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THE INTERNET'S ROLE IN PROMOTING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN CHINA AND SINGAPORE: A CONFUCIAN VIEW

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Abstract: This paper discusses the Internet's role in promoting civic engagement in Asian countries. China and Singapore were selected because they have similar ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds. This paper concludes that the Internet has a limited role in promoting civic engagement due to Internet censorship and people's political attitudes, which are deeply rooted for Confucian cultural reasons. Moreover the Internet censorship does not bother people in China and Singapore. The argument presented in this paper differs from previous studies that focused only on the Internet censorship system and ignored the cultural and socio-historical dimensions. The paper argues that the cultural and socio-historical dimensions should be considered when studying censorship.

Keywords: internet, civil society and engagement, China, Singapore, Hong Kong

Introduction

The Internet breaks down the wall between people across the world. Before the arrival of the Internet, it was difficult for people to know what was happening in other cultural groups or other societies. For instance, people in Japan could only know what was happening in the United Kingdom from traditional mass media, such as newspapers, magazines, and news reports. In the era of traditional mass media, the media was the only accessible source of information for people. However, one of the problems with traditional mass media is the lack of interaction. People could not convey their feelings back to the mass media. Some scholars describe this phenomenon as one-way communication (Bandura, 2001; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This situation could only be solved when the Internet appeared in the world.

Technological advancement has been rapid since the end of the 20th century. The emergence of the Internet appealed to many countries in the world. Many countries became connected to the Internet in the 1990s. For example, in China the Internet was introduced in 1994 (Yang, 2009a). The Internet is shaping both civil society and civic engagement. Thanks to the technological advancement, the Internet has become popular in the 21st century.

The invention of the smartphone has made it easier for people to connect to the Internet. The creation of social media websites and communication tools, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, means people can share news anytime and anywhere and respond immediately by making comments on these platforms. This two-way communication (or online-offline reactions) also encourages civic engagement, as people can engage in social issues more easily by discussing social matters or even gathering people to join and take part in social movements on the Internet.

China and Singapore were the earliest countries to connect with the Internet in Asia. China and Singapore introduced the Internet in 1994 (Peng & Berlinda, 1997; Yang, 2009a). In this article, we need to ask one question: Can the Internet promote civic engagement in these two Asian Confucianism countries after a quarter of a century? In the 2000s, academics believed the Internet would become an effective tool to challenge authoritarian regimes and promote civil society development. Yang (2009b) was quite optimistic about the development of Chinese Internet civil society. He believed the Internet would help the growth of Chinese civil society. Yang (2009b) also pointed out that China's diversified social structure would strengthen the market and civil society, and continue to influence the government's policies. The Internet is a more convenient way for civil organisations to promote public discourse. In a speech in 2000, President of the United States Bill Clinton argued that the growth of the Internet would make China a more open society like the United States, and he said that 'In the new century, liberty will spread by cell-phone and cable modem' (Clinton, 2000).

However, the role of the Internet in promoting civil society in Asia may be overestimated. First, we need to understand what civil society is. There is much controversy over the definition of civil society, and there is no agreed definition (Beck, 1992; Kaldor, Anheier & Glasius, 2003). Simply speaking, civil society includes many areas of social life, including the economic sphere, cultural activities, and political communication (Held, 1987). Although there is no specific definition of civil society, the most recognised characteristic of civil society is that it operates from 'the bottom to the top' and is 'the people's initiative'. As Habermas (1996) commented, civil society is a network of associations that aims to achieve checks and balances and minimise intervention from the state, market, and power elites. Therefore, civil society should be bottom-up, voluntary, and non-governmental.

There are two reasons why the Internet is a difficult means of promoting civil society in Asia, and these have rarely been discussed in the Western academic world. First, Asia lacks a bottom-up political culture. Under Confucianism, politics operates from top to bottom, and ordinary people just follow the elite. Because of the lack of a bottom-up political culture, civil society is difficult to achieve. This will be discussed later in this article. The second reason is Internet political censorship. Western views on censorship are largely critical and negative. One non-Western country that is often used to explore the censorship system is China – widely regarded as an authoritarian country with one of the most complex, strict, and comprehensive censorship systems in the world. Internet censorship practices in China are complex and widespread. Academic research and media reports have studied the various censorship methods of the Chinese government and the techniques used by Chinese citizens to subvert them. However, little attention is paid to understanding how Chinese citizens view censorship in daily life. Kou et al. (2017) are among the few and have pointed out that people

in China agree with internet censorship and believe that internet censorship is necessary because it is undertaken by the government to protect citizens.

This idea may be hard to understand in the Western world because politics in the Western world is often bottom-up and because of 'the consent of the governed' concept existing there. However, this is not the case in Confucian society in Asia. Historically 'God's mandate' existed in ancient Asia, just like in Europe. However, in Europe after the Age of Enlightenment, God's mandate became history, and many European countries became constitutional monarchies, even abolishing the royal family and establishing a republic. But in Asia, which did not have an Enlightenment, people still have a strong conception of God's mandate. For example, the emperor in Japan is still called Tennō (天皇, literally God-Emperor) to this day, and has supreme status in the country, despite the Allied forces headed by the United States having abolished many of the Tennō's powers after the Second World War. While in China, the last dynasty collapsed in 1911 and it had no Enlightenment either.

In some Asian countries, the phenomenon of people supporting Internet censorship is precisely a consequence of Confucianism. This article will use two classic cases as examples to discuss this relationship, which is rarely discussed in the Western academic world. Besides the frequently discussed authoritarian (or totalitarian) China, this article also uses Singapore as an example because the situation in Singapore is similar. Although Singapore has a democracy, the People's Action Party (Lee Kuan Yew's party) has dominated Parliament since 1965, when it became an independent country. In recent years, the People's Action Party government has frequently passed Internet censorship bills, and these bills rarely attract much opposition in Singapore (Sriramesh & Rivera-Sánchez, 2006). For example, the People's Action Party government passed the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act in 1975 to limit the circulation of foreign printed media. The Singapore government recently drafted the 'Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill' on 1st April 2019, submitted it to Parliament for deliberation, and passed the legislation on 8th May 2019. The bill gave the Singapore government the power to order social media such as Facebook to delete content that the government judges to be 'false' (The Republic of Singapore, 2019).

Case study 1: Jasmine Revolution in China

The Chinese Jasmine Revolution occurred in February 2011. It was inspired by the Jasmine Revolution, a series of anti-government protests held in Tunisia. The Chinese Jasmine Revolution aimed to express dissatisfaction at the current authorities and urge the Chinese government to speed up the political reform.

The revolution in China started with an anonymous person who started a campaign on *Boxun.com*, a website operated by overseas Chinese in the United States. The protest organiser wanted to challenge the accountability and transparency of the Chinese government by copying Tunisia's movement in China. This idea was quickly spread on Twitter and the other overseas online platforms. The protest initiator kept making suggestions to participants through online platforms. For example, the initiator suggested holding protests in Wangfujing and 13 selected cities every weekend; people should shout out slogans during

the protests. The initiator also suggested some designated slogans for participants (Kennedy, 2012).

However, the outcome of the protest was not as satisfactory as predicted – fewer than 1000 people attended; many residents in Wangfujing knew nothing about the protest. Meanwhile, the authorities sent out over 1000 police officers to suppress the protest, and the term 'jasmine' was soon blocked on Sina Microblogs (the Chinese version of Facebook) in the afternoon (Sullivan, 2012). Overall, the scale of the Jasmine Revolution in China was small; many people knew nothing about it because of the information censorship on the Internet carried out by the Chinese authorities (Franceschini & Negro, 2014; Sullivan, 2012). China's Jasmine Revolution only lasted for one month, from 20th February to 20th March, and it could not continue due to internet censorship and suppression by the authorities.

Through the case of the Jasmine Revolution in China, we can observe that the role of the Internet to promote civil society is limited in China. Although someone kicked off a movement on different online forums, the government soon blocked the posts and censored all related websites; people could not search for any keywords relating to the event on the blog spheres, like Jasmine and Wangfujing. Besides censorship on the Internet, the government also controlled the mass media. The police monitored foreign reporters, who could not do interviews without applying for permission.

Case study 2: Amos Yee in Singapore

There are some similarities between China and Singapore. In Singapore, 76.2 per cent of citizens are Chinese (Singapore Department of Statistic, 2015). The political and cultural attitudes in Singapore are similar to in China – conservative. As there is a strong Chinese culture in Singapore, it is reasonable to use Singapore as a case to study whether the Internet can promote civic engagement.

2015 was a sad year overall for Singaporeans. Although it marked the Republic's 60th anniversary, founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew passed away in late March 2015. Soon after the death of founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Amos Yee, a Singaporean teenager and YouTuber, uploaded a video named 'Lee Kuan Yew is Finally Dead' on YouTube to criticise Lee.

In the video, Amos Yee linked Lee Kuan Yew with Jesus and pointed out that they were dictators. Yee also criticised Lee's administration by posting an offensive picture showing Lee Kuan Yew and British Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher having anal sex together (CNN, 2015). Amos Yee was arrested soon after posting the video on YouTube, and charged with obscenity, insulting communication, and hurting the feelings of Christians (CNN, 2015). The court found Yee guilty and sentenced Yee to jail for four weeks (The New York Times, 2015). The people of Singapore did not feel sorry for Amos Yee being sentenced to prison and believed that censorship was necessary. Singaporeans generally believed that criticism of the government should be avoided. As *The Straits Times* (2015) reported, Yee 'was largely slammed by netizens over the video'. Singaporean actors Gurmit Singh and Quan Yi Fong blamed Yee's parents, saying that 'parents are supposed to be there to guide the child' and Yee's parents 'should have brought him to see a doctor' (AsiaOne, 2015).

Civic engagement is weak in Singapore; we seldom hear about people protesting and criticising the Singaporean government. In 2014, a Singaporean social activist Roy Ngerng was found guilty of criticising Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong online and gathering people to protest against the Central Provident Fund on the Internet (Agence France Presse, 2014). Similar to Yee's case, the general Singaporeans found Ngerng deserved to be jailed. Therefore, some scholars such as Sriramesh and Rivera-Sánchez (2006) believe that Singaporeans do not dare to criticise the government publicly. It is, therefore, questionable whether the Internet can encourage civic engagement in Singapore.

However, is this really because, as Sriramesh and Rivera-Sánchez said, people do not dare to criticise the government publicly? In an interview with *Channel News Asia* (2015), Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated that the 'governing authorities are open to criticism', but that the 'ability to exercise the freedom of expression comes with limits'. Although the Singapore government is authoritarian and will prosecute those who instigate the masses on the Internet, the Singapore government accepts criticism due to pressure from elections and their voters. Since Singapore's ruling party has to accept criticism from the public because of the elections, why do citizens still support the censorship of online criticism of the government? This article argues that apart from the authoritarian regime, the influence of Confucianism is a factor.

Discussion: The problems of promoting civic engagement with the Internet in China and Singapore

China and Singapore joined the World Wide Web in 1994, making them the earliest countries in Asia to connect to the World Wide Web (Peng & Berlinda, 1997; Yang, 2009a). In China, the development of civic engagement has been rapid after the Tiananmen Incident in 1989. The types of civic engagement are diverse, including labour, environment, consumer rights, and political rights (Yang, 2009a). With the development of the Internet and other new communication technologies, people can engage in these movements easily. However, due to censorship and traditional beliefs, civic engagement is still weak in China.

While in Singapore, the Singapore Government was the first government to establish an official government website in the world (Srivastava & Teo, 2005). Some Singaporeans hope that civil society can be nurtured in the cyber world. However, as Ortmann (2012) commented, civil society in Singapore is weak as people do not have a tradition of political participation. It is questionable whether the Internet can promote civic engagement and encourage people to discuss social issues. Why is the role of the Internet in promoting civil society weak in China and Singapore and disappointing people? The problem of the Internet in promoting civic engagement can be discussed in two aspects: the Confucian political order and censorship.

a. Confucian political order

Confucianism is the focus of this article. But what is Confucianism? Confucius (551 BC-479 BC) developed a comprehensive system of philosophy and ethics covering morality, politics, economics, family life, and education. Throughout the history of China, most dynasties

respected, emphasised, and developed Confucianism as the official ideology to regulate the activities of citizens and governments in the public and private spheres of social life. Confucianism continues to have a significant impact on the thinking and actions of Chinese citizens. Confucianism is conceptualised by its five virtues: benevolence [rén 仁] (how people should express love and sympathy for others), righteousness [yì 義] (how one's thoughts and behaviours should conform to one's own beliefs, and that one should resist temptation), propriety [lǐ 禮] (how to respect the behavioural norms that maintain the social structure, such as hierarchy), wisdom [zhì 智] (how a person should develop knowledge about what is right and wrong), and fidelity [xīn 信] (how one's own words and deeds support the collective good).

Confucianism centres on personal virtues, adopts a paternalistic governance model, and relies on political leaders to lead by example to reflect virtues. Confucianism entrusts the government with considerable responsibilities and obligations and emphasises that the government should govern by virtue and put the people first. Confucianism has had a significant impact on the political beliefs and values of contemporary Chinese citizens. Chinese citizens use Confucianism to understand politics and democracy as a paternalistic model (Shi & Lu, 2010). Confucianism also emphasises the stable hand of the elite in governance. Confucianism believes that the ability of the leader is more important than procedural arrangements such as fair elections. Confucianism limits the scope of ordinary citizens' political participation in conveying their concerns to political leaders. Political leaders should make decisions based on their own judgment. Ordinary citizens will only oppose the government in extreme situations, such as when political leaders significantly deviate from expected norms and Confucian virtues.

The traditional Confucian political order is an obstacle to civil society development (Metzger, 1993; Tong & Lei, 2013; Yu, 1993). As mentioned previously, civil society refers to a bottom-up political order in western tradition; civil society should be voluntary and bottom-up in order to minimise intervention from the state and market. However, in ancient China, people truly believed in the emperor and officials, based on their capability and morality; people did not dare to oppose the government (or the emperor). Yu (1993) believed that civil society is not possible in China, as Metzger (1993) echoed, the Confucianism idea is deeply rooted among the Chinese, making people desire a top-down political order. For example, *the Analects of Confucius Book 8* says, 'One should not discuss the affairs of an office one does not hold'. Professor Hsiao-Tung Fei, in his book *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*, also suggested the Differential Mode of Association by pointing out that the mode of association in China is all about selfishness and family interests, which is different from Western society:

> Selfishness is the most serious shortcoming of country people. That is the opinion of those intellectuals who advocate rural reconstruction. When we think of selfishness, we think of the proverb 'Each person should sweep the snow from his own doorsteps and should not fret about the frost on his neighbour's roof'. No one would deny that this proverb is one of the Chinese creeds. Actually, this attitude is held not only by country people but also by city people [...]
> The basic structure of Chinese rural society is what I have called a 'differential mode of association' [chàxù géjú 差序格局]. This pattern is composed of distinctive networks spreading out from each individual's personal connections. It is quite different from the modern Western

> organizational mode of association [tuánt ǐ géjú 團體格局]. In such a pattern, personal relationships depend on a common structure. People attach themselves to a pre-existing structure and then, through that structure, form personal relationships. The concept of the citizen, for example, necessarily follows the development of the state. (Fei, 1992, pp. 60, 70)

Table 1. Differences between Western and Chinese society in view of civil society

Western Society	**Chinese Society**
Bottom-up political order	Top-down political order
Organisational mode of association	Differential mode of association
To achieve 'checks and balances' and to minimise intervention from the state and power elites	To seek a good society, with the guidance of the state (e.g. People's communes [rénmín gōngshè 人民公社])
Universal, free will, voluntary	True intellectuals, and only they, should be allowed to take on politics and guide society

The comparison suggested by Metzger still applies to Chinese society nowadays. In China, many people still do not dare to criticise the government and the Chinese Communist Party; in Singapore, people always follow the direction of the government and the People's Action Party. Some scholars have commented that people do not dare to publicly criticise the Singaporean government in Singapore, even if they are dissatisfied, as they do not want to be prosecuted by the Singaporean Government (Ortmann, 2012, 2015a). The top-down political order strongly influences China and Singapore; thus, civic engagement and political participation are weak in both places. People rarely want to change the country themselves, but through the authorities; they believe the government will fix everything. Due to the lack of the tradition of bottom-up political participation, it is hard to encourage people to participate in social movements, even though the Internet provides a two-way, intense, and informative communication platform. The top-down political order in Confucianism contradicts the basic idea of civil society, making it difficult to achieve a civil society.

Yang (2019a) believes that China's civil society and the Internet are interdependent, and that the Internet can produce 'grassroots democracy'. However, China's civil society is entirely different from other places because China's market economy model is not entirely free, and there is no plural democratic system. These elements are necessary conditions for civil society affirmed by Western academia. Another point to note is that in Yang's discussion, the government is in a passive position, trying to control public opinion only when it is out of control. However, in reality, the Chinese government not only tightly controls public opinion, but also actively 'guides' it. Topics such as 'the Chinese Dream' and 'Anti-Corruption' are all actively guided by new media with official backgrounds, especially after Xi Jinping came to power. We must admit that such issues can indeed win the people's hearts, so that the government can get more support from the people to carry out more online propaganda.

China's active dominance of public opinion is a manifestation of the traditional top-down political structure. Faced with the government's propaganda machine, people rarely have negative feelings; many of them even often agree with the propaganda machine, resulting in minimal space for the practice of grassroots democracy.

A similar situation also occurs in Singapore. The top-down elite political structure has existed in Singapore for many years. As the People's Action Party has been in power for a long time, the People's Action Party has always mobilised the national propaganda machine to conduct political propaganda online and offline. Professor Yu Yingshi, a well-known historian and a Fellow of the American Philosophical Society, commented on the governing philosophy of the former prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, on 8th April 2015:

> At the beginning of 1980, Lee Kuan Yew had a plan to establish a Confucian ethics plan in Singapore. He believed that the Chinese needed social support for his politics [...] As a result of this mobilisation, his People's Action Party has indeed received the support of more than 2 million people [...] We must admit that although he opposes democracy, or even criticises democracy, he actually borrowed the form of British democracy to establish his country. He did not fight the world by force. The most important point is that he had a special situation when he founded the country. At that time, he initiated mobilisations to let people in the society follow him [...]
>
> The Singapore model is a political tool on the one hand and a reduction in the people's personal freedom on the other. This phenomenon does exist, but it was acceptable to everyone under the circumstances at the time. At that time, the majority of the Chinese believed that the country should be established first and the economy should be improved, so under these conditions they followed Lee Kuan Yew [...] The People's Action Party believes that the value of Asia is different from Western democracy and freedom from the West, but the country can be established by means of political unity and political control (Yu, 2015, pp. 151-155).

Owing to Singapore's weak opposition parties (although the government has never banned opposition parties from participating in elections), Singaporeans (especially Singapore Chinese) have had no opinion on governance for a long time, and the space for grassroots democracy is minimal.

b. Internet censorship

Internet censorship is enforced in both Singapore and China. The two countries have a similar purpose in enforcing Internet censorship: maintaining effective administration and political legitimacy. However, the reasons and approaches to censorship are slightly different in the two places.

In China, according to King, Pan and Roberts (2013), there are three types of censorship, which are the 1) Great Firewall of China, 2) keyword blocking, and 3) manual censorship. Most people believe that censorship in China aims to eliminate all negative comments towards the Central People's Government and the China Communist Party, in order to maintain legitimacy. However, King, Pan and Roberts (2013) discovered something different from our general view of censorship in China. King, Pan and Roberts (2013) tried to post political posts on over 1000 websites from January to July 2013, and kept tracking when and what type of posts were deleted because of the censorship. In the end they found that not all

the posts criticising the Chinese Government or the Communist Party were deleted; most of the deleted posts involved gathering people. This finding is crucial as it shows that the Chinese government somehow allows people to criticise the government, although this must be very minimal and controllable by the government. The primary purpose of censorship is not to eliminate criticism of the state, but to reduce the possibility of mobilisation and collective movements, which are likely to cause revolutions and damage the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party.

As for Singapore, the primary purpose is not suppressing collective movements, although Singapore wants to maintain legitimacy. Singapore is a multi-ethnic country with six ethnicities. When Singapore was still a part of the Federation of Malaya, Chinese and Malay always had severe conflicts. As a result, the Singaporean government needs to ensure harmony between each ethnic group, in order to maintain social order (Liu et al., 2002). Therefore, when the Internet was introduced into Singapore in 1994, the government had already set the rules. All racial, sexual, religious, terrorist, and ethnic related websites would be controlled or even banned (Lee & Kan, 2009)

The Singaporean Government also censors information which negatively affects the People's Action Party, the ruling party since the establishment of the Republic. The only purpose of this censorship is to maintain the People's Action Party's reputation to ensure the party can maintain its power. As mentioned in the previous part, the Singaporean government always prosecutes people who negatively comment on the government. This censorship and lawsuit discourage this civil society and civic engagement. The Singapore Government also suppresses collective movements by limiting protests in Hong Lim Park, a small park in Chinatown.

Internet censorship is not unique in Asia. It happens in other parts of the world as well, such as Cuba. Why is internet censorship in Asian Confucian countries different from that in other countries? This article suggests that the failure of the Internet in promoting civil society must combine with these two features: On one hand, the governments enforce censorship for political reasons. On the other hand, people do not resist, or they do not dare to resist, because of Confucian political culture. Since people look for a top-down political order, they might not think the political censorship imposed by the government is a problem. As long as there is social and economic stability, people are happy to sacrifice their political rights. Amos Yee and Roy Ngerng, as mentioned above, are an example, as in general Singaporeans found that they deserved to be jailed. This 'impose and accept' relationship is a chemical reaction and completely limits the role of the Internet and the overall civic development in the two countries.

From a Confucian perspective, we can understand this censorship system as government leaders making Internet censorship decisions for the public good. For example, the Great Firewall is the main technical means of restricting information access at the infrastructure level. It blocks foreign websites that the government considers dangerous, such as Facebook and Twitter, to regulate access and content, and to monitor citizens' Internet use. At the national level, the government controls the gateway to the international network and licences the operation of the Internet service providers. These paternalistic practices are manifested in several ways. For example, citizens must register with an Internet service provider using their real names (Liang & Lu, 2010).

Governments often cite practical reasons for implementing Internet censorship. For example, Singapore censors information on online platforms that may cause the public to panic. At the same time, the Chinese government has formulated censorship strategies that vary from region to region. For example, Bamman et al. (2012) researched China's practice of deleting content on social media. They found that Tibet and other remote provinces have stricter censorship, as the government believes that the regions are unstable.

Previous studies define censorship as a top-down suppression tool adopted by governments. However, there is very little research to understand how people view the Internet censorship system. Although in China, websites or software such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, and Whatsapp are banned by the Great Firewall of China, people can still use these websites or software through circumvention tools. However, a study conducted by Roberts et al. (2011) estimated that very few users use censorship circumvention tools – likely less than 3 per cent. Even if the Western apps and sites make it into China, they may face apathy from young people. Many Chinese feel that there is no need to use these websites. This is because China has corresponding software or websites to fulfil the roles of Facebook, Google, and Twitter, such as Weibo (the Chinese equivalent of Twitter), WeChat (the Chinese equivalent of Whatsapp), and Baidu (the Chinese equivalent of Google). Moreover, a lot of information on these Western websites is in English, so Chinese people have no interest or even ability to browse these websites.

Many young people in China have little idea what Google, Twitter, or Facebook are, creating a gulf with the rest of the world. Accustomed to the homegrown apps and online services, many appear uninterested in knowing what has been censored online. Recently, Chen and Yang (2019) conducted research and provided nearly 1000 students at two Beijing universities with free tools to bypass the censorship. They found that nearly half the students did not use them. Among those who did, almost none spent time browsing foreign news websites that were blocked. The research of Kou et al. (2017) also found that the online censorship system does not pressurise Chinese people, and Chinese people believe that they can still find information or communicate under the online censorship system. Kou et al. (2017) added that it is more important for the Chinese to maintain a harmonious and non-confrontational relationship with other people and the government; many interviewees even often cited Confucius to answer the questions. For example, 'one should not impose on others what he himself does not desire' (benevolence and righteousness) and 'we should maintain the social structure and support the collective good' (propriety and integrity) (Kou et al., 2017, p. 383).

The results of Kou et al. (2017) show that Chinese people have a high degree of tolerance and compliance with the online censorship system, which is in sharp contrast to the research that assumes that Chinese citizens should resist the online censorship system. In China and even Singapore, certain cultural and socio-historical dimensions existed before the censorship system, such as Confucian values and beliefs. Confucianism is the root cause of the failure of civil society in Asia, and the Internet censorship system is the 'catalyst' making the problem worse.

Confucianism also complements the Internet censorship system – under the long-term immersion of Confucianism, people have little opposition to, or even agree with, the Internet censorship system. Perhaps this is, as suggested by Fei (1992), out of selfishness –

people are just not bothered by the political and social problems, as long as their personal needs are fulfilled. These observations differ from previous studies that only focused on the Internet censorship system and ignored the cultural and socio-historical dimensions. If we understand these cultural and socio-historical dimensions, we can know why so many people in China or even Singapore still support the ruling party, and why so many netizens in China, no matter whether they are Internet commentators (also known as the 50 Cent Party [wǔmáo dǎng 五毛黨] in China)[1] or normal netizens, support the Chinese government.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the situation in China and Singapore using case studies to see whether the Internet can encourage civic engagement in Asian Confucianism countries. Although the Internet provides a two-way communicative platform for people to share information, discuss, and even gather people to participate in social movements, civic engagement in the two countries is still unsatisfactory.

Confucianism countries differ from western countries as they do not have a tradition of political participation. Therefore, it is hard to create mobilisation by transforming the power of the Internet into the actual world. Internet censorship also discourages people from knowing about social problems and participating in social movements. As a result, the development of civic engagement in both China and Singapore is limited. The Internet plays a limited role in promoting civic engagement in Asian Confucianism countries.

We should be aware that while this paper discussed the situation in Asian Confucianism countries, it cannot represent the whole of Asia. There are many exceptions in the region. For example, Taiwan, which has faced tremendous political reform and democratisation over the past three decades, and Hong Kong, which is a former British colony with many British values and cultures accepted by the people in Hong Kong (see Yu, 2020, 2021). Confucian-political features have, therefore, largely disappeared in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Furthermore, Hong Kong has also faced several political movements and changes over the past few years. The political interference from China means that Hong Kong people, young or old, are no longer political apathetic, and people are more eager to participate in politics, whether online or offline (see Ortmann, 2015b; Purbrick, 2019, 2020; Yu, 2019, 2022). There are two aspects to Taiwan and Hong Kong that we should be aware of – the Confucian-political feature is tarnished, and most importantly, there is no Internet censorship in Taiwan (Internet censorship have been reported since the enforcement of the Hong Kong national security law on 30 June 2020, see note for details).[2]

[1] This is a term for Internet commentators who manipulate public opinion and disseminate disinformation to the benefit of the governing Chinese Communist Party. The name is derived from the allegation that commentators are paid RMB 0.50 for every post by the Chinese Communist Party.

[2] In Hong Kong this was largely correct before 2020. The Hong Kong national security law, which came into force on 30 June 2020, gave in its Article 43 the government the power 'take down any electronic messages published' if the government officials think those messages are possibly endangering national security. Since then, the Hong Kong government has been blocking several anti-government or politically sensitive sites, including HKChronicles, Taiwan's Transitional Justice Commission, the official website of Democratic Progressive Party, Taiwan's Recruitment Centre of

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