

Social Media As a Virtual Broker:
A New Possibility for State-Citizen Collaboration under Authoritarianism

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

The political role of social media has long been a topic of attention, and it has returned to the spotlight recently with the explosion of studies done on “the Arab Spring.” The significant role social media plays in organizing protests and disseminating information restored scholars’ confidence in the power of media in facilitating and accelerating democratic breakthroughs (Howard 2011). Some go as far as to say that digital media initiated the “fourth wave of democracy” (Howard and Hussain 2013) On the other side of the spectrum, however, previous studies have also been persistent in investigating the role of media in sustaining authoritarian rulings. Daniela Stockmann and Mary E. Gallagher(2011) examine the role of Chinese media in sustaining regime stability of authoritarianism and find that the Chinese media contribute to regime stability and effective rule through “positive propaganda.” Seva Gunitsky (2015) studies the authoritarian regimes in Russia, China, and the Middle East and notices the shift of authoritarian government’s attitude towards media from contestation to co-optation; autocracies allows for a certain amount of freedom of media but keep it far below the level of unfettered discourse, therefore successfully incorporating media a tool for regime stability (Gunitsky 2015).

How do we reconcile these two conflicting roles of digital media — that it seems to simultaneously facilitate democracy and fortify authoritarian resilience? This study suggests that to do so, we ought to stray away from the two main underlying assumptions of existing scholarship on the topic of media politics: the techno-centric approach and the control versus resistance dichotomy. The former overpowers social media as the deterministic factor of social and political changes and therefore undermines the human agency behind the use of technologies, while the latter stereotypes the interaction between the state and the citizens as two

opposing and irreconcilable forces. Under these two assumptions, the role of social media is both exaggerated and confined.

Inspired by existing scholarships on the role of intermediary actors in civil society, this study proposes an alternative framework of media politics studies — one that focuses on the fluid, collaborative, and adaptive nature of the relationship between the civil society and the state in the age of social media. To do so, this study will develop upon existing scholarships that explore the complexity and dynamics of this partnership between the state and intermediary actors in society, such as critical journalists and NGOs, and extend the framework to apply to a state-citizenry partnership particularly enabled in the age of social media. This study will conduct an initial examination of whether and how the fluid, collaborative partnership between the state and the general public enabled by social media proposed in the theoretical framework exist through the case study of the initial stages of information dissemination during the Covid-19 outbreak in China. By examining how the Chinese civil society employs social media during a time of national political crisis, this study intends to showcase the complex process civil actors take to navigate through limited political freedom and achieve political goals without necessarily paving a path to democratization.

CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

I. LIMITATIONS OF PAST STUDIES ON MEDIA POLITIC

a. Technological Determinism: Is Social Media Inherently Democratic?

Many past studies on the political role of social media fall into the category of technological determinism: the belief that technology is the “the prime mover” of societal changes (Chandler 1995; 12). According to Daniel Chandler (1995), “Technological determinists interpret technology in general and communications technologies in particular as the basis of society in the past, present and even the future” while “‘human factors’ and social arrangements are seen as secondary”(12). The technological determinist approach has existed in political theories since Karl Marx’s “The Poverty of Philosophy” (1847) as well as the works of non-Marxists theorists such as Sigfried Giedion, Leslie White, Lynn White Jr, Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan (Chandler 1995, 12).

The technological deterministic approach to the study of communication technology has existed in the form of an overly utopianist belief in media as inherently democratic. This phenomenon could be observed since the invention of the earliest prototype of Information and Communication Technology (ICT): the printing press. In her famous yet controversial book *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1980), Elizabeth Eisenstein argues that the invention of the printing press and its functions of dissemination, standardization, reorganization, and preservation preconditioned the Protestant Reformation, the Renaissance, and the Scientific Revolution; on the basis of these historical events rises the modern Western democracy (Diamond 2012). However, history has proven that the printing press bringing the end of history

was only wishful thinking. As Larry Diamond cautiously warns us, “the printing press also facilitated the rise of the centralized state and prompted the movement toward censorship” (Diamond 2012, 71). While censorship before publication was costly and complete suppression was almost impossible, the standardization of publications allowed states to single-handedly control the distribution of information. Even after the expiration of the *License Act* in 1695, the English government was still able to implement a variety of penalties and inducements to extensively control publications (Blick 2017).

The capacity of the printing press to be used as an instrument of control for authorities demonstrates that communication technology is not democratic by default. The subsequent inventions of communication technologies — the telegraph, radio, television — have all been proclaimed as democratic as their earliest prototypes (Hindman 2008). Glenn Frank, the president of the University of Wisconsin, predicted in 1935 that “the mechanism of radio... will tend in time to give us a new kind of statesman and new kind of voter” (Wilhem 2002, 2). Obviously, the life expectancy and level of impact of telegraph were far less impressive than those expecting a telegraphic future, and the kind of radiophonic revolution imagined by Glenn Frank in 1935 did not come to play in retrospect, either. Yet, political scientists have turned their hopes to the new age of internet and defining it as the newest form of “liberation technology,” defined as “any form of information and communication technology (ICT) that can expand political, social, and economic freedom” (Diamond 2010, 70).

Parallel has often been drawn between the age of printing press and the new age of digital network, especially in its initial stages of development (Dewar 1998), intended to foreshadow another revolutionary age in political history initiated by the new age of media. To highlight the

brand new potential of this new media age, scholars have argued that social media is radically different from the older generations of communication technology (Meier 2012); unlike its predecessors, the invention of social media permanently shifted the balance between state and civil society by creating a sphere for private political discourse (Shirky 2011, 31). As Patrick Meier explains, the radio was controlled by those who actually owned the broadcasting system — usually the government; telegraph and telephone, although having wider ownership, did not match the broadcasting ability of the radio (Meier 2012, 6). The internet and social media, in contrast, reallocate the power of information dissemination from the centralized state to the hands of the people, therefore enabling democratic mechanisms such as protest coordination (Meier 2012, 6).

Uprisings in the Middle East are often drawn as evidence for the uniqueness of the social media age. Newly coined phrases such as “Twitter revolution” “Facebook revolution” and “Youtube uprising” capture the essence of this concept — that new digital tools like Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube are the pillars of these political uprisings in the Middle East. When reporting about the Iran revolution in 2009, journalists used titles such as “Tyranny’s New Nightmare: Twitter” (Rutten 2009) or “The Revolution Will be Twittered” (Sullivan 2013) to emphasize the revolutionary invention of social media, foreshadowing a new age of civil movements distinguished from the past. Andrew Sullivan, one of the most prominent reporters during the 2009 Iran revolution, wrote in *the Atlantic*: “that a new information technology could be improvised for this purpose so swiftly is a sign of the times... You cannot stop people any longer. You cannot control them any longer. They can bypass your established media; they can broadcast to one another; they can organize as never before” (Sullivan 2013). Such emotionally

stimulating passage highlights the romanticized image of this new media age: all of a sudden people are unstoppable in their democratic pursuit because these new tools called Twitter, Facebook, or Youtube have become available to them.

Unfortunately, the Twitter revolution, like earlier counterparts, did not live up its romanticized expectations. The Iranian government was quick to respond by cutting off mobile signals and imposing internet censorship, and the movement itself was unable to achieve the goal of inhibiting the dictator Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's second presidential term. Even more disillusioned to the digital evangelists is the possibility that concepts such as the "Twitter revolution" might be a concept invented by the Anglo-saxophone society of the West. As Persian-speaking journalist Golnaz Esfandiari (2010) wrote in her article "Twitter Devolution" for *Foreign Policy*, "Twitter was definitely not a major communications tool for activists on the ground in Iran" and that the so-called "Twitter Revolution" was only a bunch of Americans tweeting among themselves." Twitter has become a prominent symbol of American technological soft power over the globe: what is more thrilling than a combination of Twitter, the spreading of Western democratic ideals, and on top of that, in the Middle East, a region often characterized by "evil dictators" and "oppressed people" in American political discourse?

Although it may not have lived up to its utopian ideals, it is impossible to deny that the invention of new digital media has had some positive effects on civil movements. What is intellectually problematic, however, is the use of a technologically deterministic approach when talking about the roles of new media in politics. The use of terms such as "Twitter revolution" or "Youtube uprising" "glosses over the sheer material and moral force of millions of Egyptians and Syrians who took to the streets, risking injury, disability, or death, to fight for

self-determination, basic human rights, dignity, and freedom” (Khamis et al. 2012, 1). To put technology at the central and causal position of political uprisings is to undermine the agency of the people, who are the real actors fighting and dying for these revolutions.

As Khamis and Gold summarize (2012), the techno-deterministic approach “privileges the tools of social change over the actors that employ them, thus inappropriately elevating social media above face-to-face mass action as agents for bringing about political change” (1). To prioritize the role of technology and allow them to define political movements is to downplay human agency and action, at the same time turning a blind eye to the social-political environment surrounding these technologies for them to achieve particular goals. By disputing the role of digital media in democratic movements and questioning the optimism surrounding these studies of the new digital age, I aim to contextualize the use of social media within their larger society and relocate agency of political movements from the technologies to the actors employing them. Instead of reaching a definitive conclusion of whether social media is inherently democratic or not, future studies should recognize that its role depends on the nuanced social, political and communication structures unique to each country (Kahmis and Gold 2012). In the end, as Diamond (2012) points out, “technology is merely a tool, open to both noble and nefarious purposes” (xii) Contextualization, therefore, is the key to studying technology in political context to avoid a technological deterministic approach, and to credit the results of political movements back to the people and the society that initiated them and fought them through.

b. Control Versus Resistance Dichotomy: the Assumed Framework

Past scholars investigating the role of social media in politics have tended to fall into a dichotomic narrative of control versus resistance, especially under the context of

authoritarianism (Stockmann and Gallagher, 2011, Rod and Weidmann 2015). In these works, the state is regarded as a force of control, while citizens as the force of resistance. This trend observed is rooted in the long tradition of democracy-centric political theories, where authoritarianism is only regarded as a temporary state of governance, and will inevitably be replaced by a process of democratization initiated by the citizens after certain social and economic conditions are met, one of them being media growth or communication (Lerner 1959). Under such a linear development model of democratization, citizens and the authority would only work as antagonistic forces against each other, as one struggles for social changes and other struggles to maintain power.

Maria Repnikova's observation in her book *Media Politics in China* (2017) that such a phenomenon also applies perfectly to the trend of scholarships investigating the role of social media in Chinese politics:

“Although the focus of inquiry has expanded and diversified, the dominant frameworks for engaging with Chinese media have not significantly changed over time. They continue to feature an emphasis either on the party-state tactics or on bottom-up practices, resulting in an analytical dichotomy of control versus resistance. Specifically, whereas one set of scholarly works interrogates censorship, ranging from the study of official directives to experiments with keyword filtering, the other illuminates journalists and netizens condensation of control via a myriad of creative practices.” (9)

Examples of scholarships on media politics in China that fall into the framework of control versus resistance include, as Repnikova points out, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (2009) by Guobin Yang, where Yang details different types of control mechanisms (e.g. soft vs strong) employed by the regime on the internet while juxtaposing them with citizen's means to resist such control. The internet, as theorized by Yang, stands at the crosspoint of these two opposing forces, as Yang concludes, “The encounters between control

and resistance have given rise to an information politics in China” (Yang 2009). On the other hand, literatures also take great interest in how citizen actors come up with creative methods of resistance, such as in Jonathan Hassid’s book *China’s Unruly Journalists: How Committed Professionals are Changing the People’s Republic*, where Hassid explores how Chinese journalists circumvent the censorship system, thus challenging policies and changing China one article at a time (Hassid 2016). While this tradition of literature provides an alternative narrative to earlier scholarships that portray the Chinese people under the authoritarian regime as brainwashed and blindly conforming, they are nonetheless unable to escape the Western democracy-centric narratives of citizen activism that portrays the state and the citizens as two separate and opposing forces, each representing one side of the dichotomy of control versus resistance.

c. Existing Scholarships Challenging the Control vs Resistance Framework

What I would like to support and further explore in this study is scholarship in political science that debunk this dichotomy of control versus resistance narrative and instead recognize the fluid and collaborative nature of the state-citizen relationship. Under the context of authoritarianism, such literature exists both on the side of the state and the citizens. On the side of the state, Andrew J. Nathan’s concept of “Authoritarian Resilience” reconstructs the image of an authoritarian state as static and stubborn to one that is malleable and reflective of the citizen’s demand (Nathan 2003). In particular, the study focuses on how the Chinese Communist Party rebuilt its legitimacy after the Tiananmen uprising by opening up to input from the people and reforming the structure of the government using slogans such as “fight corruption; reform the state-owned enterprises; ameliorate the lives of the peasants; improve the environment; comply

with World Trade Organization rules while using transitional privileges to ease China's entry into full compliance; suppress political opposition; meet the challenge of U.S. containment" without losing its grip on power (Nathan 2003, 16). Nathan's concept of "authoritarian resilience" highlights the possibility of a collaborative, rather than antagonist, the relationship between authoritarian states and their citizens.

On the other hand, the concept of "Rightful Resilience" by Kevin J. O'Brien (1996) diversifies the narrative on the side of the citizens by investigating how popular resistance could act within the framework of official norms to accommodate the structure of dominance. O'Brien defines the term "Rightful Resilience" as having three characteristics: "1) operates near the boundary of an authorized channel, 2) employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb political or economic power, and 3) hinges on locating and exploiting divisions among the powerful" (O'Brien 1996, 33). By exploring the possibility of "partially sanctioned resistance," (O'Brien 1996, 33) O'Brien defies the non-exclusivity between supporting and changing the current regime in power implied by the control versus resistance model.

Similarly, Peter Ho (1999) in studying Environmental NGOs in China develops the concept of "Embedded Advocacy" that further complicates the narrative on the side of the citizens. Ho notes that "the distinction between party-state versus civil society in China is a blurred one" (Ho 1999, 198); in the case of environmental NGOs, the "true" ones often disguise themselves as "entities that they are not" while the state also sets up environmental NGOs of their ones often called GONGOs (Ho 1999, 198). Ho also emphasizes that the "blurred line" between the party-state and civil society could be used to the advantage of these NGOs by developing informal ties (*guanxi*) with government officials (Ho 1999, 198). All evidence points

to the fact that the true relationship between the state and its citizens under authoritarianism cannot be summarized by the simple, clear-cut dichotomy of control versus resistance; in reality, the two forces not only interact but influence each other, are more collaborative than antagonistic, and are constantly adapting to each other's frameworks.

II. REPNIKOVA'S FRAMEWORK: A FLUID AND COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIP

Past scholarship that exemplifies such a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the state-citizen relationship in the realm of media politics is Maria Repnikova's book *Media Politics in China: Improvising Power under Authoritarianism* (2017). In particular, Repnikova (2017) explores how critical journalists in China navigate through the limited political opening under authoritarianism to shape governance in a constructive manner without the intention to pave the way for democratization. In her study, Repnikova's theoretical framework tackles both issues of past scholarships on media politics described above: a technological deterministic approach and a control versus resilience dichotomic framework.

a. Technological Determinism Rebuttal

In Repnikova's analysis of media politics in China, technology takes a peripheral role while those of the social actors are central. The subject of Repnikova's study is the critical journalists in China, who are defined as journalists who investigate and cover contentious societal issues with the intention of "questioning, criticizing and transforming some aspects of governance" (Repnikova 2017, 3). Though critical journalists undeniably achieve their goals through the use of media, Repnikova makes a conscious effort to emphasize their human agency while avoiding the deterministic role of technology.

This is not to say that no attention is paid to investigate the role of technology in media politics in China. In Chapter 3 of her book under the section “Background: Transformative Forces behind the Emergence of Critical Journalism,” Repnikova discusses how the state’s endorsement of the internet and the emergence of social media indirectly empowered the expansion of critical journalism (Repnikova 2017, 48). In particular, she argues that “the internet... simultaneously facilitated the production and dissemination of critical discourses” and social media “has generated unprecedented connectivity across journalist communities as well as between journalists and activists in working on shared agenda and inputting pressure on the state” (Repnikova 2017, 13).

While validating the undeniable influence of communication technology development, however, Repnikova distances her argument from a technological deterministic approach by prioritizing how social actors *employ* technology as a medium to achieve their political agenda, instead of focusing on the technology *itself* as some kind of agent of change. Following her account of the development of ICT over the years, Repnikova emphasizes, “Chinese media practitioners have consistently employed internet tools to connect, collaborate and spread media reports that in the past had only been available for sale in print editions” (Repnikova 2017, 48) and that “as a result of social media expansion, journalists’ task of informed, balanced and timely reporting and interpretation of conflicting information has become ever more critical in recent years” (Repnikova 2017, 48-49). The focus of these arguments highlights that critical journalists are exerting their agency over the transforming landscape of communication technology, adapting and taking advantage of technological advancements to achieve their own goals. Moreover, the nature of this relationship between the technology and the social actors requires

in-depth analysis of the unique political structure that the social actors are embedded in, therefore calls for the cruciality of contextualization — another aspect often underplayed by technological determinists.

b. Control vs Resilience Dichotomy Rebuttal

Repnikova (2017)'s study also intentionally strays away from the control versus resilience dichotomy prevalent in the Westernized political discourses by portraying the relationship between critical journalists and central governmental authority as “a fluid, state-dominated partnership characterized by continuous improvisation” (9). The nature of the relationship being a “partnership” implies that citizens and the state work not antagonistically but collaboratively on issues, and the “fluidity” and “improvisation” characteristics of this partnership emphasize that the state and the citizen do not have clear-cut and assigned roles at all times; rather their relationship is often shaped by context. Moreover, she sheds light on the reality that “media openings are always highly contested spaces under authoritarianism, as regimes regard them with schizophrenic vision, both as potential threats to and as necessary tools for their continuing survival in the interconnected world” (Repnikova 2017, 7). Such an understanding of media and its complex role under authoritarian government rejects the assumption that citizens employing media as a political tool always intend to either sustain or challenge authority and instead explores the possibility that they could be working collaboratively with the vary authorities they are seeking to influence. Thus, her work pushes media studies away from the dominant narrative of democratization or authoritarian resilience. As Repnikova (2017) conveniently summarizes in her introductory chapter, “The aspiration of this book is to examine these tensions in more depth by stepping beyond the analytical focus on

the outcomes of liberalisation versus resilience and illuminating the processes of negotiation and mutual adaptation of different actors involved in contesting these openings” (7).

To do so, Repnikova (2017) focuses on what she calls “critical journalists” in China, defined as journalists who write “investigative, in-depth, editorial and human-interest coverage of contentious societal issues” (3-4), vis-a-vis their relationship to central authorities. Specifically, Repnikova analyzes in detail two crisis events — the Sichuan earthquake and the repetitive major coal-mining accidents. In the former case, she observes that critical journalists during post-crisis management acts as “supervision agents” of the central state by reporting on deep-seated failure of the government exposed by the crisis (111), while the government responded with “creative compromise” by enacting on immediate policy measures but also outlawing further investigation (111). She concludes that the “fluid and unequal collaboration” between the state and the critical journalist resulted in superficial improvements in governance (Repnikova 2017, 111). In response to the repetitive major coal-mining accidents, Repnikova (2017) observes that critical journalists have “carefully investigated complex government failures” by exploiting the gap between local and central government objectives regarding media oversight of coal-mining safety, thus “positioning themselves as consultant to central state” (142). This latter case demonstrates how “the dynamics of a fluid collaboration between journalists and central officials are reaffirmed in the aftermath of repetitive disasters” (Repnikova 2017, 142).

Though focused on the critical journalist—government partnership, Repnikova also implies that the “collaborative dimension” theorized in her book is not unique to journalists, but applicable to the analysis of Chinese intellectuals and other activists who are embedded in the

political system (Repnikova 2017, 11). She also further recognizes that the journalists are “deeply entrenched in the wider network of China’s activists,” one that also includes non-governmental organization leaders and lawyers (Repnikova 2017, 6). What is in common between these civil actors mentioned categorized by Repnikova is their “brokerage” relationship with the state and their intermediary status between the state and the common people, which allows them to engage in an unequal yet collaborative partnership with the state and negotiate shared goals to work towards (Repnikova 2017, 9).

III. EXPANSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF REPNIKOVA’S FRAMEWORK: WHAT ABOUT THE PEOPLE?

Repnikova limits the applicability of her findings to intermediary organizations in society — those that act in between the state and the civil society — such as NGOs, lawyers, and renowned intellectuals or activists. What is unique about these social actors is their ability to act as a broker between the state and the public, as well as maintaining brokerage relationships with each other. Their ability to establish networks horizontally and vertically give them the privilege to bargain and negotiate with the state — giving these intermediary organizations the ability to “operate within a common political framework and aspiring towards a shared goal” (Repnikova 2017, 9).

a. Brokerage

Initially used in social network analysis, the concept of “brokerage” refers to “a condition in which one party acts as an intermediary between two others” (Lind et al. 2008, 79). A brokerage relationship is consisted of at least three actors, two of whom are not directly tied to each other, and a third who acts as a bridge between the other two (Lind et al. 2008, 79). The role

of the “broker,” therefore, is to “facilitate transactions between other parties lacking access to or trust in one another” (Marsden 202 cited in Lind et al. 2008, 79). A vibrant brokerage network is crucial for the survival of chains of interaction and connectedness of a network — essential for the effectiveness and sustainability of social and political movements (Diani 2003, 107).

In the context of a social and political movement, the concept of brokerage could exist both vertically and horizontally. Vertically, two actors who are not directly tied to each other are located in the state and civil society. The actor assuming the traditional role of broker, therefore, could be intermediary organizations such as NGOs or critical journalist, who, on the one hand, are representative of public demands and, on the other hand, have a substantial connection to the government through formal and informal linkage such as *guanxi* (Ho 1999, 198). Repnikova’s study demonstrates an example of how intermediary actors (critical journalists) assume such a role as a “vertical broker” between the citizens and the state; through the two case studies, Repnikova concludes that critical journalists hold substantial bargaining power with the state over media censorship and contribute to effective crisis management by both reflecting and shaping public opinion (Repnikova 2017).

Horizontally, brokerage relationships also exist in between intermediary organizations, which allow each individual actor (organization) to be linked into a network system. Extensive studies have been done on how NGOs are able to use brokerages to establish transnational advocacy networks that allow them to effectively communicate information and achieve organizational goals horizontally to many other organizations even without direct personal contacts (Katz and Anheier 2005, Hervé 2014).

b. Virtual Brokerage in the Age of Social Media

In theory, the vertical or horizontal “broker” status is only available to intermediary actors such as NGOs or critical journalists who are connected to formal organizational structures and have established channels of communication with the state. The general public, who are not members of any formalized organization and do not have direct relations with the state, would lack the privilege to establish such brokerages and thus should be deprived of bargaining power with the state. In reality, however, the age of social media makes this previously impossible situation possible by fundamentally restructuring how society is organized.

Social media is distinguished from earlier media by its more interactive and collaborative manner and its emphasis on social interaction and collective intelligence (Murugesan 2007). What is more significant about the development of social media, however, is that the widespread use of the Internet and mobile phones in this new age of internet empowered “revolutionary social change from small group to broader personal networks” — or in other words, the concept of “networked individualism.” First theorized by Harrison Rainie and Barry Wellman (2012), “networked individualism” describes a new social “operating system” (7) that has emerged around social networks, characterized not by the small, tight ones that existed in traditional societies, but those that are looser and more fragmented (Rainie and Wellman 2012, 8). In this new form of social organization, the focus is the *person*, not the family, work unit, neighborhood, nor social group, and each person has become increasingly networked as an *individual*, not as a member of a group (Rainie and Wellman 2012, 6).

One important characteristic of “networked individualism” is its ability to blend the boundary of private versus public sphere. This is a two-way process, as the privatization of the public and publicization of private take place simultaneously. On the one hand, the prevalence of

social media use forces the private space to become public, as “private life is now mediated by technologies purposely built for instantaneous and global publication” (Salter 2018, 29). This phenomenon facilitates the creation of the “intimate public,” evident in the practices of “sexting” and “revenge porn” (Salter 2018, 30). On the other hand is the privatization of public life enabled by social media. In the realm of politics, first name Lance Bennett and Alexandar Segerberg (2011) theorizes this phenomenon as the “personalization of political action” (770); social media allows individuals to better personalize their engagement in collective actions by enabling flexibility on how, when, and with whom they choose to participate in political movement (Bennett and Segerberg 2011, 771).

It is under this latter phenomenon that the concept of *connective action* emerges. *Connective action* is distinguished from the familiar logic of *collective action*, as the latter is characterized by high levels of organizational resources and the formation of collective identities, while the former is based on personalized content sharing across media networks (Bennett and Segerberg 2011, 739). In the context of *connective action*, conventional methods of organization is replaced by digitally networked actions (DNA), and digital media takes the role of the “organizing agent” (Bennett and Segerberg 2011, 752) traditionally assumed by leaders in formal organizations. The outcome of *connective action*, as Bennett and Segerberg (2011) emphasize, is more than just a “technology-enabled networks of personalized communication” but “a flexible organization” (753) that “are in themselves organizational structures that can transcend the elemental units of organizations and individuals” (Diani 2011 quoted by Bennett and Segerberg 2011, 753). Examples of social movements that can be categorized under the

connective action framework include the Occupy Wall Street Protests or the *Indignados* movement in Spain that took place in 2011 (Bennett and Segerberg 2011, 754).

The *connective action* model is used in this current study to introduce the possibility of a virtually organized institution organizing the general public as a whole, with social media taking on the role of a “virtual broker.” This new possibility enabled by the development of social media offers an important addition to the study of political movements and activism because the general public, once lacking formal institutional structure and channels of communication with the government, is now able to establish vertical and horizontal brokerage, assume bargaining and negotiation power, and establish a collaborative partnership with the state, using social media platforms as its brokers. As a result, we would expect that the “fluid, state-dominated partnership characterised by continuous improvisation” (9) observed by Repnikova (2017) between critical journalists and the state to also apply to the state-citizenry relationship mediated by social media.

IV. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study will attempt to test the theoretical model developed above — whether social media could replace the role of traditional intermediary actors in society such as NGOs and critical journalists to enable the forming of a fluid, collaborative yet unequal partnership between the citizens and the state — through a case study of how social media was used during the COVID-19 outbreak in China. Through using both primary and secondary resource that carefully record and analyze activities and sentiments on Chinese social media such as Sina Weibo and Wechat during the initial stages of the outbreak, the study hope to showcase the nature of the

partnership between the citizens and the state enabled by social media during one of the biggest national crisis in modern Chinese history.

CHAPTER III: CASE STUDY

The COVID19 outbreak of 2019 to 2020 is not only the biggest public health crisis for China in recent years, but also the biggest PR crisis for the Chinese Communist Party in recent decades — the aftermath of which gave the unshakable CCP a startling quake, to say the least. Upset by how the government handled the crisis, the citizens did not hesitate to express their dissatisfaction online. The wave of public opinion was intense enough to infiltrate the great wall of censorship in place and make its prominent presence on social media, leaving the CCP with no choice but to take actions accordingly.

Though initially relying on traditional media outlets, the state soon recognized social media as the primary platform for effective information dissemination during a time of public health crisis, as it was crucial for information to disseminate information quickly and reach a large audience. As a result, social media such as Weibo and Wechat in China quickly became both the official channels for delivering the centralized message to the public and the platforms the public to advocate their voices. Through an in-depth look into the initial information dissemination process during the COVID-19 crisis in China, we gain a rare insight into how, in detail and specificity, social media operates as an intermediary actor between the state and the people. Does social media provide a space for negotiation and partnership between the state and the people, or does it simply pitch the two against each other? If former, what are some tactics employed by social media users to enable a malleable and ever-evolving partnership, and how do they differ from those established by traditional intermediary actors?

This chapter will strive to answer these questions by first outlining the theoretical model of social media as a contentious space under authoritarianism, understanding how the Chinese

cyberspace is shaped by censorship, and establishing the unique role of social media in times of national crisis. Then, by detailing, step by step, the initial stages of information dissemination during COVID-19 crisis in China, and pinpointing specific tactics employed by the people and the government to facilitate this partnership, this case study intends to demonstrate how social media facilitate the two parties into collaboratively shaping the national policy during this special time.

I. SOCIAL MEDIA UNDER AUTHORITARIANISM: A CONTENTIOUS SPACE

Bounded by strict and systematic censorship regulations on the one end, and free and equal access for all people on the other, social media is a naturally contentious space that theoretically serves both the authority and the voice from the people under an authoritarian regime.

Geographers and urban theorists have extensively theorized the paramount significance of space in shaping contentious politics. William Sewell (2001) argues that the relationship between space and contentious politics is interactive — that space is “simultaneously the medium and outcome of social action” (Sewell 2001, 55). Space has been regarded as an agent (“spatial agency) in social movements instead of merely a background, and spatial factors such as the surroundings of particular spatial locations, time-distance, the built environment, spatial routines have received extensive attention for their roles in constructing and forming social movements into particular shapes (Sewell 2001).

However, the attention given to space has been limited to those physical and tangible — a park, a square, a street, etc. I would like to argue here that the concept of “contentious space”

(space for contentious politics) also exists in a digital world. Cyberspaces created on social media, especially under authoritarian settings, resemble physical spaces in the nature they are constructed as well as their role in shaping social movements. In theories of space and contentious politics, physical space is created under two sets of forces: the laws and norms from the state, and protestors' spatial practices therein (Kwok and Chan 2020, 1). Cyberspace created by social media is similarly shaped by these two forces: the cyber laws and regulations from the state on the one hand and netizens' tactics to raise their voices on the other hand. As Kwok and Chan (2020) points out, maintaining a contentious political space requires coordination between the two parties, the state and the protestors (1). Similarly, maintaining contentious cyberspace also requires collaboration between the state and the netizens. Actions undertaken by both parties are inevitably shaped and adjusted under the influence of the other at all times: the state regulates cyberspace with the goal of maintaining trust from the citizens to sustain power, while the netizens — the equivalent of citizens online — employ the cyberspace to get their message across while bearing government regulation in mind. Though the relationship is one between unequal powers with the state gaining the upper hand, it is nonetheless symbiotic in nature, as one depends on the other's response for survival.

The role of cyberspace in shaping social movements, therefore, also resembles that of a physical space. As established by urban theorists, space itself should be regarded as an independent actor that plays a central role in shaping and forming social movements into particular shapes via its physical settings (Kwok and Chan 2020). Similarly, cyberspace also assumes such a central role in social movements taking place online through its settings; for

example, through censorship regulations, the structure of its displays, the matrix, etc. The state and the public, therefore, form each of their tactics in response to these settings in place.

All of the above analysis is to emphasize that the nature and settings of cyberspace, like that of physical space, take on a central role in social movements, and create a perfect habitat for the procreation of contentious politics.

II. CHINESE CYBERSPACE SHAPED BY CENSORSHIP

China's cyberspace is largely shaped by state censorship since its initial stage of development. Starting from its earliest setup in the late 1980s to early 1990, to the network expansion in the 1990s, the internet developed under close monitoring by the Chinese Communist Party (Herold and Marolt 2012). As the scale of internet use expanded, the government was prompt at responding by issuing regulations and establishing organizations to control cyberspace (Herold and Marolt 2012). Though the general public was granted access to the internet in 1997, the central government kept the ownership and control over the access route to the internet, while private companies were only allowed rental of bandwidth of government-owned entities (Herold and Marolt 2012). The fact that the Chinese cyberspace is developed under the full control of the central government distinguishes it from any other cyberspaces: freedom on the Chinese cyberspace is only "government-allowed" (Herold and Marolt 2012).

Censorship on the Chinese internet takes three major forms. First is through "The Great Firewall of China" (King et al. 2013). Brought to life in 2003, the Great Firewall has been known as "the world's most sophisticated and pervasive censorship system" (Ensafi et al. 2015, 62) This

nation-wide censorship system is designed to systematically deny access to international websites such as Wikipedia and BBC. The second form of censorship, “keywords blocking,” functions by automatically blocking contents containing a list of keywords such as “Tiananmen” or “democracy” (Herold 2013). Lastly, contents that pass the first two censorship methods can still be taken down manually by the “cyber police” employed by the state, who manually go through contents and delete those that they find objectionable (King et al. 2013).

For the past decade, the Chinese government has been leaning towards a “contained transparency” approach, supplementing censorship by employing commentators to flood the internet with pro-regime messages (Repnikova 2015). These state-sponsored commentators are commonly called by the “fifty cents army” by the Chinese netizens, referring to the fifty cents fee they reportedly receive for each entry (Han 2015a). Such a technique is called “astroturfing,” where users pose as spontaneous grassroots voices when they are actually organized or sponsored by certain groups, in this case, the Chinese state (Han 2015b). The fifty-cents army is designed to guide public opinion in a pro-regime direction, fostering the illusion of popular support for state agenda.

III. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN NATIONAL CRISIS

Social media has been credited as an essential tool for crisis communication and risk management. In 2012, OECD’s report published in 2012 titled “The Use of Social Media in Risk and Crisis Management” outlined the advantages and challenges of the government using social media during times of crisis. The paper recognized how social media has been used “to convey information during crises to send warnings, to conduct situational awareness, and even to

catalyse action and sustain dialogs and feedback loops among public authorities, volunteer groups, the business sector and citizens” (Wendling et al., 6). On top of the advantages offered by social media, the paper also discusses the challenges of crisis management using social media, especially how social media enabled citizens to “question government actions at low cost and high efficacy” and thus making credibility and trust establishment harder for the government (Wendling et al., 6).

We’ve seen the central role of social media play out in particular case analysis of crisis. Makinen and Kuira found that social media functioned as an alternative medium for citizen communication or participatory journalism during the 2008 post-election crisis in Kenya (2008). Particularly, during the 5-day broadcast ban after the election, many Kenyans turned to social media as the alternative source of information for the crisis and violence. The Kenyan citizens took on the roles of “citizen journalists” to report on the situations they observe and spread the information online in order to make up for the news blackout (Makinen and Kuira 2008). In conclusion, the authors argued that “social media generated an alternative public sphere, which widened the perspectives about the crisis and enabled new kinds of citizen participation in discussing the situation.” (Makinen and Kuira 2008, 329).

Similarly, Leong et al. uses the 2011 Thailand flooding to argue that social media empowers communities during crisis response (2015). In particular, the authors challenge the often top-down, command-and-control model in crisis management literature and instead focus on the active role of the community. While the community’s ability to participate in crisis management was previously constrained due to the lack of “mediating structure” (175), the authors argue that the emergence of social media breaks this restraint by allowing an alternative

channel of communication ((Leong et al. 2015, 175). The authors conclude that social media empowers the community during crisis by transforming their victim narrative to one competent of managing the challenges of crisis management on its own (Leong et al. 2015).

The above cases demonstrate that social media plays two roles during times of national crisis. As the OECD report notes, social media could be used effectively by the government to spread important information and receive feedback from the public; meanwhile, social media also provides citizens with the tools to report and distribute information, therefore empowering them to become active participants in crisis management while keeping the government accountable. This double-sided function of social media during crisis management aligns with the concept of social media functioning as an intermediary actor between the government and the people and serves necessary functions on both sides, as discussed in the previous chapter. This characteristic of social media is especially highlighted during times of crisis, when the state of emergency effective communication between the people and the state is at higher stake than usual. The following case study on how the initial information disseminated in China during the COVID-19 outbreak demonstrates an example of how social media plays out the role of an intermediary actor in details and reality.

IV. COVID-19 OUTBREAK IN CHINA

The COVID-19 outbreak in China first took place at the end of the 2019, right before the Chinese New Years holiday. Following the usual patterns of authoritarian regimes, the government initially dealt with the newly founded virus and the potential of an epidemic outbreak by suppressing and concealing information from the public, until the situation became

so critical that public awareness of the infectious virus became crucial. While the government maintained its initial radio silence, the citizens took on the active roles as citizen journalists to report and disseminate important information regarding the virus and keep the public informed. However, the trend and sentiment observed in Chinese cyberspace indicates that the citizens and the state did not always stand on the opposite sides. Though, as expected, the government deployed typical authoritarian strategies such as censorships and “misinformation” law enforcements to appease the public voice, it eventually recognized the essential role of social media in crisis management and utilizes its functions to establish a unequal yet nonetheless collaborative partnership with the citizens in order to reach the most effective solution for crisis management, while also maintaining its authoritative power.

a. Stage I: Government’s Initial Radio Silence and Citizen Responses

Retrospectively, cases of “pneumonia with unknown origin” were found in Wuhan as early as December 8, but the state media remained radio-silent until silence was no longer an option.

On December 30, an emergency document bearing a red-colored header and the official seal of the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission, titled “Regarding Reporting on Cases of Pneumonia of Unknown Origin” (Wikimedia) was leaked online — the first “evidence” on the new virus involuntarily made available to the public. The next day, the Wuhan government confirmed that there were a total of 27 cases, 7 of which severe, but denied that there was any evidence of human-to-human transmission (Rudolph 2020). For the following several weeks, no more reports were published on this “new pneumonia with unknown origin” (Rudolph 2020). Party meetings and celebrations leading up to the Spring Festival continued to be held as if

everything was back to normal. Clearly at this stage, the government has yet to foresee the irrepressible scale of the upcoming virus outbreak.

Meanwhile, citizens took on the proactive role to spread private information in order to compensate for the lack of information provided by the government. Most young people in China, including myself, found out about the Coronavirus outbreak not through the TV or news, but through privately circulated information on Chinese social media. Information regarding the new virus circulated through private messages and group chats, short lived due to quick censorship, yet continue to come and go in great quantity.

Interestingly, this phenomenon is also captured by a study on the association between internet search data and the daily numbers of new laboratory-confirmed cases and suspected cases of COVID-19 (Li et al. 2020). The study found that data contained from Google Trends, Baidu Index, and Sina Weibo Index on searches for keywords related to COVID-19 *preceded* the incidence peak published by the National Health Commission of China by 10-14 days; in particular, Sina Weibo disseminated the information faster than traditional websites (Li et al. 2020). This study confirms the observation that social media platforms such as Sina Weibo had been effectively employed by citizens before the outbreak peak to disseminate information warning against the newly found virus.

In contrast, another study done on news media in China during the early stages of COVID-19 outbreak found that news reports *lagged behind* the development of the epidemic and failed to indicate outbreaks of the virus from time to time (Liu et al. 2020). Though the study reasons that this delay is due to the complicated procedures and efforts put into producing journalistic work, it is undeniable that the authoritarian government that initially wanted to keep

silent about the potential of an outbreak acted as the biggest restraint on the ability of state-owned media to report timely and accurately. The contrast between the foreboding characteristic of social media and the delay of news outlets spotlights the crucial role played by social media to disseminate information during the outbreak in contrast with the failure of the state media to fulfill its role.

b. Stage II (the state) : Authoritarian Resilience

The government, however, was slow on its end to admit that the crisis could not be controlled by using censorship and suppression. One special case demonstrates such a stand of the government in detail.

Among the information circulating on social media, a leaked screenshot of group chat messages, warning against seven confirmed cases of SARS coronavirus in Wuhan hospitals, gained significant momentum online, particularly because the members of the group chat are alumni from a medical school (于无声处 2020). Later, it was confirmed that the messages were sent by Dr. Li Wenliang, a doctor working at the Wuhan Central Hospital.

The next day, on December 31st, Dr. Li was summoned by the hospital's inspection unit for a talk. Li received a call from the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission at 1:30AM, was interrogated by the officers and driven home by the chief director at 4:00AM. The next day, Li continued to be questioned by the hospital's inspection and was asked to write a self-reflection, admitting to the wrongdoings of "spreading rumors" (韩谦 2020). Later on January 3, Li was called in by the Wuhan police office to sign an admonition document, once again admitting his "wrongdoings" (Qin and Shen 2020).

Private reprimand was clearly not enough. Li, along with seven other “rumormongers” (later revealed to all be doctors and medical professionals), were publicly condemned on TV news and the Wuhan police’s official Weibo account (还原... 2020). The police warned the public, “the internet is not outside the law. The information you post and the things you say online should comply with all laws and regulations. The police will investigate and deal with such illegal acts as fabricating and spreading false information and rumors and disrupting social order. Such actions will not be tolerated” (Rudolph 2020). It was clear that at this point, the government stuck with the strategy of control and concealment.

c. Stage II (the citizens): the Emergence of Critical Citizen Journalists

To kill a chicken in order to frighten a monkey (杀鸡儆猴) — a common strategy employed by the Chinese government to elicit fear by publicly punishing certain personnel — seemed to have lost its effectiveness this time. In response, citizens continued to take on the role of information disseminators, writing more in-depth and openly critical articles regarding the epidemic.

One of the former articles written on January 21 was titled “None of the Important Information We Now Know About Wuhan Pneumonia was First Published by Wuhan Authorities.” The author unveiled the stark reality that useful information made known to the public never came from official government channels. It became increasingly clear that in contrast to the government’s self-assured statement that the epidemic is “preventable and controllable”(可防可控), the disease was highly contentious and fast-spreading in reality (事实杂货铺 2020). Such an openly critical article was, of course, quickly censored and deleted.

It is also interesting to note that citizens were backed by critical journalists, who further criticized the state's incompetence and revealed critical information to the public. For example, *China News Weekly* published the report "Wuhan Doctor: When the Epidemic Started 'we weren't allowed to say anything'" on January 25, where doctor Lin Yun from Wuhan Union Hospital was quoted, "if official channels had made the situation clear from the beginning, at least 50% to 60% of people would have taken preventative measures" (2020). On January 27, *Beijing Youth Daily* also published an in-depth interview with Dr. Li Wenliang, who has become severely infected himself while treating patients and was transferred to the ICU, detailing his experience after being accused of spreading "rumors." *Caixin*, another rising critical media outlet, also conducted an interview with Li on January 31, where Li was famously quoted, "I think there should be more than one voice in a healthy society."¹ The majority of these articles were censored and deleted, though some of them remained accessible online. Nevertheless, the articles instigated intense public response despite their short life span.

At this stage, the citizens and the state still stood at opposite sides.

d. Stage III: Working Towards a Common Ground

On January 23rd, the government imposed a lockdown of the city of Wuhan where the virus was initially discovered and fast spreading, followed by lockdowns of other cities in the Hubei province. Contrary to previous efforts of suppressing information and understating the severity of the situation, the lockdown came at many people's surprise; it sends an alarming surrender message from the state to the people that the pandemic was, at this point, out of control.

¹ Qin and Shen. "Whistleblower Li Wenliang: There Should Be More Than One Voice In A Healthy Society."

However, a study observing the public attention to COVID-19 related events through the Sina Weibo hot search list (Zhao et al. 2020) found that the public sentiment on the outbreak during this critical period changed from negative to neutral over time (Zhao et al. 2020). Looking at the timeline around January 23rd specifically, the authors record that negative emotions were decreasing while neutral and positive emotions were on the rise, and emotions also became more stable compared to prior (Zhao et al. 2020). The authors argue that this observation is due to the fact that as the epidemic spread across the country, “the public eased their concerns and fears caused by their uncertainty toward and ignorance of the epidemic, and responded to the epidemic with a more objective attitude” (Zhao et al. 2020). However, such an explanation is insufficient to rationalize why, during the most critical period of the outbreak when Wuhan faced lockdown and the virus posed threat nation-wide, public sentiment was more appeased and stabilized than before.

A further look into Zhao et al. (2020)’s data reveals that the public's attention started shifting its focus from the initial fear and panic to searching for prevention and control measures and eventually, to information focused on resource and donation requests and organization. While the search words at the initial stage were clustered around the unknown origin and effect of the virus, latter the attention shifted to disease prevention and control related knowledge and efforts, including discussions around Huoshenshan and Leishenshan hospitals, the makeshift hospitals in Wuhan specifically built to deal with coronavirus infected patients (Zhao et al. 2020). The public’s demand for information on prevention and control methods was, as the authors point out, “conducive to public health communication and promotion” (Zhao et al. 2020). Another study by Han et al. (2020) observes similar trends; collecting and analyzing Sina Weibo

texts related to COVID-19, Han et al. (2020) find that contents related to the sub-topic “popularization of prevention and treatment” took a steep increase after January 20th, while search words related to topics of “seeking help” and “making donations” also began to rise steadily after the Wuhan city went on lockdown on January 23rd (Han et al. 2020).

This positive trend in public sentiment not only indicates eased concern and fear among citizens, but more importantly, a change in attitude of the public to seek collaboration with the state. Whether it is search words related to prevention and control methods or seeking help and donation, they reflect the citizen’s demand for the government to respond more promptly and responsively in crisis management. On the government’s end, though public demand voiced online might injure the absolute authority of the authoritarian state, they nonetheless enhanced situation awareness of the virus and helped the government locate where resource and appeasement is most urgently demanded.

My personal observations of trends on social media also align with this collaborative shift in the citizen-state relation described in the above studies. Towards the second and third stage of the outbreak, posts on Sina Weibo and Wechat started to be dominated with Wuhan citizens self-reporting on the shortage of essential items, patient families seeking treatment opportunities at hospitals, or medical personnels asking for donations of essential medical supplies. Consequently, less energy was focused on condemning the state for its initial information concealment. Meanwhile, the state also started taking full advantage of social media as the primary platform for information dissemination by updating regularly on the official accounts of state-owned news outlets as well as taking full advantage of the hot search list on Weibo to gear towards a more practical and positive narrative of the current situation by, for example,

prioritizing information on the latest updates of the epidemic and highlighting effective measures taken by the government (e.g. successfully building a hospital from ground in span of ten days).

One anecdote I noted provides an interesting insight of how citizens and the state worked towards a common ground during this stage of the outbreak. One crucial concern of the Wuhan citizens at the beginning of the lockdown was food shortage. During the first few days of the lockdown, some Wuhan citizens posted on Weibo that cabbage prices skyrocketed to as high as 35rmb. The post went viral on social media and soon instigated nation-wide attention. Citizens criticized the government's inadequacy to effectively allocate resources and ensure the safety of Wuhan citizens under lockdown. Instead of immediately removing and censoring the post as usual, the government surprisingly implemented fast measures in response to the “cabbage crisis” instead. First, state media quickly took on the mission to “debunk the myth”; many were fast to produce reports on how the unreasonable price of 35rmb is a singular incident and most markets still sell at a normal price in Wuhan (Caixin; Phenix News). Moreover, the state was fast to warn against “unscrupulous merchants” that strict measures would be taken against those who sell above the regulated food price (The Japan Times). Meanwhile, the government also opened up “green channels” to ensure fast food transportation from other cities to Wuhan; Shouguang, the country’s biggest vegetable production base in Shandong, for example, received a request to deliver 600 tons of vegetables to Wuhan everyday in the next 10 to 15 days (The Japan Time). All of the above measures were taken within the span of three days after the cabbage went viral on Weibo.

IV. DISCUSSION

a. Did Social Media Serve as a Virtual Broker?

Through the case study of how social media is employed by the citizens and the state during the initial stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in China, we can observe that, despite the initial opposition, the citizens and the state were able to establish some common ground on crisis management with the help of social media.

Specifically, social media platforms were utilized on the citizen's side to initially disseminate information on the danger of the newly discovered virus when the state media remained silent, but slowly it became the primary platform for citizens to spread the knowledge on virus prevention and control as well as to voice demand for resource shortage and support. Meanwhile, though initially attempting to conceal information through strict censorship, the state slowly succumbed to the effectiveness of social media in information dissemination and therefore selectively allowed for content that were conducive to state policies of crisis management. In particular, social media such as Weibo served as an essential tool for the state to locate resource shortage, allowing the state to prioritize policies during crisis management that would provide effective solutions while appeasing public sentiment and maintaining authority.

Did social media function as an intermediary actor between the state and the citizens, like NGOs and journalists, in enabling a collaborative, though unequal, partnership between the two? The short answer to the question is: yes. During the COVID-19 outbreak, social media platforms, due to this ability to collect and present public voice in a concentrated and explosive manner, functioned as a rare channel of direct communication and information exchange between the

state and the citizen, allowing citizens to influence the construction of crisis management policies in direction conducive to their immediate needs.

While the “collaborative” aspect of this partnership was observed, it is imperative to note that the “unequal” aspect of such a partnership is also magnified under the virtual brokerage constructed by social media. In some ways, the process of negotiation that often takes place between, for example, critical journalists and the state (Repnikova 2017), is compromised when replaced with a virtual broker like social media because a formal structure for negotiations (e.g. personal connection) is no longer available. On the citizen’s end, such a negotiation can only exist when citizens probe the limitation to the cyberspace rules, gain a nuanced understanding of what content is allowed and what is not, and carefully employ creative strategies to circumvent those censorship. On the state’s end, the pervasive power of the state to censor and delete any content limits the partnership to exist *only* under the premise that the authority of the government is not compromised.

This newly created partnership between the citizens and the state enabled by social media is an exciting phenomenon for authoritarianism studies nonetheless. Though functioning under restrictions, this partnership is unique in its “autonomic” nature — theoretically, citizens can take full control of what they want to negotiate (though no success guaranteed) without physically going through another person or organization, like in the case of NGOs and journalists. Therefore, social media as a virtual broker offers new possibilities of how citizens could participate in politics despite the little freedom offered under authoritarian regimes.

b. Limitations

One of the major limitations that should be addressed in this study has to do with the strict censorship system of the Chinese cyberspace. Due to the sensitivity of the posts and articles used in this study, many of the sources faced immediate deletion and therefore could not be traced back to their origin. Therefore, primary sources utilized in this study heavily relies on websites outside of the Chinese cyberspace that keep a record and collection of activities happening within the Great Firewall (e.g. China Digital Time). Though this study makes an effort to stray away from opinion pieces and stay close to facts and observations, it is unavoidable that data and evidence might be organized and presented in certain ways that fits a certain narrative, therefore leading to potential bias.

Similarly, secondary sources used in the case study are mostly produced by Chinese institutions; faced with regulations from the state, they often fail to address the issue of censorship as well, both in their data collection process and analysis. Though this study makes an effort to re-interpret the datas collected that take into account the role of censorship, the same could not be done on the process of data collection. Nonetheless, by addressing the potential role of censorship in altering datas and instilling bias in this study, I hope to at least bring attention to this limitation.

CHAPTER IV. CONCLUSION

The debate over the complicated role social media partake in politics only continued to intensify in recent years, as social media appears to assume an increasingly central role in recent political events. It is almost impossible to imagine, and futile to hypothesize, an alternative universe in which politics can stand alone without taking into serious consideration the affects and effects of social media. However, what appears to be particularly intriguing about social media, in comparison with other political actors, is its seemingly contradictory roles in facilitating democratization in some cases and fortifying authoritarianism in others.

A further investigation into the role of social media in politics, however, reveals that these two roles assumed by social media are not inherently contradictory; what makes the two roles irreconcilable at first glance is the restraining frameworks often employed when theorizing the role of social media that falls in the trap of a western-centric the assumption of democracy as the end goal of development, and thus an oversimplification of state versus citizen interactions and an overstatement of the role of technology as the driving force of social changes.

An interactive model of citizen-state relation, inspired by how citizens and social actors navigate through limited political openings under authoritarian states, offers an alternative outlook on the role of social media in politics. Such a model has traditionally been applied by scholars to understand the complexity of intermediary actors such as critical journalists, independent news outlets, and NGOs under authoritarianism. A recent and rigorous study of such is Maria Repnikova's book on *Media Politics in China: Improvising Power under Authoritarianism*, where she theorizes the critical journalists' relation to the Chinese central state

as one characterized as an unbalanced but fluid and collaborative partnership, emphasizing the malleable and interactive nature of the relationship.

This study extends the implication of Repnikova's theory between critical journalists and the Chinese central state to one between the citizenry and the state brokered by social media. The study hypothesizes that such a partnership described by Repnikova could now be observed between the state and the general citizenry, since previously privileged mechanisms for intermediary actors such as institutional structure and brokerage are now made available to the general public through the prevalence of social media, which revolutionized the method of political participation of citizens and the nature of social connections.

This study carefully selected a very recent (and on-going) case study to examine the role of social media in live action: the COVID-19 outbreak in China. By focusing on the initial stages of information and disinformation and a series of interaction between the state and the public during the most recent and renowned national crisis of China, we observe how social media offers a channel for communication and collaboration between the citizens and the state and innovative methods of engagement and feedback between the two by consolidating individuals voices into a more impactful and harder-to-be-silenced collective whole. Meanwhile, we also recognize the limitation using social media as a virtual broker and the unequal nature of this partnership due to the fact that the Chinese cyberspace is heavily shaped by censorship.

Nonetheless, this study shed critical lights on the exciting new possibilities as well as limitations offered by social media to both the state and the people under limited political freedom. However, it is important to note that the COVID-19 case study in China is intended to serve as an initial attempt and give an example of the intermediary role played by social media

under authoritarian regimes, and is far from sufficient to draw a conclusive remark. Future research on the topic should also attempt to further test the model through studying other authoritarian regimes around the world; as remarked earlier in the study, one way to avoid a technological deterministic approach to the topic of media in politics is through contextualization — taking into account how the social-political environment the actors and the technology are embedded in influence the role and function of social media. Future research could take a step forward with the model and investigate, under the premise that social media does act as a virtual broker, the scope of activities enabled by this virtual brokerage compared to those enabled by traditional brokers with more structured relations to the state with a variety of case studies from authoritarian regimes all over the world.

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Chapter III: Case Study

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