The Rise of Rights Consciousness and **Citizen Participation on the Chinese Internet**

Written Presentation of XIAO Qiang, Director, China Internet Project, The Graduate School
of Journalism, University of California at Berkeley

Before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China

"What Will Drive China's Future Legal Development? Reports from the Field"

10 am to 12 noon, Wednesday, June 18, 2008

Chairman Sander Levin, Co-Chair Byron L. Dorgan and Distinguished Commission members,

My name is XIAO Qiang. I am the Director of the China Internet Project and founder of the online news portal China Digital Times at the Graduate School of Journalism of UC- Berkeley. It is a privilege for me to be speaking in front of this important commission, and alongside my distinguished fellow panelists. My talk today will focus on **the rise of** rights consciousness and **citizen participation on the Chinese Internet, despite** the Chinese government's intensified control in this regard.

First, let me start with some basic facts on the development of the Internet and related wireless technologies in China.

By the end of 2007, the number of Internet users in the country had rocketed to 200 million, gaining 73 million new users in just 12 months, according to the government-run China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC).

According to the CNNIC's statistics, Chinese Internet users are very young: about 51% of them are under age 25, and 70.6% of them are under age 30. The Internet population is also relatively well-educated, with more than 40% holding college or university degrees. Their education level contributes to the degree to which they participate in public affairs online.

The rise of blogging, instant messaging, and social networking services such as QQ, and search engine and RSS aggregation tools such as Baidu (www.baidu.com) and Zhuaxia (www.zhuaxia.com), have given Chinese netizens an unprecedented capacity for communication. Internet Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs) play a particularly important role in Chinese Internet life. According to research data from the beginning of 2008, 80% of Chinese sites are running their own BBSs and the total daily page views are over 1 billion, with 10 million posts published every day. By the end of 2007, China had more than 1.3 million BBSs.

At the same time, blogging activities have also exploded. Like BBS, blogging also has a very low entry cost — anyone with Internet access can open a blog on a hosting service. According to CNNIC, "By the end of November 2007, the number of blog spaces has reached 72.82 million in China, and with 47 million blog writers, it is reaching one-fourth of the total netizens." While most posts are personal, an increasing number of bloggers writing about public affairs have become opinion leaders in their local communities.

In addition to BBSs and blogs, chat rooms and instant messaging services such as QQ or MSN are also extremely popular online applications. A research report by *Analysys International* on China's Instant Messaging Market reveals that in the third quarter of 2007, active accounts of Chinese users numbered 388 million, with QQ being the most popular, and the highest number of users online at the same time reached 19.5 million. These instant messaging services play a crucial role to connect Internet users, communicate information, and coordinate actions through social networks. Finally, new photo and video sharing sites such as Yuku and Tudou are the fastest growing online applications. According to Peng Bo, deputy director of the State Council Information Office, "Eighty percent of China's 210 million Internet users have used these services." The richness of images, video, and sound online has created a powerful media space where millions of users can themselves be content producers, distributors, and the audience.

I have given testimonies before this commission on the state censorship and propaganda mechanisms over the Internet in the past. In general, the Chinese Party-state has been quite effective in controlling the political impact of the Internet by developing a multi-layered strategy to control Internet content and monitor online activities at every level of Internet service and content networks. However, beneath the surface of these constantly increasing and intensified control measures, there is a rising level of public information and awareness in Chinese society. Today, my presentation will focus on examples and analysis of an emerging social and political phenomenon.

First, let me start with three examples in 2007:

(1) Defending Rights: Chongqing Nail House

A property dispute that erupted in Chongqing in 2007 provides a window into how this process works. On February 26, 2007, a netizen from Chongqing posted a distinct photograph of a two-story house, sticking up like a giant nail in the middle of a construction site. Within days, all major BBSs posted this photo with questions and commentaries from netizens. The house, whose owners were refusing to relocate to make way for a new development, was soon named by netizens as "China's Most Incredible Nail House."

Because the image was quite dramatic and touched upon the common problem of urban construction, property rights, and forced evictions, official media soon jumped on the story. The house owners were successful and articulate entrepreneurs, who became media celebrities for their stand. The story broke just as the National People's Congress was passing a new property rights law that purports to protect individual homeowners, so the official media turned the story into a sample case under the new law, framing it as a middle-class couple standing against a powerful alliance of local officials and developers.

The story soon became the hottest story on China's Internet. Sina.com, China's largest Internet portal, offered a monetary award for digital images and videos that caught the developments in the story. Mop.com, one of the most popular online forums ran a real-time monitoring page. When the local court reached a verdict that the couple must leave their house or be forcibly removed, the husband carried a huge red banner reading "defending human rights according the law" in front of media cameras. His actions gained empathy from a public frustrated by their feelings of powerlessness in the face of business and government interests, and therefore generated huge online support. Facing heated public opinion, the local court delayed their eviction so days after the deadline, the house still stood in the public eye.

The central government weighed in to limit reporting on this topic after the couple disobeyed the court order and refused to move. As journalists for official media were no longer allowed to report the story, many netizens took on the reporters' role to cover it, using digital cameras and cell phones to follow the fate of the house and keep the story alive. Despite the reporting ban, many print and broadcast media continued to run commentaries and discussions on this case, exploring its relationship to the Property

Law. Under public pressure, the developer finally settled the case and compensated the couple for their property, which was eventually destroyed. The case vividly illustrated the pressure faced by local officials when millions of individuals come together through the Internet, especially when the official media also comes on board.

(2) Hunting Down Injustice: Shanxi Brick Kilns

Often government control over a story is not a black-and-white issue, as there can be official reasons to acknowledge some elements of a story while censoring others. A good example of this dynamic is the exposé of widespread slave labor in brick kilns in Shanxi province. The story started with a group of fathers from Henan province who ventured to Shanxi province to rescue their children, who had been abducted and illegally forced to work as slaves. After rescuing around 40 of an estimated 2,000 children, the fathers' efforts were obstructed by the local police, who, it was later discovered, were in alliance with the kiln owners. After obtaining no response from the government, the fathers published a moving open letter on June 7, 2007, on Tianya Club, one of the most-viewed Chinese online forums. The letter spread through the Chinese blogosphere and ignited national outrage. Reports in the official media followed and soon top Party officials including General Secretary Hu Jintao and Premer Wen Jiabao publicly expressed their concern over the issue.

After the top leadership weighed in on the case, local and central Chinese media carried waves of horrifying stories about the brick kilns. The Internet further circulated the media reports, bloggers' comments and analysis, and photos of missing children, and the public began asking more and more critical questions about how this could happen in 21st century China. Investigations into the case soon revealed that local Party officials and police profited from such kidnapping and slavery operations. Facing the rising public questioning over the root of slave labor in China, the Internet Bureau of the CCP Central Office of External Communication sent out the following notice to all "External Communication Offices" and "Central and Local Main News Websites" on June 15, 2007:

Regarding the Shanxi "illegal brick kilns" event, all websites should reinforce positive propaganda, put more emphasis on the forceful measures that the central and local governments have already taken, and close the comment function in the related news reports. The management of the interactive communication tools, such as online forums, blogs, and instant messages, should also be strengthened. Harmful information that uses this event to attack the party and the government should be deleted as soon as possible. All local external communication offices should enhance their instruction, supervision and inspection, and concretely implement the related management measures.

While trying to keep online public opinion under control on one hand, the central government also took action against kiln owners and officials who had been implicated in the slavery, sending 35,000 police officers to raid 7,500 kiln sites and penalizing 95 local officials. The state also turned the incident into a positive public relations ploy, publicly displaying their response to the specific crimes that had been committed, while suppressing other sharper critics and persistent investigations into the related deeper societal problems.

(3) Silenced: Ant Farmers Protest

While the cases above demonstrate the weaknesses in the official Internet censorship, we should not forget that the government is still able to exert almost near control over information distributed online in particularly sensitive cases where officials make that a priority. In November 2007, 10,000 people demonstrated in front of local government offices in Shenyang, Liaoning province, against a corrupt pyramid scheme, through which up to a million people, mostly poor or unemployed workers, had invested

their life savings but received nothing when the company went bankrupt. The story was politically sensitive because the company, Yilishen, had ties with powerful officials including Bo Xilai, the former governor of Liaoning province and current Minister of Commerce, as well as because of the mass protests that it inspired. The central government quickly imposed a complete news blackout on reporting about the incident. For a period, news about the scheme and subsequent protests could not be found through searches on the Chinese Internet. Once the foreign media began covering the case, those news reports found their way back into online forums, but were censored before they could be distributed in a mass way that reached the mainstream of Internet users.

The examples of the Chongqing nail house and the Shanxi brick kilns point to early signs of a changing dynamic: First, the stories initially broke online, and were later carried by the traditional media. In this process, thousands, sometime hundreds of thousands of public-minded bloggers and some journalists also played a critical role in amplifying these messages. Second, despite government censorship efforts, the sheer speed and number of messages and Internet posts distributed made it impossible for censors to stay ahead of the game. The timing gap between the information cascade and top down censorship instructions was key, as was the gap in control between central and local authorities, which in these cases allowed local events to become national news and make it into the centrally-controlled media. Once sensitive stories are carried by the official media, the Internet plays a role of amplifying and keeping stories alive, thus creating a big public event. Yet the Yilishen story also shows us that when it is a political priority, the central government still has the means and the will to exert almost complete control over information online.

Now, I would like to provide some analysis on the political impact of such online phenomenon.

Beijing-based Internet expert, Hu Yong, has written: "Since ordinary people now have the means to express themselves, 'public opinion' has finally emerged in Chinese society. Since China never had mechanisms to accurately detect and reflect public opinion, blogs and BBSs have become an effective route to form and communicate such public opinions of the society."

For those both in and outside of the government who want to see deeper and more fundamental political change, the rising online public participation is an indicator that the rules of the political game in China have started to change. Xiao Shu, a commentator in Southern Weekend magazine has written about this process:

The process is… to discover public events, follow public events, publicize the truth of those public events, and the logic behind and value within those events; for the public to discuss, form a consensus in the society, and then change the current rules of the game according to such consensus.

... Through SARS reporting we have established a new principle, which is that information must be public when there are matters of public security in such a crisis. Through the Chongqing Nail House event we are also changing the current rules of the game of building and evictions. Through Xiamen PX we are also changing a rule of the game, this time is to establish the following principle: before major public projects undergo construction, all people who would be affected by such a project must be consulted, and their permission granted.

Conclusion:

The CCP's censorship of both traditional media and the Internet is certain to continue. However, the rise of online public opinion shows that the Party-state can no longer have total control of the mass media and information environment. The Internet is already one of the most influential media spaces in Chinese society — no less than traditional forms of print or broadcasting media. Furthermore, through online

social networks and virtual communities, cyberspace has become a substantial communication platform to aggregate information and coordinate collective actions.

What we have seen is an emerging pattern of public opinion and citizenry participation, which represents a power shift in Chinese society, as recent news events, from the Chongqing nail house, to slave labor in the Shanxi brick kilns vividly demonstrated. The Internet allows the increasing number of netizens to propagate, comment on and promote certain topics (albeit limited) from a local platform to the national stage, and many such "public events" now play a role in promoting human rights, freedom of expression, rule of law, and government accountability.

Furthermore, some of China's more outspoken media such as Southern Metropolis Daily or Southern Weekend are also actively expressing much more liberal political ideas and pushing the envelope whenever they have a chance. Before the Internet, such reform-minded discourse was often vulnerable in the face of the domination of CCP's hegemonic propaganda. Now, however, as these more liberal elements within the established media converge with independent, grassroots critical voices online, they create a substantial force that is slowly eroding the party's ideological and social control.

As we have also learned from the series of news events leading up to the Beijing Olympics — from protest riots and the government crackdown in Tibet, the rise of nationalism among Chinese inside and outside the country in response to international human rights criticism, and the tragic Sichuan Earthquake and the unprecedented response to it from the Chinese government, media and citizens — information and communication technologies are playing a critical role in facilitating social and political action in China. The Chinese Internet is still a highly contested space. The authoritarian CCP regime is learning to be more responsive and adaptive in this new environment. Likewise, the Internet has also become a training ground for citizen participation in public affairs. This process could have profound and far-reaching consequences within China, as well as for China's emerging role in the global community.

Xiao Qiang 萧强
Director, China Internet Project
Adjunct Professor
The Graduate School of Journalism
University of California at Berkeley
Founder and Editor-in-Chief
China Digital Times: covering China from cyberspace
http://Chinadigitaltimes.net