Information Technology and the Future of the Chinese State: How the Internet Shapes State-Society Relations in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Bis Ende 2015 werden 50 Prozent aller Chinesen über einen Internetzugang verfügen. Die Möglichkeiten für eine größer werdende Anzahl von Chinesen, online zu kommunizieren und zu konsumieren, hat eine Reihe von Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftlern dazu inspiriert, sich mit Themen wie Zensur, Überwachung und Nutzung von sozialen Medien zu beschäftigen. Ein Großteil dieser Forschung baut auf der Prämisse einer antagonistischen Beziehung zwischen Staat und Gesellschaft auf. Allerdings weiß man bisher nur wenig darüber, welche Auswirkungen die staatlich geförderten und internetbasierten Kommunikationskanäle zwischen Regierungsbeamten und chinesischen Bürgern auf die Transformation der autoritären Einparteienherrschaft in China haben. Der vorliegende Artikel beschäftigt sich mit dieser Frage, indem er Chinas E-Government-Strategie einerseits zu globalen Entwicklungen in Beziehung setzt, andererseits im Kontext der sich verändernden Anreize untersucht, die politische Reformen in China in den vergangenen zwei Jahrzehnten ermöglicht haben. Es wird gezeigt, dass die Bemühungen der chinesischen Einparteienregierung, die Interaktion zwischen Staat und Gesellschaft zu digitalisieren, großes Potenzial dafür birgt, das Wesen des chinesischen Staates zu verändern. Allerdings stellen diese Veränderungen keinen Paradigmenwechsel dahingehend dar, *wie* China regiert wird. Der wichtigste Aspekt dieser Veränderungen ist, dass sie die Möglichkeit bieten, das oftmals als „Diktatoren-Dilemma" bezeichnete Problem zu lösen: Menschen in nichtdemokratischen Regierungssystemen haben Angst davor, den Herrschenden gegenüber ihre Meinung auszudrücken, und entziehen so dem Staat eine wichtige Informationsgrundlage. Es wird gezeigt, dass die Entwicklung hochintegrierter E-Government-Plattformen, wie sie sich die Technokraten der Kommunistischen Partei Chinas vorstellen, bestehender institutioneller Logik folgt und dringende Probleme zu lösen vermag. So wird die Chance darauf erhöht, dass diese Plattformen nachhaltig eingeführt werden.

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1. Introduction

Few will doubt that the Internet is changing the future of authoritarian regimes, and China in particular. The question of how this change is taking place, and with what effects, is much more controversial. Are social media rendering dictatorships unstable because they induce and facilitate revolutions such as in the Arab Spring? Or are they instead contributing to the stability of authoritarian regimes because they facilitate the emergence of an Orwellian surveillance and propaganda state? Although being diametrically opposed with respect to the assumed effect of the Internet on the stability of authoritarian regimes, these theories share a common premise – that of an antagonistic relationship between those who govern and those who are governed. More specifically, both theories conceptualize the Internet as a weapon in the struggle between political elites and opponents for the future of the regime.

While acknowledging that the Internet can indeed have a decisive impact on the outcome of such a struggle, the present contribution sets out from a different premise: that Internet-based governance can decisively influence whether the relationship between rulers and ruled becomes antagonistic in the first place. The Chinese case illustrates this well. Although ranked as one of the most unfree societies in the world, the Chinese government has speedily embraced the Internet to upgrade its governance apparatus. In seeming contrast to its low democracy score, the United Nations rate China's e-participation offers higher than those of the average European country.

What explains this apparent paradox? This article argues that the confluence of two challenges has benefited the integration of the Internet into China's governance apparatus. The first challenge was that avoiding the Internet would have come at prohibitive economic cost. If economic development was to continue, there was no way past the Internet. The second challenge was China's brittle governance apparatus at the time, which hindered economic development and was deemed unfit to meet the demands of an increasingly assertive population.

Instead of avoiding the Internet, an option chosen by only very few regimes, or yielding to the economic pressure while neglecting to simultaneously use the Internet to "upgrade" the regime, the ruling elites employed the Internet to facilitate both economic growth and better governance. In line with previous reform experience, the improvement of governance in the centre was accompanied by incentives to improve governance in China's cities and counties by means of local policy innovations, resulting in a patchwork of e-government initiatives by local governments.

2. Autocracy, Modernization and the Internet

The Arab spring has rekindled scholarly interest in the forces of political revolutions.[1] Given the prominent role of social media in the Arab Spring, the debate quickly centred on

1 There had been much interest in revolutions in the 1980s and 1990s, some major contributions being J. A. Gold-

the role of the Internet in the survival or demise of authoritarian regimes.[2] The debate is instructive for the parameters of regime survival after a regime crisis has already formed. However, there is a tendency to substitute this debate for the much larger question of how the Internet affects the operation, legitimacy and survival of authoritarian regimes in general. This would be sensible if crisis was an inherent characteristic of authoritarian regimes, but there is little evidence to suggest that this is indeed the case. It follows that current autocracy research risks committing a major fallacy: to restrict the analysis of the Internet's impact on state-society relations in authoritarian regimes to times of crisis while claiming that the results are applicable to all authoritarian regimes. at all times More importantly, the debate misses that the Internet is more than just a weapon in the fight between authoritarian rulers and the opposition. As the example of China will show, the Internet has the potential to change the operation of authoritarian regimes in fundamental ways.

The present section dissects the theoretical fallacy that much research on the Internet in authoritarian regimes succumbs to: it implicitly or explicitly subscribes to the main premises of those democratization theories that are informed by modernization theory, which is compelling and supported by much evidence, but which was formulated at a

stone, Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World, Berkeley 1991; Goldstone, Theories of Revolution: The Third Generation, in: World Politics 32 (1980) 3, pp. 425–453; T. Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China, Cambridge 1979; C. Tilly, European Revolutions: 1492–1992 (Making of Europe), Hoboken 1996. For an overview of the extensive literature, see Goldstone, Revolutions: A Very Short Introduction, New York 2014.

2 See for example M. Alexander, The Internet and Democratization: The Development of Russian Internet Policy, in: population 8 (2004) 6, p. 4; I. Allagui and J. Kuebler, The Arab Spring and the Role of ICTs- Editorial Introduction, in: International Journal of Communication 5 (2011): p. 8; L. Anderson, Demystifying the Arab Spring, in: Foreign Affairs 90 (2011) 3, pp. 2–7; D. Calingaert, Authoritarianism vs. the Internet, in: Policy Review 160 (2010) 63, pp. 63–75; M. Chowdhury, The Role of the Internet in Burma's Saffron Revolution, Berkman Center Research Publication (2008) 2008–8; H. Dabashi, The Arab Spring: Delayed Defiance and the End of Postcolonialism, London 2012; N. Eltantawy and J. B. Wiest, The Arab Spring: Social Media in the Egyptian Revolution: Reconsidering Recourse Mobilization Theory, in: International Journal of Communication 5 (2011): p. 18; P. Ferdinand, The Internet, Democracy and Democratization, in: Democratization 7 (2000) 1: pp. 1–17; P. N. Howard et al., Opening Closed Regimes: What was the Role of Social Media during the Arab Spring? (2011), http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2595096 (accessed 12 October 2015); C. Huang, Facebook and Twitter Key to Arab Spring Uprisings: Report, in: The National (2011) 6; G. Joffé, The Arab Spring in North Africa: Origins and Prospects, in: The Journal of North African Studies 16 (2011) 4, pp. 507–532; S. Kalathil and T. C. Boas, The Internet and State Control in Authoritarian Regimes: China, Cuba and the Counterrevolution, in: First Monday 6 (2001) 8, http://firstmonday.org/article/view/876/785 (accessed 12 October 2015); Kalathil and Boas, Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule, Washington 2010; H. H. Khondker, Role of the New Media in the Arab Spring, in: Globalizations 8 (2011) 5, pp. 675–679; G. Lotan et al., The Revolutions Were Tweeted: Information Flows during the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions, in: International Journal of Communication 5 (2011), p. 31; S. Madon, The Internet and Socio-Economic Development: Exploring the Interaction, in: Information Technology and People 13 (2000) 2, pp. 85–101; D. Ott and M. Rosser, The Electronic Republic? The Role of the Internet in Promoting Democracy in Africa, in: Democratization 7 (2000) 1, pp. 137–156; X. Qiang, The Battle for the Chinese Internet, in: Journal of Democracy 22(2011) 2, pp. 47–61; B. Rahimi, Cyberdissent: The Internet in Revolutionary Iran, in: Middle East 7 (2003) 3, p. 102; G. Rodan, The Internet and Political Control in Singapore, in: Political Science Quarterly 113 (1998) 1, pp. 63–89; E. Stepanova, The Role of Information Communication Technologies in the "Arab Spring", in: Ponars Eurasia 15 (2011), pp. 1–6; G. Wolfsfeld, E. Segev and T. Sheafer, Social Media and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First, in: The International Journal of Press/Politics 18 (2013) 2, pp. 115–137.

time when the Internet did not yet exist. The modernization-democratization theory holds that state-society relations in authoritarian regimes will inevitably become antagonistic, because such regimes are unfit to aggregate and meet the demands of an increasingly heterogeneous and wealthy population.[3]

Although much energy has been devoted to modelling and analysing how the Internet affects the resulting struggle for freedom, so far only little energy has been devoted to examining the impact of the Internet on the very premises on which this theory rests. The Chinese case illustrates that the Internet vastly increases the capacity of authoritarian regimes to aggregate and address popular demands. Furthermore, situating China in the global context reveals that while China might be a pioneer in how the government employs the Internet to enhance regime performance, its methods are easily replicable in other (authoritarian) states.

There are two main theoretical positions on the Internet's impact on the persistence of authoritarian regimes. On one end of the spectrum are accounts which claim that social media function as "liberation technology," a term coined by democratization scholar Larry Diamond.[4] The pessimist position of Evgeny Morozov is representative for the other end of the spectrum. In his contribution, Morozov highlights how authoritarian rulers employ information and communication technology (ICT) to monitor and manipulate their subjects.[5] The differences of the two positions notwithstanding, they share a common premise: both set out from the assumption of an antagonistic relationship between the population and authoritarian rulers. Optimists provide credible accounts of individuals using social media to oppose authoritarian regimes,[6] and pessimists show how authoritarian rulers use the Internet to control a population that would oppose the regime if not monitored or indoctrinated.[7]

In doing so, both positions explicitly or implicitly subscribe to the tenets of modernization theory by assuming that in an authoritarian regime, the relationship between rulers and ruled is determined to become antagonistic. Modernization theory, arguably the most influential theory to explain democratization, has so far been remarkably accurate in its predictions.[8] It holds that democratization becomes more likely the richer and

3 S. M. Lipset, Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy, in: American Political Science Review 53 (1959) 1, pp. 69–105 is the classic on the subject.

4 L. Diamond, Liberation Technology, in: Journal of Democracy 21 (2010) 3, pp. 69–83.

5 E. Morozov, The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World, London 2011.

6 See for example M. Castells, Communication, Power and Counter-Power in the Network Society, in: International Journal of Communication 1 (2007) 1, pp. 238–266; Castells, Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age, Hoboken 2013; C. Shirky, The Political Power of Social Media, in: Foreign Affairs 90 (2011) 1, pp. 28–41; D. Wheeler, Empowering Publics: Information Technology and Democratization in the Arab World-Lessons from Internet Café's and Beyond, OII Research Report (2006) 11, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1308527 (accessed 12 October 2015).

7 For a book-length monograph, see S. Kalathil and T. C. Boas, Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule, Washington 2010. See E. G. Rød and N. B. Weidmann, Empowering Activists or Autocrats? The Internet in Authoritarian Regimes, in: Journal of Peace Research 52 (2015) 3, pp. 338–351 for a recent contribution that empirically tests both positions and finds more evidence for the pessimists' position.

8 R. Inglehart and C. Welzel, Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence, Cambridge 2005; A. Przeworski and F. Limongi, Modernization: Theories and Facts, in: World Politics 49

more diversified an autocracy is. It reasons that once peoples' basic needs such as food, clothing, a home and personal safety are met, they begin to embrace non-material values. Not having to struggle for survival, they start to value their personal freedom, the quality of their living environment, and stress the importance of justice and equality. As authoritarian rule is not compatible with these norms, modernization theory predicts that an increasing number of people will strive for democracy.[9] Naturally, this does not apply to all people in a society – as a general rule, self-fulfilment values are more prominent in people with a high level of education.[10]

When modernization theory became popular in the social sciences in the mid-twentieth century, the Internet did not yet exist. Still, modelling its role in the modernization process is fairly straightforward if it is not regarded as a democratizing force in its own right, but an accelerator of the process just outlined. First of all, the Internet makes it easier for people to learn about the conduct of their government and to compare it to other governments.[11] Second, grievances and calls for action can quickly and efficiently be communicated to a large audience.[12] Finally, social media can be employed to organize resistance without having to rely on risky personal meetings.[13]

Just as most existing research on the Internet's democratizing effect follows modernization theory, so do the claims that the Internet can stabilize authoritarian rule. Most importantly, they subscribe to the same premise that the relationship between rulers and ruled in an autocracy is bound to turn antagonistic. The claim that the Internet benefits authoritarian rulers is not derived by negating that premise, but by arguing that revolution can be deferred or prevented by manipulating the preference structure of the populace. These theories zoom in on two aspects: targeted censorship as a way to learn about people's grievances while preventing them from engaging in collective action, and changing people's preferences by means of political propaganda.[14] Summarizing the above, most existing theories on the Internet's impact on authoritarian rule comprehend the Internet as a weapon yielded by two sides in a fight for the future of a country, and are concerned with which side is more likely to prevail.[15]

In order to better understand how the Internet might prevent such antagonism from forming the processes that are believed to inevitably lead rulers and ruled towards conflict

(1997) 2, pp. 155–183. For a more critical analysis that nevertheless concedes economic growth to be a "necessary, but not sufficient" component of democratization, see Z. F. Arat, Democracy and Economic Development: Modernization Theory Revisited, in: Comparative Politics 21 (1988) 1, pp. 21–36; D. Acemoglu and J. Robinson, Why Nations Fail, New York 2012.

9 Lipset, Some Social Requisites of Democracy, pp. 69–105.

10 Inglehart and Welzel, Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy.

11 D. Wheeler, Empowering Publics.

12 H. Buchstein, Bytes that Bite: The Internet and Deliberative Democracy, in: Constellations 4 (1997) 2, pp. 248–263.

13 Castells, Networks of Outrage and Hope; M. Chowdhury, The Role of the Internet in Burma's Saffron Revolution, in: Berkman Center Research Publication (2008) 2008–8; Rahimi, Cyberdissent, p. 102.

14 Rød and Weidmann, Empowering Activists or Autocrats, pp. 338–351.

15 Xiao Qiang even uses the word "battle" in this context (X. Qiang, The Battle for the Chinese Internet, in: Journal of Democracy 22 (2011) 2, pp. 47–61).

need to be pinpointed. The democratization literature has identified two main dilemmas authoritarian rulers find very difficult to resolve. The "performance dilemma," formulated by Samuel Huntington in his seminal treatise on the forces behind the "Third Wave" of democratization that began with the "Carnation Revolution" in Portugal in 1974 and spread across Southern Europe, Latin America and Asia.[16] Huntington, who throughout his scholarly career argued that a political system needs to adapt to the level of development and social heterogeneity of a country,[17] convincingly shows in his book that antagonism between rulers and ruled is not an inherent characteristic of authoritarian regimes, but is forming gradually. In a nutshell, he holds that people are not averse to authoritarian rule as long as they see their personal lives improve. However, he also shows that once development stops, or reaches a certain level, people will begin to resent the truncation of civil and political liberties.[18]

Another dilemma was posited by Ronald Wintrobe,[19] who focuses his attention not on the effect of modernization and development of popular attitudes, but builds on the fact that authoritarian regimes, as Juan Linz has famously stated, tend to prevent challenges to their rule by demobilizing society and breeding political apathy. According to Wintrobe, however, authoritarian rulers need to know how much support they have in the population, and whom they need to co-opt by distributing economic rents.[20] However, people are hesitant to reveal their grievances for fear of repression. Being uninformed of people's grievances and demands, Wintrobe argues, leads authoritarian rulers to assume the worst – that people are scheming to overthrow or assassinate them. As a consequence, they increase repression, which eventually makes these concerns a self-fulfilling prophecy.[21]

The purpose of this article is not to deny the necessity of studying the Internet's impact on the outcomes of struggles between rulers and regime opponents, but to argue that more scholarly attention must be devoted to the Internet's impact on reducing the likelihood of such struggles to appear in the first place. It sets out from the notion that the antagonism between rulers and ruled does not exist by default, and claims that the Internet can aid rulers in preventing such antagonism from forming. The case of China, where the leadership was demonstrably aware of the challenges posed by speedy modernization to one-party rule and reacted accordingly, illustrates that the Internet can serve to enhance regime performance and public participation without, however, causing regime-threatening antagonism to increase.

Before examining the factors responsible for these developments, the next section will illustrate how an increasing number of localities in China use the Internet to enhance regime performance and co-opt potential opponents.

16 S. P. Huntington, The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century, Norman 1993.
17 Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies, New Haven 2006.
18 Huntington, The Third Wave.
19 R. Wintrobe, The Political Economy of Dictatorship, Cambridge 1998.
20 See also B. B. De Mesquita and A. Smith, The Logic of Political Survival, Cambridge 2005.
21 Wintrobe, The Political Economy of Dictatorship.

3. Online Participation in an Unfree Country

China is a suitable case to illustrate how the Internet has been employed to overcome the dilemmas discussed above. A brief comparison of two indicators supports this claim: according to all available democracy measures, China is one of the most unfree countries in the world.[22] In contrast, China's score in the United Nation's E-Participation Index (0.6471) is higher than the European average (0.5454). The E-Participation Index measures the opportunity to participate online in three dimensions: access to public information, signalling policy preferences, and designing public policies. China is strong in the first two dimensions.[23]

3.1. E-Services and E-Monitoring

Since the early 2000s, China's annual budget for e-government has risen 40 percent per year. In 2011 alone, the government invested roughly RMB 951 trillion (EUR 114 trillion) in the computerization of government.[24] As a result of these investments, Chinese governments at all levels have enhanced their online visibility: along with the rapid increase in the Internet access rate from 8.5 percent of the population in 2005 to likely more than 50 percent at the end of 2015[25] came an equally rapid increase in webpages registered under the Chinese government's "gov.cn" domain. Between 2005 and mid-2012, the number of government webpages rose more than five-fold from 11,052 to 55,207, and the number of official microblogs exploded from less than 1,000 in January 2011 to 258,737 in December 2013. Most are operated by local government departments at the county level and below, and nearly half belong to public security departments and officials.[26]

Besides establishing an online presence for party and government commissions and ministries at all administrative levels and providing information such as laws, regulations, policies, fiscal data, administrative structures, local industry, development plans, and the biographical data of leading officials, local governments experiment with web-based innovations in providing public services and "managing society."[27] On the local level,

22 Freedom House, Democratic Breakthroughs in the Balance, Freedom in the World 2013; Polity IV Project, Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800–2012, http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm (accessed 12 October 2015).

23 United Nations, United Nations E-Government Survey 2014 2 (2014).

24 H. Hongmei, Zhongguo Dianzi Zhengwu Shi Nian Huigu Yu Zhanwang (China's E-Government in the Last 10 Years: Review and Outlook), Conference Proceedings (2012), pp. 1–15.

25 China Internet Network Information Center, Zhongguo Hulianwanglu Fazhan Zhuangkuang Tongji Baogao (Statistical Report on China's Internet Development) (1998–2003).

26 People's Daily Online Public Opinion Survey Office, 2012 Nian Xinlang Zhengwu Weibo Baogao (2012 Report on Sina Government Microblogs) (2012); E-Government Research Center, 2013 Nian Zhongguo Zhengwu Weiboke Pinggu Baogao (Evaluation Report on Government Microblogs in China 2013) (2014).

27 State Council, Zhonggong Bangongting, Guowuyuan Guanyu Yinfa "2006–2020 Nian Xinxihua Fazhan Celüe" De Tongzhi (Notification by the General Office of the Chinese Communist Party and the General Office of the State Council Regarding the Distribution of the "Development Strategy for China's Informatization Between 2006 and 2020") (2006).

governments use the Internet in three main forms to improve governance: e-services, e-monitoring, and e-participation.

E-services display certain overlaps with the digitalization of bureaucratic processes discussed above, the main difference being that the latter refers to the digitalization of processes within the government, whereas e-services entail service-related communication between government agencies and citizens. E-services are mainly found in localities that have the financial resources necessary to set up electronic gateways through which citizens can conduct transactions with government agencies.[28] Examples include paying taxes, applying for a license, and submitting a tender for a government contract. These solutions are costly because they need to be integrated with other databases and require protection against data theft. They are employed mainly in places where three conditions are met: governments must be able to afford setting up e-services, there must be enough potential users to warrant the investment, and there must be an actual demand. This mainly applies to wealthy cities where government revenue is high, a sizable part of the population has Internet access, and people are busy enough that the time saved in not having to deal with the government in person is appreciated. The main target group for e-services is not ordinary citizens, but corporate users, and e-services are seen as benefiting economic growth.[29] With tax matters, business licences, and other interactions with the government conducted virtually, personal contacts between entrepreneurs and governments can be reduced to a necessary minimum. In addition, electronic transactions make corruption harder.

As for e-monitoring, the Bureau of Supervision and other internal accountability organizations now operate platforms that enable them to monitor the transactions between service providers and citizens in real time.[30] The software recognizes when a new transaction is being conducted and measures the time needed to complete it. Usually, transactions have to be completed within a pre-specified number of days. In practice, this works as follows: each transaction is marked with a traffic light colour. When it begins, green, yellow when the deadline is near, and red after it has passed. Should a deadline pass before the transaction is completed, the disciplinary authorities will contact the service providers to enquire why the transaction has not yet been completed. Further delays can result in a report to government leaders and eventually to the dismissal of the head of the service unit.[31] Very often, e-monitoring complements e-services. Together, they are designed to render government services more efficient, with the ultimate aim of cutting costs and at the same time enhancing customer satisfaction.[32]

28 C. Göbel and X. Chen, Accountable Autocrats? E-Government, Empowerment and Control in China, University of Vienna Working Paper (2014) 12.

29 Ibid.

30 J. Schlaeger, E-Monitoring in the Public Administration in China: An Exploratory Study, http://www.researchgate.net/publication/256061504_E- Monitoring_in_the_Public_Administration_in_China_An_Exploratory_Study (accessed 12 October 2015).

31 Göbel and Chen, Accountable Autocrats.

32 J. Wu and Z. Li (eds.), Dianzi Zhengwu Yu Fuwuxing Zhengfu Jianshe (E-Government and the Establishment of a Service-Oriented Government), Beijing 2011.

3.2. E-Participation

The third form by which Chinese authorities employ the Internet to enhance performance and increase satisfaction is e-participation. China's relatively high score in the E-Participation Index is justified by the fact that citizens can now file online complaints against politicians and service providers in many localities. Often, several complaint platforms coexist. First, the Bureaus of Letters and Visits, China's traditional agency for filing complaints against government misconduct, are establishing an online presence everywhere in China.[33] Second, disciplinary organizations like the local branches of the Disciplinary Commission, the Bureau of Supervision and the Mayor's Office are also setting up online complaint portals.[34] In order to ensure citizens that their complaints are being acted on, many of these agencies display both the anonymized complaint and the government's reply online. Such platforms are not isolated phenomena: nearly two thirds of all Chinese cities have at least one website where complaints and replies are displayed publicly.[35]

This distinguishes them from the online presence of the Bureaux of Letters and Complaints, where visitors can only access their own file. Hence, visitors to these websites can learn how certain complaints have been acted on in the past[36] and, if a grievance has indeed been solved, are encouraged to complain themselves.

A digitalized bureaucracy, e-services and e-monitoring mainly serve to enhance performance, which is important in its own right because it lends credibility to the government's promise that things will continue to improve. Arguably, opposition to the government is more likely when development stagnates than when the lives of more and more people improve. This is especially true for those people who might pose a real danger to the regime, i.e. those who are well-informed and capable and willing to engage in political action.[37]

E-participation not only helps to aggregate the grievances and preferences of people belonging to this group of citizens, but provides them with an opportunity to realize their ambition to participate. Perhaps e-participation holds the greatest promise for authoritarian rulers who wish to co-opt potential regime opponents. E-participation promises mutual gains and will not function if those who participate oppose the regime. It requires a modicum of trust by those who participate, and the government's willingness to respond to complaints. Both sides gain from the relationship established by e-participation, albeit in a different way.

The authorities who operate the platform receive detailed information on the performance of the (local) state, which enables them to identify bottlenecks in service provi-

33 Interview with leading official of the National Bureau of Letters and Complaints, Beijing, July 2014.
34 Göbel and Chen, Accountable Autocrats.
35 Author's analysis, December 2015.
36 C. Göbel, Co-Producing Authoritarian Resilience: Online Participation and Regime Responsiveness in China, Working Paper (2015) 1.
37 L. Li and K. J. O'Brien, Protest Leadership in Rural China, in: The China Quarterly 193 (2008), pp. 1–23.

sion. Descriptive statistics of the most frequent words in one platform that holds more than half a million complaints provide a first indication of the range of topics addressed in such portals. The author has downloaded all complaints and conducted a simple count of all words in all complaints.[38] Knowing people's grievances is an important precondition for designing measures to improve government performance. People complain about a number of issues, including complaints against dysfunctional welfare systems, noise disturbances, and air pollution, an employer's violation of labour contracts, land grabs, police brutality, petty corruption, or inefficient police work.

Those in the population who are affected by a particular problem also benefit from its resolution. These benefits can apply to a sizable share of the population if grievances are related to issues such as social welfare, but they can also be confined to a small group of people, for example when the government addresses complaints about night-time construction in a certain neighbourhood. They can impact social groups such as workers or peasants, or the citizenry at large.[39]

E-participation has another important effect, one that only applies to those who file a complaint. As noted above, in many places, the official reply is published along with the original complaint. In localities where this is not the case, complainants will also frequently receive a reply to their submission. This means that where a reply is given, the complainant is in direct communication with the government and will receive an explanation of how the government proposes to address a grievance, and why. In this way, e-participation serves as an instrument of accountability where government officials explain themselves to individual citizens.

In this context, the concept of political efficacy is of some relevance. Efficacy is defined as the ability to produce a desired result, and scholars distinguish between internal and external efficacy. Internal efficacy refers to the belief that one is capable of producing actions that have a political impact. In contrast, external efficacy refers to the belief that the government will be responsive to one's inputs.[40] It is reasonable to assume that there is an inherent tension between these two aspects of efficacy. If an individual believes that she is capable of participating in politics, but at the same time perceives the government as unresponsive, then that person might become alienated from the regime. The ability to co-opt people with a high level of internal efficacy, i.e. those who are most likely to oppose the ruling elites if they become alienated, is likely to be the single most important game-changing aspect of e-participation. In simple terms, e-participation might be able to turn potential opponents into supporters of the regime. Contrariwise, if the grievances of those who participate online are ignored, e-participation can turn potential supporters into opponents of the regime. Hence, it would be unwise to heavily censor or be unresponsive to such submissions.

38 Due to technical reasons, the terms cannot be visualized here. For a more detailed analysis, see Göbel, Co-Producing Authoritarian Resilience and the author's website at www.christiangoebel.net.

39 Ibid.

40 S. C. Craig and M. A. Maggiotto, Measuring Political Efficacy, in: Political Methodology 8 (1982) 3, pp. 85–109.

Having established that the Chinese government employs the Internet not only to enhance the regime's economic performance, but also to increase responsiveness to popular demands and co-opt citizens with high internal efficacy, the analysis now turns to the factors that benefited these developments. In doing so, it will not only examine domestic, but also international factors.

4. The Irresistible Pressure to Go Online

While existing scholarship of the spread of the Internet in China mainly examines domestic factors, this contribution argues that a convincing explanation of the Chinese government's readiness to adopt the Internet must also account for global factors. As the following section will illustrate, the quick proliferation of the Internet in China is by no means unique, but is in line with a global trend. This suggests that non-domestic forces have an important effect on the Internet policy of China and, indeed, most other countries. It will become clear that countries have no choice but to adopt the Internet, and China's domestic Internet policy represents a reaction to this compelling external pressure. Hence, China's Internet policy must be understood not as the embodiment of a vision of far-sighted leaders, but as an answer to a challenge produced by the forces of globalization. Before accounting for the Chinese government's answer to this challenge, the challenge itself requires some explanation. The explanation starts with a seemingly innocuous question: if the Internet is indeed detrimental to authoritarian rule, why do autocrats adopt it nevertheless?

4.1. Economic Development and the Internet

The most plausible answer is economic necessity: the Internet has become embedded so deeply into the world economy that the refusal to participate would be tantamount to isolating oneself from international trade, with potentially disastrous consequences for that country's economic development.[41] However, it will be shown that contingency also matters: the case of China illustrates that the confluence of external pressure and internal demand created a window of opportunity. Arguably, the spread of the Internet just at a time when the necessity arose to upgrade China's telecommunication infrastructure promised more benefits than risks. China's leaders made the most out of this opportunity, none the least because they had drawn important lessons from the collapse of the Soviet Union. A simple regression confirms that Internet access and economic development go hand in hand, and that China's Internet penetration rate is by no means exceptional. First of all, per capita gross domestic product (GDP) and the percentage of people in a population who have access to the Internet correlate highly: Pearson's correlation coeffi-

41 M. D. Chinn and R. W. Fairlie, The Determinants of the Global Digital Divide: A Cross-Country Analysis of Computer and Internet Penetration, in: Oxford Economic Papers 59 (2006) 1, pp. 16–44.

cient for the relationship between these values for all countries is 0.849, which is extremely high – a Pearson's r of one would denote a perfect fit between the two values.[42]
Put more succinctly, this means that isolating oneself from the Internet inevitably comes at the cost of a low level of economic development. Without exception, economic strength increases with Internet penetration. While this finding seems trivial – indeed, the apparent triviality might be a reason for the lack of scholarly engagement with the question of why regimes decide to adopt the Internet – it really is not. First, it invites the question of the direction of causality, i.e. if the Internet facilitates growth, if growth facilitates the spread of the Internet, or if the relationship is co-dependent. Second, a closer look at the scatterplot[43] reveals that most countries at the high end of the spectrum are the industrialized democracies of Europe and North America, closely followed by the so-called third wave democracies, countries that became democratic after 1970. The association between regime type and Internet penetration (and GDP) vanishes for countries with Internet penetration rates between 30 and 70 percent, but reappears at the lower end of the spectrum. Here, most countries combine authoritarianism, low development and low Internet penetration.

4.2. Contagion and Contingency

Apparently, the relationship between Internet penetration and economic growth is more complex than the scatterplot suggests. One plausible explanation for the fact that we find early developers in the top end of the spectrum, catch-up developers in the middle and least developed countries at the low end is that contingency matters. The literature on technological innovation is instructive here: users of new technologies are classified into lead users, early adopters and routine users.[44] Lead users are willing to pay a high price for a new product, early adopters follow suit as the market grows and the product becomes more affordable and technically mature. Once a product is standardized, its use becomes routine – the market now includes large segments of the population. In the case of the Internet, adoption at this stage is no longer a choice, but a necessity – the more the number of countries and, indeed, citizens who use the Internet increases, the more compelling it becomes to follow the trend.[45]
For the countries in the calculation above, the observations above translate into the following logic: when the Internet became available for commercial use in 1995, the industrial democracies were the natural early adopters. First, they had the necessary infrastructure to facilitate popular access to the Internet. With broadband and wireless access not

42 Own calculations based on values for the year 2013. The values are taken from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators).
43 For technical reasons, the scatterplot cannot be reproduced here, but is available from the author upon request.
44 G. Moore, Crossing the Chasm: Marketing and Selling Products to Mainstream Customers, New York 2002.
45 Chinn and Fairlie, The Determinants of the Global Digital Divide, pp. 16–44; S. Madon, The Internet and Socio-Economic Development: Exploring the Interaction, in: Information Technology and People 13 (2000) 2, pp. 85–101.

yet available or restricted to institutional or commercial users, private citizens had to have a telephone connection in order to be able to access the Internet. Most citizens in the industrialized European and North American democracies had a telephone, but the same was not necessarily true for those countries classified by the World Bank as lower middle income and below. Second, the advanced economies were advanced enough to realize the commercial potential of the Internet, which also facilitated its adoption by private users. Not only did the promise of new markets create political pressure to improve the communication infrastructure and make it affordable, but also did new and exciting products convince people to pay for Internet access.[46] Third, the general level of education was high enough that a popular demand for these advanced technologies could develop.[47]

The lead users and early adopters chose to integrate the Internet into their economies and societies and thereby created a momentum that made its adoption more and more pressing for the catch-up developers. Internet-based technologies slowly became the standard of communication in and between developed countries, and developing countries had to follow suit to avoid being left behind.[48] However, for many countries in the low middle income range, adopting the Internet was not only a necessity, but also presented great opportunities. China is a good example of a country where the pressure to enhance Internet access coincided with an increasing affordability of these technologies and a stage of development where the adoption of the Internet promised both economic and political returns.

4.3. Technological Leap-Frogging

In 1978, China was still an agrarian country: farming was the main occupation for more than 80 percent of the population. By the mid-2000s, this percentage dropped below the 50-percent mark. At the same time, the contribution of the service sector to China's GDP nearly doubled from 24 to 40 percent.[49] In what in hindsight seems like a coincidence, China's economy and society became ready for the Internet just when the technologies needed to access the Internet, above all computers and wide bandwidth data transmission, were becoming affordable for private users.[50] On the one hand, this means that investments in the Internet infrastructure promised windfall profits for tele-

46 B. Rezabakhsh et al., Consumer Power: A Comparison of the Old Economy and the Internet Economy, in: Journal of Consumer Policy 29 (2006) 1, pp. 3–36.

47 Madon, The Internet and Socio-Economic Development, pp. 85–101; T. Thompson, V. Lim and R. Lai, Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation in Internet Usage, in: Omega 21 (1999) 1, pp. 25–37.

48 C. J. Tolbert and K. Mossberger, New Inequality Frontier: Broadband Internet Access, Economic Policy Institute Working Paper (2006) 275.

49 National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), China Statistical Yearbook (2012).

50 On the impact of broadband on economic development, see Tolbert and Mossberger, New Inequality Frontier; C. Z. Qiang, C. M. Rossotto and K. Kimura, Economic Impacts of Broadband ; C. Z. Qiang, Broadband Infrastructure Investment in Stimulus Packages: Relevance for Developing Countries, in: Info 12 (2010) 2, pp. 41–56; C. Z. Qiang, C. M. Rossotto and K. Kimura, Economic Impacts of Broadband, in: Information and Communications for Development 2009 (2009), pp. 35–50.

communication companies and other enterprises in the ICT sector.[51] On the other hand, this enabled the government to improve China's communication infrastructure right at the time when the growing industry and service sectors needed it.

The confluence of these two developments, the demand for an improved communication infrastructure and the availability of relatively cheap and fast Internet, allowed China to stop extending the network of telephone lines and instead upgrade to fibre broadband cables right away. "Leap-frogging"[52] over an old technology enabled China to catch up to the developed countries more quickly. For China, whose development strategy chiefly relied on foreign direct investments and the export of manufactured goods, not adopting the Internet was not an option. Similar to the development of the telecommunication market earlier,[53] economic necessity dictated the need to embrace the new technology. Political considerations played a role only in so far they concerned economic issues – arguably, the implications of improved and accelerated communication flows for China's political stability became a concern of the political elites only after these technologies had been adopted.

It is very likely that the situation is similar for the other countries in that income bracket, and that the developments of the last decade will continue into the future. If this is the case, then the Internet penetration rate of the late developers will gradually catch up with that of the early innovators, provided their economy continues to grow. At that time, the differences in Internet penetration between democracies and autocracies will have become moot. In other words, the fact that democracies seem to be more Internet friendly then autocracies is not rooted in the political, but the economic differences between the two regime types, which in turn can be explained by historical development trajectories. To put it more succinctly: nothing suggests that autocracies, important exceptions notwithstanding, are averse to embracing the Internet, and China is no exception.

5. China's Leaders Have Read Huntington

Although journalists and China scholars frequently emphasize how quickly the Internet has spread in China, there is nothing remarkable about China's Internet penetration rate. In terms of the percentage of the population that has access to the Internet, China is very similar to the other countries in its income bracket, no matter if these countries are democratic or not. The fact that GDP per capita and Internet penetration correlate so highly for nearly all countries in the world suggests that China follows a general trend.

51 Rezabakhsh et al., Consumer Power, pp. 3–36.

52 E. S. Brezis, P. R. Krugman and D. Tsiddon, Leapfrogging in International Competition: A Theory of Cycles in National Technological Leadership, in: The American Economic Review 83 (1993) 5, pp. 1211–1219.

53 A. P. Hardy, The Role of the Telephone in Economic Development, in: Telecommunications Policy 4 (1980) 4, pp. 278–286; E. Harwit, Spreading Telecommunications to Developing Areas in China: Telephones, the Internet and the Digital Divide, in: The China Quarterly 180 (2004), pp. 1010–1030; Harwit, China's Telecommunications Revolution, New York 2008.

Following this trend is less the result of the foresight of China's leaders, but of pure economic necessity. What is particular about the Chinese experience is how deeply Chinese leaders have embedded the Internet into their governance structures. For a country that, for good reasons, scores very low on all democracy indices, it is astonishing that so many localities are setting up websites that allow people to evaluate the quality of public service provision and to criticize local bureaucrats and politicians. Even more astounding is the fact that many of these complaints, along with the official replies, are made publicly available. Why do local governments use the Internet to improve their accountability even without being explicitly ordered by the central government to do so?

This contribution argues that a fortuitous confluence of China's level of development, the structure of its political system, and political learning are responsible for the proactive adoption of the Internet by local governments. The argument goes as follows: as China became more industrialized, urbanized, heterogeneous, and as incomes started to rise, it became increasingly difficult for leaders in the central government to design policies that met the demands of an increasingly heterogeneous society. Invoking scenarios reminiscent of those described by modernization theorists, the central government expressed their fear that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) became increasingly unable to govern China. Instead of ruling by imposing uniform development targets, the central government evolved the responsibility for maintaining social stability to local leaders. By encouraging people to protest against local government misconduct and punishing local officials for the occurrence of protests, they provided incentives for local officials to prevent people from taking to the streets. Since the repression of "legitimate" protests was also sanctioned, local leaders had little choice but to become more responsive to popular demands. Once more, the Internet provided an opportunity to aggregate and process popular grievances, demands and opinions speedily.

5.1. The Challenge of Modernization

In order to better understand why and how local governments are integrating the Internet into their governance structures, the changing parameters of central-local relations in China must be taken into consideration. More specifically, the necessity to redesign the relationship between the central government and local leaders is another factor that coincided with the global spread of the Internet. Once again, the key issue are the pressures emerging from China's level of development, and the potential of Internet-based technologies to ease these pressures. In the previous section, it was outlined how Chinese leaders, just like the politicians in most other countries at a similar stage of development, were forced to improve the basic communication infrastructure to meet the demands of speedy industrialization and social modernization. However, modernization exerted pressures not only on the existing communication infrastructure, but also on the way China was governed.

When China was still underdeveloped, many economic and social challenges could be, and indeed had to be, solved, by means of centralized policy making. With the excep-

tion of those coastal provinces that developed ahead of the rest of China, a basic public infrastructure had to be created. This included the construction or repair of schools, hospitals, government buildings and roads, the implementation of the government's birth control regime, and the enforcement of tax regulations.[54]

With most localities facing similar challenges, the central government's strategy of setting unified development targets and tying the career of local politicians to the fulfilment of these targets was viable. This was especially true where the skills and knowledge needed to devise more context-sensitive solutions were not (yet) available. However, even at a relatively low stage of development, the strategy of setting mandatory achievement targets ran into problems.[55] Given the fact that most of the funds for this modernization were not provided by the central government but had to be raised by the local governments themselves, and that some localities developed faster than others, China became increasingly heterogeneous.[56] Income differences between, but also within localities increased, an unprecedented number of people became urban citizens, and a middle-class developed. This situation made it increasingly difficult to devise and implement one-size-fits-all policies.[57]

In fact, China developed just as modernization theory would predict: the central government was increasingly unable to cater to all groups in an increasingly heterogeneous society, and feared that vital groups in society might cease to support the one-party regime. This concern had become acute when two events occurred in quick succession: the anti-regime protests on Tian'anmen Square in 1989, and the collapse of the Soviet Union briefly thereafter. Sources confirm that all administrations have taken this event very seriously and studied it closely.[58] Zeng Qinghong, who between March 1999 and November 2002 served as the head of the powerful organization department in the Jiang Zemin administration and thereafter became first secretary of the Central Secretariat for the Communist Party of China under CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao, was very outspoken in his concern that the CCP might meet the same fate. At the Fourth Plenum of the Sixteenth Party Congress in September 2004, the CCP's Central Committee passed the "Decision on Enhancing the Party's Ability to Govern."[59] Zeng justified the Decision by attributing the "overnight collapse [of] the Soviet Union, the 'number one socialist country' […] with an 88-year history and 15 million [Communist Party] members,"

54 C. Göbel, The Politics of Rural Reform in China: State Policy and Village Predicament in the Early 2000s, in: The China Quarterly 206 (2011), pp. 421–461.

55 T. P. Bernstein and X. Lü, Taxation without Representation in Contemporary Rural China, Cambridge 2003.

56 C. Riskin, R. Zhao and S. Li, China's Retreat from Equality: Income Distribution and Economic Transition, Armonk 2001.

57 G. Schubert and T. Heberer, Continuity and Change in China's "Local State Developmentism", in: Issues and Studies 51 (2015) 2, p. 1.

58 D. L. Shambaugh, China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation, Berkeley 2008.

59 Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, Zhonggong Zhongyang Guanyu Jiaqiang Dang de Zhizheng Nengli Jianshe de Jueding (Decision by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on Strengthening the Party's Governing Capacity) (2004), http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/2004/Sep/668376.htm (accessed 12 October 2015).

to the fact that "people were dissatisfied with what the officials accomplished while in charge, and they became seriously isolated from the masses of the people." In effect, Zeng drew on modernization theory when he warned that China faced similar dangers with her entry into "the critical period of the per-capita gross domestic product leaping from USD 1,000 toward USD 3,000."[60]

5.2. The Policy Innovation Paradigm

The central government's solution for this quandary was to change the way China was governed. Having identified the low quality of the local cadre force as the main predicament hindering China's future development, in particular the cadres' "low level of ideological and theoretical knowledge, weak ability to govern according to law, weak capacity to solve complex contradictions,"[61] measures were first taken to rejuvenate the cadre force, raise its level of education, make the selection process more meritocratic, and require public officials to attend various training courses.[62] In contrast to the first measures, which were mainly designed to strengthen the governance skills of local cadres, the campaigns that followed the Decision gradually imposed on local leaders a "policy innovation imperative."[63] In contrast to the 1980s, where following the central government's orders often sufficed for promotion to a higher position, local leaders were now expected to identify, even anticipate, economic and social challenges and devise ways to solve them. Designing and implementing viable policy innovations became a precondition of being evaluated as "excellent" in the annual assessment, which in turn was an important stepping stone for being promoted.

On the one hand, the central government rewarded policy innovations by local officials. On the other hand, however, it implemented measures that increased the pressure on local governments to become more responsive to the demands and grievances of the population. In particular, evidence suggests that the central government has become more discerning with regards to popular protests. While it continues to harshly repress social unrest that challenges the power monopoly of the Chinese Communist Party or the territorial unity of the Chinese state, it has become more lenient towards protests against low government performance, the violation of individual rights (especially regarding labour issues), and power abuse by local officials.[64] As suppression of protests the central government considers legitimate is discouraged, and the risk that crackdowns on protests

60 Q. Zeng, Jiaqiang Dang de Zhizheng Nengli Jianshe de Ganglingxing Wenxian (Programmatic Article on Strengthening the Party's Governing Capacity) (2004), http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2004-10/08/content_2061716.htm (accessed 12 October 2015).

61 Ibid.

62 G. T. Chin, Innovation and Preservation: Remaking China's National Leadership Training System, in: The China Quarterly 205 (2011), pp. 18–39; F. N. Pieke, The Good Communist: Elite Training and State Building in Today's China, Cambridge 2009.

63 C. Göbel and T. Heberer, The Policy Innovation Imperative: Changing Techniques for Governing China's Local Governors, Conference Proceedings (forthcoming).

64 H. C. Steinhardt, From Blind Spot to Media Spotlight: Propaganda Policy, Media Activism and the Emergence of Protest Events in the Chinese Public Sphere, in: Asian Studies Review 39 (2015) 1, pp. 119–137; Steinhardt, State

are documented and shared via social media is high, officials are pressed to prevent social unrest by being more responsive to people's grievances.[65]

Once more, political pressure is not the only reason for local leaders to employ the Internet for aggregating and addressing popular grievances. It should be recalled that Chinese officials do not represent a unified group, but are situated at different positions in China's "fragmented" polity.[66] Those who monitor policy implementation are usually not those who are bearing the blame for shortcomings and who are responsible for improving the situation.[67] In fact, e-participation strengthens the hands of leading politicians and those responsible for operating the petitioning websites, but comes at the detriment of those who are responsible for providing public services. It is therefore not surprising that e-participation websites now enjoy great popularity, as evidenced above. On a more abstract level, e-participation benefits leading officials and government units responsible for discipline and supervision while raising the bar for service providers and bureaucrats.

6. China's Multiple Futures

This article started out with the seemingly innocuous question of why authoritarian regimes adopt the Internet if the Internet is indeed as dangerous for social stability as some accounts suggest. The analysis of China, where leaders embraced the Internet as eagerly as they had embraced other information and communication technologies before, presented some solutions to this puzzle.

First, the analysis of the Chinese case has highlighted the role of contagion and contingency: the adoption of the Internet by the highly developed democracies set in motion a process that made it increasingly difficult for developing nations to resist the Internet. In other words, authoritarian regimes really had no choice but to embrace the Internet or else pay the exorbitant price of a perennial least developed country status. On the other hand, the spread of increasingly affordable ICT presented great opportunities especially for developing countries where the existing, analogue communication infrastructure had become a bottleneck for further development.

The political risks are not as great as often imagined: the Internet does not heighten the danger of a rebellion, but merely accelerates its formation. Arguably, it offers more opportunities for autocrats than for opposition groups. As the Chinese case shows, authoritarian leaders can learn from the demise of other autocracies, and the Internet allows them to co-opt potential regime opponents into the process of making government more

Behavior and the Intensification of Intellectual Criticism in China The Social Stability Debate, in: Modern China (2015), pp. 1–37.

65 C. Göbel and L. H. Ong, Social Unrest in China, in: Long Briefing, Europe China Research and Academic Network (2012), http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2173073 (accessed 12 October 2015).

66 A. Mertha, "Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0": Political Pluralization in the Chinese Policy Process, in: The China Quarterly 200 (2009), pp. 995–1012.

67 Göbel and Chen, Accountable Autocrats.

efficient. In their combination, enhanced performance legitimation and the creation of a democracy surrogate serve to alleviate social challenges to the regime.

The Chinese experience makes it plausible that some of the paradigms of modernization theory no longer hold. This, however, should not be interpreted to mean that the Internet has made authoritarian regimes invincible. Instead, e-government presents them with new challenges that deserve to be studied closely, for example the impact of the "digital divide" on political representation on the Internet and government responsiveness inviting so many demands that the system cannot process them anymore. The representation of minority rights and the explosive mix of improving governance without guaranteeing the rule of law are other potential breaking points that deserve to be studied more closely.

A final lesson concerns two potential misconceptions in the mainstream democratization scholarship. The first follows from the plausible premise that citizens compare their political system to that of other countries. With politics in developed democracies being increasingly perceived as technocratic and powerless against the economic forces that effortlessly cross national borders and wreak havoc on people's lives, "Western democracy" might be losing its attractiveness. There is a real danger that people, no matter what kind of political regime they are subjected to, will fail to appreciate the opportunities that real democracy offers, and join the ranks of those who feel powerless to alter the courses of their lives.

A second misconception concerns the future of authoritarian regimes, or rather the temptation of unwittingly assuming that the state is tied to the future of the regime. With respect to the Chinese case, this means that the institutional innovations described here will likely survive the regime that initiated it. In other words, when we try to imagine the future of China, we should not get stuck with the question of whether the CCP will or will not survive. More important is what it will leave behind. The worst case would be the dismantling of such structures as described in this contribution, and the suffocation of local initiative by an overbearing central government. The control regime initiated by the Xi Jinping administration makes this scenario a real possibility. The best case would be the transformation of the current regime into one that adopts the rule of law and allows its citizens to not only monitor bureaucrats and low-level politicians, but also hold the decision makers in the central government accountable. This is not bound to happen anytime soon, but nevertheless remains a plausible scenario for a more distant future. The third, and perhaps most realistic scenario involves the rekindling of local initiative after the central government's grip over local officials loosens. The modernization and improvement of China's government structures would continue, for the benefit of whoever will rule China in the future.