

John Lagerkvist, **After the Internet, Before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society**, Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2010, 325 pp., \$88.95 (paperback).

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The political implications of the Internet for authoritarian countries have become an important research agenda. In the case of authoritarian China, scholars have long explored the role of the Internet in Chinese politics. Some are rather pessimistic about its impact. They emphasize the reactive strategies to the Internet that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has adopted for its political stability (e.g., see Morozov, 2011). Other scholars are quite optimistic. They argue that the Internet has posed an instrumental threat to the Chinese authoritarian regime, and such a threat “arise[s] from Internet use by the mass public, civil society, the economy, and the international community” (Zheng & Wu, 2005, p. 510). John Lagerkvist, author of *After the Internet, Before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society*, belongs to the optimistic camp. He argues that the Internet will lead to “a democratization of society and politics in China,” which will occur as the result of competition between the nation’s youth and the CCP over the construction of social norms (p. 263). In other words, the influence of the elite party-state norm over public opinion will be ultimately undermined by the oppositional youth/subaltern norm.



After the Internet, Before Democracy is based on interviews conducted from 2002 to 2010. The book features an introduction and eight chapters. In his introduction Lagerkvist indicates that he uses social norm theory as his analytical tool. He argues that it is a useful tool for understanding “how Chinese society, and especial [*sic*] its young citizens, media organizations and companies, have reacted toward Internet regulations involving both enterprises and individuals” (p. 30). According to the author, there are two major social norms contesting the future trajectory of China’s Internet development. One is the elite party-state norm, which is “articulated by, and manifest in, the policies and ideology of the Communist Party” (p. 31). The other is the youth/subaltern norm, which is a social norm that “contests and questions the legitimacy of the elitist and hegemonic party-state norm” (ibid.). The youth/subaltern norm is “imbued by the experiences of young people and other politically or economically marginalized groups in society” (p. 33). The purpose of this book, Lagerkvist writes, is to illustrate how these two social norms compete with each other and ultimately contribute to an unlocking of the locked-in public sphere in China.

Chapter 1 uses three cases to show how the party-state norm and youth/subaltern norm compete for public opinion in the Internet regulation and implementation process. In the *Internet Café* case, it is the party-state norm that has been victorious as the state-controlled media successfully bend and stimulate public opinion, especially that of the parents, in support of government regulation on Internet Café after 2002. However, in the second case, *Green Dam*, the youth/subaltern norm garners wide public support. The failure of the party-state norm is not only because it has underestimated the transformed parental norms since 2002 but also because it vilifies the “citizen prosecutor” and insists on surveillance (p. 59). In the third case, *Real Name Registration*, Lagerkvist argues that there is an ongoing

tug of war between "the party-state norm favoring effective Internet security and social stability," and the youth/subaltern norm "wanting to maintain as much privacy and integrity for the individual as possible" (p. 55). In these three cases, the CCP consistently tries to advance its political interests by using "persuasive moral rhetoric to win over public opinion on all issues that concern social and political stability" (p. 64). However, the party-state norm will win only if its political interests play second fiddle, as in the case of Internet Café. Otherwise, as Lagerkvist notes, the party-state norm will be strongly challenged by the youth/subaltern norm and even lose the popular support.

Chapters 2 to 4 explore the major sources and shapers of the youth/subaltern norm in China. According to Lagerkvist, blogs, citizen journalism, and Internet irony together contribute to the rise of an emancipatory youth/ subaltern norm. Regarding blogs, the author argues, when Chinese young individual bloggers voluntarily come together to "contribute to, form, and adopt [. . .] the youth/ subaltern norm of a counter-public," their efforts will have influences on public opinion and on the party-state (p. 92). On citizen journalism, he believes its incorporation with investigative journalism in traditional media helps to "expose government misconduct and unethical business behavior" (p. 125). Lagerkvist views online accounts of irony as "a weapon of the weak" (p. 157). It helps Chinese citizens generate alternative voices under the severe censorship of the party-state. Moreover, he argues that the increasing use of irony on the Internet makes "the hidden transcript of the youth/subaltern visible in the open" (p. 158). In other words, online irony has indeed presented a threat to the party-state.

In Chapter 5 the author examines developments inside the party-state's propaganda system. According to Lagerkvist, the party-state has used a new style of propaganda, "ideotainment," to cope with the increasingly "hard-to-control information dissemination" situation brought on by the Internet (p. 37). Ideotainment means the propaganda content becomes "more informative and less propagandistic," but still "biased and politicized" (p. 161). Compared with old-style propaganda, it is more difficult to detect the persuasive nature of ideotainment. It is the juxtaposition of "colorful and entertaining animations designs and interactive performances with subtle, but at times overt, ideological constructs, symbols, and nationalistically inclined messages of persuasion" (p. 169). One salient form of ideotainment is *wu mao dang*. The party-state has recruited low-paid staff to counter oppositional opinions in China's cyberspace. The task of these paid commentators is to "guide opinion," working against the perceived enemies, and win the battle of public opinion (p. 171). Lagerkvist believes that ideotainment is a useful tool with which the CCP can sustain its legitimacy in the digital age.

Chapter 6 tries to examine the possible consequences of Chinese nationalism. Differing from those scholars who view Chinese nationalism as "chauvinistic and potentially dangerous for both China and the world," Lagerkvist believes that nationalism has positive effects on Chinese democratization (p. 191). The reason is that it becomes increasingly more difficult for CCP to promote state-orchestrated nationalism with the emergence of a popular nationalism in China. Popular nationalism is a "brainchild of both state dirigisme and a product of simmering ideas in grass-roots society" (p. 198). It has the same features and forms as state nationalism, but popular nationalism is independent from the party-state. On the surface it seems pro-party, yet it is actually "in constant tension with state nationalism and, counter intuitively to most conventional wisdom, displays democratic credentials" (p. 220).

In Chapter 7 Lagerkvist explores the ongoing competition between a global libertarian business norm professed by Google and a domestic alliance between the party-state norm and the red capitalist norm. According to the author, Google's business norm has opened up "the vista for a shared view on the value of free speech for innovation and economic growth by adherents of the youth/subaltern norm" (p. 258). He argues that, though Google has already existed in the Chinese market, its presence is still influencing the contestation between the party-state norm and youth/subaltern norm.

Lagerkvist discusses the possibility of China's democratic breakthrough in the last chapter. He argues that this breakthrough would come as much from a youthful digital civic society as it would from the party-state itself. That's because the party-state norm will finally be eroded as its inside agents become suspicious of this norm. The erosion of the party-state norm equates the erosion of the party-state's power over civil society. Lagerkvist believes, a "peaceful evolution" of China is taking place, which not only makes the "society but also politics more democratic" (p. 282).

Overall, Lagerkvist offers a timely and rich analysis on the role of the Internet in China's democratization process. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in China's media landscape and her democratic future. Yet it has some limitations. The author tries to use social norm theory to integrate the entire volume, but readers may still feel the book is somewhat fragmental. The author could have paid more attention to linking empirical data to his theoretical concepts. How are Chinese blogosphere, citizen journalism and Internet irony together shaping the youth/subaltern norm? What is the relationship between ideotainment and the party-state norm? How is the party-state norm transformed, dimmed and even eroded during the competition with the youth/subaltern norm? And how are other social norms inside and outside China (such as parental norm, global libertarian business norm, et al.) influencing the consequences of this competition? The empirical analysis should be around the theoretical concept: social norm. Another weakness of the book is that the author has not clearly illustrated how the erosion of party-state norm will lead to China's transition from authoritarianism to democracy. He could have shown the linkage between social norm and political system at both the theoretical and empirical levels.

References

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