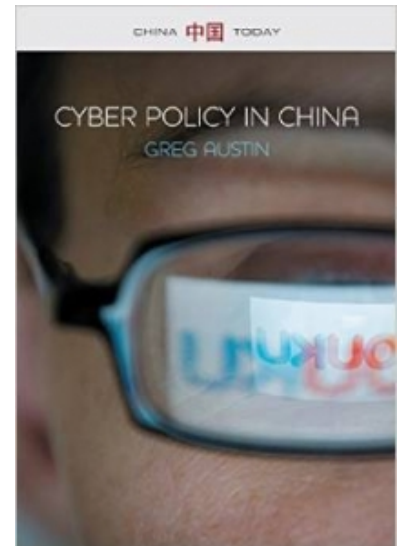# Book Review: Cyber Policy in China by Greg Austin

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China's rise is one of the defining issues of our time, but its democratic and human rights credentials continue to worry observers. In his new book on cyber policy in China, Greg Austin looks at the way that cyber policy works in China, and links into issues of democracy, rights and freedoms in what is soon to become the world's largest economy, in what **Indrani Lahiri** *describes as a 'must read'.*

Book Review: Cyber Policy in China by Greg Austin. Polity Press. 2014

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This book takes us through a detailed and engaging journey into the realm of cyber policy in China. Greg Austin thoroughly focuses on the quandary that exists in the formulation of the cyber policy in China. Austin interestingly focuses on how China aims to become a major advanced information society, but at the same time, intends to build the protected castle of information society based on strict monitoring and control of the internet content. The 6 chapters cover China's cyber ambition, the burning issues of e-democracy, and i-dictatorship, keeping in mind the binding core of security, making this book an interesting read for researchers, academics and experts interested in China, political communication, study of ethics, changing societies, operations of the communist and socialist governments in the age of information technology, cyber nationalism, e-governance and international relations. This book is highly relevant given the world perspective where China as the fastest growing and emerging economy is at the centre of world's attention. The cyber policy is another most relevant subject to discuss in the age of information society. But when a book focuses on both China and cyber policy it becomes an epic.

The cyber journey in China began in 1995 with public access to internet. However, China has the potential to dominate cyberspace owing to the economic and infrastructural expansion that they have managed to accomplish. More importantly, China has a different concept of information society that has been reflected in their policies and administrative acts. The author identifies the difference between 'informatization' and information society to direct readers on the more materialist side of the concept as viewed by the Chinese government. The author thus highlights Chinese government's concept of information society to be 'less people-centred than UN version and more in the mould of the materialist and technocratic traditions that Chinese Communists have preferred' (p.XV).

The question however is more intense in regard to the Chinese government's expectations from this information society that they want to create. The expectations as the author highlights in this book embed policy framing dilemmas shaped by their political values and ethics (p. XV). Therefore the theoretical framework adopted for studying cyber policy in China, in this book, is based on the study of ethics and the author lucidly separates it from the works in social sciences.

Austin has a background in international security which has enabled him to explore how the international security aspects moulded the thoughts of the Chinese government on the relevance of information society post 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (p.49 and p. 129). His coherent flow of arguments based on the findings on how information dictatorship (i-dictatorship) has been forced to coexist with China's e-democracy holds a critical explanation in the context of social productivity and the ethical framework that the Chinese government follows. The book holds special relevance to the study of information society based on the political affiliation of the society and uncovers China's obligation to connect with the 'free and open international knowledge society' to reach its cyber ambition (p.176).

The opening chapter of the book addresses a pressing question on why China wants to develop a world-class information society. The political leaders of China want to prioritise this advancement so as to ensure economic and social growth including reform. However, China also desires to connect this growth to its cultural traditions and prevailing social system where the question of state security occupies a central discourse. They do not want to advance this development depending on the private sector and the civil society alone but the government has to play a leading role owing to the question of the security of the state (p.2).The priorities as detailed in the National Informatization Plan (NIP) 2006-20 proposed by the Central Committee and the State Council in 2006 include four vital components – information society, e-government, national information security system and the IT legal system among others (p.3).

The author eloquently emphasises in this chapter that it is the mixed intention of technical and political interest that has given rise to the complex reports by the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) but at the same time the report thus undertakes a more human approach than the NIP report (p. 3-4). This clearly suggests the dilemma that China has over the path to adopt their informatization policy. The author here indicates a vital component of social computing, highlighting its political relevance over the control of the Chinese government in the cyberspace (p.4). The author then critically looks into the report by the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) in 2013 that emphasised on promoting agriculture rather than information society (p. 5-6). Irrespective of these quandaries, as Austin underline in this chapter, China did manage to create 'the largest and most effective network of internet monitors and censors in the world and it is credited with spectacular successes in cyber espionage against United States and other countries' (p.6).

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However that does not necessarily suggest political monitoring over informatisation policies in China has slackened but it does indicate the growing pluralisation within the Chinese society that has the potential to pose challenges for the Chinese government to pursue its directives. The author efficiently manages to delineate the existing contradictions and challenges that the politicians in China is currently facing and offers nine ideal policy values to look into the Chinese perspective of cyberspace (p.11-18).

More interestingly, Chapter 3, 'e-Democracy i-Dictatorship' addresses the question of social control versus state censorship in China by the CCP and how the Politburo shaped its cyber policy to promote 'socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics' (p.53). This chapter deals with the leadership values and narrates a consistently coherent

analysis of the cyber policies developed by the CCP relating to the nine ideal policy values for an information society. The Chinese government had to be mindful about both control and innovation. Hence they adopted a new approach of social control where the organisations are delegated the responsibility to censor content that are held inappropriate by the government (p.65). Therefore as the author finds that controlling the content of the internet is the topmost political priority for the CCP (p.67), in other words the internet is used as an 'instrument of control' by the CCP (p.69).

Finally the author connects to the three values among nine ideal policy values and concludes; firstly, 'state secrecy and state ideology' are the basis of information exchange, secondly the protection of information exchange in China resulted in more journalist arrests, banning content and publications and thirdly the trusted information as perceived by the Chinese government is under serious challenge from the globalising Chinese society. Based on the findings Austin suggests a 'deeper consultative democracy' for the CCP to survive politically in this information age.

Overall this is a must read. Greg Austin's *Cyber Policy In China* provide insightful views that challenges the way the Chinese government deal with the development of information and communication technology and relates them to a classic analysis of the leadership values. It raises a fundamental question on the ethical setting and political values of the CCP which can impede the information society ambition of the Chinese government. Austin presents in depth analysis of the CCP and its other organisational reports. It follows a consistent chronological approach but at the same time presents and connects the relevant documents to the complexity prevalent within the cyber policies of the Chinese government.

The findings suggest that the research work conducted for the book did not follow an easy route given the amount of control that is exerted by the CCP on dissemination of information. Finally this book raises a major question in hindsight : will China stay convinced in structuring advanced but secured information society or modify itself to embrace the international knowledge society and 'enjoy the sustainable prosperity that the capabilities of an advanced information society can offer' (p.176).

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