**Bringing a Network Perspective to Chinese Internet Studies:**
**An Exploratory Analysis**

## Introduction

Various social science studies have shown that social interactions grounded in interpersonal networks are conducive to the bridging and/or bonding of social capital. Social capital, generally described as the "goodwill" (e.g. trust, sympathy) that is derived by cooperation between individuals and groups, plays a vital role when collective sociopolitical mobilization is called for among people embedded in the networks (Granovetter, 1973 and 1981; Adler and Kwon, 2002: 18). As a result of this understanding, there has been a movement toward a "network approach", conceptually or methodologically, in regard to analyzing the nexus of social relationships (or "ties") and sociopolitical participation. Network concepts and methods are more routinely adopted by sociologists than by political scientists, though the latter are increasingly attending to the network approach and asking whether it can be used in political studies as well (Chen, 2012b:78).

The advancement of communication technology, particularly the recent spectacular rise of the internet and numerous social networking sites (SNSs) is believed to further "scaffold" (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2010:887-889), engender and consolidate social ties, hence bringing new dynamics to contemporary sociopolitical mobilization (Valenzuela, Park and Kee, 2009; Ellison, Steinfield and

Lampe, 2010; Junco, 2012).

Not all empirical findings, however, agree with this positive association between digitally-mediated social ties and sociopolitical participation. For instance, Morris (2010) and Turkle (2011) have found that fostering online relationships can sometimes lead to erosion in offline relationships as people become gradually disconnected from their "unplugged" life. Overall, more and more authors are drawing on different empirical evidence to present diverse pictures of the nexus between digitally-mediated relationships and sociopolitical engagement.

The aim of this theoretical paper is to join this academic debate and fill three kinds of literature gap. As mentioned, political scientists are relatively less familiar than their sociology peers with using a network approach to explore digitally-mediated relationships and collective actions. This is the first gap. The second gap is that for those working on internet politics in China, there are bourgeoning empirical studies, but without theoretical underpinnings (Kluver and Yang, 2005:306).[1] The last lacuna is that scholars exploring internet politics in China rarely employ a network approach, although this approach has been used for studying internet politics in western democracies. In light of these deficiencies, my goal is to

[1] Guo and Feng's 2012 paper is an exception. A theoretical framework was well-constructed before empirical test.

provide a network perspective in understanding the impact of digitally-mediated social ties on sociopolitical actions in China. It is exploratory in the sense that I seek to draw on some preliminary observations to formulate my hypotheses. I expect that this study will pave the way for further empirical tests in the future. By then, social network analysis (SNA) as a methodology can be applied to facilitate the empirical examination.

*Weak and Strong Ties*

In current literature, at least two kinds of digitally-mediated relationships have so far been discerned: weak and strong. The definitions of these two types of social ties vary from one research project to another. Weak ties are oftentimes defined as online social relationships created in cyberspace without offline interactions, or offline relationships devoid of any online interactions whatsoever. Conversely, strong ties refer to relationships that exist both online and off.[2] Within social science literature, there are divergent views and mixed empirical findings about how these two types of ties influence sociopolitical mobilization.

Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2010:887-889) observe that SNSs, such as

[2] The strength and character of an interpersonal tie can be measured by a number of indicators, such as the "amount of time", the "frequency of exchanges", and the "emotional intensity". (Granovetter, 1973:1361).

Facebook and MySpace, incubate weak ties that are essential to the development of bridging social capital (as distinguished from bonding social capital, a type usually found between individuals in tightly-knit, emotionally close relationships). Loosely structured networks prompted by the internet are pivotal for collective actions (Bennett, 2003). In the context of China, statistical analysis by Shen, Wang, Guo and Guo (2009:467) reveals that the internet *does* help Chinese users expand their networks, which further fosters the overall "expression environment" online. This finding corresponds to the results of most small-N case studies on a similar theme.

To delve further, Zhang and Wang (2010) suggest differentiating SNSs. When Chinese internet users (netizens) visiting social networking sites "find out about one another through existing social contacts", they can be said to be visiting a relationship-oriented site. In contrast, visitors to interest-oriented sites find out about each other through shared interests. Given these differing reasons for entry, Zhang and Wang argue that relationship-oriented SNSs contain more strong ties than weak ones, while interest-oriented SNSs contain more weak ties than strong ones. In their comparison of two SNSs in China, *Xianoei (*now *Renren)* and *Douban*, they discovered that interest-oriented sites can help establish new ties and bridge social capital. As noted earlier, this kind of social capital has been identified by sociologists as being vital to mobilizing people into collective action, particularly on novel and

controversial issues (Granovetter, 1981). Therefore, Zhang and Wang concluded that interest-oriented sites, which normally promote weak ties, are conducive to collective action.

While Zhang and Wang's network perspective is interesting, the kernel of my argument in this paper is that strong ties, in ways that diverge from weak ones, can also be favorable for encouraging collective action and, in fact, may be even more important in pushing ties toward decisive action. The existence of weak ties is essential for collective actions of all kinds, but when it comes to the initiation of sociopolitical mobilizations that entail high risk, strong ties are absolutely vital.

The nature of a contention can give us an initial understanding of whether a collective action that comes in response to such a contention is high risk or low. Nevertheless, for any collective action to occur the process must be stimulated by the interplay of social ties.

That being said, I think we need to address two issues. First is the nature of a contention. Second is the type of ties that potential stakeholders and sympathizers possess in the offline and online world.

*Structure of this Paper*

To address the aforementioned two issues in one single paper is daunting – but this is

what I intend to achieve. In **section two** coming up next, I work on conceptualizing citizen-authority interactions in China so as to scaffold the theoretical foundation of my thesis. This sets the stage for defining the four main citizen-authority interactive scenarios in **section three**: *chicken game scenario, public crisis scenario, compromise scenario,* and the *banal scenario* (Chen 2012a and Chen 2012c). As the scenarios are discussed, it will become clear that the nature of contention does have an impact on the types of collective actions that could occur in China, and the risks involved with these actions.

In terms of the various levels of risk associated with collective action, the highest levels occur in the *chicken game scenario*. In order of diminishing levels of risk, this is followed by the *public crisis* and *compromise scenarios*. Most tangible and documented sociopolitical mobilizations occur in the context of the chicken game and public crisis scenarios. The *banal scenario* is a black box that has yet to be sufficiently investigated in the current literature. Much ambiguity remains with respect to the kinds of collective actions that might occur in this scenario.

Accordingly, **section four** discusses the scenarios that we are capable of outlining. It is also from this point on that the network perspective is brought into the analysis. We will examine how the impacts of social ties vary with respect to forming a collective identity in pursuit of sociopolitical mobilization in the chicken game,

public crisis, and compromise scenarios. Drawing from observations made in this comparative analysis, I will postulate the types of sociopolitical mobilization that may emerge from the black box of the banal scenario in **section five**. **Section six** concludes this paper with an indication of how I believe my theoretical work can contribute to the study of China's social media.

## Conceptualizing the Citizen-Authority Relationship

The aim of this section is to conceptualize the preferences and potential behaviors of Chinese netizens in relation to the authority. This paves the way to generate four conceivable scenarios in the third section. Here I use the broad term "authority" (or government actor) rather than "state" to indicate that the conceptual framework applies to both the central government and all local governments.

I refer to ordinary Chinese individuals as "potential entrants" because they have the capacity to "enter" a public domain to discuss or contest an issue over which the authority can take action if it so desires (Chen, 2012a). When an individual expresses a view in cyberspace, an online interest articulation can be said to have taken place. Entrants are defined as "potential" because most netizens are "run-of-the-mill" individuals (Tilly, 1978:87-90) who only enter cyberspace when triggered by a particular event or circumstance (Zhu and Robinson, 2010). This is in keeping with a

number of recent research articles that define collective actions as those that cross boundaries between private and public life (e.g., Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl, 2005; Zhang and Wang, 2010).

Even when "the boundary" is said to have been crossed, one needs to be concerned with whether the person crossing the boundary is able to strike a chord with other citizens. When individuals crossing the boundary raise an issue that has little or no potential of resonating with other members of society they are regarded as "weak" entrants. Conversely, individuals who raise issues that garner strong resonance are considered "strong" entrants (Chen, 2012a).

*The Uncertainty Faced by the Authority and Entrants*

At first, the authority in question is often unsure of the type of entrants it is encountering. Are they weak entrants, whose interests represent little or none of those of a wider collective community? Or are they strong entrants, whose interests are likely to find resonance among a large number of citizens, and who are capable of stimulating both online and offline mobilization? Weak entrants may be those concerned with "shallow infotainment" as observed by Leibold (2011:1023), or those he describes as having marginalized collective interests within "interest-based ghettos". These entrants tend to exist on the periphery of the space of public

contention so are less likely to have a significant sociopolitical impact.

While it is true that the authority is unsure of the type of netizens it is dealing with, it is equally true that each netizen is uncertain of the type of authority he or she faces behind some remote computer screen (Chen, 2012a). It is generally agreed that Chinese authorities are autocratic in nature and exercise greater control over civilian behavior than their liberal democratic counterparts, but given our rapidly changing world and the technology it entails, one can no longer treat Chinese authorities as unitary actors. There is a need to discern a strong authority from a weak one, based not in terms of capacity (Guo, 2013:126), but on a perception of relative loss or gain in regard to the actions it may take on a particular issue or in a particular situation.

There are situations in which the authority is considered a weak actor, meaning that it perceives the cost of suppression to be higher than that of yielding to the cyber activity in question (Chen, 2012a). For instance, the Chinese regime has the stated intent of punishing officials engaged in corruption, as corruption disrupts the social harmony that the regime seeks to maintain. Generally speaking, the Chinese state shares interests with victims of corruption and would prefer a sound monitoring system to tackle the problem (Chen, 2012a). In the case of an individual reporting a grievance online, it is more beneficial for the state to concede and reform than fight, arrest, or otherwise chastise the entrant.

Then there are cases in which the authority perceives itself to be strong. In such circumstances, it prefers to suppress rather than concede to civil demands as it perceives the cost of acquiescence to be higher than suppression (Chen, 2012a). A typical example of this is when a social contention is perceived as directly challenging Chinese sovereignty. For instance, as calculated by Chinese leaders, a cause or movement sympathetic to Tibetan, Uyghur, or Taiwanese self-determination must without exception be put down rather than tolerated. Thus, one can see that the perceived payoff and strategic preferences of the authority depend entirely on the nature of the issue.

The above summarizes the uncertainty surrounding the counterpart with which both the authority and the netizen must contend, i.e. the uncertainty works both ways. Moreover, in real life, the authority may at times repeatedly interact with the same individual. Individuals are likely to have numerous entry opportunities (Chen, 2012a). For example, to enter the public domain an individual could use online strategies a number of times, or they could use both online and offline strategies. As online and offline actions are not entirely separable, this is considered highly plausible.

*Behavioral Preferences of the Authority and Entrants*

Although the reality is far more complicated than this single-shot conceptual game

suggests, the strong entrant would generally fare better by “entering” than staying out, because despite knowing that the authority will likely contest, the payoff of entering is still higher than not entering (Chen, 2012a). The logic that motivates the strong entrant is that he or she is aware that there are others who share the same interests, indicating that their common cause is salient and strongly felt. That is to say, in deciding whether or not to enter the space of public contention, most entrants consider the willingness of other potential entrants to do the same and signal their support (Margetts, John, Escher, and Reissfelder, 2011:17). Observers can credibly assume that the regime is more predisposed to address an issue when confronted with a collective demand by a large number of supporters than one with little or no backing. Therefore, strong entrants prefer to fight.

Weak entrants, by contrast, will follow more random strategies (Chen, 2012a). Although weak entrants are better off staying out, in order to maximize their chances of success they might consider feigning strength by entering the game. It is a strategy akin to bluffing. The purpose is to mislead the authority and make it think that the entrant may be strong. Consequently, a weak entrant may have a chance to win the acquiescence of an authority if the authority falls for their bluff.

Strong authorities have different strategic preferences to weak ones. A strong authority always prefers to fight contesting entrants because it hopes that, in the long

run, this will encourage fewer individuals to join the online - or even offline - public space. Hence, in the short term, it is better for a strong authority to fight entry (Chen, 2012a).

The calculations of a weak authority are more complicated, largely because it has an interest in not allowing netizens to know it is weak. As discussed earlier, potential entrants may know little of the authority they are dealing with, but an entrant can use his or her prior interaction with such an authority as a basis for determining whether or not to take part in an online articulation. Knowing this, even if a weak authority has little interest in containing online articulations, it will from time to time opt to squelch them in order to foster a "reputation" to convince potential entrants that they face a strong authority (Chen, 2012a). Thus, in order to prevent further contention, a mixture of acquiescence and suppression strategies are used by the weak authority to conceal its "type" in the hope that they will generate a deterrent effect. This is what the Chinese call a tactic of "killing the chicken to scare the monkey" (Harwit and Clark, 2001:395; Yang, 2003:409).

*Summary*

This conceptual exercise leads us to conclude that a strong authority always has more incentive to fight than a weak one. Similarly, a strong entrant favors entering the

public space rather than staying out, at least at the beginning of an individual-authority interaction (Chen, 2012a). If an actor is weak, be it the authority or the entrant, then a more randomized strategy is preferred, as such a course of action has the capacity to confuse the counterpart and raises the chances of obtaining acquiescence (Chen, 2012a). The key to success for both is unpredictability. Randomness is the most obvious choice for each actor to maximize his or her interests.

The above discussion alludes to four types of potential authority-individual interactions: *weak authority vs. strong entrant(s)*, *strong authority vs. strong entrant(s)*, *weak authority vs. weak entrant(s)*, and *strong authority vs. weak entrant(s)*.[3] The following section places existing empirical studies into a matrix comprising these four ideal-type interactions (Figure 1).

## Defining the World We Study: The Four Scenarios

### *Strong Authority vs. Strong Entrant: The Chicken Game Scenario*

The chicken game scenario occurs when strong entrants interact with a strong authority (Figure 1). Both would prefer not to give in, so leading to a classic "chicken

[3] In reality, there is a wider range of entrants and authority along a spectrum from weak type to strong type. For the purposes of conceptual expediency, I have used a dichotomous approach here, discerning actors into strictly weak or strong.

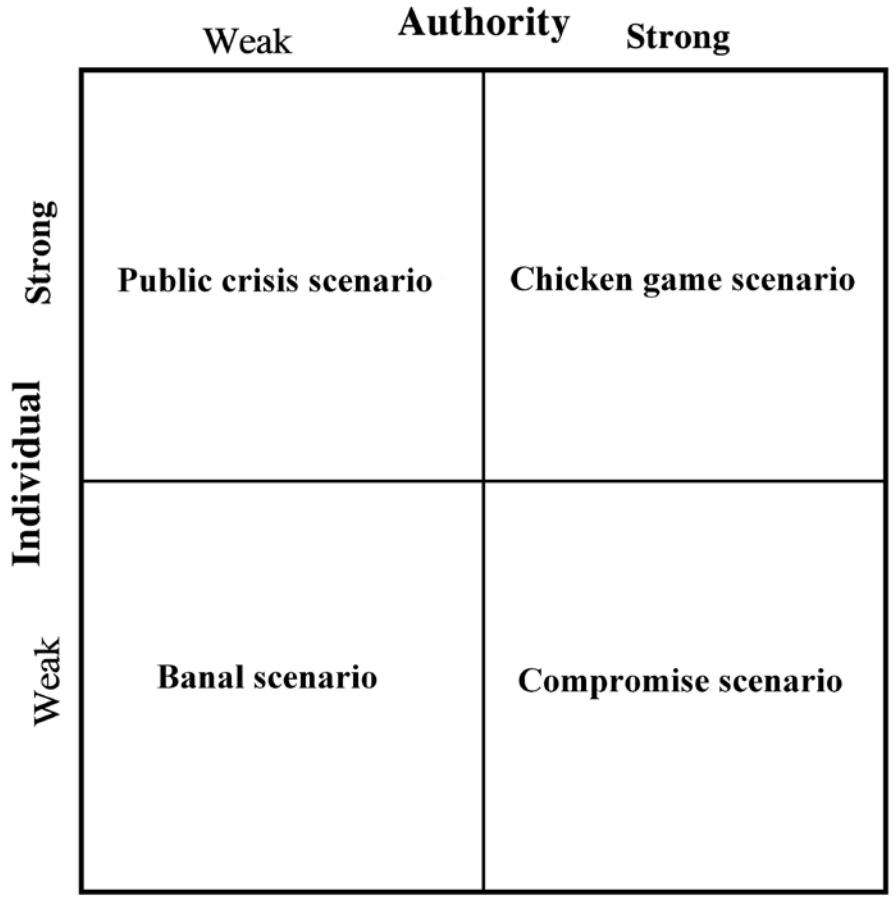
game" wherein both actors pressure their counterpart to surrender before they themselves give up the fight. Significantly, this is the case even if it is clear at the outset that both will pay a short-term price for their behavior (Kreps and Wilson, 1982: 254). The interactions between the Chinese regime and the Chinese Democracy Party, Free Tibet Groups, Uyghur diasporic networks, and the Falun Gong movement are typical examples (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002:9-13; Chen, 2010).

In the chicken game scenario, the origin of a mobilization is offline. And even when cyberspace is utilized, it is with the expectation that online activities will serve as a catalyst for, rather than a replacement of, offline mobilization. The internet is employed by individuals only to help articulate and disseminate their interests on a particular issue.

In other words, online mobilization is not an end in itself. It is a means for expanding offline mobilization. And importantly, not all online mobilizations succeed in fostering offline movements. The most commonly-cited successful case is the Falun Gong movement when email helped coordinate action among members, which resulted in a major protest outside Beijing's Zhongnanhai central leadership compound in 1999 (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002:9-10). The government had absolutely no expectation of this demonstration (Chase and Mulvenon, 2002:10). In this scenario, Beijing, a strong player, showed zero tolerance for any challenge to its

authority by Falun Gong – another strong player – and clamped down hard on Falun Gong both online and off.

**Figure 1: Individual-Authority Interactions**




*Weak Authority vs. Strong Entrant: The Public Crisis Scenario*

The public crisis scenario addresses a situation in which a weak authority faces a number of strong entrants (see Figure 1). The authority is defined as a weak actor and will typically yield when confronted with strong collective action, rather than pay the perceived high cost of suppression. The corruption example outlined in **section 2**

indicates how the Chinese regime has a marked preference for siding with the victims of corruption, as corruption is seen to disrupt "social harmony". For this reason, it finds it more beneficial to concede to online objections on the issue than to forcibly put an end to them (Chen, 2012a; Huanqiu Times, 2012).

In the public crisis scenario, strong entrants continue to express their interests online, while the authority demonstrates a mixture of strategies, from concession (both substantial and superficial) to suppression. The weak authority's contradictory behavior arises from fear that citizens could become aware of its weakness. Consequently, even the weak authority has little interest in containing online articulation it still opts for an occasional muffling of such activity to garner a more resolute "reputation", leading individuals to believe that they may actually be facing a strong authority (Shen, Wang, Guo and Guo, 2009:455). This has occurred in many crises involving the public good, such as the 2003 SARS crisis, the Sun Zhigang and Sun Dawu events (Zheng and Wu, 2005:528-530; Leibold, 2011:4), the BMW incident (Hung, 2010:334-335), as well as the 2008 melamine-tainted milk scandal (Chen, 2012c).

As in the chicken game scenario, the origin of issues encompassed by the public crisis scenario occur offline. But unlike in the chicken game scenario, where mobilization is first initiated and largely carried out offline, issues in the public crisis

scenario are initially raised or disseminated online (Hung, 2010:335; Tang and Sampson, 2012:461) and then spill over into the offline public space (e.g. Sun Zhigang event, see Zheng and Wu, 2005:528-530).

In both the public crisis and chicken game scenarios, the internet provides avenues for strong entrants to express strong opinions, which then stimulate others (e.g. latent sympathizers, bystanders etc.) to make further contributions that ultimately result in public protest of one kind or another (Tang and Sampson, 2012:461; MacKinnon, 2008:36-37). Online mobilization can help boost the scale of an offline movement when individuals play a proactive role by using the internet to achieve their particular sociopolitical aspirations. In the following two scenarios, however, this is not automatically the case.[4]

[4] While ideal-type scenarios are important for identifying the predominant interaction patterns between the authority and the individual, these interaction patterns are subject to change during the process as the "types" of authority and individuals change. During a public crisis, for instance, we often observe changes in the choices of both players, thereby altering their types. In many crises involving the public good, the state is at first a strong player interacting with a number of strong entrants, all wishing to reveal the truth of the crisis. So at first glance, it appears that a chicken game scenario is brewing. But, in the example used, the Chinese state turned from strong to weak during the interaction because it recognized that by fulfilling public expectations and managing the actual crisis, it would fare better than by denying the problem or suppressing the entrants (Chen, 2012a). Throughout its transformation into a weak player, the state randomized its strategies. The authorities made certain concessions to pacify public discontent, while at the same time, continued to exercise censorship on citizens of their choosing to deter large numbers of people from following, or movements from forming.

*Strong Authority vs. Weak Entrant: The Compromise Scenario*

The compromise scenario describes cases in which a strong authority faces weak entrants. Weak entrants adopt a mixture of strategies. Sometimes they enter the public space by articulating interests; at other times they remain silent. A strong authority will do everything in its power to squelch attempts to voice individual interests. The interaction between the Chinese state and members of the "Administrative Planning Forum" is a quintessential example (Chen, Yap and Lee, 2013: 239).

The origin of an issue in the compromise scenario could be either online or off. In the case of the "Administrative Planning Forum", the issue at stake began online. Founded in 2000, the Administrative Planning Forum (now known as Map Forum) is made up of Chinese fans of administrative maps,[5] and its purpose is for members to engage in the exchange of self-drawn administrative maps. Beijing has traditionally treated geographic data as confidential information vital to national security. But

[5] The author has communicated with an anonymous senior member of the Administrative Planning Forum (later renamed Map Forum) throughout 2012. The interviewee used to be the head of a number of sub-forums of the Map Forum. He currently has VIP status allowing him to participate in a closed sub-forum where all sub-forum heads interact online and discuss sensitive issues, including tactics for handling the government crackdown. The interviewee provided internal memos of its members from 2008 to 2010 for this research. For more information on the Map Forum, see URL: http://bbs.xzqh.info/ (in Chinese).

when the internet made available a wide range of channels for map fans to share, exchange, and discuss their hobby, many foreign maps and maps that were considered off limits by the Chinese government were suddenly freely accessible (Chen, Yap & Lee, 2013: 239).

Such online activity eventually resulted in a series of government crackdowns, as Beijing began the “Initiative to Govern Problematic Maps”, which set out to remove or otherwise delete unapproved maps in cyberspace (Chen, Yap & Lee, 2013: 239). The forum, as a venue for netizens to exchange and post unapproved maps, was thus shut down by the government in 2008.

At first glance, this case demonstrates a pattern similar to the chicken game scenario, as witnessed in the interaction between the Chinese regime and the Falun Gong interest group. Just as friction between the Falun Gong and Beijing persisted even after the suppression, so did tension between Beijing and the Administrative Planning Forum. After the 2008 crackdown, members of the Administrative Planning Forum marshaled to move its server to the United States. In 2010 they finally did so, re-establishing the forum under the name “Map Forum”.

Conceptually, the Map Forum case belongs to the compromise scenario (i.e. strong authority vs. weak entrant) rather than the chicken game scenario, because its members are not as strong as, for example, those in the Falun Gong movement.

Leaders of the Map Forum understand the political sensitivity of their map-exchanging activities, and have communicated with members to alter their behavior to render it more politically and socially acceptable. Defying a Chinese authority is not their intent. Hence, members have been more discreet about how they exchange views on administrative planning, as well as share maps and geographic information online. Importantly however, they have not given up their hobby because of the crackdown.

*Weak Authority vs. Weak Entrant: The Banal Scenario*

The banal scenario includes cases in which both the authority and the entrant(s) are weak, and both randomize their strategies. A randomized strategy creates unpredictability, confuses the counterpart, and so raises the chances of obtaining acquiescence (Chen, 2012a). Although monitoring and control of online expression is routine, the Chinese government has gradually become more tolerant and open about using preventative rather than punitive means. It is, in general, more willing to make expedient concessions to disruptive online behavior and, for this reason, some "not-so-correct" activities are tolerated today (Chen, 2012a). Similarly, Chinese citizens show a mixture of behaviors that exist in a continuum between obedience and defiance.

As the sociopolitical implications of the banal scenario are less obvious, political scientists studying China find concrete research subjects and specific topics for examination harder to come by. The banal scenario is thus under-researched in social science literature. I will address how to tackle this less-studied scenario later. It is now time to bring the key factor of "social ties" back into our discussion.

**Establishing the Missing Link: Social Ties and Levels of Risk in Mobilization**

Although the aforementioned scenarios conceptualize individual-authority interactions, the question of how potential entrants are prompted to enter a public space for contention continues to go unanswered in the traditional "authority vs. entrants" analytical paradigm. The missing link is the failure of Chinese internet studies to adequately explore the structures of websites and online platforms. Do people use the internet with the intention of achieving personal sociopolitical aims? Or are they prompted by the structure of the online platforms they visit to behave in ways that might lead to sociopolitical change?

In the first three scenarios, individuals do in fact appear to have played a relatively conscious role in making use of the internet to achieve certain results, be they sociopolitical or purely hobby-oriented. However, the level of risk that the individuals involved are willing to accept in regard to collective action varies widely.

High-risk mobilization occurs in the chicken game scenario, as it is mostly in this scenario that participants challenge the legitimacy and sovereignty of the state, resulting in a clampdown by the regime. Compared to this scenario, the level of risk involved in the public crisis scenario is relatively low. Opinion leaders or "policy entrepreneurs" (Mertha, 2009:996) essentially accept the legitimacy of the existing political system, and merely seek redress of their particular grievance (Hung, 2010:333). This is certainly true in the compromise scenario as manifested in the Map Forum Case, where members have no interest in agitating the authority, desiring only to arrive at an accommodation with the authority that will allow them to continue pursuing their online hobby.

We will now discuss the relationship of social ties and collective actions in the chicken game, public crisis, and compromise scenarios. Then, drawing on patterns observed in these three scenarios, we will be able to discern patterns that are likely to occur in the most ambiguous scenario - the banal scenario.

*Strong/Weak Ties and High-Risk Mobilization in the Chicken Game Scenario*

Most researchers who have used the example of the Falun Gong to discuss the impact of the internet tend to give the impression that the success of the 1999 rally was primarily down to the use of email and posts to online forums immediately prior to

the event. What existing studies have almost universally failed to recognize is that there were previously created ties - both weak and strong - that contributed far more to the surprising strength and cohesion of the group that was exhibited that day. These bonds were based on a collective belief in a lifestyle that encompassed daily exercises and study, a collective identity and a common spiritual bond, and were in existence long before. It was, in fact, during these formative years that the potential for the 1999 rally emerged.

Before the official crackdown by Chinese authorities there was no specific list of members. Practitioners met in the morning for group exercises before going to work and/or after work for group study. At the exercise and/or study site, members did not necessarily know one another's full name or personal information. For the most part, they referred to one another as "brother Wang" or "auntie Wu" and, although limited, phone calls and emails among members did occur. In the run-up to the 1999 protest, a combination of word of mouth, emails and phone calls resulted in a highly successful effort.[6]

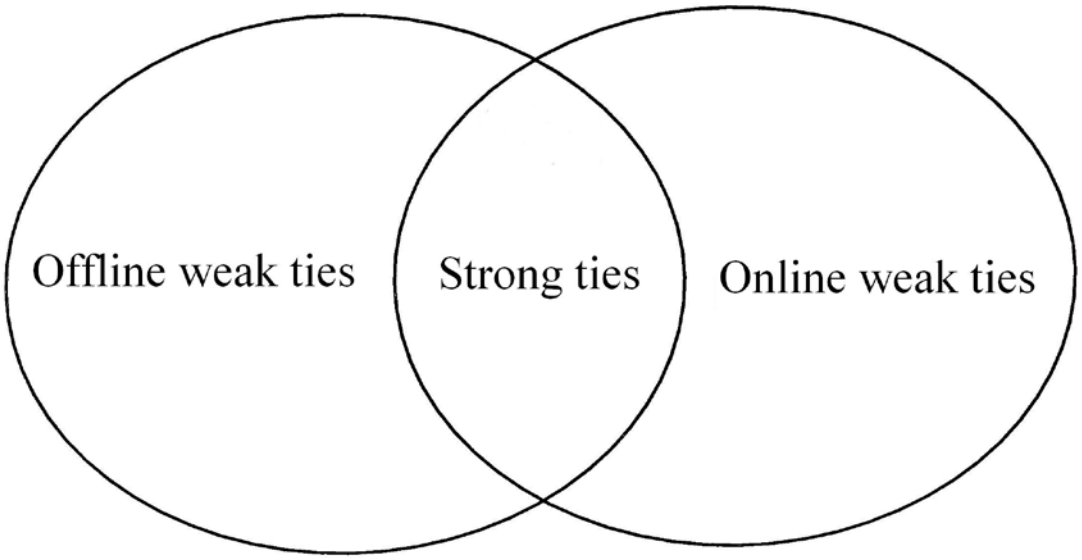
If one applies the definitions of weak and strong ties mentioned at the outset of this paper , then the ties that prompted the 1999 protest must largely be referred to as

[6] Email correspondence with an anonymous Falun Gong practitioner and observer based in Washington D.C. on November 9th, 2012.

weak as they consisted of social relationships that existed only offline or only online. In saying that, there were also members who initially knew one another offline and, through emailing, these members who had already established relationships helped spread and coordinate the plan for staging the rally.

Empirically untangling the complex networks of weak and strong ties that prompted the 1999 Falun Gong protest can be a real challenge for political scientists. Just to reiterate, it is precisely these interwoven social relationships that allowed the group not only to disseminate plans for the protest, but to foster a collective identity. When individuals decide whether or not to join a collective effort, they will, by and large, consider how many others are participating (and whether or not they know them). A number of studies in human behavior, public opinion and democratization have demonstrated this convincingly (Granovetter, 1973; Noelle-Neumann, 1993; Kuran, 1995:247-260; Elkink, 2011:6-8). Since individual choices are interdependent (Kuran, 1995:260), the networks people embed themselves within are central to whether or not they decide to join a collective action. Taking part in a network that falls within at least one of the three zones (i.e. offline weak ties, online weak ties, strong ties) thus gives netizens a chance to understand and imagine the potential unity of their group in joining the rally (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Weak Ties and Strong Ties**




However, not all individuals embedded in these Falun Gong networks, as shown in Figure 2, openly expressed a stance. This silent majority kept the Chinese government and outside observers in the dark. Even several of their less-activist Falun Gong peers were caught unawares by the event. Many members stood back and watched the overall trend and collective unity of the group until they felt comfortable enough to openly express support. Hence, during this process, there was a "latent bandwagon" developing (Kuran, 1995:256). Given the right combination of conditions, including the nature of the individual-authority relationship as well as the formation of group identity through strong and weak ties, members of the Falun Gong eventually managed to stage the 1999 rally, which shocked the regime and surprised outside observers. The existing literature sheds much light on the role of the internet, but fails

to underline the essential element of latent strong and weak ties in sparking the protest.

Previously, we noted the research of Zhang and Wang (2010), which uncovered the importance of weak ties in fostering collective action. In Gladwell's (2010) observation of a number of digitally-mediated revolutions around the world, he contended that, in actual fact, strong ties play the central role, particularly in high-risk mobilization. So, contrary to all previous research into this case, the Falun Gong example demonstrates that it is a combination of both strong and weak ties that most increases the likelihood of a high-risk mobilization.

*a) Weak Ties and Low-Risk Mobilization in the Public Crisis Scenario*

The origin of a mobilization in the public crisis scenario may occur either on or offline. Interactive platforms, such as bulletin board systems (BBS) and other online forums, have been widely used by victims and bystanders of public crises to share their plights and opinions.

For the most part, such individuals do not know one another either on or offline, but due to a shared sentiment toward an issue involving the public good, they enter to express their views online. This type of social tie is called "weak". Of course, one cannot deny that in the public crisis scenario, there are also strong ties involved in

exchanging these views. On the whole, however, weak ties are the main thrust for collective actions in the public crisis scenario. Again, using Figure 2 as a conceptual framework, the zone of strong ties is comparatively smaller in the public crisis scenario than in the chicken game scenario. The tangible connection people have is the crisis itself, which is a tie that is likely to vanish once the public issue diminishes or is resolved.

As found by Zhang and Wang (2010), weak ties may be a fruitful source of new ideas and information for effectively mobilizing collective action. However, the collective actions studied by Zhang and Wang are not high risk, as they do not require participants to commit themselves to sacrifice for the sake of achieving sociopolitical change. As manifested in the public crisis scenario, weak ties can be instrumental in garnering support for public good when the state and society share fundamental interests in correcting a social ill. Conversely, strong ties are crucial for high-risk activism in which the ultimate aim is to challenge the Chinese regime, as revealed in the chicken game scenario.

*Weak Ties and Low-Risk Mobilization in the Compromise Scenario*

In the compromise scenario, the collective actions of weak entrants, even as they consistently encounter government censorship, tend to be low risk. Using the Map

Forum as an example, the number of registered members in the present Map Forum is around 8,888 (as of 30 January 2013) according to our anonymous source. Although he was unable to provide the precise past number of members, this figure has dropped since the government restrictions began. Before the crackdown, interested fans could easily join the forum by registering online. But in the wake of the crackdown and relocation of its web domain and servers to the United States, the number of participants has fallen. First, some older members were unaware that the website had changed and so did not know how to find it. Second, others lacked the capacity to scale China's "great digital wall". Finally third, after the government action, the webmasters removed many inactive members. Those who had not participated for a certain period had their memberships deleted.[7] In the interest of caution, fans now need to email the webmasters for screening and approval before gaining entry.[8]

Members of the forum come from across China and only learn of one another after joining. Apart from exchanging maps and views on the forum, they interact in groups on QQ (http://qun.qq.com), which is a social networking platform similar to MSN Messenger or Google Talk. At present, there are at least 10 QQ groups of Map

[7] There are two webmasters in the Map Forum.

[8] Ibid. There are a number of sub-forums under the Map Forum, such as those focusing on administrative planning and mapping in the North, East, South, and West of China. There is also a sub-forum on Taiwan, and another on administrative planning and mapping elsewhere in the world.

Forum members.

The Map Forum is a typical interest-based site where members without any existing offline relationships are drawn together by a shared interest in administrative planning and mapping. As a result, weak ties are dominant here. Interestingly though, some forum members, particularly leading ones (i.e. heads of sub-forums) and ardent followers, have decided to meet in person - thus creating strong ties. Their meetings are irregular. To give an indication of this, since 2005, our anonymous Map Forum interviewee has participated in around 10 gatherings in various cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Shenyang, Ningbo, Fushun, Xining, Xongshan, Shenzhen, and Golmud. The wide geographical spread of these locations confirms that forum members are from different parts of the country and have no prior knowledge of one another. As the anonymous interviewee revealed, in recent years, more dedicated members have become increasingly willing to travel in order to meet their online friends.

While it is true that some online ties have evolved into offline interactions, resulting in strong ties, the majority of ties existing in the Map Forum remain weak. If there is a group identity in the process of forming, it is one based on a shared hobby, not an aspiration for sociopolitical change or reform. The issue is that the sharing of geographic information, such as maps, is considered a disclosure of state secrets. This

is why the forum has had to face multiple crackdowns. As noted earlier, the leading members of the forum understand the political sensitivity of their personal hobby, and seek to discourage participants from posting politically sensitive words (e.g. Bo Xilai, June 4th), comments and rumors (e.g. Jiang Zemin passed away) online. It was never the intention of the Map Forum members to resist government authority, and their commitment toward risky sociopolitical mobilizations is low. They seek to gather and participate only in *non-political* social gatherings.

*Summary*

Social ties can be considered "intervening variables" mediating the effect a contention has on a collective action's level of risk. The more SNS users' online ties match their offline ones, the greater the likelihood that their online ties will support a high-risk political mobilization in which they are participating (see Table 1). However, when online ties fail to sufficiently coincide with offline ones, such online ties are less likely to join a high-risk sociopolitical mobilization supported by their weak online counterpart. Nonetheless, "purely" online friends may be supportive of mobilizations that entail a limited commitment or risk, such as posting supportive statements in cyberspace as per the public crisis scenario, or attending relatively benign social gatherings as in the compromise scenario. In sum, two hypotheses can be postulated:

H1: The more SNS users' online ties match their offline ties, the more likely their online ties will support the high-risk political mobilization in which they participate.

H2: The less SNS users' online ties match their offline ties, the more likely their online ties will support the low-risk political mobilization in which they participate.

**Table 1: Social Ties and Sociopolitical Mobilization**

| | **Chicken game scenario** | **Public crisis scenario** | **Compromise scenario** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Dominant online platforms and/or means used for communication** | Emails and online forums | Online forums | Online forums |
| **Weak ties vs. strong ties** | Weak ties > strong ties | Weak ties > strong ties | Weak ties > strong ties |
| **Proportion of strong ties among all ties** | More | Less | Less |
| **How much do online ties match offline ties?** | Relatively more match | Relatively less match | Relatively less match |
| **Level of risk involved in mobilization** | High | Medium | Low |

Compared with the aforementioned three scenarios, there is much uncertainty with regard to the kind of individual-authority interaction and outcome that will result from the banal scenario. It is in this scenario specifically, that at the outset individuals lack a conscious intent to utilize websites for sociopolitical change. Their online activities primarily involve gossip, career advancement, dating, entertainment (e.g. gaming),

and online shopping. What is intriguing, however, is the possibility that social connections and interactions formed in this context may act as a catalyst for mobilizations when a sociopolitical issue arises.

Currently, we lack the evidence to say for sure. But as our comparison of the public crisis, chicken game, and compromise scenarios indicates, there appears to be an association (if not causation) between the matchability of online and offline ties and the level of risk involved in various collective actions. Assuming this is the case, we will examine the degree of matchability between online and offline relationships in the least researched scenario in political science - the banal scenario.

**Exploring the Black Box of The Banal Scenario**

In terms of the public crisis scenario, the chicken game scenario, and the compromise scenario, there is no lack of political science literature. What is lacking information-wise and which I would suggest is worthy of far more in-depth observation, is the banal scenario. Because both the authority and individuals demonstrate mixed strategies in the banal scenario, confrontations between the entrants observed in the chicken game, public crisis, and compromise scenarios might also occur. What is unique about the banal scenario is that both actors may simultaneously be weak in their behavior, and thus demonstrate interactions that are

not usually focal points of social science research.

Before I begin to examine the banal scenario, I believe there is value in first clarifying the significance of studying this scenario.

*Situating the Banal Scenario in a Research Agenda*

The banal scenario is a universe in and of itself, primarily because the authority and individuals demonstrate mixed strategies. This means that the other three scenarios mentioned above might all appear in this scenario. The banal scenario is a game that contains all games.

Empirically, what this implies is that the hypothetical linkage between social ties and level of risk involved in mobilization examined previously should be observed in the banal scenario too.

Below I intend to use two empirical cases to examine H1 and H2. This is only a preliminary attempt to fill the current literature gap. These hypotheses are still subject to larger-N empirical tests in the future.

*Higher Matchability, Higher-Risk Mobilization: 2009 Shaoguan Incident*

While details of the 2009 Shaoguan incident remain sketchy due to governmental intervention, the internet is widely believed to have helped sparked the fire. The

Shaoguan incident occurred when Han Chinese factory workers raided the dormitory housing of some of their Uyghur colleagues, after hearing rumors that Han Chinese women had been raped by Uyghurs. Two Uyghurs were killed and at least 60 injured (Culpepper, 2012:198-9; Hoshino, 2009:99-117).

The rumor was initially put forward by a disgruntled former employee of the factory (whose ethnic identity is until today concealed by the government) on the internet (O'Brien, 2011:391-2). Targeted readers of the rumors were factory workers who were connected in the offline world, and who had some online interaction as well. That said, there was a relatively higher match of online and offline ties among those factory workers.

The rumor led to a mass late night brawl at the factory involving up to 1,000 Han and Uyghur workers. People who were on site videotaped the brawl on their cellphones and transmitted it online. This is widely believed to have prompted subsequent protests in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region - which is thousands of miles to the west. The protests later escalated into violence culminating in the now widely known July 5$^{th}$ riot (Wang and Wang, 2009:27; Hassid, 2012:212).

The participants in the Shaoguan incident and in the Xinjiang protests are different groups of people, and due to lack of abundant and non-propaganda information (from both Beijing and separatist-minded Uyghur diasporic groups) on

the July 5th riot, I prefer not to draw inference or place too much relevance on the internet's impact and involvement in the riot. Rather, my focus is on the Shaoguan incident itself, and how the online and offline ties of the factory workers from both the Uyghur and Han groups helped mobilize them to take part in the brawl. The nature of the contention is not just about the rumor of a Han girl being raped. It goes way back to the deep-rooted tensions between the Han and the Uyghurs in Chinese society. The online rumor simply rekindled this tension. The Han and the Uyghur workers each drew on existing online and offline relationships, which stimulated both sides to become easily mobilized and to subsequently confront each other in the late night brawl.[9]

It is vital to note that these online and offline ties among factory workers are normally "dormant" in the banal scenario. The factory workers have no intention to confront any authority or to cause discord among themselves. But as said, the banal scenario is dynamic and can bring about unintended consequences when high matchability of online and offline ties is fueled by a crisis like the rumor of a Han raped by Uyghur workers. These conditions increase the likelihood of higher-risk mobilization.

[9] I wish to thank David O'Brien for sharing his knowledge with me. David O'Brien has interviewed a number of people who were at the 2009 riot.

The rippling effect of the Shaoguan incident was tremendous, spilling over to the far west of China. This was without doubt one contributing factor to Beijing's decision to close down the internet in Xinjiang for a year, as well as China's bidding of farewell to international SNSs such as Twitter and Facebook.

*Lower Matchability, Lower-Risk Mobilization: The Flyer Tea Forum*

If the Shaoguan incident is an example of higher matchability of online and offline relations leading to higher-risk mobilization, the next example is about lower matchability resulting in lower-risk mobilization.

The "Flyer Tea" forum (http://www.flyertea.com/portal.php) is the first Chinese website to allow members to share and discuss information related to world travel, such as choosing hotels and airlines. The website was founded by a Chinese entrepreneur who studied in the United States and then returned to China to become a businessman. Flyer Tea is approved by the Chinese government and Chinese users can browse the site freely. The content, as described, is not political and rarely crosses any government red lines. The site also has clear rules stipulating that posts related to politics, advertising, and pornography are forbidden.

An anonymous interviewee joined the Flyer Tea forum at the time of the site's

birth in August 2009.[10] For the sake of convenience, let us call the interviewee Zhou. Zhou is a fan of air travel. He enjoys trying different airlines and even has his own Chinese blog on which he posts vivid pictures from inside different aircraft to compare service and amenities. As of now (early 2013), Zhou has been a Flyer Tea member for three years and one month.

Zhou's involvement in Flyer Tea is mostly for the purpose of checking travel information. When other users post a question he happens to know the answer to, he posts a comment. So to summarize, he has no offline interactions with other members, and he never participates in high-risk sociopolitical mobilizations initiated within the website.

The only type of post he has observed that might cross the government threshold is when members share information about air mile bonuses earned from foreign airlines. Most often, this would entail scaling China's "great digital wall" as some sites operated by foreign airlines are blocked in China. For instance, on August 19th, 2012, a user nicknamed Pablo posted a piece of information explicitly suggesting that in order to register to earn bonus air miles from a foreign airline, scaling the wall would be required. Since the post is written in Chinese, it is very likely written by a forum member who is a native Chinese speaker. It is interesting to note, however, that

[10] Interview conducted via Skype on October 21st, 2012.

the online photograph Pablo uses to represent himself is of a foreign male. This shows that Pablo does not want to reveal his true identity (most likely knowing the sensitivity of some of his posts) to avoid being censored.

Technically, scaling the great digital wall is not an act permitted by the government. But in this case, the reason for scaling the wall is not to achieve sociopolitical change. As it turns out, only four Flyer Tea members replied to the original post, expressing appreciation for the usefulness of the information. It is hard to know precisely how many readers actually scaled the wall to register to earn bonus air miles after reading the post and, in any case, the government does not appear too interested in this not-so-correct behavior. As of November 2012, the post was still there.

*Summary*

The Shaoguan incident and the Flyer Tea forum examples serve to provide an initial examination of H1 and H2 respectively. People whose online linkages highly match their offline relationships have greater potential for supporting each other when political mobilization entailing high risks or involving more commitment is called for. This was observed in the Shaoguan incident.

When online ties do not match well with offline relationships, online friends are

less likely to support the entrants by joining political mobilization that requires significant commitment or which carries high risk. Nonetheless, it is probable that these "pure" online friends can still be supportive of mobilization involving less commitment or lower risk. This is observed by Zhou in the Flyer Tea forum.

Further empirical tests should be undertaken to test the two hypotheses vigorously. I expect that the applicability of these hypotheses can reach beyond the case of China. If they are valid, we will be able to understand why small-scale political mobilization can be encouraged via the Internet (which is commonly seen in liberal democracies), while large-scale political mobilization (including revolutionary types of political mobilization) are hard to come by through "pure" online channels (Gladwell, 2010).

**Conclusion**

The internet can be intentionally used for fostering sociopolitical change (i.e. as in the public crisis and chicken game scenarios). Furthermore, ties engendered through online activities may or may not serve as latent catalysts for sociopolitical change when relevant issues arise (i.e. as in the compromise and banal scenarios). In the first case, individuals are relatively proactive in making use of the internet for sociopolitical change, while in the latter case, the implication is that the internet can

induce human behavior for potential sociopolitical change.

There is much uncertainty surrounding the banal scenario. It is here that some scholars (e.g. Leibold, 2011:1023-1041) posit a pessimistic picture of the impact of the internet on sociopolitical change. In Leibold's view, most netizens generate "the same shallow infotainment, pernicious misinformation, and interest-based ghettos" found elsewhere in the world (Leibold, 2011:1023).

I would suggest a less pessimistic view, in which weak ties and even strong ones developed in the banal scenario sow the seeds for civic engagement (Shen, Wang, Guo and Guo, 2009:469-470). As already noted, most of the time citizens are not publicizing their sociopolitical positions, and instead use the internet for non-political purposes. But once they join a network(s), they become observers of public opinion and trends, and without being noticed by any authority, outside observer, or even their peers, they may become part of a latent bandwagon supporting sociopolitical change. As the saying goes, "a single spark can start a prairie fire". When an individual realizes that the majority of their weak and/or strong ties support a cause, a collective action may be sparked, shifting the individual-authority interaction from the banal scenario to the public crisis or chicken game scenarios. The network perspective allows us to understand how digitally-mediated relationships can aggregate to form larger-scale sociopolitical collective actions.

It is also worth noting that in the public crisis and chicken game scenarios where tangible sociopolitical actions have been observed, we see that the predominance of weak ties, either offline or online, nurtures collective action (Shen, Wang, Guo and Guo, 2009:457). While strong ties exist in these scenarios, they appear less pervasive. This research suggests that in the chicken game scenario, higher-risk collective action is made more likely by the existence of more strong ties. Strong ties breed cohesion (Granovetter, 1973:1378) and were effective in boosting the 1999 Falun Gong rally in Beijing. But as Granovetter (1973:1378) indicated decades ago, there is a paradox, because when strong ties breed cohesion, this may lead to the emergence of factions within the group and result in its overall fragmentation. This has been demonstrated in the cases of the Uyghur and Tibetan movements. This area demands further investigation.

One can consider the individual-authority interactions described in this paper as one pillar of a larger theoretical framework, the other pillar being the stimulating role of social ties. Our discussion has been designed to link these two facets, which should serve to enable more profound research into Chinese internet studies. Demography, the structure of coalitions, and resources are also potentially vital factors that have been commonly explored in the general literature on collective actions, but not specifically as they apply to online activism in China. These could be fruitfully

integrated and tied to our discussion here. How these variables are related requires more comprehensive examination. It is hoped that this research will spur an interest in the theoretical and conceptual framework, and research agenda contained herein.

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