As China has the world’s largest community of Internet users, it is not surprising that the impact of social media would be potentially more transformative there than in many other countries.

But to truly understand the potential of social media in China, it is essential to put it into historical context and weigh its development against thousands of years of dynastic control over public discourse, writes Hu Yong, a professor at Peking University and one of China’s most widely read bloggers.

In ancient China, during the Warring States period, Shang Yang, a famous statesman of the state of Qin, advocated strengthening the king’s power. He believed that in “current times” when “strong states aim at annexation while weak ones are concerned to maximize their defense,” it was necessary to adopt strong laws, and that violence in the form of “punishment imposed on people at home and wars against other states abroad” was the only solution. He stressed that “laws are the life of people and the basis of the king’s rule.” Therefore, people must be taught to obey laws, he argued.

To ensure that people were well taught, Shang Yang appointed legal officers to teach all people throughout the state. In other words, Shang Yang empowered these officers to take over the educational system. He called this set of theories and practices *Yijiao* (literally “unified teaching”), which banned all thoughts and opinions against the laws and his doctrine of *Nongzhan*, meaning “agriculture and war” (Shang Yang believed that “the means whereby a country is made prosperous are agriculture and war”). According to him, “Yijiao will make inferiors obey superiors.”

Han Fei, a philosopher known for developing the framework of Chinese Legalism, inherited Shang Yang’s “unified teaching” and believed that “people, within the state’s boundary, when practicing persuasion and eloquence, must always conform to the law.” Han Fei said, “The literati disturbed laws by means of letters and martial heroes transgressed prohibitions by means of violence, yet the king still treats them both with propriety,” and this was the cause of disorder. A marked practice of “disturbing laws by means of letters” was “being half-hearted.
towards the king and engaged in private studies.” Therefore, “such practice must be banned, the gangs dissolved, their partisans dispersed.” Han Fei then put forward the renowned Legalist proposal for education: “Therefore, in the state of the enlightened sovereign there is no literature written on bamboo slips, but the law is the only teaching; there are no quoted sayings of the early kings, but the magistrates are the only instructors.”

Although Han Fei failed to implement his proposal, his fellow scholar Li Si (they were both under the tutelage of the great Confucian Xun Zi), a minister of Qin Shi Huang, finally pushed the edict throughout the Qin Empire. Qin Shi Huang was the First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty, and in the 33rd year of his reign (214 BC), Li Si proposed to burn all the copies of “the Classic of Poetry (Shi Jing), the Classic of History (Shang Shu), and the writings of the hundred schools of philosophy.”

Under his proposal, “the books that have exemption are those on medicine, divination, agriculture, and forestry” and “those who have interest in laws shall instead study from law officers.” As a result, Li Si brought to an extreme the belief of Shang Yang and Han Fei that “the law is the only teaching and the law officers are the only instructors.” Ever since, China’s rulers have enforced an orthodox code of learning, religious beliefs and social norms in order to put these recommendations into practice.

Adopting Qin Practice
Mao Zedong once remarked, “All dynasties adopted Qin’s way of rule.” Although the Qin Dynasty did not last forever, despite Qin Shi Huang’s prediction to the contrary, he did create a system of central authority that united China and lasted for more than two thousand years. The residue of the system can be seen even in modern times. For example, Chinese today are familiar with the slogan, “Listen to the Party,” which is actually to listen to Party officials — a modern version of “law officers are the only instructors.” In the Cultural Revolution, the “great leader” was also referred to as the “great instructor,” who managed both politics and people’s thoughts. To manage thoughts was to eliminate dissidence from public opinion — a reflection of “people, when practicing persuasion and eloquence, must always conform to the law.”

When Mao started a campaign against “Hu Feng’s anti-revolutionary clique” in 1955," he said, “there should be a unified public opinion as well as one set of unified laws.” By saying that, Mao meant that if there was anti-revolutionary dissidence in ideology and public opinion, the state legal apparatus should punish those who dared to dissent. Independent thinking by Hu Feng and his followers was at first deemed a “petit-bourgeois viewpoint,” then “anti-party and anti-people artistic thoughts,” and finally an “anti-Party” and “anti-revolution” crime. Hu was sentenced to a 14-year term in prison. At the end of December 1965, he was released from the notorious Qincheng Prison. But two years later he was imprisoned again and sentenced to life for the crime of “writing anti-revolutionary poems.”

The Hu Feng incident left behind a grim legacy — the “unification of public opinion” being ensured by the state apparatus and by laws. Expansive government control over ideology and severe restrictions on the freedom of expression were institutionalized, and exerted long-lasting influence. During the Cultural Revolution, “the unification of public opinion” was brought to an extreme and transformed into the idea that “the dictatorship of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie must be fully implemented in all areas of the superstructure.”

From Unified to Guided
After the Cultural Revolution, China’s political atmosphere became far more open, with much bolder criticisms and challenges to corrupt leaders and the bureaucracy. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policy of “the unification of public
Less limited by codified social norms and institutionalized authority, the Internet has helped Chinese popular opinion emerge from obscurity. In the real world, many Chinese may still belong to the “silent majority,” while on the Internet they have the chance to voice their opinions and take actions they think proper.

opinion” turned into “the guidance of public opinion,” which means to encourage some kinds of public opinion while suppressing others. The Propaganda Department often told the tightly monitored state media that they should not be reporting on “wrong points of view” and instead should cover positive stories that promote “socialist values.”

Guo Luoji, a political commentator, pointed out: “The guidance of public opinion’ assumes someone’s opinion is superior to the society’s view and cannot be challenged. It imposes the principle of monopoly instead of the principle of competition.”

In other words, even as the development of a market economy and the opening up of society mean public opinion can no longer be unified, the authorities still want to maintain the old structure of the “opinion field.” Market-oriented media have, to some extent, helped people air their ideas, but basically they are still affiliates of official media.

The situation began to change in the 1990s when the Internet emerged in China. But the real turning point came in the first decade of the 21st century when social media such as blogs and microblogs gained popularity.

What do social media mean for China? It is a gathering place for citizen journalism, allowing local news to become national. It is a home for public discourse, a national arena that transcends place and class as never before. It is a source of citizen action, where the people unite and struggle together to improve society. In sum, social media have massively strengthened the public spirit of China’s netizens, as shown in the emergence of the “online crowd.”

In other words, China’s public opinion has gone through a structural transformation. The so-called “mainstream public opinion field” no longer dominates discourse; a wave of popular opinion has arisen to compete with and challenge the official discourse.

Transformation of Opinion
Many acute observers have captured such a structural transformation. Nan Zhenzhong, the former Chief Editor of Xinhua news agency, said that there are now two public opinion fields in contemporary China: one is the “official field” represented by the party-controlled traditional media, and the other is the Internet. In the former, media resources are highly concentrated in the hands of a few, while in the latter, “gatekeeping” is greatly weakened. Anonymity on the Internet gives online commentators more sense of security and a greater desire for expression. As a result, the diversity of thoughts, lifestyles and cultures is far more obvious on the Internet. Hence, audiences prefer online media to traditional media.

Such a preference was explained by Qi Shuyu, a professor at China National School of Administration,
ignore. Until recently, such a phenomenon was quite beyond the imagination.

The new interactive medium enables anyone anywhere to observe their social surroundings and inject a thought, a criticism or a concern into public discussions. Different forms of networks in the public sphere are in the making, through which everyone can speak, question and investigate without turning to traditional media. As a result, we have seen a new and decentralized approach to government supervision. It also influences agenda-setting, starting new political discussions as well as re-arranging the issues that concern most people. In sum, people who were once “subjects” and part of a passive audience now become potential contributors to political dialogue and actors on the political stage.

Hu Yong is a professor at Peking University’s School of Journalism and Communication, and a well-known New Media critic and Internet pioneer. He is also an active blogger and microblogger. His blog boasts a readership of 6 million, and his microblog has more than 2 million followers.

when he interacted with readers at people.com.cn, the website of People's Daily (the official organ of the CCP). He said that People’s Daily is the mouthpiece of the party and the government, while the Internet is the mouthpiece of people representing their own voice. “We cannot turn the Internet into the party’s mouthpiece; otherwise, the very existence of the Internet makes no sense.”

Discussions in the two public opinion fields have very different topics, types of discourse and forms. The official media claim to represent “mainstream public opinion,” which, according to Zhang Shouying, Director of the News Research Center of People’s Daily, “promotes mainstream values of the state or the party.” He maintains that the mainstream media’s major task is to promote the principles and policies of the party and the government and to disseminate socialist core values. Mainstream media report news as well as “guide public opinion,” but in both roles, they have shown more of a one-way output.

Public opinion on the Internet has the opposite effect. The official public opinion field focuses on how the government creates a harmonious society rather than how civic culture develops, while the public opinion field of the Internet explores how citizens are motivated to influence the current political system through their creativity and initiative.

Less limited by codified social norms and institutionalized authority, the Internet has helped Chinese popular opinion emerge from obscurity. In the real world, many Chinese may still belong to the “silent majority,” while on the Internet they have the chance to voice their opinions and take actions they think proper. Online commentators have never been as active as they have in the past several years. Any significant incident, be it domestic or international, can give rise to a huge online discussion, arousing passions and stimulating actions that governments, institutions and public figures cannot ignore. Until recently, such a phenomenon was quite beyond the imagination.

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