

*A Dilemma or Hope for China's Democratization: A Research on Cyberpolitics  
Participation of Chinese Citizen Based on Chai Jing Event*

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**Abstract**

This article discusses the problem of whether the cyberpolitical participation could bring China's democratization a hope or not through examining the main characteristics of Chinese cyberpolitical participation and the reasons behind in the context of the Chai Jing network event. In theory, with the fast development of internet technique and greatly improvement of political system in China, more and more Chinese citizens could be provided with quite number of opportunities to conduct political participation broadly in cyber space, and then a new era of democracy in China will come soon. However, the true situation of cyberpolitical participation in China may largely not bring the true democracy for China in a short span of time for the Chinese political cultural tradition and the limitations of political practice, which will reversely slow down the course of democratization in China. This article also explores a new way to categorize the cyberpolitical participation subject in China.

Keywords: Chinese cyberpolitical participation, Chai Jing, democratization, internet populism, cyberspace

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## **Introduction**

The first popular network event in China 2015 belongs to Chai Jing who is a female celebrated ex-journalist of China Central Television [CCTV]. Conducted by Chai Jing, an investigation named *Qiongdong Zhi Xia* on recent Chinese environmental problem makes a splash in cyber space of China and creates a new high peak of cyberpolitical participation. Almost the whole internet is suddenly saturated with the video of Chai Jing's investigation and related news reports as well as a variety of fierce discussions by means of Microblog, Wechat, BBS and some public forums of China. Currently, the Chai Jing network event is a quite representative internet event because the whole process of it has totally revealed the true situation of the cyberpolitical participation in China as well as various problems relating to Chinese political system and political culture such as the phenomenon of the boundless infringement of the power in China, the problem of the internet populism in cyberpolitical participation, and the problem of whether the course of democratization in China will be to some extent accelerated by a wide-range of cyberpolitical participation.

The existing literatures of the cyberpolitical participation in China mainly focus on the influencing factors contributing to the situation of cyberpolitical participation in China. Zhao and Zhang (2009) pointed out that the main pattern of the Chinese cyberpolitical participation was largely reshaped by the Chinese main-stream political ideology and its traditional political culture (p. 132). Ma (2011) considered the problem of the tyranny of the majority in China's cyber space would bring some new traits to Chinese cyberpolitical participation (p. 33).

This article discusses the main characteristics of Chinese cyberpolitical participation as well as some important reasons behind through exploring a new way to categorize the cyberpolitical participation subject in China. The reasons behind those main characteristics of Chinese cyberpolitical participation could be mainly focused on some aspects including some problems resulted from the transitional period in China, the disadvantages of Chinese civic education and the boundless intervention of the power, which also result in the advent of the typical Chinese internet populism.

This article develops in four parts. In the first part, the context of the Chai Jing network event will be given. In the second part, the main characteristics of cyberpolitical participation in China are discussed. The third part focuses on the construction of virtual identity of cyberpolitical participant. In the last part, the phenomenon of internet populism as an obstacle of Chinese democratization is clearly explained.

## **The Context of the Chai Jing Network Event in Chinese Cyber Space**

During the beginning of 2015 in China, the first popular network event belongs to Chai Jing who is a female celebrated ex-journalist of China Central Television [CCTV]. Conducted by Chai Jing, a profound investigation named *Qiongdong Zhi Xia* on recent Chinese environmental problem makes a splash in cyber space of China and then creates a new high peak of cyberpolitical participation. Basically, the environmental problem on which Chai Jing's investigation focuses is not only a domestic problem of China but an international problem which mainly relates to human living environment. Goodell (2014) noted that "the blunt truth is that what China decides to do in the next decade will likely determine whether or not mankind can halt - or at least ameliorate - global warming"(p. 54). However, as a typical network event, it has not only aroused a wide range of Chinese cyberpolitical participation but also has shown the tendency of the internet populism in China.

Released on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2015, the video of Chai Jing's investigation causes an enormous uproar in Chinese cyber space. Almost the whole internet is suddenly saturated with a sea of related news reports and a variety of fierce discussions by means of Microblog, Wechat, BBS and some public forums of China. According to the related statistics collected by Mediaob (2015), by 0:00 a.m. on 1<sup>st</sup> March, the number of the total page view of Chai Jing's investigation video amount to 312.44 million. Specifically, according to the statistics collected from some main-stream video websites, the statistics of the page view are respectively 166.37 million by Tengxun, 70.93 million by Youku, 49.99 million by Letv, 15.10 million by Sohu, 5.20 million by Tudou and 4.85 million by QIY. As both an investigator and a mother who is suffering the misery of her only newborn daughter diagnosed with benign neoplasm which is most likely resulted from heavy pollution in China, Chai Jing with her investigation is moved to the centre of online public discussion. Wang (2015) described that just as the basic meaning of her Chinese name, which a match was not satisfied with living in darkness but firing its body and soul to call for light, Chai Jing and her investigation had aroused a wide range of citizen participation in the cyber space of China.

Specifically, the whole process of the Chai Jing network event is quite dramatic. In the beginning, the video of the Chai Jing's investigation is released on Youku video website on 28<sup>th</sup> February. As a result, almost the whole network is wrapped up by a sea of positive comments on the Chai Jing's investigation. The popular commentator Jiazhuang Zai Niuyue considered that people who forwarded Chai Jing's investigation

video should watch it seriously since it was indeed a very meaningful video (as cited in shishang zuiquan chajing shijian shimo yu gefang shengyin, 2015). What's more, the new China Environmental Protection Bureau Chief Chen Jining also expresses his profound appreciation to Chai Jing. Chen assumed that the awareness of environment protect of Chinese citizen might be awakened by the serious result of the Chai Jing's investigation (as cited in shishang zuiquan chajing shijian shimo yu gefang shengyin, 2015). In addition, a quite number of supporting reports and comments gush from various popular medias such as Microblog, Wechat, Tianya forum, Maopu forum, Xinhua website, Renmin website and so on. However, it is beyond imagination that the online comments suddenly change to the negative side. Many people begin to open fire on Chai Jing's investigation from various perspective. What is worse, more and more netizens are turning their eyes on Chai Jing's private life rather than the investigation itself. Basically, Chai Jing and her investigation are attacked from three main respects as follows. Firstly, some people begin to question the true reason of her newborn daughter's benign neoplasm which might be brought by Chai Jing's unhealthy personal living style such as heavy smoking. Besides, Chai Jing's identity of environmentalist is also questioned because she is found to drive the car with a large displacement; Secondly, some intellects question the internal logic and supporting materials of her investigation. The professor Wu Jing of Peking University addressed that Chai Jing's investigation was organized with superabundant personal emotion and dramatic self-performance rather than rational analysis and precise logic (Anonymous, 2015); Lastly, Chai Jing's identity of being a heroine of environment protect is so challenged by the public that some netizens consider that Chai Jing's investigation is deliberately manipulated by some special interest groups. Therefore, the disordered internet war between the supporters and the opponents starts. However, the Chai Jing network event gradually disappears from the sight of the public with the interference of the power in China.

Importantly, the typical Chai Jing network event has showed the true situation of the cyberpolitical participation and has also revealed quite number of crucial problems of Chinese political system and political culture in contemporary China including the boundary of the power, the disadvantage of the true situation of civic education in China and the advent of the internet populism which undoubtedly hinders the course of Chinese democratization. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that the Chai Jing network event is quite representative because at first the focus of most netizens just on environmental problem is changed abruptly into the emphasis on Chai Jing's private life. With irresponsible comments and unreasonable discussions, an internet chaos known as Chai Jing network event comes into being finally.

## **The Main Characteristics of Chinese Cyberpolitical Participation on The Basis of An Analysis on the Chai Jing Network Event**

A number of existing academic researches on the cyberpolitical participation in China revealed some typical characteristics of cyberpolitical participation from various perspectives. Yang (2014) explored the different patterns of the cyberpolitical participation from the perspective of the cyberpolitical participation subject (p. 138). Ma (2011) considered the problem of the tyranny of the majority in China's cyber space would bring some new traits to Chinese cyberpolitical participation (p. 33).

With one month continuous researching on the process of Chai Jing network event, from the perspective of focusing on the cyberpolitical participation subject, the main characteristics of the Chinese cyberpolitical participation can be concluded in four respects as follows: 1. the phenomenon of the group polarization of the cyberpolitical participation; 2. the instability of the political attitude of the cyberpolitical participant; 3. the defocus of a certain network event and immature approaches of cyberpolitical participation; 4. the intervention of the power.

Above all, the phenomenon of the group polarization in Chinese cyber space might be the key point to result in the internet violence in China. The group polarization describes a phenomenon that compared with the individual attitude, the group attitude is unstable and much easier to fall in the very extremes. Aronson and Elliot (2010) pointed out that "in social psychology, group polarization refers to the tendency for groups to make decisions that are more extreme than the initial inclination of its members" (p. 274). Isenberg (1986) assumed that "Group polarization is the phenomenon that when placed in group situations, people will make decisions and form opinions to more of an extreme than when they are in individual situations" (p. 1143) However, how does the group of polarization form in Chinese cyberpolitical participation? What is the function of the group polarization in cyber space?

Actually, the path of the formation of the group polarization in cyber space of China derives from the formation of the group cognition, the group psychology and the group attitude. Chen (2010) explained that the group cognition was the base of the formation of the group attitude, and the information stimulation was the precondition of the formation of the group cognition (p. 91). On the basis of the formation of the group cognition, the concept of the group psychology is formed, which largely promotes the development of a series of internal group interactions, and therefore the group attitude is formed finally. Sha (2006) noted that the group attitude usually

exerted important effects on the pattern of behavior of the whole group (p. 211). Basically, the group attitude is built on the basis of the individual attitude, but the group attitude conversely reshapes the individual attitude so intensively that the phenomenon of the group polarization appears in cyber space.

As a main characteristic of the Chinese cyberpolitical participation, the group polarization makes a tremendous effect on the appearance of the internet violence. Initially, most netizens in Chai Jing network event hold relative moderate ideas, but finally they firmly hold the completely extreme opinions. Honestly speaking, it is the group polarization that stimulates the attitude of netizens to evolve into very extreme attitudes so that other voices will not be heard, and finally the focus of the network event is also transferred gradually.

Secondly, with the advent of the group polarization, the political attitude of Chinese netizen is rather unstable and vulnerable to change even from supporting side at first to totally opposing side at last. However, the primary reason of the changeable attitude mainly rests with the failure of establishing the self-awareness of Chinese citizen who are mainly cultivated by the Chinese traditional monarchy-subject political culture. Consequently, most Chinese citizens easily incline to be stuck in the parental type of relationship between the people and government at the expense of their self-awareness and consciousness of being masters of their country. What's more, under the monarchy-subject political culture, citizens should need some elites who are qualified to train and teach with adequate professional skills. However, the serious problem in Chinese cyber space is that some elites have been increasingly questioned by the public and supervised by the power in China. Therefore, the real situation of Chinese cyberpolitical participation is that there is a group of people with rather changeable attitudes in control of the Chinese cyber space.

Thirdly, with the assistance of the group polarization, the defocus of a certain network event together with the immature approaches of the political participation are much easier to be formed. Typically, in Chai Jing network event, the phenomenon of the defocus appears with the attitudes of the public changing from the positive side to the negative one. Basically, the internet criticism in China usually develops from a public discussion into a universal suspicion over the participants of some hot network events, however, which usually ends up with an irresponsible quarrel filled with moral and ethic judgments.

Last but not the least, it seems that in China almost each and every sensational issue usually ends up with the intervention of the power, and it also can be applied in Chinese cyber space. Just after three days, it is impossible to watch this video on the main-stream websites of China. More seriously, after several days, this video together with some related comments and discussions completely disappear from Chinese cyber space under the serious circumstances of strict supervision. Therefore, the power in China has a powerful and almost boundless strength to interfere almost all public affairs.

### **From Chai Jing to the Generalized Subject of Cyberpolitical Participation: An Analysis on the Construction of Virtual Identity of Cyberpolitical Participation Subject in the Context of the Transitional Period in Contemporary China**

“Identity” initially belongs to the philosophy discussion category, and it derives from the exploration towards the state of existence and the significance of life. Charles Taylor explained identity in a philosophy framework through asking a classic question of “who am I”. To some extent, the exploration on the concept of identity means the equivalent research on the relationship between individual and collective.

In the words of Jenkins (1996), “Identity has become one of the unifying frameworks of intellectual debate in the 1990s” (p. 7). Basically, with the development of the large-scale social movement of fighting for rights in the 1990s, a number of social groups such as homosexual group, racial group and feminism group gradually put much more emphases on the process of identifying identity. Consequently, more and more scholars in various fields begin to focus on the problem of identity. Meanwhile, the research on the concept of identity steps into a new academic era which belongs to sociology and psychology.

On the concept of individual identity, Tajel (1978) explained that the individuals could distinguish themselves from others in the same space and time. In the words of Parcel (1981), the concept of social identity is that “individual identity and self-concept are determined in large measure by group membership” (p. 1193). In other words, just as Jenkins (1996) explained “the expression refers to the way in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities” (p. 4). As for the concept of racial identity, Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley and Chavous (1998) considered that it mainly concerned about the establishment of racial attitude and belief.

My understanding of the virtual identity concept could be partly explained as follows. Compared with the traditional concept of identity, the concept of virtual identity is a process of establishing and identifying a new or partly new identity under various conditions in cyber space. However, the process of establishing and identifying a virtual identity is largely subjected to different values, beliefs, objectives and emotions. Consequently, the new identity reestablished in cyber space may duplicate, partly duplicate or depart from the old identity in reality. Besides, once a new or partly new virtual identity is established in cyber space, it possesses an obvious trait of extreme instability, and even one individual may hold different identities simultaneously under different conditions. However, it should not confuse the concept of the dissociative identity disorder with the concept of virtual identity. The former is largely applied to the situation in which the sick as the subject of identity totally or partly fail to identify his or her identity, but the concept of virtual identity tends to describe a healthy individual who not only has the capability to recognize his or her identity but also can recreate various virtual identities under the different conditions in cyber space.

There are at least two categories of Chinese cyberpolitical participation participant. In the first category, virtual identity established and identified as well as the old identity recognized in reality may wholly or partly match together. In other words, these people who indirectly participate in the network political events by means of comments and discussions hardly need create some new identities for seeking a certain sense of self-existence and self-satisfaction. However, under the first category, two types of netizen could be classified according to different believes, objectives and sense of responsibilities.

The first type of the first category is the elites with many prominent characteristics such as a firm faith, great ambition, short-term and long-term objective and strong social responsibility. What's more, the elites are equipped with not only professional knowledge but also the basic capability of thinking and behaving in a logic way, which qualify them to be experienced opinion leaders who always set good examples of how to behave like a responsible citizen in Chinese cyber space. However, with the stepping up efforts in supervising the internet, some elites turn to abandon the internet platform to explain and spread their theories. For instance, during the summer of 2013, a wide range of fighting rumor movement in cyber space launched in China. Once the "rumor" was detected in cyber space, people who were considered as circulators of the "rumor" could suffer a lot.

The second type of the first category is the “zombie” which is a metaphor to describe a group of Chinese netizens who tend to be motivated only by economic benefit. However, this group of zombies are always hired by some other people including interest groups and the left or the right in contemporary China. Besides, the Chinese government has been strictly supervising Chinese internet through directly deleting and revising some internet posts and comments which are regarded as a certain serious threat to the social harmony. Therefore, under the circumstances of what so called free cyber space in China, the attitudes of the ordinary netizens are much easier to be manipulated by not only those interest groups but also Chinese government.

Compared with the first category of netizens, the second category of netizens in China varies in the mismatch between the virtual identity and the real one. Specifically, netizens of the second category usually establish and identify some new or partly new identities while participating in internet political activities. However, under the different circumstances, there are at least two different types of netizens in this category, which are respectively the violence oriented netizen and the heroism oriented netizen. The type of the violence oriented netizen refers to the netizens who have been suffering so heavy burden from career, family and other parts of daily life without a appropriate way to release that those heavy pressure are gradually transformed into a certain negative psychological condition usually expressed by the boundless release of negative emotion, aggressive attitude and over-extreme expression. On the contrary, the type of the heroism oriented netizen refers to the netizens who usually express their negative emotions by playing as heroes in the online public discussions by means of some seemingly logical concepts and opinions in order to seek a sense of self-satisfaction and self-confidence.

Basically, the syndrome of the transitional period of China might partly give rise to the appearance of the two typical types of netizens in China. With the rapid economic development in China, many crucial problems during the transitional period of China are becoming more and more obvious such as the big gap between the rich and the poor. Every individuals has to take much burden in daily life. Consequently, more and more Chinese are suffering from losing out of control in their lives. However, it is the internet together with some political events that will provide them with a chance to be out of control by others and then live in a virtual life of self-control. That’s why the more harmonious a society is, the more chaotic its virtual society is.

## **The Obstacle on the Way to Democratization in China: The Appearance of the Populism in Cyberpolitical Participation**

The populism can be traced back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it enters a relatively thriving period in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the concept of populism has not been becoming one of the unifying framework in academic world. Wang and Fang (2011) denoted that the concept of populism as a kind of social thought was imbued with so many distinctive understandings given by scholars in different realms (p. 115). Yu explained (1997) that as a sort of social thought, the basic meaning of populism was an extreme trend towards civilian, which emphasized the values and demands of the general public and regarded the popularization as the only radical source of the legality of political system; as a sort of political movement, the basic meaning of populism emphasized that social reform and political development should rely on the general public instead of the elites (p. 89). Wu (2008) compared the populism as transformers, which underlined the extreme instability of this kind of theory (p. 1). Basically, for most scholars, the basic consensus of the concept of populism comes to the confluence of its extreme focus on the power of the general public instead of elite and authority.

However, the internet populism in contemporary China is undoubtedly a special case compared with other countries. Cong (2014) explained that with the suddenly advent of the internet as a new means of media in China, hundreds and thousands Chinese citizens who actually lacked of the capability to well participate in politics swarmed into the public sphere to comment on public affairs and exerted impacts on public designs and thus the internet populism was much easier to develop in cyber space (p. 55).

During the whole process of the Chai Jing network event, the phenomenon of the internet populism becomes more and more obvious. Specifically, the internet is firstly saturated with the voice from the supporting side. However, with the development of the heated debate, the public comments are gradually transferred to the negative voice. Numerous negative comments begin to open fire on Chai Jing's investigation from various perspectives. What's worse, more and more netizens are turning their eyes from the radical significance of the environment protection to Chai Jing's private life instead. What's more, because of the distrust towards authority as well as the elites, netizens are much easier to suffer the unreasonable chaos filled with so many irresponsible discussions. Specifically speaking, under the circumstances of the transitional period of China, the type of violence oriented netizens and the type of

heroism oriented netizens, who respectively hold two different voices in the Chai Jing network event begin to pretend opinion leaders just for self-satisfaction and self-confidence. Consequently, a seeming public discussion becomes a public quarrel which is saturated with infringement of privacy and irresponsible remarks.

Actually, on the whole Chai Jing network event, it is not difficult to find that the advent of Chinese internet populism is not an occasional case. First of all, with the rapid development of economy in China, many different kinds of problems brought by the special China's transitional period which is a transformation from a traditional society to a modern one are shown in the cyber space either. For instance, the unsettled important problem of the bigger gap between the poor and the rich will, to some extent, deeply shape the public attitudes towards the social stratification of China, and therefore some negative emotions may be much easier to be released by the public through internet. What's more, the disadvantage of civic education of China and Chinese typical monarchy-subject political culture may not be beneficial to cultivate the true citizens who at least possess the basic consciousness of citizenship. As a result, so many netizens have been discussing in an extreme way which is undoubtedly a prominent characteristic of the internet populism. Chen (2011) explained that under the circumstances in Chinese cyber space, even a trivial thing could become a sensational network event because of extreme emotion and uncontrolled behavior with the help of anonymity of the cyber space in China (p. 157).

## **Conclusion**

From the full analysis of the recent Chai Jing network event, the main characteristics of Chinese cyberpolitical participation could be concluded as follows. Firstly, the phenomenon of the group polarization of the cyberpolitical participation; Secondly, the instability of the political attitude of the cyberpolitical participant; Thirdly, the defocus of a certain network event and immature approaches of cyberpolitical participation; Lastly, the intervention of the power.

By exploring a new way to categorize the participants of cyberpolitical participation in China, some reasons behind those main characteristics of Chinese cyberpolitical participation could be focused on some aspects including the social problem of the transitional period in China, the disadvantages of Chinese civic education, the quite immature civil society in contemporary China and the boundless intervention of the power of China, which not only promote the appearance of the characteristics of Chinese cyberpolitical participation, but also radically contribute to the advent of the typical internet populism which undoubtedly hinders the process of democratization in China.

However, with the rapid development of internet technique in China, whether the prosperous situation of cyberpolitical participation could radically contribute to the progress of China's democratization? And, under the circumstances of the large-scale cyberpolitical participation in China, whether the various types of virtual identities could also promote the democratization in China? Undoubtedly, the answer to this question is not difficult to find. In theory, with more and more Chinese citizens swarming into the public sphere to broadly conduct cyberpolitical participation, a completely new era of democracy in China will come soon. Nevertheless, the true situation of cyberpolitical participation of China might not bring the true democracy for China in a short span of time for the Chinese political cultural tradition and the limitations of its political practice, which will reversely slow down the course of democratization in China.

Especially, with the advent of the typical internet populism in China, it draws a question mark of whether the China's democratization would be accelerated under the help of a wide-scope cyberpolitical participation in China. Undoubtedly, the internet as a crucial means of communication is value neutrality. It can be served as both a vehicle of democratization and a means of populism. As a tool of democratization, the internet contributes a lot to the western democratic states because most citizens of these countries who would like to participate in politics are indeed mature citizens who not only clearly understand their basic rights but also have enough capability to express their political demands in order to make influence on important political decisions. However, in the mainland of China, the people in China lack enough and true experience of democratic practice and even they have not established the consciousness of rights. In spite of the help of the internet technique, Chinese netizens are still many individuals who have not so adequate political knowledge that they hardly shoulder the responsibility of what they should think and behave as masters of their country. What's more, since there still are lots of emergency problems of Chinese representative democracy to be tackled, it seems much earlier for China to place big hope on the internet civic participation and the internet democracy. Therefore, the advent of the internet populism has given a hint to China that as for the course of democratization in China, there will be a long way to go.

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