Internet in China

An Emerging Society

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About "Inside China" Series
The China Research Program (CRP) within the Institute, as a part of its activities, undertake research and organise events under "Inside China," aimed at exploring issues and challanges in contemporary China covering economic aspects of China's growth, political development and emerging social tensions and fault lines. This essay was a part of the first annual conference in 2011.

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The 'Internet' has been largely accepted as the most remarkable innovations of the millennium. Though China came in touch with this technology a little later than the other developed countries, yet today the internet contributes heavily to its all round growth and development. Though the internet was brought into China for economic purposes, it is gradually emerging out as a means of communication. The open public discourse occurring on the internet is quiet commendable. The increasing role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in political as well as social sphere cannot be overlooked. These forms of media have broken the shackles of vertical connection between its suppliers and its users, like in case of print media or electronic media, thus developing a horizontal communication of networks wherein there are many modulators as well as spectators.

The constantly increasing role of the Internet in the Chinese political, social, and economic sphere makes the study of its impact of great importance. It is influenced by socio-cultural factors, like, cultural identity, State policy and other media. The functioning of the internet as a true 'boundary-less space' has to be reconsidered when a Communist country like China is to be examined. The internet is not only a political tool but also a social tool. The amalgamations of these factors are constructing new trajectories for State-society relationship in China. This research work argues that, in closed regimes like that of China, though the internet is heavily guarded by the State authorities, yet it is breaking boundaries of political and social decorum, thus giving rise to new phenomenon, like the emergence of a networking society.

I
DEVELOPMENT OF THE INTERNET IN CHINA

With the introduction of the 'reform and opening up' during late 1970s, China was set on a new path of development. The 'four modernization', encompassing the agriculture, industry, defence, and science and technology, led to the growth and development of 'industrialization and informatization' together. The shift from command economy to market economy of the reformist policy made the ICTs salient. As one senior government official put it, "We in the government think we missed a lot of the industrial revolution. And we do not want to miss this revolution" (Hachigian, 2001, p.122). The most significant of these was the '863' Programme (so called because of its launch in March 1986). It aimed at promoting excellence in scientific research and the building of a national capacity in high technologies that could compete with the western industrialized countries. (Xiudian, 2003, p.9)

With constant State support and futuristic goals China was recognized as the country with full functional internet accessibility in 1994. (Jack Linchuan Qiu, 2003, p.1) The year 1995 proved to be a land mark in the historical development of the internet in China as the internet was opened for public use. China has injected enormous sums of money into internet infrastructure construction. From 1997 to 2009 a total of 4.3 trillion Yuan was invested in this regard, building a nationwide optical communication network with a total length of 8.267 million km. Of that, 840,000 km was long-distance optical cables. By the end of 2009 Chinese basic telecommunications companies had 136 million

broadband internet access ports, and international outlet bandwidth was 866,367 Mbps, with seven land-submarine cables and 20 land cables, that had a combined capacity exceeding 1,600 Gigabyte. That ensured internet access to 99.3% of Chinese towns and 91.5% of villages, and broadband to 96.0% of the towns. In January 2009 the government began to issue third-generation (3G) licenses to mobile service suppliers. Today, 3G network covers almost the whole country. Along with the swift expansion of the mobile internet, more people will benefit from this technical advancement.
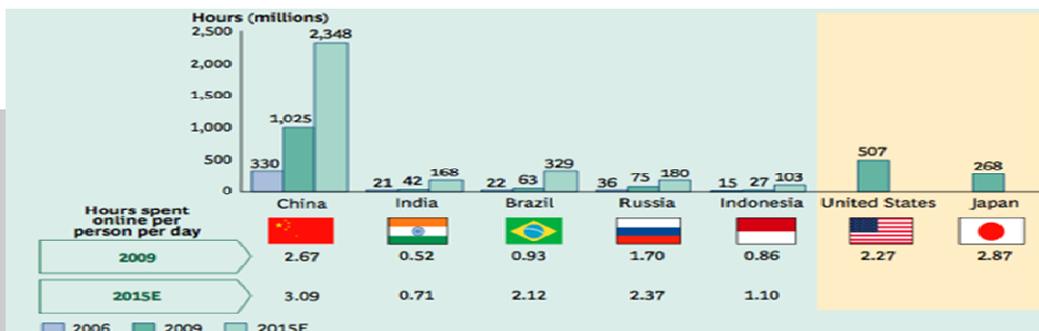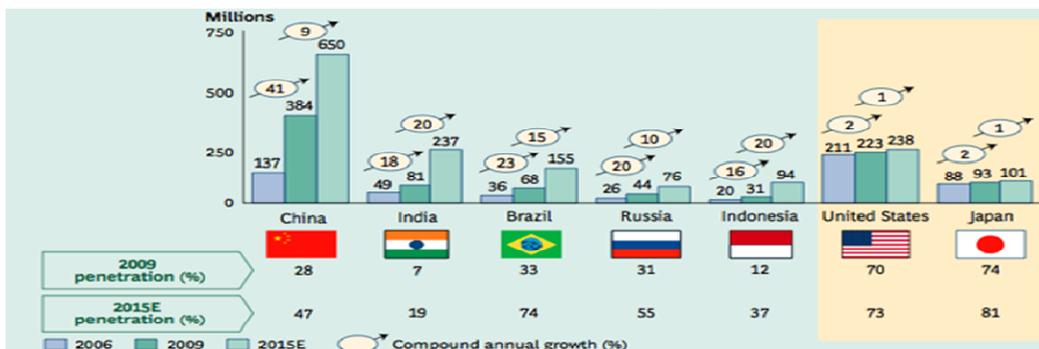
The statistics representing the internet users worldwide are quite impressive and in China's favour. China surpassed the United States in June 2008, representing the highest number of internet users' worldwide. China has emerged out as a world player in the internet market and its future holds further good news. Recently a report published from the Boston Consulting Group entitled, 'The Internet's New Billion' (http://www.tamingthebeast.net/blog/

ecommerce/internet-new-billion.htm), reflects that China has taken a lead in the usage of internet all over the world.

In combining China with other internet using countries like, Brazil, Russia, India and Indonesia (BRICI countries), there will be 1.2 billion netizens in these countries and China is supposed to have the highest internet penetration rate by 2015. This is more than three times the number of internet users in Japan and the United States combined. The rate of Internet penetration will be the highest in China by 2015. Moreover the netizens in China are not only numerous but they are more engaged than any other country. The time spent online in China is the highest among many major internet active countries. The internet is connecting the Chinese netizens with one another by promoting discussions on issues of their likes and dislikes.

However, the development of the internet in

Number of Internet Users 2010-2015E

Total Hours Spent Online Per Day, 2006-2015E
(Source: http://www.thomascrampton.com/social-media/world-association-newspapers-asia/trackback/)
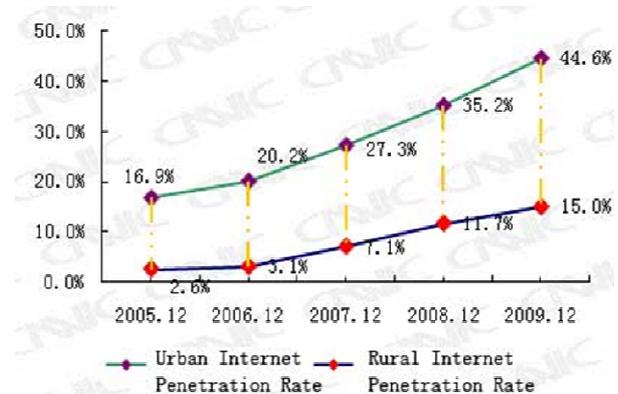
China is imbalanced regionally, and between urban and rural areas, resulting in a 'digital divide' . Due to regional disparities and differential economic development, the internet has been developing more rapidly in the eastern than in the western parts of the country, and has a higher penetration rate in cities than in the countryside. These are reflected in the profiles of the internet users, who are mostly located in cities like Beijing, shanghai and Guangdong province. All of these areas are relatively affluent areas in terms of material wealth and show high concentration of institutions of higher learning.

By the end of 2009, internet had reached 44 percent of the population in eastern China but only 15 percent in western China; and urban internet users made 72.2 percent of the national total, leaving the 27.8 percent in rural areas (http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/ china/2010-06/08/c/3339232.htm). Across the nation, 70 percent of high schools, more than 60 percent of vocational schools, about 40 percent of middle schools and 12 percent of primary schools already had internet access (http:// news.brisbanetimes.com.au/breaking-news-technology/chinas-internet-access-matches-rich-world-20100820-138i8.html.) As digital literacy and economic well-being are entwined, technological inequalities will be on a rise.

II
USES OF THE INTERNET

The usages of ICTs are in diverse fields including political, economic, social, military and scientific, to name a few. But here we must restrict ourselves to the uses of the internet made by the people and also how the State uses it to read the sentiments of the people. The State uses the internet to popularize its political interests under the agenda of its state policy. The "Government Online Project" (zhengfu shangwang gongcheng) started in 1999, aimed at promoting all the official departments to build their own Web sites and provide online management and service functions (Bin and Hong, 2010, p.110 . The E-governance has been a major breakthrough in the way the people referred to Chinese procuratorates. In 2009 the Supreme's People's

Difference in Internet Penetration between Rural and Urban Areas

(Source: CNNIC Survey Report, 2010)

Court (SPC) published its outline of the third Five-Year Reform of the People's Courts (2009-2013).

There are a number of sites like www.china.org.cn, www.chinalawinfo.com, www.spp.gov.cn/falv/default.htm etc., which impart official information. But after the incoming of the internet technology, immense official information is made available to the public. The official rationing of the information has been abandoned to a large extent.

One of the most important internet usage made by the State is for propaganda dispersion. The cyberspace provides a lucrative opportunity to the State to spread national rejuvenation, though in limits. The Chinese cyberspace is emerging out as a cultural sphere to which most of the people identify with, unlike other modernist ideologies on the Left and the Right. Strong Nation Forum (Qianguo Luntan) at 'peopledaily.com' is one such example. It was an effort to encourage discussion of the anti-NATO movement of 1999, but now it also entertains topic ranging from corruption, WTO, problems of unemployment, all under the broader goal of national rejuvenation. "The first web-based grass root movement with relentless nationalist sentiment occurred during the 'Protest against

Japanese occupation of Diaoyu Island' in September 1996 coordinated by Peking University BBS station, and it was also the first unauthorized student demonstration since 1989. From then online movements have occurred that targeted Indonesia (1998), NATO (May 1999), Taiwan (July 1999), Japan (Jan. 2000, & Feb-March 2001), and the United States (April-May 2001)" (Qiu, 2003, p.15-16).

The internet is heavily used by the netizens in China for a variety of purposes. The maximum number of netizens belongs to the age group nineteen to twenty-nine years (33 percent in 2008). The students who are either in their senior middle/technical school surf the internet heavily (37 percent in 2008 of the total internet population). The netizens used the internet to see the news updates. Entertainment was the most sought after topic on the internet by the rural as well as the urban netizens. Online activism has changed the face of journalism. It has dragged the people from their comfort zone of being mere spectators to creators of news. Guobin Yang illustrates online activism as digital contention which uses the internet for its propagation, is carried out for social and political issues, ranges from online signature campaigns to violent public gatherings, and has long-lasting impact (Guobin, May-June 2003(b), p.459 .

III
MONITORING THE INTERNET

The State policies with respect to the growth and the development of the internet in China are quite plausible. But the adaptation of the internet on the Chinese grounds has been quite paradoxical. On the one hand it is the state which incorporates futuristic schemes to include the technological nuances more and more in China, and on the other hand it is the state itself which heavily monitors the supply of the internet in China. China has one of the most intricate cyber strategy in the world broadly encompassing three features; legal regulation, technological regulation, and encouragement of self-regulation and monitoring. Regulations include complex procedures for acquiring license for the Internet Service Providers (ISPs), registration of individual users and broad

restrictions on permissible content. Various government bodies are involved in reviewing and enforcing laws related to information flowing within, into, and from China.

The laws and regulations clearly prohibit the spread of information that contains contents subverting state power, undermining national unity, infringing upon national honour and interests, inciting ethnic hatred and secession, advocating heresy, pornography, violence, terror and other information that infringes upon the legitimate rights and interests of others. Terms like 'State secrets' have been ambiguously defined in the charters thus giving the authority an upper hand in suspending anyone who reveals them. The government monitors the internet by means of a skilful blend of filtering technologies (The Golden Shield Project, The Green Dam Project), cyber police surveillance and propaganda (various rules being promulgated at regular intervals), in all of which China invests massively.

Yet, the mere existence of a hierarchical 'firewall' beginning at the topmost official level and ending at the common 'wangmin' does not ensure the entire control of the internet and its usage as the state demands. There are numerous ways to circumvent these filtering techniques, for example, surfing by proxy servers, or through Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). And the state is well aware of the fact that the employment of technological innovations cannot be restricted to water-tight compartments which encompass the cultural heritage of China. The threat to the political stability and the rich cultural burden is of major concern to the Chinese communist state. Hence, by employing filtering techniques it wants the process of circumventing the web of censorship to look difficult and if not impossible. Thus, the state believes that the official limits to the cyberspace should not restrict the netizens from acquiring basic information, but certainly demoralize them to cross the ethical and morally acceptable code of conduct.

IV
INTERNET: A NEW PLACE TO HANG AROUND

In China, there are a range of issues which appear on the digital screen time and again. They

can be categorized into the following;
Abuse of power
Right to know
Right to protection
Corruption
Popular nationalism
Class conflicts between the wealthy and the poor.
Environment protection.

In the recent years internet based campaigns which emerge on bulletin boards and blogs within hours or days have pressured the Chinese government to set free prisoners, launch investigations into scandals such as trafficking of underage children for slave labours in coal mines, and putting corrupt officials behind bars. The discussions on the internet can include criticism of the government as well.

People use their political rights like complaining to the respective officials or filing lawsuits, reporting to media, use personal networks, use the internet or even carry out demonstrations more freely than ever before. People are using technology like never before. One of the famous blogger Han Han expressed that, "English-speaking countries treat the internet as technology, while Chinese-speaking countries treat the internet as medicine" (http://

chinadigitaltimes.net/2010/11/the-internets-cyber-radicals-heroes-of-the-web-changing-the-world/).

Due to the opening up of the economy since 1978, there has been a gradual increase in the formation of new ideas in the arena of social and political theory in China. The term 'civil society' has gained momentum in view of building a harmonious society and organizing the interplay between state, private, non-profit sector and social organizations at different levels. The official discourse has also shifted from people's collective identity as 'masses' or the 'people', or individually as 'comrades', contributing to collective identity, to 'citizens' with individual rights as well as obligations. The concept of civil society has been promoted both from political leadership as well as from grassroots level. The two leading universities in Beijing have established civil society and NGO research centers. The NGO Research Center at the Tsinghua University was established in 1998, the Civil Society Research Center at Peking University was formed in 2005" (Kuhn & Wu, 2006, p.25). The table below shows that there have been many organizations which work through the internet and they include NGOs and student associations, apart from state groups.
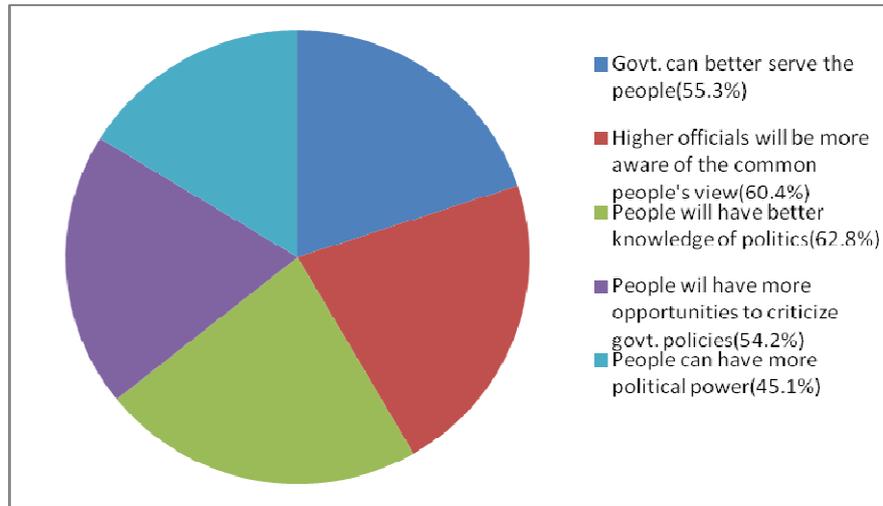Michael Keane suggests that the emergence of

Usage of Internet by various NGOs

Items / Name of NGOs	Time of Establis-hment	Time of Internet Accessing	Classification	Staff	Service Objective	Field of Activity	Income of the year 2005 (RMB)	The Main Functions of the Internet
Student Green Association, Tsinghua	1995	1999	Student Association	0	students	Environmental Protection	3,000	A,B,C,D
Shining Stone	2002	2002	Grassroots NGO	6	community residents	Community Participation	320,000	A,B,C,H
CANGO	1992	1999	GONGO	9	other NGOs	Communication and Cooperation with NGOs	1,320,000	A,B,C,E,F
China Population Welfare Foundation	1987	1998	GONGO	15	underprivil-eged people	Health for the poor	19,200,000	A,B,C,E,F
CBAC	2005	2005	Grassroots NGO	3	smaller NGOs	Learning Network Capacity building	800,000	A,B,G
ActionAid	2001	2001	International NGO	33	underprivil-eged people	Poverty Alleviation	_	A,B,E
China Development Brief	1995	1997	International NGO	8	NGOs, researchers donors	Information Service	_	A,B,D,I,J

Note: A =Office Automation, B=Information Exchange, C=Publicity, D=Cost-cutting, E=Internal Management, F=Fund-raising Tool, G=Learning Network, H=Policy Participation, I=Information Service, J=Advertisement Income

(Source: Berthold Kuhn & Wu Wei, Dec. 2006,

Using the Internet

(Source: Guo Liang, 2007, p.46).

civil society in China is not the same as in Western concept, but, it has more to do with "economic entrepreneurialism" than with "popular resistance" to the Communist regime and the Communist Party's policy of "allowing a hundred schools of thoughts to contend", has catalyzed the emergence of a kind of public sphere with limited space (Keane, 2001, p.2&4). Beverly Hooper agrees with Keane's view and suggests that development of market economy has been in congruence with the growth of consumers and hence there has been emergence of "consumer citizens" and by the mid-1990's there were 3000 consumer's association at provincial and county level, in addition to 45,000 grass-root organizations. Hooper also points that with the expansion of communication networks including the internet, there has been a growing awareness among people about their individual rights, with a limitation to economic and legal rights (Hooper, 2005, p.16&5).

Several scholars support the state policies on internet and suggest that a civil society has emerged in China where people interact through a common thread called "Internet". Nina Hachigian opines that the CCP is actively promoting the internet because of its positive role in developing knowledge economy (Hachigian, Mar-Apr 2001). Yang Guobin discusses the symbiotic relationship that exists between internet and the civil society . He also believes that the internet has not only mapped a society in China but has also organized a transnational Chinese cultural sphere (Yang, May-June, 2003(a)). In his views, on one hand internet has facilitated civil society activities by offering new possibilities for citizen participation, on the other hand civil society has facilitated the development of the internet by providing necessary social basis that is citizen and citizen groups, for communication and interaction (Yang, May-June, 2003(a)). Tai Zixue has discussed the cultural and political ramifications of the internet for Chinese society. Tai argues that the internet has democratized communication in China. He concludes that the interplay between the civil society and internet in China has played a liberating force for Chinese civil society (Zixue, 2006). .

V
INTERNET AND EMPOWERMENT OF THE PEOPLE

There has been a boost in Chinese media market after the foreign media sources like Google and Yahoo were allowed to contend with local state owned media like Baidu and Sohu. People are

free to choose their source of information though with certain accountability attached to it. Like, it is quite common to hear the people say that they can speak anything publicly as long as it does not involve criticizing the government directly. And the internet has given one such platform where people organize, cooperate and demonstrate their common likings.

David Talbot quotes Yasheng Huang, "the Internet has empowered the Chinese people more than the combined effects of 30 years of [economic] growth, urbanization, exports, and investments by foreign firms. "China may not have free speech, but it has freer speech, because the internet has provided a platform for Chinese citizens to communicate with each other" (Talbot, 2010, p.3). And that communication can include criticism of the government.

Following are few incidences wherein the internet has acted as an active medium of organized communicational sphere between the people and the state authority in China.

> a) The death of Sun Zhigang in 2003 sparked a row of debate in China as it was the consequence of inhuman state policies on "Measures for Internment and Deportation of Urban Vagrants and Beggars", promulgated in 1982. This measure restricted the migration of rural people to urban areas in search of job opportunities and asked them to carry a residency permit. Unfortunately, Sun Zhigang was unable to produce the document when he was stopped by the local police officials on his way to a cyber cafe. Later he died due to official negligence in a clinic made specially for various patients from custody and repatriation centers. The atrocity of this incident immediately caught public attention and led to public outrage. From the moment the first story about Sun's tragic death was published online major Chinese portal sites posted the story without delay and spread the news. Soon an online page was established for Sun titled "Sun Zhigang: You Are Swallowed by the Dark", by an enraged software

engineer in Hangzhou, and it attracted over 3000 visitors within the first two hours. Later the title was changed to, "Heaven Does Not Require Temporary Residency Permits" in order to protest against the government policy (Zixue,2006, p.264).

This incident resulted in a national debate and uproar against the Chinese deportation system. Finally, the State Council at a conference chaired by Premier Wen Jiabao on June eighteenth, 2003 decided to terminate the "1982 Measures on the custody and repatriation of urban vagrants" and enforce a new set of management for such people.

b) Again in 2003 when SARS spread in China and surrounding countries like Hong Gong, Taiwan, Singapore etc. the state authorities in China tried to hide the grim situation in the earlier phase. But when it spread to other countries people realized that the situation was actually grave than the state had shown them. Here, the internet truly played as a boundary-less sphere. People in China extracted information through the internet about the life threatening epidemic. Chinese netizens flocked the overseas online sources to gather information about the disease, and then circulated them on Bulletin Board System (BBS), wireless text messages, and informal networks. Later on the state too realized the effectiveness of internet in combating a crisis like this and as a part of this effort; a new Web site was created with the URL http://wenming.cycnet.com/ to join the government's "People's War" effort. The Chinese government used the internet as an effective tool of mass mobilization. In Hangzhou, for example, local government officials organized community groups to make phone calls, send flowers and groceries, and deliver books to the residents confined. Officials also set up BBS where people could leave their messages. Among the people who

left messages on the BBS was the provincial Part Secretary, whose note read: "The sacrifices you have made in the fight against SARS heighten our optimism further that we can surmount all types of difficulties" (Zixue, 2006, p.242).

c) When Liu Xiaobo was announced as the Nobel laureate for Peace Prize in 2010, it was a proud moment for the people in China. But the state denounced this award, as Liu Xiaobo has been labeled as a dissident for formulating 'Charter 08' which calls for freedom and an end to one party rule. The daily news was curbed from publishing anything which glorified Liu's achievement or even mentioned anything about it. Though there was resentment among the supporters of Liu, yet the state acted severely on this issue and went far enough by putting the supporters behind bars or under house arrest. Beijing tried to dissuade diplomats from attending the Nobel Prize award ceremony in Oslo on 10 December 2010 and prevented several human rights activists from leaving the country. Liu's wife, Liu Xia, is under house arrest and her relatives are not permitted to leave China. The Nobel Committee awarded the prize to an empty chair (http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4d822690c.html).

d) Japan's contention for permanent UNSC seat ran into hot waters when an online petition formally launched in Los Angeles in the US by a California based grass-root organization was advocated by their Chinese as well as its South Korean counterparts. The online petition was signed by ten countries including US, China, South Korea, Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, France and New Zealand and they demanded that Japan should explicitly affirm its contrition to its past misdeeds, its determination to justify all historical wrongs and bring all pending issues to final closure.

The above four cases of online activism reflect that the internet is playing an important role in bringing the citizens of China face to face with their state and also with their counterparts spread worldwide.

VI
CONCLUSION

The ICTs has been buffering the process of globalization and will do so in the coming years as well. It has successfully carved out its own niche in today's click generation. The impacts of such open medium of communication have been quite obvious in western countries. But in authoritarian states like China, the trajectories of its growth and development have been unexpected. The changes are different in more than one sense. Instead of turning out to be mere tools of political control, they are emerging as a tool of empowerment of the people. These participatory media have not only created an almost free medium of exchange of information but also have enabled the formation of a separate identity of the netizens distinct from the state. The Internet has opened new vistas for the people who have been malnourished due to lack of information until now in China. It has empowered the Chinese people to create, dissipate and discuss any information at large. These technological weapons are posing severe challenges to the Chinese authoritarian state.

The growth and development of the internet has been paradoxical, as the state promotes as well as censors its supply in China. The mere presence of advanced filtering techniques does not assure the usage of the internet in accordance with official charter. The various online communities give us a glimpse of emerging state-society forums as well as person to person communications. The above research work clearly amplifies the fact that the internet certainly buffers the process of evolution in social and political sphere of China which encompasses the participation of both these entities. Though the internet has allowed the penetration of diversified sources of information, consecutively leading to the weakening of state influence on the people's thought, but the increasingly controls still have a myriad impact.

The state tries to curb 'spiritual pollution' through crude measures such as mass closure of internet cafes or suppression of political activism on the internet by punishing the guilty. The amount of control is not as important as the subjects of control. The issues constantly monitored by the officials reflect the major concerns of the state in maintaining its status-quo.

The construction of a society through this technical medium is evident, though it would be too soon to decide the winner between the State and the netizens, and rushing to any conclusion would lead to half-hearted analysis of the 'continuous revolution' occurring through the click world. But for now, the state as well the netizens will be using the internet to communicate with each other and providing spaces for each other's progress. Thus we can conclude that the 'Internet Revolution' is emerging out to be a dynamic field of study in China as this catabolic process of social change seems to be irreversible. The internet to a great extent has led to the formation of dynamic groups which are successfully creating a strong foothold in China, giving us a glimpse of emerging state-society forums as well as person to person communications.

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