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## **Microblogs in China: Bringing the State Back In**

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## Microblogs in China: Bringing the State Back In

### **Abstract**

This paper reflects the adaptation and transformation of the Chinese party-state's governing strategy in the digital era. Through a discourse analysis of the current Chinese debate on the role of microblogs in China, it argues that China's political elites have revised their social management strategy. They now tend to base their political decision-making on strategic calculations that reflect online public opinion in order to increase the system's efficiency and to generate a new kind of performance-based legitimacy. This turn to a more responsive mode of governance has been driven by the findings of Internet surveys and reports provided by Chinese research institutes and advisory bodies. A close reading of these documents and reports helps to answer the question of why authoritarian states such as China do not prohibit the spread of new communication technologies, even though these are said to have triggered or at least facilitated the rebellions of the Arab Spring.

Keywords: governance in China, e-government, e-governance, deliberation

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# Microblogs in China: Bringing the State Back In

Nele Noesselt

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## 1 Introduction

In December 2011 the number of Chinese microblog users amounted to 250 million, an increase of almost 300 percent over 2010 (CNNIC 2012: 36).<sup>1</sup> Microblogs are a rather new communication tool in China. Sina Weibo opened its microblogging service in August 2009. Other Internet service providers such as Tencent and Netease followed. Microblogs are mass messages with a 140-character limit that can be directly forwarded, commented on or reposted. They allow many-to-many communication and provide a tool for rapidly processing information at a very low cost. They have thus attracted the attention not only of China's

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Internet generation, but also of journalists, who, inspired by the Arab Spring, conceive of these new communication technologies as catalysts of system change.

The current microblog debate in the media is somewhat of a revival of the debates that took place in the 1990s, when China first became connected to the Internet. These debates can be subdivided into two streams: Following the general ideas of modernization and transformation theories, one stream sees in China's cyberspace a breeding ground for contestation and system change. Studies belonging to this democratization approach highlight the activities of cyber dissidents and their strategies to circumvent the "Great Firewall" and content censorship (Chase and Mulvenon 2002: 1–43). The second stream, however, contradicts this technological-determinist scenario and postulates that new information technologies such as the Internet are controlled and managed by the Chinese party-state and thus serve as a tool for rebuilding and maintaining the CCP's monopoly on power (Zheng 2008; Jiang and Xu 2009: 175).<sup>2</sup> This paper formulates the hypothesis that the Internet should not be viewed as an independent variable in the power struggle between the party-state and Chinese society, but should rather be understood as a platform for state–society interactions. A renegotiation of state–society relations is taking place, and the microblog debate provides insights into the internal calculations that guide the party-state's governance strategy. Microblogs are not a communication tool of dissident organizations; they have been launched by Chinese companies, which are motivated by economic interests. However, the establishment of microblogs requires the (silent) consent of the political authorities. This leads to a new research question: Why do authoritarian states such as China not prohibit the spread of new communication technologies, even though these are said to have triggered or at least facilitated the rebellions of the Arab Spring? The paper argues that China's political elites tend to base their political decision-making on strategic calculations that reflect public online opinion in order to increase the system's efficiency and to generate a new kind of performance-based legitimacy. This turn to a more responsive mode of governance<sup>3</sup> has been driven by the findings of Internet surveys and reports on microblogs and public online opinion provided by Chinese research institutes and advisory bodies.

The paper's discussion is divided into three parts: The first part (Section 2) outlines the theoretical framework of (online) deliberation and illuminates its explanatory value for analyzing the Chinese Internet. Section 3 then discusses two recently published Chinese reports on the structures and functions of microblogs in the Chinese context and embeds them into the deliberation–legitimation framework. The third part (Section 4) undertakes a contextual

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2 Instead of dealing with the black-and-white question of democratization or regime survival, recent scholarship has been more concerned with the interplay of state-centered and society-focused frameworks of analysis (Yang 2009: 6–10). Although Yang distances himself from the technological determinism of modernization theories, he is nevertheless convinced that the Internet is a highly contentious place.

3 For a theoretical-conceptual approach to the "new" responsiveness of authoritarian regimes, see also: Lambach and Göbel (2010: 79–91).

analysis by linking the two reports to China's e-government strategy. The means of centralized control, the paper argues, have been replaced by a dynamic and complex set of recursive feedback loops that allow the system to preempt public demands. As the Chinese case illustrates, modern authoritarian states are permanently adapting themselves to their changing environments. Although they do not allow open elections, they are aware of the meaning of public opinion for the persistence of their political regimes and have developed strategies of direct and indirect deliberation to avert a crisis of governance.

## 2 Deliberation and Legitimacy

In fragmented, diversified societies, decision-makers have to respond to a plurality of interests. According to socio-cybernetic models (Easton 1965; Deutsch 1963), the legitimacy of the political system depends on its ability to formulate policies that reflect the interests of the majority of the people and preempt the prevailing demands. Deliberative theories (Dryzek 1990; Dryzek 2006; Fishkin 1991; Fishkin 1997; Gutman and Thompson 2002) postulate that these demands and preferences are not given, but rather shaped through negotiation. The legitimacy of a decision thus requires that those affected by it have the right to participate in deliberation about the general ideas that determine political decision-making and require public consensus: "Outcomes are democratically legitimate if and only if they could be the object of a free and reasoned agreement among equals" (Cohen 1989). Along these lines, deliberation represents an alternative to (or extension of) traditional electoral and representative modes of democracy (Dryzek 1990; Dryzek 2000; Fishkin 1991).

However, deliberation, according to He and Warren, is not a unique phenomenon of democratic systems (He and Warren 2011; He 2006a). Deliberative mechanisms increase the responsiveness of China's political regime to the multiple demands articulated by civil society actors. By opening new channels for canalized and controlled debates, the party-state is following a strategy of cooptation and incorporation. Deliberation is thought to increase transparency and to make the system more efficient, as it provides citizens with an instrument with which to supervise the bureaucracy and to draw attention to administrative insufficiencies (He and Warren 2011: 281). In authoritarian regimes, deliberation, defined as "[a] mode of communication in which participants in a political process ... respond to the substance of claims, reasons, and perspectives in ways that generate persuasion-based influence" (ibid.: 271), represents a reconfiguration of state-society relations without an overall transformation of the political system towards democratic structures. The Chinese concept of deliberation does not allow direct citizen interference in elite bargaining processes but, in most cases, seeks to achieve issue-related consensus at the local level (Rosenberg 2006: 105).

Chinese political scientists are engaged in an active debate about the applicability of the concept of "deliberative democracy" to the case of China. Shengyong Chen traces deliberation in Chinese politics back to its ancient philosophical traditions (Chen, Shengyong 2010:

164–165). Although Chen stresses the systemic differences between China and liberal democracies, he argues that China has its own traditions of political deliberation and that these traditions could be reactivated without triggering a transition to democracy (ibid.: 170). Some scholars even identify public forums set up by Confucian scholars or in accordance with the Maoist mass line as elements of deliberation in the Chinese context (He 2006b: 179).

These reflections highlight the divergences between the modes of deliberation developed for democratic systems and the practices of deliberation in authoritarian regimes. Deliberation theory is often linked to writings on democracy (Habermas 1996; Rawls 1999). Habermas (1996) emphasizes the role of the public sphere in deliberative democracy and stresses the impact of procedural legitimacy on the stability of a political system. Although some authors have documented the emergence of a civil society in China, its structures do not reflect the assumption of an antagonism between state and society that dominates writings on “Western” democracy. In China, civil society organizations do not form an opposition, but rather agree to cooperate with state institutions. The main conflict does not materialize between state and society, but between elites and counterelites (Ding, Xueliang 2006). Moreover, in the Chinese context, deliberation is facilitated by the party-state. It is impossible to establish any institution for consultation and deliberation without the prior consent of the authorities (He 2006a: 138). Comparing the social and psychological foundations of deliberative mechanisms in China and in the West, Rosenberg (2006: 105) defines the Chinese approach in the following terms: “Oriented by the normative goal of social harmony, the Chinese view on deliberation is one of local discussion that aims to establish consensus on specific issues that are consistent with broader collective understandings and values.”

Nevertheless, deliberation – understood as consultative bargaining – can also be found in authoritarian regimes (He 2006a). Chinese scholars have identified online bulletin boards and chat rooms as part of China’s “deliberative democracy” (*xieshang minzhu*), which allows for the indirect participation of citizens through informal bargaining mechanisms (Chen and Du 2005; Sun 2011). As a lack of control over public opinion is regarded as one of the key factors that triggered the breakdown of the Soviet Union (Zhao 2010), China’s officials are concerned about the channeling of (online) public opinions. By studying online opinions, the government seeks to gain more insights into recent social developments. In the case of the deliberation process in Wenling, the local government did not use the term deliberation (*xieshang*), instead referring to “sincere talks” (*kentan*). This underlines the meaning ascribed to government-organized consultation meetings: By listening to people’s views and opinions, the government aggregates information, while simultaneously using these meetings for persuasion (He 2006b: 182). Like deliberation in democracies, deliberation between representatives of the one-party state and civil actors tends to resolve conflicts through discussion, to foster understanding and support for political actions, and to seek a balance between the different interest groups. He, one of the pioneers in the research on deliberative processes in China, concludes that such deliberative mechanisms are limited and could easily be dismantled. He iden-

tifies the predominant role of the party-state and the lack of a monitoring system for these deliberative mechanisms and institutions as the main obstacles to the institutionalization of multilateral deliberation (ibid.: 193).

To summarize, in one-party states deliberation is part of the administrative procedures and is introduced to strengthen the system's efficiency and to reestablish a consensus between the ruler and the ruled. Modern autocracies no longer base their rule on domination through military power; instead they try to win the minds of their people. In China, governing processes are based on formal consensus at the elite level as well as between the elites and the majority of the society. Consultation and deliberation are thought to reduce cleavages and to enhance compliance (He 2006a: 134–135). This leads to Pan Wei's (2006) paradigm of a "rule of law without democracy," which he has presented as a third way beyond Western-style democratization and old-fashioned socialism. Thus, deliberation in China and on the Chinese Internet does not automatically lead to the breakdown of one-party rule.

Deliberation is not limited to local consultative meetings; it has also been extended to the realm of the Chinese Internet. According to Jiang (2010), who applied the framework of "authoritarian deliberation" to the analysis of the Chinese cyberspace, the Chinese Internet is composed of various spaces for online deliberation: "central propaganda spaces," that is, government websites and state-led commercial online portals; "emerging civic spaces"; and "international spaces." Deliberation occurs in all of these subspaces. Whereas the "central propaganda spaces" are subject to direct control, it is much more difficult to regulate the "emerging civic spaces." By opening and hosting spaces for online deliberation on government-related websites, the Chinese party-state has adopted a more sophisticated online regulation strategy. The state-run media maintain their own discussion rooms, such as the *Qiangguo Luntan* (Strengthening the Nation Forum), which is run by the *People's Daily*. These fulfill a dual function: By granting limited spaces for deliberation, the party-state seeks to channel the public debates and to prevent people from joining the emerging civil society online spaces, which are beyond its direct reach. The costs of all-encompassing control and censorship of the Chinese Internet would exceed the party-state's financial and personnel capacities – and would certainly not contribute to stabilizing the fragile relationship between state and society. Jiang (2010: 7) underscores this ambivalence: "Public deliberation online is authoritarian because, similar to offline practice, the state actively shapes and defines the boundaries of political discourse in Chinese cyberspace ... it is deliberative because citizens do participate in public dialogue in issues of their concern." Following Jiang's argumentation, online deliberation might "flourish as a viable alternative to ... radical electoral democracy" (2010: 33), but it does not result in the transformation of the authoritarian state.

MacKinnon (2010) further elaborates on the apparent paradox of authoritarian deliberation by introducing the concept of "networked authoritarianism." In "networked autocracies" political authority remains centralized in the hands of a small group of elite cadres. At the same time, modern communication technologies open up new channels for conversation.



Though netizens are not completely free, they have the opportunity to post comments on social problems and bureaucratic mismanagement, and can sometimes even get the central government to act as a mediator in local conflicts brought to the attention of the political leaders through digital communication channels (ibid.: 3).

Deliberation is seen as a necessary add-on to electoral democracy. Some Chinese scholars argue that the PRC practices a combination of both. They link the electoral element to the National People's Congress and stress the deliberative role of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (Hu, Wei 2011: 6).

In the last few years, China has been experimenting with "deliberative democracy" at the local level. In addition to village elections, public budget hearings, which have taken the form of public polling, have been held at the township level. In certain issue areas, deliberation (that is, public hearings) is prescribed by law (for example, the Law on Price, the Administrative Punishment Law and the Law of Legislation) (Zhou 2012: 5). In 2005 the National People's Congress organized a public hearing on the personal income tax threshold (He 2006b: 180). In addition, deliberative polling on budget issues and local infrastructure projects has emerged as a new feature of governance in China (Fishkin et al. 2010).

Most of these deliberation experiments have been launched at the local level. If they are successful, Florini et al. expect a spillover to the higher administrative levels. They stress that electoral mechanisms, first introduced at the village level, are also being applied at the level of selected cities and inside the party. They see the opening of deliberative platforms as a first step towards a more "democratic" decision-making process (Florini et al. 2012: 171).

The motives for introducing deliberative features are more than obvious: In the last few years, social movements and public discontent have continuously increased in number. The demonstrations in Wukan illustrate the fact that villagers are willing to fight for the rights guaranteed to them in the Organic Laws. The Chinese government reacted to these demonstrations by imposing constraints on social gatherings and by increasing spending for public security. At the same time, it also started to set up institutions for deliberation and consultation. These institutions fulfill a venting function and reduce the pressure exerted on the central party-state (He 2006b: 176–178).

In the following sections, this paper argues that the adaptation of the Chinese party-state's e-government strategy and the opening of government microblogs have been inspired by the state's calculations regarding the interplay between deliberation and legitimacy described above.

### 3 Microblogs and Feedback Loops

#### 3.1 Government Microblogs

In December 2011, Zhu Huaxin, the secretary of the *People's Daily* Public Opinion Monitoring Office, and two colleagues published a report on public online opinion as articulated through (civil society) microblogs (Zhu et al. 2011). The report summarized the central topics of the microblog debates in 2011, focusing especially on the Wenzhou train crash and its impact on public opinion and people's trust in the government.<sup>4</sup> The train crash (July 2011) was made public via social networks prior to any official statements. It triggered an online discussion among netizens about the responsibilities of the related government agencies and thus posed an immediate threat to the party-state's authority (ibid.). The report stated that a decline in the credibility of the government and its official statements would lead to an expansion of (online) public debate and could fuel public discontent (ibid.: 10). It stressed that conflicts and tensions between the different social strata were increasing and, due to the global financial crisis, were no longer restricted to the lower classes and the inhabitants of less developed regions (ibid.: 11). The authors concluded that the government, in order to avoid a public opinion crisis, would have to become more responsive to public demands and online public debates. In this context the report also mentioned government microblogs, which it saw as a new bridge between the party-state and civil society (ibid.: 12–13).

A second report, also edited by the *People's Daily* Public Opinion Monitoring Office, which is far more detailed and more comprehensive than the first, exclusively examines the development of government microblogs (PDPOM 2011). It analyzes the structure, content and services of Sina Weibo<sup>5</sup> microblogs maintained by government agencies or individual party cadres.

The report begins with an overview of microblog development since 2009: The first government microblog was set up by the provincial government of Yunnan in November 2009. In April 2011, more than one year later, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was the first organ of the central government to register on Sina Weibo (Yin 2012; Zhu et al. 2011: 12–13). In October 2010, Sina.com hosted 552 government microblog accounts (government agencies/departments: 312; individual government officials: 240); by October 2011, their number had grown to 18,132 (government agencies/departments: 9778; individual government officials: 8354) (PDPOM 2011: 7; *People's Daily*, 16 December 2011; Yin 2012). Today, government microblogs exist across the country, including in the peripheral areas, but government online

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4 On the microblog debates relating to the train crash see also: Schucher, Günter, and Maria Bondes (2013 (forthcoming)). China's Dream of High-speed Growth Gets Rear-ended: The "Wenzhou 723" Microblogging Incident and the Erosion of Public Confidence, in: Peter Marolt and David Herold (eds), *Online China: Locating Society in Online Spaces*, London and New York: Routledge.

5 Sina Weibo was the first Chinese Internet service provider to offer a microblogging service on the Chinese Internet (August 2009).

activities are more active and diversified in the big cities and richer provinces. Of the top-200 government microblogs in 2011, 45 were located in Guangdong, 19 in Beijing, and only 8 in Shanghai. However, only one of Guangdong's government microblogs was listed under the top ten (PDPOM 2011). According to the official CNNIC figures, the total number of Chinese government microblogs is now 80,000 (September 2012).

The main findings of this report can be summarized according to three points:

- More than one-third of all Chinese government microblogs are maintained by offices and agencies responsible for public security. From the list of the top-ten government microblogs, the most frequented blog with the largest group of followers is *Ping'an Beijing (Safe Beijing)*, which is maintained by the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau. Since September 2011, when the Ministry of Public Security officially encouraged its substitutes to engage in microblogging (*China Daily*, 27 September 2011), similar (public security) microblogs have been established at all administrative levels throughout the country. The maintenance of public order and social stability is at the top of the party-state's agenda – as the spread of public security microblogs illustrates.
- The second-largest group of government microblogs is subsumed under the category administration/government. This includes the websites of government organs as well as online news portals. Among the first provincial governments to establish a microblog news office was Sichuan. Several cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing and Beijing, followed in 2011. According to Xinhua, Shanghai's municipal government microblog had 30,000 followers only five hours after being launched (Xinhua, 28 November 2011), but it is nevertheless not as influential as the Shanghai Metro microblog, which is ranked fourth on the list of the top ten. The news release microblogs are continuing the government's earlier initiative – which initially started with four cities: Beijing; Shanghai; Shenzhen and Nanhai – to establish public information platforms at all levels of public administration (Ma et al. 2005: 29).
- The China International Rescue Team maintains the second-largest government microblog. Several thousand netizens logged on to it to learn more about China's rescue efforts and support for the Japanese after the reactor meltdown in Fukushima in 2011 (PDPOM 2011). The high level of interest in China's participation in international rescue missions (the China International Rescue Team microblog is number two on the list of the top-ten microblogs) and the work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (number three on the list of the top-ten microblogs) illustrates people's desire to know more about the PRC's international engagement and the recent developments in China's external environment.

By setting up its own microblogs, the government is reacting to the rise of multiactor online discussions via microblogs that, during 2010, increased exponentially in number (*People's Daily*, 16 December 2011). Party-state organs have learnt from the microblog protests regarding the handling of information related to crises and emergencies such as the Wenzhou train crash: Shanghai Metro used its microblog to immediately apologize for the train collision in

September 2011, in which almost 300 people were injured (*Global Times*, 10 November 2011). While outsourcing selected administrative responsibilities to lower levels of the state apparatus, the Chinese authorities are taking steps to (re)centralize control over information flows. Yet rather than increasing the physical control and surveillance of the Internet, the party-state is following the dual strategy of monitoring and canalizing public online debates.

### 3.2 Direct and Indirect Deliberation

Deliberation between the political elites and Chinese netizens in the online context can be subdivided into direct and indirect modes of exchange.

The websites of Chinese ministries and administrative organs include tools for e-consultation: questions and answers between netizens and government officials, online petition systems, online opinion polls and citizen-input boxes (Jiang and Xu 2009: 183–187). Government microblogs, in operation since 2009, offer an additional channel for bilateral interaction. Zhu Huaxin of the *People's Daily* Public Opinion Monitoring Office argues that the government should use the new channels of direct mass communication to respond to articulated demands and reported problems (Zhu Huaxin, quoted from *Xinjingbao*, 17 December 2011). However, the mere existence of these tools does not mean that direct deliberation really takes place. The above-mentioned report on Chinese government microblogs published in late 2011 criticizes the fact that most of these are used for the unilateral circulation of information (PDPOM 2011). A *China Daily* article raises the criticism that most of the government microblogs are rather infrequently updated. Even those that regularly post information and have lots of followers, among them the Beijing Municipal Health Bureau, do not make use of multidirectional communication channels. They function as online bulletin boards, and even if they have a comment button, they seldom get replies from Chinese netizens (*China Daily*, 13 December 2011). Nonetheless, even if government microblogs are mostly unidirectional tools, they still function as an instrument for refuting and correcting false rumors (Zhao, Feng, quoted from *Global Times*, 14 December 2011) and thus contribute to restoring the party-state's monopoly on information. Irritated by the spread of false and potentially harmful information, more and more Chinese netizens are referring to information provided by government agencies (*Renmin Ribao*, 16 April 2012).

State institutions encourage the Chinese online society to comment on draft laws and regulations. This feedback mechanism is a necessary step to overcome the central government's lack of information about local conditions. The inclusion of local issues in centrally drafted policies is a necessary precondition for guaranteeing the implementation of central government prescriptions. At the same time, these online feedback loops give people the impression that they have a voice in political decision-making, even though there is no direct participation through elections. The Legislative Affairs Office of the State Council maintains a comment room to collect opinions and reactions to draft versions of laws and regulations (*People's Daily*, 23 February 2008). In June 2010, for example, it published a draft regulation

for the protection of China's water resources. The new regulation targeted Taihu Lake, China's third-largest freshwater lake, which had been heavily polluted by neighboring factories (*People's Daily*, 3 June 2011).

In March 2006, delegates of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference at the central administration level established a blog for the annual sessions of these two legislative bodies. Apart from outlining the central topics of the forthcoming sessions, the blog invited comments from its readers and followers. During the annual meetings, the blog counted more than 100,000 hits per day (Liu 2007: 8). It did not directly empower the grassroots level, but rather guided public opinion during the time of the two meetings (ibid: 42). Since 2010, online deliberation has been extended to the meetings of the people's congresses and the people's political consultative conferences at the municipal and provincial levels. Two Chinese provinces, Anhui and Hunan, now also include a chapter on "public online opinions" in their annual reports (*People's Daily*, 11 March 2010).

In 2009, the highest representatives of the Chinese party-state began to engage in so-called real-time government chats. These chats are coordinated by China's e-government website (<www.gov.cn>) and the Xinhua News Agency. Topics have included China's position in the financial crisis and domestic issues such as unemployment, income gaps, the urban-rural divide, social security and corruption (*China Daily*, 28 February 2009; Xinhua, 27 February 2010; Xinhua, 27 February 2011; Liu, Jie et al., 27 February 2011). As the government chats have taken place just before the annual meetings of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, they seem to have provided a stage for the presentation and justification of central government politics. The background behind which netizen posts are selected for inclusion in the real-time chat is not transparent. Nonetheless, an analysis of the main topics shows that the government responds to issues that are dominating online debates and that might, if not solved in due time, contribute to a decrease in the party-state's legitimacy.

The 2011 government chat announced in advance that the National People's Congress would raise the personal income tax threshold, thereby reducing the tax burden of those with low and middle incomes. Furthermore, it also stated that the targeted annual GDP growth for the period 2011–2015 would be "lowered" to 7 percent. Both points were reactions to the spillover of the international financial crisis to China and illustrate that the Chinese government has been highly concerned with safeguarding domestic growth and stability (Xinhua, 27 February 2011). As these steps were introduced in the aftermath of the outbreak of the financial crisis, one could argue that the Chinese government's efforts to strengthen state-society deliberation processes are an attempt to replace its efficiency- and performance-based legitimacy with a legitimacy model that relies on indirect and direct input modes without introducing electoral mechanisms.

The number of demands and requests submitted through these "direct" deliberation channels has not been made public so far. The only thing that can be deduced from the new

modes of online deliberation described above is the adaptation of the party-state's official e-government strategy. China's political elites have recognized that public opinion is in an indicator of people's level of support for a political regime. Long-term stability can only be attained by appeasing public criticism and responding to people's demands. The opening of new input channels on the Chinese Internet suggests a turn to a more responsive approach to social steering and the balancing of state–society relations. However, the impact of these inputs and their quantity remain undisclosed.

Online debates that take part in the emerging civil spheres of the Chinese Internet, although they only represent indirect deliberation, have a more direct impact on government politics. In 2007 Chinese president Hu Jintao urged government officials "to improve their internet literacy and [to] use the internet well so as to improve the art of leadership" (*China Daily*, 28 February 2009). His comments indirectly referred to the debates on Chinese microblogs and other online platforms, which Chinese scholars in the fields of administration and information technology have identified as archives of public opinion. These scholars have advised the Chinese party-state that rather than censoring the net or influencing public opinion through paid pro-government blog entries, it should follow online chatter to learn more about the interests and demands of the people. China's political leaders, to use the terminology of a heatedly discussed *People's Daily* editorial, should listen to the "sunken voices" of the silent majority (*Renmin Ribao*, 26 May 2011) to anticipate and preempt public discontent (Zhu, Huaxin, quoted from *Xinjingbao*, 17 December 2011). As microblogs enable citizens to point out power abuses and local problems, they offer the information needed to strengthen the government's efficiency and to fight corruption. Thus they indirectly provide the citizenry with a new instrument of government supervision (Wang, Yukai, quoted from *Xinlang*, 30 October 2011). However, they can also pose a challenge to the legitimacy of the government. Due to the speed of information distribution via microblogs, the party-state is now forced to broadcast information about current events immediately. Otherwise it would run the risk of losing public trust and support (Wu, Hui, quoted from Yin 2012). The new responsiveness of the Chinese government becomes visible when one analyzes the transcripts of its real-time online chats. In the 2011 online discussion, Wen Jiabao directly responded to microblog debates by announcing government measures to help homeless children, a problem made public by netizens on the microblog *Street Photos to Rescue Child Beggars* (Wu, Chen, 27 February 2011).

#### 4 E-Government in China

The "online deliberation" approach – described in the introductory part of this paper – conceives of the Chinese party-state as an agenda setter and mediator that interacts with the public and reacts to public (online) demands. This top-down scenario can also be categorized under the framework of "e-government," which, contrary to the concept of "e-governance,"

is a state-centric model of online politics (Holliday and Yep 2005; Kluver 2005; Jiang and Xu 2009; Seifert and Chung 2009).

E-government, according to the World Bank (2011), is

the use by government agencies of information technologies (such as Wide Area Networks, the Internet, and mobile computing) that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government. These technologies can serve a variety of different ends: better delivery of government services to citizens, improved interactions with business and industry, citizen empowerment through access to information, or more efficient government management. The resulting benefits can be less corruption, increased transparency, greater convenience, revenue growth, and/or cost reductions.

The core principle of e-government is the utilization of information technologies to increase the quality and efficiency of government services. Furthermore, the digitalization of government work is said to increase the transparency of administrative acts and to make the government more accountable to the people.

China's e-government strategy, which the country's leaders began to pursue in the late 1980s, started from a similar understanding. In the initial stage, it mainly included three aspects: office automation, the establishment of an intranet to link all government bodies and agencies, and digital information exchange between the government and the business sector (Zheng, Yongnian 2008: 37). China's leaders saw modern information technologies as a necessary tool for the streamlining and modernization of administrative acts. As early as the mid-1980s, shortly after the decisions on reform and opening up, the first government departments started to computerize the processing of documents and to digitalize their archives. In the 1990s the first nationwide intranet for government bodies came into existence (Zhang, Junhua 2002: 44). As a second step, the Chinese government launched the so-called Golden Projects, which were to allow for the gathering of data in central areas of (economic) governance (Kluver 2005: 87–89). With the Government Online Project (GOP), which was initiated in 1998, the focus of China's e-government strategy shifted from state bureaucracy and administrative procedures to the level of state–society relations: the central government established an online presence that integrated all government websites under one virtual roof. It included information about how to connect to local administrative agencies and offered channels for submitting individual requests.

Although the number of projects related to the Chinese e-government strategy, including government microblogs, is quite impressive, evaluations of the state of China's e-initiative have come to rather pessimistic conclusions. In 2002 Zhang Junhua (2006: 62) argued that the focus of China's e-government approach was on building an intranet for networking between government organs, not on "citizen-oriented front office work." However, he also speculated that the e-strategy might be readjusted under the leadership of the fourth genera-

tion of political leaders (Zhang, Junhua 2002: 63). A few years later, however, Kluver's (2005: 76) report on Chinese e-government, which covered the first two years of the new Chinese administration, did not document any major improvement: "e-government initiatives in China have had as their purpose not the empowerment of citizens, nor even to attract external investment, but rather to add stability and order to a chaotic governing process and social change, and to reestablish the control of the governing authorities."

However, state–society relations and the empowerment of citizens have never been the main concerns of "e-government" as defined by the UN or other international institutions. E-government is first and foremost part of the nation-building process and does not include any statements on citizens' rights or a system's political constitution. The critical evaluations of the Government Online Project quoted above merge the concept of e-government with elements of e-governance (Ma et al. 2005: 21). E-governance, in contrast to e-government, is based on the active participation and integration of the society in governing processes. It can facilitate the strengthening of e-democracy, but both are independent concepts. UNESCO (2005) provides the following definition:

"E-Governance involves new styles of leadership, new ways of debating and deciding policy and investment, new ways of accessing education, new ways of listening to citizens and new ways of organizing and delivering information and services."

By shifting from administrative digitalization to online information distribution through government websites, China's leaders have moved beyond the narrow understanding of e-government but refrained from introducing e-democracy. Governance is generally defined as a practice different from government-based regulation and steering (Rosenau 1992). Some authors argue that it should be understood as a combination of hierarchical modes of governing, markets, networks and social self-organization (Mayntz 2004: 66; Kooiman 1999: 253). Governance in China, contrary to these definitions, is still centrally organized. However, even authoritarian one-party systems have to acknowledge that modern societies can no longer be controlled and regulated through top-down administration. The Chinese party-state has started to distribute former central government duties to lower administrative levels and now cooperates with civil society organizations and business networks.

In the political science literature, the state's return to governance has been conceptualized as "meta-governance" (Jessop 2011). However, meta-governance only partly describes the Chinese party-state, as this concept brings the state *back into* balance and regulates markets and autopoietic structures, which have been facing a steering crisis. In China, the party-state *never withdrew* from managing and regulating state–society interactions, but it has made some concessions vis-à-vis nonstate actors. This development shows similarities to the steering strategies of liberal economies, which is not really surprising, as the reorientation of China's governing strategy resulted from the launching of economic reforms and the introduction of market principles in the late 1970s: After the initiation of economic reforms in 1978,



the former control mechanisms of the Maoist era were dismantled. The administrative system had to be reorganized in order to respond to the new demands and expectations of Chinese society. Reform started modestly with some institutional adjustments. The National Economic Reform Commission was set up under the State Council in 1982 to regulate and coordinate the introduction of market mechanisms. Likewise, as a response to China's opening up to foreign trade, several ministries were reorganized and merged into the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade. In the next step, during the second half of the 1980s, China's key decision-makers pushed for the separation of government functions and enterprise management (Zheng, Shiping 1997). Ministries and commissions were transformed into business enterprises. China's ongoing transformation to a market economy was accompanied by further mergers between and restructuring of ministries and state organs. Former central government duties and responsibilities were delegated to lower levels of the bureaucracy, which led to a de facto decentralized, federalist administrative structure (Zheng, Yongnian 2007). The decentralization process posed a severe challenge to the authority of the central government. The informatization of the governing process illustrates the central government's subsequent efforts to gather data from the different administrative levels and to safeguard its role as a coordinator in the reform era.

In July 2001, the State Information Leading Group issued two documents on China's Internet strategy – the *Informatization Plan for National Economy and Society* and the *Instructions on Building E-Government* (see Zheng, Yongnian 2008: 37) – which highlighted the importance of modern information technology for economic growth and modern state-building. However, it was not until the tenth five-year plan that “social informatization” was officially recognized as one of China's “first priorities” (Seifert and Chung 2009: 14). Jiang Zemin's (2002) report to the sixteenth party congress in 2002 linked e-government to “administrative restructuring” and “administrative efficiency.” These links were later reaffirmed by the *Recommendations on the Construction of E-Government*, published in 2003 (see Kluver 2005: 85–86).

When the negative sociopolitical side effects of the economic reforms became visible, the Chinese leadership extended its e-government strategy to include social management. The focus was shifted from efficiency to balanced, sustainable development. To restore people's trust in the government, the party-state's Internet strategy was complimented by e-governance mechanisms. At the National People's Congress in 2006, Chinese prime minister Wen Jiabao stated that the government should listen to online voices and reflect public opinion (Zheng, Yongnian 2008: xvi). Hu Jintao continued in this vein and introduced a broader mode of e-government that was no longer limited to administrative and bureaucratic features. In addition to administrative reforms, Hu voted for a service-oriented government and presented e-government as being related to social management (Hu, Jintao 2007).

This new e-government approach in China has not, however, meant any relaxation of political control over online content. China's political leaders are attempting to manage and minimize the risks and challenges of new communication technologies through censorship

and by channeling debates. China's Internet strategy oscillates between censorship and the free flow of information. Currently, China's authorities are making efforts to reestablish central control. In Hu Jintao's report to the eighteenth party congress, the term "e-government" was replaced by "social management:"

"We should improve the online services and advocate healthy themes on the Internet. We should strengthen social management of the Internet and promote orderly network operation in accordance with laws and regulations. We should crack down on pornography and illegal publications and resist vulgar trends."

(Hu, Jintao, quoted from Xinhua, 17 November 2012)

Even in times of relative relaxation, the Chinese party-state has always maintained its control over the media. According to the *People's Daily*, China's media guidelines stipulate that all statements have to be in line with the party and should guide public opinion. At the same time, however, "the closeness, attraction and appeal of media reports" should be increased (*People's Daily*, 20 June 2008). These dual obligations faced by the Chinese media and Internet service providers explain why the latter are rather reluctant to implement regulations that might reduce their popularity. Although the deadline for implementing real-name registration for Chinese microbloggers has long passed (*China Daily*, 20 December 2011), Chinese Internet service providers have not been very active in enacting the new rules. This is reminiscent of one of the Chinese government's earlier attempts to require ID registration for mobile phones. As this would have meant that the sale of mobile phones would be limited to a few selected stores and would have caused high losses for the telecommunication industry, the government encountered the concerted opposition of China's telecommunication providers – and ultimately never enforced the implementation of the new regulations (see also Zheng, Yongnian 2008).

## 5 Conclusion

China's e-government strategies can be classified as elements of the official program to modernize and reform the administrative state sector (Yang 2001: 68). In addition, they reflect the government's efforts to regain control over information flows. In theory, government microblogs are multidirectional platforms that provide officially approved information and offer tools for reporting problems and submitting complaints. Seen from a more pragmatic point of view, these government–citizen e-communication platforms serve first and foremost a venting function, which is thought to prevent the rise of large-scale public dissent (a function not unique to the Chinese case).

Government microblogs do not mark any major shift in the party-state's Internet strategy. The party-state still controls the (social) media and information systems, but it has started to soften its control instruments by relying on self-censorship and by setting up its own mi-

croblog information systems. All these efforts can be summarized under the framework of e-government, which, in contrast to the concepts of e-governance or e-democracy, postulates that online deliberation between the party-state and Chinese society is of a top-down nature. Deliberation has been extended from discussions with selected think-tank advisors and experts to online debates that include the general public. Policy making in the post-Maoist era has thus undergone a threefold reorganization: individual, personalized leadership has been replaced by collective leadership; consultation mechanisms have been introduced to professionalize the decision-making process; and new modes of indirect participation through deliberation have been set up to relegitimize the party-state.

The Internet is not a closed space of political activity separated from offline events; rather, it should be regarded as an integral part of Chinese politics. In Chinese academic articles, it has been theorized as an instrument to increase the system's administrative capacity. Its main goal is to professionalize the political system by streamlining administrative features. Another dimension of the government's e-strategy has also recently come to the surface: online debates contain information about the demands and interests prevailing in Chinese society beyond the channels of official complaints and proposal submissions. Indirect deliberation and new modes of state-led deliberation – that is, the monitoring of online discussions by the party-state and real-time state–society online discussions, respectively – are elements of the rebalancing of state–society relations in the context of growing discontent and increasing socioeconomic imbalances. Consequently, any study on contemporary Chinese politics that seeks to excavate the underlying dynamics of the changes in state–society relations in the PRC will have to include the linkages between online opinion and offline politics.

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