society to collect information about policies and provide resources and social services to citizens, authoritarian regimes can potentially become more durable in the long run (Teets 2014). Most significant, Teets’ conclusion offers an interactive and dynamic process whereby the government and civil society groups can learn from one another to improve governance and increase pluralism while maintaining control.

Subsequent years saw more works pursuing this line of argument, as Weiting Wu (2018) discusses the method of “adaptive confrontation.” Wu examined this form of social contention in the context of gender advocacy groups whose goal was to promote social change in China (Wu 2018). In her view, it is adaptive because activists can choose cooperative strategies in order to survive; it is confrontational because gender groups aim to expand the political space in spite of immense pressure from the state (Wu 2018).

Altogether, these alternative models of social contention represent a crucial milestone in reconceptualizing the relationship between the Chinese state and social actors. Rather than viewing the authoritarian regime as playing a restrictive role, social organizations can view it as an “enabling one,” where both sides can work in partnership to produce social good (Wang 2019, 41).

Tactics of Nonconfrontational Activism: Framing Strategies, Calculated Positioning and “Incrementalism”

Framing Strategies: Using Mainstream Policy Discourse

However mutually beneficial the relationship between activist groups and the Chinese state may appear, due to the increasingly oppressive nature of the CCP’s censorship program, NGOs have learned to adopt nonconfrontational strategies to evade government retaliation. In her book, Wang cites O’Brien and Li’s notion of “rightful resistance” as a useful framework on the ways in which resisters can utilize the tools of the powerful to subsequently curb the exercise of power (Wang 2019, 43). Notably, Wang argues that NGOs must learn to use state laws, mainstream policy discourse, government commitments, and politically neutral terms to legitimize their contention. For instance, drawing evidence from her own nonprofit organization, NGO2.0, which is focused on ICT-powered (information and communication technology) activism, Wang opted for “nonprofit technology” rather than promoting NGO2.0 with the loaded term “media” (Wang 2019, 43). This framing technique subsequently resulted in Premier Li Keqiang turning NGO2.0’s slogan, “Internet Plus,” into a mainstream policy discourse (Wang 2019, 43).

Calculated Positioning: Figuring out the Boundaries of the Government

Apart from prudent framing strategies, a central skill adopted by NGOs is their ability to tactfully navigate between what is deemed acceptable and what viewed as unlawful by the regime. With respect to social groups in China, the CCP utilizes a system of positive and negative incentives, or “differentiated controls” (Teets 2014, 8), which are subject to change based on the type of group to which the organization belongs. The government uses different control mechanisms on groups labelled as “safe,” which includes those mainly focused on service delivery, whereas those interested with human rights activism may receive harsher treatment (Teets 2014, 8). In this system, positive incentives consist of the potential for government funding and grants, capacity-building initiatives, pilot project permits, and access to policy making. Negative incentives, by contrast, include cell-phone monitoring, volunteer or staff intimidation, seizure of documents or office space, and lengthy questioning of staff by security departments. Ultimately, these negative sanctions could lead to the loss of financial resources, personnel, and support from civil society, thereby threatening the sustainability of social groups (Wu 2018).

While the incentive system appears useful, there are several barriers that prevent activists from using it as an effective tool. In the first place, the incentive system is not available to the public. Due to the opaque nature of the Chinese government, social organizations do not know precisely which groups are categorized as “safe” and which ones are viewed as “dangerous.” It is the authorities who have the power to determine the level of threat a social group poses to the regime’s legitimacy. Moreover, the boundaries set by the central regime are constantly “falling in and out of the regime’s favour at a given moment” (Wang 2019, 43). It is therefore necessary for social groups to prepare for the fluctuations in policies by determining what position the government has taken at that time and the appropriate way to face it (Wu 2018).

“Incrementalism”: Social Media Tactics Adopted by NGOs

With meteoric rise of Tencent’s mobile messaging app, Wechat has become the most widely used social media platform in China, with over 1.4 billion active users (Wang 2019). NGOs, many of which have previously relied on other platforms such as and QQ and Weibo, now use Wechat as their most frequented communication medium. In a recent study on NGO users of Wechat, 59.13% of surveyed organizations had created official WeChat accounts and 53.3% used private and group WeChats to publicize their work (Wang 2019). It should be noted that, according to Wang (2019) most NGOs tend not to use Wechat and other networking platforms in a way that causes authorities to view them as rogue agents who wish to promote regime change and social disruption. In recent years, the country has witnessed more Chinese NGOs utilize Wechat for less politically sensitive objectives, such as developing social connections to mobilize resources to bring relief to disadvantaged rural and urban communities. Rather than attempting to enact sweeping revolutionary change, which will result only in government retaliation, grassroots NGOs have taken an “incremental” approach to produce social change (Wang 2019).

A successful example of using social media to foster incremental change within Chinese civil society is illustrated by Greening Han River, a Hubei-based grassroots NGO aimed at raising environmental awareness in China. Its major goals include the following: “to mobilize the public to participate in the cause of water protection and preservation”; “to explore all the resources available to us”; and “to better our job by doing grassroots work in ground-level villages and

communities” (China Development Brief n.d.). In 2011, the organization documented a live-broadcast of the entire process of testing the polluted Han River through various platforms, such as microblogs, Google Buzz and Twitter (Wang 2019). Greening Han River was thus able to build civic communities online where people participated as active observers in real time and shared the water testing journey on social media. As a result, the organization gained more transparency with the local community and inspired residents to look after the river, and more broadly, the environment. As a successful environmental awareness campaign, Greening Han River demonstrates how grassroots NGOs can engage in the nonconfrontational strategy of incrementalism to become agents of behavioural change, incite creative activism, and enhance community leadership in the Hubei region (Wang 2019).

Revolution vs. Nonconfrontational Activism

Over the years, Chinese social organizations opted for the strategy to walk around obstacles instead of walking through them (Wang 2019). Lest some critics want to characterize this type of action as “nonaction” (Wang 2019, 131), I will quote from Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo’s reflection on the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square Massacre on June 4, 1989.

“Revolution” implies unyielding, uncompromising, intolerant, uncooperative qualities—a radical justice that shows no forgiveness; the more radical, the more extreme; the more absolute, the more revolutionary . . . an obsession with “revolution” caused us to lose our humanity and rationality, to lose our social conscience and tolerance, to lose the most basic standards of right and wrong. (Liu Xiaobo 1992, quoted on page 131 of *The Other Digital China* 2019)

In his long and non-violent struggle for human rights in China, Liu Xiaobo discovered that a glorification of the radical means of political change would only give ammunition to the Chinese Communist Party to rule with an iron fist, and propel civil society into a violent confrontation (Wang 2019). Therefore, promoting change in a country where despotism and censorship have defined its brand for more than a century must be, in the wise words of Liu Xiaobo, “gradual, peaceful, and long term” (Liu Xiaobo 1992, 313).

The Singapore Model

Singapore, with a total population of only 5.7 million, has a GDP of \$101,376 per capita, making it the second highest GDP in the world in terms of purchasing power parity (The Heritage Foundation, n.d.). While China's economic freedom score is only 58.4, making it 107th freest in the 2021 Index, Singapore remains the freest economy with a score of 89.7 (The Heritage Foundation, n.d.). However, despite its unmatched economic freedom, Singapore's ruling party like China, has implemented authoritarian policies to tighten control of civil society.

When analyzing the government system of Singapore, it is necessary to recognize its nuances. While the Singapore government is a combination of democratic and authoritarian rule, it is distinguished from a complete democracy and pure authoritarianism. Unlike China, Singapore is a city-state in which democratic elections exist in conjunction with authoritarian rule. Almost every citizen in Singapore has the right to vote in regular elections to choose the next president or legislative body. Although the voting system is, for the most part, fair and does not tend to involve fraudulent activities, the People's Action Party (PAP) has maintained its dominance over opposition parties since the city-state's independence in 1965 by virtue of its robust electorate (Zhang 2016).

Despite its democratic elections, Singapore's governance style is largely authoritarian. Similar to the case of China, traditional mass media in Singapore is heavily monitored, surveilled, and controlled (Zhang 2016). The government is able to tame opposition through economic, political, and legal means, which includes various pieces of legislation under Singaporean law as well as defamation lawsuits (Zhang 2016). For instance, the *Internal Security Act* (ISA) permits the state to imprison anyone, including publishers and journalists, without trial. The reduced presence of competing messages enables the ruling party to exert greater influence over perceptions in the political opinion climate. Furthermore, many individual internet and social media users have been charged with defamation and sedition for criticizing the ruling party. In a case that gained nation-wide attention, a 17-year-old YouTuber named Amos Yee voiced his criticism toward the late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and was subsequently arrested under the Singapore Penal Code in 2015 (Zhang 2016). Thus, a strong case can be made for Singapore's robust electoral authoritarianism.

It should be noted that, despite the city-state's increasingly draconian censorship measures, new media, especially social media, are often the only alternative sources to state-controlled media in Singapore (Zhang 2016). When the citizenry is exposed to different opinions and facts, their perceptions on politics may change. Researchers consider elections to be a special period during which the actions of various political and non-political actors are magnified and closely observed. A few questions follow from this: How important was social media to the opposition parties during the 2011 and 2015 elections in Singapore? What was the effect of their social media outreach? What was the government's response? The following section will focus on the dialogue between opposition parties, activist groups, and the government and how this space has been broadened and narrowed during the 2011 and 2015 general elections.

Changing the Dialogue: The Effects of Social Media in the 2011 Election

In the general election of 2011, social media played a pivotal role in facilitating political discussions and generating oppositional support (Tan 2012). Opposition parties, including the Workers' Party (WP) and the National Solidarity Party (NSP), utilized social media platforms to publicize events, mobilize support, and communicate their political views by disseminating information that was largely unavailable through traditional mass media. Active supporters of the opposition parties gathered for party rallies and shared pro-opposition content on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter (Zhang 2016). This magnified the influence of online voices and demonstrated the power and reach of minority voices to change the perceptions of the majority (Zhang 2016).

In the end, although the PAP won the election, the ruling party suffered its "worst ever" electoral performance in the country's history (Abdullah 2020, 1124). Consequently, the Singaporean government promised to expand the political arena and adopt a softer tone. Unlike the case of China, the ruling party wished to start a national "Our Singapore" conversation, where the government would welcome alternative viewpoints and work with civil society advocacy groups on pertinent issues facing the country (Abdullah 2020; Chua 2020). Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat went on to announce his ambition to shift the governance of the People's Action Party from a government that works for you to a "government that [works] with

you, for you” (Chua 2020). Thus, many analysts expected Singapore to pursue a path of greater democratization and liberalization after the 2011 general election.

Facebook and Social Media Use by Political Parties in the 2015 Election

Leading up to the 2015 election, social media was expected to become “a key front,” as all nine political parties utilized social media in their campaigns (Soon et al. 2016, 90). In particular, Facebook has become a popular channel for many articles and discussions pertaining to Singaporean politics (Soon et al. 2016). As of November 2015, 70% of Singaporeans had a Facebook account, making it the top ranking social media platform in the country (Soon et al. 2016). Political parties used Facebook to routinely ask readers to sign up for updates by promoting their websites and campaign events in almost every post leading up to the election. Specifically, the Workers’ Party wrote a personalized caption for every post, adding hashtags such as “#GE2015” and “#EmpowerYourfuture” to gain viral support (Soon et al. 2016, 106). The most popular form of online participation by voters was following a discussion on political candidates they were interested in, as well as voicing their opinions on certain political issues. As a result of the talk surrounding social media, many observers were hopeful that the opposition parties could use social media to increase the number of candidates in Parliament. However, the election results clearly demonstrated that the incumbent party was the PAP as its vote share increased from 60.1% in 2011 to 69.9% in 2015, occupying no less than 83 out of the 89 seats in Parliament (Soon et al. 2016).

Post-2015: Tightening of the Political Opinion Climate Via Legislation

Although members of the opposition parties were able to use social media to promote their political views, there has been an onset of “democratic backsliding” since 2015 (Abdullah 2020). In hybrid regimes, democratic backsliding can be understood as the overreach and control of executive powers and the restricting of political space for opposition parties and the citizenry (Abdullah 2020). In particular, executive aggrandizement in the form of media control, the weakening of institutional checks on power, and the stifling of opposition forces to challenge executive leadership were all part of the Singaporean government’s strategy to secure the coercive capacity of the government against dissenters. In 2019, the *Protection against Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act* (POFMA) was passed to extend the reach of executive power.

Notably, the law has been invoked mostly on opposition members and critics of the government (Abdullah 2020). With increased self-censorship and curtailment of freedom of speech, activists and opposition politicians have faced punitive measures, including defamation lawsuits and fines.

As a result, similar to the NGOs in China, it is increasingly the case that civil society organizations in Singapore are forced to navigate the narrow space in which advocacy groups are permitted to operate. Due to the legal and political restrictions implemented by the Singaporean government, activist groups must adopt non-confrontational strategies to avoid being perceived as disruptive to the political order. For instance, the Community for Advocacy and Political Education, an organization aimed at raising “political literacy and consciousness” (CAPE n.d.), had to avoid politically sensitive keywords such as “activism” and “democracy” and instead resorted to less sensitive phrases like “active citizenry” in their promotions (Chua 2020). Despite the government’s commitment to expand the political space, the levels of censorship and repression faced by opposition forces and advocacy groups have significantly intensified after the 2015 elections in Singapore.

Conclusion: Neither Revolution Nor Inertia

The rise of social media activism has allowed individuals to engage in political discussions by providing a platform for civic engagement from the bottom-up, which in turn can potentially alter power dynamics and challenge the status quo. In the last five years, however, the Chinese Communist Party has extended its power and reach in the apparatus of centralized digital authoritarianism in order to exert maximum control over society. As a result, civil society groups are forced to navigate the narrow space between what is lawful and what is illegitimate in a regime where the boundaries may change at any given moment. Through the discussion on the contemporary literature surrounding the notion of “nonconfrontational activism,” the first section of the essay demonstrated how grassroots NGOs in China have adopted non-confrontational strategies, such as careful framing tactics, calculated positioning, and incrementalism, to produce social change within an authoritarian environment. The second half of the paper outlined the ways in which opposition parties and civil society groups in Singapore engaged in social media discourse and how this space has been broadened and narrowed in the context of the 2011 and

2015 general elections. The summary of the ways in which political parties and advocacy groups utilized online communication platforms could potentially provide specific recommendations for social groups that wish to promote change without provoking retaliation from an authoritarian government.

Ultimately, in the absence of government accountability and transparency, it remains the case that dissenters and advocacy groups will face an increasingly uphill battle against an indomitable power that is the authoritarian regime. In both countries, the ruling parties have strengthened their coercive capacity through pervasive censorship. However, it is important to recognize that social change is difficult to achieve in any society, especially in illiberal societies, where social contention is not the norm but the exception. Rather than resorting to a radical means of political change, activists can build a quiet yet powerful coalition to bring incremental progress to their society.

Acknowledgements

I would like to give a special thank you to Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for supporting the scholarship programme that made this research project possible. In addition, I would like to thank my Laidlaw Coordinator at the University of Toronto, for her encouragement and support, and my supervisor, Dr. Victor C. Falkenheim, for his wisdom and guidance on this journey.



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