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This article analyzes the main features and political functions of Chinese Internet-mediated networks that inhabit and traverse online and offline realms and that derive strength from their amphibious character whether they are primarily based online or offline. Internet-mediated networks in China shape the rules, practices, and institutions of Chinese politics by engaging in information politics, symbolic politics, leverage politics, and accountability politics. They influence the governance of Chinese cyberspace and Chinese society most visibly by contributing to the rise of an informational politics. The article identifies prominent features of this informational politics and discusses how new norms about information and information technologies are articulated and contested and what implications they have for democratic struggles in China. The case studies explored here involve environmental protection and those involving physical harm to vulnerable individuals.

### **Internet activism in China**

Among the countries with the largest numbers of Internet users, China is unique in its combination of high levels of Internet regulation and Internet activism. Frequent efforts at control, such as the promulgation of a set of regulations and a police crackdown on cyber-dissidents, are accompanied as frequently by the outbursts of cyber protests. Since the popularization of the Internet in China in 1998 [1], not a year has passed without some influential cases of Internet-mediated activism. In the same period, an entire apparatus of Internet control has shaped up in China. It almost seems as if there existed a symbiotic relationship between control and resistance. In no other nation is this paradoxical situation more apparent than in China today.

This makes China a uniquely important case for understanding the sources, dynamics, and consequences of Internet control and Internet activism. How is Internet activism sustained under conditions of control? How does such activism shape institutions and practices of power? Why has the Internet become an arena of intense political struggle in China? Conceptualizing the social forces on the internet as Internet-mediated networks and China's governance structures as a political "regime" (Braman, 2003) or "field" in the Bourdieusian sense, I argue that it is in and through these networks that Internet activism takes place. These Internet networks shape China's political field by helping to bring about an informational politics.

In addressing these questions, I draw on the analytic framework developed by Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998) in their study of transnational advocacy networks. Transnational advocacy networks function across territorial borders to shape international and domestic politics by engaging in information, symbolic, leverage, and accountability politics. China's Internet-mediated networks engage in similar kinds of politics by spanning the borders between cyberspace and the "real" world.

## Characteristics of Internet-mediated networks in China

The social forces that congeal on and around the Internet are not a swarming mass, an impression often conveyed by media reports of Internet activism. Closer examination reveals that this “swarming mass” is organized, though not in the traditional sense of organization. It is organized around Web sites, bulletin board systems (BBS), newsgroups, and e-mail mailing lists. In some cases, the organization has an offline base, but by simultaneously establishing an online presence, it extends itself in time and space. There are observable and predictable patterns of interaction and information flow, with nodes and bridges among nodes. In other words, what appears to be a swarming mass is in fact a web of networks. These networks may be highly fragmented, yet they are also organized. Because they are mediated by the internet, I refer to them as Internet-mediated networks, or Internet networks for short. They may be primarily based online or offline [2], but usually operate across online-offline boundaries [3].

Primarily offline-based networks include voluntary groups. These may be officially registered organizations or informal, unregistered groups. They typically have home pages and bulletin board systems (BBS). Like transnational advocacy networks, they have specialized issue areas. One issue area with active networks is environmental protection.

The Internet networks engaged in environmental protection consist of a spectrum of formal and informal environmental NGOs. They are Internet-mediated in two ways. First, they are linked into a network through Web sites, e-mail and BBS forums. In a survey of their Web sites conducted in March 2004, I found that of the 74 environmental groups surveyed, 40 have home pages [4]. An analysis of the links in these home pages shows that most environmental NGOs are closely linked to peer organizations and fairly closely linked to international organizations, forming a loose network structure. As Table 1 shows, on average, the Web site of each organization surveyed contains links to about eight peer organizations, two international organizations, and barely one domestic government environmental agency. Table 2 shows that consistent with network theory, the more influential organizations are more likely to be linked to. What attests to the unique feature of Internet-mediated networks is that small groups active on the Internet are among the most frequently linked organizations. Green-web (<http://www.green-web.org/>) and Desert.org.cn (<http://www.desert.org.cn/>) are such groups. They are active on the Internet and rank relatively high in the number of links to them.

**Table 1: Number of organizations linked in ENGOs Web sites by organizational type, March 2004**

Types of organizations	Total	Mean
Domestic peer organizations	314	7.8
International organizations	92	2.3
Government agencies		

Second, the Internet networks include Web-based groups. These informal groups are built around a home page with active BBS forums. Their organizational identity is closely tied to their Web sites. Among the better known of these Web-based groups are Greener-Beijing (<http://www.gbi.org.cn/>) and Green-web (see Yang, 2003a for details).

**Table 2: Most frequently linked organizations in 40 ENGO Web sites, March 2004**

Organization	Number of links
Friends of Nature	19
WWF	14
Green-web	9
State EPA	8
Desert.org.cn	7
Global Village of Beijing	6
Institute for Environment and Development	6
Greener Beijing	6
Green River	5

Primarily online-based networks encompass various kinds of online communities, such as online social clubs, knowledge networks, epistemic communities, and online resource networks [5]. These networks are formed around Web sites and BBS, but their activities extend offline. The largest among them are operated by big dotcom companies such as Sohu.com (<http://www.sohu.com/>), Sina.com (<http://www.sina.com/>), and Netease.com (<http://www.163.com/>).

Large online communities such as those hosted by Tianyaclub.com (<http://www2.tianya.cn/>) have as many as one million registered users. At any time of the day, there are thousands of users simultaneously engaged in online activities of reading and posting messages. Thousands of messages are posted daily [6]. Once compelling information is brought into the networks, it can circulate rapidly and produce publicity effects as powerful as the mass media.

The transnational advocacy networks studied by Keck and Sikkink have recognizable organizational forms, leaders, and constituencies. They work on identifiable issue areas and are bound by shared values. **Primarily online-based networks in China differ in that they have an**

**informal, episodic, and emergent character.** In ordinary times, Internet-mediated networks are not advocacy networks. The dotcom companies that support online communities have no other explicit goal than to generate and maintain regular online traffic as a means of promoting their brand names. **Yet these networks have a social structure.** For social actors, the important thing is to be in the network structure and not left out of it. When critical social issues enter China's Internet-mediated networks, they activate the network structure and transform them into advocacy networks. In this sense, the logic of Internet-mediated networks is consistent with the **logic of Castells' (1996) network society**, where to have power is to be in the network.

Internet networks are not completely free realms. The general trend in the past 10 years is the growing amount and scale of control and the increasing sophistication in the methods and technologies of control (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002; Tsui, 2003; Zittrain and Edelman, 2003; Kluver, 2005; OpenNet Initiative, 2005). **The regime of internet control in China has evolved along three axes.** One is social and political control. Examples are **arresting a cyber-dissident** or assigning bulletin board managers to  **censor posts**. Another is **technological control**. **Filtering** of keywords and **blocking** of Web sites are examples of this kind of control. The third is **psychological** control. The first two kinds of control, when widely known to Internet users, has the effect of a **panopticon** (Tsui, 2003). **By accustoming citizens to the idea that they are always been watched, the agents of control may induce self-disciplined and conformist behavior.** All activities in the Internet-mediated networks take place in an environment of control. **That these activities are taking place at all indicates both the limits of control at the current stage of Internet development and the resistance and creativity of social actors [7].**

## **The politics and transboundary dynamics of Internet-mediated networks**

Transnational advocacy networks engage in four kinds of politics (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). In **information politics**, advocacy networks generate politically usable information and move it to where it will have the most impact. In **symbolic politics**, they use symbols or stories to frame a situation. In **leverage politics**, they call upon powerful actors to affect a situation where weaker members of a network have little influence. In **accountability politics**, they hold powerful actors to their previously stated policies or principles. The differentiation of these four types of politics makes Keck and Sikkink's analytic framework particularly useful for disaggregating the practices on the ground. Its emphasis on information and symbolic politics captures central features of Internet-mediated activism. As such, it represents a step beyond the framing perspective in social movement theory [8].

What is less clear in Keck and Sikkink's study is how the four types of politics are enacted. The main strategy in these networks assumes a boomerang pattern, where actors seek to influence their own governments by mobilizing international governmental or nongovernmental forces in their networks. Yet precisely what mechanisms drive such dynamics is not specified.

**I propose that the most important mechanism driving these four types of politics is transboundary interactions.** These are **interactions** between **online and offline** realms, **across locality** (hence translocal), and **across territorial boundaries** (hence also transnational). These interactions

create linkages and enable diffusion of information and ideas. They also help to evade control because of their flexible and multi-nodal character. A key element of the transboundary interactions is media, which Keck and Sikkink's study largely ignores. It is media that make possible the long-distance interactions and communication typical of transnational networks.

Internet-mediated networks in China engage in information, symbolic, leverage, and accountability politics through transboundary interactions, but there are some important differences in the forms and contents of the politics. In China, the information politics is not just about getting factual and technical information out to the public. It is also about political struggles over the use of the Internet — about access and control, freedom of speech and surveillance, tactics of evading censorship. Symbolic politics takes on a different face as well. The Internet greatly facilitates the production and circulation of graphic symbols. It is thus common for activists to use photographs and digital images to achieve powerful symbolic effects. In the leverage politics of transnational advocacy networks, domestic actors can achieve a boomerang effect by requesting international organizations and foreign states to pressure domestic governments. **In Internet-mediated networks, the leverage comes from the Internet as well as from international organizations. Where social actors have no access to the mass media, the Internet becomes a lever.** Finally, in China, accountability politics is often based on citizens' legal claims. **Typically, activists seek to hold their opponents accountable to established laws and the constitution in a contentious mode known as rights-based contention (O'Brien, 1996).**

## Overview of four empirical cases

In recent years, there have appeared many cases of mobilization involving Internet-mediated networks in China. By analyzing **four such cases, I will demonstrate how Internet-mediated networks engage in information, symbolic, leverage, and accountability politics, what kinds of transboundary dynamics are at work, and how they influence norms and state behavior.** I chose these four cases because they involve intense Internet activism and exemplify the dynamics and politics of Internet-mediated networks.

**Case I** concerns the murder of Qiu Qingfeng, a female student in Beijing University [9]. The murder took place on Friday, 20 May 2000. The University authorities decided to cover up the news. At 11:19pm, 22 May 2000, a message appeared in the "Triangle" BBS forum of Beijing University, exposing the authority's attempt to suppress the information about the murder. This news spread online rapidly, triggering one of the largest online protests up to that time. While protest raged online, demonstrations and candle vigils took place on the campus of Beijing University. Online-offline interactions became a crucial source of mobilization. The combined online and offline protest thwarted the attempt of the University authority to control information. The protest forced the University authorities to publicly acknowledge the murder case and accept students' demand for a formal funeral service.

**Case II** concerns a fatal disaster in a tin mine in Nandan, Guangxi province. The accident occurred on 17 July 2001 and killed 81 miners. After the accident happened, the local

government and mine authorities covered it up. News about the accident first hit Internet bulletin boards around 27 July. A journalist from a *People's Daily* branch office in Guangxi province picked up the clue and went to Nandan to investigate the disaster on 30 July. Based on the investigation, the *People's Daily* local team dispatched a report to its headquarters in Beijing. On 31 July, *People's Daily Online* (<http://peopledaily.com.cn>) published a news release titled "Mysteries Surrounding an Accident in the Mining Area of Nandan, Guangxi." This was the first piece of verified news about the disaster. It provoked extensive protests among Internet users and the protests reportedly prompted top Chinese leaders to order a criminal investigation of the disaster.

**Case III** concerns the death of Sun Zhigang. A college graduate, Sun died of a police beating on 20 March 2003 while in custody in Guangzhou. Lacking a temporary resident permit, Sun had been taken into custody three days earlier. News of his death was published on April 25 because of the coverage of a local newspaper called *Nanfang Dushi Bao* (*Southern Metropolis Daily*). Soon, an outraged public filled the Web with debate and protest, demanding an official review of the two-decades old "Measures for Internment and Deportation of Urban Vagrants and Beggars," the legal basis for taking Sun into custody. As a result of the contentious activities in the Internet-mediated networks, suspects involved in Sun Zhigang's death were charged and convicted and the Chinese government revoked the "measures" in June 2003.

**Case IV** involves the environmental campaign to stop dam building on the Nu River in Yunnan province. In August 2003, China's National Development and Reform Commission approved a proposal by a hydropower company to build dams on the river. The main components of the project are a series of 13 dams on the lower reaches of the Nujiang River. Environmentalists launched a campaign to stop the project and achieved initial success when in April 2004 China's State Council reportedly suspended the project. [Table 3](#) summarizes the basic information about the four cases.

**Table 3: Four empirical cases**

Case
Issue
Location of incident
Year
I
Murder of student
Beijing
2000
II
Mine accident
Nandan, Guangxi
2001
III
Police brutality
Guangzhou
2003
IV

Environmental protection  
Nu River, Yunnan  
2003

All four cases involved information, symbolic, leverage, and accountability politics, but information politics was a basis for other types of politics. **It was only when factual information about the individual cases was made public that symbolic, leverage, and accountability politics became possible.** The actual political process did not evolve neatly from information to accountability politics. The different types of politics were intertwined and made possible by transboundary mechanisms. I discuss them separately to emphasize their analytical differences.

## Information politics

Two types of information are central to information politics: **testimonial information** and **technical information**. Getting these two types of information out to the public helps to “make the need for action more real for ordinary citizens.” [10] Transnational advocacy networks achieve their influence partly because they can obtain such crucial information and transmit it quickly to where it matters most.

## Releasing factual information on the Internet is a witness-bearing act.

The Chinese cases both resemble and differ from the transnational networks studied by Keck and Sikkink. As in transnational advocacy networks, the release and transmission of factual information is crucial. **Releasing factual information on the Internet is a witness-bearing act. It makes the need for action “more real for ordinary citizens.”** [11] Unlike the transnational advocacy networks, however, China’s Internet-mediated networks are simultaneously engaged in struggles over information access. On the one hand, agents of power are bent on controlling information and information channels. On the other hand, individuals and groups who try to access information must contend with these efforts of control.

In Case I, the interactions between pre-existing online and offline social networks were critical to the entire process. Offline networks are prevalent among university students in China such as those among classmates, dorm-mates, friends, and alumni. The structure of Chinese universities is conducive to such social networks. Classmates have close and sustained interactions because upon entering college, they are assigned to a class and in most cases remain in the same class until graduation. They live in dorms that facilitate daily interactions. After the Internet was introduced, an online social network built on university BBS was basically overlaid onto the existing social networks, creating networks that can move easily between the online and offline realms. University BBS played a pioneering role in shaping China’s Internet BBS culture. The first BBS in China was set up in 1995 in Tsinghua University. Since then, a lively BBS culture has developed in Chinese universities and in Chinese cyberspace more generally. University

bulletin board systems are often interconnected through links to one another, serving as sources of information on academic studies, job opportunities, and other things [12].

In the initial stage of the protest, individuals with Internet access were pivotal in producing an information politics. The information about the murder was first sent to the online networks in Beijing University through a few BBS postings. Once the information entered the networks, it went in several directions. It first reached the bulletin board systems hosted by universities and then the online communities supported by commercial portal sites in China and some online communities based outside of China (Yang, 2003c). This information flow transformed an online social network into a network of political activism.

Second, this online network reached actors in the offline space while offline actors tapped the resources of the online network, creating information flows between online and offline spaces. On the one hand, there was almost instantaneous online broadcast of campus protest events. Thus one posting describes in detail the evening vigil on 23 May, as shown in the following lines: “On the stairs near the Triangle area, a huge heart-shaped pattern was laid with flickering candles, with little white-paper flowers in the middle of the heart.” [13] (Young, 23 May 2000, “Triangle” cited in Yang 2003c, p. 471) On the other hand, some online posts were printed and posted on campus, providing a source of wall posters, traditionally a key repertoire of contention in China. During the protest, the author of one post reported reading an article on campus that had first appeared on the Internet:

“I just came back from the Triangle area [14]. Some articles had been posted on the wall, not so many yet. Many people were crowded together reading the articles. I read one article that was written in memory of our sister [15]. I read it already on the Internet but it still made me sad to read it there again. People around me were silent, a few were whispering. The crowd was growing.” [16]

In Cases II and III, the most important transboundary dynamics happened between the Internet and a few mass media professionals. In the new political activism of the Internet networks, the involvement of the officially controlled mass media is an exception, not a rule. Yet in some cases, a few courageous **media professionals** — call them **cultural activists** — can make a difference by sending information into the internet networks. **Strategically positioned in China’s multimedia world**, these individuals often have **access to critical information**. They can initiate a social protest by simply releasing such information into the Internet network. In this sense, these individuals play a leadership role, although it is a different kind of leadership than is found in conventional social movements.

The dynamics of information flow manifest two transboundary patterns. In one case, mass media professionals break news on the Internet, resulting in public dissemination. In the other, mass media professionals break news in print form before Internet disseminates it. Case II illustrates the first pattern. The accident occurred on 17 July 2001 in a tin mine in Nandan, Guangxi. After the accident happened, the local government and the mine authorities covered it up for about half a month. News about the accident first hit Internet bulletin boards around 27 July 2001, but the news was not verified (Song, 2002). On 30 July, a journalist from the *People’s Daily* branch station in Guangxi went to Nandan to investigate. Based on the investigation, the *People’s Daily*



local team dispatched a report back to their headquarters in Beijing. At 3pm, 31 July, *People's Daily Online* published a news release titled "Mysteries Surrounding an Accident in the Mining Area of Nandan, Guangxi." This was the first piece of verified news about the disaster and was widely carried in Web sites. On 2 August, after reading this news release, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji reportedly instructed thorough investigation of the case.

According to *People's Daily's* head reporter in Guangxi, their strategy in covering the case was to "combine print with Internet media and give priority to the Internet." (Zheng, 2003) Thus throughout the two-month investigation, they published more than 20 articles in the print editions of *People's Daily* and over 150 articles in *People's Daily Online*. When the news first broke out in *People's Daily Online*, its main BBS "Strengthening the Nation Forum" (QGLT) saw a sharp increase in the number of posts about the mine disaster — daily posts numbered in the tens of thousands (Zheng, 2003).

Case III illustrates the second pattern. A college graduate, Sun died of beating on 20 March 2003 while in police custody in Guangzhou. Lacking a temporary resident permit, Sun had been taken into custody three days earlier. News of his death became public on 25 April because of the coverage of the local newspaper *Southern Metropolis Daily (Nanfang Dushi Bao)*. For years, this local daily had developed a reputation for its investigative reporting on social issues. It was the first news media to cover the Sun Zhigang case. The issue was then taken to the Internet, initiating an extended period of debate and protest.

The information politics in Case IV involved publicizing factual and technical information but differed in one way. In the first three cases, much of the information politics was to expose suppressed information. Once exposed, the information about vulnerable victims such as college students and coal miners aroused public outrage. The public expressions of such outrage produced great moral force, compelling government authorities to pay attention. The environmental campaign differed in that the exposure of the hydropower project could not provoke the same kind of public outrage as happened in the first three cases. The project had strong supporters both in the Yunnan provincial government and in the central government. Even the public was divided about its pros and cons. Thus the information politics in this case was less about exposing the hydropower project than about marshalling and presenting evidence to convince the public of its negative aspects.

Environmental NGOs were the main players in this process. They focused on mobilizing the media. The most active NGO was Green Earth Volunteers, led by two media professionals. They organized a study tour of the Nu River in February 2004 to collect information and subsequently put on a photo exhibit in Beijing to educate the public. Both journalists published many news reports in the mainstream newspapers. In addition, one of them used the Web site of her newspaper (*China Youth Daily*) to cover the debates; the other ran an e-mail mailing list and helped to set up a campaign Web site. Information was published in the campaign site as well as on Web sites run by environmental NGOs. The mailing list was used to send action alerts and discuss campaign strategies.

All four cases involved struggles over access to information and information channels. In Cases II, III, and IV, the strategy to gain such access is to make simultaneous use of traditional media and the Internet. Access to the mass media being limited, information dissemination depends crucially on the Internet. Yet traditional media are important in their own way. When well-

known media professionals publish information on the Internet, the information has more credibility than anonymous information.

Case I differs from the other three cases in that access to the mass media was clearly unavailable. There was a media blackout on the case. Thus struggles were centered on the Internet. Throughout the protest, the possibility that the university BBS could be shut down by the university authorities remained real. Thus part of the activism focused on keeping the BBS open. Users were urged to use reason while BBS hosts were cajoled to support people's freedom of speech [17]. Protest spread to BBS forums supported by commercial portal sites as well as universities. There was evidence that official BBS forums like "Strengthening the Nation Forum" initially attempted to block postings about the murder case. Messages concerning the murder appeared significantly later than in university BBS forums. News about the murder case hit QGLT at 2: 21pm, 24 May, almost 40 hours after the first message appeared in Beijing University's "Triangle" forum. Censorship in QGLT was exposed by a post entitled "The QGLT is trying to block news about the case in Beijing University. This is futile! Discussions in all other bulletin boards are about this case." [18]

The four cases show that information politics is central in China's online activism, involving both the release of testimonial and factual information and struggles over information channels. The transboundary interactions between online and offline realms were an important mechanism driving the information politics.

## Symbolic politics

All four cases involved symbolic politics, that is, the **use of symbols and narratives to frame an event and influence the public**. Many narratives stress the innocence of the victims and the injustices they suffered. In contrast, the perpetrators are often described as heinous and ruthless. These narratives present the archetypal contrast between the good and the evil, the innocent and the guilty. For example, one of the most widely circulated posting in Case I was a poem that describes the victim's youthful beauty and innocence. Narratives about Sun Zhigang's death in Case III similarly contrasted his youthful innocence and intelligence with the brutality of the police.

Disseminating graphic images of the victims is an important feature of the symbolic politics. The Internet is ideal for this purpose. Like narratives, these images highlighted the victims' innocence and beauty. The following image of the victim in Case 1, showing her in youthful beauty, was posted in many Web sites during the protest.

Figure 1: Qiu Qingfeng (1980–1999).

In Case IV, a group of activists traveled from Beijing to the distant Nu River valley on an investigative field trip. Then they organized a photo exhibit in Beijing to showcase the primordial beauty of the river in order to mobilize public opposition. Selected items of the exhibit were

published on the campaign web site. As Figure 2 shows, the starting page of the Web site shows two innocent little girls bathing in the river. The image highlights the young girls' vulnerability, beauty, and innocence, as if to exhort the viewer to help stop the dam-building project that will destroy the river.

Figure 2: Starting Page of Nu River Campaign Web Site.

Transboundary mechanisms helped to spread the images and narratives about innocent victims. One such mechanism was the cross-posting of messages in BBS forums. Such cross-posting established connections among Internet spaces. For example, in Case I, one of the first and most detailed postings that told the story about the murder was cross-posted in many bulletin boards. A second transboundary mechanism is the online-offline interactions discussed above. This mechanism was also at work in the environmental campaign, where activists literally traveled to the Nu River, took pictures, and exhibited them on university campuses and in the campaign Web site. In these symbolic struggles, activists constructed a new space interlocking the local, the national, and the virtual.

## Leverage politics

Leverage politics was evident in all four cases, but it differed from the kind studied by Keck and Sikkink. In transnational advocacy networks, **domestic actors seek international pressure on domestic governments. The leverage comes from the outside.** In Internet-mediated networks, the **leverage comes from the Internet as well as from the outside.** For this reason, some observers consider the Internet as a "court of appeal" in China (Yardley, 2004a; Liebman, 2005).

In Cases I, II, and III, the Internet was clearly an important lever of information dissemination. Thus in Case I, there was no mention of the murder in the mass media. The Internet was the only source of information. In Case II, courageous journalists published the first and decisive report on the Internet before the mass media picked up the story. In Case III, although the first story appeared in a local newspaper, it made national news only after the information was taken to the Internet.

The leverage politics in China's Internet networks resembles that of the transnational advocacy networks in that it involves international pressure. The pressure may come from international organizations or foreign governments. The environmental campaign, for example, involved international NGOs. The International Rivers Network published news updates about campaign developments inside China on its Web site and set up a link to the campaign Web site in China. Rivers Watch East and Southeast Asia (RWESA), a coalition of NGOs in these regions, also published online news releases on the Nu River campaign.

**... some observers consider the Internet as a "court of appeal" in China.**

International pressure is often mediated by the Internet. The typical dynamics assumes the following boomerang pattern. First, international media pick up information initially published on the Internet. Then, they publish their own reports based on further investigations. This produces international publicity and creates pressure on domestic state actors. Sometimes, the international media reports are channeled back into China's Internet networks, thus completing the circle of network flow, only with enhanced publicity and influence.

In Case I, for example, after news of the murder spread on the Internet, it was quickly picked up and reported by the international media. BBC News (2000) had a report on 24 May 2000, just one day after the information got online. Even lesser known international newspapers like *The Irish Times* carried a news report (O'Clery, 2000). Similarly, BBC News carried a timely report about Case II, while *The New York Times* carried a whole series of stories about Case IV, the Nu River campaign (e.g. see Yardley, 2004b).

## Accountability politics

China scholars have shown that there is a growing rights consciousness in contemporary China. More than ever before, Chinese citizens are turning to litigation to seek redressing of wrongs and assertion of their rights. Besides formal litigation, citizens also resort more and more to the language of law and rights in contentious activities. As O'Brien [19] puts it, **“by citing specific clauses or the spirit of law, “ordinary people are learning to speak the language of power with skill, to make officials prisoners of their own rhetoric.”** This rights-based contention is perhaps the most typical version of **accountability politics** in China today. Its core is the invoking of the spirit of law. Law has become a staple official rhetoric, but the rhetoric is often removed from reality. An effective strategy of contention is to **hold the officials accountable to their rhetoric**. This strategy is as common in internet networks as in other arenas of collective action.

The accountability politics in Case I centered on individual rights and freedom of speech. A central issue raised by protesters was why the University authorities tried to cover up the murder case and stop students from mourning the victim. A message posted to the “Strengthening the Nation Forum” claimed that the protest occurred “because their right to mourn their dead sister was rudely deprived.” [20] This was an invocation of individual rights. Similarly, much of the contention over the use of the Internet focused on freedom of speech, a right that was, theoretically speaking, protected by the Chinese constitution. Under the pressure of the combined online and offline protest, the President's Office of Beijing University issued a public statement on 23 May 2000 confirming the news of the murder. On 24 May, the President of the University announced that memorial services would be held the next day. The University also promised to compensate the victim's family and commit more efforts and resources to improving campus safety conditions.

In Case II, the accountability politics initially also centered on why local government officials and mine owners conspired to cover up the accident. After the news hit the Internet, there were many public demands for investigations of the covers-up scheme and prosecution of the

responsible individuals. In Case III, similar demands were raised. Because Sun was initially taken into custody under the pretext of “Measures for Internment and Deportation of Urban Vagrants and Beggars,” citizens called for the invalidation of this outdated set of administrative measures on the ground that it contradicted the constitutional protection of personal freedom. Finally, in Case IV, one of the main challenges against the hydropower company was that the hydropower project was not subject to the environmental impact assessment procedures required by the newly promulgated “Environmental Impact Assessment Law.” An explicit goal of the campaign was to hold the hydropower company accountable to the EIA law.

In all four cases, therefore, activists in the Internet–mediated networks sought to hold those in power positions accountable to the Chinese constitution and other laws. All four cases were successful in this respect [21].

## **Internet–mediated networks and informational politics in China**

How do Internet–mediated networks in China impinge on the governance of Chinese cyberspace? How do they affect Chinese politics as a whole?

The power of Internet networks emanates from their new organizational features. They are dispersed networks linked together by the Internet. They consist of individuals, informal groups, as well as formal organizations. Mostly located in China, they have numerous points of linkages with transnational activists. Indeed, if China’s Internet–mediated networks function in ways similar to transnational advocacy networks, it is because they share some important features of transnational advocacy networks and may thus be considered as a variant of the latter. Unless the Internet itself becomes re–territorialized, Internet networks necessarily have a transnational feature. Political scientists (Keohane and Nye, 1998; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Braman, 2003) have noted that loosely structured, non–state networks have become important players in international politics and policy regimes. **This article has shown that they have also become players in national politics. This is the first major political impact of China’s Internet–mediated networks.**

Second, China’s Internet–mediated networks have **articulated new norms** and given new meanings to old norms. **Freedom of speech used to mean freedom of speech in the mass media and through other alternative channels, such as wall posters. With the Internet, its meaning has broadened.** Indeed, the center stage of popular struggles for freedom of speech has moved from conventional media to the Internet. **The daily activities in online communities not only happen under conditions of political control, but also contest control.** Besides these age–old ideals, new ones have been articulated. **Information disclosure, the right to know, and information right** have entered the vocabulary of democratic struggles in China. These new values have not been incorporated into China’s governance system in any institutional form. They meet with **resistance from agents of the state.** Yet as my empirical cases show, state actors are pressured into acknowledging or accepting these principles, at least in rhetoric. This widens the space for accountability politics. Perhaps the most important impact on political norms lies in the very process of political action. **Transcending boundaries to engage in**

**information, symbolic, leverage, and accountability politics is not just a means to an end. It is an end in itself.** It is through practicing these politics that information right and freedom of expression are affirmed.

**China's Internet-mediated networks ... produce and disseminate powerful narratives and images to shape people's understanding of the events and persuade or emotionally move them to action.**

Finally, China's Internet networks have introduced new dynamics into China's political field. These are the transboundary dynamics of information politics, symbolic politics, leverage politics, and accountability politics. These dynamics resemble those analyzed by Keck and Sikkink in spirit but differ in specificities. Thus China's Internet-mediated networks engage in an information politics both of the dissemination of factual information and of struggles over information access and information right. They produce and disseminate powerful narratives and images to shape people's understanding of the events and persuade or emotionally move them to action. Using the Internet as an information channel, they overcome the controlled access to mass media and turn the Internet into a lever of political struggle. By invoking the constitution and the spirit of law, they affirm the legitimacy of their action and hold agents of power accountable to institutionalized rules and norms.

Why have the Internet-mediated networks been able to influence a powerful political field? These networks are not the only social forces shaping Chinese politics today. Traditional forms of contention such as labor strikes and peasant rebellions have persisted or revived. In the same period in which Internet networks have grown in influence, Chinese society as a whole has become more contentious. The broader social environment thus favors the development of these networks. Yet it should also be stressed that Internet networks face a rapidly expanding and highly repressive Internet regulatory regime. That these networks have remained active over an extended period of time must be due to some unique strengths.

This study suggests that the strengths come from three sources. One is the organizational character of the networks. Their fluid, episodic, and emergent character challenges control. This is especially true of those networks primarily based online. In ordinary times, these are mainly social, not advocacy, networks. They serve both social purposes and commercial interests. Yet as the occasion arises, they can turn into advocacy networks. This chameleonic nature adds flexibility to the networks and raises the barrier for control.

**Second, China's Internet networks are not only chameleonic, but also amphibious. They inhabit two worlds simultaneously, online and offline.**

Second, China's Internet networks are not only chameleonic, but also amphibious. They inhabit two worlds simultaneously, online and offline. The online world being networked across localities and national territories, these networks occupy multiple realms. They cross many boundaries and have numerous entry points. In times of political action, therefore, a transboundary mechanism enables actors to enter the networks through any available access point, whether online or offline. My empirical cases provide evidence, for example, of how mass

media professionals propelled action by sending information to the Internet or how offline actors retrieved information from the Internet for offline circulation.

Third, China's Internet networks rely primarily on information, ideas, and persuasion to achieve political influence. Such influence comes essentially from soft power. In asymmetric power relations, the subordinate party cannot use hard power to confront the hard power of the dominant party without grave risks. Soft power, however, can challenge hard power in legitimate ways. Non-violent civil disobedience exemplifies the use of soft power to challenge hard power. The age of information magnifies the relevance of soft power (Keohane and Nye, 1998). As my empirical cases show, information itself becomes a source of power in challenges against state agents, even as state agents use information as a power resource in their own ways.

The political activism in China's Internet networks marks the rise of a new, informational politics in China. This is *informational* politics because the central stakes and arenas of political struggles are information access, information rights, and information technologies. All power structures are based on the control and manipulation of information and China is no exception. Yet never before has information occupied such a central and visible place in Chinese politics. **The creation in recent years of a Ministry of Information Industry, the extension of the functions of the Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Public Security into the governance of information suppliers, information contents, and information users, the promulgation of laws and regulations concerning the use of the Internet** — these are merely the most visible manifestations of this obsession with information and information control. Such obsession attests to the power and dangers of information. Hence an informational politics.

## Conclusion and theoretical implications

This article demonstrates that Internet-mediated networks, activated through a transboundary mechanism, provide the most fundamental channels and dynamics of online activism in China. These networks raise the bar of political control and facilitate participation in protest. The transboundary dynamics serve to link up nodes of networks, thus enhancing the speed and scope of protest. This finding implies that in the age of the Internet, networks have become a central concept for understanding social movements and collective action. By showing that Internet networks can function as channels of popular contention even under conditions of control, it challenges the logic of power and inequality proposed by Manuel Castells (1996) and other social theorists. **Castells (1996) argues that in an age of network society, power functions by exclusion. To have power is to be in the networks, to be excluded from the networks is to be powerless.** Coming from a very different camp [22], Scott Lash reaches similar conclusions, writing that **to be powerless is to be left out “from the loops of information and communication flows.”** [23] This article has shown that networks are not only a central source of power, but also of resistance. Networks of resistance may form from both within and without networks of power.

**... networks are not only a central source of power, but also of resistance.**

Internet activism is not just observed in China, but also around the world. The rise of Internet activism thus presents new opportunities and challenges for social movement theory. Many scholars have drawn on well-established theories to illuminate its origins and dynamics. As a recent review article shows (Garrett, 2006), however, the dominant analytical concepts in analyzing Internet activism are those associated with the political process model, namely, political opportunity structures, mobilization resources, and framing. My analysis shows how a network approach may help to explain the sources and power of Internet activism in China. As such, it contributes to a growing literature on network explanations of collective action (Diani, 2001; Lin, 2001; Diani and McAdam, 2003; Bennett, 2003a, 2003b; Tarrow, 2005). [24]

Future research should examine more empirical cases in order to understand better the nature and functions of the Internet-mediated networks. One research area is to examine systematically who is likely to resort to the Internet networks for political activism and why. One hypothesis is that the better-educated and more technically savvy individuals are more likely to be in the networks and therefore biographically available for Internet activism. If so, what does it mean for marginalized groups who do not have direct access to the new technologies? What are the ways of linking them up with those who do have access? Another area for future research concerns the connections and interactions between online and offline spaces. To what extent do the interactions depend on existing social relations and identities? How do they produce new relations and identities? What is the relative significance of weak and strong ties in the networks for political mobilization? Addressing these questions is essential for understanding how Internet-mediated networks may continue to shape Internet protest and how Internet protest may transform the nature of popular contention.

## About the author

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## Notes



1. Although China was connected to the Internet in 1994, the number of Internet users remained small in the first few years. By mid-1998, however, Internet users reached one million. Half a year later, it exceeded two million.
2. If primarily based online, they may be called cybernetworks (Lin, 2001).
3. Internet-mediated networks are a world-wide phenomenon. For example, Warkentin's (2001) study provides empirical evidence of the dynamics and functions of several influential online resource networks and NGOs in Europe and North America. His empirical cases resemble what I refer to as Internet-mediated networks. The digital formations studied by Latham and Sassen (2005) and the computer networks analyzed by Wellman and his associates (Wellman, *et al.*, 1996, 1999) are also forms of Internet-mediated networks.
4. I first compiled a list of 74 environmental groups based on existing sources and personal contact. For others, I conducted a systematic search using the most popular search engine in China, [www.baidu.com](http://www.baidu.com). I then analyzed the contents of the Web sites of all 40 organizations.
5. Warkentin (2001, p. 143) considers online resource networks as "a particular type of NGO that is a unique product of the Internet." I take a broader view and consider as online resource networks all those online networks, no matter what organizational form they take, that serve as online clearing houses for information and resources.
6. Mechanisms of control and censorship sometimes block the posting of certain kinds of messages.
7. Studies of the Chinese Internet have overwhelmingly focused on issues of control. For empirical studies of the actual uses of the Internet, see among others Yang (2003b, 2003c, 2003d), Hung (2003), Barne and Davies (2004), Hockx (2004), Hartford (2005), Hu (2005), and Zhou (2006).
8. For a critique of the framing perspective, see Benford (1997).
9. For information about the background of the case and data collection, see Yang (2003c, pp. 469-470).
10. Keck and Sikkink, 1998, p. 21.
11. *Ibid.*
12. It is clearly because university BBS serves as such powerful information clearing-houses that the Chinese government has been exercising more and more control over it. In March 2005, there was news that access to university BBS in China would be restricted to the university community only. Until then, they had been open to the public.
13. Ten photos of the scene described in the posting can be viewed at <http://mem.netor.com/m/photos/adindex.asp?BoardID=2309> as of 15 December 2003.
14. Probably the most prominent public space on the Beijing University campus is the Triangle area, after which the "Triangle" news forum was named. Historically, the Triangle is the

unofficial site for protest in Beijing University. It has influenced national politics by spreading protest from here.

15. During the protest, the victim was commonly referred to as “our little sister schoolmate.” This way of naming the victim had several connotations. It means that she was a schoolmate, was like a sister, was one of “us,” and was “little” and therefore loveable. The message was that if “we” did not stand up for her, who else would? This way of framing the issue is consistent with the point made by Keck and Sikkink that one of the main areas of mobilization in transnational advocacy networks concerns physical harm to vulnerable individuals, because such issues have particularly strong moral force.

16. jinni, 23 May 2000, “Triangle Forum”.

17. One post in the “Triangle” forum addressed the host in the following words:

Don’t be afraid. Let us vent our feelings and sadness as much as we want and express our grief for the dead. If we surrender [our right of expression] because of possible pressure, what else is left for us? — jinni, 23 May 2000, “Triangle Forum”.

18. Wo zhetou sizhu! 24 May 2000, QGLT.

19. O’Brien, 2002, p. 226.

20. Tian Ma Xing Kong, 29 May 2000, QGLT.

21. The environmental campaign in Case IV is ongoing as of this writing, but initial success was achieved when the Chinese government halted the project in April 2004.

22. Scott Lash’s analysis of the logic of information is heavily phenomenological. His notion of information society both resembles and differs from Castells’ (1996) notion of network society. Like Castells, Lash emphasizes flows, circulation, and networks. Unlike Castells, Lash takes a rather literal view of these attributes: they are the attributes of information, whereas Castells emphasizes the sociocultural dimensions of the network society. For Castells, a network society is a system of social structures based on network structures. For Lash, an information society is a system of information and communication structures. Where Castells sees society, Lash sees the “primary qualities of information itself.” (2002, p. 2) See Yang (2005).

23. Lash, 2002, p. 75.

24. Network theory is nevertheless widely used in analyzing the social formations on the Internet. See Wellman, *et al.* (1996) and Wellman and Gulia (1999).

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