

Censorship Regime and Democratic Movement: A Case Study of Hong Kong 2014 Occupying Central Movement and Chinese Internet Censorship

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Introduction

How the Chinese government strategically employs media censorship to maintain its resilient authoritarianism remains an interesting topic in academia. The content of the government censored in fact has served as a way for scholars to discern China's intentions and goals. While current literatures appear promising in the understanding of ways and patterns that the Chinese government manages public opinion via internet censorship, there are no in-depth single or comparative case studies to address an important area of issue – international democratic movements.

In 2014, Hong Kong, the former colony of the Great Britain handed over to China in 1997, experienced a large-scale social protest and civil disobedience against the Chinese government in restricting the constitutional democratic reform in the city. The large scale of civil disobedience, known as the Occupy Central Movement, associated with strong demand of democracy, raised an interesting question – how did the Chinese government manage the public opinion in China via internet censorship regarding this movement, and why? While collective action and democracy are the two most sensitive topics in Chinese media, would the Chinese government completely censor internet messages related to the movement in Hong Kong?

Via investigating the news content of *People's Daily* and censored internet messages throughout the 2014 Occupy Central Movement in Hong Kong from late September 2014 to late Dec 2014, I argue that the Chinese government has been strategically guiding public opinion in China by officially reporting that the movement was triggered by social minority, illegal, and undermining the prosperity of Hong Kong. Moreover, it is apparent the Chinese government selectively censored messages that support the movement. These findings shed new light on how the Chinese government might strategically employ both traditional propaganda and internet censorship to guide the public opinion in China.

This research paper first lays out the literature review of China's media management and the background of the 2014 Occupy Central Movement; then presents my findings based on the tone of *People's Daily*, the government's keyword censoring, and hand censoring regarding the movement; and finally suggests the theoretical implications of this research as well as rebuts some alternative explanations.

Literature Review: Chinese Internet Censorship

To begin with, King, Pan, and Roberts suggest that the Chinese government employs internet censorship to improve its legitimacy by allowing people to express grievances. In their work, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," they found that the Chinese government allows internet users (netizens) to criticize

the government.¹ Based on their findings, they developed the collective action potential theory, which suggests that states would ban expressions that have the potential to trigger collective action.² Through classifying different topics of internet discussion posts, they discovered that the Chinese leaders in fact encourage social media to flourish, and do not restrictively ban opinions that criticize the state's policies unless those opinions pose danger to power holders.³ This strategy is conducive to effectively mollify people's sentiments by allowing people to voice out their grievances. By contrast, state only suppresses opinions that bring potential collective actions since collective actions would bring real threats to power holders.

Lorentzen in his piece, "China Strategic Censorship," focuses on how censorship works in news reports.⁴ He agrees with King, Pan, and Roberts that the Chinese government is employing strategic censorship to sustain authoritarian rule. Notwithstanding, he believes that internet censorship "is still far less than what the Chinese government can exert over the traditional media."⁵ In his formal theoretical model, he suggests that authoritarian states employ media censorship to benefit their governance by enabling news investigative reports targeting low level malfeasance. Strategic censorship is also constantly adjusting the amount of negative information in order to prevent local discontents from evolving into revolution amidst overloading negative information. More than that, the model suggests that the increase of uncontrollable news in the cyberspace pushes the government to impose stricter restriction on news media to maintain ambiguity about the social tensions.⁶

Tai in his article, "China's Media Censorship: a Dynamic and Diversified Regime," treats censorship in China as a dynamic and diversified political tool.⁷ By using the data of directives, he discovered that media censorship has been declining at both the local and central level. Magnitude of censorship regarding the issues of livelihood, sovereignty, governance, and protest has declined significantly from 2008 to 2012.⁸ Second, he found that censorship regime has become dynamic in which the Chinese government is attempting to switch from restrictively banning unfavorable information to softly guiding public opinion. Yet, he also found that the state is more likely to ban reports regarding protests and separationist movements. He argues that since guiding public opinion takes more time, the propaganda apparatus prefers to ban news that involves high political risks.

Yet, while all these three pieces place great emphasis on understanding which domestic issue areas of messages were banned more restrictively, and how censorship is related to collective expressions, they may overlook an important area – international democratic protests and movements. While democratic movements and protests are particularly sensitive to autocratic regimes, movements and protests outside of China are less risky to trigger demonstration effects in China. This issue area may serve as a new lens for scholars to investigate the nature and complexity of censorship in China. Moreover, whereas the current

¹ Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013), 2

² Ibid., 9

³ Ibid., 14-15

⁴ Peter Lorentzen. "China's Strategic Censorship," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 2 (2014): 402-414.

⁵ Ibid., 412

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Qiuqing Tai, "China's Media Censorship: A Dynamic and Diversified Regime," *Journal of East Asian Studies*, (2014)

⁸ Ibid., 195

literatures mainly employ large-N statistical research to understand the relations between censorship and the state's intentions, there is a lack of in-depth single case study, which is fundamental to provide a nuanced and empirically-rich account of the understanding of Chinese censorship to the current literature. In this regard, I employ the 2014 Hong Kong Occupy Central Movement as a case study to understand the nature of censorship in China. Although Hong Kong is part of China, by employing a different political system from China under "one country, two systems" scheme, Hong Kong exists as a unique political entity in China and is, to a certain extent, independent from China's political influence. As a matter of fact, the case study of the 2014 Hong Kong democratic movement, which did not impose a direct threat to Communist Party autocratic regime given the different political systems, may serve as a new analytical perspective to understand the censorship effort towards international democratic movement.

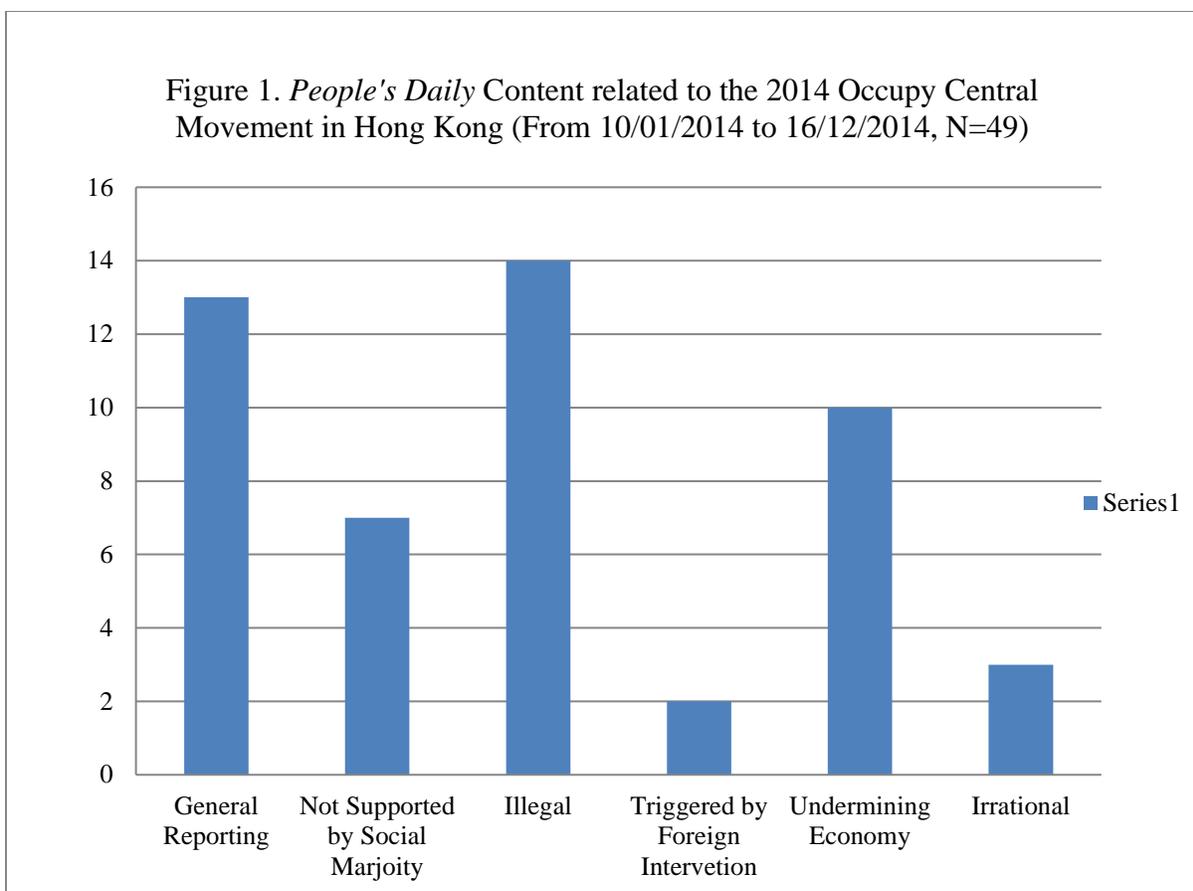
Overview of 2014 Hong Kong Occupy Central Movement

In the course of the 2014 Hong Kong electoral reform, the Occupy Central Movement intended to pressure the Chinese Government into granting an electoral system for the 2017 Hong Kong Chief Executive election that satisfies the international standard of universal suffrage as promised according to the Hong Kong Basic Law Article 4. The Occupy Central Movement is the largest civil disobedience movement since the 1989 student movement in China. During the movement, more than a hundred thousand people occupied the roads in Central, Mongkok, and Causeway Bay. The movement lasted from Sept 28, 2014 to Dec 11, 2014. This research aims to examine how the Chinese government manages public opinion through internet censorship during this period of time.

Negative Tones towards Occupy Central Movement

One way to understand the government's stance towards the movements is by looking at the official tone of state newspapers. I conducted a content analysis of *People's Daily*, the official mouthpiece of China from Oct 1 2014 to 16 Dec, 2014 in order to discern the government's attitude towards this democratic movement.⁹

⁹ I retrieved all the news articles of *People's Daily* from the database "人民数据" by searching the keyword "Hong Kong (香港)" from Sept 28, 2014 to Dec 31, 2014. News articles that are not related to the Occupy Central Movement but related to Hong Kong are not included into this analysis. While some news articles' content may argue with more than one argument the same time. In this regard, I coded the news content according to the headline of the news articles. The category, "General Reporting" refers to news articles that are only fact descriptive, for example, the news article "Police Will Remove the Illegal Road Block at Central and Admiralty on Thursday (香港警方周四将清除中环金钟非法障碍物)," falls into this category.



As shown in Figure 1, all the news articles on *People's Daily* were reporting the movement in a negative tone, and the Chinese government portrayed the movement as “illegal (非法),” “undermining the economic prosperity (损害经济繁荣稳定),” “not supported by social majority.”

The news articles emphasize that the movement is jeopardizing the economic prosperity of Hong Kong. In the news article, “Occupy Central Ruins the Foundation of Hong Kong’s Prosperity and Stability (占中破坏香港繁荣稳定的基础),” published on Oct 15, 2014, argues that the movement “strongly undermines people’s confidence that Hong Kong can maintain long-run prosperity, (很多人对于香港保持长期繁荣的信心遭到重挫).”¹⁰ Another news article, “占中斫伤香港经济发展活力 (Occupy Central Undermines Hong Kong’s Economic Development Vitality),” published on Oct 1, 2014, argues that the movement “would upset Hong Kong’s status as an international financial center (将动摇香港的国际金融中心地位).”¹¹

The official mouthpiece also stated that the movement was illegal. In the news article “Social Instability Ruins Social Order and Hong Kong’s Rule of Law (扰乱社会秩序践踏香港法治),” released on Oct 5, 2014, it argued that “illegal activities seriously hinder the enforcement

¹⁰ “占中破坏香港繁荣稳定的基础,” *人民日报*, Oct 15, 2014, accessed on March 5, 2014, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2014-10/15/nw.D110000renmrb_20141015_8-04.htm

¹¹ “占中斫伤香港经济发展活力,” *人民日报*, Oct 1, 2014, accessed on March 5, 2014, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2014-10/03/nw.D110000renmrb_20141003_4-03.htm

of social order in Hong Kong, and they are not beneficial to the city's long-term stability (非法闹事, 严重阻挠了香港社会秩序, 对香港的长治久安没有什么好处).¹²

Lastly, *People's Daily* also pointed out that the movement was not supported by social majority whereas it was an illegal movement triggered by social minority (社会少数).¹³ In the news article, "Hong Kong Citizens Actively Petition against the Occupy Central Movement (香港市民踊跃签名反占中)," released on Oct 26, 2014, it claimed that people petitioning against the movement "reflects the genuine voice and public opinion of Hong Kong society (反映香港社会的真正声音、真正民意)."¹³

To sum up, the official stance of the Chinese government towards the movement was negative, and emphasized that the movement was illegal, organized only by social minority, and undermining the Hong Kong economy as a whole.

Decreasing Magnitude of Keyword Blocking Censorship

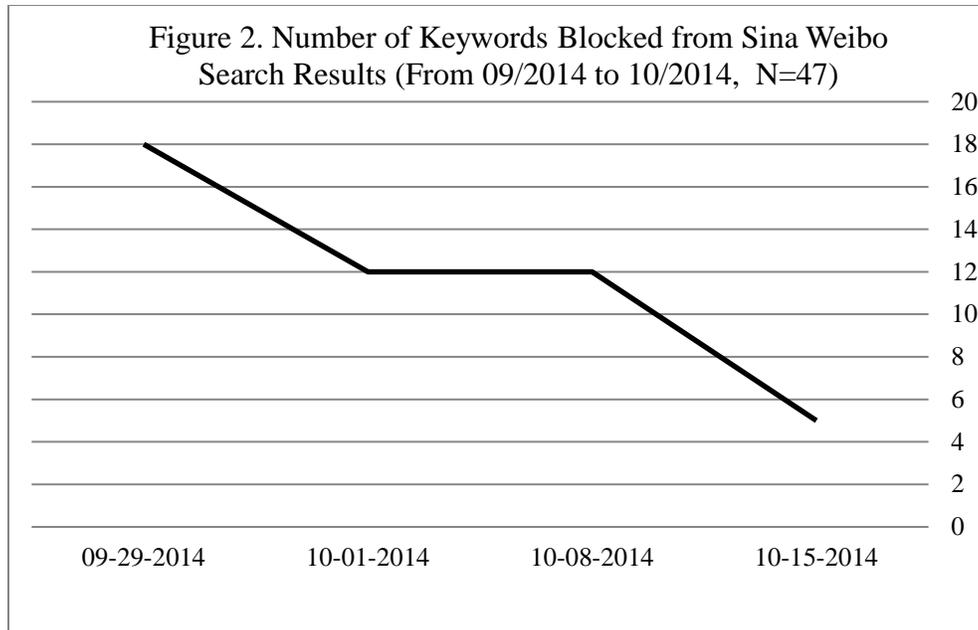
Keyword blocking is one of the major types of censorship for the Chinese government to control public opinion on cyberspace.¹⁴ This type of censorship enables the Chinese government to stop a user from posting text that contains banned words or phrases. Albeit keyword blocking is not effective to control public opinion compared to hand censorship, to analyze the nature of blocked keywords can discern the government's intention towards particular political issue. I employed the data from China's Digital Times (中国数字时代), a web database that has tracked the sensitive keywords blocked from Weibo search by the Chinese government since April 2011, to examine the censored content and quantity of keywords related to the movement, in order to discern which types of information the Chinese government disclosed to public.¹⁵

¹² "扰乱社会秩序 践踏香港法治," *人民日报*, Oct 1, 2015, accessed on March 5, 2014, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2014-10/05/nw.D110000renmrb_20141005_2-03.htm

¹³ "香港市民踊跃签名反占中," *人民日报*, Oct 26, 2015, accessed on March 5, 2014, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2014-10/26/nw.D110000renmrb_20141026_5-04.htm

¹⁴ King, Pan, and Roberts, "How Censorship," 3

¹⁵ I obtained all the keywords related to the 2014 Occupy Central Movement blocked by the state from Sept 2014 to Dec 2014 from the China's Digital Times (中国数字时代) database. The data sheet can be accessed via <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/06/grass-mud-horse-list/>



As shown in Figure 2, the number of keywords has declined significantly from 20 to 5 keywords from September to October. While the Chinese government initially blocked more than 18 keywords related to the movement, the Chinese government only blocked 5 keywords during the middle of the movement. It shows that the Chinese government has reduced its censorship magnitude along with development of the movement.

Sensitive Keyword (Chinese Version)	Sensitive Keyword	Date/Result of Test 1	Date/Result of Test 2	Date/Result of Test 3
香港 + 开枪	Hong Kong + open fire	(Y) 9/29/2014	(N) 10/1/2014	(N) 10/15/2014
占中	Occupy Central	(Y) 9/29/2014	(N) 10/1/2014	(N) 10/15/2014
占领 + 金钟	Occupy + Admiralty	(Y) 9/29/2014	(N) 10/1/2014	(N) 10/15/2014
香港人 + 上街	Hong Kongers + take to the street	(Y) 9/29/2014	(Y) 10/1/2014	(Y) 10/15/2014
公民抗命	citizens disobey orders	(Y) 9/29/2014	(Y) 10/1/2014	(Y) 10/15/2014

One of the most interesting findings is that not only the Chinese government has decreased the magnitude of censorship, but the Chinese government re-allowed people searching essential keywords related to the movement after the initial censorship. As shown in Table 1, the

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(N) refers that the keywords were not censored whereas (Y) refers that the keywords remained censored.

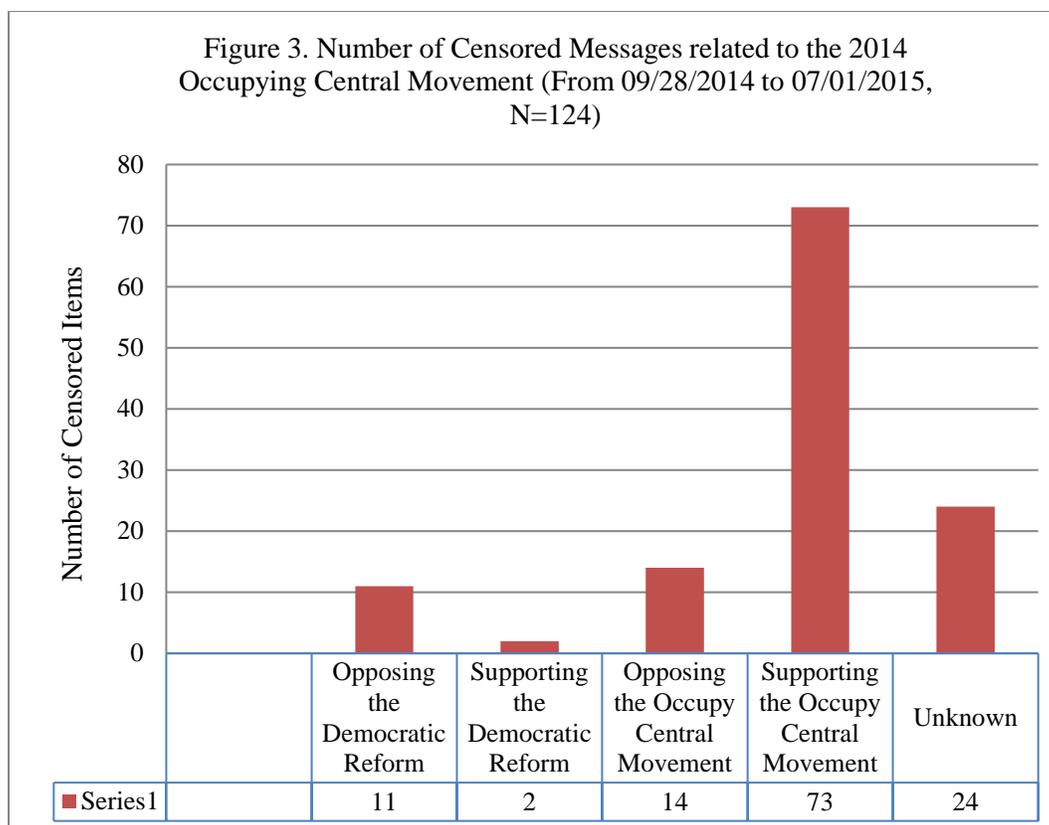
highly related keywords, “occupy Central (占中),” “占领 + 金钟 (occupy + Admiralty),” as well as “Hong Kong + open fire (香港 + 开枪),” were censored during the start of the movement on Sept 29, 2014. Yet, the Chinese government enabled people to search those keywords again on Oct 1, 2014, two days after the start of the movement. Meanwhile, intriguingly the first article published on *People’s Daily* was not on Sept 29 but on Oct 1, 2014 as shown in the previous paragraph. However, other keywords related to the nature and ways of the movement such as “civil disobedience (公民抗命),” and “Hong Konger + take on the street (香港人 + 上街),” were not released from censorship. One of the explanations is that the Chinese government did not want Chinese people to emulate the ways of protests in Hong Kong, such as the method of civil disobedience. It can be also inferred that the Chinese government on Oct 1 has officially defined the movement and the policy line.

Content of Messages Censored by Hand Censoring

Barely understanding what keywords were blocked from Weibo search may not thoroughly imply how the Chinese government wanted people to discuss the movement. Different from keyword censoring, hand censoring, wherein messages posted online are read individually by censors, is the most extensive form of censorship.¹⁷ Accordingly, I collected the censored messages related to the movement from the Hong Kong University Weiboscope Project, which took regular samples of more than 350,000 Chinese Weibo bloggers, each with more than 1000 followers and resurrected their censored messages, in order to further analyze the intention of the government and its strategy to control online opinion.¹⁸

¹⁷ King, Pan, and Roberts, “How Censorship,” 3

¹⁸ Wa-Fu King, Chung-Hong Chan and Michael Chau, “Assessing Censorship on Microblog in China Discriminatory Key-word Analysis and Impact Evaluation of the “Real Name Registration Policy,” *IEEE Internet Computing*, 17,3 (2013) 42 -44; Since the system only allows me to search 200 results maximally, I coded all the messages with the keywords “Occupy Central Movement (佔中).” Moreover, some re-tweeted messages are not included into this study. I classified those censored messages as either positive or negative to the movement and to the constitutional reform of Hong Kong.



As shown in Figure 3, most of the censored messages related to the movement were supportive of the Occupy Central Movement, while only 14 over 124 of them were actually opposing to the movement. For example, one positive message towards the movement, “Occupying central and counter encircling is happening at the same time. The road for police to access to Admiralty and Wan Chai has been blocked. Civil disobedience is blossoming. Hong Kong people. Like [Like]. 佔中與反包圍同時進行中，金鐘的道路已被人群佔領，灣仔也堵塞了警察的專路。公民抗命，遍地開花，香港人，贊[贊],” tweeted on Sept 28, 2014 was censored.¹⁹ Another Weibo tweet, “Are Hong Kong students manipulated? It is so funny. Does Hong Kong still have a way to go back? Are people really craving to be enslaved? If students in Beijing won 25 years ago, will China still be the same today? (香港學生被人利用？真逗，香港還有退路嗎？不被奴役渾身難受？二十五年前北京如果學生贏了，何至有今日之中國?),” tweeted on Sept 29, 2014 was also censored.²⁰

While the majority of censored messages were supporting the democratic movement in Hong Kong, some messages were also banned despite the fact that they were criticizing the movement. For example, the message, “Claims about people occupying central are zombies are true. There are no dumbest people, only those who are dumber (說佔中友是喪屍沒錯的，沒有

¹⁹ 封不了的 Sandra, Weibo post, 2014-09-28 16:24:08, <http://weiboscope.jmhc.hku.hk/wsr/list.py?id=3759812632294855>

²⁰ 大糊涂虫儿, Weibo post, 2014-09-29 07:01:59, <http://weiboscope.jmhc.hku.hk/wsr/list.py?id=3760033550834020>

最低能, 只有更低能),” was banned on 24 Oct, 2014, perhaps it was because the negative comment on the movement also associated with the re-tweeted image that includes a slogan “they can’t kill us all,” as shown below.”²¹



It is apparent that the government selectively banned most messages that were positive to the movement. Meanwhile negative messages associated with sensitive content were also censored.

Online Opinion towards Occupy Central Movement

Obviously, the propaganda apparatus allowed Chinese netizen to access to incomplete information regarding Occupy Central Movement by enabling people to barely search certain important keywords as suggested above. Moreover, the propaganda apparatus mainly banned messages that supported the movement instead of completely filtering all the messages regarding the movement. Another question is that – what is the major Chinese public opinion towards the Occupy Central Movement? While it is difficult to achieve messages related to the movement available on Weibo and other cyberspace and conduct a systemic content analysis of them, I investigated some online posts and comments regarding the movement on online forum, *Tianya* (天涯).

In the post, “the Debate on Hong Kong Occupy Central Movement (香港占中事件的辩论),” published on Oct 15, 2014, the author criticized that foreign powers (外国势力) were involved in the movement.²² Interestingly, most of the replies were in line with the tone of *People’s Daily* as mentioned above. One reply said, “Those who got affected by the negative impact of Occupy Central [Movement] are Hong Kong people. I insist to stand for Hong Kong people’s interests (占中影响的是香港人民, 坚决维护香港人民利益).” Another reply mentioned that the movement strongly damaged the economy of Hong Kong, especially to the service industry, and China should “go all out to boost the economic development (全力发展经济).” Some comments took on a tone similar to how the *People’s Daily* portrayed the movement, that “democracy is all about rationally and calmly expressing your demand (理性温和地表达自

²¹ JoeLee_JoeLee, Weibo post, 2014-10-24 10:01:04, <http://weiboscope.jmsc.hku.hk/wsr/list.py?id=3769149140864284>

²² “香港占中事件的辩论,” *天涯论坛*, Oct 15, 2014, accessed March 24, 2016, <http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-208-62536-1.shtml>

己的诉求)。” Surprisingly, there was a comment saying that the previous comment he/she posted was censored.

Albeit netizens in *Tianya* discussion forum are well-known as nationalistic, and barely looking at the internet posts on this forum may be biased to suggest that most internet messages available on the cyberspace opposed to the occupy movement and exhibited similar view as the Chinese government towards the movement, the research findings above do show that at least some netizens on radical forums exhibit close view with the state towards the Hong Kong democratic movement.

Theoretical Discussion

This original single case study research in fact echoes Tai’s argument that the Chinese censorship regime is more dynamic. The selectivity of censorship reflects that the internet censorship regime has become more sophisticated.

Once the Chinese government has established a clear party line and official tone, the Chinese government allowed netizen to discuss the movement on cyberspace on Oct 1, 2014. However, according to the findings in the part of hand censoring, it is clear that instead of completely censoring messages related to the democratic movements and protests in Hong Kong, the Chinese government was actually “filtering” the public opinion that was not falling in line with the party line. Most of the messages available on *Tianya* discussion forum according to my research also echoed the state’s stance that the movement was undermining the economy of Hong Kong, illegal, and irrational.

My argument is that since the Hong Kong democratic movement is less risky to trigger another wave of protest within China compared to other rural or labor local protests, which directly threaten the survival of the regime, it is less risky for the Chinese government to subtly steer public opinion instead of restrictively banning all internet messages related to the movement. As a result, this movement serves as an opportunity for the Chinese government to softly steer the public opinion not to support democratic reforms and movements in a long term perspective.

While it is hard to measure the public opinion in China, some western news articles have a similar observation– the Chinese government strategically employed internet censorship to filter unfavorable messages to steer the public sentiment. Liu claims that due to the strong censorship imposed by the Chinese government, the state’s official tone towards the movement has “become part of the everyday language that Chinese use to discuss and understand social and political issues.” He suggests that the language system created by the Chinese propaganda machines caused Chinese people to bear “much less sympathetic toward Hong Kong protesters than some outsiders have expected.”²³ Moreover, in the news article, “Infographics on Hong Kong Protests Are Circulated in China,” Tatlow observed that social media in China circulated the official infographics which emphasized the illegal origin of “the-occupy-central.”²⁴ These two news articles observe the same phenomenon that my research findings suggested. The Chinese government used the internet censorship to steer the public opinion by only enabling people to discuss the movement in accordance with the party-line.

²³ Ran Liu, “The Great Divide: Chinese with Different Views of Hong Kong protests Can’t Even Agree on the Words to Use,” *Foreign Policy*, Oct 6, 2014, accessed March 3, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/06/the-great-divide/>

²⁴ Didi Kirsten Tatlow, “Infographics on Hong Kong Protests Are Circulated in China,” Oct 6, 2014, *The New York Times*, accessed March 3, 2016, <http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/06/infographics-on-hong-kong-protests-are-circulated-in-china/>

An alternative explanation for the Chinese government to guide public opinion instead of completely banning messages related to the movement is for the purpose of negotiation. By manipulating public opinion, the Chinese government could demonstrate to the Hong Kong opposition parties that the majority of Chinese did not agree with the Chinese government to make concession. During the bargaining process, it would strengthen the Chinese government's position. However, this alternative explanation may not completely contradict to my central argument, as the Chinese government could achieve these two goals simultaneously. Yet, this mechanism may not apply into other international democratic movements as the Chinese government did not need to negotiate with those states.

While the alternative explanation does not contradict to my central argument, more future research is encouraged in order to understand the mechanism of the Chinese censorship regime and confirm the robustness of my research. More comparative case studies of internet censorship of China in response to international democratic movements, such as the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, 2013 Taiwanese Sunflower democratic movement, and 2011 Arab spring can further discern the pattern of internet censorship in China.

Limitation and Conclusion

My research suggests that combining with the use of traditional propaganda, the Chinese internet censorship is sophisticatedly employed by the Chinese government to steer public opinion. Employing the 2014 Hong Kong Occupy Central Movement as a case study, this research unveils that instead of completely banning messages related to the democratic movements, the Chinese government employed internet censorship to limit Chinese netizens to discuss the movement strictly according to the party line or official tone, and as a result softly discouraged the domestic demand for demonetization in a long term perspective.

While the public opinion in China is particularly hard to gauge, some western news articles echoed my argument in which the limited information released by the Chinese government led people to use the state's official tone commenting on the movement. More research should be conducted in this sense so as to have a more comprehensive and systemic understanding of how internet censorship may change the online and public opinion in China.

My research is also limited to a single case study, which may require more research in the topic of pattern of internet censorship towards the other international democratic movement, such as the Arab Spring crisis and Taiwan Sunflower movement to confirm my central argument, given that Hong Kong is part of China. However, the case of Hong Kong unveils to a great extent that the wider use of cyberspace in China would not be conducive to democratization of China. By contrast, the tight control of information in the cyberspace allows the Chinese government to sustain its authoritarian resilience.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of DKI APCSS, the U.S. Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

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“香港占中事件的辩论,” 天涯论坛, Oct 15, 2014, accessed March 24, 2016,
<http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-208-62536-1.shtml>

Appendix

1. Basic Statistics: Content Analysis of *People's Daily*

Classification of Content	N (Number of News Articles)
General Reporting	13
Not Supported by Social Marjoity	7
Illegal	14
Triggered by Foreign Intervetion	2
Undermining Economy	10
Irrational	3
Sum (Total Number of News Article)	49

2. Basic Statistics: Keyword Censoring

Date Being Blocked from Search	Number of Censored Keywords
09-29-2014	18
10-01-2014	12
10-15-2014	12
10-15-2014	5

3. Basic Statistics: Hand Censoring

Classification of Content	Number of Censored Weibo Messages
Opposing the Democratic Reform	11
Supporting the Constitutional Reform	2
Opposing the Occupy Central Movement	14
Supporting the Occupy Central Movement	73
Unknown	24
Total	124