

Guobin Yang, **The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online**, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, 320 pp., \$26.02 (hardcover).

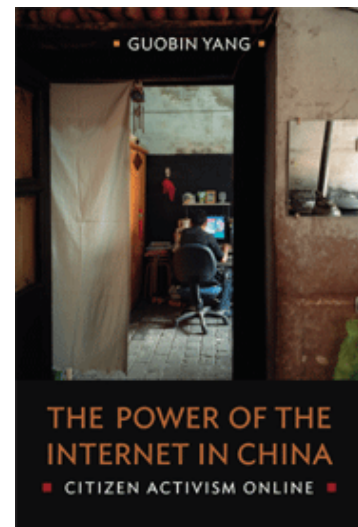
Reviewed by
Peter Marolt
Asia Research Institute
National University of Singapore

Understanding the ever-shifting connections between political participation and social change is one of the key challenges of the 21st century. At the core of Guobin Yang's outstanding book lies the conviction that social change in China cannot be properly grasped without understanding the radical nature and contested struggles in China's cyberspace. Yang calls these struggles "online activism" and aspires to show how Chinese people have "created a world of carnival, community, and contention in and through cyberspace and how in this process they have transformed personhood, society, and politics" (p. 1). To a large extent, the book achieves this ambitious objective.

Yang draws upon research data he has collected over a decade and employs a variety of (mostly qualitative) methods in a quest to examine social movements, voluntary organizing, and Internet politics in China. Introducing online activism as the centerpiece of a "multi-interactionist" perspective, Yang identifies two types of struggle: the one for recognition and the other against oppression and exploitation. Rendering online activism as part of life and online activists as imbued with real power, Yang presents a complex picture of online activism and argues effectively that at the core of China's Internet lies its contentious character. The main body of the book comprises eight chapters, the first of which outlines the shifting character of digital activist contention and links it to undergirding larger structural transformations. Tracing digital activism's historical origins to citizen activism instigated by the student-led 1989 prodemocracy movement and situating the online component as an integral part, Yang argues that the increase of social conflict in China is a clear sign that Chinese society has entered an age of contention. Yang then investigates a wide range of activisms, from legitimate protest to political subversion, and focuses on analyzing the complex interactions between activists, state, corporate, and transnational actors.

In heeding the multidimensional dynamics between state and civil society, the monograph makes an important contribution to a better understanding of the power, dynamics, and character of Chinese citizens and their Internet culture.

Few scholarly observers have demonstrated a comparable interest and depth of engagement with the social uses of the Internet in China and its interface with social activism. Yang, who holds PhDs in sociology and English literature, is an associate professor in the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern



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Cultures at Columbia University's Barnard College. At once erudite scholar and participant observer, he has published on a wide range of social issues in China. With a sustained focus on the role of the Internet in the transformation of Chinese society, he recognizes that the Internet has come to constitute a "living record" (p. 21) of society. When one examines the online worlds of Chinese activists and groups, changes over time not only become observable but also meaningful parts of the present condition and identity of a person or society. Departing from the traditional political-process model of social-movement theory, but with a nod to recent theory developments, Yang calls for renewed attention to the cultural aspects (symbols, imagery, rhetoric, sounds) of activism, to both the innovative and appropriative aspects visible in China's ever-changing cultural conventions. There might have been "premonitions" among structural theorists associated with social-movement theory that continuous negotiation is an indispensable part of the dynamics of contention, but Yang makes cultural contention (and not political processes) the focus of his analyses. Equally important, Yang develops a lens that centers on concrete issues and situations that are both empirical-practical and conceptual-theoretical. Behavior, or what Yang calls "new structures of feeling," rather than the mere existence or usage of new technological tools, is his central stage of action and thus provides the indicators of societal change.

The many published reviews of this book attest to its excellence and to its impact upon the trans-disciplinary field of Chinese Internet studies (for example, see Kluver et al., 2010). The most common critiques articulated against the book imply that Yang's outlook is too optimistic, avoiding engagement with more critical investigations into China's Internet. Yet Yang's accomplishment lies exactly in challenging pervasive narratives of ever-expanding state control and suppression by directing his readers to the vast examples of citizen activism online and to the creative negotiations of political power by "a restive society alive with conflict and contention" (p. 209). Yang's core achievement is to show that China's Internet is not all about entertainment and play, that virtual discourse does have the potential to empower people by channeling their anger and frustrations and altering societal structures "from below."

But at the same time, these critiques draw attention to weaknesses in Yang's narrative that prevent us from making an informed judgment about the extent to which citizen activism online is bringing about more democratic structures and measurable social change. Early on in his book, Yang contends that online activism in China is a direct reflection of its new citizen activism, and "a response to the grievances, injustices, and anxieties caused by the structural transformation of Chinese society" (p. 7). This move situates the book squarely within the social movement literature, with specific emphasis on tracing how online contestations are connected to offline events. However, the differences and mutual influences between online and offline agency and intentionalities could have received more attention. Instead, Yang's "trajectory of co-evolution" (p. 17) is based on a processual assumption—that a growing civil society leads to an extended terrain of political struggle and thus to growing online activism. In an insidious way, technological determinism creeps back into Yang's narrative. I think this is the reason why we find little empirical detail on agency, emerging institutional forms, various forms of intermediation of online contention, and related changes in emplaced governance and control. Also, we find little on the effects of the various new directives geared at "soft control" (*rouxing guanli*) of citizen activism that were issued by Chinese authorities, and on how online activism might have influenced "the state" in devising these policies. To what extent do social activist practices visible online lead to trust, shared meanings, and broader, enduring societal change? Examining close to 70 often highly publicized events that help us

understand the agencies and linkages involved in social change is a start, but at the same time it offers only a small and inevitably distorted glimpse of the potential impact of online activism on governance structures and policies. This said, it would be unreasonable to expect that these absences can all be tackled within the spatial confines of only one book. Rather, they constitute trajectories for future research into the shape and possibilities of libratory spaces emerging on the Chinese Internet.

If one adopts a more abstract way of seeing, the aforementioned absences indicate that Yang has encountered a serious shortcoming within the very theories on social movement and action. Apparently, these theories "have simply taken the actor's power of agency for granted and concentrated instead on the question of how that agency is employed" (Campbell, 1996, p. 157). Of course, academically produced categories are often and inevitably applied in ways that legitimize the structure and hierarchy of the framework in which they are deployed. Thus, while Yang's investigations are structurally and empirically apposite, they are also rooted in a positionality that leaves little room for the conceptualization of agency, as it deems "methodological individualism" (i.e., engaging with personal identity) to be unsuited to the production of rigorous scientific knowledge. The very types and categories of knowledge produced by Yang's sociological approach constrain our understanding of the various forms of online activism and effects on both society at large and its institutional base. It is due to the dominance of the paradigm Campbell calls "social situationalism" in all kinds of social science endeavors that we face a severe lack of theorization of how people manage to act at all (ibid.). Social situationalism is focused on social action as situated conduct that has a "social meaning." Scrutinizing such conduct leads to the (false) claim that individuals learn their behavior from others, through language and rational communicative acts, and that therefore individual consciousness and agency can be neglected when studying social structure. Campbell puts forth an "action theory," which is concerned with the ability of people to make choices, that is, understanding why people perform the acts they do, when they do. He argues convincingly that while sociology, political science, and communication studies all offer theories of social action and traditions of thought, these theories fail to recognize the critical role of emotions, feelings, or imagination in the accomplishment of individual or collective agency and action (ibid.).

Indeed, to the extent to which online activism resists and circumvents centralized information control and creates new ways of thinking and action, it does develop patterns of civic engagement that could eventually lead to institutional changes and more democratic structures. Yet when it comes to understanding the implications of the myriad contentions visible on the Chinese Internet, future scholarly enquiry needs to transcend processual situationalist investigations. Yang's book spearheads a commendable trend toward research into the Chinese Internet that is increasingly aware of the fractured and emancipatory nature of our lifeworlds. Investigating the rise, forms, and dynamics of online activism, framed in terms that facilitate examinations of a thriving multidimensional, heterogeneous, and polyphonic cultural pluralism, Yang has provided an intriguing narrative based upon which these new trajectories and conceptualizations can be imagined. Yet it is only through more field-based research and a positionality that is cognizant of "methodological individualism" that we can possibly meet this challenge.

References

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