



REVIEWS



THE POWER OF THE INTERNET IN CHINA: CITIZEN ACTIVISM ONLINE

by Guobin Yang
Columbia University Press,
320 pages, \$29.50

Reviewed by REBECCA MACKINNON

TWO SHORT MESSAGES were posted to Twitter at 5 a.m. on July 16 by somebody called “amoiist”:

“Pls help me, I grasp the phone during police sleep.” “I have been arrested by Mawei police, sos.”

These “tweets” were quickly “retweeted” by hundreds of people in China and around the world. Nothing more was heard from amoiist, real name Guo Baofeng, on the Internet. But his short postings—sent furtively from a mobile phone while the policeman watching him dozed—were enough. People in Mr. Guo’s Twitter network who knew his real identity followed up with his family and friends in the city of Mawei.

News quickly spread around Twitter that the police had taken Mr. Guo from his office the previous afternoon. He was arrested along with several other bloggers on defamation charges after posting information online related to an alleged gang rape and death of a young woman. The case had enraged Chinese netizens writing in chatrooms and blogs after the young woman’s parents insisted she had been violently raped, despite an official autopsy

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listing the cause of death as a hemorrhage from an ectopic pregnancy.

Bloggers immediately rallied for Mr. Guo’s release. One blogger organized a campaign in which hundreds of people mailed postcards to the Fuzhou detention center where Mr. Guo was being held with the simple message: “Guo Baofeng, your mother wants you home for dinner.” Other people organized a fund-raising drive to pay for his defense. After 16 days in detention, Mr. Guo and two other bloggers arrested around the same time were released. “I used Twitter to save myself,” he wrote on his blog. The massive online reaction, he believes, helped to free him.

I was a Beijing-based correspondent for CNN in the 1990s before the Internet became widespread. If Mr. Guo had been arrested then, few people in China would have ever known. Most likely the foreign media would have found out via a handwritten fax sent by a Hong Kong-based activist. If editors deemed the story important enough, we would report it. But many arrests, particularly those in which details were sketchy involving people unknown to the international human-rights community, would go unreported even in the foreign media.

Now people like Mr. Guo with Blackberries and Twitter accounts can instantly rally people inside and outside China to help them. Not only do the tools exist, but a community has developed around the tools, a community that spreads information and mobilizes people to act. That is a profound change.

Guobin Yang’s book is an in-depth exploration of this evolution. Make no mistake, democracy is as absent as ever from China’s

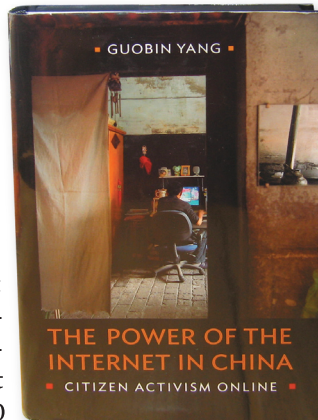
political system. Yet while there has been no political revolution, Mr. Yang argues that China is undergoing a “communication revolution” that is “expanding citizens’ unofficial democracy.” He believes “this communication revolution is a social revolution, because the ordinary people assume an unprecedented role as agents of change and because new social formations are among its most profound outcomes.” As a sociologist, not a political scientist, Mr. Yang provides no insight into how China’s profound cultural and social changes might actually lead to political and institutional change. He concludes, however, that these deeper changes are laying the groundwork for the eventual realization of “institutionalized democracy.”

The Power of the Internet in China is an important contribution to the English-speaking world’s understanding of Chinese Internet culture. It is the product of 10 years’ worth of research and fieldwork, physically in China and in Chinese cyberspace. Mr. Yang’s fact-based research is informed and enhanced by his personal experience as a mainland-born scholar who lived through the fanaticism of Mao’s Cultural Revolution. As a Chinese graduate student and then professor based in the United States, he experienced firsthand how new technologies enable global Chinese communities to stay connected with people and events back home for a range of purposes—personal, professional, as well as activism surrounding all kinds of causes across the political spectrum.

Readers who can’t read Chinese—or even those who can but don’t spend time surfing the Chinese Internet—will be surprised by many of Mr. Yang’s findings. Despite China’s authoritarian political system, censorship and surveillance, the Chi-

nese Internet that Mr. Yang describes is a highly contentious place; debate is fierce and passionate. While political realities prevent the Internet from being a medium for overt political organizing as it is in most democratic countries today, he provides a range of examples of how outraged citizens have used the Internet to expose and bring down corrupt officials. Thus the Internet is influencing how government officials behave, at least at the local level.

While it is difficult for NGOs to survive and thrive in China due to political constraints, Mr. Yang finds that new organizations in particular have used the Internet to raise awareness for causes and expand membership. Many more people use the Internet to organize informally around matters of common concern, such as a shared medical ailment. One of the examples he cites is the story of how students and parents used the Internet to raise



awareness about university discrimination against diabetic students; they eventually succeeded in changing university admission practices nationwide.

Mr. Yang points out that the contentious nature of Chinese Internet culture has pre-Internet roots; it is influenced by a long tradition of social protest throughout Chinese history. (He is an authority on such protest; his previous research focused on youth during the Cultural Revolution.) The Chinese are using the Internet to create new communal narratives about what is happening in their country and around the world.

The Chinese Internet is a “window” through which people share emotional and social bonds that ultimately shape their ideas of justice and fairness, arriving at a rough consensus on what should

be considered acceptable behavior by both the powerful and the hitherto powerless. It is a place where millions of people play out their fantasies and emulate legendary heroes—many use screen names and language that evoke the literature of the Warring States period.

The Chinese Internet is also an often hilarious and delightful place—full of jokes, puns and parodies. Internet businesses have an incentive to promote contention and debate—as well as creativity and light-hearted fun—as a way of gaining customers and traffic. A transnational space for Chinese culture has also emerged; the long-term consequences are yet unclear.

Readers seeking predictions about how all of these changes will affect political outcomes in China over the next few decades are likely to be frustrated. This is not intended as a predictive book, and Mr. Yang wisely makes no attempt to forecast future events based on current trends. But for an in-depth understanding of how life has changed for China's 300 million plus Internet users, and how these personal transformations have in turn affected contemporary Chinese society and culture, Mr. Yang's work is essential reading.