Chapter IX
The Politics of the Governing the Information and Communications Technologies in East Asian Authoritarian States: Case Study of China

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ABSTRACT

China has vigorously implemented ICTs to foster ongoing informatization accompanying industrialization as a crucial pillar to drive its future economic development. The institutional and legal reforms involved were initiated and put into practice in order to meet the increasing demand for technological convergence and the negotiations for the expected entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). The Chinese government has nevertheless long been torn by the ambivalence brought about by the Internet. It regards the Internet as an engine to drive economic growth on the one hand, and as a subversive challenge to undermine the ruling Communist Party on the other hand. As soon as ICTs were introduced and Web sites mushroomed, the Party was so determined to harness the new medium to assure the Internet’s economic and scientific benefits. As a consequence, controls other than stifling ICTs would be critical for the CCP’s agenda to achieve the century-long modernization process and in the meantime, consolidate its power.
Arguably information and communication technologies (ICTs) are nowadays integral part of the whole realm of human activities. Manuel Castells, for example, notes that we have seen that ICTs are (re)shaping the material basis of society at an accelerated pace. He argues that the new information-centered technological revolution is now fundamentally altering every aspect of our lives (Castells 2000). In other words, it seems we live in a world, that in the expression of Nicholas Negroponte, has become “digital.” (Negroponte 1995) In another work, Castells goes on to describe work the specific role of the Internet as “the fabric of our lives,” adding that,

...if information technology is the present-day equivalent of electricity in the industrial era, in our age the Internet could be likened to both the electrical grid and the electric engine because of its ability to distribute the power of information throughout the entire realm of human activity (Castells 2001: 1).

It is usually believed that “authoritarian systems are inherently fragile because of weak legitimacy, overreliance on coercion, overcentralization of decision making, and the predominance of personal power over institutional norms.” (Nathan 2003: 6) Yet, Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor Boas reject the idea of “blind optimism” about the Internet, suggesting that the Internet may not necessarily transform authoritarian regime. The new media may instead be exploited by the authorities there as an effective tool to further strengthen their governing capability in the information age (Kalathil and Boas 2003). Similarly Nina Hachigian holds one-party states who embrace the Internet are not more likely to fail than those that attempt to constrain the medium (Hachigian 2001, 2002). This chapter does not, however, suggest that (new) technology absolutely determines social activity, nor does the realm of society and politics condition the entire course of technological change. Instead, it is likely to be a two-way interaction between the technology and sociopolitical development.

In the Chinese context, as China is gearing up to transform its economy from central planning into one of the world’s key IT-driven economies, it provides a crucial test case for other like-minded regimes—Vietnam and North Korea, particularly—as to the ways in which governments may handle the threat or grasp the economic opportunities from cyberspace. As Hu Angang, a renowned Chinese scholar who is close to the central leaders in Beijing, enthusiastically holds, China, under economic globalization, ought to adopt the knowledge-driven strategy as its most significant national development approach in the twenty-first century. He explains that the application of ICTs can not only “bridge the divide between China and developed countries in terms of knowledge development, but also shrink the digital gap between hinterland and coastal China.” (Hu 2002: 15)

The Chinese government has no doubt acted as a vital driving force for boosting Internet and e-commerce diffusion. In retrospect, from March 1993 the Chinese central government embarked upon a series of so-called “Golden Projects”—including Golden Bridge, Golden Card, and Golden Customs—to give it information on and control over the rapid decentralization of decision-making that was taking place as a result of the move towards a market economy. The year 1993 can also be remembered as the formal start-up stage of China’s informatization. (Lu 2002: 53) On the one hand, this was aimed at laying the infrastructure for the digitization of China’s telecommunications network, on the other hand, the central government started indeed to utilize the infrastructure of the Internet to improve its own administrative control over provincial and local offices, enhancing its governing capacity and authority, as well as sociopolitical stability. In November 1998 the authorities further announced the “Government Online Project” whereby the end of 1999 and 2000, at least 60 and 80 percent respectively of
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