
Conclusion

AS WE HAVE SEEN, social and political contexts have largely shaped the effects of new information technologies in China. Public circular telegrams were highly influential in the last years of the Qing dynasty, and the impact of the Internet in contemporary China has been profound. Information technology does not in itself open up public space in society, however; people using the technology do. Technologies such as telegraphy and the Internet are thus neither inherently oppressive nor automatically emancipatory. Different parties can use them for very different ends. Those who make the facile assumption that a certain kind of information technology (i.e., the Internet) will change China in a certain direction (i.e., democracy) are victims of the fallacy of technological determinism, and many of the early enthusiasts of the Internet have abandoned their rosy expectations now that the reality has turned out to be more complex.

The main aim of this study has been to tackle the complex relationships between technology and society, between the applicability of new information technologies and their political outcomes in concrete Chinese historical contexts. The discussions of the previous chapters have shown that not only Chinese attitudes toward adopting telegraphy and the Internet but also foreign pressures on the Chinese to accept these technologies were historically conditioned, and the two cases are thus very different. Moreover, the historical context has also shaped the particular paradigm in terms of which many of us view information technology. In the late nineteenth century, few attempted to relate China's adaptation of telegraphy to political reform of the Qing empire. Today, however, many

take for granted that the Internet plays a clear-cut political role in the PRC, unconscious of the value-laden implications of this sweeping assumption. I hope that by historicizing and contextualizing the adoption of telegraphy and the Internet in China, I have presented a more nuanced picture that will serve as a basis for further discussion.

This volume is largely concerned with how telegraphy and the Internet have helped to make Chinese politics more public, but its focus is not on the technologies *per se* but on the contexts within which they have influenced politics. No one denies that new means of political participation have been made technologically available by these new information technologies, but the actual realization of their potential has depended more on what I call the “receiving context” of the technology’s introduction. This receiving context is the multilayered, constantly changing historical environment in which the technology is perceived, adopted, controlled, and applied. Clearly, the late Qing court faced a very different receiving context from the government of the PRC. Whereas the late Qing court resisted telegraphy for twenty years, fearing both loss of control to foreigners and damage to its interests, the current Chinese regime has actively promoted the adoption and development of Internet technology, hoping to take advantage of it to modernize the country. Different internal and international conditions explain these different attitudes. Whereas the weakened Qing dynasty sought to ward off foreign control, the more confident PRC regime has adopted a more proactive policy.

The receiving context not only affects how the technology is used but also how the information it conveys is interpreted. Social conditions lead to the technology being used in a certain way, and a hospitable receiving context then reinforces its wide usage. In the thirty-year history of telegraphy under the late Qing dynasty, it was not until the traumatic national crisis of China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War in 1894 that the circular telegram appeared. Even though the technology had been available for more than a decade, the concerned Chinese elite only finally adopted the circular telegram as a form of political participation when telegraphy and modern newspapers were harnessed in tandem.

The subsequent national crises from 1895 to 1911 provided numerous opportunities for the Chinese elite to express their political opinions through circular telegrams, and the proliferation of newspapers resulting from weakened Qing control made public telegrams more widely circulated and influential, encouraging their use on an even larger scale. With the adoption of the circular telegram, late Qing politics was forced to be-

come public to an unprecedented degree in the history of Chinese dynastic rule. After the turn of the twentieth century, when more and more organizations representing rising political forces in China became adept users of the circular telegram, the authority of this new genre of political text reached new heights. The status and power of their senders, their solemn textual style, and their vast reach when reprinted in newspapers were all factors that made the circular telegram acceptable to many Chinese.

It cannot be overemphasized that, among all the factors that made the circular telegram so popular, the most important one was the rise of modern Chinese nationalism. The rise of nationalism prompted the Chinese elite to recognize that the Qing empire was falling apart and even to believe that China and the Chinese “race” were facing the danger of extinction. With the advent of the New Policies, the Chinese elite was allowed more room to participate in discussions of national politics. This was the period in which public telegrams were sent in great numbers by various parties. The nationalist pursuit became the legitimate reason behind political participation and mobilization, and nationalist sentiment became the main appeal of public telegrams, enhancing the status of those who sent them and leading to their favorable reception. The desire to save China became a dominant sentiment, culminating in the Chinese elite’s attempt to pursue constitutionalism, which became the most important topic of public politics in the first years of the twentieth century. The sending of public telegrams and the drawing up of public petitions were the two most popular forms of political action. It was in this context that the public telegram found a highly receptive receiving context in the early twentieth century.

The circular telegram was only one factor that made the politics more public and transparent in the last decade of the Qing dynasty. Successive national crises, weakened dynastic rule, policy disagreements among the Qing rulers, expanded room for political participation, the rise of new social classes and organizations, the proliferation of modern newspapers, and innumerable salvific ideas and strategies all contributed to making the circular telegram not only possible but also an important and popular instrument of political participation and mobilization. In summary, it was the historical context of the late Qing that made the circular telegram an effective means of political participation. It was not the circulation of the circular telegram that propelled China to adopt constitutionalism, but vice versa—it was the need to publicize and broaden the reach of the idea

of constitutionalism that made sending circular telegrams an imperative political practice. In retrospect, the convergence between rising Chinese nationalism and the emerging consensus of constitutionalism was only an outcome of the working of various historical forces in Chinese politics and cannot be seen as inevitable, as demonstrated by the fact that the appeal of constitutionalism was soon replaced by zeal for revolution in 1911.

We can certainly learn from history—though when we examine the case of the Internet, we have to be careful not to overread its history. The fact that the telegraph provided a new means of political participation and eventually played an important role in political mobilization does not imply that the Internet would follow the same path, although there is considerable continuity between these two technologies. As we have seen, in less than a decade the development of the Internet enabled many Chinese to express their opinions online. This new technology seems to have more political potential than telegraphy, and the government has tried very hard to deal with it. Facing this uncharted water, the Chinese state has had to open up some online space to newly emerged netizens, while employing online tools to confront those who might use it for political purposes that go against its interests. In the meantime, Chinese intellectuals, marginalized *minjian* writers, and niche Internet surfers like the military fan groups have all made efforts to expand political participation, in which they have succeeded to a certain degree, especially in their own web sites and BBS forums. Yet so far, the Internet has not been as influential and effective in shaping the public sphere as the circular telegram was a century ago.

The reasons for this are complex and to be found in the receiving context that the Internet faces. At the state level, the Internet is facing a Chinese regime more confident and competent than the late Qing court, and the government has adopted a proactive policy attempting to take advantage of the technology, while avoiding its potential threat. Even after twenty years of reforms, the state still has an effective grasp on media and the press and does not tolerate organized political dissent, thus limiting the scope of political participation. Besides, the factors that enhanced the effectiveness and influences of the circular telegram, discussed at length in Chapter 5, hardly exist today. In terms of textual power, while public telegram texts were associated with the traditional genre of *xiwen*, many articles and messages put on the web sites and BBS forums are written impromptu and are often perceived as inferior to their print equivalents.

Worse still, the unprecedented freedom to express individual opinion online has not necessarily led individuals to engage “in rational and critical public discussions that formed the basis for a ‘public opinion,’” which Habermas describes as the essence of the public sphere. As some scholars have pointed out, many messages on BBS sites in China are the online equivalent of the “big character posters” of the Cultural Revolution.¹ The abundance of “junk” messages decreases the authority and credibility of a web site or a BBS forum, often discouraging people from participating in discussions there again.

The authority and credibility of public telegrams was enhanced by the fact that their senders were often not only of high status but both resourceful and influential, especially those newly emergent organizations. Anyone with access to a computer equipped with a modem can send out messages to anyone online anywhere, however, so the authority and credibility of online discussion varies greatly and is generally hard to predict. So far, almost all online political discussions have been conducted by individual participants. Even though by the end of 2001, there were more than 230,000 registered *minjian* (unofficial or private) organizations in China, few political discussions were carried out in the name of particular organizations.² While a lot of hope has been invested in the power for change supposedly possessed by the rising new classes in Chinese society, like entrepreneurs and white-collar workers, these groups and their representative organizations have been very quiet and generally shun national politics, in sharp contrast to the role played by chambers of commerce in the political mobilization of the late Qing era. This shows that the PRC has firmer control of societal forces than the Qing court did, and the lack of collective and organizational participation severely limits public online texts’ authority and credibility in times of political mobilization.

Perhaps the popular genre of the online open letter most closely resembles the public telegrams of the late Qing era. As its name indicates, the open letter is a public text aimed at the largest possible audience, and this genre of text has traditionally been used in China to appeal for justice or make one’s position known to the public. Strictly speaking, many circular telegrams can be seen as open letters sent by telegraph. As summarized by Wang Yi, Chinese intellectuals have a long tradition of using open letters to express political opinions in modern China, best exemplified by the petition led by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao in 1895. This genre was adopted in the 1980s by the dissident Fang Lizhi to write to

Deng Xiaoping asking for the release of all political prisoners. During the Tiananmen movement in 1989, intellectuals organized a number of mobilizations to sign public statements on the precarious situation. But owing to political pressure by the regime, the writing of open letters has not been practiced widely since 1989.

“The rapid development of the Internet, especially the online forums, has finally changed the situation [of not being able to issue open letters],” Wang Yi asserts. When the Strengthening-China Forum tightened its monitoring practices in 2000, open letters were sent to the SCF to register protest.³ The year 2001 witnessed two waves of collective signing and circulation of open letters on the Internet. The first was from conservatives within the Communist Party who signed open letters to question Jiang Zemin’s speech on July 1 proclaiming that the party would recruit private entrepreneurs as members. The subsequent investigation of these open letters led to the closing down of a number of BBS forums, as well as of a couple of conservative-leaning magazines. The other was an open letter to President Bush initiated by twenty-three Chinese intellectuals and subsequently signed by another 200, in which they expressed sympathy with the American people after the September 11 attacks. The letter ended with the sentence “tonight, we are Americans,” and its signers were subsequently ridiculed as “one-night Americans” by nationalist-leaning Chinese, resulting in heated exchanges. The direct consequences of these two rounds of open letters were the breaching of the old limits and expanding the room for political expression in cyberspace.⁴

Moving on to 2002, the open letter began to be used more frequently. Wang Yi lists five waves of public signing of open letters, including an open letter to oppose the overstrictly stipulated “Software Regulations,” open letters calling for reassessment of the Tiananmen crackdown, open letters to protest the issuance of “Provisional Regulations on Publication on the Internet,” an open letter appealing for a fair trial for a Tibetan lama, and finally open letters protesting the arrest of Liu Di, known in cyberspace as “Stainless Steel Mouse.”⁵ Another example of the collective online signing of open letters by Chinese intellectuals is the “Statement by Chinese of Various Circles” in February 2003 opposing the U.S. government’s plans for war against Iraq, initiated by Han Deqiang and other left-leaning scholars and signed by 400 Chinese worldwide. The statement was also made available to and broadcast on the Arabic-language Al Jazeera television network, which provoked another wave of heated debates between liberal and left-leaning intellectuals in China.⁶

A more recent development in employing the Internet to participate in national politics is the worldwide collective online signing of Chinese against Japan's efforts to gain a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, and the subsequent use of the Internet to organize anti-Japanese demonstrations in a dozen Chinese cities in spring 2005, which has attracted attention from Western media as well as China observers. The catalyst for anti-Japan sentiment is a newly approved textbook in Japan that distorts atrocities committed by the Japanese against the Chinese during the World War II. It is said that a total of 22 million signatures were collected in the worldwide online drive. During the process, newly available technologies, such as e-mail, BBS, Internet blog, text messages and instant online messaging, served as an organizing tool for protesters. In a significant development, some unofficial (*minjian*) anti-Japanese organizations became the main initiators of demonstration-organizing messages online and on the mobile phone.⁷

These developments certainly signal that Chinese are continually employing the Internet to expand their room for political expression, and it seems that the Internet is functioning rather like late Qing telegraphy. Nonetheless, one must be wary of overstretching the analogies between the technologies in order to show the similarity. As I cautioned before, the deciding factor is not the technology per se but the receiving context in which its potential is exploited. The receiving context of the Internet is very different from that of late Qing telegraphy in terms of the degree of state control, the authority and authenticity of texts, and the power and influence of their issuers.⁸ Not even the appearance of collectively signed online open letters has substantially changed this. Most of the public letters circulating online are signed by either political dissidents or marginalized intellectuals. The influence of these open letters is also very limited, because they are usually either circulated in limited circles, such as small numbers of nonconformist intellectuals, or are unable to attract a large following from the general public, as is the case with letters issued by "democracy advocates" or overseas Chinese dissident organizations.⁹

Why are the online open letters advocating democracy and freedom of the press not as well received as might be expected? Don't the Chinese desire freedom of expression, and isn't the Internet the right technology to enable them to obtain it? A better way to answer these questions is to pause and first look at the multiple points in the processes through which the technologies (telegraphy and the Internet) convey information. These processes consist of two parts: information issuance and information re-

ceiving. The first part involves the technology, whose existence is the precondition for information transfer, and the issuers, who often have to overcome political obstacles to transfer the desired information freely. The second part consists of the receivers of the information and their social context. Internet utopians often have too much confidence in the technology and the information it conveys, believing that these are likely to have a great impact on the receivers. This assumption is not necessarily wrong, but when it is viewed as only a one-way process, it becomes problematic. In fact, history shows that information receivers do not just receive information passively; they have always played an active role in selectively receiving and actively reinterpreting it, based on the general social context.

Reader-response criticism, a major school of twentieth-century literary theory, may be of some help here. Contrary to the long-held opinion that the value of a literary work is determined by its textual composition, reader-response criticism emphasizes the role readers play in deciding how a text is received and the value attached to it. And different readers may have different responses to the same text, depending on tastes and literary connoisseurship, which are conditioned by various factors at the time. The text alone cannot dictate the responses it will get from readers.¹⁰ From this perspective, those who believe that the availability of information can in itself change China in a certain way are overconfident about the power the information possesses. Just like the old conviction that a “good text” will make readers think it is a “good” text, these Internet enthusiasts believe that “free” information will make a society freer because the information receivers are believed to have no alternative but to be receptive to the “free” information.

Without taking account of the concrete receiving context the information faces, the above assumption is problematic for two reasons. First, it assumes that if certain kinds of information are made accessible to people, they will be influenced, affected, and changed in the precise way the information promotes. In today’s political context, the catchwords are “democracy” and “free market,” though it may have been something very different a hundred years ago. In fact, the criteria used to define “free” information (most of them of Western origin) are also ideologically specific and change as time passes. As demonstrated by Michael Adas, the West has adopted a number of different criteria to make the “Other” (races and civilizations) “inferior” by judging them by their mastery or otherwise of Western science and technologies.¹¹ Even though

those criteria were often taken for granted and enjoyed hegemonic status, they have not withstood the test of history and are now discarded as erroneous and racist. The dominant contemporary discourse of liberal democracy and the free market seems to have enjoyed a similar hegemonic status, yet it is too early to believe that this is the “end of history.” The superiority of “free” information thus needs to be scrutinized historically.

Secondly, the available information can be reinterpreted in a radically different way from the expectations of “free” information advocates. As discussed in the last chapter, the position of Chinese nationalists online is not explained by theorizing that they have been misled by the Chinese state and consequently do not “get it right.” Rather, they are in fact well informed through the Internet and other media, but are responding in ways that are not congruent with the expected changes the information is supposed to exert upon its receivers, that is, by becoming pro-democratic opponents of the current regime. The reason is that the Chinese have adopted a new system of interpretation that examines “free” information through the “interest-driven, game-playing” paradigm that has de-ideologized much of Chinese thinking in contemporary China. Under this paradigm, the tensions and discrepancy between what information issuers claim to be “true” and “objective” information and “real” and “positioned” information does not remain unnoticed by the information receivers. It would be a big mistake if attention were only paid to how information gets through, on the assumption that the available information will automatically and inevitably influence Chinese in the desired way.

There is no doubt that because of the Internet and the availability of other media, many Chinese are able to access an unprecedented amount of information today compared to a century ago. Yet this new development may not necessarily make the Internet a more effective means than the telegraph of making politics public. At least, this has not so far been the case. I argue that, though technologies provide opportunities for the making of a public sphere in China, this sphere’s actual realization depends more on human actions and strategies by both the state and societal players. Misuse and abuse of technology on both sides could impede the emergence of an embryonic public sphere that otherwise holds great promise for the future.

It is thus important to keep in mind that the ideal public sphere described by Habermas does not exist in China. What I call a public e-sphere is still in the process of being created, and, when realized, it may

bear unique Chinese characteristics and differ from other public spheres. Both the state and the societal players on the Internet are exploring various ways to push the newly opened public space in the direction they want it to go. The ideal scenario for the formation of a public e-sphere is no government control, free participation by self-disciplined discussants, and the formation of sites with well-established authority and credibility. Under the current political situation however, this scenario is far from the present realities of China, and it may never exist.

The influx of Western ideas, the rise of nationalism, and the adherence of the Chinese elite to constitutionalism in the last years of the late Qing era were results of complex interactions between domestic and international politics. Public telegrams met the needs of a dramatically changing society because the receiving context was extremely receptive to telegraphic texts. That historical context is gone and cannot be revived, however, and only political fortune-tellers can claim that the Internet will function to promote democracy the way public telegrams served to promote constitutionalism. The Internet will certainly continue to be used by Chinese to expand the space for political participation, but what kind of politics will be their central focus in the coming years, whether it is liberal democracy, nationalism, or something else, only history will be able to tell.