THE DOOR IS CLOSED, BUT NOT LOCKED: CHINA’S VPN POLICY

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts in
Asian Studies

By

Kejing Yang, B.A.

Washington, D.C.
April 24, 2017
THE DOOR IS CLOSED, BUT NOT LOCKED: CHINA'S VPN POLICY

Kejing Yang, B.A.

Thesis Advisor: Victor D. Cha, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explain why China still allow some people to use Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to bypass China’s heavily guarded Internet content censorship system, despite the assumption that the free flow of information can bring regime instability and collective political action. After excluding two alternative explanations, technological capability and political attitude, I argue that the use of VPNs in China is a result of a deliberate government policy of keeping a partially open Internet. Furthermore, a partially open Internet can, in fact, award the government by providing the Chinese Communist Party with the intended regime legitimacy. More specifically, a selective VPNs enforcement mechanism minimizes the political damage while optimizing China’s economic performance, maximizing its external propaganda and soft power, and rallying domestic nationalist support.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Between Internet Freedom and Democratization</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of the Internet Censorship in China</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The First Alternative Explanation</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Second Alternative Explanation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Argument: VPN Utilization for Legitimacy Consolidation</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Component 1: VPN Utilization Increases Economic Performance and Innovation</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Component 2: VPN Utilization for External Propaganda and Nationalism</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


LITERATURE REVIEW

Guobin Yang (Yang 2011) provided a vivid record of how the Chinese netizens have used the Internet as a new vehicle to defend their rights and formulate their online activism. Despite the Chinese regime’s efforts to control the Internet, the Chinese netizens become more creative in advocating changes in the Chinese society.

Samuel Solomon (Solomon 2012) talked about the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter’s effect on the Egyptian revolution of 2011. The use of social media tools facilitated the growth of “information cascades” and challenged the Egyptian government’s information control. The Mubarak regime’s downfall was partially caused by its inability to control the political discussion in time therefore lost its legitimacy.

Yi Mou, David Atkin, and Hanlong Fu (Mou et al. 2011) explored the limitations of China’s online discussion, and they keenly observed the lack of its political context. They argue in China’s case, the Internet’s role as a liberating and democratizing force should not be overstated.

Joss Wright (Wright 2014) indicated that China’s Internet filtering system is not homogeneous. In other words, regional variations across the China do exist. In some areas that have a higher political risk of collective actions, for example, Beijing, the Internet policy is more restrictive.

Gary King, Jennifer Pan, Margaret E. Roberts (King et al. 2014) reverse-engineered the censorship system in China's online forums. They discovered that the online posts that have "collective action potential," or ability to gather real-life political events are most likely to be reviewed and deleted.
Yi Mou, Kevin Wu and David Atkin (Mou et al. 2016) examined the factors behind the Chinese netizens who use these circumvention tools. Other than political disobedience and attitude toward Internet policing, some individual-level variables, such as technological fluidity and gender, also have a positive correlation with the circumvention tool usage.

These research projects and papers have provided us with critical perspicacity into the Chinese Internet censorship system and the Chinese netizens who work against it. However, instead of being explanatory, these research conclusions are largely descriptive. Some of these papers are very technical and were not written from a social science perspective. Part of the reason is that a researcher cannot find the “smoking gun.” The inner mechanism and scale of China's Internet censorship system remain a top state secret, and general academic inquiry do not possess the kind of classified intelligence. Occasionally, through leaked documents and reverse-engineering, researchers can discover new clues about the making and execution of China’s Internet policy, but we still do not know how centralized is China’s Internet policy-making process and how it is done. Whenever a website is blocked in mainland China, the researchers can only speculate the real reason. And whenever a new sensitive word has been added, we do not know which level of the state apparatus was involved to make the final decision.

When writing about the resistance against Internet censorship, such as the use of circumvention tools, the existing literature tends to describe the attributes of the netizens who are engaged in this activity. The characteristics such as their geographical location, their gender,  

\[\text{In this paper, I will use China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Chinese authorities, the Chinese regime, and the Chinese government as interchangeable terms. I am aware that these words carry very broad and different political and legal connotations, but because until the day this paper was written, no one can declare definitively as which person and what organization is responsible for all the planning and administration of the Chinese Internet. As far as my research is concerned, these five words all meant the rule-makers of the Chinese Internet space and the ultimate benefactors of these rules. As China is a one-party state and there is virtually no government agency outside the CCP that makes these Internet policies, I will treat all five words as the same entity. Also, I will use "Virtual Private Networks (VPNs)" and "circumvention tools" interchangeably. There are other methods other than the VPNs to bypass the content filtering system China imposes on its cyberspace, but the VPNs are the most shared and influential method; so, I will use a broader definition of VPNs to represent all the methods. Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau are not part of the discussion of this paper.}\]
their trust level toward the government, and their online political discussion are a common theme. (Mou et al. 2016, Yang, 2014) However, very few articles have been written about the other end of the censorship— the government. If there have been, the articles are all describing the censorship rather than explaining why censorship is done in a certain way. And this paper is to try to fill in the blank. Why the government does not catch and punish all netizens who try to use circumvention tools? If the government does not care enough to find and punish them all, then why does the government invest so many resources into this censorship system in the first place? Why does the government write this rule and sends no one to enforce it? What are the other objectives and methods of Internet policy other than repression and policing? To get to the heart of these questions, I must explain why does China allow the use of circumvention tools. It is a very interesting and important research question because it is indeed counter-intuitive and understudied. It also carries significant implications on how the Chinese government sees itself and the ways it enhances its power dominance. I argue, contrary to the common belief that CCP’s legitimacy and the use of VPNs are mutually exclusive, tolerating VPN usage in some areas are in fact beneficial to the government because it stabilizes the country and earns more respect for its domestic and foreign policy. A partially-open attitude on circumvention tools does not damage the regime’s power, instead, a controlled usage consolidates its power.

**RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTERNET FREEDOM AND DEMOCRATIZATION**

The history of online censorship is almost as long as the history of China’s Internet development. In China's case, it is nothing surprising. In academic literature, political scientists and sociologists (Lynch 2011, Salgado 2012) have intensively discussed the impact of freedom of expression to various authoritarian polities. The emergence of Internet as a new public space
for open discussion as well as a networking tool for the free association are something of a recent development. But the netizens who can coordinate their political activism through the Internet have enormous political implications. In the Middle East and North Africa, collective actions such as protests and riots have taken place during the Arab Spring, and these political gatherings are planned and executed through online tools such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. In some cases, the use of these online tools has caused the downfall of various authoritarian regimes.

According to Marc Lynch, social media has facilitated grassroots-level political change in four ways. (Lynch 2011) First, the Internet has significantly reduced the “transaction costs” of small protests and increase their respective exposure. Second, the Internet fosters the “informational cascades” by making the oppositional views more visible, and thus empower netizens to air their dissent. Third, the Internet also raises the costs of governmental repression by drawing international attention. The authoritarian governments must consider the external criticism on their legitimacy when they make decisions to crack down. Fourth, the use of Internet increases the scale and diffusion levels of demonstrations. For instance, in Egypt, social media has played a very significant role in convincing the Egyptian population that political change is possible. So, therefore, the initial activists rallied enough protesters in Tahrir Square between January 2011 and February 2011 to force Hosni Mubarak’s resignation. The proliferation of anti-Mubarak Facebook pages and the government’s inability to delete the pages quick enough are a significant factor for the resulted regime change in Egypt at 2011. (Solomon 2012)

Hence, the motive for China’s internet censorship is clear: information control. China wants to police its people’s online political discussion so that they will not challenge the official narrative of events, history, and assessment of government policy. It also wants to eliminate unauthorized collective actions that could lead to political instability or even revolts.
HISTORY OF THE INTERNET CENSORSHIP IN CHINA

China’s own Internet development started with its first email message sent by Professor Qian Tianbai of Peking University on September 20th, 1987. Seven years later, on April 20th, 1994, the National Computing and Networking Facility of China project established a 64k international circuit through Sprint Co of the United States, and therefore formally granted China’s full access to the Internet and permanently elevated China onto an “Internet accessible country.”

Online forums and web-enabled communication quickly followed. On August 8th, 1995, Shuimu Qinghua Bulletin Board System (水木清华 BBS) had its inception as the first Chinese online forum. By early 1996, the registered users, mostly Tsinghua University students and faculty members, have climbed to a few hundred. However, in September 1996, during a discussion on the 65th anniversary of Mukden Incident of 1931, many students have called for an organized protest against Japan and Japan’s occupation of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. The Chinese authorities were afraid of another mass movement like that of 1989, Shuimu Qinghua BBS and another forum based on Peking University were temporarily shut down. And this is the first example of the online censorship system in use. Since then, the battle for controlling information has begun. On the one hand, it is the netizens’ pursuit for more freedom of expression and craving for more information; and on the other hand, it is the Chinese government that wants to maintain stability and prevents the free flow of information. It is often

---

3 In case of confusion related to translation, I will include the original Chinese characters.
a dialectical process- in the words of Guobin Yang, “Online community is both a social basis and an outcome of contention. Contention challenges control and adapts to it. Popular contention and the search for community are processes of human agency and creativity.” (Yang 2007)

The first peak of online content filtering system began at 2001. According to a report from International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development based in Montreal, Canada, by 2001, China has started the development of a “massive, ubiquitous architecture of surveillance” which is code-named Golden Shield Project and “the aim is to integrate a gigantic online database with an all-encompassing surveillance network – incorporating speech and face recognition, closed-circuit television, smart cards, credit records, and Internet surveillance technologies.” The report also identifies the political problem with China’s growing Internet connectivity. China is well aware of the lurking danger and is heavily committed to restrict the online content and to constrain the access Chinese netizens have to the information published outside of the country. Websites such as Voice of America and the New York Times website were blocked in 2001. But a few days after Arthur O. Sulzberger Jr, the publisher of the New York Times, raised his concern face to face during a meeting with the Chinese President Jiang Zemin, the website was accessible in China again.

The second peak of massive censorship comes between 2008 to 2010, during which China faced exacerbated ethnic tensions that disrupted the political stability, particularly in its volatile regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet. During this period, the government primarily targeted social media websites. On March 2008, a series of protests and self-immolations by Tibetan monks took place across Tibet and neighboring provinces, including Qinghai, Gansu,

and Sichuan. These protests were centered around various Tibetan Buddhist monasteries such as Ramoche Temple and Labrang Monastery, and the Chinese government responded very promptly to restore order by sending People’s Armed Police. (Topgyal 2011) This confrontation also attracted international attention after videos that depicted police brutality, including their incessantly beating the Tibetan monks with clubs, circulated on video-sharing websites such as YouTube. In an attempts to contain information, local authorities blocked reporters from CNN, the New York Times, and the Washington Post from entering Tibet. The videos and pictures, whose source cannot be verified, became the dominant source of information. China’s state-owned newspaper China Daily criticized the videos of its erroneous caption by pointing out the police officers were dressed in Nepali police uniforms, and the incident took place at an earlier time in Kathmandu, Nepal. China certainly sees the incident as an orchestrated event to damage its international image before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. By March 16th, 2008, YouTube was blocked in mainland China.

On July 5th, 2009, Ürümqi, the capital city of Xinjiang, experienced a violent Uygur-Han ethnic clash that involved thousands and resulted in the death of 197 people. Because the rioters used Facebook to coordinate their activities, the People’s Daily published an editorial online criticizing Facebook and appealing all Chinese netizens to boycott it. As reported by the People’s Daily, a Facebook group named “Global protests. Support Uyghurs to seek independence” has violated China’s laws and “has overstepped the boundaries of normal cyber

---

8 Ibid.
activities and become a foothold for "Xinjiang independence" organizations' collusion and alliance overseas." In a survey done by the People's Daily, over 80 percent of Chinese netizens demanded Facebook to shut the group down.\textsuperscript{12}

On January 12th, 2010, Google published an article on Google blog titled “A New Approach to China,” detailing the constant hacking attempts against Google users, particularly, the Chinese human rights activists’ Gmail accounts. The aim of these attacks, described by the article, is to “limit the freedom of speech on the web” and it has led Google “to conclude that it should review the feasibility of our business operations in China.” In conclusion, Google announced that it would no longer abide by the Chinese rule of filtering online content and it decided to withdraw from the mainland Chinese market.\textsuperscript{13}

The third wave of blocking foreign websites are associated with international media’s reporting on China’s leaders. China tends to blacklist foreign news outlets that have covered Chinese leaders’ assets, their family members, or have directly criticized them by name-calling. One of the most notable examples is the how the New York Times has been blocked once again after its China correspondent, David Barboza, published an article about Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s family assets with vivid details about his wife’s and son’s business operations.\textsuperscript{14} The New York Times website remained blocked in mainland China as of April 2017.\textsuperscript{15} Bloomberg and its Businessweek site were also cut off from mainland China after its coverage of China’s then-


vice president Xi Jinping’s family assets. Both occurred in 2012. Similarly, in 2016, the *Economist* and the *Times Magazine* were deleted from China’s cyberspace for their criticism of China's President Xi Jinping. The *Economist* criticized Xi for building a cult of personality around him, and its *WeChat* public accounts were also suspended. The Panama Papers scandal that broke out in April 2016 had leaked evidence for hidden assets of China’s top leaders, including that of several Politburo members and their family. China’s censorship task force quickly deleted all the related news stories and made words such as “Panama Papers” and “brother-in-law” unsearchable in China’s search engines.

Websites associated with human rights, Tiananmen Movement of 1989, Cultural Revolution, the Great Leap Forward, Falun Gong, and pornography are all blocked. According to GreatFire.Org, a website dedicated to monitoring China’s online censorship regime, China completely blocks or partially blocks at least 80120 Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) out of 100,000 monitored sites in mainland China. And among the world’s top 1000 Alexa domains, at least 179 were inaccessible in mainland China.

Despite continuous content control efforts from the Chinese government, the Internet industry, online community, and cyberspace thrived in mainland China. Starting from a few hundred students from top Chinese universities back in the 1990s, the number of Internet users in

---


18 It is reported that Xi Jinping’s brother-in-law, Deng Jiagui, was also involved in the scandal.


21 Alexa is a website that specializes in web traffic data and page views analysis; and this figure means that among the world’s busiest 1000 websites, at least 179 of them are not accessible in mainland China without the circumvention tools.

China had surpassed 731 million, which is around 53.2% of China’s total population.\(^{23}\) If the current growth rate continues, the amount of people online in China will exceed the total population of Europe by the end of 2017.

The Chinese government, while enjoying economic fruits brought by the information age, faces the political dilemma I have discussed previously. As we demonstrated through the long history of Internet censorship in China, many resources and time have spent to contain information, as the regime cares about its legitimacy. But by the estimation of researchers, at least 18 million devices in China use circumvention tools on a regular basis in 2010 (Roberts et al. 2010). The figure could be much higher in 2017. And yet, as of April 2017, no one has been prosecuted solely because of VPN usage. There are essentially three explanations to China’s seemingly contradictory behavior.

**THE FIRST ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION**

The first explanation is that the Chinese government does not have the technical ability to block VPN usage or to catch the individuals who use them. In the past as well as in China now, blocking a website usually involves Internet Protocol (IP)-address blocking, Domain Name System (DNS) hijacking, and the Transmission Protocol (TCP) content filtering. (Mou et al. 2016) These methods would sometimes combine to disrupt a device from connecting directly to a webpage. However, a Virtual Private Network (VPN) allows a user to encrypt his or her communication by establishing a virtual connection with a computer/server whose location is outside of the original locality, and thus bypass the Chinese censorship mechanism by “fooling”

---

it. As the encryption process makes it more difficult for the administrator to monitor what content a given device is browsing, it would be technically harder to follow and to crack down.\textsuperscript{24}

Proponents of this explanation stated that because people can always find a new way to bypass the system, the Chinese government cannot do anything but to permit a small window under which the users can operate. To some extent, it is true, as the VPN users are often forced to switch between accounts and among different VPN providers for the best service. A phrase used by the \textit{Economist} summarizes that there is an eternal “cat and mouse game” between the government and the netizens.\textsuperscript{25}

However, China has been demonstrating its ability and willingness to utilize extreme measures to prevent people from using VPNs if it so desired. On May 2011, China upgraded its Great Firewall system (GFW) to make Google and MSN harder to penetrate by VPN.\textsuperscript{26} On December 2012, China upgraded its GFW to block “at least four of the common protocols used by VPNs,” which crippled VPN connection. The GFW also has acquired the ability to “learn, discover and block” VPN activities.\textsuperscript{27}

Even at the national level, China can and is willing to shut down the Internet altogether if the local situation has turned into a state of emergency. In 2009, China closed Internet service for a 10-month period in Xinjiang following the July Uyghur riot in Ürümqi.\textsuperscript{28} The locals would have to travel to neighboring provinces to get online. According to the Chinese officials, this


measure was to “quench the riot quickly and prevent violence from spreading to other places.” International phone calls and SMS servers were also curbed. The online services resumed in March 2010, when the region returned to a more stable status.

At the individual level, the Chinese government also had shown its capability to catch and punish any individual even when his "crimes" were committed online and under anonymity. For example, in April 2011, Ren Jianyu, a village-level official in Chongqing was sentenced to one year of "re-education through labor" (劳动教养) because he posted his criticism online about Bo Xilai, a senior Chinese politician. As reported in 2015, China had also invented the technique to cut off one’s mobile phone services if that individual has tried to use VPN on his phone or has downloaded foreign messaging applications such as Whatsapp or Telegram. The targeted device would lose its function unless the owner is voluntarily going to “consult the cyberpolice affiliated with the police station in your vicinity as soon as possible.” These cases demonstrated that China could catch and stop its people from certain online activities, such as using VPN, if it is steely determined.

China’s control of VPN can oscillate among important dates. In some days, VPN control is more restrictive than the others. Annually, two plenary sessions from the National People's Congress (NPC) and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) would be held in the Great Hall of the People, Beijing. As the two sessions carry symbolic significance for the Chinese government and they include the rare opportunities for various minister-level officials and the Chinese Premier to face the press, foreign media

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
would come to Beijing to cover the story. To avoid any unrest or unwanted exposure, political dissidents would be escorted out of Beijing and security of the city would be tightened. In part of this intensive security package, Beijing would also tighten its internet control by interrupting unauthorized VPN services. Residents and businesses sometimes complain. Astrill, a popular VPN service provider, announced that “due to political meetings in Beijing there’s increased censorship, so access to VPN may be restricted at this time.” When the two meetings end and foreign media went home, the VPN service typically resumes to normal level. A similar pattern of action was observed during the World War II anniversary military parade of August 2015.

As I have shown above, citing Chinese government’s impotence as the only independent variable to explain why circumventions tools were used in China would not suffice. From Xinjiang to Chongqing, from a national level to an individual level, the Chinese authorities are competent enough to discover, catch, punish, and to shut down VPNs. In fact, China is even technologically adept enough to tighten and loosen its VPN control across region and time.

**THE SECOND ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION**

The second hypothesis assumes the Chinese government does not care about the fact that people are using circumvention tools, so it does not shut them down. In other words, the Chinese government is not willing to invest too many resources to stop these activities because they are not dangerous enough to pass the threshold of punishment. Proponents of this theory can derive

---


their argument from the article written by Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. The article argues that a post is more likely to be deleted if it triggered a “collective action potential.” (King et al. 2014) Through a reverse-engineering of the censorship process and statistical analysis, the researchers found out that many sensitive topics, such as calling out corruption cases or naming a politician specifically, do not incite censorship as much as a post calling for a political gathering. More broadly speaking, the censorship alert system is more sensitive toward online activities that can lead to real-world political meetings; the posts that are critical of a particular policy or a leader, although also subject to deletion or review, are less prioritized. (King et al. 2014)

Also, by the estimation, only 2% to 3% of China’s internet community are using the VPNs. (Roberts et al. 2010) And it means the population who escapes the government’s information control is a very tiny minority among China's online world and certainly does not constitute a genuine regime threat.

The finding has significant implications for my research question because it renders the research question invalid. It turned my question into a meaningless discussion of a method, rather than the real objective. Perhaps it is not the fact that one uses the VPNs that matters, but what one does after using a VPN. The argument holds that the VPN is only a means to stay connected, but the final collective actions are what the government really cares. For example, if an individual only uses circumvention tools for browsing and consuming banned material or for chatting with his overseas friends, the authorities care less than someone using the VPN to organize a demonstration in front of the government building tomorrow morning.

As tempting as it sounds, the argument underestimated the importance of banned material consumption. No doubt, the Chinese government cares tremendously about potential collective
actions on the streets because any government wants stability and survival, but it also cares about what people are reading. For the CCP, the fact that people are browsing unwanted content itself is a serious issue. The Communist Party wants to make sure its narrative is the only unchallenged and authoritative one, and the commentaries censored by the Great Firewall do not evolve into a mainstream public opinion in China. Competing narratives and opinions on Chinese politics are nothing but corrosion toward its legitimacy.

On November 8th, 2012, the then-General Secretary of the CCP Hu Jintao delivered an opening speech to the 18th Party Congress in which he advised the Party to “strengthen the management of online society and to advance the Internet in a lawful and regulated direction.” And on August 19th, 2013, the General Secretary of the CCP Xi Jinping hosted the National Publicity and Ideological Work Conference (全国宣传思想工作会议), and he pointed out that the “ideological work” is “an extremely important work” of the Party. More specifically, “ideological work” means to “consolidate” the guiding status of Marxism in the Party and to elevate it to the position of the shared “intellectual foundation” for all party members and Chinese people. As the China’s development faces immense challenges and unprecedented difficulties, the propaganda and ideological work must speak the voice of unity, of stability, of inspiration, and of positivity. When facing issues of “fundamental political principles,” the CCP must be proactive to help the “masses” clarify their “clouded misunderstandings.”


37 The Chinese word for “publicity” and “propaganda” are the same word, xuanchuan “宣传.” “Xuanchuan” in Mandarin Chinese is a neutral word and does not carry a negative connotation of the word “propaganda” in the English language.


39 Ibid.
Xi’s speech was echoed with numerous publications by local cadres and other propaganda officials. Party Secretaries, Governors, and Mayors from every Chinese province and municipality announced their dedication to Xi’s speech and will implement its instructions within their jurisdictions. Li Pei, the Director of Policy Research Office of Guizhou Province, penned an article on Guizhou Daily, the Guizhou provincial Party newspaper, agreeing to the General Secretary. Li Pei’s article also appeared on the People’s Daily and Qiushi, signifying its significance in the Party. Li Pei combined Hu’s report and Xi’s speech, and strongly urged the CCP to capture the “public opinion high-ground (舆论高地).” The most pressing issue, Li argued, is to intensify the online media guidance. Because, as he warned, the stage of control and guidance on the online public opinion in China is still very “primitive” and “lacks a proper enforcement mechanism and environment.” Externally, China is confronting a very hostile international environment and must stay vigilant as the Kosovo Wars and the Golf Wars are all part of a “color revolution” that was built on online media. On August 12th, 2015, Global Times, a state-owned newspaper published an editorial. The editorial board claimed that there had been an essentially anti-China hostile force emerged overseas, and it had used, incessantly, the Internet as the medium to meddle in China’s internal affairs. While advocating for greater press access within China, the Global Times wanted the Chinese media to compete with the “overseas forces” for the “power of narrative (话语权).”

---

40 The position is “贵州省政策研究室主任” in Chinese
41 Qiushi 求是 is a prominent bi-monthly academic journal of political theory in China. It is under direct leadership from the Central Party School and the Central Committee of the CCP
43 Ibid.
These reports, speeches, articles, and editorials were repeatedly published within China for a reason. They range from the top leadership to the mass-media outlets, only to show that every level of the Chinese leadership is paying attention to the circumvention tools and is keenly aware of where the Chinese media fell short. If the Chinese netizens, now more than 700 million in number, are all using VPNs to browse banned materials and are all exploring alternative information sources, what function does the CCP’s own newspapers, television stations, radios, books, and magazines serve? These party outlets simply cannot “guide the public opinion” and serve as the “voice of unity, of stability, of inspiration, and of positivity” as Xi instructed, and the Great Firewall’s function is completely crippled. The CCP knows that the VPNs and the outside information penetration are giving them a hard time adjusting their policies and are testing the Chinese people’s trust to the government. For a country like China, legitimacy and credibility are the fundamentals; and the VPNs are shaking their propaganda methods to the core. Since it is related to the CCP’s power and its survival, to argue that if collective actions are not involved then CCP does not care about the circumvention tools usage is to ignore the basic facts.

MY ARGUMENT: VPN UTILIZATION FOR LEGITIMACY CONSOLIDATION

China is consciously employing a partially opened Internet policy to consolidate its legitimacy and power because it is reliant on economic growth and nationalism for its legitimacy. Surprisingly, instead of draining the power away, allowing some “backdoor” to the blocked websites would consolidate the CCP’s power. As an authoritarian country that relies on performance, China must stay connected to the rest of the world economically. A unique feature makes it impossible to shut down all Internet traffic like the North Korean government did. The CCP also needs VPN for external propaganda to nurture China’s own narrative in the
international community and to cultivate domestic nationalism. When China tolerates the use of circumvention tools, it carefully selects the regions, the sectors, and the people who are using them; so that the circumventions tools will not be used for subversive ends but to enhance the CCP’s ability to control China. In the following chapters, I will break my argument into two components and explain both.

**COMPONENT 1: VPN UTILIZATION INCREASES ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE AND INNOVATION**

In this paper, I define “legitimacy” as a characteristic a government has in order to be accepted by its public as the rightful policy-maker. In other words, without legitimacy, the people of a state would constantly challenge a said government’s policies, either actively or passively. (O’Neil 2015, p46) When the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, China derived the original legitimacy from nationalism and Marxism-Leninism-and Mao Zedong Thought. However, since the reform era began by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China’s legitimacy has gradually shifted to the direction of a “performance-based” one. (Zhu, 2011) It means the Chinese Communist Party must now find a way to reach concrete goals such as maintaining economic growth and employment, providing public goods, and offering some governmental accountability when the society demands it. (Zhu, 2011, Shambaugh 2008) Although this new characteristic does not mean China is moving toward the direction of democratization, it incentivizes the government to be more responsive, transparent, and accountable. As a result, the Chinese people respect the government, despite the fact that they are not democratically represented in the decision-making process. As a demonstration of this legitimacy shift, the Chinese Premier has been delivering the annual *Report on the Work of the Government* (《政府
工作报告）) on the National Congress uninterruptedly since 1978. The report summarizes the Chinese government’s achievements for the past year and its goals for the next year. The full text often contains valuable insight on the sectors and the industries the Chinese government plans to support, and serves as an irreplaceable indicator of the government’s assessment of its own work.

According to the 2016 estimation, China’s GDP is now composed of 8.6% of the agricultural Sector, 40.7% of the industrial sector, and 50.7% of the service sector. Relying heavily on the industrial sector would consume a lot of energy resources, and China is already facing a huge air pollution problem that has taken a toll on its public health and legitimacy. Apart from encouraging clean energy initiatives, China must also strengthen its service sector growth. Ejaz Ghani (Ghani 2010) and Arpita Mukherjee (Mukherjee 2016) discussed Information Technology (IT) and IT-led services growth in India, which makes India’s service sector much stronger than that of China. Yanrui Wu (Wu 2016) pointed out that, as rapid urbanization takes place, China needs to take “further reforms and prudent government policies” to reduce the over-reliance on manufacturing and to promote service sector growth. Yanrui Wu (Wu 2016) also found that the Total Factor Productivity (TFP) growth has contributed heavily to China’s recent overall growth, and the TFP growth depends on innovation.

The Chinese government is clearly aware of the underdevelopment of China’s service sector and China’s innovation potential. In the Report on the Work of the Government of 2016, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang pointed out that “innovation is the primary driving force for development and must occupy a central place in China's development strategy, which is why we

---

must implement a strategy of innovation-driven development.\textsuperscript{47} He also highlighted an ambitious plan for China’s innovation: China would strike to make major breakthroughs in basic and applied sciences by 2020, invest 2.5% of its GDP in research and development (R&D), and increase the contribution to economic growth by science and technological advances to 60%. Li Keqiang summarized the objective is to “turn China into an innovative and talent-rich country.”\textsuperscript{48} In a similar vision, in the 2017 report, Li claimed the government has “strengthened innovation's leading role, spurring the rapid development of new growth drivers.”\textsuperscript{49}

It is worth noting that on both reports, Li Keqiang has heavily emphasized the role of the Internet. In 2016, he promoted the “extensive application of big data, cloud computing, and the Internet of Things.”\textsuperscript{50} The Chinese governments, from the national level to the village level, must carry out the "Internet Plus government services” model. The “Internet plus” model represents better communication between government departments and reduced cost for businesses to get governmental approval. In the 2017 report, Li went more specific as he vowed to “increase broadband speed and lower rates for Internet services” for the Chinese netizens.\textsuperscript{51} A safer, faster Internet connection is good for growth in every sector. The word “Internet” was mentioned six times in the 2016 report, and seven times in the 2017 report.

Tolerating the use of VPN is a major component of China’s pursuit of innovation and growth. In a 2015 interview, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg claimed that although China does not provide Facebook with a massive customer base because it is banned in China, a lot of advertisers on Facebook are actually from mainland China. Indeed, mainland China is now one

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
of Facebook’s biggest advertising markets.\textsuperscript{52} The statement from Mark Zuckerberg reveals how internationally-driven the Chinese companies are, as they need to advertise on Facebook pages to increase their exposure to potential buyers overseas for higher revenue. As of 2015, 22\% of China’s GDP, or about 2.42 trillion dollars, is made of exported goods and services.\textsuperscript{53} In absolute figures, China’s export volume is the highest in the world. In term of percentage, this figure puts China behind the world’s average, which is 29.53\%, but its percentage still higher than the United States and Japan.\textsuperscript{54} The United States, China, and Japan are the three biggest economies in the world, and China is clearly much more reliant on the exports.

By allowing Chinese companies to use VPNs to advertise on international social media sites, China is supporting its export and sector and their respective employment potential.

Roberts, Zuckerman, York, Faris, & Palfrey (Roberts et al. 2010) estimated the population in China who use circumvention tools are no more than 3\%, maybe considerably less. Sonya Yan Song, Robert Faris, and John Kelly have used both qualitative and quantitative analysis to track down the geopolitical location of Twitter users in China. (Song et al. 2015) The researchers divided Chinese people’s Twitter interactions into four categories: political, technological, entertainment, and mixed. The users who regularly interact within the "technology cluster” are heavily concentrated in Jingjinji region (京津冀; the region around Beijing which includes Beijing, Tianjin, and part of the Hebei Province) in northern China, Pearl River Delta (珠江三角洲) in the south, and the Yangtze River Delta (长江三角洲) in the east. These findings are consistent with my argument: China tolerates VPN uses more in the three international-
commerce-driven economic zones because it wants to benefit from a globalized trade network. If the Chinese government maintains an equal treatment of all parts of China, the clusters should have strong concentrations on population centers such as Henan Province, Shandong Province, and Chongqing. By intentionally making the coastal cities more accessible to the Internet, just like opening a small window, the Chinese government is consolidating its power by providing its people a viable economy. Of course, by completely opening all its Internet up, China could economically grow more, but the political risk is too high for the reasons as mentioned above.

Aside from import and export, economic growth brought by innovation and the Chinese technology companies are also a big factor behind tolerating VPNs. In my interview with a dozen employees of Alibaba Group, Tencent, and Baidu, they all claim the Great Firewall (GFW) is almost nonexistent in their respective company campus. Sometimes when the programmers travel to a new location where the GFW is effective, their organization would provide them with a VPN account and software, so they still have the connection to search engines such as Google and software-sharing websites such as GitHub. When asked if their company or the local cyber police worry about the political content the developers might be browsing, one employee from Alibaba replied with disdain. The interviewee said a company like Alibaba is the world’s pioneer in innovation, and its team must absorb the latest information from all around the world to stay competitive. He elaborated by arguing Alibaba’s employees are generally not interested in being the political activists; they prioritize finishing their assignments on time so that they can stay employed. If his words were to be believed, it shows the Chinese government is consciously taking some risks, by allowing these programmers to access banned online content without reprisal, in exchange for Alibaba and other Chinese technology companies’ contribution to the

---

55 Interview conducted in Beijing, China on August 15th with a group of former employees from Tencent and Baidu
56 Interview conducted in Hangzhou, China on July 7th, 2016 with two employees from the big data research department in Alibaba
economic growth. These Chinese technology companies, unrestricted, would improve China’s economic condition and help the CCP to govern. In a 2014 interview with CBS, Jack Ma, the founder and executive chairman of Alibaba Group, put it in a simpler way: “they (the government) care that I can stabilize the country. I tell the government, if people have no jobs, you are in trouble. Government will be in trouble. My job is to help more people have jobs.” In 2014, China surpassed the U.S. as the world’s leading destination for foreign directed investment, totaling a staggering 128 billion dollars. Many foreign businesses and companies are employing people in China and contributing to the local economy, and these companies require VPNs to stay in touch with their headquarters overseas. Indiscriminately banning all VPNs are economically destructive and politically suicidal to the government.

**COMPONENT 2: VPN UTILIZATION FOR EXTERNAL PROPAGANDA AND NATIONALISM**

Another component of legitimacy build-up by the CCP through controlled circumvention tool usage is external propaganda. China has a public relations problem in the world. Because of its different political system from other major countries and the official communist ideology, China has repeatedly complained about the coverage bias from the mainstream Western media such as the New York Times, CNN, and BBC. A prominent Chinese political science professor at Fudan University and the director of Center for China Development Model Research, Zhang Weiwei, told the New York Times in 2015 that China is rising and China needs to have its voice heard across the world. More specifically, China needs a “Chinese political narrative” that

---


defines China’s rise differently from the Western media, and the Chinese scholars and media can and must engage in debate with China’s Western critics on many issues.\(^5\) China should challenge many of the Western beliefs about democracy, market economy, and the societal order. As opposed to the Western media, whose coverage of China often associated it with “communist,” “dictatorship,” and “authoritarian,” the new China discourse or narrative, will be “comprehensive, thorough, robust and international.”\(^6\) Perhaps a Chinese professor’s personal opinion will not translate into actual policy, but China’s top leader’s speech certainly represents an external publicity strategy.

On the same National Propaganda and Ideological Work Conference Xi Jinping hosted back in 2013, Xi commanded the Chinese media to ramp up its efforts for external publicity. The Chinese media outlets, according to him, must carry out “meticulous external publicity work,” (做好对外宣传工作) and be innovative with the ways for external publicity (创新对外宣传方式). A new Chinese narrative, or the way to frame and express China’s rise, must be built and relentlessly propagated. The ideal China narrative must successfully “tell the story of China”(讲好中国故事) and “express China’s voice.”(传播好中国声音)\(^6\) Xi also made clear that to construct this new narrative, one cannot solely rely on the Chinese journalists or reporters, it must be a comprehensive cooperation of all “front lines” and all government departments.\(^6\) The new narrative should not only exist in newspapers or television programs, but become an all-

---

\(^6\) Ibid.  

---
encompassing “meta-publicity” (大宣传) which must be tightly aligned with administrative management, social engineering, and “industry management” in various areas and layers to penetrate all domestic and foreign audiences.63

Since the reform of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China has been softening its political rhetoric away from Marxist ideology. Rather than portraying itself as the fearless revolutionary who is staunchly anti-imperialist in the international community and the savior of the world's proletariat class, China embraces more of the narrative of nationalism. (Pomfret 2016, 535-550) Domestically, the Communist Party intensified the efforts of flaring up nationalist sentiments after the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. However, externally, because China relies so much on foreign trade and investment, it still needs to preserve a functioning, or at least a non-hostile, relationship with the developed countries. The “external publicity” gradually expanded from government to government relations to government to non-government, non-government to non-government interactions. (Tsai, 2016) As Tsai Wen-Hsuan noted, the new concept of “external publicity” formulates on concepts such as soft power and public diplomacy after the era of Jiang Zemin (1989-2002), as it gathered increasing attention from the top Chinese leadership.

The term “soft power” is a concept first coined by Joseph Nye in the late 1980s, and he further developed and elaborated it in his book Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics. Joseph Nye defines “soft power” as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our (American) soft power is enhanced.” (Nye, 2004, Preface x) In the book, Joseph Nye cited numerous examples of how the United States has successfully used soft powers to advance its foreign

63 The original Chinese is “要树立大宣传的工作理念,动员各条战线各个部门一起来做, 把宣传思想工作同各个领域的行政管理、行业管理、社会管理更加紧密地结合起来.”
policy agenda and to be recognized by other major powers as the legitimate world leader. The Chinese government certainly wants to strengthen its soft power because it needs to be admired and respected and recognized as the only impeccably adept government of the Chinese nation by all countries in the international community. Instead of being seen as a hostile militant nation, it also wants to be seen as a benevolent new power whose rise only brings peace and development. So its emergence as rising power will not invite encirclement or containment but more accommodation from other countries. (Bradly, 2014) From Xi Jinping to Zhang Weiwei, the push for the “China narrative” or the “Chinese political discourse” are serving this purpose: to reduce outside suspicion of China and the CCP, to seek support for its policy and governance, and to expand China’s international influence.

Without question, the Internet is a great space where the Chinese government can operate and execute the “external publicity” strategy. Xi has instructed that China must take advantage of the new forms of media and be innovative with the new approach. The Internet, compared with traditional media, has its unique advantage: it is efficient, it is low-cost, and it has an appeal to the younger population. Social media sites such as Twitter quickly became a key platform for Chinese state-owned media. The table is an incomplete list of Chinese state-owned media accounts on Twitter. Apart from media outlets, China also has many of Twitter accounts from different provinces that serve tourist and local cultural promotion purposes.

---

Table 1. List of Chinese State-owned Media Accounts on Twitter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date Registered</th>
<th>Number of Followers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China Daily USA&lt;sup&gt;66&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>November 2009</td>
<td>696 K&lt;sup&gt;67&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xinhua News Agency&lt;sup&gt;68&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>February 2012</td>
<td>8.59 M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China SCIO (State Council Information Office)&lt;sup&gt;69&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>September 2015</td>
<td>4523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGTN (China Global Television Network)&lt;sup&gt;70&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>January 2013</td>
<td>2.43 M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCTV (China Central Television)&lt;sup&gt;71&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>July 2009</td>
<td>275 K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijing Review&lt;sup&gt;72&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>June 2009</td>
<td>39.9 K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China Plus News (the English news channel of China Radio International)&lt;sup&gt;73&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>April 2009</td>
<td>81.7 K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China.org.cn&lt;sup&gt;74&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>May 2010</td>
<td>348 K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People's Daily&lt;sup&gt;75&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>May 2011</td>
<td>3.27 M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Times&lt;sup&gt;76&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>June 2009</td>
<td>227 K</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Twitter

These Chinese state-owned media organizations publish stories from China extensively, but mostly in non-critical tones and focus strongly on the positive sides. Another interesting discovery is that these organizations have almost all chosen “Beijing, China” as their location, and judging from their update frequency, the staffers who maintain these accounts are most

---

<sup>65</sup> As of April 13th, 2017
<sup>67</sup> “K” stands for one thousand followers. “M” stands for a million followers.
likely working from China Standard Time (CST) Zone. For instance, on April 13th, 2017, the People’s Daily’s Twitter account had an hourly update of international news, sometimes providing 3 to 4 tweets within a one-hour period. But the frequency was considerably reduced between 1 PM to 6 PM Eastern Standard Time, under which it only provides two tweets in a 5-hour period, this period coincidentally corresponds to 1 AM to 6 AM in CST Zone, showing the possibility the staffers are taking a night-time break. There are good indications that the Chinese authorities are allowing either the individual reporters or the offices of their news organizations in Beijing to access Twitter, even though Twitter itself is a forbidden social media website to the rest of Chinese society since 2009. Together, by allowing these organizations to successfully “tell the China story and express China’s voice to the world,” the CCP is building a “China narrative” by taking advantage of the freedom of expression in the West. The Chinese authorities’ permission of its news organizations to use circumvention tools is consistent with their pursuit of soft power and legitimacy. Moreover, the risks are much lower. The employees or reporters who work in these Chinese outlets can log into Twitter and other banned websites are already part of the CCP organ, so their career has a close symbiotic relationship with the success of the CCP. Internally, there is also an intense re-indoctrination program and cadre education system to ensure political loyalty within the Party organ. (Mertha 2017)

From a personnel arrangement perspective, the external publicity objective is tightly related with Internet policy of China. The current government body manages and executes the Internet filtering system from the center is the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) (国家互联网信息办公室) which was separated from the State Council Information Office (SCIO) (国务院新闻办公室) in 2011. From 2011 to 2017, three successive directors who had supervised the

CAC all have many years dedicated to the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of CCP (中共中央宣传部). The table summarizes the résumé of every director of the CAC. The connection shows the CCP’s intention of combining external publicity work with its Internet censorship regime.

Table 2. List of CAC Directors and their Publicity Department Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Past Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Director of the <em>People’s Daily</em> 2003-2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Deputy Director of Publicity Department and Director of External Publicity Office of the CCP 2008-2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lu Wei 鲁炜 79</td>
<td>2013-2016</td>
<td>Deputy Director of the <em>Xinhua News Agency</em> 2001-2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Head of Publicity Department of CCP Beijing Committee 2011-2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xu Lin 徐麟 80</td>
<td>2016-Present</td>
<td>Head of Publicity Department of CCP Shanghai Committee 2013-2015</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Cadre Database on CPC News Website

Furthermore, the “China discourse” is part of a global initiative of the CCP to avoid political isolation. In 2013, the CCP Publicity Organs circulated an internal document named *Briefing on the Current Situation in the Ideological Realm* (《关于当前意识形态领域情况的通报》) which harshly criticized “universal values” since it is “an attempt to weaken the theoretical foundations of the Party’s leadership.” The document above implies that whenever there is an

---

international discussion about “freedom of expression” and “free Internet,” China is inescapably politically isolated and attacked because these discussions criticize China is a country that denies these freedoms to its citizens.

On December 2015, China hosted the second World Internet Conference in Wuzhen, Zhejiang Province. President Xi Jinping delivered the opening remarks in which he advocated for “cyber sovereignty” and strongly censured “cyber-hegemony,” citing China, as a sovereign state, has the right to choose whatever approach to its Internet administration. Lu Wei, the director of CAC, echoed Xi’s speech in his “four core principles” of Internet policy. For China, the Internet policy must “respect cyber-sovereignty,” “safeguard peace and stability,” “promote openness and cooperation,” and “construct a beneficial order.” During the conference in Wuzhen, the GFW was disabled so every device can connect to the usually forbidden sites. The Chinese state-owned media covered the story from Wuzhen very extensively, sometimes use forbidden sites like Twitter and Facebook.

As I have proven earlier, that CCP fears collective actions because of its potential challenge to the regime. That is the reason that all protests and demonstrations must be pre-approved and registered by the authorities. However, in the past, China has taken advantage of its domestic nationalist protests to solicit foreign concession. Jessica Chen Weiss argues that, in various Chinese protests against Japan and the United States, China has used the protests as a bargaining chip to incentivize foreign governments to make concessions and maintain the status

---

quo (Weiss 2013). Due to the fear of instability and escalation of tensions, foreign governments will often over-estimate China’s resolve and choose to back down. China has also used these occasions as an approach to muster the popular support for the government. (Weiss 2013)

This phenomenon is also evident in China’s Internet policy. China carefully controls the use of circumvention tools by its netizens and even encourage them for a limited time for a political purpose. Republic of China (Taiwan) held its presidential election on January 16th, 2016, in which the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won both the legislature and the presidency. The election result showed growing political tension and mental divide between the mainland Chinese and the Taiwanese, as the leader of the DPP, Tsai Ying-wen, had refused to endorse the “92 Consensus” (九二共识) or the “one China principle” (一中原则). Four days after the election, the mainland Chinese netizens, in a full display of their anger toward the perceived Taiwan secession movement, posted on Weibo (微博) and Baidu Tieba (百度贴吧), both are Chinese social media sites, calling for an “expedition” (远征) toward pro-independence Taiwanese Facebook pages. These netizens are called “little pinks” (小粉红) because of their fervent support for China and its representative color red. The primary goal of the “little pinks” is to spam pro-China Internet memes on Tsai Ying-wen’s Facebook pages and on other independence-leaning Taiwanese media pages such as SET News (三立新闻), Apple Daily (蘋果日報), and Liberty Times (自由時報). But to log into Facebook, one needs a VPN, so the mainland Chinese netizens share VPNs programs, accounts, and techniques among themselves on a massive scale. The Facebook page of the Army Command of the Republic of China claimed it had deleted 1,600 “troll” accounts and their comments, and the Taiwanese
military had halted the attacks after a whole day of work. The comment section from these pages was completely flooded with comments from mainland netizens at one point. The spammed content usually includes anti-Taiwan independence images and offensive language, landscapes and cuisines from mainland China, and nationalist slogans about reunification and China’s rise.

To share VPNs tools, or to use them without the authorization from the relevant agencies is not a welcomed online activity in China. China has repeatedly announced regulations regarding the use of VPNs and renews these regulations on a regular basis to make the regulations stricter and more technical. Even on the first four months of 2017, the regulations have been renewed once again. The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of China announced in January 2017 that it would cleanse unauthorized use and sharing of VPNs services. All VPN users must obtain a license to use it, and the license is not tradable among companies or individuals. On March 2017, the Public Security Bureau of Chongqing threatens to impose a fine on unauthorized VPN usage. Nevertheless, during the frenzy of Taiwanese Facebook spamming, the Chinese government did not punish a single individual for unauthorized use and sharing of circumvention tools when obviously there are a lot of violations; it is an evidence for selective enforcement. The Chinese government even partially encouraged this campaign by airing its support on state-owned media. On January 21st, 2016, the Global

---

Times, a state-owned newspaper published its editorial, refused to criticize the spamming campaign or the use of circumvention tools, because “patriotism” is the foundation and value of this movement. The Global Times also announced: “one cannot always expect China adapt to the external world, the external world sometimes needs to adapt to China as well.”^89 The leading website owned by People’s Daily, People.cn (人民网), issued a commentary online on February 23rd, 2016 requested the readers to “praise the ‘little pinks’ for their uncompromised patriotism.”^90

The Chinese government’s efforts might not be entirely facilitative toward this “expedition,” but its partially open attitude proves my argument. The Chinese government is willing to take some risks, by temporarily allowing many netizens to use circumvention tools against the imposed regulations, to gather political support to the Chinese nation and the Chinese government. Undeniably, recognition and respect among Chinese netizens for the long-standing Chinese policy of reunification are strengthened, especially among China’s young population; and this “virtual protest” also sends a clear message to Taiwan and the world about mainland China’s position and the amount of public support it enjoys back home.

CONCLUSION

This paper begins by discussing the relationship between open Internet policy and instability it brings to authoritarian regimes. As I review the brief history and the websites China blocks, I understand the motives for China’s information control: regime survival and power

---


consolidation. Then I encountered a very contradictory feature of the Chinese Internet policy: it allows some Chinese netizens to use circumvention tools to break the information control system. After taking out two alternative explanations: technological capability and political attitude, I discovered that the tolerance of the use of VPNs are an intended result because it consolidates CCP’s power and stabilizes the regime. The partially open Internet policy benefits the CCP in a few ways. More specifically, China needs to stay connected with the outside economic world for reaching tangible goals such as employment, R&D, and the economic growth. The CCP also needs its state-owned media outlets to have a strong presence on the international social media, so that they can contribute to the building of a “China narrative” that is favorable to Beijing; thus, the CCP can enlarge its international recognition and dismiss political isolation. Occasionally, CCP will loosen its control on circumvention tools to vitalize domestic nationalism, so it collects a greater support from its nationalist populace while soliciting foreign concessions.

A great word to describe China’s policy toward the VPNs is “manipulation.” Depending on the circumstances, China carefully changes its policy from repression and disruption to acceptance and even encouragement. Among the population that develops a more symbiotic relationship with the Party, for example, Alibaba programmers, Chinese nationalists, and state-owned media employees, China will be more tolerant. And to the people that have a completely different political agenda, like Uygur secessionist movement activists or Tibetan secessionist advocates, the Internet policy to them is much more restrictive. The conclusion is consistent with the observation of Xiaoru Wang (Wang 2009), who suggested that under China’s constrained Internet environment, Chinese netizens tend to participate more in government-supported political debates and activities. China has also used Internet as a vehicle to foster nationalism, so the Internet’s momentum as a democratizing force and a challenger to the authority is minimized.
Additionally, the conclusion resembles the theory of David Shambaugh, (Shambaugh 2008) who discovered CCP’s ability to “adapt” and to “atrophy.” When facing a recent invention such as the VPNs, and the potential detrimental effects VPNs have on the Party’s legitimacy and even survival, the CCP has exhibited an incredible willingness and ability to change its approach. Although the regulation is universal, delicately selective enforcement mechanisms gave the Chinese government crucial flexibility to tilt the use of VPNs to its favored direction. I expect similar methods in other areas of social management as well.


