Chapter 7

Will Microblogs Shape China’s Civil Society Under President’s Xi’s Surveillance State? The Case of Anti–Extradition Law Protests in Hong Kong

Kenneth C. C. Yang
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4176-6219
The University of Texas at El Paso, USA

Yowei Kang
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7060-194X
National Taiwan Ocean University, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

Western scholars have previously predicted Weibo and social media will provide Chinese netizens with an opportunity to foster its nascent civil society. However, the growing applications of surveillance technologies have challenged this rosy, yet deterministic prediction. This chapter argues that Jürgen Habermas’s concept of public sphere is less likely to function properly, given the pervasive applications of surveillance technologies in China, which has fundamentally challenge its many assumptions. Using Habermas’s analytical framework that is used to better comprehend the role of social media in Chinese politics, the authors argue that information technologies turn out to deteriorate the formation and maintenance of a public sphere for Chinese civil society. The authors employ a case study to examine the interrelations among social media, surveillance technologies, civil society, state power, economic development, political process, and democratization in China as demonstrated in Hong Kong’s Anti-Extradition Law Protests.

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INTRODUCTION -

China is an emerging power with 1.35 billion people that are composed of over 50 different ethnicities (including the largest Han ethnic group, Hui, Manchu, Miao, Korean, Mongol etc.) (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2013). Many political leaders around the world have acknowledged the rise of China in recent decades (Graham-Harrison, 2007; Shambaugh, 2013). China’s rapid rise in the world politics has created widespread geo-political schisms in South China Sea (Center for Preventive Action, 2019) and other parts of the world. Former U.S. Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, had argued that China’s rise in politics and economics is irreversible, and advocated close collaborations between two superpowers to avoid potential conflicts and wars (Graham-Harrison, 2007).

Economic indices have undoubtedly already confirmed China’s status as a global economic powerhouse after its GDP of $5.87 trillion surpassed Japan as the second-largest economy (Jacquez, 2012; Shambaugh, 2013). China’s economic growth is expected to slow down between 2014 and 2019 to 6.8% (IBIS World, 2014) and recently published GDP figure in the 2nd Quarter of 2019 has shown its economic growth was hit hard by the trade war to slow down to 6.2% (He, 2019), the lowest figure in the past 27 years. Nevertheless, China remains to be one of the most robust economies in the world (Yao, 2014), given that the Chinese government still has a lot of incentive measures to promote its domestic growth, despite the current trade war with the U.S. (Chan, Kwan, & Thomsen, 2019). With its growing political and economic prominence (Graham-Harrison, 2007), China has been cultivating its soft power to expand its influence in international politics through its Confucius Institute and mass media out-reach as far as Africa (Lee & Melissen, 2011; Li, 2009; Shambaugh, 2013).

Nevertheless, increasing social unrest and rights defense movement have occurred across China (Biao, 2012; The Economist, 2012). These protests have grown more organized, according to a report by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) (The Economist, 2012). It is estimated in a report by J.P. Morgan and Chase that trade war continues with the U.S. will cost China 700,000 or more jobs (Bloomberg News, 2018). The worst case scenario means China will lose 5.5 million jobs and 1.3% of its GDP growth (Bloomberg News, 2018). The sudden rise of unemployment rate will cost the ruling Chinese Communist Party (henceforth CCP) regime its legitimacy (Richards, 2018). Losing “the Mandate of Heaven” can cause the CCP regime to collapse rapidly when social unrests occur and spread rapidly across China (Richards, 2018).

During this volatile phase of the modern Chinese history, information-communication technologies (ICTs) (such as Weibo) are likely to play an important role. Despite of the intentional aloofness of government media to create a façade
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