**How does Cyberspace Influence**

**the Development of Civil Society in China**



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# Abstract

The Internet has been developing in China for decades and in recent China it has become more and more influential. During the earthquake in Sichuan in 2008, the Internet was extensively used by the Chinese government, neitizens, and civil society organizations to facilitate and participate in the disaster relief. Meanwhile, the internet then heated up the discussion on civil society’s role in China as weakness of the government and its GONGOs was exposed in the disaster relief. Recent incidents such as the anti-corruption online campaign demonstrate the power of civil participation in the Internet-based cyberspace. In this sense, this thesis hypothesizes that the cyberspace possesses the power to influence the development of civil society in China.

This thesis starts with observations on the Internet’s role in the disaster relief in 2008 in China and then raises a research question on the issue of cyberspace’s role in the development of civil society in China. With background empirical data and two cases selected, it continues to conduct a deductive analysis with the theoretic tools provided by theories of Public Sphere and Empowerment. I conclude that the cyberspace is promoting civil society’s development by bringing a sense of citizenship to the public, changing the way of state’s penetration on society, and intensifying the dynamic interaction between the individual and the state.

**Key Words**: Cyberspace, Civil Society, Public Sphere, Empowerment, China

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# Introduction

We are now in the age of information society. The Internet has laid the technical foundation of this great age. Internet has been used so widely that nowadays people cannot live without it for a single day. In China, Internet has been developing since the adoption of opening-up policy in the late 1970s and has been promoting the economic growth and social development from then on. For a long time, the Internet has been regarded as a hi-tech tool to facilitate the economic growth and the rewarding economic benefit has proved this assumption true. No one can deny the significance of Internet to modern China. However the Internet is not only influencing China economically but also societally.

The year of 2008 marked the first year of civil society (China.com.cn, 2009) in China as is widely acknowledged by domestic scholars and media in China. Several important incidents happened one by one from riots in *Tibet* and *Xinjiang* autonomous areas to national event namely the 29th Olympic Games. On May 12th in the same year, an unprecedented 8-magnitude earthquake attacked China's Southwestern province *Sichuan* and resulted in millions of casualty among which around 70,000 died. This devastating disaster brought misery to the victims as well as mobilized sense of citizenship to the public. Donations, volunteers, self-organized rescue teams, and philanthropic NGOs, along with the governmental rescue forces assembled and headed to the very center of the disastrous area.

Internet became a constructive role player at this time. First of all, it was the most used platform for news releasing. According to China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the 4 most influential news websites (people.com, xinhuanet.com, chinanews.com and cctv.com) played a leading role in news releasing and by May 23rd they "*had released about 123,000 pieces of news on the earthquake relief (including pictures, texts, audios and videos)* ", and the 4 biggest commercial websites (sina.com, sohu.com, NetEase and Tencent) "*jointly released 133,000 pieces of news*". Altogether the 8 websites "*received 11.6 billion hits on news with up to 10.63 million follow-up replies*". CNNIC later concluded with that "*The Internet played an important role in news releasing about earthquake relief, helping people find their missing kin, delivering aids and soliciting donations. The development of China’s Internet media has come to a new stage*". (CNNIC, 2012)

Second, with the widespread of social media in China, such as RenRen and Weibo, which are equivalences to Facebook and Twitter in the West, groups of netizens emerge. Netizens criticized that several buildings should not have collapsed and deprived hundreds of lives of the school children if the constructions were not jerry-built projects. Therefore, criticisms and suchlike posed great pressure to the local and even the central government for the weakness of governance. While at the same time several non-governmental entities and even individuals like social celebrities stood out for their advocacy and action in disaster relief and philanthropic campaign.

From these incidents, people in China began to be aware of the importance of the role of the society not merely the state's force. From the Western scope, those social forces should be interpreted as factors which would help the emergence of civil society. In China's context, however, it seemingly was not the case. The notion of *civil society* was not as welcome as *democracy* in China, for those concepts were so western-oriented and value-added in the Chinese perspective. Hence although the discussion on civil society was within the scholars' interest, the governmental attitude remained vague. After the year 2010, civil society faded out gradually in China’s political or even scholarly discourse but replaced by the notion of *social organization*.

Despite of that, discussion on this issue never disappeared online. As a self-publishing medium, the Internet affords scholars with platforms to spread their ideas. As a discussion forum, the Internet assembles people’s voice and leads to the emergence of public opinion over the importance and possibility of civil society in China. As an action-oriented technology, the Internet has the power to organize offline activities even to form self-organized groups which could be the early form of civil society.

Cyberspace or Internet, above all it is a technological development, which has changed the form of communication greatly, but now it is an overarching mechanism which is bringing about magnificent social Change. In China’s context, the role of cyberspace in the social dimension has been witnessed during the earthquake in 2008. Since then on, it has been continuously influencing the discussion of civil society in China. But the mechanism and process have not been uncovered. With all these observations and assumptions raised above, this thesis raised a research question as stated in the problem formulation:

## Problem formulation

*How does cyberspace influence the development of civil society in China after the year 2008?*

The problem statement makes it clear that this thesis focuses on the relevant research after the year 2008. Hence any resources, materials, and data before 2008 are considered irrelevant to this thesis. However, certain materials aimed at illuminating the historical background of the Internet and civil society development in China will be applied as an exception.

In order to have a clear answer to the problem raised above, certain sub-questions as follows should be addressed in order to lay the foundation for a holistic understanding over this issue.

1. *Will cyberspace in China function well to create a public sphere which has the potential to facilitate the civil society development?*
2. *As an empowering media, will cyberspace to certain extent change the status quo of state’s penetration on China’s civil society?*

# Methodology

This section provides a methodological structure of this thesis. In a master thesis, the methodological consideration should be highly taken into consideration as it is the overview of scientific approach applied in the research. It also embodies the author’s logic thinking over the research process. This section contains three parts: The first part aims to define certain key concepts which will be repeatedly used in this thesis; the second part gives a general overview of the theoretical framework, including the choice and application of theories; the third part entitled as empirical framework in which the data collection, choice of cases will be included.

## Key concepts

Given the fact that this thesis will conduct an interdisciplinary research, several repeatedly mentioned concepts should be clearly defined in terms of definition, connotation and extension before engaging in deep analysis thereof ambiguity and irrelevance will be effectively avoided.

* + 1. Cyberspace

The term cyberspace in most cases remains vague and uncertain since there is no standard even objective definition exiting in scholarly work. In spite of this, cyberspace in this thesis will be understood by the definition that *“cyberspace refers to the Internet and the World Wide Web, or to any similar shared, interactive, computer-mediated environment.”* (Kendall, 2003, p. 112)

It was the science-fiction writer, William Gibson, who firstly coined this term to depict a world in the future where “*people could immerse themselves in graphical representations of information contained in computers*”*.* (Kendall, 2003, p. 112)Later in modern context, especially with the advent of the Internet, the term has been used broadly to refer to the social and informational connections created by computer-mediated communication. “*People are said to be “in cyberspace” when they engage in such activities as browsing the World Wide Web, writing email, chatting with others through text online*” (Kendall, 2003, p. 112)

The term contains both technological and social implications: First of all, it is the Computer and Internet technology that enables individuals to communicate in such a virtual society. Second, cyberspace affords users with perceived freedom of communication in virtual online community, in which people assemble and discuss on certain issues. In this thesis, when referred, cyberspace must be understood as a combination of technological term of the Internet and the communicative forms and actions existing in the internet.

* + 1. Civil society

Civil society is a vague term in China’s context, as it is deeply rooted in western history thus domestic Chinese scholars question its relevance to China. Moreover, as Scholar Deng Zhenglai points out, “Chinese civil society is constructed in a top-down process whereas the Western civil society is with bottom-up development.” (Deng, 2010, p. 366) Historical and realistic differentiations weaken the explanatory power and the consistency of the western conceptualization of civil society in China’s context. A paradigm shift in this sense is in need. However, in this thesis, civil society is the point of departure for analysis as well as the foothold for a conclusion, therefore, it is essential to clarify the term of civil society adopted in this thesis.

Various conceptualizations of civil society in the West shared the consensus of the “*perceived tensions between the public and the private, the social and the individual, collective responsibility and self-interest, and state prerogatives and individual freedoms.”* (Gregory, et al., 2009, p. 87) Due to unique historical and social background, the civil society in China must be embedded with both the common features and Chinese characteristics. In this thesis, I assume the civil society is a broad term which is closer to the definition that “*as the associational realm located between the state and other constitutive parts of society, such as individuals, families and firms.”* (Shieh & Deng, 2011, p. 183)In this thesis, much attention will be paid to the civil society organizations which grow in China and strive for independence from the state’s control, in which NGOs and voluntary organizations motivated by individual’s sense of citizenship are thought to be highly relevant.

## Theoretical framework

This thesis is a multi-disciplinary research mainly in the scope of sociology and communication studies. This serves as the point of departure when choosing the specific theories to be applied. Considering the research question, I have decided to adopt two theories, one is Habermas’s public sphere theory and the other is the empowerment theory of Elisheva Sadan for this thesis.

Public Sphere is a widely used concept in philosophy and sociology, which is highly relevant to the issue of civil society and cyberspace. Empowerment theory focuses on the empowerment process taking place in individuals and communities. It inspires me to use it as a tool to examine the how the Internet empowers the netizens and to what extent this empowerment process influence the social structure. The public sphere is more like a macro theory while the empowerment theory is more instrumental.

## Empirical framework

The empirical data as a whole constitutes one chapter of this thesis and is divided into three sections. The first section provides background information about the development of Internet in China. The second and the third sections are cases selected that one is the Red Cross Society of China’s recent crisis, and the other is about the anti-corruption online.

* + 1. Data collection

In this thesis, both qualitative and quantitative data will be collected and used in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of reality. Because the first section of empirical data is aimed to map up the fact of Internet development in China, statistics and text will constitute the main form of data. Furthermore, to ensure credibility, statistics will be exclusively obtained from the latest and most official reports, news coverage of mainstream media, and articles of professional journals. In order to take a neutral stance, both Chinese statement and western views will be presented if certain issue arouses confrontation.

Secondary sources will be exclusively use in this thesis. Theories mainly derive from the scholars’ most influential books. The Internet is the main source of most statistics and fact so as to achieve the most up-dated information, also several reports, insightful comments are use. Relevant journals, electronic document, databases, articles contribute to this thesis as well.

* + 1. Case selection

As to the case study, two cases are chosen and used throughout the thesis. One is the Red Cross Society of China which has been trapped in deep crisis, and the other one is Civil Supervision website which aims at countering corruption. Those two cases, both including several incidents, will be presented comprehensively in the chapter of empirical data so as to sustain the consistency and causal relations between different incidents. In the analysis part, a few relevant data concerning the two cases will be added as complementary information. The two cases are selected for the reason that both of them contain incidents which are mostly initiated and processed in the cyberspace and reflect the interactive relation of the state and society which is highly relevant to the issue of civil society development.

## Analytical Framework

In this thesis, analysis is conducted based on a combination of the theory and empirical date. It will be divided into three sections.

The first section is a theoretical extension of the first section of empirical data which aims to illuminate the cyberspace’s effect on China’s social change. It examines the cyberspace in China from a macro perspective hence the subsequent analyses could extract certain arguments from it.

The second and the third sections are parallel case studies on the RCSC’s crisis and the anti-corruption campaign online. Based on the first section, these two sections may bring about findings on a micro perspective as well as the potential to enhance or modify the first one.

Hence, an analytical framework that enables respective also inter-related analyses is constructed.

# Theory

This chapter will extensively introduce the two chosen theories. As mentioned above public sphere empowerment theory will be adopted as an instrument to guide and secure the analysis within the scientific framework.

## Public Sphere

Public sphere is a concept with a long tradition in philosophy and sociology. The contemporary understanding of this term is mainly premised on the work of German scholar Jürgen Habermas, who provided a comprehensive analysis of its nature and historic transformation. As a philosopher and sociologist, Habermas firstly conceptualized the notion of Public Sphere in his influential scholarly work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere – An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. In this book, Habermas provides a systemic study on the origins, history, and distortion of the bourgeoisie public sphere. Based on his work many intellectuals of various academic backgrounds developed this notion into more modern versions.

* + 1. Definition

The term *Public sphere* appears in English as a spatial notion of the public, which means a domain existing between the state and the society, whereas its original German term, Öffenlichkeit, implies a stronger meaning of a communicative realm. (Delanty, 2007) Hence, it could be understood as “*an area in social life where individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action.”* (Panneerselvan & Nair, p. 2)

In 1989, Habermas clearly defined that the public sphere is

“*a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. […] Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest. In a large public body, this kind of communication requires specific technological means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Today, newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere.”* (Habermas, 1989, p. 136)

Habermas's explanation is of various meanings and connotations. First of all, it is an autonomous area rising from society and distinct from the state, and thus making a distinction between private and public. Second, Public Sphere is the place where public communication interaction orienting to decision and opinion exists. Third, Public sphere functions as a structure, institution and agent, which in principle should be accessible to all the citizens and ensure their equal ability of participating in public debate and opinion expression.Koçansummarized that Habebermas’s definition of public sphere *“portrayed as an autonomous social sphere of communicative occurrence in which the realm of private individuals as equals comes together as 'public', in a spatial place”.* (Koçan, 2008, p. 8)

In this context, Habermas clearly illuminates both the spatial and communicative feature of the Public Sphere. Moreover, it has been obviously put forward the normative orientations closely associating with it. To put it in another way, the free access to the public, general interest and rational-critical debate constitute the core value of Public Sphere.

* + 1. Historical Background

Habermas’s Public Sphere theory has its origins in the European Enlightment. In the 17th and 18th centuries, with the development of capitalist economic the bourgeoisie class emerged. Although economically rising, those bourgeoisies were politically marginalized in reality so they took the form of open debate of equal people and free expression of viewpoints developed in clubs, salons, coffee/tea houses and even the newly developed mass media, the newspapers, to form the public opinion and confronts the ruling elites. Hence the bourgeoisie public sphere emerges.

The decline of bourgeoisie public sphere according to Habermas is mainly due to the political centralizations and commercialization of the mass media with the consequence of turning rational-critical citizens to audiences of the mass culture. People under such circumstances are fed information that degrades public opinion to “*mere aggregation of uninformed, unchallenged, underdeveloped and prejudicial views”* (Koçan, 2008, p. 8)*.*

Habermas once identified the bourgeoisie public sphere as an ideal model of public sphere because it embodies the key normative characteristics such as the rational-critical debate, the public opinion orientation and communicative use of public reason. Nevertheless, his assumption exposed himself to critiques hence later Habermas paid more attention to the communicative feature of Public sphere. In 1992, he redefined the Public Sphere as a “*network for communicating information and points of view…the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions”.* (Habermas, 1997, p. 360)

* + 1. Public Sphere and the Cyberspace

From Habermas definition, a more active role of the communicative technology, namely the media, has been raised. Newspaper, magazine, radio and television are conceived as technological tool of transmitting messages from the sender to the recipient in the framework of Public Sphere. However, in the modern context, the cyberspace encompasses the technological function of the Internet, as well as spatial characteristic of engaging the netizens in a virtual community online. Hereupon the cyberspace could be regarded as certain form of public sphere in the information age.

## Empowerment theory

The notion of Empowerment is widely used in psychology, sociology, philosophy and the political sciences thus it is always reasonable to keep in mind it is a multidisciplinary and multidimensional term when applied in research. In this thesis, Elisheva Sadan’s conceptualization of Empowerment will be used as a theoretical framework to guide the analysis.

Dr. Elisheva Sadan, who is a teacher of the Paul Baerwald School of Social Work at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (mpow.org, 2004), extensively conceptualized a theory of empowerment on the premise of various theorists’ work including that of Michel Foucault and Anthony Giddens in her book *Empowerment and Community Planning* which was published originally in Heberw in 1997. Later in 2004 the book was translated into English by Richard Flantz and became free for downloading online.

* + 1. Definition

In the English version of the book, Sadan defines the process of empowerment as “*a transition from a state of powerlessness to a state of more control over one’s life, fate, and environment*”. (Sadan, 2004, p. 13) The manifestation of this transition can be an improvement in the perceived ability to control or the actual ability to control. (Sadan, 2004, p. 144) This transformative process aims to bring about changes to the social condition in three dimensions, which are “*people’s feelings and capacities, the life of the collective that they belong to, and the professional practice that gets involved in the situation.”* (Sadan, 2004, p. 13) Accordingly, the three dimensions are perceived by Sandan as three levels of empowerment (Sadan, 2004)which are individual empowerment, community empowerment, and professional practice.

The sense of powerlessness among people belonging to groups suffering from stigma and discrimination is created by disempowering social processes. It brings about a consequence of turning self-worth to self-blame, leading to indifference towards and alienation from the environment, and decline in the ability to act for oneself in terms of solving one’s own problem whereas an increasing dependence on social service and specialists.

*“Empowerment is a transition from this passive situation to a more active situation of control.”* (Sadan, 2004)It is the realization of one’s humanity that necessitates empowerment. If a person is powerless concerning his life and environment, he is regarded as fail to realize his innate human potential. Because the disempowering social process serves the source of powerlessness, the empowerment process is aimed to impact upon human agency which is oppressed and the social structure embedded with limitations and possibilities that human agency exists and reacts.

Sadan develops her theory of empowerment on the basis of Anthony Giddens’s structuration theory or duality of structure in other words which is regarded as a meta-theory of hers. Consequently, Sadan adopts several terms from Giddens’s to construct her theory. She argues that it is suitable to use the principle of duality of the structure which is for analysis of any social process to explain the various levels of empowerment.

* + 1. Individual empowerment

Individual empowerment is the first dimension of the empowerment theory. According to Sadan, it is the personal and intimate change process (Sadan, 2004, p. 13), and “*focuses on what happens on the personal level in the individual’s life"* (Sadan, 2004, p. 75)*.* It is a process of personal development involving skills and abilities development, as well as a more positive self-definition, within which a sense of more self-respect and self-esteem grow among individuals towards themselves. A redefinition of self that breeds self-confidence and feeling of self-efficacy closely relates to the “*improvement in personal knowledge, abilities, skills, resources and life opportunities”*. (Sadan, 2004, p. 84)

Although the essence of individual empowerment lies on individual’s ability to redefine self and to act efficiently for self, individual empowerment could not be perceived as the exclusive and principal component of the empowerment theory for the reason that powerlessness is an individual problem and a social and structural condition as well. (Sadan, 2004, p. 85) That is to say individual empowerment only constitutes one component of the empowerment process, for the reason that this process as a whole combines *“the personal and the individual with the collective and the social in people’s lives”*. (Sadan, 2004, p. 85)

Sadan argues that just the like one’s humanity, the potential of empowerment exists in all human beings, so does the ability to make a difference. Systematically and permanently constraining one’s ability to exert power means a negation of people’s humanity. According to Giddens, a human agency fails to exist if the ability to influence the world somehow is hampered (Giddens,1984). A full sense of human agency includes the ability to carry out intentional acts with the purpose to achieve defined goals, precisely speaking, “*to influence the environment and to be able to bring about change*.” (Sadan, 2004, p. 146)

* + 1. Community empowerment

According to Sadan, *“community empowerment is the increased control of people as a collective over outcomes important to their lives”* (Sadan, 2004, p. 85)and it “*emphasizes the collective processes and the social change.”* (Sadan, 2004, p. 75)Explicitly, it is a “*collective social process of creating a community, achieving better control over the environment, and decision making in which groups, organizations or communities participate”* (Sadan, 2004, p. 137) *and “is human activity that has structural and organizational aspects, which are aimed at changing social systems and creating structural alternatives.”* (Sadan, 2004, p. 143)

The outcome of community empowerment is the development of “*a sense of responsibility, commitment, and ability to care for collective survival, as wells as skills in problem solving, and political efficacy to influence changes in environments relevant to their quality of life*.” (Sadan, 2004, p. 145) It can be realized among individuals sharing same critical characteristics both geographically or non-geographically. It could happen in geographically defined areas in which the residents’ common critical characteristics are constituted, or it can take place in groups sharing common critical characteristics such as origin, age, gender, physical disability and so on. (Sadan, 2004, p. 133)

However, community empowerment could not be realized without resources of its own. Sadan raises two aspects of these resources:

1. Individuals have come to realize the importance of acting rather than solely realizing their personal desires or interests, notwithstanding in the framework of pursuing the improvement of the quality of personal life.

2. External change agent (for example, professionals) is getting involved in a planned change process and to which contributing rules and resources such as meaning, legitimation, and power which help to create a community and improve the ability to influence the environment. (Sadan, 2004, p. 147)

Sadan continuously argues that this process is conditioned by the social structure which enables or limits it. (Sadan, 2004, p. 147) In a democratic regime, the individual’s participation in public decisions is permitted and encouraged while in a regime where the individual’s acting and changing rights are neglected, the social processes are shaped differently. (Sadan, 2004, p. 147)

* + 1. Professional practice

In her book, Sadan defines empowering professional practice as *“the organizational and functional change that encourages the realization of both individual empowerment and community empowerment*” (Sadan, 2004, p. 13) and it is the methodical intervention with the aim of encouraging and facilitating “*processes of increased control of individuals and collectives over their lives and environments and develops intervention methods through which people can effect changes in their lives.”* (Sadan, 2004, p. 148) Besides, it is professional activity that originated from social systems hence the role of professionals and the methods of intervention are high relevant in this process.

The professionals have a role played in the empowerment process as *resource consultant, sensitizer, teacher or trainer, service planer, coordinator and networker, advocate*, as listed by Sadan in the book. Hence as professionals, they should be embedded with a sense of professionalism with themselves that is to say the *professionalism of empowering professional practice* which is expressed in their critical approach to themselves and their practice. It means those professionals should place their professions at the service of processes empowering people and choose strategies and ways of action encouraging empowerment. Moreover, the professionals themselves should be empowered thus raising an issue of the empowerment of the professionals for the reason that the empowered professionals are considered to be more empowering professionals. (Sadan, 2004, p. 134)

Sadan outlines several methods of empowering professional practice and concludes that all the methods share a single common principle that an empowering practice does not seek for easy solutions. (Sadan, 2004, p. 308) She warns that people especially professionals should develop a whole scale understanding of the social situation rather than content with *out-of-context diagnoses* (Sadan, 2004, p. 308) that only release sufferings of limited numbers of individuals. As Sadan puts it, “*the cause of people’s distress is not to be sought in the victims.”* (Sadan, 2004, p. 308)

To encourage empowerment, certain recommendations about methods of intervention are given to professionals to illustrate the way of implementing empowerment in professional practice. Sadan is aware of the lack of uniformity of the selection of those methods so she classifies them in two groups as ***strategies*** and ***tactics****.*

**Strategies** are methods of intervention that also contain principles, a rationale, and a special role. (Sadan, 2004, p. 124) Strategic methods are *participation, organization, integration of levels of intervention, praxis—integration of learning and action* and so on.

**Tactics** are more specific ways of action and serve as part of the strategy which is developed by a professional aimed at achieving a defined objective, a particular outcome, and a planned goal. (Sadan, 2004, p. 124) Tactics abound and vary in forms, *enabling, linking, catalyzing, priming, providing information and knowledge, developing skills, modeling, precise formulation of values, informality in the professional intervention, developing social technologies, technical assistance*, all the above are considered as tactical methods of professional practice.

Sadan illustrates the relationship between empowerment and professional as follows: “*Empowerment is a source of inspiration and innovation in the domains of practice of professionals who are interested in social change and in the personal change that it entails.”* (Sadan, 2004, p. 132)Hence the adoption of an empowering professional practice by professionals is much more relevant to their views and beliefs on professionalism, subjectivity, the origin of social problems which correspond to their beliefs, values, goals and intentions.(Sadan, 2004, p. 132)

The empowerment process provides people with opportunities to “*learn to take on socially valuable roles, to exercise social skills, to exert interpersonal influence, to develop commitment, to take responsibility and to acquire political efficacy*.” (Sadan, 2004, p. 148) The acquired abilities in return facilitate the joint goals of empowering themselves both as individuals and as a community. (Sadan, 2004, p. 148) This is exactly how empowerment influences the society.

## Application of theories

The theories will be applied in each case, though theory contains both strength and limits.

The public sphere theory in the first section of analysis will be used to examine the strength and limits of China’s cyber-public sphere from two approaches. One is a descriptive approach that is used to identify whether the cyber-public sphere is there, and the other is a normative approach that is used to test whether it has the power to influence the social change. In the case of the RCSC crisis, Public Sphere theory will be applied as a framework to understand the social force which urges for transparency and credibility. In the case anti-corruption case, Public sphere again serves as a theoretical tool to understand the power relation between the state and the individual to illuminate the social structure which hinders the civil society to grow in the area of anti-corruption.

The empowerment theory, which provides a clear structure, will be used in each section. In the first section, empowerment be applied to explain how the Internet empowers the netizens. In the second section, three levels of empowerment will be respectively applied to examine the strengths or limits of cyberspace in the social and structural change in China in the area of philanthropy. In the third section, a similar approach will be followed and the emphasis goes to the individual level for its high relevance to the case.

This thesis does not include a part of critiques to the theories mainly because that the two theories are broad in their scope and area, therefore their weakness or limitations may be revealed in particular case studies.

# Empirical Data

In this chapter, relevant data will be presented with the purpose to illuminate the background and detailed information concerning the social context and current situation of the Internet and Cyberspace in China. This chapter will be divided into three parts. In the first part, background information will be given to facilitate a holistic understanding of cyberspace in China. In the second part, the recent crisis of Red Cross Society of China will be introduced as a case study aimed at shedding light on the challenges facing the China’s GONGOs. The third part will focus on a website which has devoted to individual anti-corruption campaign and gained popularity recently in China.

## Background data of Internet development in China

The Internet has been developing in China for decades while it still encounters certain constraints. In this section, the key issue here is to depict a whole picture of this paradoxical phenomenon by presenting relevant data including facts and figures and taking into consideration the interaction between various actors involved as a clue.

* + 1. The current development of Internet in China

According to *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China* released on January 2013, the number of Internet users in China has risen to 564 million and China’s Internet penetration rate has reached 42.1% by the end of the December 2012. (CNNIC, 2013, p. 15) The chart below shows the trend of the growth of Internet users and Internet penetration rate from the year 2005 to 2012.



Figure Size of Chinese Internet users and Internet penetration rate

With the advent and development of mobile technology, the way people get online has changed. Mobile phone has become a counterpart to the conventionally widely used commuter and laptop because mobile phone has been installed with the access to Internet. By the end of December 2012, China has had 422 million mobile phone Internet users and the total number has risen by 64.4 million compared to that of the end of 2011. (CNNIC, 2013, p. 18) “Among all the Internet users, those using mobile phones to access Internet increased from 69.3% at the end of 2011 to 74.5%.” (CNNIC, 2013, p. 18) The year 2012 witnessed a sharp increase in the size of mobile phone Internet users which surpasses the number of desktops users in the middle of the year. (CNNIC, 2013, p. 19)The fast development of mobile Internet means a lot to China’s development. The obvious is that it helps to the innovation and adaptation of mobile technology. More importantly, the *digital gap* among the poor and rich areas could be reduced because it makes it possible for people from areas where Internet access and terminal availability are limited to access the Internet through mobile phones. As a terminal to access Internet, mobile phone is inexpensive and easy to operate and this feature meets the primary demands of groups with low income and poor education background. (CNNIC, 2013, p. 19)

With the fast pace of urbanization in China, a huge gap between the urban area and rural area in the Internet penetration rate emerges. According to CNNIC, the rate among urban residents has reached about 60% while it was only 23.7% in rural area by the end of 2012. (CNNIC, 2013, p. 22) Although the gap has stops from enlarging and become stable nowadays, it still remains huge.

It's worth noting that the age structure, education structure and income structure embodied by Chinese Internet users tell a story which is highly relevant to this thesis.



Figure Age structure of Internet users

Shown in the figure above, the young people aged between 20 and 29 constitute the largest proportion of Internet users. Internet users aged between 20 and 39 account even more than 50% of the whole number.



Figure Education structure of Internet users

The above figure shows that the Internet users with education of junior high school and senior high school rank first and second in the rate. This means on an average level, China’s Internet users lack the experience of college education or even higher one.



Figure Personal income structure of Internet users

This figure demonstrates the income structure of Internet users in China. We could see the group with income less than 500 yuan and group with income between 2001 yuan and 5000 yuan are the largest proportion.

* + 1. The Chinese government’s role in the development of the Internet

The Chinese government is an important actor in cyberspace. It is a disposable role player in this mediated environment. In 2010, the Chinese government issued a white paper on the Internet in China, in which it extensively expressed China’s official attitude toward the Internet and introduced efforts made by Chinese government to enhance and administrate the development of the Internet in China.

The Chinese government regards himself as an active promoter of Internet technology as is stated in the White Paper that “*the Chinese government energetically advocates and actively supports the development and application of the Internet across the country*”. (The Information Office of the State Council, 2010) The Chinese government knows that “*to build, utilize and administer the Internet well is an issue that concerns national economic prosperity and development, state security and social harmony, state sovereignty and dignity, and the basic interests of the people.”* (The Information Office of the State Council, 2010)As a promoter and administrator of the Internet, “*the government has a basic policy regarding the Internet: active use, scientific development, law-based administration and ensured security*”. (The Information Office of the State Council, 2010)

However, the West remains suspicious of the Chinese government’s role in administrating the Internet. The online censorship and its corresponding technologies have been long criticized by the West as hindering democratization. Reports and news covers over online censorship are rarely seen in China’s domestic media while the western media has always covered this topic. According to *the economist,* China has systematically deployed projects such as the Great Firewall and Golden Shield which have been used to keep out “undesirable” foreign websites and monitor activities with China. (The economist, 2013) The access to foreign websites such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube is blocked, which a common sense among the Internet users within China. Meanwhile, the domestic internet companies have worked closely with the Chinese government by following the doctrine of online censorship. Some even became the supplier of internet security products to the Chinese government.

* + 1. The widespread use of micro-blog in China

Micro-blog first came to China in 2010 when Sina, the Chinese online media company for Chinese communities around the world, launched Sina Weibo which is an n equivalence to Twitter in the West.

According to CNNIC, by the end of December 2012, in total there have been in China 309 million micro-blog users, accounting for 54.7% of the internet users, and 65.6% of micro-blog users, which is around 202 million, have accessed micro-blogs and published micro-posts via mobile phones by the end of 2012. (CNNIC, 2013, p. 36) CNNIC has described Micro-blog as a communication center of public opinion because of the vast number of its users. The conventional sketch of the creation and communication of public opinions has been changed by the widespread use of Micro-blog by normal users, opinion leaders and traditional media. To them, micro-blog has become the main channel to “obtain news, publish news, express opinions and stir up public opinions”. (CNNIC, 2013, p. 47)

## The Crisis of GONGOs, a case of the Red Cross Society of China

In China, civil society organizations such as the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC) are classified by scholars as GONGOs, which is short for *Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations.* (Wu, 2003, p. 35)The RCSC had been long enjoying a good reputation but the situation was suddenly changed in 2008.

* + 1. Transparency crisis since 2008

In 2008, after the disaster of the Sichuan earthquake, donations to the Red Cross jumped and reached over 1.5 billion RMB of which almost 90% was aimed at Sichuan relief work. (Sauer, 2013) Such a huge amount of money exposed the RCSC to pressure coming from the public who suspected and criticized its lack of transparency and poor organization. Rumors spreading online said that the RCSC even did not maintain open books (Sauer, 2013) thus making the public feel anxious and worried about usage of their donations. It was true the then RCSC did not install mechanism to afford donators with the access to trace every donation they made thus causing the public suspicion over its professionalism and credibility. Under this circumstance, with years of efforts, on July 31st 2011, the RCSC posted in its official micro-blog the official notice of the launch of online platform to disclose donation information which was seen as a “gesture to reassure donors of greater transparency”. (Li, 2011)

In June 2011, RCSC came under fire again after the credibility crisis erupted online originated in 2008. A 20-year-old girl named Guo Meimei, who claimed herself the manager of a RCSC-related agency, posted pictures on Sina Weibo of her fancy cars, luxurious handbags, and palatial villa and displayed her lavish lifestyle to the public. Ms Guo’s actions, along with a series of other scandals concerning RCSC, infuriated the netizens. They began to question whether Guo had used the money donated to RCSC to finance her luxurious lifestyle and launch a human flesh search to identify the relationship between Guo and the RCSC. (Chinadaily.com, 2011)

RCSC firmly denied having any connection to this girl. Correspondently, Guo removed her identity on Weibo and apologized for damaging the reputation of RCSC. She declared that it was all because of her ignorance that caused such an incident. (Sauer, 2013) Unfortunately, subsequent disclosures of inside stories revealed that Guo somehow connected to RCSC’s then Vice President Guo Changjiang. Disputes over this incident and suspicion over RCSC flooded the Internet. “The Red Cross Society of China was plunged into an unprecedented crisis of trust,” (Chinadaily.com, 2011) as Chinadaily commented on this event. The Guo Meimei incident even aroused the attention of the Ministry of Civil Affairs and prompted it to make amendment of laws and regulations concerning donations and voluntary services. (Sauer, 2013)

On April 20, 2013, another deadly earthquake hit Sichuan again. The Chinese were motivated again and rushed to help the relief work. However, this time they tried to find alternatives other than RCSC to make donations. Although the RCSC responded to this disaster at the first time and posted a called for donations on its official Weibo, no positive comments followed but thousands of 'thumbs down' emoticons and an overwhelming shout of “滚”( English: *get away*) greeted this post. (Feng Qing Yang, 2013)

* + 1. The rise of the One Foundation

Contrary to the RCSC, the One Foundation, which is an independent charity organization in China, has been embraced by the Chinese since the year 2008. It is a public fundraising foundation working on disaster relief, children's welfare and philanthropy development. (One Foundation offical website, 2013) During the April 20 earthquake, it also provided disaster relief and received support and donations greatly from the Chinese citizens. Statistics showed that in eleven hours after the earthquake, the RCSC only received 142,843 RMB, while the One Foundation collected 22.4 million RMB. (Carter, 2013) On its official Weibo, netizens warmly praised its efforts and the hardworking of its volunteers.

According to its official website, One Foundation defines its mission as to “provide a professional and transparent public service platform according to the vision of ‘It Starts with One’”. (One Foundation offical website, 2013) Its professionalism is premised on its structural and functional features. It involves a wide range of professionals in its board of directors such as Feng Lun, Jet Li, Liu Chuanzhi, Pony Ma, Ma Weihua, Jack Ma, Niu Gensheng, Wang Shi, Yang Peng, Zhou Qiren and Amy Zhou (One Foundation offical website, 2013), most of whom are elites or celebrities in China.

One the functional level, One Foundation has been in an advantage over the RCSC by its practice of organizing social media campaigns and facilitating donations via various forms of online payment. (Carter, 2013) Its transparency has been assured by closely collaboration with independent audit companies such as KPMG and Deloitte and release of financial report annually.

One Foundation was originally established in April 2007 and affiliated to the RCSC with the name Red *Cross Society of China Jet Li One Foundation Project.* In 2010 it became authorized to act as a fully independent charity with registration in Shenzhen. (One Foundation offical website, 2013)

## The Civil Supervision website, Individual Anti-corruption campaign online

* + 1. The People’s Supervision Network and citizen journalist

The People’s Supervision Network(Chinese: 人民监督网) is a website established in June 2006 and in May 2007 with the authorization of the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region it transformed to a media corporation group. It claims that since establishment it has successfully exposed various corruption cases in accordance with the constitution of the PRC. Statistics show that 48 above bureau-level officials and 32 below county-level officials were exposed to the public because of corruption, among which 1/3 were disciplinarily punished, removed from office or even jailed. (The People's Supervision Network, 2013)

In its official website, the People’s Supervision Network defines its mission is to uncover the dirty things of the political circles and business circles and to safeguard the public interest. It says that it has gained support of several influential scholars in China such as *Jiang Ping* of China University of Political Science and Law, *He Weifang* of the Peking University, and *Zhan Jiang* of Peking Foreign Language University. Besides, the famous investigate-journalist and model figure Wang Keqing has contributed to some important news reports. (The People's Supervision Network, 2013)

Zhu Ruifeng, the founder of the People’s Supervision Network, recently gained his popularity as an investigate-journalist for blowing the whistle on a sex scandal that toppled 11 officials in Chongqing. He regards himself as a citizen journalist and devoted himself in the counter-corruption campaign. In November 2012, Zhu first published the sex video of *Lei Zhengfu*, the then Party Secretary of Chongqing's Beibei District in the People’s Supervision Network, later it was posted in Sina Weibo by another famous investigate-journalist Ji Xuguang. 63 hours later, Lei was removed from his position.

Zhu told that he remained relatively unscathed after releasing the video, although he was once confronted with death threat from people suspiciously associated to Lei but was left alone by authorities. (William, 2013) He once said that “police had harassed him at his Beijing home and that he feared for his safety”. (Li, 2013) Despite of that, Zhu has been living a safe life. According to report of Washington Post, Zhu once expressed that "In the past, I've encountered a lot of threats, censorship and even kidnapping, but this time, my Web site wasn't shut down. There was no blocking or attack." (William, 2013)

* + 1. Lei Zhengfu Scandal

Lei Zhengfu, the former Party Secretary of Chongqing's Beibei District, was sacked from his position 63 hours right after the sex tap was published online. It has been confirmed that the video was secretly created by the 18-year-old girl named Zhao Hongxia who was hired and trained by a property developer with the aim to blackmail Lei in order to get the bid for urban construction projects. As the local chief, Lei was reported to abuse his power to help his brother’s company to win most bids of the urban construction projects thereof irritated those competing companies. Sex bribe and blackmail were the tactics adopted by those companies as a way to get what they want. Lei’s incident was not an isolated one but with complex ties to various figures. Subsequent cases were exposed one by one and in total 11 officials were sacked. However, as Zhu Ruifeng told the media, “he did have sex videos involving more high ranking Chongqing officials that are not included in the 11 fired officials.” (Chang, 2013)

Commentators said that the Lei Zhengfu incident symbolized the triumph of “Network supervision by public opinion". With the mass participation of netizens on micro blogging, the Internet plays a magnificent role in anti-corruption campaign. Meanwhile, one reason for such a high efficient exposures of official wrongdoings could be ascribed to the help and support by central government determined to combat corruption (Xinhua, 2012) after the CPC leadership transition in November 2012.

# Analysis

## Cyberspace’s effect on the China’s social change

As defined in the Methodology, Cyberspace as a term contains dual meanings. One the one hand, it is a technological advancement which has become the new engine of economic development, on the other hand, it is a constructor that sets up new rules and bring about changes in the societal level.

* + 1. Chinese government’s motivation

In China, it is very obvious to see the changes taking place under this circumstance. The statistics have vividly shown that number of Internet users in China has risen to 564 million and China’s Internet penetration rate has reached 42.1%(see page 22). As the most populous country in the world, China has proved its strength to spread the new technology nationwide. The fast development of Internet is mainly due to China’s priority of economic development. China for decades has been the leading force in economic development since opening up in the late 1970s. The key issue in China’s political life since then has been economic development. In order to achieve this goal, technology advancement was highly emphasized as seen in Deng Xiaoping’s famous saying that *Science and technology are the primary productive forces* (Deng, 1988)*.* It is also clearly stated in the White Paper that Chinese government warmly embraces the Internet technology because it concerns national economic prosperity. With the overwhelming governmental supporting, the information industry is booming. Although economy is not the within the scope of this thesis, it does influence the social domain which is constructed on the premise of economic dynamics.

* + 1. The empowering medium and the empowered

The Internet is an empowering media. In China’s context, it has been empowering people with three rights: right of information, right of expression, right of action. (Shi, 2012)

First of all, the new media empowers people with expanded access to acquire information. In China, the traditional mass media is run under the principle of *unitary system, dual operations*（Chinese:一元体制, 二元运作） (Chen, 2005). *Unitary system* means that the State owns the media and enjoys the right of broadcasting and publishing; *Dual operations* means the media gets revenue from market by taking the political advantage afforded by the state and in return utilizes the revenue to fulfill the political task of ideology. (Chen, 2005) Under this condition, the traditional mass media such as Television, Newspaper, and Magazines are under control of the State and subject to state guidance in their agenda setting. Information to be released has to be censored and filtered in accordance with the state will. Under this situation, people’s right for information is hampered. In the new media age, the access to acquire information is extensively expanded. The Internet provides an alternative to the traditional mass media and empowers people with capability of acquiring information which was once beyond reach in the mass media. The information channel constructed by new media is generating a new systemic network and social relations, which ultimately forms a new social field in which people could empower themselves by autonomously choosing information which interests or excites them (Shi, 2012). Such information was by no means accessible or perceivable in the past. Hence individual is transformed from a state of powerlessness in knowing to an informative situation, in this sense, individual empowerment functions.

Second, the new media empowers people with right of expression. Online expression has been widely utilized by netizens in China, a sign here is the widespread use of the Micro-blogging recently. Statistics show that in the year of 2012 54.7% (see page 27) of the Internet users are micro-blog users and an increasing trend in this has been witnessed. In the cyberspace, the power of expression is manifested in its impact in influencing the public affairs and public policy implemented by the state. By expressing their views on certain issues and communicating with each other, a virtual community or public sphere is constituted. With the aggregation of public opinion, the virtual community is empowered with the power to influence the ongoing social issues. During the 2008 earthquake, the fragile school buildings that deprived hundreds lives of children and the government’s incompetence were criticized fiercely online thus a subsequent nationwide campaign on sustaining the quality of constructions of schoolyard was promoted by the government. From this incident and more similar ones, the power of cyberspace is exemplified by expression or even collective attention of the public. The slogan that *Onlooking is changing China* is another reflection of power of the online expression, which means the aggregation of public attention online, even without expression, could demonstrate its power to influence the social issues.

Third, the new media empowers people with the right of action. One observation in this sense goes to the fact that various self-organized volunteer activities and public services emerge and abound in recent China’s society. Most of those activities are initiated and receives participation through internet. For instance, the donations to charity such as One Foundation are mostly conducted online. Another observation is that the online anti-corruption campaign is heated up recently, in which the mass participation combined with the professionals’ initiative has been proved effectively to expose and counter corruption. The empowerment in action is backed up by the sense of citizenship that grows in in China’s society in recent year, and in return the sense of citizenship of the netizens enforces their action.

From the empowerment approach, the Internet could be seen as an empowering medium which empowers China’s netizens with the right of information, expression and action. This empowerment will result in an intangible formation of public sphere in cyberspace which serves as the platform for the aggregation of public opinion.

However, this assumption may be subject to criticism of net enthusiasm because it neglects one important role player in the cyberspace, the Chinese government. As an empowering medium, the cyberspace does not only empower the Internet users but also the government that tries to manage it. This is a little tricky to understand but it should be included in the analytical framework provided by empowerment theory otherwise the analysis would leave a big logical drawback in this thesis.

How does the cyberspace empower the Chinese government? In order to answer this question, it is needed to reflect on its motivation again. It is obvious that within years of development, the state dominance has contributed to the fast proliferation of the information technology with the concern of enhancing the economy. This is still the case in the current context that development especially economic development is prioritized in the state’s agenda. The speeded-up flow of information in the cyberspace fulfills the requirement of market economy which demands competence, transparency and autonomy and simultaneously brings about the individual empowerment as well. The Internet affords people with the power to acquire information, express themselves and act collectively. Under this circumstance the conventional control over the information flow is weakened thereof the state is put into a passive situation. Recognizing the challenges brought about by the prevalence of the Internet, the state correspondingly adopts a dual policy that resembles its media policy. On the one hand, the Chinese government continues to finance the R&D of information communication technology and the construction of Internet-related infrastructure and industry. On the other hand, new surveillance and control measures have been implemented within the process of infrastructure building as effective means to “keep out ‘undesirable’ foreign websites and monitor activities within China” (The economist, 2013). It is worth noting that the Chinese government takes a pragmatic stance here, as scholars point out that “the Chinese government has found a compromise between its desire to control the Internet and the need to become more competitive in the industry” (Wang & Hong, 2010). In the scope of empowerment, the state is empowered with the ability to manage the Internet within its own design.

From the analysis above we could draw an impression that with the continuing empowerment of the Internet, the netizens acquire certain autonomy while the state is also benefitting from the Internet to maintain the social order and stability. However, the relation between the individual and the state has become more dynamic and extensively interactive, which manifests vividly in a cyber-public sphere.

* + 1. Cyber Public Sphere in China: Strength and limit

As a technology, the Internet may be regarded as a value-free instrument which is used to promote economic development. However, the Internet is not solely a kind of technology, but it brings with itself certain spillovers. The Internet first of all is technology advancement in communications and has been evolved from simplicity to complexity in a very short period. In the scope of public sphere, the cyberspace is deemed to be an ideal model for the revival of public sphere. Those who embrace such an assumption are considered as net enthusiasts.

Different media have differentiated effects in influencing the development of public sphere, constructively or destructively. Habermas’s historical reflection on the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere illustrates the media’s role in such a process. Just as Dahlberg argues that the political press and open coffee house discourse facilitate the development of the bourgeois public sphere by fostering an informed and active citizenry (Dahlberg, 1998, p. 72), however, with the intervention of increasingly commercialized mass media the public sphere was diminished and colonized, hence the rational-critical citizens were turned to audiences of the mass culture. With the advent of the Internet and Cyberspace, the scenario to some extent has been changed. “The electronic linking of computers enables the formation of a virtual meeting place, cyberspace, whereby participants can interact”. (Dahlberg, 1998, p. 1) This statement makes a clear cut between cyberspace and the mass media by emphasizing computer networks’ role in creating a space for interaction. The computer-mediated communication possesses a nature of two-way, many-to-many, asynchronous interaction that it could inspire the sense of community and promote dialogue whereas the mass media only generate passive reception of the audience. (Dahlberg, 1998, p. 79) Theoretically, the technological nature of cyberspace may enable itself to structuralize an ideal model of public sphere. However, as Dahlberg points it out, “in order to understand the medium’s potential to enhance the public sphere, its technological form must not be separated from the context shaping its development, deployment and uses”. (Dahlberg, 1998, p. 1) Therefore, in china’s context, a comprehensive understanding of cyberspace’s role entails a holistic and dialectic analysis.

First of all, the origin of the Public Sphere is premised on the state’s retreat from society. However, China had a long history of the unity of state and society in feudal time. In modern China, the planned economy necessitated a highly centralized political system thus inevitably result in another form of the unity of state and society (Deng, 2010, p. 35). The overthrow of planned economy and the transformation to market economy taking place in the late 1970s witnessed the increasing autonomy of the society and the retreat of the state’s power. The unity of state and society therefore was changed into a relatively flexible structure of state over society, which means the state’s penetration on society much loosens but still remains dominant. Although not in a full sense, the foundation for the emergence of a public sphere has been laid.

The state over society structure is high relevant to the cyber public sphere in China. The net enthusiasm claim illuminates the potential autonomy and freedom embedded in cyberspace and it was much realized when the control over Internet has not been systemized. However, the cyberspace’s expansion in China has been followed by the increasing governmental penetration enhanced by legislative, administrative, and technological apparatus. The Chinese government rationalizes his actions by “citing national security measures that promote Internet surveillance as a necessary tool in monitoring illegal behavior.” *(Wang & Hong, 2010)* Scholars even have observed that certain Western companied have become the suppliers of mechanism for Chinese government to facilitate the control, surveillance, and censorship  *(Wang & Hong, 2010)*. Therefore, the market not only fails to be the force to counter state penetration, but serves as the source that generates the power of control. On the basis of censorship and surveillance, the cyberspace in China does not entail the democratic implication of Habermasian public sphere, which means it “is not a catalyst for the termination of authoritarianism or for the expedition of democratic transitions in China*”* (Wang & Hong, 2010)*.*

Nevertheless, the dynamics of state and society keeps involving all the time. The technological advancement to some extent influences it and brings about changes. It is worth noting that with the proliferation of mobile technology, the digital gap between the poor and the rich, the rural area and the urban area has been bridged. Statistics show that China has had 422 million mobile phone Internet users by the end of December 2012(see page), hence the cyberspace in China is significantly improved in its availability and accessibility. What is more, although censorship still remains, the combination of Micro-blog and mobile technology enables the extensive interaction between Micro-blog users far more before the censorship starts to function. Hence, a theoretical reflection on this phenomenon is that the cyberspace in China is becoming more close to a normative public sphere as it ensures the principle of publicity.

* + 1. Sub-conclusion

With an overview of the analysis conducted above, this section is concluded by:

1. The Internet is developing in a significant speed and the main reason should be ascribed to the promotion of the Chinese government with the purpose to facilitate economic development.
2. The Internet empowers the netizens with right of information, right of expression and right of action, however, it also facilitate the government control and surveillance in the Internet.
3. The cyberspace has constituted a cyber-public sphere in which participation may subject to state penetration that is intangible but still powerful.
4. The cyberspace in China reflects a transition from the unity of state and society to a structure of state over society, which results in a more dynamic and interactive relation between the state and society.

## Analysis on Red Cross of China

The term GONGOs means *Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations*. The Red Cross Society of China (RCSC) is a typical GONGO in China which functions as an NGO whereas associated to the government closely in terms of financing and organizing. With years of good reputation in the field of charity and philanthropy, it has been functioning to facilitate the social development which has long been marginalized by the prioritized economic development. However, just as controversial as term in its wording, the RCSC itself has been exposed to controversy and crisis. In a large scope, it does demonstrate a structural weakness brought about by the state over society structure. In this part, the analysis will be conducted in line with the theoretical framework of public sphere and empowerment with the purpose to illuminate the changes brought about the cyberspace on such CONGOs.

* + 1. A philanthropic public sphere emerging online

For a long time, the public sector in China has exclusively take the role in the philanthropy and charity, and the RCSC has served this role for a long time. Hence no openly discussion on philanthropy took place in China before the emergence of the Internet. However, it does not mean that the Internet brings about the discourse of philanthropy, but means Internet serves as a platform to host that discussion. So here comes a question, why in recent years philanthropy has become a hot topic for discussion? The reason abounds, however, in the line with public sphere, several are highly relevant:

First, the market economy has prevails in China for years thus the state-society structure has been changed with the increasing autonomy of the profit pursuers. The market economy’s logic is based on the agents’ autonomy and competence as well as the law-ensured rules. Therefore, the arbitrary of state force has been constrained and limited to an extent that ensures market to function well. In this sense, the state has gradually drawn back from the society and this makes it possible for the emergence of the public sphere.

Second, those benefitting greatly from the market economy constitute the middle class of China’s society. Although without testifying, those who belong to middle class resemble the bourgeois of the burgeoning capitalist economy in the 17th century. Both of them share the feature of economically rising but politically marginalized. In the specific area of philanthropy, those middle classes account for reasonably large proportion of the donators, however, in the RCSC’s structure and mechanism, they do not possess the power to trace the use of their donation or to have a say in the organization of RCSC. It is the emergence of the middle class and the feeling of powerlessness that triggers the online discussion over the philanthropy-related issues, among which the RCSC stands out.

Third, the cyberspace and the Internet evolvement realize the public debate and ensure the accessibility for a massive participation. In the RCSC case, people now feel certain that it has been long run under a structure that lacked transparency. However, it was only with the help of cyberspace that this problem became known to the public. Hence, with the technological feature which seen from net enthusiasm perspective as an ideal to construct a public sphere, cyberspace does play a role just as that of the open cafe, salon, and other mediums to the public sphere in the European Enlightenment.

With all the analysis presented above, it seems convincing enough to draw a conclusion that a philanthropy-related public sphere has constituted in China perfectly along the Habermasian approach. However, as is mentioned, the dominance of the state over society is much more intangible but is still there. Why the state power is hardly realized in this case? What if this quasi-public sphere does not grow by its own but is needed and deliberately cultivated by the state? This thesis is not extensive enough to provide insights into this question, however, it does raise an issue of how to define the state’ role in public sphere like such, as a dominant force be excluded outside the public sphere, or as a participant with positive influence.

* + 1. Empowerment and Outcome

The RCSC crisis itself includes a wide range of actors and inter-related incidents so it provides an overview that helps to examine cyberspace’s influence on the China’s civil society. The Sadan’s empowerment theory provides a framework that helps structuralize the analysis on multiple factors. The RCSC case in general reflects the empowered neitizens demand for transparency and thus in return empowers those NGOs run with transparency. The empowering process generates multi-facet outcomes concerning the state-NGO relations.

***Individual Empowerment***

According to Sadan, empowerment is a process of *a transition from “a state of powerlessness to a state of more control over one’s life, fate, and environment*” (Sadan, 2004, p. 13). In the case of RCSC, the individual empowerment goes to the fact that netizens, with the use of Internet, became more active in exposing, criticizing, and questioning the RCSC’s activities and finally forcing it to make changes.

Individual empowerment “*focuses on what happens on the personal level in the individual’s life"* (Sadan, 2004, p. 75)*.* In the RCSC case, especially for those donators, the netizens generally noticed that their money might not be used properly by the RCSC because it lacks transparency. What is worth noting is that in the Guo Meimei incident, although no evidence directly shows she has engaged in any mismanagement or corruption of the RCSC, the netizens kept fiercely criticizing Ms Guo and RCSC. The reasons are complex but closely related to the individual cognition on the environment. First, it is the social disparity amplified by Guo Meimei that irritates the netizens. According to figure 4(see page 26), the largest proportion of Internet users are with income less than 5000 yuan/month whereas Ms Guo is companied by fancy cars and luxurious handbags, therefore, the sentiment of anti-the rich arouses. Second, since the RCSC lacked transparency and Guomeimei titled herself the manager of RCSC-related entity, the netizens automatically relates Ms Guo to the suspicious misuse of the donations to finance her extravagant lifestyle. Third, the commercialized operation of the RCSC aggravates the netizen’s suspicion over the non-profit orientation of the RCSC.

Hence the individual empowerment in this case is that, netizens have become well aware of the importance to utilize the Internet as a empowering instrument to gain information, to question the unfairness, and to make a change in their behavior.

What we have observation is that the RCSC had made changes in their operation such as installing an online information release platform and repeatedly explaining to the public in the Internet. What is more, the environment has been changed because more and more attention is paid to the effective management of such philanthropic organizations including the RCSC itself. In this sense, the netizens sufficiently act as human agents “*to influence the environment and to be able to bring about change*.” (Sadan, 2004, p. 146)

***Community empowerment***

The community empowerment brings about another perspective to observe the cyberspace. According to Sadan, *“community empowerment is the increased control of people as a collective over outcomes important to their lives”* (Sadan, 2004, p. 85)and it“*emphasizes the collective processes and the social change.”* (Sadan, 2004, p. 75) Taking this definition as a point of departure, we find it is highly relevant to the case of RCSC crisis.

Discussion in the cyberspace is a process that starts with individual netizens and later evolves into a collective action that is sufficiently exemplified by the thousands of “thumb down” emoticons and “get away” characters simultaneously appearing on RCSC’ Weibo. Within this process, a virtual community engaging netizens in discussing on the RCSC crisis somehow emerges. This community, leading by the aggregation of the public opinion, shows its muscle to the RCSC with a solid demand on transparency and a thoroughly investigation on the Guo Meimei incident.

The community empowerment here results in multi-level outcomes. First, the RCSC’s credibility is seriously damaged thus any initiative and appeal of RCSC on its Weibo is always replied with suspicion and even mockery by netizens. Second, netizens turn to find alternative organizations to donate. One Foundation is the one recently gains much support and trust because of its emphasis on transparency and professionalism. The recent earthquake on April 20th witnessed that in 11 hours after the earthquake the One Foundation received donation of 22.4 million RMB whereas the RCSC only collected 142,843 RMB (Carter, 2013) .

Moreover, the community empowerment has the potential to bring about social changes, so in this case, what exact changes will take place? It is noticed that after the Guo Meimei incident, the Ministry of Civil Affairs was prompted to make amendment of laws and regulations concerning donations and voluntary services (Sauer, 2013). It seemingly reveals the state’s flexibility in adjusting itself to the demand of the people. What is more, the One Foundation’s case is even more convincing as it successfully transformed to an independent NGO which enjoyed autonomy and legitimacy in China’s society.

As Sadan argues, the process of community empowerment is conditioned by the social structure which enables or limits it (Sadan, 2004, p. 147). In this case, since the community empowerment has not been hindered, it demonstrates that China’s social structure has a positive implication for social change.

***Professional practice***

The empowering professional practice highlights the importance of the professionals role and intervention methods used in this process of empowerment. In the case of the RCSC crisis, the professional practice mainly manifests in One Foundation’s structural and operational features.

One Foundation’s board of directors includes elites from various circles. Most of them are influential businessman such as Jack Ma, Niu Gensheng, and Wang Shi (One Foundation offical website, 2013). With their contribution, One Foundation is run along with professionalism. Moreover, the professionalism in return ensures the transparency. It has been closely collaborating with independent audit companies such as KPMG and Deloitte and disclosing financial report annually, so the transparency has been secured.

Consequently, donors recently have shunned the official charity namely the RCSC and chosen to donate to dependable private charity like, the One Foundation. “This is proves the fundamental importance of integrity, be it business or charity.” (Feng Qing Yang, 2013)

* + 1. Sub-conclusion

In the area of philanthropy, the cyber-public sphere demonstrates strength in facilitating the open discussion of philanthropic issues, and with the empowerment of the Internet, the individual and the society are becoming powerful to make changes in its relation with the state. Concerning the philanthropic civil society, a more active role of NGOs embedded with transparency and professionalism is needed by the state in order to facilitate the social development.

## Analysis on anti-corruption campaign online

This section will have a close look inside the anti-corruption campaign via the cyberspace. Focusing on the specific case of the People’s Supervison Network and the people involved will provide a comprehensive understanding over the interaction between the individual, civil society, and the state in the area of anti-corruption.

* + 1. Autonomy or dominance

It is witnessed that a cyber-public sphere has emerged in China, however, the state’s penetrating force still remain (see page 38). However, in the case of Zhu Ruifeng’s anti-corruption campaign via the Internet, the high efficiency and the clear-cut outcomes in the appearance would strengthen the net enthusiastic viewpoints. However, the obvious should always be testified then proved.

First of all, according to the People’s Supervison Network, it was established and authorized in Hongkong, a special administrative region of the PRC. Located outside of China’s mainland, its accessibility to netizens there could not be ensured. On the 29th of April, Zhu posted on his Sina Weibo (Zhu, 2013) that the website had adopted a new domain in responding to blocking by network operator of one city. Zhu did not clarify which city it was but he continued to say the website had been changing URL and machine room constantly to avoid inaccessibility. Second, although Zhu first published the sex video of Lei Zhengfu on the webiste of the People’s Supervison Network, but it was only when the video went on Weibo then it was given mass attention. Hence, the website itself, as a cyber-public sphere, is weak in encouraging public participation.



Figure Zhu Ruifeng’s post on SinaWeibo (Zhu, 2013)

It seems that Zhu and the medium Weibo are the main actors in this case. Zhu identified himself as a citizen journalist and in the recent Lei Zhengfu scandal successfully got 11 involved officials disciplinarily punished. However it is not credible enough to come to a conclusion that the empowered individual enjoys the autonomy to participate in such an anti-corruption.

Apparently, the state plays an important role in this case, and commentators tend to address it more as a political issue rather a simple anti-corruption case. One argument holds that after the CPC leadership transition in November 2012, “new leadership needed to raise public support and to promote its legitimacy despite the risk of reducing the whole Party’s prestige” (Hunaneagle.com, 2013). While the State-run Xinhua news agency reported that the high efficient exposures of official wrongdoings was helped and supported by new central government who was determined to combat corruption (Xinhua, 2012). Consequently it is doubted that what the outcome of Zhu’s campaign would be if the power transition did not take place. Therefore, the state’s will and support, which reversely could be regarded as another form of penetration, effectively dominated this issue in this specific case. Put it in another way, what this thesis has found interesting in this case is that the individual autonomy to effectively counter corruption in the cyberspace is backed up by the state power, but in essence, this kind of autonomy is yet differentiated from that of the Habermasian which is developed from a bottom-up approach. However, in this case, it is a mixture of bottom-up and top-down, and to large extend is subject to the state agenda transition.

* + 1. Individual empowered but civil society constrained

It is acknowledged in this thesis that the Internet is an empowering medium. In this case, the individual empowerment is especially revealed by Zhu Ruifeng. By tactically utilizing the social media, he has become well known to the public and had more control over the current situation. As an investigate journalist, regardless whether it is self-defined or truly he is, he must has acquired certain professional skills or expertise in muckraking. In the scope of empowerment theory, the individual empowerment and empowering professional practice have demonstrated in this case.

As to community empowerment, the prosperity is dim. The community empowerment is oriented toward social changes and structural aspects, which is hard to achieve in this case. Although this anti-corruption campaign and the fruitful outcomes are highly praised by netizens and media, it does only “create an illusion of victory” (Hunaneagle.com, 2013). The campaign does not necessarily bring about fundamental changes to the anti-corruption system. The individual involved in this campaign can only function well when the government pays attention to it. Even in the micro-blog which is relatively harder than the traditional media for the state to control, censoring and filtering still work. The anti-corruption campaign online does not have the power to influence the structure of the state, it functions just as “throwing a stone across the wall” (Hunaneagle.com, 2013) and “which unlucky guy on the other side will be hit” (Hunaneagle.com, 2013) remains a mystery to us. Hence, the empowerment process in this case is constrained into an individual level.

As analyzed in the former section, we believe the individual’s autonomy is backed up by the state’s will. Hence, the community is not needed for the individual to seek collective collaboration to further the campaign. The reason behind is simple: the social structure does not enable the process to empower such a community. What we have come to a sub conclusion is that the China’s society is a structure of state over society, which partially allows for autonomy but mostly remains dominated by the state. In this sense, we do not see the possibility of the civil society’s role in such an activity. Even the People’s Supervision Network itself cannot function well as a civil society in the anti-corruption campaign in China.

* + 1. Sub-conclusion

The individuals play an important role the anti-corruption campaign in the cyberspace in China. But it is not the fully realized autonomy that makes netizen’s participation function, it the state’s dominance that deliberately cultivate such participation within its own purpose and agenda. Individuals may have the great opportunity to participate but do not have the power to fundamentally change the social structure, hence the community empowerment is hard to achieve thus the civil society in the area of anti-corruption is hindered. Since it is an issue concerning politics, the anti-corruption is carefully managed by the state.

# Conclusion

As a deductive research, this thesis applies two theories, one is the Habemas’s public sphere and the other is Empowerment theory conceptualized by Elisheva Sadan. These two theories are used to guide the analysis in order to draw an answer to the problem formulation：***How does cyberspace influence the development of civil society in China after the year 2008?*** Besides, a section of background information and two cases compose the empirical data part. The background information aims to present an overview of the facts and statistics of the internet development in China, and the two cases e are used to clearly examine the two sub questions:

* ***Will cyberspace in China function well to create a public sphere which has the potential to facilitate the civil society development?***
* ***As an empowering medium, will cyberspace to certain extent change the status quo of state’s penetration on China’s civil society?***

With the direction of theory and problem formulation, the analysis has been conducted and with findings that could precisely answer the research problem I hereby conclude this thesis as follows:

The Internet empowers the netizens with right of information, right of expression and right of action, however, it also facilitate the government control and surveillance in the Internet. The cyberspace has constituted a cyber-public sphere in which participation may subject to state penetration that is intangible but still powerful. The cyberspace in China reflects a transition from the unity of state and society to a structure of state over society, which results in a more dynamic and interactive relation between the state and individual and leave the room to the growth of civil society.

The cyber-public sphere has emerged in China but its strength to facilitate the development of civil society much depends on context and areas. In the area of philanthropy, the cyber-public sphere demonstrates strength in facilitating the open discussion of philanthropic issues, thus the voices and actions that promote the transparent and professional NGOs are promoting the civil society to grow in order to facilitate the social development left behind by the polarized economic development. Whereas in the area of anti-corruption, which is more politics-oriented，civil participation is encouraged and deliberately cultivated by the state as an apparatus to fulfill its own agenda, hence it is subject to state power, and the civil society is not seen possible to function in this area.

The penetration of state over the society remains strong, but since the Internet has more and more demonstrated its empowering strength, the state has changed its tactics, in area such as philanthropy, the penetration is loosened but in the area of anti-corruption, the penetration is even more influential. Here we assure that in recent China the civil society will not enjoy full autonomy and be free from state penetration, but the way of it has been changed to be more intangible and flexible.

So how does the cyberspace exactly influence the development of civil society in China?

Firstly, cyberspace brings a sense of citizenship to the individuals by empowering them with right of information, right of expression, and right of action, this makes the civil society a relevant issue for discussion in society.

Secondly, cyberspace brings about changes in the way of state penetration. This makes those in-agenda civil society organizations to grow and function as a complementary apparatus to facilitate social development.

Thirdly, cyberspace intensifies the dynamic interaction between the individual and the state. Hence it leaves the room and potential for the civil society to emerge in-between.

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