New Media, Emerging Middle Class and Environmental Health Movement in China

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In October 2012, protests in China's south-eastern city of Ningbo in Zhejiang province erupted, born of environmental concerns and involving thousands of people. The opposition to the local government's decision to build a paraxylene facility (PX Project) at a petrochemical plant, to be operated by a subsidiary of state-run oil giant Sinopec, reached its climax on 26th and 27th, when riot police used tear gas and fire hoses against protesters, much of which was documented by smartphone-wielding demonstrators. The Ningbo government later announced a halt to the plan. Ningbo thus follows in the footsteps of Xiamen, Chengdu, Dalian and Shifang, where protests by residents have in recent years resulted in the cancellation of similar plans to build polluting plants.

The popular protests in Ningbo highlight big challenges facing China's leaders. First of all, while China has achieved astonishing economic development over the past three decades, the single-minded pursuit of economic growth with little regard for the environmental or social impact has given rise to dire environmental consequences and social unrest. According to the World Bank, up to 400,000 people in China die each year from outdoor air pollution, 30,000 from indoor air pollution, and 60,000 from water pollution (McGregor 2007). In 2011, the head of China's environmental agency, Zhou Shengxian, blamed the rising number of riots, demonstrations and petitions across the country on public anger at environmental hazards (Watts 2007). According to Yang Zhaofei, vice-chair of the Chinese Society for Environmental Sciences, the number of environmental protests has increased by an average of 29% every year since 1996, while in 2011 the number of major environmental incidents rose 120% (Liu 2013).

Secondly, until recently, most protesters were either downtrodden workers or farmers opposing job losses or land expropriation, or a rag-tag collection of dissidents. The protesters against environmental degradation are what many overseas media call urban 'middle class' citizens, the beneficiaries of the country's economic transformation in some of the country's most prosperous cities. China's urban middle class has protested on the streets only very rarely. They often chose to express their discontent online.

Finally, it must also be noted that these are people who have recourse to new media technologies and who can record and spread unfolding events there and then like wildfire over Chinese social networks. Gone are the days when news is released solely through the media outlets controlled by the Party-state.

Led by urban middle classes, and backed up by social media, recent protests have succeeded in immediate reversion of local government decisions. However, none have resulted in policy changes. Another noticeable feature is that protests escalated in 2012: prior to 2012, both officials and the public showed restraint. But in 2012, protestors are reported to clash frequently with the government and the police, with events turning increasingly violent. Questions that urgently need to be addressed are
    1. Why are the protests heading towards the more violent?

2. What role do middle class urban dwellers play in the protests?
3. What role does new media technology play?
4. Why do none of the protests result in policy changes?
5. What implications do these social-media backed-up urban mobilizations have on the changing relationship between the government and society?

Although scholars and observers of China have debated the implications of the emergence of middle class in China for political development, research into China's new rich has as yet been uneven and, perhaps necessarily, inconclusive (Goodman and Zang 2008). Likewise, the socio-political impacts of the Internet and the internet-enabled social media have been an important agenda in social research in recent years. Indeed economic development in the last three decades has created new conditions for mobilization and protests. However, few observers have looked at the impact of the joint forces together.

For a better understanding of the increasing environmental health movements in China led by the technologically empowered urban middle class, this chapter examines and analyses the protests against the expansion of a petrochemical plant in Ningbo in October 2012 as a case study. The researchers are fully aware of local dimensions to ideology and organization, economic structure, social history and cultural construction that play a significant role in social changes. We therefore do not claim that findings from this project can be generalized across China. However we do hope that the examination will shed light on important questions about technological change and China's social reform and development, thus offering us a better understanding of both the empowering effects and the limitations of ICT in urban mobilization. We also aim to contribute to the expanding literature on the growing middle class and their role in the changing relationship between state and society in China. The chapter first sets up the context by briefly reviewing the debate on the middle class and development of social media in China in general and the situation of Ningbo in particular. The analysis draws on the theories of Gramsci's hegemony (1971), and is based on in-depth interviews with relevant participants involved in different ways in the protests as the main research methodology. To get access to informants directly involved in the protests proved to be more difficult than the authors' anticipation. It was considered to be a highly sensitive topic by some, and for others it was a question of trying to avoid any potential risk. It was only through personal connections, to whom the authors are indefinitely grateful, and repeated reassurances that their names would not appear in any writing without their consent, that some of them finally agreed to be interviewed. The interviewees consist of two Weibo bloggers (one a member of the core group creating and sharing educational information on environment protection, and the other on the police 'black list' for 'inciting protests'), one media worker for Ningbo TV station, one official of a local university where students took part in the demonstration, one academic who also works for the Internet Development Centre in Ningbo, and two local university students who participated in the demonstration. Not all of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, as one respondent only agreed to be interviewed by telephone. However, they were all very open when interviewed, greatly helping the authors in their search for answers to the questions they set out to address at the beginning of the chapter. The interviews are contextualized by documentary data such as news reports, postings from participants and followers on online forums.

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The debate on the emerging middle class in China
Three decades of reform since 1978 in China have resulted in the growth of new social groups, leading to fundamental changes in the structure of Chinese society. This development has led to lively debates among scholars in China itself and internationally, with much of the focus on whether middle class is a truly existing entity and, if so, how do we identify it, and can it be seen as a force for democratization?

Discussions on the middle class in the Chinese academic community first began in the mid-1980s. The fact that so many translations are used for this concept, introduced from the West, signifies the complexity in defining the membership: zhong chan jie ceng 中产阶层, zhong chan jie ji 中产阶级, zhong jian jie ji中间阶级, zhong deng jie ji中等阶级, zhong ceng jie ji中层阶级. 'While most western social scientists, including academic economists, have been generally dismissive of the idea of a Chinese middle class in the last decade' (Cheng Li 2010a, 9) as they fail to identify a coherent identity, a class culture, and socio-political attitudes and values or class action, among Chinese researchers (even though the exact definition of the term is hotly contested) there is a general agreement now that this group exists and is expanding quickly (Rocca 2012, 18). Goodman (2008) refers to the new social groups as 'the new rich'.

This chapter follows the growing number of scholars who use occupation as a criterion for the middle class in China (Li 2006, 70), although the authors are in agreement with Goodman (2008) who rightly cautions researchers not to equate the new social groups with a universal middle class. A nationwide sample organized by the Institute of Sociology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) shows that as far as profession is concerned, five categories constitute the middle class: Party and state cadres (*guojia ganbu*), business managers, private entrepreneurs, professionals, and office staff (H. Li 2006, 70).

According to CASS, the population of the Chinese middle class would increase from about 36 per cent (474 million) of China's total population in 2012 to about 40 per cent of China's total population by 2020 (Tu 2012). This is a noteworthy phenomenon as Cheng Li (2010a, 3) points out: 'among the many factors shaping China's course of development, arguably none will prove more significant in the long run than the rapid emergence and explosive growth of the Chinese

middle class' as this transformation is likely to have wide-ranging implications for every aspect of Chinese life. Arguably the most important debate concerning the Chinese middle class is over the potential impact its development will have for China's political development (Li 2009; Li 2010b; Li 2012a).

The emergence of a middle class and democracy is a common category in political discourse. Lipset (1963), Huntington (1991) and Moore (2003), among many others, all emphasize from various analytical angles the vital role of the middle class in a democracy. Whether or not the Chinese middle class also carries democratic values is hotly contested.

According to Li (2012b, 92), liberal intellectuals in China thought the growth of this social group would bring about political changes. Accordingly, authorities have continued to deem the middle class a threat to the existing system - the term was almost prohibited from formal publications during 1990s, as it acquired political connotations during the 1980s when radical intellectuals were expecting a democratic movement, propelled by the rising middle class (Li 2012c). Many believe that, as in many societies, the size and characters of the middle class are critical for the establishment of a democratic political institution. The rational is simple: continued economic growth will make China more prosperous and thereby in turn boost further growth of the middle class. This growth will then lead to demands for democratic reforms because the middle class naturally wants a say in government (The Economist 2002). China's burgeoning middle class is therefore expected to hold the key to the future of the country as they become an increasingly significant force to shape China's future and help define its role on the world stage.

Overwhelmingly, however, others (Xiao 2003; Cai 2005; Li 2006; Goodman 2008; Chen and Dickson 2010) argue vehemently that, different from their counterparts in the West, these new economic elites do not support a system characterised by multiparty competition and political liberty, including citizens' right to demonstrate, partly due to their close political and financial ties with the state and partly due to their shared concern for social stability. As Li (2008, in Cheng Li 2010a, 9) has observed, it was the business community in China and their associates in the media that initially turned the idea of a Chinese middle class from an abstract academic subject to a hot topic throughout society. Since 2002 with Jiang's declaration at the Sixteenth National Party Congress that 'expanding the middle-level-income group' was one of the policy targets of the government, 'cultivating' and 'expanding' the middle stratum, as an income or consumer group but not a social group, have become a goal of social development the Chinese government pursues (Li 2012b). He also points out that the construction of a middle class had become a political project of the CCP long before Jiang's speech (Li 2006).

Perhaps An Chen's (2002) four-part answer is the most comprehensive to the question why the Chinese middle class does not like democracy: first, a significant number of middle class members are part of the political establishment. That is, the Chinese middle class is composed of not only intellectuals and professionals in private and foreign-owned enterprises, managers of small and middle-sized businesses, but also the middle and lower-level cadres under the payroll of the Party-state. They have been the major beneficiaries, as well as to a large extent the drivers of this massive transformation. Second, they tend to have 'an elitist complex which poses a psychological obstacle to their acceptance of political equality based on the one-citizen-one-vote principle.' Third, growing economic disparities and social tensions have often led them to form

alliances with the rich and powerful in the common cause of resisting democratization and averting the collapse of the regime.' And fourth, they tend to associate democracy with political chaos, economic break down, the mafia, and other social evils.

By the 1990s, most scholars had changed their stance, describing the middle class as a social stabilizer for political order, supporting the government's policies of economic reform and serving as a driving force for economic development (Li 2012c, 171). Although some recognize the differences between the middle classes themselves in socio-political attitudes, of whom a small radical segment could be quite critical to the Party-state and call for such structural transformation as democratization (like the Charter 08 event) (So and Su 2012), the middle class as a whole is thought to lack the political incentives to confront the existing political order. They are called "the vanguards of consumption and the rearguards of politics" (Goldman 1999).

In spite of different perspectives on the political implications of the middle class, both sides of the debate believe that the development of market economy has given birth to a growing middle class in China, which is different in many ways to the middle class in other countries. What is more, almost all of these studies acknowledge the inconclusive nature of their arguments and assumptions about the role of the Chinese middle class in the political development in China. The authors of this paper argue that when social and technological conditions change, the role of middle class can change too.

Empowerment of the state and society by social media in China

Almost 20 years after it went online, China today boasts the biggest population of "netizens" -- users of the Internet -- in the world. According to the latest report by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC 2013), the current total number is 591 million, with penetration rate standing at 44.1%. The capacity for instant communication and the rapid promulgation of large volumes of information provides Chinese netizens with opportunities for dissemination of information and discussions on social and political issues that are forbidden in other forms of media. There is a general consensus that the Internet in China, especially microblogging, has both expanded and altered the discursive terrain, allowing citizens to mobilize in new ways (Leibold 2011), as all recent urban environmental protests demonstrate. However, in many ways the development of social media also provides technological conditions for the Party-state to reach out to the most mobilized, informed and engaged segment of the population, to understand public opinion, to implement policies, and to monitor unresponsive public services or corrupt officials. It can serve as an important valve for monitoring and easing social pressures, in addition to being a new engine for economic growth.

Sina Weibo is China's equivalent of Twitter, and is the largest domestic microblogging (weibo) platform. It had 300 million subscribers as of February 2011 (Cao 2012), posting over 780 messages per second, according to company figures. The success of microblogging stems from the concise nature of this form of communication – online diary-style journal entries of no more than 140 Chinese characters. This 'quotation' style of information dissemination "is much faster and fits into the rhythm of modern life that makes people impatient with lengthy commentary" (Tong and Lei 2013, 294). Figures provided by CNNIC show that 56% of China's netizens are engaged in microblogging (CNNIC 2013). Perhaps of greater impact still, mobile Internet is highly utilized in China, with 78.5% accessing the Internet via their mobile phones (ibid.). The

microblog format on Sina Weibo allows each post to contain an accompanying image thumbnail, which can be either a still photograph or a small moving image file. These images can be easily expanded without leaving the newsfeed. As such microbloggers can easily use their mobiles to upload photos online, to be accessed, commented on, or forwarded within seconds. Additionally, the explosion of the Chinese mobile phone industry since 1999 has led to the use of text messages (often referred to as SMS) as prominent carrier of non-official discourse (He 2008). Both these features have made governmental censorship of mass communication more difficult than ever on the one hand, and greatly distracted users from the official discourse on the other. Research by Youth Daily of China shows that 73% of users consider microblogs as an important source of information, and 56.5% of users count these sources as trustworthy (Synthesio 2011).

As microblogging websites facilitate the rapid exchange of information between millions of users, removing offending posts from microblogs is literally 'closing the stable door after the horse has bolted'. That means even when an original post is deleted, its traces may already have spread through the network, via a rapid system of reblogs and comments. Such information is virtually impossible to delete in its entirety.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has gone to great lengths to build a highly regulated environment to ensure economic growth while maintaining the existing political and social order. In doing so, it has constructed one of the most sophisticated Internet filtering and monitoring systems in the world (Cherry 2005; Esarey and Xiao 2011; J. Zhao 2009; Wu 2009). However, censorship is only one side of the coin. In the wake of increasing social unrest fuelled by online activity, the Chinese authorities have also begun to utilize Weibo as a more direct and effective platform to send out its messages to 'fight fire with fire'. During the Ningbo protests, for instance, while Sina Weibo users were unable to upload photos from the protests to the site from local IP addresses, with attempts met with this message: "20021 transmitted contents is illegal," on October 29, 2012, a message also appeared at the official social media account of the Ningbo Public Security (宁波公安), Ningbo Police, urging citizens not to disrupt 'public order'.

A recent newspaper report claims that the Chief of Propaganda in Beijing has issued a directive "to mobilize the city's combined force of over 2 million propaganda workers in opening accounts on microblog sites to spread 'positive energy'" (Kennedy 2013). It is also known that the Public Security Bureau has already set up more than 4,000 official micro-blogs on the Sina Weibo service, and around 5,000 police officers have their own microblogs (Zhang and Shaw 2012). This is in addition to the countless members of the Internet commentators who receive remuneration from the Chinese authorities to shape online public opinion (ibid.). In their interaction the advent of social media has empowered both the society and the state.

Protests in Ningbo

Ningbo, one of the most prosperous eastern coastal cities in China, is known for its entrepreneurial spirit. The rapid development of the Internet in the city speaks of its prosperity: according to the Ningbo Internet Development Blue Book 2012 (CNNB 2012), the netizen population in Ningbo is 5.96 million, with the penetration rate at 59.2%, more than 15% higher than the average penetration rate in the whole country, and 3.1% higher than the average in Zhejiang province. The Blue Book also shows that 56.7% of the Internet users are also Weibo

users and 81.5% of them access Weibo via their mobiles. Interestingly statistics from Sina also show that government organisations using Weibo rate highly in Zhejiang province (ibid.).

The China's environmental activists tend to be educated, and in many cases are members of the middle class by profession. It is therefore unusual that Ningbo's protests turned violent, involving riot police using tear gas, fire hose and police arresting protesters. Prior to the protests in 2012, very few Ningbo residents had engaged in environmentalism. According to Ni (2012), Ningbo citizens "are not politically demanding; given that they've been through extensive industrial expansion and pollution".

Interviews revealed that most Weibo bloggers in Ningbo learned about the harmful effects the PX project could bring to the environment through posts circulated during anti-PX protests in Xiamen in 2007 and Dalian in 2011. Only as they searched the Internet for more information did they also learn, much to their surprise, that there was already a PX project in the district of Zhenhai, just 30 kilometres away from the city centre of Ningbo. However, their real concerns started when they learned about the forthcoming expansion of the petrochemical plant in Zhenhai. Their concerns worsened as a series of fires broke out in the area of the petrochemical plant, all in the first half of 2012, with some Weibo bloggers reporting that the toxic smell from the petrochemical plant increased in the evenings. While bloggers were greatly engaged in heated discussions about the further harm the expansion of the PX project could bring, officials chose to keep quiet on this matter. As the expansion date approached, microbloggers had an increasing sense of urgency about the hidden risks. They posted long Weibo entries (in order to write more than 140 characters microbloggers convert the extra words into a picture) demanding for transparency, truth and accountability for the environmental impact assessment process. As the number of posts soared, the Ningbo Environmental Protection Bureau finally posted some figures on Sina Weibo. By then, microbloggers had reached a consensus that the expansion project poses a high risk to the local environment and that the authorities had not released all the information the public needed to know.

According to one of the interviewed microbloggers, the online discussions had been 'academic'. They were led by those who belong to the middle class elites who have received education above university level and have a profession. They are mostly in their 40s or 50s, some in their 30s with a child of four to five years of age. They all have a strong sense of pride for their hometown, which also emports a sense of responsibility to stop the city from further environmental deterioration. They create and share educational information on issues that may have a direct impact on their health. Before the demonstrations broke out, they had been seeding Weibo with their concerns about the toxic side effects of the PX plant. However, they did not promote taking to the streets, nor, in fact, did any one of the core members participate in the weeklong protests. Two reasons prevented them from going offline to the street: first, it was not necessary, as they had not exhausted all the means to achieve their goal. Second was the fear for the consequences of taking a lead in the street protests. In his book on public opinion and political change in China, Tang (2005) shows that the Chinese leadership uses three basic techniques of repression, compensation, and scapegoating to handle popular protests. The leadership can repress popular protest by arresting the organizer, satisfy public demands at least partially through compensation, or replacing the responsible official, if necessary. 'We are old enough to know what can happen', the micro-blogger said. Many of the leading microbloggers in this matter therefore proactively

avoided going to the streets. And they were right: during and after the protests some of the microbloggers were detained by the police for hours for 'inciting' citizen complaints and environmental protests in the street. The interviewed microblogger stated that he and his friends were highly suspicious of the police's intention to use microbloggers as scapegoats. In her late 20s and having received her post-graduate studies education overseas, Miss X was on the Ningbo police's 'black list' and was banned from accessing the blog site for some time after her post questioning the necessity of the expansion of the chemical plant was reblogged hundreds of times. However, she confessed that although she hated to see her hometown being ruined by environmental hazards, she would 'be more careful' if anything similar happens again in the future, for fear of being watched all the time and for losing her current job.

Who, then, were the protesters? On October 25th, farmers from Nanhong village in the district of Zhenhai gathered to protest in front of the Zhenhai District government, as the latter had agreed to relocate villagers living 1,600 metres away from the plant, but not those from Nanhong, which was slightly further away. Many users of social media in Ningbo such as Weibo and QQ made the protests and the causes known to more people and in the following days, the protests moved from Zhenhai to the Ningbo City Centre, joined by other nearby villagers and urban citizens in Ningbo, all sharing the same fear for the potential health risks should the planned paraxylene manufacturing facility leak toxins into surrounding rivers and coastal waters, much of which was learned from social media on smartphones, and the Internet. At 6:45 p.m. on October 28, 2012, suspension of the projects was formally announced through the official social media account of the Ningbo government (Ningbo Releases 2012).

Discussions – causes for protests in Ningbo

The outpouring of public anger at environmental deterioration in Ningbo is emblematic of the rising discontent facing Chinese leaders, who are obsessed with GDP growth at all cost. According to Ningbo's Government Report 2012 (Liu, 2012), Ningbo's GDP increased 7.8% in 2011, which was behind many other cities in the province of Zhejiang. As the growth of GDP is the only criteria for measuring the achievement of a city, Ningbo needed some big projects such as the expansion of chemical petrochemical plant to improve the situation, even though the municipal government was aware of the cost for the environment. There are two main causes for the protests in Ningbo.

First is the information control. In traditional Chinese society, information was strictly controlled by the government and the people was a passive audience, in that they knew only what the government wanted them to know and they had little freedom to express themselves. Contemporary China earns its reputation of being restrictive with information by blocking sites like Facebook and The New York Times. Such censorship leads not only to a lack of information (even though people do access these websites through proxies regardless), but also by manipulation of that information. For citizens, the cost of obtaining the truth involves verbal attack, government denial, and even bloodshed. For Chinese officials, concealing such information actually places their own authoritarian privilege at risk.

Ningbo's protests shows that, unless government officials open up channels for information, expression, consultation and participation for Chinese citizens, mass protests become their only

options as they have little access to information about industrial projects and are completely excluded from the decisions that affect their lives.

No less important is an institutionalized system to absorb public opinion, without which people can only resort to protecting their rights by taking to the streets and 'crying out loud.' In other words, the public's right to know and participate is also key to resolving disputes, but neither is taken seriously. For instance, Ningbo citizens were largely kept in the dark about the expansion of the petrochemical plant. According to Liu (2013), five years ago the government issued interim measures on public participation in the Environmental Impact Assessment process and regulations on the release of environmental information, in order to protect these rights. If these were implemented, there would, in theory, be no protests over the environment. But for whatever reason, five years later these rules still exist only on paper. Although the development of social media such as microblogs allow netizens to publish and share information, to express positions and representations of social groups, the channels of expression are not institutionalized and therefore there is no guarantee as to what opinions the authorities will choose to hear. Furthermore, without a solid institutional foundation, the opportunity for developing a flashpoint protest such as the ones in Ningbo into a sustainable movement for a liveable environment is greatly reduced. The government concessions can be revoked as soon as the protesters have dispersed and the microbloggers have moved on. Interviews with some officials and media workers in Ningbo, for instance, indicated that the Ningbo government would later restart the expansion project.

The role of social media and the middle class in Ningbo in halting the project

Urban mobilization through social media, especially microblogging, has been a key factor in all recent urban environmental protests. The development of the internet-enabled social media offers an alternative information channel, making it possible for people (for perhaps the first time) to have a tool to publish and access information. It also enables netizens to participate in discussions on issues that they have never been involved before. In that sense, it accelerates the political process and political agenda in general.

The case of Ningbo demonstrates that, while the effects of social media (and in particular the microblog format) are undeniable, it is not enough by itself to achieve significant social change in the Chinese environmental movement. They are important means of social change only when they are combined with other forces.

Neither can the middle class on its own achieve rapid social changes, as is shown by what happened in Ningbo. They prefer 'negotiation and rationality based ways of protest' (Rocca 2012) above other means. The media savvy members play a great role in educating others in defending their rights to a cleaner environment. Although they are not, in a strict sense, environmental activists – they do not organize protests – the loosely connected but otherwise active members of the Weibo community microblogging on environmental issues are nevertheless important actors publishing and disseminating information on environmental health issues. Other microbloggers access the information and then share them with their families, friends, colleagues and neighbours. By disseminating information, focusing on key and consistent elements of the issue and organizing discussion and interaction on the subject, Weibo blogging serves to establish the

common sources of the problem and to raise other people's consciousness of the issues at stake. It also helps to build up a sense of shared collective consciousness and understanding.

However, although they want to defend their rights, and therefore they are supposed to be democrats, they are rational and moderate not only by nature but also because they benefit a lot from the reform policy. They do not want to make trouble but just want to have a say in governance of the city. They prefer to work together with the government in changing the cities to a competitive, clean, modern and efficient city. After all, "the Party has adopted policies that are particularly aimed to boost the well-being of the new middle class" (So and Su 2012, 194). Consequently when they publish information on the Internet, it frequently leads to participation in a theoretical debate over environmental issues, rather than physical involvement in the protest. As one of the interviewed bloggers admitted reluctantly, without the offline large-scale street protests, the government would not have been so ready to stop the project, as online opinions and criticism would take a much longer time to have an impact.

Another important factor that contributes to the success in the case of Ningbo is the sensitive timing of the protests and the government's obsession with stability. One of the main reasons the Shifang and Dalian protests were victorious was because they attracted widespread attention via social media. However, in the case of Ningbo, the Ningbo authorities, having learned the lessons from Shifang and Dalian, pre-empted and stemmed the spread of the news by shutting down Ningbo's communications with the outside world. Moderators at Sina Weibo also frantically deleted undesirable content. It was even revealed by Jing Gao (2012) that journalists and celebrities, who have a wide following, had been told not to relay any message related to Ningbo's project. So why did the protests still lead to the halt of the project?

On November 8th the Party was to convene its 18th National Congress in Beijing. With this political event of huge importance to the Communist Party just around the corner, local cadres as well as national leaders were eager to ensure that China appeared to itself, and to the rest of the world, like a happy and harmonious place. Any outbreak of social protests and instability would be suppressed, with a goal of handling the protests locally. Both the official from a local university and a media worker in Ningbo confirmed that they got instructions 'from above' to stop students from participating in the demonstration and not to report on the event under the name of preserving social stability.

Protesters, according to participants at the demonstration, threw some water bottles without any other forms of violence. Photos circulated on Weibo at the time of protests also showed some participants picking up litter left by crowds, because 'they were determined to show to the government that they were not unruly troublemakers but law-biding citizens defending their rights' (Chen 2012). However, Riot Police still used tear gas, fire hose and arrests in order to disperse the big crowds quickly and to restore social order. When violence failed to stop protestors from going into the street, the government had to back down and announced immediate shelving of the project.

Furthermore, the concessions on the part of the government also illustrates that, while the Chinese Party-state is determined to sustain the regime at all costs and by all means, it is also obsessed with retaining power through legitimacy. One of the consequences of China's reform is

that it is moving away from totalitarianism towards hegemonic rule, which, according to Gramsci, is characterized by a combination of coercion and consensus, with the latter as the driving force in social and political relations (Yoko 2008). The Chinese leadership has realized the growing importance of the middle class. Politically, the Chinese government is strong enough to terminate the democratic process in response to an "unacceptable outcome." Despite daily headlines of protests, the CCP has so far been relatively successful at suppressing or redirecting potential opponents and at bringing new social forces into its fold. In the meantime, the party has co-opted elites by offering party membership to able persons from all walks of life. In so doing it has been constantly revamping and perfecting this regime, and progressively undergoing amplification and modernization since the early 1990s (Y. Zhao 2008, 61). It is true that in maintaining its domination, the CCP has often resorted to coercive measures. However, coercion alone cannot explain the Party's hold on power. After thirty years of reform, Chinese society has developed a momentum of its own and the Party-state has to rely on measures such as purchasing the allegiance of the middle class and changing the way it relates to its people by taking advantage of social media too to stay ahead of challenges.

Conclusion: joint forces at work

This chapter is mainly concerned with the role of new media and the middle class in urban mobilization. Disparities in wealth distribution, segregation and stratification have often accompanied processes of industrialization and urbanization (Tomb and Tang 2008). However, in the case of Ningbo the same concern for pollution brought together the urban middle class, who are otherwise in favour of 'quiet democratization', and the traditional farmers experiencing a process of urbanization, who embark on direct confrontations with the government, thus pushing it into responsive action. New media technologies serve as a platform where different social groups meet and become empowered, including the state in its adaptation to the new social and technological conditions. In other words it was when the middle class elites in Ningbo (empowered by new media and information), villagers directly threatened by the PX project, and urban middle class all came together, taking advantage of the political opportunity provided by the imminent 18th National Party Congress, that the government was forced to halt the expansion.

Finally it is important to point out that although like many other protests in other cities, the protests in Ningbo did not result in any policy changes at the time. However, it is the well-educated middle class who will continue to work on pushing the government in setting up mechanisms for public participation. They will also make the information occasionally released by the government more understandable. As one of the interviewed microbloggers repeatedly emphasized, there may be more information on environmental issues now thanks to the protests but it may not be accessible to many people because they could be too technical for the majority to understand. These well-educated elite middle class members, very often working in government agencies, will play the role of interpreting, analysing and commenting on the information, enabling others to get involved and participate. The case of Ningbo supports Cheng Li (2010a, 21) in that although the Chinese middle class is presently serving as a socio-political stabilizer, there is a possibility that it may become a de-stabilizing force on the socio-political order in the long run.

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