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# Official/ Unofficial: Information Management and Social Association

Kay Hearn

**Abstract:** This paper explores the debates around civil society and corporatism as ways of understanding changes in social association, including non-governmental organisations and protest groups, and information management in relation to the development of the Internet. Both concepts have been used to examine the changes that have taken place since the implementation of the Open Door Policy and more recently the development of the Internet, and have shed light on the way in which new forms of social association operate, and on their relationship to the government. However, both concepts tend to be deterministic and reductionist positions. Instead, I use a centre-margin analysis based on medium theory to explore the relationship between the state and society as a way of shedding light on the interaction between the government and NGOs and on how the state manages the flow of information in order to shape public discourse.

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**Keywords:** China, Internet, civil society, corporatism, government, non-governmental organisations

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## Introduction

The Internet and the development of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have enabled the formation of associations of people around a myriad of interests. At the end of 2006 there were an estimated 354,000 NGOs in the People's Republic of China (PRC) according to China's Ministry of Civil Affairs. However, according to Jia Xijin, an associate professor at the School of Public Policy and Management at Tsinghua University, the real figure was likely more than one million (2007). Alternatively, corporatism and bureaucratic authoritarianism have been used to analyse the way NGOs are managed by the state. The Internet has enabled many groups to organise and to exchange ideas, and these developments are often pointed to as the beginnings of a civil society, a prerequisite for democracy. This paper looks at the concepts of civil society and the public sphere and the way that official and unofficial discourses such as public debate are managed. It is my contention that the concepts of civil society and the public sphere are inadequate for understanding the way in which informational flows are managed as a consequence of the development of the Internet. I will begin by looking at the concept of civil society and its application to the opening of the economy and the Internet in China. Alternatively I use a centre-margin analysis, based on medium theory, to explore the power relationships that are negotiated between the party and social organisations and provincial and local governments to argue that public discourse and informational flows are managed via the Internet. I also argue that the Internet serves as a window to the activities of provincial and local governments and as a window to public opinion. As a way of supporting my claims I will then look at the way official discourses are managed through NGOs, specifically those that concentrate on the environment and HIV/ AIDS. I will confine my discussion to the overall management of environmental and HIV/ AIDS NGOs. Because there are so many of these groups, it is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate them in depth. I will then contrast the official discourses with the unofficial discourses in the context of the way a particular event was reported on (the Huaxi/ Huankantao riots that occurred in response to pollution), and the reporting on an HIV/ AIDS activist and her blog in the PRC.

The Internet has been effectively managed by the Chinese government through the development of content, legislation and the code used to construct the architecture of the Internet commonly known as the "Great Firewall". By "architecture" I mean the technological means to

build the Internet, including both the hardware and the software. Lawrence Lessig (2006) argues that “code is law” and by this he means the way in which code is used to regulate behaviour. An example of code being used to regulate access would be the use of passwords to access e-mail or banking information. In China, where information has been subject to tight control and suppression, there is, I would argue, an emerging understanding that information management and spin is more likely to succeed than suppression. I aim to look at the way that the Internet (as it is viewed in Mainland China) is shaped by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and how resistance is articulated and silenced or incorporated into existing discourses. More broadly, the Internet only empowers certain groups within society because it suits the CCP. When an event occurs that can be used by the party to advance a particular ideology, the Internet is allowed to empower society. When an event runs contrary to the CCP line, such as the riots in Lhasa, Tibet, in 2008, there is a crackdown and a public relations/ propaganda offensive follows. The CCP clearly has clear control over the “social pool of information”. Though the Internet has enabled Chinese citizens to participate in a new form of public life, there is still no space in which dissent is allowed. As far as the Internet is concerned, the CCP has sought to maintain its authority over “what is known” through the development of content and through the code used to construct the architecture of the Internet. Code is also used to develop content.

The Internet acts as a tool of policy dissemination and a window onto public opinion and social activism in a wide variety of forms. The Internet is a point at which many competing interests can be observed, by either the central government or researchers. My analysis is based on medium theory; in particular I draw upon the work of Harold Innis (1951, 1952, 1972), as this allows for a centre-margin approach to look at the ways in which power relationships and policy implementation are negotiated. Spatial relationships involve the negotiation and interplay between central authorities and policy-makers in Beijing and provincial governments as sites of policy implementation at the provincial margins. A centre-margin approach also allows a structure for analysing the interplay between social actors such as NGOs and special interest groups that arise in response to an issue or event. The case studies illustrate the ways in which these relationships are negotiated. There is interplay between official and unofficial discourses that can be observed via the Internet. The Internet acts as a window onto all kinds of activity, official and un-

official, and the way it is managed sheds light on the way politics vis-à-vis social association and broader civic participation is managed. There is a lot of negotiation between social and political actors in China.

## Civil Society and the Public Sphere

The formation of NGOs and the networking capabilities of the Internet in China are often given as evidence of the beginnings of a “civil society” and an emerging public sphere, and both of these are seen as fundamental preconditions for democracy. The discourse in China on the concept of civil society has led to a reinterpretation of Marxism by Chinese scholars (Ma 2005: 22). Indeed, much of the scholarship concerning the Internet in China uses theories of civil society as a framework – theories influenced by Habermas’ notion of the public sphere and civil society inside and outside of China (Tai 2006; Wu 2006; Yang 2003a, 2003b; Zhou 2006). In general the arguments here are that the Internet is providing the means to transform China’s political culture from the bottom up through the creation of a space in which groups can form and have the potential to influence the government. It is in this sense that the Internet is seen as a public sphere that is a democratising force. Wu uses the notion of public sphere to explain the emergence of a non-official ideology of nationalism that is articulated on the Internet in China. Guo-bin Yang argues that the Internet and civil society form a nexus of mutual benefit. He states that

the Internet facilitates civil society activities by offering new possibilities for citizen participation. Civil society facilitates the development of the Internet by providing the necessary social basis – citizens and citizen groups – for communication and interaction (Yang 2003a).

These notions of civil society and the public sphere are closely associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas, who looked at the formation and articulation of public opinion and debates in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Western Europe. Habermas wrote that

by ‘the public sphere’ we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body (Habermas 1974).

Habermas traced the materialisation, transformation and collapse of the public sphere back to a highly commercialised mass media that reshaped and confined political discussion to the media. According to Habermas, public opinion was previously formed through face-to-face discussions in coffee-houses over newspapers; now the articulation of public opinion and discussion is confined to the media itself.

Definitions of civil society are much more hotly contested: Most definitions de-emphasise power relationships that are embedded in the potential formation of civil society groups in authoritarian countries, where these groups are only allowed to exist with government sponsorship, legal or financial. A broad definition of civil society based on voluntary associations de-emphasises the political nature of the interactions of these groups and fails to account for the inherent inequality in these interactions. The definitions based on voluntary associations are too broad, as these could include sporting clubs and groups outside the law such as triads or gangs (Ehrenberg 1999: 235-236; Rodan 2003a: 506). The problem with civil society is that it diffuses attention away from the unequal power relationships inherent in all political interactions, regardless of whether these groups are actually able to influence the government. The concept of civil society is deterministic in its assumptions about the ability of people to organise associations and the inevitability of a form of pluralistic democracy in that it overlooks the restrictions and regulations that are placed on the formation of associations, particularly in authoritarian countries such as China. The tracing of centre-margin relationships provides a better framework for negotiations of influence and power as it assumes that these contests are unequal from the start and that they are under constant arbitration, resulting in wins and losses on each side.

Yang Guobin (2003b) argues that the Internet has helped to establish the beginnings of a civil society in China and points to growth in voluntary organisations that are beyond the reach of the government as evidence of the emergence of a civil society. Many of these groups however are unable to register with the government, and that limits their influence. To some degree the inability to register also has the potential to impair mobilisation because unregistered groups can be made illegal at any time and forced to cease their activities or move their operations underground. Unregistered groups may lack legitimacy in the eyes of the state – which marginalises them and their activities – even though these groups only exist because the government has allowed it. The Falun

Gong case and the ongoing campaigns to prevent their re-establishment make it abundantly clear that if the government wishes to ban an organisation and remove it from the “public sphere”, it is quite capable of doing so. The degree to which unregistered groups are able to forge links (*guangxi* 关系) with the government is unclear, a fact which may prevent an accurate evaluation of the effectiveness of these groups.

White, Howell and Shang, using a sociological approach, argue that there is an emerging civil society in China, and they are cautious in the way they use the term “civil society”, citing many of its limitations. Even though there is a high degree of regulation among groups recognised by the government, White et al. describe the situation as a “piebald civil society” because there are groups that operate outside government regulation. The authors cite four types of groups: the caged, the incorporated, the extra-government, and the suppressed. The caged include party organisations such as the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the Communist Youth League and the All-China Women’s Federation. The incorporated include NGOs and GONGOs (government-operated non-governmental organisations) and finally the groups in limbo, outside of government regulation. The groups outside of the government are those groups lacking formal recognition and those groups that have obtained official recognition through the patronage of an official agency or individual. White et al. write that

each of these categories of social organisation embodies, to varying degrees, the characteristics of associational qualities of ‘civil society’. This partial and piebald ‘civil society’ is made up of a complex and rapidly changing social constellation with many layers and many different types of relationship between them and the state (White, Howell, and Shang 2003: 282).

White et al. also argues there are various layers to this process of incorporation and repression of different social organisations. Howell (2007) argues that civil association in China had passed the point of no return: She believes there are multiple civil societies and that the corporatist model is insufficient as the number of social associations has spread and is beyond the control of the party/ state, however she concedes that there is repression of groups perceived as critical of the government. What this spectrum and position overlook is the interaction between different levels of the government itself in the form of local interests that are interwoven with the opening of spaces of political discourse via social organisations. There is an assumption that the state in this process is

monolithic and has homogeneous interests across the nation. Quite clearly this is not the case. The Internet adds another layer of complexity to the mix in that it acts as both a window onto the activities of social groups and as a window onto the activities of provincial and local governments. In this sense, while it allows a new space of social interaction, it also provides a site in which social interactions can be more closely monitored. This is akin to the arguments made by Boyle (1997) about the Internet as a remote and electronic panopticon.

In terms of using the Internet as the basis for a civil society, the CCP has sought to manage the flow of information to prevent the formation of groups that would seriously challenge their role and political authority. The argument I make here is similar to the one made by Rodan (2003b) in relation to Singapore, whose government has also been very successful at preventing the formation of an effective opposition to the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). This, according to Rodan (2003b), is the objective of media controls in Singapore. An example of this would be the effectiveness of the shutting down and limiting access to the Internet in Xinjiang following the Wulumuqi riots in July 2009.

Since 1978 groups in China have emerged and formed independently of the government, and to some degree they are autonomous. However, the degree to which they are regulated by the CCP means that they are managed and shaped to conform to the CCP's monopolistic knowledge and view. In addition, many registered NGOs cultivate state relationships as a means of sustaining their operations. Ma writes that

ironically NGOs have tried to become more independent by holding on to their relationships with the government [...]. [They] often have to rely on government's authority to increase the size and influence of their projects (Ma 2005: 97).

The problem with the application of the concept of civil society and the public sphere is that it fails to adequately acknowledge the power relationships embedded within these institutional arrangements. This is not to say that the way power in China is exercised by the CCP is totalising and that there is no room for civic participation. Nor does it imply that these groups are not the creation and visualisation of new spheres of influence outside of the party. However, there are limits to what can be said, and clearly the CCP still define those boundaries. The application of civil society overstates the ability of these groups to potentially challenge the government.

In some ways the formation and regulation of NGOs is more consistent with development theories of state corporatism or corporatism and bureaucratic authoritarianism. Ma (2005) argues that since the emergence of NGOs in the mid-1990s, the function of civil associations has evolved along both civil society and state corporatist lines. This model acknowledges the kinds of relationships that are shared by the state and NGOs in China. In a corporatist system, the state usually channels the interests of a group into a single organisation. Unger and Chan argue that

the state determines which organizations will be recognized as legitimate and forms an unequal partnership of sorts with such organizations. The associations sometimes even get channelled into the policy-making processes and often help implement state policy on the government's behalf (Unger and Chan 1995: 30).

The corporatist model is likened to the fascist states of the 1930s, where business and labour interests were subordinate to the state. Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan have all been described as corporatist in earlier stages of their development.

The strategy outlined above by Rodan is much the same as in the PRC, and this is not surprising as China has often looked to Singapore for models of development and containment of informational flows on the Internet. In terms of the development of civil society and the limits of autonomy of civic association, it is the CCP that still defines the limits of any public discourse and they alone remain the final arbiters of what can and cannot be said. While the political process has opened up to some degree, there are clear limits on expression. In order to remain in the market, the hosts of websites, blogs, online games, Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs), and chat rooms all conform to the boundaries set by the CCP. In the case of voluntary and autonomous association this is still largely dictated by the CCP. For example, there are no trade unions that are independent of the government. The corporatist model better explains the CCP's attempts to manage informational flows. Unger and Chan write that

harmony is the catchword of a corporatist system, regardless of whether this harmony is truly consensual or imposed from above. And it is very often a goal-oriented harmony, orchestrated to serve a national mission (Unger and Chan 1995: 32).

Hu Jintao's concept of "social harmony" echoes Unger and Chan's sentiments, and the formation of NGOs and their function in Chinese society as defined by the CCP is to support "social harmony".

The qualification that Ma (2005) makes in her argument about the formation of civil associations and NGOs being consistent with both civil society and corporatist lines allows for an account of CCP management and power relationships, as well as an acknowledgement of the emerging influence and role that these groups play in Chinese society. Ma writes:

The experience of Chinese associations indicates that the state has generated mechanisms for adopting profound economic and social structural changes in corporatist relations the state stills holds control. At the same time, associations, bottom-up ones in particular, are raising their voices in the implementation and even in the making of policy; there are clear indications that civil society is evolving (Ma 2005: 137).

Ma's fusing of civil society and corporatism is similar to Innis's notions of centre-margin relationships, and the negotiation of a monopoly of knowledge and the management of time and space. Ma argues that this approach provides a better explanation of the ways in which the CCP has sought to manage and contain NGOs from the top down, while at the same time she explains the impact and formation of NGOs from the ground up.

The centre-margin approach I argue for is similar to the "fragmented authoritarian" approach advocated by Andrew Mertha. He argues that China has become more pluralistic in terms of policy formulation and implementation despite remaining an authoritarian state:

The 'fragmented authoritarianism' (FA) framework, first proposed in 1988, has remained the most durable heuristic through which to study Chinese politics. It asserts that policy made at the center becomes increasingly malleable to the parochial organizational and political goals of various vertical agencies and spatial regions charged with enforcing that policy. Outcomes are shaped by the incorporation of interests of the implementation agencies into the policy itself. FA thus explains the policy process as being governed by incremental change via bureaucratic bargaining (Mertha 2009: 996).

Mertha argues that the Chinese state is increasingly responsive to the demands of society. He writes that

the rules of the policy-making process are still captured by the fragmented authoritarianism framework, but that the process has become increasingly pluralized: Barriers to entry have been lowered, at least for certain actors (hitherto peripheral officials, non-governmental organizations and the media) (Mertha 2009: 995).

## Small Government, Big Society

The government encouraged the formation of NGOs and Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) in reaction to some of the consequences of the Open Door Policy and reforms that were begun in 1978 under the slogan “Small Government, Big Society”. Some reasons the NGOs were promoted were to help fill the gap that was left in welfare services after the iron rice bowl<sup>1</sup> was rolled back, and to help with response to disaster relief. NGOs have also been useful to the government in the development of the economy. Ma says that

the government believes that the resources, development program and services brought in or provided by the non-governmental sector, domestic or international, will help the CCP restore its legitimacy, reduce public pressure on the government, and bring social stability (Ma 2005: 47).

At the same time, the CCP sought to manage NGOs through registration and regulation under the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Another role of NGOs in China is to act as a conduit for discontent and for directing complaints through official channels. In the case of environmental groups, their function has been to steer victims of pollution through the courts to prevent their rioting in the streets.

Twenty years after the launch of the Open Door Policy, China sought to develop a legal structure to deal with social organisations (SOs), and in 1998 the first regulations aimed at this sector were introduced (Ma 2005: 76). Ma argues that

the current state of Chinese NGOs is shaped by the present political culture, the party-state’s continuing intervention in the private sector, and the mixed influences of Western ideas and traditional Chinese thoughts (Ma 2005: 77).

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1 The iron rice bowl (*tiefanwan* 铁饭碗) refers to the work unit system of lifetime employment that guaranteed housing and other benefits through employment in state-owned enterprises (SOEs). The reforming of the economy has effectively ended this system.

The official CCP NGO policy is one of “nourishment, development, supervision, [and] regulation” (*peiyu, fazhan, jiandu, guanli*, 培育, 发展, 监督, 管理) (Ma 2005: 69).

Good examples of how the government limits civic participation by NGOs are the closures of the online journal *China Development Brief* and the civil society journal *Minjian* (Popular) in November 2007. *Minjian* was published under the sponsorship of the Social and Citizenship Development Research Center of Zhongshan University in Guangzhou. *Minjian*'s publication license was withdrawn by the news-publishing bureau of the municipal government of Guangzhou in July 2007 (*Radio Free Asia* 2007).

The closures highlighted the precarious legal position of NGO publications. The journals had been operating without a publishing license (*kambao* 刊号), and this was the legal justification for the closure. However, thousands of NGOs run publications without licenses.

In China all licenses for publishing are held by sponsoring institutions, or *zhubuan danwei* (主管单位), that are responsible for ensuring party propaganda discipline at publications under their watch (Bandurski 2007).

*Minjian*'s editor, Zhai Minglei, stated that

all of the internal organizational publications and materials of NGOs in China are illegal publications [...] [a]nd so it is with all of those small booklets we circulate among friends and acquaintances in China as a form of interaction or to seek the appreciation of friends, or those various poetry collections we call people's publications (民刊), all reading materials shared among colleagues. All they need is to be printed and they are illegal publications (Bandurski 2007).

Zhai turned to his blog after the magazine was closed; his home was raided by the police and his hard drive confiscated.

In another incident in November 2007, a website aimed at providing information and contact assistance for those with Hepatitis B was closed after six years of operation without any meddling from the government (*Radio Free Asia* 2007). The website was owned by an NGO, and the closure followed the reclassification of the site as a healthcare service provider. The site's forums were removed after recommendations were made by the Ministry of Health (*Radio Free Asia* 2007). Again, this illustrates the ability of the government to silence critics.

## Environmental NGOs

The state of China's environment is one of the most serious problems facing the country today, and the CCP widely promoted the Beijing Olympics as the "green" Olympics. In 2006 Zhu Guangyao, Deputy Chief of the State Environmental Protection Agency, put the cost of environmental damage at 200 billion USD, 10 per cent of the country's GDP (*China Daily* 2006). The environment was also identified as a problem by Hu Jintao (2007a) in his report at the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China on October 15, 2007. The damage to China's environment is now seen as a serious threat to economic growth as well as a consequence of that growth and development. In 1998 the government launched the "Three Green Project" to develop what it called a "green market" to promote green consumption (Zhang 2007a). Pan Yue, Vice Minister of the State Environmental Protection Administration, stated that "the ultimate force to solve China's environmental problems lies in the public, or in another word, every ordinary people [sic]. Chinese people are approaching the absolute green consumption step by step" in an article that promoted the use of NGOs in solving China's environmental crisis (Zhang 2007a).

A large number of NGOs have formed around the environment, and in June 2007 the All-China Environment Federation claimed that there were 2,770 environmental NGOs (Zhang 2007b). Despite the official numbers, most NGOs are underdeveloped and many more remain unregistered. Given this I will briefly outline the ways in which the largest and most influential environmental NGOs are promoted and managed by the government.

The oldest and most influential environmental organisation is Friends of Nature (FoN), the first NGO to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, in 1994. Global Village Beijing (GVB) is another influential environmental group, and both are located in Beijing. Both of these groups run educational programs and are active in developing smaller NGOs throughout the country. The leaders of FoN and GVB, Liang Congjie and Liao Xiaoyi, respectively, were both appointed to the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad (BOCOG).

In 2005 the All-China Environment Federation was established and promoted by the government. At the opening ceremony for the federation, China's Vice Premier Zeng Peiyan said that he "encouraged the federation to further study the major ecological problems and offer better consultation to government decision-makers" (*People's Daily* 2005). In

October 2006 China's environmental NGOs were called upon by Zhu Guangyao, the deputy head of the State Environmental Protection Agency, "to play a bigger role in promoting supervising environment protection" (*Xinhua* 2006).

Though there have been incidents when these groups have challenged the government, the close relationship these NGOs share with the CCP is evident, and the promotion of these groups and official sanctioning of their positions is a way of channelling their influence and limiting or confining their activities. In doing so, the government has by default effectively managed NGOs' communication strategies and has confined and shaped environmental discourse. In addition to this, the registration process also acts as a filter because it is costly and time-consuming; however, to avoid bureaucratic red tape and rigorous selection procedures, many NGOs turn to industrial and commercial administrative bureaus for registration because the process is easier and quicker (Xin 2005).

## Green Riots an Unofficial Discourse

The promotion of NGOs by the government in the media is generally of the "good news" story variety. For instance, the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) website mainly covers good news stories relating to China's environment. The CCP showcased their ability to clean up the environment as a part of the 2008 Olympics. In July 2007, the SEPA launched a two-month campaign to clean up the country's rivers and recovered 725 million CNY (146 million USD) in fines from polluting businesses (*Reuters* 2007). This clean-up effort is a stark contrast to the numerous environmental riots and protests reported by the international press. When these stories do appear in the Chinese media, they are often reported very differently.

Small-scale, rural protests are common, and unless they are large they do not make it into the national or international press. A report in the *New York Times* in 2005 put the number of protests at 74,000 incidents, up from about 10,000 a decade earlier (French 2005). Environment-related riots, protests, and disputes in China increased by 30 per cent in 2006 to more than 50,000 (Green Clippings 2006). As with many stories on China in the international press, they are often initially generated by the Chinese media. Local press may cover an event which then gets picked up by the international media – these stories are then re-

articulated and re-circulated for a wider audience. This was also the case with the Nandan mine disaster and the Jiangxi school explosion in 2001, where the stories were first released by local press and then picked up by foreign media. The Western press often cast these stories as David versus Goliath clashes, whereas the Chinese media often cast rioters as having been stirred up by a small group of troublemakers. An example of this obfuscation occurred in April 2005 when it was estimated that thousands (the reports on the number of rioters vary from 20,000 to 60,000) of residents of Huaxi, a town in Dongyang, rioted against police over pollution from chemical plants in a nearby industrial park. The residents of Huaxi and nearby Huankantao had been complaining about the pollution and how it affected their health and the productivity of their farms for four years prior to the riots. The residents signed petitions and sent them to the SEPA, and had sent delegations to the Zhejiang Provincial Headquarters in Hangzhou and to Beijing prior to the riot (Cody 2005). The local paper *Dongyang Daily* blamed local agitators for the riot (Yardley 2005). By way of contrast, the *New York Times* cast the protesters as victims of pollution and official corruption (Yardley 2005).

The *Phoenix Weekly*, which is available on the Internet, and is a subsidiary of *Phoenix TV* in Hong Kong (legally received by ordinary Mainlanders with access to cable or satellite television), ran extensive coverage of the incident which has since been translated by Roland Soong of the *EastSouthWestNorth* blog. According to the translation by Soong, the *Phoenix Weekly* noted conflicting stories within the Mainland media that also conflicted with the stories that their journalists were picking up on the ground at the riots. *Phoenix Weekly* stated:

Although the mainland media were instructed not to report on the matter, the incident was rapidly disseminated in Zhejiang. The people called it a peasant rebellion, the Hong Kong media called it a 'large-scale riot' but the local government said that 'the removal of illegal structures in Dongyang city was obstructed' because 'the desire of the citizens for environmental protection was used by a small minority of individuals with ulterior motives' (*Phoenix Weekly* 2005).

Soong also claims that much of the coverage of the incident by foreign journalists came from Chinese media reports and Internet sources. This is due to the fact that journalists were not able to gain access to the area; in fact, one foreign correspondent was briefly detained. Access to Dongyang was blocked and checkpoints were set up at all of the major entrances to the town, making it even more difficult to report on the

riots. This tactic was also used after the Jiangxi school explosion. The residents of Huaxi responded in the same way that the parents did at Jiangxi – they turned to the Internet as a means of revealing the story to a wider audience. According to Roland Soong, news of the event

was rapidly transmitted from the local chat rooms, but the local government immediately blocked the chat rooms and other channels. The local media were also ordered not to report on this case. Yet, foreign media and Hong Kong newspapers were able to report on this incident through the chat room information sources (*Phoenix Weekly* 2005).

The riots began on the night of 10 April and were discussed in Internet forums up until 13 April, when this source of information and discussion was shut down and posts deleted.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, Western news reports claimed victory for the people of Huaxi/ Huankantou as six of the thirteen factories were ordered to shut down following the protests, though nine residents were arrested (Cody 2005; Ramirez 2006).

In October 2005, six members of Green Watch were arrested by the Public Security Bureau in Hangzhou. Green Watch is an environmental group that formed after members monitored the riots in Huaxi. According to the NGO Human Rights in China, one of the members of Green Watch, Lai Jinbiao, “was placed under criminal detention from April 12 until May 11 on the charge of “illegally providing intelligence overseas” (Human Rights in China 2005). It can be confidently hypothesised that Lai was talking to foreign journalists who had converged on the area to cover the story.

In 2007 I searched the Internet again for information on the riots and what had happened in Huaxi, and I did not find much information. What remains on the Internet – that is accessible outside of China – are stories of the riots in 2005. Searches on official websites such as those of the *China Daily*, *Xinhua*, and the *People’s Daily* result in “good news” stories about the prosperity of the town.

In terms of the management of official discourse, the CCP deletes and blocks stories from the Internet that do not concur with their own view of the event. This is a theme that has run throughout the case studies in this paper: When an event occurs, traditional informational flows

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2 Roland Soong translated a number of posts from Chinese Internet forum comments (via Boxun). He cites this as an “example of citizen reporters taking over when the mainstream media are missing in action” (Soong 2005).

are circumvented and new flows are created through the Internet. Information about these events is managed according to CCP needs, so stories are either eliminated or rewritten and used to benefit the CCP's image-building. Events that are seen as a challenge to the authority of the CCP are contained and are systematically removed from Chinese cyberspace, as in the Jiangxi school explosion and the Huaxi/ Huankantao riots. At other times, stories have been absorbed by the CCP and used to push the party line. The result is that China has, to some extent, built a separate Internet – an Internet with alternative histories and journalistic accounts of events with material that is different in focus and content from the broader World Wide Web. An example of this blatant absence of history is that accounts of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre are absent from this separate Chinese Internet.

The CCP has responded quickly to the changes in informational flows as a consequence of the Internet. This adaptation to a changing environment is consistent with Ronald Deibert's extension of the ideas of Innis in Deibert's use of Darwin's theories of evolution as applied to changes in communications technology, and his application of medium theory. Deibert argues that

a change in the mode of communication (environment) will 'favour' certain social forces and ideas (species) by means of functional bias towards some and not others, just as natural environment determines which species prosper by selecting for certain physical characteristics (Deibert 1997: 30).

By social forces, Deibert means "actual social groups, actors, and various forms of social organisation or normative or goal driven social behaviour" (1997: 32). My aim here is to extend this and to argue that survival of a species in an evolutionary sense is about the adaptation of a species to a changing environment. Just as some species are able to adapt and change, some social groups are able to adapt and change. It is not so much the environment that chooses which species or ideas survive and flourish, but rather the ways in which a species or a group adapt to those changes. In the case of China, as elsewhere, the government has adapted to the changing communications environment. The CCP has been actively involved in shaping that environment through the strategies that they employ to manage the Internet, which include the management of code as a means of censorship, the construction of a legal framework, and the development of content. In the end, the Internet is a tool that both facilitates change and can be shaped and modified by those who

use it. It is because of this that it is more important to look at what people do with the technology rather than the technology itself.

The management of the Huaxi/ Huankantao riots also highlights the negotiation of centre–margin relationships between Beijing at the centre and officials in Zhejiang province at the margins, as well as centre–margin relationships in Zhejiang between Hangzhou, the provincial capital, and the Dongyang officials at the margins. Goodman and Segal argue that this negotiation of regionalism is a consequence of the Open Door policy. Goodman and Segal (1994: 13) argue that “the centre lays down the broad outline of a policy, with the provinces adopting specific local measures for implementation”. In the case of the Huaxi/ Huankantao riots, the Internet provided a window through which the central government was more able to closely observe what was going on at the margins, thus reinforcing the authority of the centre. Traditional modes of communication allowed provincial officials to cover up facts and paint a picture of what Beijing “at the centre” wanted. For example, the famine that was a consequence of the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s is largely seen as a result of poor central planning and the policies of the campaign. Food shortages were exacerbated by the boastful claims about grain output that were exaggerated at every level of government in order to paint a picture of success for the benefit of the central government (see Wei and Tao 2005). This has also contributed to the perception that official figures in China are notoriously unreliable.

As previously mentioned, the environment has been identified by the government as one of the most serious issues facing the stability of the country. In response to this impending crisis, there have been experiments with new forms of public participation so as to avoid riots like those in Huaxi/ Huankantao. The Xiamen PX (paraxylene) plant in Fujian is a good example of this, and is being hailed as a victory for the power of the people in the PRC (see Soong 2007). In 2007 construction began on the plant, and by May, residents of the area were complaining that it was already giving off an industrial odour. A mass protest was organised via mobile phone text messages (see Figure 1). News of the event spread across the Internet via social websites such as Twitter, Flickr, and MySpace, and it also emerged as an issue on blogs and other forums. Zoula, also known as the first citizen reporter, descended on Xiamen to cover the story on his blog and website. As is often the case, as the story grew, the local press stopped covering the story, however coverage of the story was allowed to continue nationally. A columnist for

the *Southern Weekend*, Lian Yue, wrote at length about the issue on his blog. He also suggested that Xiamen residents start websites (*Asia Sentinel* 2007).

Figure 1: SMS Danger Warning



Note: The following translation comes from the China.org website run by the State Council: "The Taiwan-funded Xianglu Group has begun building a PX plant. It's like an atomic bomb in Xiamen".

Source: China.org 2008.

Many people will suffer leukaemia and more babies will be born with congenital defects. A paraxylene project should be at least 100 kilometres from a major urban settlement, but we are only 16 km from the project. For the sake of our future generations, please forward the message to all your friends (China.org 2008).

The end of the message calls for people to protest on the streets on 1 June.

An estimated 8,000 to 10,000 people took to the streets on 1 June to protest against the plant. The Xiamen press followed the familiar pattern of blaming an individual or a small group of agitators for the unrest. An editorial published in the *Xiamen Daily* claimed that the government and most citizens had Xiamen's best interests at heart. The editorial identified XiamenWave22 as a troublemaker who wrote an SMS that was stirring up trouble. The editorial said that XiamenWave22 was "misleading the public and provoking hostility between the government and the masses" (*Asia Sentinel* 2007).

In an unusual twist, the project was stalled by the government on 7 June, a week after the street marches, when the government put a hold on the project pending an environmental assessment and public consultation. This action was unprecedented and represented a form of experimentation with public participation. On 27 December there was an announcement that the project would be moved and that the provincial government would compensate the plant's owners.

The new forms of experimentation with public participation follow from the Seventeenth National Party Congress, during which Chinese President Hu Jintao called for the expansion of socialist democracy. Hu (2007b) argued China needed to

expand socialist democracy and better safeguard the people's rights and interests as well as social equity and justice. Citizens' participation in political affairs will expand in an orderly way. The rule of law will be carried out more thoroughly as a fundamental principle, public awareness of law will be further enhanced, and fresh progress will be made in government administration based on the rule of law. Primary-level democracy will be improved. The government will markedly enhance its capability of providing basic public services (Hu 2007b).

The way the protests over the Xiamen PX plant were portrayed in the media is a visualisation, via text and images in the media, of public opinion and of how centre-margin relationships are negotiated on the Internet. These groups do not necessarily speak to one another directly; they do so via the media. In this instance, the CCP allowed the expression of public opinion to drive the outcome of the project. If they had wanted silence the protestors and forge ahead with the plans for the plant, they would have done so, just like they did in Huaxi. If the authorities want to close down chat rooms and BBSs, they can; if they want to delete blogs and stop people posting, they can. If the CCP chooses not to block and delete postings it is probably because they are showing an emerging understanding that "spin"-type management usually has more positive and fewer negative consequences.

## HIV/ AIDS

The unreliability of official figures in China on the number of HIV/ AIDS sufferers makes it difficult to get an accurate picture of the extent of the problem. The first case was reported in 1985 and the disease has

spread rapidly since that time. In 2005 a joint study by the Ministry of Health, the World Health Organization and United Nations AIDS (UNAIDS) put the number of people living with the virus at 650,000, of whom 75,000 had developed full-blown AIDS (Wang Zhiyong 2007). In 2006 the number of infections reported was 183,733 and it was said this was up 30 per cent from the previous year. In another report in 2007, the number of people infected with the virus was put at 214,300 with 56,758 having full-blown AIDS (Wang Hongjiang 2007). An official report released prior to World AIDS Day on 1 December 2007 said that

China officially reported 223,501 HIV contracted cases, including 62,838 AIDS patients, by October 2007 while about 700,000 people are estimated to be living with HIV/ AIDS (*China Daily* 2007a).

In the news reports that I researched for this paper there also seemed to be a time lag in the figure-reporting. For instance, several of the official CCP news stories from 2007 used figures from 2005. Despite the inaccuracies in the figures, the CCP has encouraged the development of NGOs to address the epidemic.

The CCP's rhetoric on the fight against HIV/ AIDS is as contradictory as its management of the environment and the Internet. On the one hand, the government promotes the development of NGOs to help tackle the epidemic, but at the same time the government attempts to silence other groups when it comes to the issues of HIV/ AIDS. The aim is to control debate within the confines of an official version of the outbreak of HIV/ AIDS and its management. The official version includes the acknowledgement of the problem of HIV/ AIDS to some degree, and through the use of the media and NGOs, the government is trying to convey that the epidemic is being addressed and well managed. NGOs are bounded by regulation and the need for government support in order to exist and this in turn affects the way they operate.

As in the case of environmental NGOs, there are hundreds of HIV/ AIDS NGOs and very few of them are recognised by the government; consequently, few are funded by the government. For example, in 2007 the central government announced an alliance with certain HIV/ AIDS NGOs to assist in the fight against the disease. The Chinese Association of Sexually Transmitted Diseases and AIDS Prevention and Control will oversee the alliance as well as integrate and coordinate the participation of Chinese and international NGOs (China.org 2007a). This new system is similar to the integration of environmental groups, and centralises the management of NGOs.

In the run up to World AIDS Day in 2007, the central government launched a new campaign to combat the spread of the virus and to curb the prejudice aimed at those who suffer from the disease. The campaign included a series of television commercials featuring Jackie Chan. Premier Wen Jiabao and President Hu Jintao both made public appearances to promote AIDS awareness, which was consistent with Western PR practices, i.e. the photo opportunity. Premier Wen has been making the photo opportunity pilgrimage to Henan province every year since 2003. During these trips, the premier visits orphanages and reiterates the central government's position and policy on health care, which is the provision of free medicine and doctor's consultations to people infected with the virus, and free education for children orphaned by AIDS. Hu Jintao also visited communities and doctors in northern Beijing as part of World AIDS Day. Both Hu and Wen were using these visits to promote awareness about the virus and to address the prejudice against those with the virus (*China Daily* 2007a). These visits are tightly controlled by both central and provincial authorities who hold their own "shows": one for the world, one for the central government, and one for the people.

As is often the case, there is a gap between central policy and regional implementation. According to the *Washington Post*, provincial hospitals fail to run the correct tests to reveal the virus, or they purposely misdiagnose the virus in order to cover up the extent of the problem, and this has been exacerbated by corruption (Fan 2007). Regional differences are also reflected in the different modes of transmission of the virus. This is due in part to regional economic conditions and issues that have arisen from the open-market economy. For instance, in central China the main mode of infection has been through the collection and transfusion of blood products. In coastal cities the virus has been spread through prostitution, and in western China through prostitution and intravenous drug use (Ma 2005: 133). Nationally, though, in 2005 unsafe sex was cited as the main mode of transmission (*China Daily* 2007b). The number of reported cases varies from region to region and this is reflected in the diverse attitudes to the management and prevention of the disease in different provinces (Bezlova 2005).

One of the most tragic cases of mismanagement and corruption involved the medically acquired infection of thousands of rural peasants in Henan, which also serves to illustrate the tensions in centre-margin relationships. In the 1990s, officials in Henan, one of the poorest provinces, encouraged peasants to supplement their income through the sale of

their blood. At the time, there was no screening for disease, and blood was often collected in unhygienic conditions which led to the rapid spread of the virus. In some cases this was exacerbated by attempts to prevent anaemia through the practice of injecting regular donors with unscreened red cells extracted from the valuable plasma (Human Rights Watch 2006). In 2001 the scandal broke nationally and the central government responded by ordering the collection clinics to be phased out and the screening and regulation of blood products be tightened. However, the practice continued and there are still occasional reports about illegal blood clinics. In June 2007 a new campaign was launched in central China to crack down on the practice (China.org 2007b).

It is not clear how many people were infected as a result of this practice; however, official figures from 2006 put the number at 35,232 reported HIV carriers, including 21,828 with AIDS (Human Rights Watch 2006; China.org 2007c). The effect has been devastating and in some instances has wiped out entire villages and left thousands of children orphaned and abandoned by their extended families and the broader community (Human Rights Watch 2006). The situation in Henan is comparable to the hardest hit communities in Africa, and it is the worst affected area in Asia (Beyrer and Csete 2003).

The mismanagement and corruption of blood collection practices is not confined to Henan, and the pattern of neglect of AIDS victims along with the denial of the problem are reflected in other parts of the country. The epidemic is not seen as a national tragedy but an economic problem and a major source of embarrassment for the government. This case B highlights the negotiation of spatial relationships between Beijing at the centre and provincial governments at the margins. Beyrer and Csete argue that

China's stalled responses to the outbreak, and its treatment of those few courageous citizens who have exposed it, reflect the state of civil society, rule of law, rights of citizens, and emerging center-periphery dynamics of the new China (Beyrer and Csete 2003).

Government officials in Henan were actively involved in trying to cover up the tragedy, and this is also a feature of the SARS outbreak. There were also reports that courts in Henan had refused to hear compensation cases of those infected. Human Rights Watch said that the "Health Minister Gao Qiang was quoted in the international press as saying that the courts should admit those cases and make fair judgments" (Human Rights Watch 2006). In another incident in 2006, the New York-based

Human Rights Watch claimed that numerous sufferers of HIV/ AIDS in Henan were placed under house arrest to stop them from petitioning the National People's Congress, in order to prevent them from seeking redress from the government after being infected by tainted blood products. Corruption also became a feature of centre-margin relationships when local officials were arrested and others sacked for the theft of aid from the central government and private donors in 2006.

The Henan provincial government has also gone to great lengths to contain the activities of high-profile activists. Dr Yaojie Gao, an internationally acclaimed gynaecologist, first brought the scandal of Henan to light after her lengthy investigation into the number of people presenting to her with symptoms of the virus. Dr Gao used her own funds to treat people with the virus and has often been threatened and harassed for her work with victims of the virus. Her attempts to uncover the extent of the crisis were thwarted by local officials who told her to stop what she was doing. Furthermore, she was prevented from visiting villages. The campaign against her was stepped up when her children lost their jobs. When Dr Gao tried to take her findings to Beijing, she was detained by authorities in Henan. Dr Gao was named a "Model Citizen" by the Ministry of Education in Beijing in 1999 but was prevented from being able to pick up the award by Henan authorities. In August 2002 she was interviewed by *China Newsweekly* about her work, an interview which was reprinted in other publications. Following the publication of the interview, Henan provincial officials ordered her not to talk with journalists ever again (Gao 2001). Her story and findings were eventually taken up by the international media when a Beijing-based journalist for the *New York Times* covered her story and that of the victims of Henan (Beyrer and Csete 2003).

Dr Gao was awarded the Jonathan Mann Award for Health and Human Rights by the Global Health Council in 2001, and the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service in 2003, but was denied the right to travel to receive her awards. China Central Television designated her as one of "Ten People Who Touched China in 2003". There has been an outcry from the international community over Dr Gao's treatment, and she was eventually given permission to travel to the United States in 2007 to receive an honour bestowed upon her by the Vital Voices Global Partnership, a non-profit organisation. (Initially she was denied permission to travel but this was later revoked.) As Beyrer and Csete point out, it appears that under international pressure, Beijing ordered

the Henan government to “ease its threats and harassment”. When asked why the Chinese communist government did not want her to travel to the United States to receive awards, she answered, “They’re afraid that I will expose the fact that (illegal) blood-selling is the main reason for the AIDS epidemic in China” (Sun and Tian 2007).

In a situation that seems to have changed direction, Peter Piot, Director of UNAIDS, went to China in July 2007 to meet with Dr Gao in Henan and to visit families affected by the virus. Dr Gao was also visited by Henan officials as part of a photo story for local papers during Chinese New Year celebrations, even though she was under house arrest and was being prevented from travelling overseas (Yardley 2007). Dr Gao and her story have been absorbed into the central government’s version of the AIDS epidemic, and their attempts to use her for their own propaganda confirm this. In July 2007 the government admitted that illegal and unhygienic blood-collection practices in Henan are the main cause of HIV/ AIDS in the province. However, they still cite other reasons such as unprotected sex with foreigners and prostitution in other provinces (China.org 2007c).

There are definite tensions between Beijing at the centre and Henan at the margins, but the extent to which Beijing is in control or has a clear stance on Dr Gao is unclear. Despite the apparent backing down, Dr Gao was still effectively under house arrest until 2009 when she left China for the USA, where she now lives in exile and will not return for fears regarding her safety. However her blog remains; it is still hosted by SINA (China’s largest portal) and was still accessible as of September 2010 – her last entry was made in 2009. The blog could easily be shut down if Beijing wanted it that way, and the fact of the house arrest combined with the permission to keep blogging suggest a lack of consensus between the provincial and the central governments on how to deal with Gao and what she represents.

Other prominent HIV/ AIDS activists such as Hu Jia, Zeng Jinyan, and Wan Yanhai have been treated in a similar way. Wan, the founder of the grassroots organisation AiZhi (爱 love and 知 knowledge), was arrested in August 2002 for posting “illegally acquired interior classified documents of relevant state departments to overseas individuals [and/or] media sources” on a website (China.org 2002). Wan was released after confessing his crimes and after intense international pressure (Beyrer and Csete 2003; Ma 2005). In an interview following his release, Wan said that

AIDS became an ideological weapon to attack Western culture. The media didn't talk much about AIDS in the 1980s—at least not AIDS in China. There was no limit to talking about AIDS internationally, but the media kept silent on AIDS domestically (Rosenberg 2003).

In one of China's most famous cases, Zeng Jinyan and her husband Hu Jia, environmental and AIDS activists, were detained by Chinese authorities in Beijing and spent 214 days under house arrest between August 2006 and March 2007 without any legal proceedings. Hu had been posting information on his website and blog about dissident and peasant protests. Zeng told their story in a blog that detailed their surveillance by secret police and her husband's disappearance. Naturally her blog was blocked but she continued to blog via email on a blog site outside of China. This occurred despite her Internet connection being regularly cut (Bristow 2007). In September 2007 the couple won the Sakharov Prize, a human rights award given out by the European Parliament. In the same year, *Time* also named Zeng one of the world's 100 most influential people. The couple have also turned their detention and surveillance into a documentary called *Prisoners of Freedom City*, and when they attempted to leave China in May 2007 to show the film overseas, they were detained and placed under house arrest once again. The documentary is available on YouTube outside of China.

On 27 December 2007 Hu Jia was arrested, and Zeng and their two-month-old baby were placed under house arrest. The only visitors she has been allowed are their parents. Hu's lawyers have been prevented from seeing him because his case is said to involve "state secrets". Threats have also been made to take the baby away in between feedings, and friends and supporters of the couple have been prevented from delivering baby formula to Zeng; some friends have even been taken in for questioning, according to *Radio Free Asia* (Mudie and Chen 2008). Bloggers have come out in support of Hu and Zeng and there is an online petition calling for Hu's immediate release. It is quite feasible that Hu and references to him can be erased from the Internet using technological means. In the Western media, Hu's arrest was tied to a pre-Olympics crackdown on dissident activities. *Radio Free Asia* also reported that Dr Gao's family has been threatened and harassed, that her e-mail has been blocked, and that her phone has been tapped (Mudie and Chen 2008).

All three cases and the way they played out in the international media and on the Internet are also a visualisation, via text and images in the

media, of the negotiation of centre-margin relationships between Beijing and the international community. These cases also highlight the tensions in those relationships and the contradictory nature of the way in which the Internet and its impact on the management of information can be viewed. A case can be made for either an emerging democracy or further authoritarian oppression. The gaps and contradictions evident in some of the case studies also allude to differences in the party at different levels.

## Conclusion

NGOs represent an official voice: As they have been sanctioned by the CCP, they are regulated and registered. Then there is the unofficial voice – this includes individuals who post videos of China's pollution on YouTube for the world to see, and riots that are reported in the international press. The rioters and the YouTube posters are often there in response to an event or a crisis, as was evident in the cases of the mine disasters and the SARS epidemic. They become events in a broader sense when they hit the Internet and then become staged events when the government begins to mount their response. Even a riot, though spontaneous, is a constructed event, albeit a chaotic one. A riot is still a form of protest. In addition, the way local officials handle these things has come under increasing scrutiny from the central government in Beijing, and the Huaxi/ Huankantao riots bear this out. The management and harassment of HIV/ AIDS activists has been played out on the international stage through the Internet to some extent, because to some degree international relations are played out in the media through press statements, interviews, and events. In the end, though, what all of these case studies reveal is that in order to understand the effect of the medium of communication, we must look at the context in which people are using it and how authorities manage that use. The ways in which authorities manage information flows need further contextualisation in relation to issues such as environmental degradation, the AIDS epidemic, and the image China wishes to present to the world. In addition, the increasing pressure from the international community over issues such as Beijing's involvement in Darfur and the handling of the situation in Tibet are also having an impact on the way in which information is managed and public discourse is shaped in China.

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