Review of
"Contesting Cyberspace in China: Online Expression and Authoritarian Resilience" by Rongbin Han

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Rongbin Han is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Affairs at the University of Georgia, and "C*ontesting Cyberspace in China*" is derived from his dissertation in political science at University of California, Berkeley. Han cites the geographical and technological isolation that he felt while an undergraduate at Peking University's Changping campus in the late 1990's with prompting him to visit the university's main campus in Beijing, where he first experienced the Internet and e-commerce. More importantly, Han observed how student protests surrounding the murder of a fellow student were more impactful on the main campus that had Internet access compared to his offline campus; thus, began Han's interest in cyberpolitics. Han argues that the Chinese Party-state can continue to coexist with the emancipating Internet because the Internet empowers not only regime critics in China but also pro-regime advocates. Han's argument thus counters those who claim that the Chinese Party-state's endurance in the Internet era is due to their ability to control and adapt to change, but

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also pro-regime advocates. Han's argument thus counters those who claim that the Chinese Party-state's endurance in the Internet era is due to their ability to control and adapt to change, but also those who overestimate the potential of the Internet to bring radical democratization to China.

Contesting Cyberspace in China aside from an introductory and a concluding chapter, falls into two thematic parts. The first part of the book, constituting chapters two to four, scrutinizes the cat-and-mouse censorship activities between the state, netizens, and Internet regulatory intermediaries. Chapter 2 entitled "Harmonizing the Internet" tracks technical and administrative Internet control in China as well as both internal (e.g. conflicting policy, silencing legitimate concerns, censorship for profit) and external (e.g. anonymity, Western attention) challenges to the state's censorship efforts. The author in Chapter 3, "The Intermediaries' Dilemma", considers how intermediaries, including Internet service/content providers, IT professionals, and forum managers must vacillate between enforcing state censorship to keep their sites open at the same time that they know that envelope-pushing content fuels their sites. The fourth chapter of the book entitled "Pop Activism" explores the means by which netizens climb the Great Firewall and circumvent China's Green Dam censorship software in less visible (e.g. posting at obscure times, asterisks interfixed into taboo words) and more visible (e.g. arguing with the state discourse, parody, homophonic and metaphorical cyber-vernaculars) ways. The Great Firewall climbers' motivations range from and blend political activism/apathy, entertainment, and/or self-aggrandizement.

The second half of the book, constituting chapters five to seven, explores different aspects of discourse competition. Chapter 5, "Trolling for the Party", elaborates on paid commentators like China's Fifty-Cent Army (FCA) of paid online commentators who drum up fake grassroots state support (i.e. astroturfing). Han identified the FCA during his online fieldwork through their parroting of official discourse and non-interaction. Han argues that the FCA is unmotivated, underpaid, aspiring apparatchiks who lack skills and knowledge and thus their propaganda often backfires. In the 6th chapter entitled "Manufacturing Distrust" Han examines how party-state critics, like the regime itself, lose credibility via discourse competition when legitimate criticisms of the party-state are perceived and framed by netizens as Western political sabotage. In Chapter 7, "Defending the Regime", Han examines the formation (e.g. those labeled as FCA for pro-state views), techniques (e.g. labelling, wars, face-slapping, crosstalk, fishing, and positive mobilization),

and motivations of the Voluntary Fifty-Cent Army (VFCA) (such as nationalism and rationality).

Han's research includes sixty online and offline interviews with forum managers, forum users, media professionals, and scholars. In these semi-structured interviews Han found that some were reluctant to speak and found their reluctance to be noteworthy data. Han also used in-depth online ethnographic work involving observation and limited interaction with participants on selected international sites (e.g. overseas Chinese forums Mitbbs.com, ccthere.com) and domestic forums (such as bdwm.net, kdnet.net, www.newsmth.net, bbs1.people.com.cn a.k.a. Qiangguo Lutan, and tianya.cn). In addition, Han enquires into media reports, official documents, some leaked, and scholarly studies to supplement the data.

Regarding method and data, in chapter seven, Han references that he discovered the VFCA via his guerilla ethnography techniques citing Guobin Yang's work entitled "The Internet and the Rise of a Transnational Chinese Cultural Sphere" published in "Media, Culture & Society" in 2003. Although I personally appreciate that the book does not diverse into lengthy methodology discussions, as this makes the work more accessible, a term like guerilla ethnography needs unpacking as Yang's discussion is succinct and selective. Some researchers describe multilayered intricate protocols as guerilla ethnography just as I have heard others critically minded scholars deploy the label colloquially to denote breaking from more established practices to account for the novel, unexpected, and extraordinary factors found in the field. In addition, guerilla ethnography sources formulated prior to the proliferation of online research might have built in assumptions about the field as a real public place in real time and the sites that Han studies are qualified public places albeit, ones where the participants do not have to occupy the same time and place.

The point here is that theories like guerilla ethnography are well suited to online research; however, a discussion of the gaps experiences and discoveries made in applying these techniques online is necessary. Moreover, it would be interesting to know more about Han's relationships with some of the interviewees regarding how he built trust and secured disclosure. That said, I do understand his positioning of himself as a non-participant observer in his online research field (i.e. sometimes called lurkers) and thus letting the data, or in the case of interpretive findings, capta, be the focus. I also make these points at the same time that I note that Han's brevity in his discussions of methods does make the work more practically readable.

Overall, Han discusses the impact of the Internet on Chinese politics in more complex ways than what is currently seen in the existing literature (as an illustration, positioning the state and society in opposition to each other with alternate perspectives on one or the other being in the dominant position). Han argues that such oppositional dialectics are too simplistic and ignore the complexities of Chinese politics, society, and Internet use(rs). In fact, Han's analysis separates the Chinese-Party state and state internet regulation agencies in order to show that both governance structures are fractured, and not just the former as most research fails to recognize administrative and ideological fragmentation in both. This multilayered fracturing further complicates one's experience of Chinese cyberspace. Han highlights how one's experience of Chinese cyberspace is by consequence also fractured and fragmented for different users depending on the tools one has mastered to access and disseminate information but also the agencies, policies, and intermediaries overseeing one's corner of the Internet, and the government's changing emphasis on different aspects of censorship (e.g. 2009's crackdown on online pornography, 2018's crackdown on gay identity pride content on sites like Sina Weibo).

In sum, Han's work dissuades us from simplistic dyadic thinking on Chinese cyberspace and too surely from predicting political futures in the PRC. Han's depth of information is completely appropriate for a book of this type in that it is detailed to explore the subject; however, does not belabor the subject thus the author clearly understands the process of revising a dissertation into a monograph. Interestingly, while Han's research is directed at better understanding the interplay of cyber-discourse and politics in China, this reader cannot help but wonder how works like this might be adopted by authoritarian or totalitarian regimes to enhance their official control over the Internet discourse. In other words, will this book and others like it, be the guidebook for developing FCA 2.0? In terms of readership, this work is written by a Political Scientist with research interests in social activism, Internet politics, political participation, and democratization/authoritarianism and thus the book fits readers with these interests. At the same time, academic and non-academic readers interested in Censorship, Communications/Communication Studies, Cultural Studies, Cyberspace Studies, and Media Policy Studies will appreciate Han's multifaceted analysis.