The Emergence of Cyber Society and the Transformation of the Public Policy Agenda-Building Process in China*

Zhu Yapeng and Joseph Y. S. Cheng

Abstract

The impressive spread of Internet use in China has led to the rapid emergence of a cyber society, which in turn affects public policy agenda setting in China, promoting political participation in the

ZHU Yapeng, Ph.D., is currently Research Fellow at the Chinese Center for Public Administration Research, and Associate Professor at the School of Government, Sun Yat-Sen University, Guangzhou, China. His research focuses on social policy, and housing research in China. Main publications include Housing Reform in China: Policy Innovation and Housing Inequality (Sun Yat-Sen University Press, 2007), “Urban governance, neoliberalism and housing reform in China” (With James Lee), The Pacific Review 19(1) (2006). His recent research project focuses on social policy and policy process in China.

Joseph Y. S. CHENG is Chair Professor of Political Science and Coordinator of the Contemporary China Research Project, City University of Hong Kong. He is the founding editor of the Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences and The Journal of Comparative Asian Development. He has published widely on the political development in China and Hong Kong, Chinese foreign policy and local government in southern China. He has recently edited volumes on Whither China’s Democracy?—Democratization in China since the Tiananmen Incident; and Guangdong—Challenges in Development and Crisis Management.

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policy-making processes in areas acceptable to the Chinese authorities. This article uses the Gandan Xiangzhao 肝膽相照 Forum (Gandan xiangzhao is a traditional phrase meaning strong mutual trust and support) as a case study to investigate its impact on public policy agenda building. The case study shows that the development of the Internet not only serves as an instrument facilitating participation in the public policy agenda-building process, potentially it also embodies the spirit of consultation, at least when it is not perceived as a threat to the party regime. This development articulates the demand for the democratization of agenda building in China, and to a limited extent public participation has been realized in implementation.

In the second half of the twentieth century, in line with the rapid development of the information technology (IT) revolution, the technological foundation and social structure of the entire world underwent dramatic changes. Since the mid-1990s, with the development and popularization of cyber technology, computerization and the application of the Internet have spread to almost every aspect of Chinese society; the emergence of a cyber society has become a well-recognized fact. The public policy arena is no exception. In terms of policy orientations, policy objectives setting, choice of policy instruments, definition of policy issues, style of policy making, and so on, significant changes have been taking place. To a certain extent, one may even consider these changes as “policy paradigm shifts.” In these processes, Internet forums as an important element of cyber society and one of its principal forms of existence have also been enjoying impressive development in China in recent years. Internet forums not only offer the community channels for mutual information exchange, and even interactive public space for interest articulation, they also raise the skills and effectiveness of the public’s participation and promotion of public policy agenda building and break the monopoly of the agenda-building processes, which has been in the hands of government officials, thus transforming the existing model of the processes.

This article adopts the policy agenda-building model of Roger W. Cobb, J.-K. Ross, and M. H. Ross as the analytical framework and applies it to a case study, the successful inclusion of the “Gandan Xiangzhao Forum” of the issue of discrimination against hepatitis B carriers into the public policy agenda. The case study illustrates the role of Internet forums in public policy agenda building in China and the impact