Authoritarian Restraints on Online Activism Revisited

Why "I-Paid-A-Bribe" Worked in India but Failed in China

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The spread of the Internet and new communication technologies has opened a new and potent avenue for contention in authoritarian regimes. Thus far, the study of authoritarian restraints on online activism has centered on direct measures of state control—primarily regulation, censorship, and repression.[1] Despite a surge of attention to online activism,[2] however, there has been scant analysis of the forms and origins of internal organizational problems among politically active cyber-communities in non-democratic societies. How do netizens organize and behave in authoritarian China compared to their counterparts in democracies?[3] What does online behavior in China suggest about the limits of online activism under authoritarian rule?

This essay provides a rare comparative study of online political participation in two contrasting political regimes: China and India. Focusing on I-Paid-A-Bribe (IPAB), a crowd-sourcing platform for reporting incidents of bribery anonymously, I examine why this site originated and thrived in India, whereas a bottom-up copycat effort in China fizzled out only months after it emerged. Through a comparative exercise, I look beyond the direct suppression of online activism by authoritarian states. I highlight instead the extended and often inadvertent effects of authoritarian rule in weakening the ability of netizens to self-govern and constructively engage the state.

The transplantation of IPAB from India to China presents a unique analytic opportunity to cast in sharp relief the distinctive features of online state-society interactions in authoritarian China. In 2008, The Janaagraha Centre, based in India, founded the I-Paid-A-Bribe website, which mobilizes citizens to anonymously report encounters with bribe extraction.[4] Using these reports, the Centre tracks patterns of bribery and recommends anti-corruption measures to the government. Following its popular reception in India, spin-offs of IPAB spread to other countries, including China.[5] During the summer of 2011, replicas of IPAB sprang up across Chinese cyberspace, igniting enthusiasm in the online community. However, the spontaneous movement was short-lived. Only months after the appearance of these sites, most were forcibly or voluntarily closed.

Many attribute the failed outcome of IPAB in China exclusively to the suppression of free expression in an authoritarian state.[6] It is widely assumed that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) viewed citizens' online reports of corruption as threatening and would therefore seek to shut down IPAB sites as soon as they appeared. These opinions surfaced throughout media and scholarly reports:

> In the networked authoritarian state, there is no guarantee of individual rights and freedoms. Those whom the rulers see as threats are jailed.[7]

> The Chinese experiment is doomed to fail because the country lacks the environment in which the Indian anti-bribery platform … operates and thrives: an open, democratic ecosystem that protects free speech.[8]

> They are threatening enough that when a rash of similar sites popped up in China last summer, the government stamped them out within a couple of weeks, contending they had failed to register with the authorities.[9]

As we will see, however, the assumption that IPAB failed in China as a result of authoritarian intolerance and the suppression of corruption reports is partial and even inaccurate. By tracing the spread and demise of IPAB in China and comparing it to the dynamics in India, I draw two counter-observations. First, Chinese state authorities did not clamp down on IPAB immediately or resolutely. Instead, their responses vacillated between approval and suppression. Furthermore, consistent with the model of "fragmented authoritarianism," state responses appeared divided across ministries and levels of government.[10] Second, even before the Chinese portals were officially closed down, they were plagued by internal problems of organization, including mismanagement, opportunism, and narrow goals of anti-corruption, which were comparatively absent in India.

The organizational problems seen in China's IPAB sites do not suggest that Chinese netizens are intrinsically deficient. Rather, I argue, they may be traced to prolonged restrictions placed against autonomous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and free association under non-democratic rule. China lacks autonomous and professional NGOs that can channel online activism into constructive policy engagement and public education. The equivalent of India's Janaagraha Centre, an NGO dedicated to monitoring government, is not permitted in China.[11] In the absence of professional and autonomous organizers, the underlying lack of experience with and knowledge about constructive norms of civic engagement among netizens is left unfiltered and exposed. For these reasons, we see instances of venting, personal vengeance, and profiteering through IPAB in China. Furthermore, an analysis of web content reveals a striking lack of appreciation among Chinese netizens of the original mission of IPAB in combating petty corruption as a systemic problem. Instead, the focus of China's IPAB was on exposing and arresting corrupt individuals, echoing the state's own rhetoric of corruption as a problem of bad agents, rather than of structural political and economic factors.[12]

In short, in order to understand the limits of online activism in authoritarian states, it is not sufficient to examine the external shackles imposed on citizens. That is one significant form of restraint, but it is not the only form. It is equally important to look to such issues as the motivation for and quality of online participation in politics. Authoritarian rule provides an inhospitable environment for nurturing online citizenship in the full sense of the word, involving not only the exercise of rights and free speech, but also accountability, responsibility, and trust.[13] The Internet has played a positive role in freeing political expression in China; however, it is emphasized that both the core obligations of citizenship and the constructive norms of public participation and debate are still being learned.[14]

The Rise and Spread of IPAB in India

The original I-Paid-A-Bribe website (www.ipaidabribe.com) was founded in India, in 2008, by the Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy, a non-profit organization (NPO) based in Bangalore. The goal of the initiative was "to tackle corruption by harnessing the collective energy of citizens." It called on citizens to anonymously report incidents and amounts of bribe-giving, with a focus on everyday forms of petty or "retail" corruption, such as bribes paid to obtain birth certificates or driving licenses. The site also enables citizens to report instances when they successfully resisted paying bribes and when they meet honest officials who did not ask for bribes. As of January 2013, over 1.6 million people have visited the site. By May 2012, over 17,000 bribe reports were made.[15]

The two main goals of IPAB are procedural reforms and public education. The website (1) recommends changes in the way approvals or public services are delivered in order to reduce opportunities for petty bribery and (2) educates citizens about their legal entitlement to public services, as well as how to avoid and resist paying bribes. The mission, it should be emphasized, is not to kick any particular politician or bureaucrat out of office for malfeasance. Rather, IPAB consciously positions itself as a facilitator, helping to amplify the voice of citizens to highlight systemic patterns of corruption and improve governance. As stated on the website, its mission is to "work with citizens and the government to improve the quality of life in Indian cities and towns."

The focus on public education is apparent on the website. There is an online Q&A session ("Ask Raghu") where users can seek advice from a former senior civil servant. By May 2012, Raghu had answered over 1,050 questions. Another section on "Experts Speak" posted articles on corruption by experts. A "how to" section explains legal facts and documents on mundane but practical matters encountered by regular citizens, such as "how to procure a working permit in India" and "how to get customs clearance of import shipment without paying bribe."

The Janaagraha Centre has the explicit goal of working closely with the government to change administrative processes, with the aim of minimizing opportunities for bribery. One of its most well-known sets of policy recommendations was a report of nearly forty pages addressed to the Transport Department.[16] The report summarizes patterns

of bribery connected to transport services. It tracks various administrative processes, the official fee schedule of each procedure, and legal requirements for obtaining a permit or service. For each step in the process, readers are alerted to "bribe prone zones"; for example in obtaining a learner's license, readers are warned that "agents set shop outside office disguised as Xerox shops and offer to get work done for a price."

Drawing on citizens' reports, the Centre recommended a list of concrete measures to the Transport Department to reduce opportunities of bribe-taking. It is worth noting that their recommendations were not vacuous statements to "do the right thing," but were practicable and grounded in citizens' input. For example, it recommended replacing manual driving tests with simulator tests, requiring employees of the department to wear identity badges, and creating a single-window system. It also recommended medium-term reforms to remove the region-specific nature of Transport offices, introducing competition to improve the delivery of services.

In another success case, IPAB changed processes in land registration. Traditionally, to register the purchase and sale of land, Indian citizens had to obtain approval from a regional land registration office where the particular land parcel was located. Reports from citizens indicated that bribery was higher in offices on the periphery of the city than those in the city, as the periphery experienced a concentration of new growth. The finding prompted the Janaagraha Centre to propose to the Department of Stamps and Registration to allow citizens to register land transactions in any regional office. As indicated on the website, "It took several months of advocacy, and we got it—and rates for land transactions have come down since then."[17]

Importantly, the constructive role of IPAB in fighting corruption has been endorsed by a number of high-ranking government officials. One of the keenest supporters was the Transportation Commissioner of Bangalore, Mr. Bhaskar Rao. The Janaagraha Centre worked with the Commissioner and his senior management to reengineer the process flow of issuing drivers' licenses and converted two steps to automated tests, thereby reducing bureaucratic discretion. More recently, the Chief Secretary of the State, the highest-ranking bureaucrat, sought the Center's support in doing more to fight corruption.[18]

As news about IPAB spread, the site captured international attention and acclaim. The website was featured as a success story in major news media, including the *New York Times*, *The Economist*, *BCC News*, and the Anti-Corruption Research Network (a global online platform on corruption research). The Harvard Business School featured IPAB as a case study in its instructional series.[19] The founders saw "international franchising" as a way of sustaining IPAB and extending its influence globally.[20] Versions of the website have diffused to seventeen other countries, including Bhutan, Pakistan, and Kenya.[21] In June 2011, IPAB was brought to the attention of Chinese netizens.

The Birth and Death of IPAB in China

IPAB was first introduced to China by a press report. Immediately following the report, netizens responded with a frenzy of interest and hope for change. A wave of spin-offs

followed. Yet, by the end of the summer, the wave extinguished. Though the entire process lasted only a summer, it can be divided into five stages:

1. Initial wave of emergence
2. Proliferation and surging popularity
3. First wave of shutdown
4. Approval and re-launch
5. Second wave of shutdown

Based on a collection of media reports, I trace each of these stages, focusing on the life cycle of one of four sites that had gained official, albeit short-lived, registration approval: www.woxinghuile.com. One data caveat that needs to be acknowledged is that by the time this subject came to my attention, it was already at its terminal stage. All the sites had disappeared, so I do not have access to the original content of the sites. Thus, I draw on secondary reports and remnants from woxinghuile to trace the birth and death of I-paid-a-bribe in China.[22]

Initial Wave of Emergence   The first spark was lit on June 8. *Beijing News* ran a full-page feature on IPAB in India.[23] The article stoked popular interests by highlighting two points: that the website "projected people's power" and that the Transport Commissioner "became one of the most loyal fans" of the initiative. On the same day, the original article in *Beijing News* was reprinted in other news outlets. Within days, spin-off versions of the Indian prototype sprang up across cyberspace. Woxinghuile was created on June 9, only a day after the report on *Beijing News*. On June 12, Xinhua press ran a report on the emergence of a string of copycat sites and identified three major I-paid-a-bribe websites, including woxinghuile, woxinghuila, and wohuiluole.[24] Below are screenshots of India's I-paid-a-bribe and China's woxinghuile respectively.

Figure 1   I-Paid-a-Bribe in India versus China
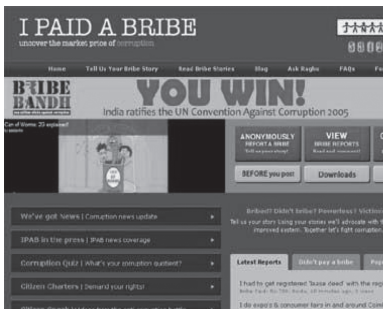
Screenshot of I-Paid-A-Bribe in India   Screenshot of *woxinghuile* in China

Proliferation and Surging Popularity   IPAB sites peaked during a two-week period from mid to late June. It remains unclear how many of these websites were created during that time. Some said twenty-five, others claimed as many as sixty. They were difficult to count and track because whereas there is only one website in India with a clearly-defined identity and format, spin-off websites in China took myriad forms. While some looked almost exactly like the Indian version, others bore little resemblance. Some sites merely added a section for posting bribe-giving stories on existing forums and platforms. Most IPAB websites found themselves unexpectedly popular. Woxinghuile reported that within days of operation, it had as many as 50,000 visitors a day, with over 8,000 posts.[25] The site's traffic was so overloaded that it broke down intermittently.

First Wave of Shutdowns   The first wave of crackdowns began in mid- to late June. On the fifth day of its operation, around mid-June, woxinghuile was abruptly shut down. To keep the site running, the webmaster shifted his server between Hong Kong and China and used a temporary IP address. When asked if he thought the government would shut down his site, the webmaster of woxinghuile expressed optimism. In a press interview on June 12 with Xinhua, he said: "I believe the government will support us. Anti-corruption is a need of the party and the people. If India's Transportation Minister can become a fan of I-paid-a-bribe, then why can't the Chinese people's fight against corruption thrive openly?"[26]

The webmaster's hopes turned out to be too optimistic. On June 20, in a press interview, the anti-corruption bureau and procuratorate chiefs in Beijing expressed concerns and disapproval, but not explicit prohibition, of IPAB sites.[27] They noted that these websites could invite false postings and defamation, and could also disrupt existing investigations on corruption if they alerted suspects to charges. Finally, they added that there were already official channels for sending tip-offs to the government. In the words of the officials, the online platforms were "not serious." During that period, the press media began to question if IPAB would last.[28] Reports appeared on various problems that emerged on the IPAB forums, such as false information and profiteering.

Approval and Relaunch   By late June, there was a surprising burst of renewed hope. The government, specifically the Ministry of Information & Communications, approved the registration of four IPAB websites, including woxinghuile. The webmaster expressed surprise at the approval. Yet, following state approval, popularity of the websites declined dramatically. On August 4, reporters who accessed one of the websites found that the maximum number of visits over three days, following approval, reached only 2,975 and had less than 5,000 postings, a far cry from the first week of operation.[29] By this time, the webmasters responded to state concerns by tweaking slogans to sound less confrontational and deleted "tip-offs" that identified individuals. However, users found it less thrilling and

useful to participate in these platforms than during the initial free-wheeling period. Even before the state's decision to close the sites, the IPAB fervor had already lost steam.

A Second and Final Wave of Shutdowns   By early August, for reasons not explained to the public, a second and final wave of shutdowns began. Registration approvals were abruptly revoked. On August 8, the webmaster of woxinghuile posted a message on his blog, saying that he would strive to maintain the site. He even offered to "donate" the site to the government in the hope of keeping it alive.[30] However, the next day, he was informed by the government that the site had lost its approval. Oddly enough, on the same day, *China Daily* ran an article titled "Bribery websites up and running."[31]

By the time I checked the sites in late August of 2011 and more recently, virtually all of the major reported sites no longer existed. The few remaining ones posted only news articles but not personal encounters, thus essentially abandoning the model of IPAB. After August, no more articles about IPAB appeared in the state media. The issue was entirely dropped from public discourse. In sum, within a period of two months, IPAB emerged with a bang and then went on a roller-coaster ride from huge popularity, state approval, and eventually to closure. Table 1 summarizes the brief life-cycle of Chinese-style IPAB.

Table 1   The Life and Death of "I-Paid-A-Bribe" (IPAB) Websites in China

Emergence	Mid-June 2011	IPAB websites emerged in China. News reports of the websites immediately followed, including official media like Xinhua and China Daily. Most of the websites were inspired by the Indian IPAB website. A few were pre-existing forums that added sections on bribery/corruption exposure.
Proliferation	Mid to late June 2011	Over 50 websites were reported to have followed, but most were small in scale and lesser known.
First Shutdown	Late June 2011	Most small forums were shut down. Four bigger ones that later gained official approvals survived but were unstable.
Approval	Late June to mid July 2011	First approval dates back to 6/24/11 and was granted to woxinghuile. Another three were subsequently granted official approval.
Decline	Mid July 2011 onwards	Websites that still survived saw a drastic decline of posts and visits. Majority of posts on websites still available were concentrated in mid-June.
Final Shutdown	Early Aug 2011	Official approvals were revoked without explicit reasons. Almost all websites are inaccessible both in and outside China. News articles about the websites also seemed to stop around this time. No new reports can be found after mid-August.
Shaky Comeback?	December 2011	Fanxinghui, which first emerged in mid June, was accessible intermittently around early December. Nonetheless, no new posts were found on the website after July. By mid-December, the website was closed down again.

Why IPAB Failed in China: A Map of My Approach

Narratives in the earlier sections illustrate that whereas IPAB originated and thrived in India, a bottom-up copycat effort in China fizzled out within months of emergence. In making sense of China's outcome, "success" in India and "failure" in China needs to be qualified. My outcome of interest is on the sustainability of IPAB. In addition to the fact that IPAB still exists in India, we see a constructive pattern of civic engagement between state and society. India's IPAB works with state authorities to channel crowd-sourcing inputs into process change, provides public education on resisting bribery, and has even become an international model for other countries. Failure in China manifests not only in the quick disappearance of IPAB sites, but also in the initiative's double failure to engage government or maintain public credibility and interests.

To be clear, then, "success" in India and "failure" in China should not be construed as meaning that IPAB eradicated bribery in India but failed to do so in China. On the whole, it appears that India has a more pervasive problem of petty bribery than China.[32] Although some recommendations by IPAB were successfully introduced in India, they have not—and should not realistically be expected to—eradicate corruption. There are numerous factors that go into explaining why petty bribery is hard to root out in India. My outcome of interest is not on differing levels of corruption in the two countries, which is outside the scope of this analysis.[33] Instead, I ask: given the same crowd-sourcing platform, how do we account for a much shorter length of survival and a qualitatively different pattern of participation in China, compared to India?
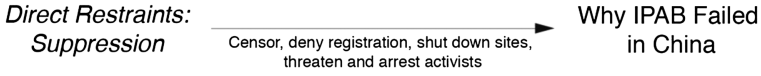
Figure 2 below maps out my explanatory approach in contrast to the conventional view. For many, the intuitive answer to the failure of IPAB in China is authoritarian intolerance of corruption reports and repression. However, my analysis will modify the conventional view in two respects. First, although Chinese authorities did in the end decided to close IPAB sites, their responses wavered and were fragmented in the weeks leading up to a final decision. Second, in addition to employing measures of direct suppression, I argue that authoritarian rule indirectly debilitates the organizational roots of online activism. Prolonged restrictions against autonomous NGOs and free association present the underlying conditions for organizational problems that emerged in the wave of IPAB sites (to be detailed in the next section). Resultantly, the initiative quickly lost public credibility and user enthusiasm, and authorities justified the need to step in as regulators. China's IPAB began to crumble even before the state officially denied registration to the sites.

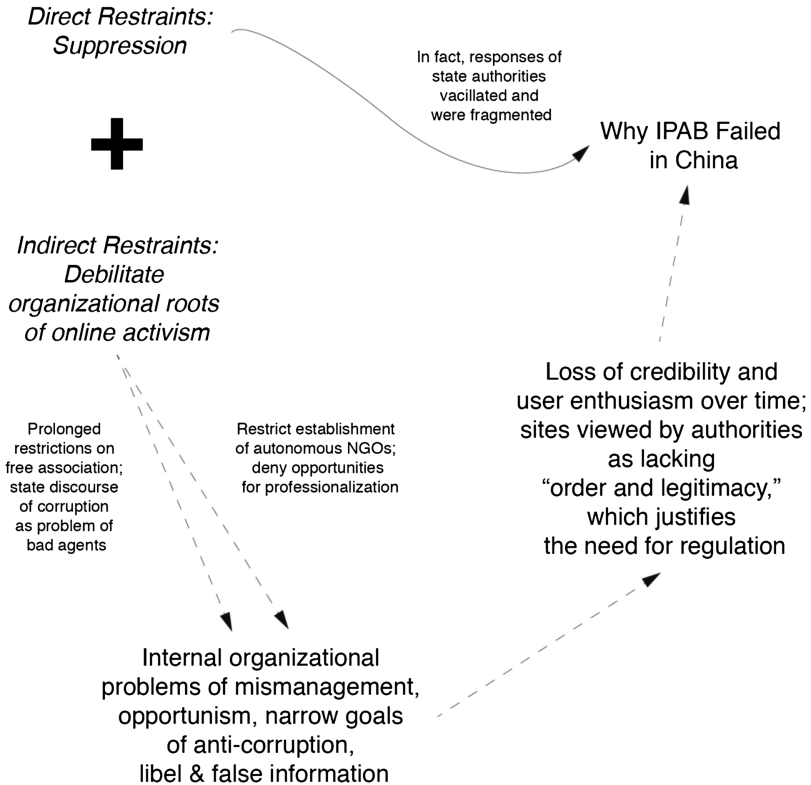## The State's Wavering Response toward IPAB

Not all authorities in China viewed IPAB as threatening. For central authorities, IPAB was a double-edged sword.[34] On the one hand, engaging citizens to report petty bribery can be a useful way to collect information and control low-level agents.[35] On the other hand, IPAB could amplify anger over corruption and undermine state legitimacy.

Figure 2 Conventional View vs. My Account of Why IPAB Failed in China

Conventional View: *Direct* Restraints

Direct Restraints:
Suppression

Censor, deny registration, shut down sites,
threaten and arrest activists

Why IPAB Failed
in China

Both *Direct* and *Indirect* Restraints

Direct Restraints:
Suppression

+

In fact, responses of
state authorities
vacillated and
were fragmented

Why IPAB Failed
in China

Indirect Restraints:
Debilitate
organizational roots
of online activism

Prolonged
restrictions on
free association;
state discourse
of corruption
as problem of
bad agents

Restrict establishment
of autonomous NGOs;
deny opportunities
for professionalization

Loss of credibility and
user enthusiasm over time;
sites viewed by authorities
as lacking
"order and legitimacy,"
which justifies
the need for regulation

Internal organizational
problems of mismanagement,
opportunism, narrow goals
of anti-corruption,
libel & false information

Additionally, state responses diverged at different levels and clusters of authority. Central officials appeared more supportive of IPAB, as postings were local and petty in nature and unlikely to reveal grand corruption at the highest level. He Quoqiang, Head of the Central Discipline Committee, spoke approvingly about the role of the internet in fighting corruption.[36] In March 2011, the Chief of the Central News and Publications Office and the Chief of Intellectual Property Rights Office expressed that the internet can be a positive platform for reflecting public opinion. However, local officials were likely to find IPAB sites threatening, as they could be personally implicated. In a Northeastern city, two IPAB sites that revealed corruption in the area where they were based were charged with "extortion" by local authorities, and the organizers were jailed.[37]

There also appeared to be divisions across central ministries, which could explain why four websites were approved in late June but revoked weeks later. Without access to central-level bureaucrats, who are very difficult, if not impossible, to interview on this subject, there are few clues about the internal bargaining and decision-making processes. However, we know that whereas the Ministry of Information & Communications revoked the license, the Central Discipline Committee, as quoted above, seemed more tolerant of IPAB portals. Furthermore, ministerial decisions and reports in the state media were sometimes inconsistent. For instance, on the day that woxinghuile lost its approval, *China Daily* reported that the websites were "up and running."

The process traced is consistent with the imagery of "fragmented authoritarianism." As Lieberthal pointed out, "Authority below the very peak of the Chinese political system is fragmented and disjointed."[38] Mertha adds that fragmented authoritarianism has been complicated in the recent decade by "an increasing number of non-traditional—and non-state—policy entrepreneurs," including, in this case, online activists and netizens.[39] Different levels and parts of the party-state engage civil society differently, depending on whether the work of the groups serves their needs and agendas.[40]

However, for the state, the decision to bar IPAB sites from registration does not mean the end of crowd-sourcing techniques in exposing corruption. In April 2013, central authorities announced the creation of "online informant" web-pages on major news sites that solicited tip-offs on corruption. It was said that these state-run platforms would "help people report corruption in an *orderly* and *legitimate* manner."[41] This is further evidence that Chinese authorities are not necessarily against having citizens snitch on corruption—the key is that they want these reports to be collected and processed *by* them, and not by independent non-government actors.

Internal Organizational Problems in China's IPAB

Having documented the state's fragmented and wavering response to IPAB, this section moves to examine the operation and use of IPAB in the online community. I will discuss five main organizational problems that emerged in China's IPAB, comparing each with the case of India. A side-by-side comparison usefully shows that

the operational structure of IPAB does vary across countries. To schematize, India's IPAB can be compared to a standing army and China's to guerilla fighters. Whereas NGOs in India can openly exist and direct civic efforts toward a constructive cause, online activists in China fight constantly in "guerilla warfare" to circumvent and dodge state controls.[42] However, as we will see, the dispersed structure and guerilla tactics that allow Chinese netizens to survive in a hostile authoritarian environment also make it difficult for them to self-govern effectively, professionalize, and engage the state on a long-term agenda.

Absence of Consolidation and Professional Management   IPAB in India is a single website established by an NGO, the Janaagraha Centre. The co-founders of the Janaagraha Centre are Ramesh and Swati Ramanathan. Both received graduate education in the United States. Ramesh Ramanathan received an MBA from Yale and was chosen as a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum, while Swati Ramanathan was elected as a Young Asian Leader by the Asia Society. Working with the founders are sixteen other managers and professional staff members.[43] The Janaagraha Centre can exist and thrive in India not only because India is a democracy that allows free association, but also because India has a highly educated group of young people, like the Ramanathans, willing to take on social causes.

In contrast, China could never tolerate an autonomous NGO with the stated mission of checking the government and recommending administrative reforms. In the absence of a lead organization, we see a variety of spin-off sites, none of which were professionally funded and managed. Many of the IPAB webmasters hid their identities and used online pseudonyms. The webmasters were not professionals but rather individuals who ran the sites out of personal interest and occasionally even for monetary gain. Keeping their identities secret was a necessary "guerilla" tactic used by webmasters to avoid state censorship and control. While the absence of a consolidated effort makes it difficult for censoring authorities to shut down all the sites, it was a precursor to down-stream organizational fissures.

Narrow Goals of Anti-Corruption as Punishing "Bad" Officials   In any associational effort, whether an NGO or an online platform, formulating and articulating the mission is central to the organization's value and success. In China, the absence of consolidated and professional management had a direct impact on the value of the reports collected and the type of online participation observed. IPAB in India, on the other hand, serves a clearly articulated goal of fighting corruption as a systemic, rather than individual, problem. As stated on the website, "Our intent is to change the system that breeds corruption, rather than indict the individuals within the system. Besides, you change the individuals, the threat of corruption remains. But change the system and you root out corruption permanently."[44]

It appears that webmasters in China either missed or misunderstood the core objective of India's IPAB to fight systemic corruption. Instead, their focus was on exposing and punishing "bad" officials. Organizers saw themselves as a platform

for tip-offs or even as an extension of state investigative authorities. One webmaster said he hoped his site could, "like India's IPAB, catch a few corrupt officials or at least place them on the alert."[45] Some webmasters turned IPAB into private investigation businesses. Others proposed to link their sites to the press media, so that exposés could be elevated to public attention and corrupt officials swiftly deposed.[46] None mentioned or noted the success of the Indian case in advocating concrete institutional changes like the ones earlier described, such as by changing the way land registration is done.

We also do not see a conscious effort at providing public education in China's IPAB sites. The Indian site works to inform the public about their rights to access public services without having to pay a bribe, track bribery patterns, warn about "bribe-prone zones," and spread requisite legal knowledge to understand rights and resist bribery. The objective of public education, which was central to the Indian site, was lost in China. In fact, the whole idea that non-governmental entities should and can educate the public is alien to Chinese society. Education, particularly in political matters pertaining to rights and the rule of law, can only be done by the state.

The apparent obsession with punishing bad officials reflects the larger political environment. In fighting corruption, the CCP has long relied on periodic campaigns to purge individuals.[47] During the most recent 18th Party Congress, the new leaders acknowledged that corruption is a serious problem, which led to a whirlwind of anti-corruption campaigns and arrests, proudly advertised in the press media.[48] The ruling party consciously avoids discussing the systematic causes of corruption,[49] however, as these discussions would ultimately point to the vast concentration of power in a single party as the primary cause. Given that the problem of corruption strikes at the heart of legitimacy in the CCP-controlled state, corruption is treated with far more trepidation by authorities in China than in India.

Postings Not Guided for Policy or Educational Purposes   India's IPAB was designed to collect data for public education and to inform policies. Thus, the site provides a template for citizens to report incidents of bribe giving, of resisting to give a bribe, and encounters with honest officials. Before writing and submitting their stories, users are asked to provide details regarding the bribe, including the city, the date, and the amount. Viewers can see a daily updated summary of citizens' reports by category (urban, rural, medical), city, department, and bribe amount.

Contrastingly, in China, there was little conscious effort to translate the reported stories into policy recommendations. Instead, there were sites of various shapes and formats. Even woxinghuile, one of the four major sites, did not provide a template for entries. This omission signals that the webmaster had no plan to collate the reports to track corruption patterns. The site simply provided a platform to tell stories. The Chinese sites, furthermore, did not provide expert or legal guidance on what constituted a bribe, unlike in the Indian case.

As a result, IPAB reports in China were a dizzying mess. Some were valid reports of bribery, but others reported acts that did not necessarily constitute bribery, such

as vote-buying in villages and parents pulling strings to help their children gain admission into top-ranked schools.[50] There were also self reports of bribe-taking, though their veracity is doubtful. Below are posts scavenged from woxinghuile, written in exaggerated and inflammatory language:[51]

> Village elections are so dark!!!!!! For example, during the last village election, in my hometown in Zhongshan city of Guangdong province, vote-buying was extremely serious. All the villages are like that. In some villages one vote costs a few thousand Yuan. Votes for a few hundred Yuan are common. Everyone knows this. Everyone is willing to take money and vote! Some even say with each round of elections, I can earn a few thousand Yuan!!! This is extremely common!

> For birth certificates, particularly birth certificates for a second child, [you have to pay] 800 to 3,000 Yuan. Why are the prices not the same? Because it depends on your relationship [with the authorities]. Depends on the targets of the cadres. Depends on whether you are desperate!!!!! They know how to manipulate the situation.

> I am the principal of a key-point public school in Suixi (of Anhui Province). Four years ago, I spent 100,000 Yuan to buy my current position—you have no evidence against me, so it's not against the law. After I bought my position, those who needed my favors had to pay me 3,000 to 5,000 Yuan each. Ha ha! I am the first pot of gold since I came to office. During the holidays, whoever fails to present me gifts will have to scram!

A Chinese webmaster conceded that he was disappointed by the content of the posts, as "most are just used to vent personal anger."[52] Indeed, the content of the posts reflects a social phenomenon in China known as "the mass mentality of hating officials" (*chouguan xintai*). With hatred as a key motivator for IPAB participation in China, there is little hope that the platform, even if it had not been shut down, could have delivered the process change and public education seen in India.

False Information, Libel, and Personal Revenge   False postings, libel, and personal vengeance were other pernicious problems in China. Without a guiding mission and template, it was not uncommon that Chinese users specified the actual location, person, and department of the bribe incident when reporting their encounters on IPAB.[53] In fact, from the little content salvaged from woxinghuile, I found entries that identified names, even cell phone numbers, from users angry at bribe-taking officials who failed to deliver promises.

> Between July and October 2010. Hunan Province, Changde City, Commerce Bureau. I bribed the station chief and vice-chief. Their surnames were Fu and Wen respectively. I am a university student who wanted to start my own business, but I didn't have a license for two months, so they gave me trouble and wanted to fine me 3000 Yuan. They threw out a bunch of big theories; what national law; what spirit of the document; what auditing. Then I gave them two packs of the best-quality cigarettes (300 Yuan each) and 500 Yuan in cash.

> In the Hongshan district of Wuhan City, Wang [first name] of the Real Estate Office took a pack of cigarettes from me, costing 400 Yuan. After he accepted the cigarettes, he did not deliver what he promised. I don't know if I can get this thing publicized. This bastard only knows how to talk and does nothing. Some netizens say I am a fake and that I gave too little. I only make 1,200 Yuan a month. 400 Yuan of cigarettes is a lot to me. I announce his cell phone number so you can call and verify his identity: [cell phone number].

In comparison, India's IPAB preempts the potential of false information and libel in several ways. From the beginning, the site made clear that its goal of collecting citizens' input was to combat systemic corruption and not to punish individuals. The Center installed software that automatically deletes the names of individuals. The site also hired a moderator whose job is to delete defamatory reports. Most importantly, although false postings could certainly happen in India, the anonymity of reports reduces incentives for falsification. As explained, "By not allowing names to be published, we have eliminated any incentive for any individual to make a false or malicious complaint. Since nobody will gain anything by reporting a false complaint on our site because we do not act on complaint, we expect the stories on the site to be true."[54]

Lack of Funding and Opportunism   Last but not least, one finds in China allegations of opportunism and even bribe-taking among IPAB organizers, which is connected to the lack of open and sustainable sources of funding. The Janaagraha Centre is funded by individual and institutional donors, including charitable foundations, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and companies like Dell and Google. The annual financial reports are posted online for public view. Financial transparency ensures sponsors of the proper use of funds, which contributes to the site's sustainability. In contrast, the spin-off sites in China were largely self-funded by individual webmasters, who lacked formal fund-raising strategies. One organizer claimed to have spent about 10,000 Yuan of his own funds to start a site. Wohuiluole, another major site, survived on cash donations from a group of thirty netizens. The webmaster expressed hope that the site could rely entirely on donations by netizens. Another webmaster hoped to receive financial support from foreign foundations. Facing financial pressures, online organizers were compelled to ask for posting fees or use netizens' reports to generate popularity for advertising revenue.[55]

Financially constrained or eager to profit, some webmasters in China attempted to generate revenue by offering to investigate and verify citizens' reports. The IPAB wave inspired the term "outsourcing tip-offs": i.e., netizens could "outsource" their "tip-offs" to webmasters by paying fees to have reports verified, elevated to public attention, and, finally, to have opponents or corrupt officials who fail to deliver promises arrested. One of them, named Lu, argued that if a webmaster or organizer undertook the task of checking reports for veracity, then it was only right for users to pay his salary and travel expenses. He said, "Although this is not legal, this is reasonable. After all, even though anti-corruption activists like us are righteous in our hearts, our stomachs protest!" Webmaster Lu added that he would charge no more than 3,000 Yuan

to investigate and verify each report. Another site, mingjizaixian, announced its fee-based services on the homepage: "You will have to pre-pay my travel expenses and stipend. Upon arrival at the investigation site, all expenses will be borne by the user [i.e. whoever posted a corruption story and sought to have it verified]."[56]

Even worse, there were allegations that some IPAB organizers extracted bribes to delete posts on bribe-giving. One webmaster lamented that there were "opportunists" among them who "hung the heads of lambs but sold dog meat."[57] Attempts to profit from IPAB or even extract bribes through the initiative are unthinkable in India, where associations are open, bound by norms and laws, and held publicly accountable. In fact, problems of and opportunism in China are not limited to IPAB or online organizers. Among journalists, allegations of corruption, bribes, and blackmail abound as well.[58]

Conclusion

By comparing state and social responses to IPAB in China and India, this study modifies two prevailing sets of knowledge about the limits of online activism—and more broadly, civil society—in authoritarian regimes. First, I shift attention away from the conventional focus of authoritarian restraints in the form of repression, cooptation, and inducement of self-control toward the indirect debilitation of civil society.[59] In the area of online activism, censorship and arrests are obvious restraints imposed by the state. Less obvious, however, are the extended effects of authoritarian rule in keeping NGOs from professionalizing and citizens from learning to self-govern. Some previous studies have documented the dysfunctional aspects of civil society in authoritarian settings.[60] However, I go further to stress that the challenges to self-organization and constructive civic engagement are exacerbated in online platforms. Although barriers to participation are lowered, there is less commitment among those who join, and anonymous participants are not able to police one another.[61] The result is a vicious cycle. The more an authoritarian state controls, the more civil society is incapacitated; and when collective civic efforts falter, state authorities are compelled to step in and exert more control.

Second, I caution against sanguine images of activists and netizens in authoritarian societies as crusaders against oppressive controls, images that assume liberal-democratic qualities among participants of online activism. Certainly, the Internet and social media have liberalized political discourse in China, allowing regular citizens to obtain information and to challenge the state more freely than through traditional forums;[62] however, if we peer deeper, we find a darker side to the world of netizens, including the presence of opportunistic individuals, intolerance of divergent opinions, and a deep social hatred for officialdom that is prone to radicalization.[63] One editorial insightfully notes:

> With the rapid uptake of social media, Mainland Chinese are becoming increasingly outspoken when it comes to politics, at least online. …Unfortunately … we have

witnessed a rising tide of radical political viewpoints, expressed often in little more than verbal abuse. These kinds of activists, when faced with a well-informed opponent, even resort to physical violence. … On the Internet, detractors of the government become "traitors" who should be "persecuted," while its supporters are mocked as "patriotraitors" or "running dogs of the government."… As each camp claims to be right, they refute the right of their opponents to exist.[64]

Admittedly, extremism may appear in any society, but in China, at least, narrow notions of corruption and vitriolic speech, as well as attempts to "purge" individuals via the Internet, uncannily reflect political moves and discourses practiced by the ruling elites.[65] Ironically, as much as they do criticize the government, Chinese netizens are deeply influenced by the political climate to which they are accustomed.

My study also informs a broader set of debates about the political effects of new media on mobilizing contention and enforcing bureaucratic accountability. Some argue that the spread of new media empowers collective action and may even trigger democratization in authoritarian regimes.[66] Events in the Arab Spring were cited as prime examples.[67] Yet, others are more skeptical.[68] I argue for a tempered view that takes into account the role of civic associations in channeling online activism and the sustainability of contentious agendas. Online political participation offers the advantages of accessibility and anonymity, producing a dynamic of contention different from face-to-face modes of contention between state and social actors.[69] In one prominent example, the "PX incident," residents of Kunming City used social media platforms and text messaging to organize protests against a refinery project. Sporadic successes like these project an image of new media's revolutionary power. New technologies of communication, however, do not replace or make obsolete the role of civic associations in directing social inputs toward constructive causes, as the organizational problems and swift demise of IPAB in China clearly show. My analysis further underscores the formidable organizational challenges that are faced when masses of anonymous netizens attempt to pursue a long-term agenda of institutional change.

Optimism that online activism can effectively keep corrupt officials in check needs to also be tempered. In recent years, there have been several prominent cases in which netizens succeeded in deposing corrupt officials by posting exposés on the Internet. The central disciplinary committee has also set up websites to elicit tip-offs from citizens. These incidents project the impression that netizens can constrain official power by means of whistle-blowing. However, the role of online activism in anti-corruption remains haphazard. Even with new media added, anti-corruption continues to be a game of whack-a-mole: after one "unlucky" official is exposed, another one soon takes his place. Exposés may successfully lead to arrests and the replacement of individual officials, but they cannot systematically motivate institutional or procedural changes.

Even more importantly, for online exposés to effectively check government abuses, clearly stipulated rules of bureaucratic accountability must be put into place (i.e. rules that stipulate what public officials can and cannot do). In China, these

rules are still not clearly articulated or enforced.[70] Officials often stumble over complicated and even conflicting goals imposed by higher levels of the government.[71] Furthermore, negative exposure on the Internet can get officials fired, whether or not they are proven guilty of crimes or dereliction of duty.[72] Thus, although the rise of online activism puts Chinese officials on the alert,[73] it may actually encourage a perverse form of accountability, where officials are punished for both correct and random reasons. Such a political environment creates tremendous uncertainty for bureaucratic operations and cripples governance at the grassroots level.[74]

While it is heartening that Chinese netizens are increasingly emboldened to expose corruption and challenge state discourse, the revolutionary potential of new media has to be viewed with healthy skepticism. New media may lower the barriers to political participation, but a weak civil society, with new media added, is still weak. New media may encourage whistle-blowing, but sporadic anti-corruption campaigns that ignore the root causes of systemic corruption, even with new media added, are still haphazard. Building civic empowerment requires more than kicking corrupt officials out of office. More fundamentally, it requires cultivating autonomous NGOs and civic values, freeing political debate from state censorship and vicious attacks from fellow citizens, and creating clear legal rules of bureaucratic accountability. Beneath the straitjacket of overt controls, these are the deeper challenges that call for serious attention.

NOTES

1. Larry Diamond, "Liberation Technology," *Journal of Democracy*, 21 (July 2010), 69–83; Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review*, 107 (May 2013), 326–43; Rebecca MacKinnon, "Flatter World and Thicker Walls? Blogs, Censorship and Civic Discourse in China," *Public Choice*, 134 (January 2008), 31–46; Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas, *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).

2. Guobin Yang employs the term "online activism" to describe the surge of "contentious activities associated with the use of the Internet and other new communication technologies." I follow his use of the term here (G. Yang, 3). For a review of the recent literature, see Henry Farrell, "The Consequences of the Internet for Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 15 (2012), 35–52.

3. The term netizens is literally translated as "citizens on the internet" (*wangmin*).

4. To view the site, visit www.ipaidabribe.com.

5. "Web Sites Shine Light on Petty Bribery Worldwide," *New York Times*, Mar. 6, 2012.

6. "New Generation of Internet Activists Targeted," *Amnesty International*, March 23, 2013.

7. Rebecca MacKinnon, "China's Networked Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy*, 22 (April 2011), 32–46, 33.

8. "India's Anti-Bribe Campaign Inspires Chinese Netizens," *First Post*, June 13, 2011.

9. *New York Times*, Mar. 6, 2012.

10. Andrew Mertha, "'Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0': Political Pluralization in the Chinese Policy Process," *The China Quarterly*, 200 (December 2009), 995–1012; Kenneth Lieberthal, "Introduction: the 'Fragmented Authoritarianism' Model and Its Limitations," in Kenneth Lieberthal and David Lampton, eds., *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Andrew Mertha, *China's Water Warriors: Citizen Action and Policy Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

11. The roles of NGOs in China are limited to providing welfare assistance and disaster relief. Mary Gallagher, "The Limits of Civil Society in a Late Leninist State," in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Jessica C. Teets, "Post-Earthquake Relief and Reconstruction Efforts: The Emergence of Civil Society in China?" *The China Quarterly*, 198 (June 2009), 330–47; Anthony J. Spires, "Contingent Symbiosis and Civil Society in an Authoritarian State: Understanding the Survival of China's Grassroots NGOs," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 117 (July 2011), 1–45.

12. Systemic causes of corruption include the monopoly of power and excessive state intervention in the market. Susan Rose-Ackerman, *Corruption and Government: Causes, Consequences, and Reform* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Melanie Manion, *Corruption by Design: Building Clean Government in Mainland China and Hong Kong* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Andrew Wedeman, *Double Paradox: Rapid Growth and Rising Corruption in China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

13. Morris Janowitz, "Observations on the Sociology of Citizenship: Obligations and Rights," *Social Forces*, 59 (September 1980), 1–24; Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1989); Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

14. Qiang Xiao, "The Battle for the Chinese Internet," *Journal of Democracy*, 22 (April 2011), 47–61.

15. See "About I-Paid-A-Bribe" on www.ipaidabribe.com, accessed on December 1, 2013.

16. The Janaagraha Centre, "I-paid-a-bribe.com: A Janaagraha Initiative—Report on the Transport Department." This report was mentioned in *New York Times*, Mar. 6, 2012.

17. See "About I-Paid-A-Bribe" on www.ipaidabribe.com, accessed on December 1, 2013.

18. Ibid.

19. Karthik Ramanna and Rachna Tahilyani, "I Paid a Bribe (Dot) Com," Harvard Business School Case 112–078, June 2012.

20. Ibid.

21. *New York Times*, Mar. 6, 2012.

22. Shortly before woxinghuile was entirely closed, we salvaged fifty posts from the website. All of these stories were posted on June 12, 2011 and accessed on August 26, 2011. It is not known why the stories were all posted on the same date in June.

23. "India's i-paid-a-bribe is popularized," *Beijing News*, June 8, 2011 (in Chinese).

24. "Three i-paid-a-bribe sites have appeared," *Xinhua Press*, June 12, 2011 (in Chinese).

25. *Nanfang Daily*, June 23, 2011.

26. *Xinhua Press*, June 12, 2011.

27. "Beijing Procuratorate claims that i-paid-a-bribe is not legal," *Caijing News*, June 21, 2011 (in Chinese).

28. "Why China's Anti-Corruption Sites Last?" *China Media Project*, June 16, 2011; "Will Anti-Bribe Sites Work in China?" *Global Times*, June 23, 2011.

29. "I-paid-a-bribe applies for registration, visits fall," *Xiaoxiang Morning News*, Aug., 4, 2011 (in Chinese).

30. "I-paid-a-bribe site asked to be donated to government," *Jinghua News*, Aug., 10, 2011 (in Chinese).

31. "Bribery Websites Up and Running," *China Daily*, Aug. 9, 2011.

32. India is ranked slightly more corrupt than China in the Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. In 2012, China was the 80th least corrupt country and India was ranked 94th. However, the CPI score should be read only as suggestive as it does not disaggregate types of corruption.

33. Yan Sun and Johnston Michael, "Does Democracy Check Corruption? Insights from China and India," *Comparative Politics*, 42 (October 2009), 1–19.

34. For a similar view on media liberalization as a double-edged sword, see Daniela Stockmann, *Media Commercialization and Authoritarian Rule in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 18.

35. On the creation of "input institutions" to solicit information from citizens, see Andrew Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy*, 14 (January 2003), 6–17.

36. *Nanfang Daily*, June 23, 2011.

37. Ibid.

38. Lieberthal, 8.

39. Mertha, 2009, 1012.

40. Spires.

41. "China opens online informant pages for corruption fight," CCTV News (English), Apr. 19, 2013. Emphasis in italics added.

42. Yang also described online activism in China as "online guerilla warfare," where netizens use guerilla tactics such as hidden digital transcripts. See G. Yang, 60–61.

43. See the official website of the the Janaagraha Centre, www.janaagraha.org, accessed on December 1, 2013.

44. See "About I-Paid-A-Bribe" on www.ipaidabribe.com, accessed on December 1, 2013.

45. *Xiaoxiang Morning News*, Aug. 4, 2011.

46. *Nanfang Daily*, June 23, 2011.

47. Manion; Andrew Wedeman, "Anticorruption Campaigns and the Intensification of Corruption in China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 14 (February 2005), 93–116.

48. "Anti-Graft Campaign Results in Progress," *China Daily*, Jan. 10, 2013.

49. A similar blame attribution strategy was seen during the disastrous Great Leap Forward (1958–1960) under Mao's reign. Jisheng Yang et al., *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine, 1958–1962*, 1st American ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

50. *Xiaoxiang Morning News*, Aug. 4, 2011.

51. These quotations were actual posts made by netizens in Chinese, which I translated into English. The original posts in Chinese are available from the author by request.

52. "Bribe-Reporting Websites in China Get Mixed Reviews." *Xinhua News*, June 19, 2011.

53. "I-Paid-a-Bribe Sites Die after 10 Days," *Jinyang Net*, June 24, 2011 (in Chinese).

54. See "About I-Paid-A-Bribe" on www.ipaidabribe.com, accessed on December 1, 2013.

55. *Nanfang Daily*, June 23, 2011.

56. Ibid.

57. *Nanfang Daily*, June 23, 2011.

58. Jonathan Hassid, "Four Models of the Fourth Estate: A Typology of Contemporary Chinese Journalists," *The China Quarterly*, 208 (December 2011), 813–32.

59. For a "corporatist" view of authoritarian constraints on civil society, see Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan," *Comparative Politics*, 33 (October 2000), 43–61.

60. Teresa Wright, *The Perils of Protest: State Repression and Student Activism in China and Taiwan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001); Marc Morjé Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in post-Communist Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

61. Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

62. Yongnian Zheng, *Technological Empowerment: The Internet, State, and Society in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Ya-Wen Lei, "The Political Consequences of the Rise of the Internet: Political Beliefs and Practices of Chinese Netizens," *Political Communication*, 28 (2011), 291–322.

63. James Leibold, "Blogging Alone: China, the Internet, and the Democratic Illusion?" *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 70 (November 2011), 1023–41.

64. "Put the Debate Back into Politics," *News China*, July 2013.

65. The Cultural Revolution comes to mind as an extreme illustration of radical political dynamics mirrored at the elite and societal levels.

66. Philip N. Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, *Liberation Technology: Social Media and the Struggle for Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

67. Zeynep Tufekci and Christopher Wilson, "Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations From Tahrir Square," *Journal of Communication*, 62 (April 2012), 363–79; Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain, "The Role of Digital Media," *Journal of Democracy*, 22 (July 2011), 35–48.

68. Marc Lynch, "After Egypt: The Limits and Promise of Online Challenges to the Authoritarian Arab State," *Perspectives on Politics*, 9 (June 2011), 301–10.

69. On face-to-face modes of contentious politics in China, see Elizabeth J. Perry, *Challenging the Mandate of Heaven: Social Protest and State Power in China* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2002);

Yongshun Cai, "Power Structure and Regime Resilience: Contentious Politics in China," *British Journal of Political Science*, 38 (July 2008), 411–32; Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

70. Nicholas Howson, "Enforcement Without Foundation? Insider Trading and China's Administrative Law Crisis," *American Journal of Comparative Law*, 60 (2012), 955–1002.

71. Mayling Birney, "Decentralization and Veiled Corruption under China's 'Rule of Mandates'," *World Development*, 53 (January 2014), 55–67; Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Selective Policy Implementation in Rural China," *Comparative Politics*, 31 (January 1999), 167–86.

72. As reported in the *China Daily*, "There is an online phrase—killed within a second—that describes those officials investigated and sacked shortly after being exposed of corruption." See *China Daily*, Jan., 10, 2013.

73. Greg Distelhorst, "Publicity-Driven Accountability in China: Qualitative and Experimental Evidence," MIT Political Science Department Research Paper Working Paper 2012–24, 2012.

74. Shukai Zhao, "Rural China: Poor Governance in Strong Development," Stanford University CDDRL Working Paper No. 134, 2013.