Song Shi, **China and the Internet: Using New Media for Development and Social Change,** New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2023, 380 pp., $37.95 (paperback).

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According to the latest statistics released by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), China has maintained its position as the world's largest Internet market, boasting an impressive user base of over 1.108 billion as of January 2025 (CNNIC, 2025). Despite this massive digital footprint, academic inquiry into the Chinese Internet phenomenon has been disproportionately focused on political dimensions, creating a significant research lacuna in understanding its multifaceted societal impacts. As Herold and de Seta (2015) critically observe, this persistent disciplinary bias threatens to constrain Chinese Internet studies within the narrow confines of political science, thereby marginalizing its inherent interdisciplinary value and broader sociocultural implications.

Against this backdrop, Song's seminal work emerges as a timely intervention that bridges this critical research gap. Through its theoretically informed, empirically rich framework, the monograph offers groundbreaking insights into how new media ecosystems catalyze developmental processes and enable social transformation in contemporary China. Employing a communication for development approach, the study innovatively examines the tripartite dynamics of new media interventions, systematically analyzing the complex interplay between governments, NGOs, and activists in shaping China's digital transformation and its consequent societal impacts.

At the heart of Song's work lies an examination of five meticulously researched case studies, each providing a nuanced and multilayered exploration of the complex relationships between activists, NGOs, and various tiers of the Chinese government within the realm of new media interventions. Challenging the prevailing academic discourse that predominantly frames state–society relations in China through a lens of conflict and confrontation, Song's work makes a profound contribution by illuminating the often-overlooked cooperative dimensions that underpin these interactions. The findings reveal a dynamic interplay of negotiation, adaptation, and strategic collaboration, painting a more intricate picture of state–society relations than previously acknowledged.

This nuanced perspective underscores the importance of understanding state–society relations as contextually embedded processes rather than static adversarial positions. The adaptive strategies employed by NGOs and activists in their engagement with governmental entities, particularly in their
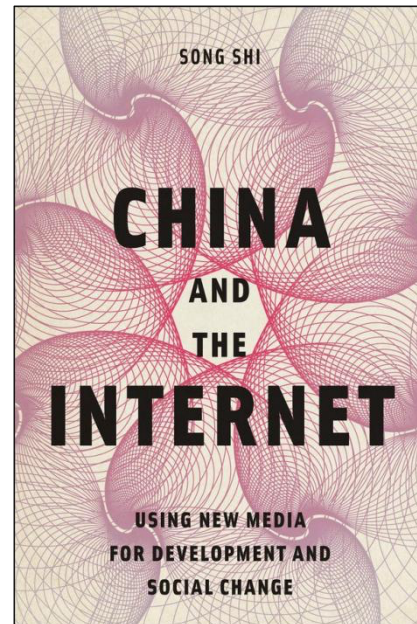
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pursuit of social change initiatives, demand analytical frameworks that account for the specific sociopolitical conditions and institutional environments in which these interactions occur. Such an approach not only provides a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary Chinese civil society but also challenges simplistic dichotomies in the study of state–society relations.

Song's selection of five case studies provides a representative overview of China's digital transformation landscape. The first case, the Connecting Every Village Project, initiated in 2004 by China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, stands as a testament to the government's ambitious nationwide effort to bridge the digital infrastructure gap between urban and rural areas. Through the analytical lens of van Dijk's (2005) conceptual framework of the digital divide, Song delivers a penetrating critique of the project's limitations in addressing the persistent rural-urban digital disparity. Song's analysis identifies two critical sustainability challenges that undermined the project's effectiveness: the insufficient engagement of rural communities in the implementation process and the inadequate attention to skills acquisition and motivational barriers among target populations. More significantly, Song traces these shortcomings to the project's theoretical foundations in the modernization paradigm. As she astutely observes, this paradigm inherently positions members of less developed communities as passive recipients rather than active participants in development initiatives, fundamentally constraining the project's potential for meaningful impact.

The second case study, the NGO 2.0 Project, exemplifies the transformative power of strategic new media and ICTs in empowering Chinese grassroots NGOs. Launched by researcher activists from the New Media Action Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, this initiative addresses systemic inequalities in communication and resource distribution within China's nonprofit sector. Over its twelve-year implementation period, the NGO 2.0 Project conducted 51 specialized training workshops, significantly enhancing grassroots NGOs' capacity to harness Web 2.0 technologies for social change. A particularly striking achievement lies in its success in narrowing the resource and influence gap between grassroots NGOs and their government-operated counterparts, particularly in their relationships with governmental agencies, mainstream media outlets, funding organizations, and other key stakeholders. Song attributes the project's efficacy to its participatory communication model, which emphasizes collaborative knowledge construction—where problem identification, solution development, and even the conceptualization of development challenges emerge through continuous dialogue among all stakeholders. Furthermore, Song underscores the project's strategic approach to government engagement, advocating for viewing governmental entities as potential collaborators rather than obstacles—a perspective that proves indispensable in navigating the complex ecosystem of China's nonprofit sector.

The third case, Tiger Gate, exemplifies how activists leverage new media and ICTs to drive social change within China's contemporary sociopolitical and technological frameworks. In this instance, individual activists and informal online communities emerged as catalysts for action and collective knowledge production, effectively challenging official government narratives and fostering greater government accountability. However, Song highlights the inherent limitations of new media in achieving structural reform, as the Tiger Gate incident resulted in only 13 low-level officials facing disciplinary action. Song concludes that while new media activism primarily influences local governance in China, it significantly impacted "slow-moving institutions"—encompassing cultural norms, values, beliefs, and social

expectations that shape perceptions of governmental accountability. These gradual transformations, Song argues, will ultimately catalyze changes in "fast-moving institutions," including legal and political structures.

The final two cases, Free Lunches and NCP Life Support Network, show how activists and grassroots NGOs, through a multichannel approach encompassing mass media, interpersonal communication, ICT channels, and more, collaborate with the state, corporations, and other stakeholders to drive development and social change. The Free Lunches case highlights the contentious and reciprocal relationships among activists, various levels of government officials, and corporations in addressing hunger and malnutrition in rural China. The NCP Life Support Network case, on the other hand, demonstrates how activists use ICTs to save lives and support vulnerable groups facing health and social challenges during Wuhan's 76-day COVID-19 quarantine. As Song notes, the NCP Life Support Network not only provided essential aid to those in need but also pressured the government to enhance its crisis response through various ICTs and government channels. Together, these cases illustrate how activists and grassroots NGOs, empowered by ICTs, can play a pivotal role in the development and betterment of Chinese society, particularly in areas where the government and market have fallen short in fulfilling their responsibilities.

In the conclusion, Song endeavors to synthesize his empirical findings with his theoretical framework. He argues that his research, which diverges from the predominant modernization approach in ICT4D (Information and Communication Technologies for Development) and adopts a participatory paradigm, provides a more effective lens for examining a wide range of interventions and initiatives aimed at leveraging communication and ICTs for socially beneficial outcomes. The analysis of five cases of new media interventions presented in the book reveals distinct patterns in the relationships between activists/NGOs and the Chinese government. Specifically, efforts targeting conventional development issues—such as hunger and malnutrition, poverty alleviation, and disaster relief—tend to foster cooperation. In contrast, initiatives aimed at social change issues—such as government accountability and transparency in policy making—are more likely to result in confrontation. Furthermore, Song advocates for a multichannel approach rather than an exclusive focus on ICTs. He emphasizes that while ICTs are pivotal tools for facilitating development and social change, their impact must be evaluated in conjunction with other communication channels, including mass media and interpersonal communication, which coexist and often interact interdependently with ICTs. This holistic perspective underscores the complexity and interconnectedness of communication strategies in achieving development goals.

China and the Internet: Using New Media for Development and Social Change represents the culmination of the author's decades-long work in development communication. However, its significance goes beyond this. This groundbreaking work introduces an innovative framework for analyzing the potential and limitations of ICTs and the Internet in driving development and social transformation in developing nations like China—an aspect that has been largely neglected in existing scholarship on Chinese Internet studies. For scholars, policymakers, and anyone interested in understanding the intricate relationship between digital technologies and societal change in contemporary China, this monograph offers invaluable insights. That said, the book is not without its limitations. The author's analysis of grassroots NGOs and activists tends to be overly positive and optimistic, lacking the necessary academic critique. In reality, Chinese grassroots NGOs have faced significant challenges and controversies in recent

years (Jing, 2018). Another shortcoming is the limited inclusion of perspectives from government officials. Interviews with state actors would have provided a more balanced and complete picture of China's new media interventions.

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