

Chinese Online BBS Sphere: What BBS Has Brought to China

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores various aspects of the online Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) world as they relate to the possibilities of the public sphere in China. It addresses two major questions: what has BBS brought to China where traditional media primarily serve as the mouthpiece of the government? And, why are Chinese netizens, especially younger generation, particularly enthusiastic about this online platform? Through a full-dimensional view into BBS's information communication mechanism and BBS users' identities, social behaviors and values, we investigate the pros and cons of BBS in terms of its potential to contribute to cyberdemocracy in China.

The Introduction addresses research motivations, critical questions, and research goals. It also provides an overview of China's Internet landscape and a brief review of Chinese BBS studies. Chapter One walks through the history and development of BBS in China, and analyzes the demographics and online behavioral patterns of BBS users. Chapter Two looks into the distinct information communication mechanism of BBS as well as BBS regulation and censorship in China. Chapter Three looks at a cohort of BBS users, exploring who are using BBS in China, why they are enthusiastic about this online community, and what are their distinct identities, social behaviors and values. The Conclusion makes explicit the relevance of these developments to the ongoing growth of the Chinese Public Sphere.

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Introduction

Research Motive

During my two years of study at MIT's Comparative Media Studies program (CMS), I witnessed the rapid ascent of Myspace and Facebook on the American Internet. The buzz of Web 2.0 and Social Networking Sites (SNS) was as strong as ever during these two years. American new media enthusiasts acclaim Facebook-like SNS another miracle after Google.

Social Networking Sites are “web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within bounded system, to articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connections, and to view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.”¹ SNS gained such success in the western world that it immediately enticed Chinese entrepreneurs to start up similar virtual networking platforms in China. A myriad of SNS thereafter mushroomed in Chinese cyberspace, though very few of them achieved the status of their American counterparts in spite of the fact that China has just surpassed the US in terms of the online population this year. Among America's top five most trafficked sites, two of them are Social Networking Sites, with Myspace ranked the third and Facebook the fifth². By

¹ Danah M. Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), article 11. <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>

² Based on the statistics of Alexa on June 30, 2008, the top five most popular sites in the States are: Google, Yahoo, Myspace, Youtube and Facebook. For more details, please visit

contrast, in China, the most “successful” SNS Xiaonei.com was ranked only the 31st.³ *Newsweek* published an article about the situation of China’s social networking sites in December 2007, titled *These Surfers Do It Their Own Way*, which mentioned that “China’s Internet audience has, for the most part, given sites like Facebook and MySpace the cold shoulder. Even local Chinese sites like Xiaonei or 51.com have failed to establish big national followings.”⁴

In stark contrast with Chinese social networking sites, traditional online Bulletin Board Systems (BBS)⁵, which appear to have largely lagged behind the novel concept of web 2.0, continue to play a significant role in the life of Chinese netizens, and lead SNS in the volume of traffic and popularity. The top seven trafficked sites in China

³ Based on the statistics of Alexa on June 30, 2008.

http://www.alexa.com/site/ds/top_sites?cc=CN&ts_mode=country&lang=none

⁴ Melinda, Liu and Manuela, Zoninsein. “These Surfers Do It Their Own Way.” *Newsweek*, Dec 24, 2007, online available at <http://www.newsweek.com/id/78112/page/1>

⁵ Bulletin Board System (BBS), as the Computer Desktop Encyclopedia defines, is “a computer system used as an information source and forum for a particular interest group. They were widely used in the U.S. to distribute shareware and drivers and had their heyday in the 1980s and first part of the 1990s, all before the Web took off. A BBS functions somewhat like a stand-alone Web site, but without graphics. However, unlike Web access via one connection to the Internet, each BBS had its own telephone number to dial up. Although still used in some parts of the world where there is little or no Internet access, most every resource found on a BBS migrated to the Web. Software companies may still maintain their old BBS to serve as alternate venues for downloading drivers.” The definition is available at <http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/BBS>. In the first chapter, I will give a detailed explication of the history of BBS and online forums in the States and China. What needs to be emphasized here is the two terms “BBS” and “online forum” are inter-changeable in China, both referring to the web access Internet sites for users to share and exchange information, chat with community members, make friends, etc. Interestingly, a large majority of China’s college BBS retains the old technology by which users can access the server through a telnet connection from a terminal program, even though all of them have employed a user-friendly web based system. In this paper, I will not particularly differentiate BBS from online forums from a technological view, though I will still specify the differences between the two terms.

(Baidu, QQ, Sina, Google China, Netease, Taobao, Sohu)⁶ have all launched online forums for attracting users and maintaining traffic. For example, Baidu (a search engine) has “Baidu tieba (Baidu post bar);” QQ (originally an instant message tool, it now has evolved into a large portal that contains news report, online game and online auction) contains one of the largest instant message-based BBS forum; Netease (web portal) runs an alumni-centric BBS community; and Taobao (an e-commerce site) well known for its ecommerce based BBS.

According to a report on China’s online communities produced by iResearch, a Shanghai-based Internet Research Company, 80% of China’s websites are running their own Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) in 2007⁷. The number of daily page views across BBS totaled 1.6 billion, with 10 million posts published daily⁸. Furthermore, the iResearch survey reports that 44.7% of Chinese BBSers spend 3-8 hours per day, and 15.1% even spend over 8 hours.⁹ Another report released by Comsenz Inc., owner of Discuz!-the most widely used BBS system in China, depicts a particularly young, dynamic and devoted BBS culture with rich statistical data: 68.9% of the BBS users are aged 18-30; 79.7% are receiving or have completed higher education; 69.7% have been

⁶ See note 2

⁷ A Brief Report of the study on China’s Internet Communities (2007). Released by iResearch, a Shanghai-based Internet market research company. Available at <http://www.iresearch.com.cn/Report/Free.asp?classid=&id=1081>

⁸ Gang Lu. (2008) “Old School BBS: The Chinese Social Networking Phenomenon”. Available at http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/bbs_china_social_networking.php

⁹ See note 7

using BBS for over five years; 79.8% have ever published or replied to BBS posts¹⁰. These data demonstrate to us the extreme popularity of BBS among Chinese netizens.¹¹

Another important indicator of BBS's unmatched power in China is its ability to exert great influence on the real world and even direct the agenda of Chinese society – a task originally the monopoly of the traditional state-controlled and monitored mass media.

In 2003, the BBS community displayed its enormous impact through the Sun Zhigang case. In March that year, Sun Zhigang, a graduate of the art design program at Wuhan Academy of Science and Technology, was detained in Guangzhou for failing to present an adequate ID. Sun had recently moved to the southern metropolitan city-Guangzhou, thus, he was considered a migrant and was required by law to carry a temporary residence permit. On March 17, when local police stopped him, Sun did not have his residence card with him and was detained in a local repatriation center. Three days later, Sun was beaten to death while being kept in police custody. Sun's story went unreported on Chinese media for nearly a month until the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* broke the story of Sun's death.¹² However, that article did not bring much attention from the public to Sun's case until it was put on BBS. It immediately "engaged the [online] public in discussions that touched upon the issues of social justice, inequality, legislation,

¹⁰ The 2nd Survey on the Development of China's Internet Communities (2006). Available at <http://app.discuz.net/2006vote/>

¹¹ The term "netizen," or "*wang min*" in Chinese, is politically and ideologically neutral, which simply refers to "Internet users" in China.

¹² The source of the Sun Zhigang case: EastSouthWestNorth at http://zonaeuropa.com/20060627_1.htm, and UCLA Center for Chinese Studies: "The Internet in China: A Force for Democracy or Oppression" at <http://www.international.ucla.edu/china/article.asp?parentid=67152>

human rights, and constitutionalism...the political meaning of this incident lies in that it was a public protest movement that grew out of Internet communities, and had a substantial impact on society.”¹³ The pressure of the public opinion growing from BBS eventually led to a change in legislation: “Premier Wen Jiabao signed an edict abolishing the 1982 Measures for the Custody and Repatriation for Vagrants and Beggars in Cities in June 2003.”¹⁴ BBS, in this case, empowered the public to challenge the authorities of local government, and to prompt revisions of legislation, which exemplified huge progress for China’s democratization stimulated by new media.

The peculiar popularity and immeasurable influence of BBS in Chinese society, compared to the relative obscurity of BBS in the western world, poses two critical questions to us:

- What has BBS brought to this country where media primarily serve as the mouthpiece of the government? (Vertical/historical comparison)
- Why are Chinese netizens particularly enthusiastic about this online platform?

The Internet in China

Before I delve into these two questions, it is necessary for us to first take a look at the overall picture of China’s Internet development.

¹³ “The Internet in China: A Force for Democracy or Oppression” at <http://www.international.ucla.edu/china/article.asp?parentid=67152>

¹⁴ *ibid.*

During the past decade China witnessed an impressive leap in its Internet industry. According to a recent survey released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), a government backed research institute, the number of China's netizens had soared to 253 million by July 2008, surpassing the U.S. to be the world's biggest Internet market¹⁵.

In his book *The Internet in China*, Tai Zixue mapped out four major stages of the Internet development in China, with each period “reflect[ing] a substantial change not only in technological progress and application, but also in the government's approach to and apparent perception of the Internet.”¹⁶ The first phase ran from 1986 to 1992 when online application was limited to the use of email among a handful of computer research labs. The second stage started from 1992 and ended in 1995. During this phase, the Chinese government, alarmed by the Clinton Administration's adamant support of the Internet development in the U.S., proposed several critical network projects, and fostered a national information network infrastructure to accelerate its economic expansion. The third period runs from 1995 to 1997 and witnessed a rapid growth in information infrastructure construction and a sustained expansion of the Internet user base. The Chinese government stepped up its effort to involve China into the global IT revolution “in the hope that the Internet-led IT industry would yield significant economic benefits to

¹⁵ David Barboza. “China Surpasses U.S. in Number of Internet Users.” NYTimes.com, July 26, 2008, online available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/26/business/worldbusiness/26internet.html?ei=5070&en=68da0954805473a5&ex=1217736000&adxnnl=1&emc=eta1&adxnnlx=1217095389-KcN5XsvE+5qQyZFwX9F/FQ>

¹⁶ Zixue, Tai (2006). *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society*. Routledge, New York, 122

the national economy.”¹⁷ Meanwhile, afraid of losing the control and regulation of the nation’s information flow, Chinese authorities started to formulate and implement a variety of “technological and policy control mechanisms” to beef up the state’s censorship and surveillance of the information on the Internet.¹⁸ The fourth stage started from 1998 and continues to the present, during which time the Internet has reached a larger user base and became a powerful transforming force in Chinese society¹⁹.

As we can see, the government played an important role in fostering the advance of its Internet economy. Both Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin had “stressed the crucial role of development of the information infrastructure to China’s goal of achieving the ‘four modernizations’ in agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology.”²⁰ The state-led information infrastructure construction in the 1990s paved the way for the skyrocketing development of the IT industry in China. Besides, starting from the late 1990s, the Chinese government opened the telecommunications industry to the free market mechanism. This policy immediately attracted a large amount of investment in China’s IT industry, which served as another driving force for the phenomenal growth of China’s Internet sector. Furthermore, the convenient no-application Internet access offered by China Telecom also contributed to the astonishing expansion of the Internet user base. “People can log onto the Internet via a telephone by

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 133.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*,130.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 119-135.

²⁰ Yongming, Zhang (2006). *Historicizing Online Politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China*. Stanford University Press, California, 137

simply dialing 163, using 163 as both login name and password. And the charge will directly appear on the telephone subscriber's monthly bill"²¹. All of these favorable conditions guaranteed a staggering increase of Chinese Internet users in the past fifteen years.

However, the absolute number of netizens cannot veil the fact that the Internet penetration rate of China is still low, which is below the world average 19.1%. Figure 0.1 compares the penetration rates in seven different countries. Iceland has the highest rate of 86.30%, while India only 3.70%. China's Internet penetration rate was 16% in 2007.

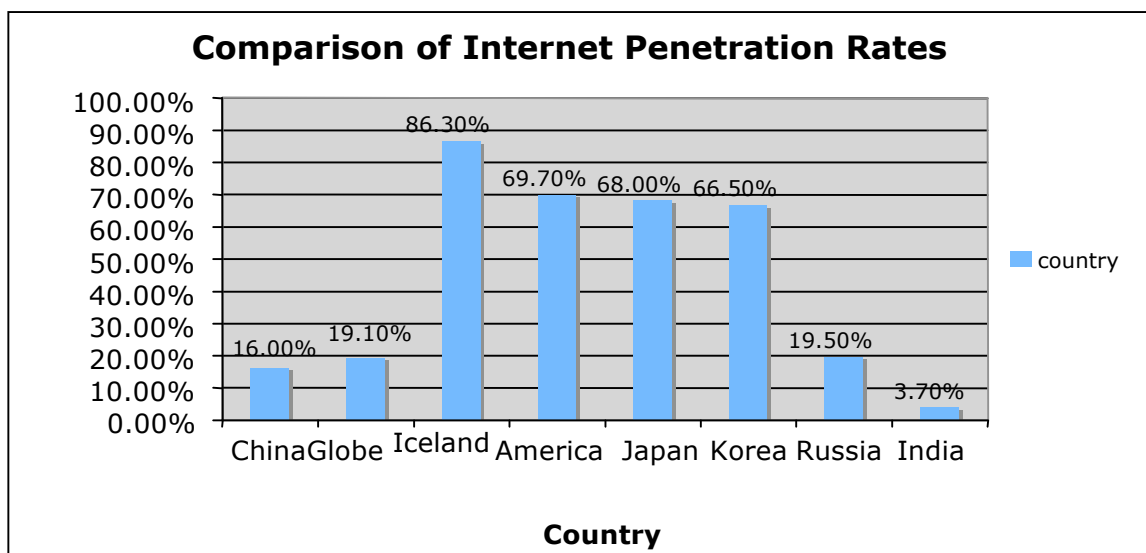


Figure 0.1. Cross-national comparison of the Internet penetration rate (2007). The data are collected from the 21st Statistics Report on the Internet Development in China (Chinese), released by China Internet Network Information Center, available at <http://www.cnnic.cn/index/0E/00/11/index.htm> and the Internet World Stats at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/links.htm>.

²¹ *ibid.*, 139.

Furthermore, there exists a significant digital divide between different regions and social groups in China.

The 2007 survey on the Internet development in Rural China reports that the Internet penetration rate in rural areas was only 5.1% in 2007,²² while the population there account for 56% of the total 1.3 billion people of the country.²³ In sharp contrast, “the number of urban Internet users had reached 125 million [by the end of June 2007], with the penetration rate reaching 21.6%.”²⁴ In metropolitan cities like Beijing and Shanghai, the penetration rate had arrived at over 45%, with Beijing 46.4% and Shanghai 45.8%. But in poor inland provinces like Guizhou, the rate was only around 6.0% in 2007.²⁵

The age based digital divide is also serious in Chinese society. According to the statistics of CNNIC, the largest group in China’s cyberspace is young students aged 18-24; more than half (50.9%) of the Internet users are under 25, and 69% are below 30 years old. In the US, however, young people (18-30) only account for roughly 20.5%²⁶ of

²² Survey Report on Internet Development in Rural China 2007. Released by China Internet Network Information Center, available at <http://www.cnnic.cn/en/index/00/02/index.htm>

²³ National Bureau of Statistics of China: Chinese rural population account for 56% of the whole population. Reported by News of sina.com.cn on Oct.22 2007, available at <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2007-10-22/150214140356.shtml>

²⁴ See note 22

²⁵ See note 22

²⁶ I calculate out this figure based on the sources of the Pew Internet and American Life Project (http://www.pewinternet.org/trends/User_Demo_6.15.07.htm) and 2006 American demographics (http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/STTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-qr_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0101&-ds_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_): 87% of the adults aged from 18 to 29 log on the Internet. Since people aged from 18 to 29 account for around 6.8%+7.0%+(7.2%-

total American Internet users. If teens are added, the percentage of younger netizens aged below 30 will still be no more than 30%²⁷. China's cyberspace, thus, is dominated by city based younger generation aged 18-30 who have good educational background. This demographic structure largely determines the distinct net culture of China, which I will further discuss in chapter three.

Internet Censorship and College BBS Regulation

The advance of China's Internet industry was greatly promoted by the government. Nevertheless, the embrace of new media development by the authoritarian regime is based on two premises: 1) "[the Internet] can serve as the newest engine of economic acceleration and productivity;" 2) "[the government] has systematically put in place a regulative mechanism to filter out of the Chinese cyberspace politically incendiary and socially offensive content [in the belief that] with proper technologies at its hand, it can succeed in creating a cyber environment with all the information that's fit to see."²⁸To reach the goal of completely filtering and regulating the information flow on China's Internet, the government has already built the Great Firewall of China-a powerful surveillance and filtering technology on the Internet. Yochai Benkler's book *Wealth of Networks* also touched upon the government's tight rein of online information flow in China:

4.3%)=16.7%, and the percentage of Internet users among American adults is 71%, the percentage of the population aged from 18 to 29 who use the Internet=(16.7%)(87%)/(71%)=0.2046≈20.5%

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ See note 16, 287

“[T]he government [of China] holds a monopoly over all Internet connections going into and out of the country. It either provides or licenses the four national backbones that carry traffic throughout China and connect it to the global network. ISPs that hang off these backbones are licensed, and must provide information about the location and workings of their facilities, as well as comply with a code of conduct. Individual users must register and provide information about their machines, and the many Internet cafes are required to install filtering software that will filter out subversive sites. There have been crackdowns on Internet cafes to enforce these requirements. This set of regulations has replicated one aspect of the mass-medium model for the Internet—it has created a potential point of concentration or centralization of information flow that would make it easier to control Internet use.”²⁹

Then, how does the censorship affect common users’ online activities and experience?

First, all “sensitive” websites—including the sites that contain pornography, crime, and politically sensitive content that covers topics such as the Tiananmen Square protest, Falun Gong, and the Tibet Independence Movement are all blocked from China’s Internet.

Secondly, the search results of certain taboo terms on the search engines (including Google, Yahoo and baidu) have been filtered. For example, keywords such as “min zhu (democracy),” “ren quan (human rights),” and “zang du (Tibet independence)” are all censored by search engines.

²⁹ Yochai Benkler (2006). *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. Yale University Press, 2006, 268-269

Thirdly, Internet content/service providers are all regulated and censored. Afraid of being shut down by the government, Internet content providers employ internal staff to maintain surveillance of user generated content on their sites. For example, on BBS, site administrators and board moderators are entitled to remove politically sensitive posts and comments. When a user attempts to publish some “inappropriate” content on a blog site such as MSN Space, or send an online message that contains sensitive words via IM tools like OICQ (a Chinese instant message tool), the system automatically identifies these words and immediately prevents the netizen from publishing or sending the information. A window will pop up, telling the user “You are using some improper words!”

The enforcement of the powerful censorship mechanism in China, in turn, creates “a chilling effect” that causes individuals to sometimes “willingly censor their own communications to avoid legal repercussions.”³⁰

The net censorship by the Great Firewall is probably “effective enough for a government negotiating economic and trade expansion with political stability and control.”³¹ However, Chinese Internet users are still able to “use a variety of techniques to avoid the filtering, such as the use of proxy servers.”³² Essentially, it is impossible for

³⁰ Chinese literature on the Internet censorship is very limited. My descriptions about the Internet censorship in China are based upon my personal Internet surfing experience in China as well as American online resources including wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_censorship_in_the_People's_Republic_of_China#Golden_Shield_Project)

³¹ See note 29.

³² *ibid.*

a centralized government to 100% control and filter out the information on the Internet.

As Benkler concluded in his book:

“In authoritarian countries, the introduction of Internet communications makes it harder and more costly for governments to control the public sphere...The efficacy of these techniques of repression is blunted by adoption of the Internet and the emergence of a networked information economy. Low-cost communications, distributed technical and organizational structure, and ubiquitous presence of dynamic authorship tools make control over the public sphere difficult, and practically never perfect.”³³

Thus, it is very important to understand that the censorship of traditional media is completely different from that on the Internet. The former is conducted on a highly controlled and centralized top-down information communication system. All news items have been censored before they get released. The latter, nevertheless, is more difficult for the government to execute because the Internet is a highly decentralized system (except for keyword censorship which is effective for preventing users from publishing any content containing sensitive words). User generated information on the net is too fragmented to regulate and guide tightly. Therefore, online censorship usually functions in a post-facto manner: only when a number of users have intensively discussed one “sensitive” issue does the site regulator begin to throttle down the further diffusion of the information. The decentralized structure of the Internet, hence, leads to the fact that the

³³ See note 29, 270-271.

discussion topics and issues covered in China's cyberspace are far more diverse and "sensitive" than those on traditional media.

Besides, Chinese netizens, in order to get around keyword censors, frequently invent "net jargons" to replace politically sensitive words, through the way of which they appear to talk about one thing while all their peers understand they are saying something totally different. For example, after the censorship is done under the slogan of "constructing a harmonious society," Chinese netizens used the jargon "he xie (River Crab)" to replace the "he xie (harmony/harmonize)" for circumventing the intensified Internet censorship. The "River Crab Society" thus became a new satire of the political ideology promoted by the government³⁴.

BBS, as one of the most active and influential online communities in China's cyberspace, is a "hot spot" for the government. Among miscellaneous BBS sites in China, college BBS occupies a particularly sensitive and important position in the mind of politicians because 1) users are young college students, many of whom behave in a very active, aggressive and even extreme way on the Internet; 2) College BBS once raised some critical social issues that eventually grabbed extensive attention from the public in real society, such as the Sun Zhigang case in 2003. The 1989 Tiananmen Square protest had taught the government to always keep an eye on young students³⁵. Thus, in 2005, college BBS in China experienced a major reform: the Ministry of Education required all College BBS sites to transform into an exclusive, on-campus communication platform

³⁴ Under the Internet Police's Radar: <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2007/08/under-the-internet-polices-radar/>

³⁵ The Tiananmen Square protest in 1989 was primarily mobilized by young college students in Beijing.

based on real-name registration. This implies that each user ID is uniquely associated with a real identity, and off-campus users, including alumni, are no longer able to connect to the BBS, or may connect only with limited access. The measures were carried out in order to consolidate and further enhance the monitoring and supervision of online activities and speeches conducted by college students. The new policies stimulated a wide range of debates and even “protests” from college students. Some College BBS sites thus forked into two versions: one serving on-campus students only and the other targeting the public. For example, LilyBBS of Nanjing University has two versions: lilybbs.net (or bbs.nju.edu.cn, on-campus version) and lilybbs.us (this public version was launched in 2005 by NJU alumni in the US after the reform); Tsinghua BBS also built a new version newsmth.net that is open to the public. The real name registration largely shrank the user population in the beginning because the system required all users to add student ID number, and college alumni cannot get access to their college BBS any more. After the wave of the reform in 2005, however, real name registration was no longer strictly enforced by college BBS. I once experimented with the registration system of LilyBBS. I input faked information about my address and school department. And my ID turned out to be approved by the system³⁶.

What is noteworthy is that the 2005 reform only applied to college BBS, which account for a small proportion of all Chinese BBS. A myriad of online public forums still employ anonymous registration system. MOP and Tianya, the most popular BBS sites in China, are both anonymous forums and have accumulated millions of users in China.

³⁶ Baidu Zhidao also gave an example about the loose execution of real name registration of college BBS in China: <http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/8231464.html?fr=ql>

Thus, the 2005 reform was far from enough to alter the mainstream anonymous environment of China's BBS sphere.

Internet censorship and regulation is a disputable issue for scholars researching the social influence of new media technologies. Over the years, there has been extensive scholarly investigation of the impact of the Internet on China's democratization from researchers with diversified academic background. However, "there has also been the disconcerting tendency among many scholars to make sweeping conclusions based on single-factor analysis or reductionistic views of these new communication technologies."³⁷ The censorship is considered one critical factor that has induced many scholars to completely deny the democratizing power of the Internet in an authoritarian regime like China. Nevertheless, as Tai Zixue pointed out, "the real significance of the Internet in a society must be evaluated in the context of the social consequences that may or may not have been designed or expected by either the government or civil society."³⁸ As we see, Chinese netizens frequently develop evasive strategies to route around keyword censors and get access to the information from alternative sources on the Internet, which is completely unexpected or unplanned by the government. Compared to the past, people have been endowed with a lot more freedom to utter their voices on myriad social issues, and have been "exposed to a growing body of information sources online." Even though the government "maintains a formidable presence in Chinese cyberspace," the Internet still "marks a dramatic departure from previous types of communication

³⁷ See note 16, 289.

³⁸ Ibid.

technologies” and “democratizes communication of information in Chinese society” in many ways³⁹.

Internet censorship in China is not the focus of my thesis. The reason why I explicated it at full length here is that it has become a critical and knotty issue when I try to further explore the social effects of the Internet or BBS in the thesis. I believe that a “full-dimensional view” into the changes brought by the Internet to Chinese society instead of an “all-or-nothing”⁴⁰ stand towards the censorship issue can yield a more accurate picture for us to understand the BBS sphere in China.

Tai Zixue argues that, despite all of its imperfections, there are four ways the Internet has “transformed the arena of public opinion in Chinese society” compared to the pre-Internet era: “first, it creates a new platform that was not available before for Chinese netizens to express their opinions online on just about anything... secondly, it produces a steady, core cohort of opinion leaders that constantly sway public opinion in China’s cyberspace...thirdly the Internet allows an ever-increasing number of Chinese Net surfers to be exposed to the pulse of their Net pal’s opinions;”⁴¹ and [finally], the Internet has become “a barometer for politicians, government functionaries, and lawmakers, among others, to gauge public opinion and to consider actions thereafter.”⁴² For example, Premier Wen Jiabao, in a press conference in March 2005, remarked that “he was deeply

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ see note 16, 188

⁴² see note 16, 205

touched by hundreds of questions Chinese netizens posted on the official Xinhua Net, and promised that he and other government officials would look into many worthy suggestions [on the net].”⁴³ All of these changes signified the progress of democratization stimulated by the Internet in China. And, only keeping this in mind can we better understand the influence of the BBS sphere to Chinese society.

The distinct functionality of Chinese BBS

Building upon the overview of the entire Internet environment in China, we will now narrow down our research to BBS per se which is the focus of this thesis. So, what is BBS? What is the distinct functionality provided by BBS, compared to other prevalent online platform on China’s Internet? In fact, today’s media including television, mobile phone, and online media are very good at synthesizing a variety of functions to create an all-in-one platform. For example, a lot of Chinese BBS sites provide the service of personal blogs, emails and instant messages; SNS contains BBS; Blog service providers launch online forums for users to share and exchange information. Media convergence enhances the difficulty of providing a clear-cut definition of BBS. I will specify Chinese BBS’s unique affordance based on my comparisons of BBS with two other community-featuring platforms, Blog and Social Networking Sites, seen from the perspectives of core function, organizational structure, communication mode, and user generated content.

The Chinese BBS has two major categories: comprehensive and specialized BBS. The former type of BBS usually has hundreds or thousands of discussion boards (or sub-forums) on a wide spectrum of topics such as job-hunting, travel, literature, news,

⁴³ Ibid.

entertainment, sports, love, etc. The most trafficked BBS sites, MOP and Tianya, are both of this type. In contrast, specialized BBS usually has a single theme such as photography, cars, or electronic device, etc. A major difference between the American and Chinese BBS sphere is that vast amounts of online discussions in various areas in the west take place in highly specialized and autonomous forum sites since attempts to consolidate a variety of discussion topics under one roof (AOL) have generally failed. In contrast, the collectivism-oriented culture of China seems potentially to encourage people to follow shared trends, thus leading to public convergence. Comprehensive public BBS can usually aggregate a large number of users due to their diversity of topics, which in turn attract more users to join. Americans are much more self-directed than other-oriented. And thus, an individualist-oriented culture tends to steer them away from the “mass.” The cultural disparity between the West and East Asia is also translated into people’s distinct attitudes towards “the hottest or popular topics on the net” in the two countries, which I will illustrate in chapter three. In this thesis, my focus is primarily on comprehensive BBS sites that have greater influence on Chinese society. (In the following chapters BBS refers to comprehensive online forums). Keeping this in mind, I will specify the distinct functionality of Chinese comprehensive BBS.

The first difference between BBS and the other two community-featuring online applications - blog and SNS - lies in their disparate primary functions. BBS is for users to discuss news, affairs, events, topics or issues. Users post news and articles to the public BBS sites and others make comments, with which BBS users share and exchange their

thoughts. The blog, as a kind of “we media,”⁴⁴ is a vehicle for self-publishing. It takes full advantage of hyperlinks to expand content and connect with other blogs and sites to establish a virtual community. Such a community is nevertheless relatively dispersed and atomistic compared with the dynamic and dense BBS sphere. The BBS provides a space for *public* discussion or chatting, while the Blog works more as a *personal* publisher. SNS, which is distinct from both the BBS and Blog, aim at helping users connect with friends and build online personal networks. Though most SNS have consolidated the functions of forums and Blogs, their primary function, as the name indicates, still rests with “networking” rather than “public discussions.”

Secondly, the organizational structures of the three platforms are different. The BBS is a highly dense virtual community that could contain thousands of discussion boards (also called sub-forums). Users usually do not stick to one particular board but surf around to many popular sub-forums. The hierarchy of BBS can be generally divided into three levels - “system (or site) administrators (*zhan zhang*)”, “board moderators (*ban zhu*)”, and “common users.” Site administrators and board moderators have the right to delete “inappropriate” posts on BBS. Common users can revise or delete their own posts, but cannot remove others’ comments. On the contrary, the Blog, as I mentioned above, is a relatively dispersed and loose community compared to BBS. The Blog Service Provider (BSP) has the power to delete any blog posts and even block a user’s personal page. Individual bloggers can also play the role of “gatekeepers,” who are entitled to remove

⁴⁴ This term “we media” was coined by Dan Gillmor in his 2004 book *We the media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*, also online available at <http://oreilly.com/catalog/wemedia/book/index.csp>

any comments made by others. The comments made by visitors to a blog are usually sporadic, non-instant and non-interactive compared to those on BBS. The SNS's structure is like the Blog's, with individual users managing their personal pages and filtering the information to their own ends. These nuanced differences in terms of organizational structure and users' rights lead to disparate communication modes on the three platforms.

The structure on BBS brings about a dynamic bottom-up many-to-many communication among BBS users. The post publishers on BBS lose their control of others' comments, and their posts are open to critique from anyone in that community, which guarantees the diversity of voices on BBS. Even though board moderators have the right to regulate the information flow, they cannot delete posts arbitrarily because they are elected by common users and can also be dismissed by them. However, on Blogs and SNS, users are entitled to delete all unfavorable information and comments on their personal pages, which, to some extent, results in a top-down one-to-many communication mode on individual blog pages.

The last difference lies in the primary user generated content on the three platforms. Chinese BBS usually consolidates a wide spectrum of topics under one roof, which therefore brings about rich and diverse content that covers almost everything including the latest news and social issues. Compared with the kaleidoscopic BBS sphere, individual Blogs are more sporadic and inactive in terms of pulling up hot issues in society. SNS is a networking-centric platform, and thus, most user generated content is actually daily greetings and random chatting.

Online Platform	Primary Function	Organizational Structure	Communication Mode	User Generated Content
BBS	Public Discussion	System administrator→board moderators→common users	Many-to-many communication; users cannot delete any others' comments; users' comments are usually highly interactive	A wide spectrum of topics; dynamic up-to-date information communication and exchange; posts are usually short and concise
Blog	Self publishing	Blog service provider→Blogger→visitors/readers/audience	one-to-many communication; blogger can delete readers' comments to their own ends; comments made by readers/visitors are usually sporadic, non-instantaneous and non-interactive	A variety of topics; less dynamic in terms of pulling up to latest news and hot issues; blog posts are longer and more in-depth than BBS posts

SNS	Social Networkin g	SNS service provider→ user/personal page owner→visitors	One-to-many; SNS personal page owners can regulate comments and information on the own site	Daily greetings and random chatting
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The above table concludes the major differences among the three platforms. There are other granular differences such as anonymity and user behavior that I will discuss in chapter two and three. The distinct functionality of BBS can be generally summarized as follow:

BBS is:

- A virtual community for online public discussions and debates on a broad spectrum of topics that cover miscellaneous aspects of society and life. The information on BBS keeps pace with current events and news in real society. “Offline events and major discussions [on BBS] are picked up at roughly the same time.”⁴⁵
- The many-to-many information sharing and exchange among users on BBS is highly dynamic and interactive.
- The hierarchical structure of BBS is composed of site administrators, board moderators, and common users. Board moderators are usually elected by users, and they can also be dismissed, which guarantees the proper execution of rights by board moderators.

⁴⁵ Karsten Giese (2004). “Speaker’s Corner on Virtual Panopticon: Discursive Construction of Chinese Identities Online”. *Cyber China: Reshaping National Identities in the Age of Information*. Palgrave Macmillan. November 4, 2004: 28.

BBS Research in China

Since the phenomenal growth of the IT industry in China from the beginning of the 21st century, the Internet, as an unprecedented medium, has enabled Chinese society to transform in many ways. The significant changes have more connotations and implications in a country like China where media primarily serve as the mouthpiece of the government. As Tai Zixue said, the Internet should “be approached as a brand-new social space... we see the greatest potential of the Internet-as a liberating force in civil society, especially in repressive regimes like China. As Chinese netizens become actively involved in the communication, this fundamentally changes the platform of public communication, which used to be monopolized by officially sanctioned media as the sole source of information.”⁴⁶

BBS, as one of the earliest and most active computer-mediated virtual communities in China, has attracted extensive attention from Chinese media scholars and sociologists. The research on BBS in China can generally be divided into four major areas⁴⁷:

First, BBS platform structure research, which focuses on BBS’s history, operation, technologies, applications, classifications, etc. Most studies in this area employed the methodology of case study, especially when dealing with the questions of

⁴⁶ See note 16, 162-163

⁴⁷ Hai Ming, Wang and Ruixia, Han (2004). Review of Present Condition of Domestic Researches on BBS. Journal of Lanzhou Petrochemical College of Technology, issue 4, 2004.

BBS's technological system and operational mechanism⁴⁸. This technologically oriented research laid the foundation for further investigation of BBS within specific Chinese social and political context.

The second domain is BBS's functional properties, seen from users' perception and experience. Building upon these discussions, scholars extended their investigation into the great potential of applying BBS to distance education in China⁴⁹. For example, Qiu Weiting (2000) held that the "anonymity, equality, and universality" of BBS is conducive to at least one educational principle in China—"everyone should be equal in front of education."⁵⁰ Most of the analyses in this area, nevertheless, stayed with perceptual level and did not delve further into the social influences of BBS.

The third research area is the impact of BBS on real society. Since college students are one of the largest groups using BBS in China, the influence of this online platform on younger generation has obtained extensive discussions among scholars. For example, Meng Xin (2003) studied why college students are enthusiastic about BBS, and concluded with seven reasons: 1. the "freedom [of talking about almost anything]" and the "broadness [of topics and areas]" on BBS; 2. the psychological satisfaction brought by online communication; 3. the stimulation of joining public discussions and chat; 4. getting help for specific and practical questions from BBS; 5. relaxing and releasing

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Weiting, Qiu (2000). The Application of BBS to Distance Education. *Journal of Jiangxi Broadcast and Television College*, issue 4, 2000, 55-56.

pressure; 6. self-expression and self-recognition; 7. making friends⁵¹. Another survey on BBS's influence on students' psychology also reported that 73.3% of users in college believed that BBS was conducive to reducing stress. The negative influence of BBS on young students serves as another facet for researches in this area. For example, there have been some studies on youth's Internet addiction and online moral education⁵².

The studies on BBS's social role in China, however, are falling into a binary analysis-good or bad, positive or negative. Scholars have not yet probed into the profound connotations of BBS as a virtual community within China's specific social and cultural context.

Based upon these preliminary and comprehensive investigations into BBS's technology, functionality, and social influences, scholars began to move forward to analyzing the social implications and connotations of the BBS sphere in a more profound way. Two theoretical frameworks were applied to this research area: social interaction theory, and Jurgen Habermas's public sphere theory. The former is employed to study the interpersonal interactions on BBS, while the latter is for looking into the potential of BBS to generate an East Asian parallel to the Harbermasian public sphere and to "democratize communication of information" in Chinese society⁵³. My thesis is closely related to the

⁵¹ Xin, Meng (2003). BBS's Influence upon University Students and Ways to Cope with It. *Journal of Nanjing University of Technology (Social Science Edition)*, issue 4, 2003, 100-104.

⁵² Jinsong, Lan and Peng Yong. (2000) "BBS's Influence on College Students' Psychology: an online survey." *Contemporary Youth Research*, issue 4, 2000, 20-23.

⁵³ See note 16, 289

research on Chinese cyber public sphere. Thus, I will briefly discuss the discourse of online public sphere and cyberdemocracy in China.

The term “public sphere”, first introduced by Jurgen Habermas in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, refers to a virtual or imaginary community that does not necessarily exist in any identifiable physical space. In its ideal form, the public sphere is "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state."⁵⁴ Though the notion of the public sphere is most often referenced in relation to 18th century Europe, the concept has received considerable attention from non-European social scientists and historians in the past decade. Scholars see the idea of the public sphere as an institutional arena of discursive interaction, as central to democratic theory and practice⁵⁵. In fact, the worldwide trend of democratization and the recognition of civic participation, including the 1989 “pro-democracy demonstrations” in Eastern Europe and China⁵⁶, have driven public attention to the concept of the public sphere and civil society⁵⁷. Some scholars see Chinese BBS as

⁵⁴ Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991: 176.

⁵⁵ Villa, Dana R. (1992) “Postmodernism and the public sphere.” *American Political Science Review* 86: 712-21

⁵⁶ Wakeman, Frederic, Jr. (1993) “The civil society and public sphere debate.” *Modern China* 19: 108-38, quoted in Jeong-Woo Koo. *The Origins of the Public Sphere and Civil Society: Private Academies and Petitions, 1506-1800*, available at http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/0/5/5/6/p105566_index.html

⁵⁷ Ehrenberg, John (1999) *Civil Society: The critical History of an Idea*. New York: New York University Press, quoted in Jeong-Woo Koo *The Origins of the Public Sphere and Civil Society: Private Academies and Petitions, 1506-1800*, available at http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/0/5/5/6/p105566_index.html

a parallel to the Habermasian public sphere in China. BBS's novel communication mode, characterized by the "decentralization," "anonymity," "de-stratification," "equality," "openness," "rational critique," combined with the positioning of BBS as a "service" platform instead of a "regulation" tool, makes it the most promising virtual community for establishing a public sphere in China.⁵⁸ Other scholars disagree, and suggest that China's BBS space is far from the benchmark of "public sphere." Jing Siying and Yang Lixuan (2007) studied whether Chinese BBS sphere has accomplished the critical functions of the Habermasian public sphere by examining the system and content of BBS. They concluded that China's BBS is still not able to generate the "public sphere" for three reasons: first, BBS administrators and moderators have the right to regulate the information on BBS sites, and the articles and comments of "opinion leaders" on BBS tend to overshadow the voices of grassroots BBSers. Thus, this "invisible" hierarchy on BBS potentially deprives common users of their right of speech;⁵⁹ secondly, anonymity on BBS does not necessarily lead to "rational", "critical", and "equal"⁶⁰ argument and discussions among users; finally, a great deal of the content in China's BBS sphere is

⁵⁸ Jie Chen (1999). "BBS: Dawn of China's Public Sphere." *China Youth Research*, issue 5, 1999, 52-54

⁵⁹ Lin Qi. (2003). "The limitation of the Right of Speech on the Internet: Taking BBS as example." *Journalism Knowledge*, issue 11 of 2003, quoted in Siying Jing and Lixuan Yang(2007). "The Inspection of the Reality of Online Public Sphere: Taking BBS forums as example." *Sichuan Journalism Review*, issue 1 of 2007: 41.

⁶⁰ For Habermas, the basis for generating the public sphere is on rational-critical discourse-everyone is an equal participant and the supreme communication skill is the power of argument, according to Soules, Marshall: Jurgen Habermas and the Public Sphere. Online available at <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~soules/media301/habermas.htm>

related to recreation and love affairs, rather than public affairs or political issues,⁶¹ which makes it impossible to generate public sphere at current stage.

Research Goal

This thesis does not attempt to various aspects of the BBS world as they relate to the possibilities of the public sphere. I believe, rather than sticking to the concept of public sphere and then testifying to the existence or nonexistence of a similar type of space in China, a more fruitful path to follow is to examine what particular type of the influential civic community exists in China and what impact it has had or will have on real society⁶².

Now, let us turn back to the two questions I proposed in the beginning:

First, what has BBS brought to this country where media serve as the mouthpiece of the government? What is the “superior” information communication mechanism of BBS that helps attract so many users and facilitate information flow and diffusion on BBS, while no other online platforms in China have ever produced a comparable scale of social influence? On the other hand, what are the restrictions of this online platform that may or may not have limited its social influence? These communication mechanism oriented questions will be addressed in chapter two.

Secondly, why do Chinese BBSers embrace this platform more enthusiastically than their American counterparts? What are their distinct identities, social behaviors and

⁶¹ Siying Jing and Lixuan Yang (2007). “The Inspection of the Reality of Online Public Sphere: Taking BBS forums as example.” *Sichuan Journalism Review*, issue 1 of 2007: 41-42.

⁶² See note 16, 177-186.

values that are conducive or detrimental to the creation of a cyber public sphere in China?
The study on Chinese BBS users will be conducted in chapter three.

I will employ both quantitative analysis and case studies in this thesis.

Chapter 1 (**Introduction to BBS and Online Forum**) will explore the history and development of BBS in both the States and China. I will introduce two major BBS forms in China: College BBS and public online forums. At the end of this chapter, I will present a series of data analyses about the demographics and the online behavioral patterns of Chinese BBSers in order to pave the way for further investigation into information communication mechanism and BBS user behavior in the following two chapters.

Chapter 2 (**Information Communication and Diffusion Mechanism on BBS**) investigates the distinct communication mechanism of Chinese BBS compared to Blog and Social Networking sites, and examine how information gets spread across the BBS space and finally shape the agenda of real society. I will also talk about BBS regulation and censorship in this chapter to give an all-around view into its communication system.

Chapter 3 (**China's "Post 80's Generation" on BBS**) shifts the focus from BBS's communication mechanism to the participants of online public discussions on BBS. It attempts to address the question why BBS is particularly popular in Chinese society. It will look at a particular cohort of BBS users, exploring who are using this platform, why they are enthusiastic about online discussions on BBS, and what are their distinct social behaviors, values, and identities.

The **Conclusion** will make explicit the relevance of these developments to the ongoing growth of the Chinese public sphere.

Chapter 1 – Introduction to BBS and Online Forum

Bulletin Board System (BBS) has a history of around 38 years. The early BBS technology emerged long before the advent of WWW. After experiencing a period of prosperity in the States, BBS was rapidly edged out by the Internet. BBS was first introduced to Chinese universities in the mid-1990s. Unexpectedly, it obtained huge success in terms of the popularity among Chinese youth⁶³. In this chapter, I will walk through the history and development of BBS in both the States and China, and then introduce two major Chinese BBS forms-College BBS and public online forums. Meanwhile, I will present the data analysis about the demographics and the online behavioral patterns of online forum users in China⁶⁴.

1.1 History and Development of BBS and Online Forums

I start my thesis with the explication of the history of BBS and the clarification of the differences between “BBS” and “online forums” from a technical perspective. BBS and online forums share many common characteristics and features in terms of functions and services, which often leads to the misconception that the two terms are synonymous. They both refer to a network application we will discuss extensively in this thesis, in which users mainly discuss various topics, contribute user-generated contents, and share

⁶³ Min Pan, Hui Lin, and Chaoyang Yu.(2007). A Comparative Study on the Development and Management of BBS Forums in China and Abroad. *Journal of Ideological and Theoretical Education*, issue 7, 2007: 68-72

⁶⁴ The literature on the history and development of BBS is relatively scarce and non-systematic in both the States and China, especially in academic publications. The resources I used for the research were primarily collected from online materials introducing BBS, such as The BBS History Library <http://www.bbshistory.org>; The BBS Corner Telnet Guide: <http://telnetbbsguide.com>); The BBS Corner: <http://www.dmine.com/bbscorner/history.htm>

information and materials. From the interviews I conducted with several American and Chinese Internet users, I found that the perceptions of these two terms differ remarkably in the two countries. In China, the term “BBS” is regarded interchangeable with “online forums”. In the States, in contrast, less people talk about “BBS”, which refers to an old technology before the Internet era. It is very important and beneficial to keep the terminology unambiguous.

Commonly perceived as an antiquated technology, BBS (Bulletin Board Systems) was invented as early as the 1970s and soon rose to popularity in the United States, long before Chinese people had access to personal computers. In the old days when network infrastructure was primitive with a low data transmission rate, users connected to the BBS server through the telephone line via a modem. The client software used to access BBS looked like a mysterious black window called a terminal program, in contrast to the web browser people usually utilize today.⁶⁵

The early services of BBS included message boards, news, and file sharing. As technology advanced, chatrooms and online games were added. But posting and replying to messages remained the core function of BBS and today’s online forums. One user starts a thread of discussion by either forwarding public news, or writing up his/her own ideas, questions or opinions. Other users who get interested then follow up by posting their replies. Depending on the nature of the topics, different threads receive diverse popularity and attention from users, which is often measured by the frequency of views and the number of replies. These functions and services, which are crucial to a lot of

⁶⁵ Steve Jones. (2003) *Encyclopedia of New Media: An Essential Reference to Communication and Technology*, Sage Publications, Inc., 45-47.

Internet users for their virtual life, are still being offered in various formats today. Therefore, BBS is usually regarded as “a precursor to the modern World Wide Web (WWW)”⁶⁶ in many aspects. For example, with regard to news sharing, BBS was replaced by major portal sites (e.g. yahoo.com), media/broadcast sites (e.g. cnn.com) and news search engines (e.g. news.google.com); the online chatting function of BBS was inherited by various instant-messaging tools (e.g. MSN, AIM).

The whole discussion system of BBS is divided into sub-forums usually categorized by users’ interests. Each sub-forum further consists of several discussion boards covering more specific and detailed topics. Posts within a discussion board are displayed in a chronological order, or organized in accordance with threads. Each board has administrators or moderators (*banzhu* in Chinese) that help clean posts periodically, mark valuable articles, and resolve conflicts. Moderators vs. normal users, experienced users vs. newbie users, connected users (which refer to users who can recognize each other’s usernames and keep close online connections) vs. unfamiliar users, etc., all these relationships form the structure of an online community inside BBS. In other words, BBS users behave socially in the virtual community examined and influenced by other members. There has been extensive research work done devoted to this area⁶⁷.

⁶⁶ Bulletin Board Systems (BBS): available at <http://www.squidoo.com/bbs>

⁶⁷ Some relevant publications: Howard Rheingold: “The Virtual Community”, The MIT Press, 1993

David Trend: “Reading Digital Culture”, Blackwell Publishers, 2001

Q. Jones: “Virtual Communities, Virtual Settlements & Cyber-Archaeology: A Theoretical Outline – Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 1997

Before mid-1990s when the computing power of computers and network bandwidth were highly limited BBS created a suitable environment for users to exchange messages, information and read news with its customized software and network management⁶⁸. However, early BBS was significantly different from the online forums we use today. The information was displayed in plain texts without any rich Internet content such as videos and images. People connected to BBS using a special network protocol named "Telnet" from the terminal program. Unfortunately, no mouse was available to facilitate the user experience, all user inputs and interactions with BBS had to be done only with a keyboard using hotkeys. Many of the hotkey combinations still remain - Ctrl+W for editing, Ctrl+P for posting the written message, Ctrl+R for replying to others' posts and automatically adding a "RE" as the prefix of the title. After memorizing all the hotkey combinations and getting used to the BBS environment, users could interact with BBS fast and efficiently.⁶⁹

It is worth emphasizing that long distance connection to the BBS server incurred extremely slow data transmission and increased expense for telephone line occupancy.⁷⁰ As a result of this technical constraint, members of online communities and social groups established in BBS were often in close physical proximity. For example, they resided in nearby cities accessing the BBS server via telephone lines; or, they were in the same college campus or enterprise buildings within the same local area network (LAN).

⁶⁸ The BBS History Library: <http://www.bbshistory.org>

⁶⁹ The BBS Corner Telnet Guide: <http://telnetbbsguide.com>

⁷⁰ See note 3.

Abundant resources of information, a novel virtual environment to communicate with peers, and a short learning curve for mastering BBS operations, brought great popularity to BBS till mid-1990s in the United States. The platform not only encouraged users to participate in various online activities, but also inspired many hobbyists to set up and manage their own BBS servers. People could easily run a BBS site by installing and configuring readily available BBS server software, and offer BBS service free of charge.⁷¹

The late 1990s were a turning point for BBS - the period in which the Internet infrastructure was widely deployed and become the primary network interface for connectivity in the United States⁷². World Wide Web (WWW) became the dominant and mainstream online service, which actually led many people to incorrectly use the term “WWW” when they actually meant Internet. “WWW” support was added to BBS such that it could be accessed from a web browser instead of a terminal program that requires Telnet to make a connection. Vastly improved bandwidth enabled users to quickly log into any BBS, no matter where the BBS site was geographically hosted. Meanwhile, more powerful web development tools and more sophisticated user interface design principles were invented and published, bringing remarkable innovation and revolution to the online world and users’ experiences with various web-based services. Besides, a lot more new functionalities were added to BBS: users could open personal blogs, add avatars when managing their profiles, attach images and videos to their posted messages,

⁷¹ BBS: The documentary: <http://www.bbsdocumentary.com>

⁷² *ibid.*

etc. A majority of users prefer to use web browsers instead of terminal programs to access BBS, simply because they found mouse interfaces easier to use, enjoyed watching multimedia contents, and felt more comfortable with browser operations. It was during this transition period that the original definition and extent of BBS started to turn blurry and ambiguous. To most Internet users, the difference between web-based BBS and online forums could hardly be perceived in terms of functionalities. BBS, which used to be strictly referred to as a terminal-based, Telnet-connection oriented online service, confounded many users to believe it was synonymous to online forums.





Fig. 1.1 Two ways to access BBS. Top: a terminal connecting to SMTH via Telnet; Bottom: a web browser visiting SMTH via “WWW”⁷³

Advances in web technologies and notable improvement in computer hardware and software, however, did not bring more success to BBS in the United States. Rather, BBS and its successor online forums quickly lost their popularity. During the surge of “Internet Bubbles”, a wide spectrum of web services and applications were developed and offered. BBS and online forums experienced great challenges and fierce competition. Most users could find better alternatives to existing BBS services, which drove them to quickly immigrate to other forms of online services⁷⁴. People go to Yahoo or CNN to read news; open Google to search for information; post buying and selling information on Amazon or EBay; log into Facebook or Myspace to make friends; share their opinions and experiences via personal blogs; exhibit photos and videos on Flickr and Youtube; contribute their knowledge to Wikipedia, etc. Many features and functions of BBS were taken up and parsed out by more specialized and powerful online applications. Compared

⁷³ Screen shots of the homepage of SMTH BBS, <http://newsmth.net/>, on 2008, July 13th

⁷⁴ Roger Clarke’s Web 2.0 as Syndication: <http://www.anu.edu/people/Roger.Clarke/EC/Web2C.html>

with these dominant Internet giants, BBS and online forums have been left with extremely limited space, especially after 2004, when the concept of “Web 2.0” became prevalent in the States and provided new guidelines and philosophy for creating user-interactive websites.⁷⁵

It is not surprising that BBS and online forums faded rapidly in popularity given the flourishing alternatives in cyberspace. Indeed, many services of BBS have been replaced by other more powerful and sophisticated web applications. Moreover, members of a social group are now much more in favor of using a mailing list to exchange opinions and figure out problem solutions rather than log into a BBS site or a forum to post and get answers.

Today, online forums are mainly used by a small group of people in the States to discuss specific topics. For example, open source software developers use forums to discuss technical issues; class websites in universities hold forums for students’ discussions⁷⁶; customers use forums to exchange discount information about merchants; political fans use forums to share their views and complaints, etc. Nevertheless, none of these sites are of large scale and have influential impacts on ordinary users.

To generalize the differences between the two terms, “online forums” refers to the web application emerging more recently in the IT technology history, based purely on web browsing. “BBS” refers to the older technology in which users access the server through a telnet connection from a terminal program. “WWW” support of BBS makes the

⁷⁵ Web 2.0 EXPO: <http://www.web2expo.com>

⁷⁶ For example, forum.ubuntu.org for discussions on the Linux operating system, and Stellar.mit.edu, an online teaching management website offering forums for students

web interface indistinguishable to users. In this thesis, however, I will not particularly differentiate the concept of “BBS” from “online forums” but focus more on their common functionality: a centralized platform where users can discuss various topics interactively, contribute user-generated contents, and share information and materials, topics are either organized by threads or listed in a chronological order.

1.2 Development of BBS in Chinese Universities

While BBS and online forums quickly declined in popularity in the United States, on the other side of the globe, BBS has demonstrated a peculiar vitality and magnetism in China.

BBS was first introduced to Taiwan in the early 1980s. In 1992, Taiwan Zhongshan University established the first BBS site with Chinese language supports. BBS soon became a cultural fashion among college students all over the island. Shortly after, the success of BBS extended to Mainland China. In 1995, the first BBS system on college campus, Shui Mu Tsinghua (SMTH), was founded in Tsinghua University, becoming incredibly popular among students. Students could access SMTH by using public computers in the newly founded computer clusters, or using their personal computers in their dormitories, which were usually purchased and shared by several students. It was from here that BBS started its wonderful journey in China.⁷⁷ By 2005, SMTH had more than 500 discussion boards with more than 300 thousand registered users from inside and outside the Tsinghua campus. As a record, 23674 users were

⁷⁷ Min Pan, Hui Lin, and Chaoyang Yu.(2007). A Comparative Study on the Development and Management of BBS Forums in China and Abroad. *Journal of Ideological and Theoretical Education*, issue 7, 2007: 68

online visiting SMTH at the same time. These data clearly demonstrates the popularity of SMTH BBS.

Chinese universities provided the best environment for BBS to evolve and become more prevalent. From the mid-1990s, the Chinese government started to build and construct Internet infrastructure within universities⁷⁸, thus making college students the earliest adopters of Internet services including BBS. Meanwhile, the costs of personal computers (PC) and other hardware parts were dramatically reduced. Universities constructed plenty of computer rooms for students' study and research. Many students could afford to buy PCs of their own and use them in the dorms. BBS has become a crucial component of a college student's campus life, and served as an important tool for students to obtain information and news, discuss events in and outside of the school, and make friends.⁷⁹

By 2007, more than 130 BBS sites had been established in more than 80 universities. Table I lists statistics of 4 College BBS sites located in Shanghai.⁸⁰

Table 1: Statistics of BBS usage for four College BBS in Shanghai

University	Shanghai Normal Univ.	Shanghai Jiaotong Univ.	Fudan Univ.	Tongji Univ.
Registered users	162304	76346	70061	21000
Percentage of students	70%	70%	85%	90%

⁷⁸ Zixue, Tai (2006). *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society*. Routledge, New York, pp.119-135.

⁷⁹ Chunsheng Zhang.(2005) *BBS on College Campus: From a Bulletin Board System to a campus portal site. Research on Youths, 2005*

⁸⁰ Bureau of Science and Education, Shanghai, Survey on the construction of BBS platforms in the Universities of Shanghai, quoted in Min Pan, Hui Lin, and Chaoyang Yu.(2007). *A Comparative Study of the Development and Management of BBS Forums in China and Abroad. Journal of Ideological and Theoretical Education, issue 7, 2007: 69*

Average online users	3000	5000	7000	600
Average posts	10000	35000	8000	2000
Total number of students, faculty members and stuffs	42000	52000	46000	54000

It is evident from the table that College BBS has high coverage among the students. The number of registered accounts usually exceeds the number of students, faculty members and staffs, which implies that some have multiple accounts registered and people outside the school also participate actively. Many students spend several hours a day on BBS - posting and reading articles, joining discussions, and chatting with friends. Interestingly, a lot of users still keep using terminal software, such as FTerm, QTerm, to access BBS via the Telnet connection, even though “WWW” has become the mainstream and dominated web applications. They still prefer the “legendary” keyboard-only way to highlight their experiences with BBS.

The BBS is a unique online environment for college students, and an interesting cultural phenomenon in China. Several features of College BBS differentiate them from public online forums:

1. One of the most important characteristics of College BBS is its semi-anonymity. The real identity of a user is hidden behind a user id, which protects the user’s privacy. However, users of the same BBS site often study in the same university and their offline lives are closely interconnected. They often have extensive knowledge of how to reveal the real identities concealed behind user ids. Besides, regular social events are organized within the discussion forums so that virtual figures come out of their symbolic identities and meet each other in person. The

semi-anonymity of College BBS indeed stirs up more incentives for college students to engage in BBS activities.

2. Each BBS is often operated and managed by a university, and titled with the university's name. This piece of virtual land is highly appreciated and cherished by college students. They claim the BBS site as their exclusive online territory and become very defensive about the "reputation" and "purity" of their BBS. Such kind of loyalty leads the students to particularly stick to this "land". They feel obligated to wipe out all commercial advertisements on their BBS, and even "fight" against users from other schools over many controversial issues (such as which university ranks higher in China).
3. The information published and exchanged on BBS discussion boards covers almost all aspects of students' campus life. BBS has become an indispensable companion to every student, and exerts substantial impact on his or her daily life. Students rely on BBS to acquire information, make friends, ask and answer technical questions, engage in academic discussions, chat about music, movie or basketball games, buy and sell second-hand goods, share a memorable experience, or simply relax by hanging around.

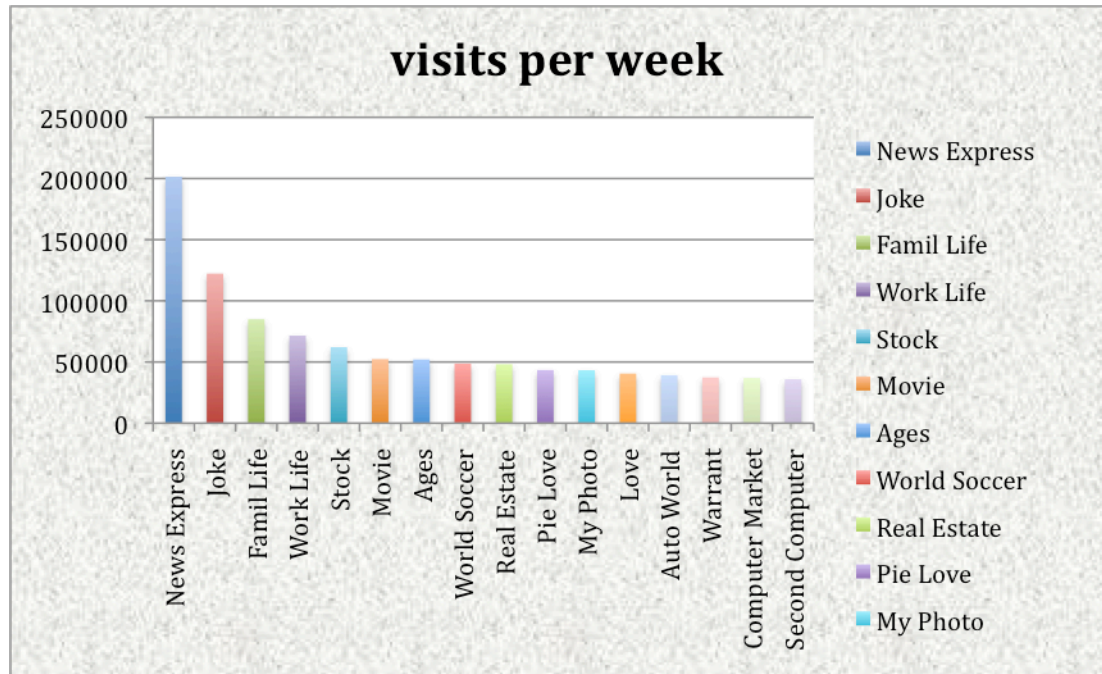


Fig. 1.2 - Statistical information of the top-15 most-visited discussion boards on SMTH from June 25th, 2008 to July 5th, 2008, available at <http://www.newsmth.net/> (Statistical information can be found in the “BBSLists” discussion board)

Fig. 1.2 displays the statistical information recording the number of visits per week to the top 15 most trafficked discussion boards of SMTH BBS during the week from June 25th to July 5th, 2008. The bar chart also informs us of a basic fact that online activities within a BBS site are extremely diverse, covering a wide spectrum of interests.⁸¹

4. BBS also provides a virtual and equal space for college students to exhibit their social skills and leadership skills on BBS. Those who lack confidence in real life and feel uncomfortable when speaking face-to-face with others can be very aggressive, active, and eloquent on BBS. Many students enjoy becoming famous

⁸¹ Data collected from new SMTH BBS site on July 13th, 2008 (<http://www.newsmth.net/>, statistical information can be found in the “BBSLists” discussion board)

or being regarded as an opinion leader in the virtual world, though in reality they may be bashful and quiet.

1.3 Development of public online forums in China

Public online forums refer to the web-based Internet application which users access from a web browser. The set of services are nearly identical to what BBS offers. In China, the two words “BBS” and “forums” are used interchangeably. From the late 1990s, when personal computers and network service became affordable commodities in many households in China, online forums rolled out and grew at a fast pace⁸². Here, we use the adjective word “public” to highlight the distinction between online forums that serve all Internet users and College BBS that mainly target college students.

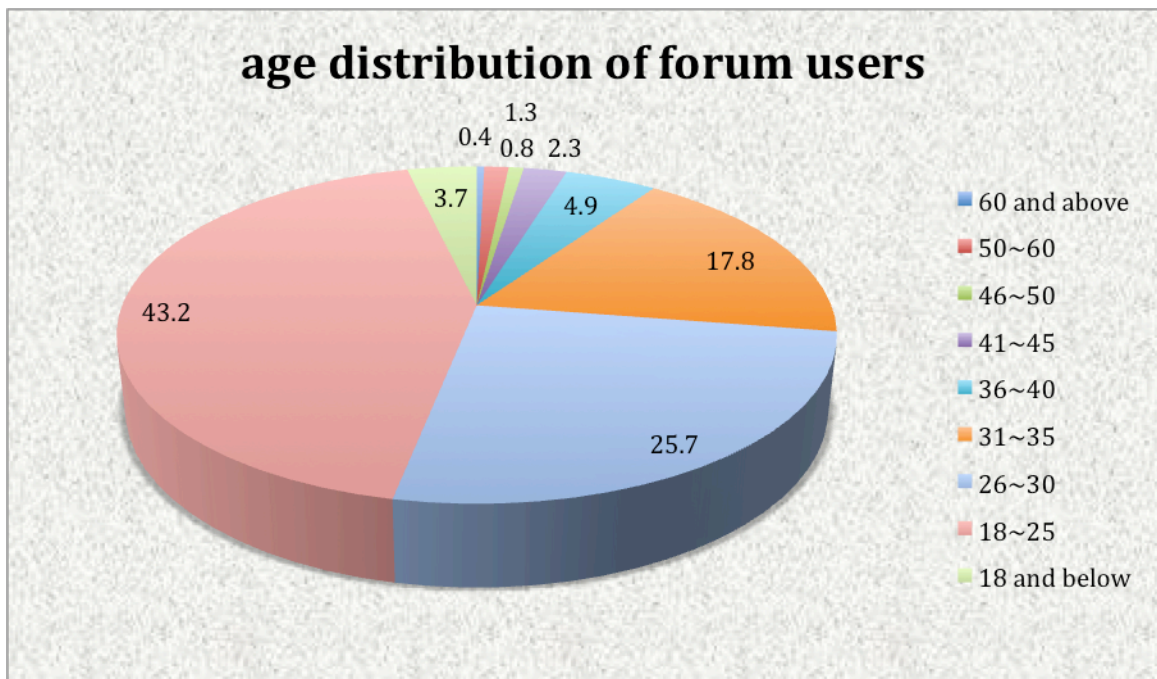
The focus of this thesis is on those large-scale all-inclusive forums covering a wide variety of topics, as opposed to small-sized forums designated for niche subjects among a certain group of people. The most popular and influential online forums in China include: Tianya Community, Baidu Tieba, Sina Forums, TOM Forums, QQ Forum, Sohu Forums, Netease Forums, etc. Among them, Sina, Tom, Sohu and Netease are all giant portal websites in China with enormous user base, and forums are only offered as part of their services.

Online forums have undergone a rapid growth and expansion over the past few years in China. According to the statistics released by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) in 2006, 43.2% of all Internet users frequently used

⁸² China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), China’s Internet Development Timeline, The Internet Timeline of China 1987~1996, 1997~2000

BBS/Online forums, even exceeding the number for instant messenger (IM) users⁸³. Tianya Community, one of the most popular online forums in China, always has more than 100,000 users online at any time, one tenth of which are registered users.⁸⁴ By the end of June 2007, Tianya had already accumulated 20 million registered users in total⁸⁵.

The services provided by public online forums are not confined to the traditional message posting and replying. Instead, the online forums are integrated with other emerging web services such as personal Blogs, search engines, Wiki, multimedia sharing, etc.



⁸³ China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), Statistical Report on the Internet Development in China, 2006, available at <http://www.cnnic.cn/index/0E/00/11/index.htm>

⁸⁴ Data collected from www.tianya.cn, for the past three months

⁸⁵ Tianya user population: <http://article.tianya.cn/2005/ad/forty.htm>

Fig. 1.3 The age distribution of Chinese online forum users (in percentage) in 2006. Data are collected from The 2nd Survey on the Development of China's Internet Communities (2006), available at <http://app.discuz.net/2006vote/>

Fig. 1.3 shows that youths constitute the majority of online forum users. 68.9% of the forum users are between 18 and 30. Nearly 90% are below age 35. The younger generation is considered aggressive, energetic, active, open to new technologies, and concerned about their quality of life. They continuously inject fresh blood into online forums.

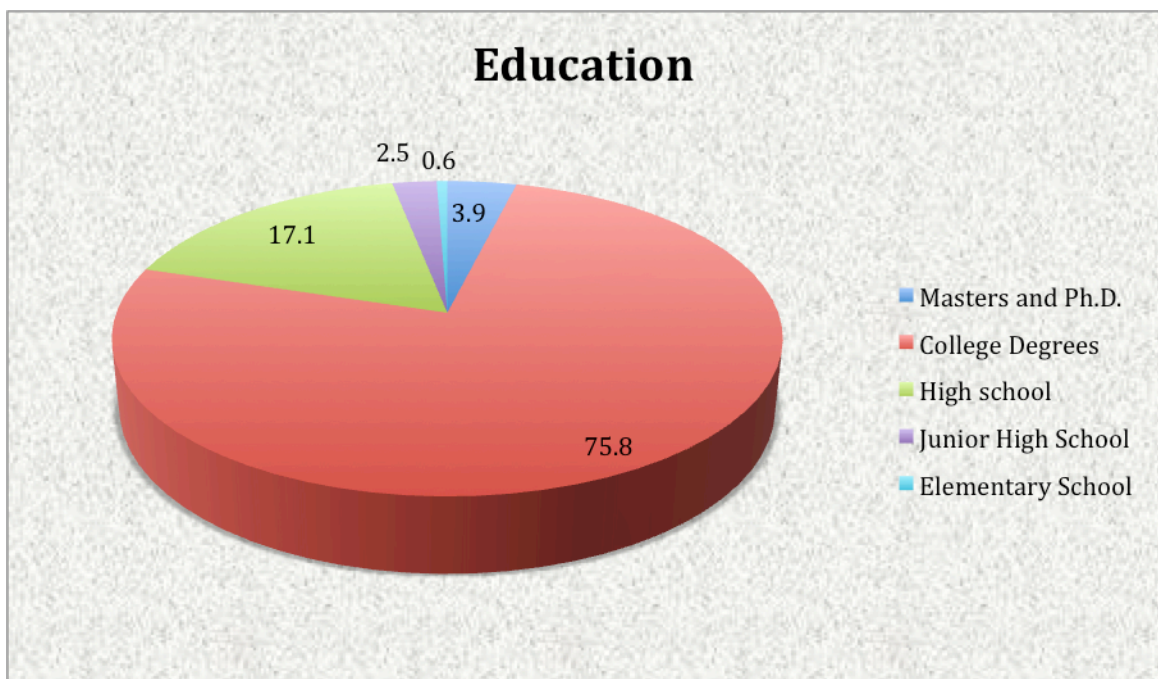


Fig. 1.4 The distribution of educational backgrounds of Chinese online forum users in 2006

Fig. 1.4 presents the educational background of Chinese online forum users. Almost 80% users own college or higher degrees, revealing the fact that most of the

online forum users are well educated. They have their own independent and logical thinking; they are interested in communicating and debating with others over a variety of issues.

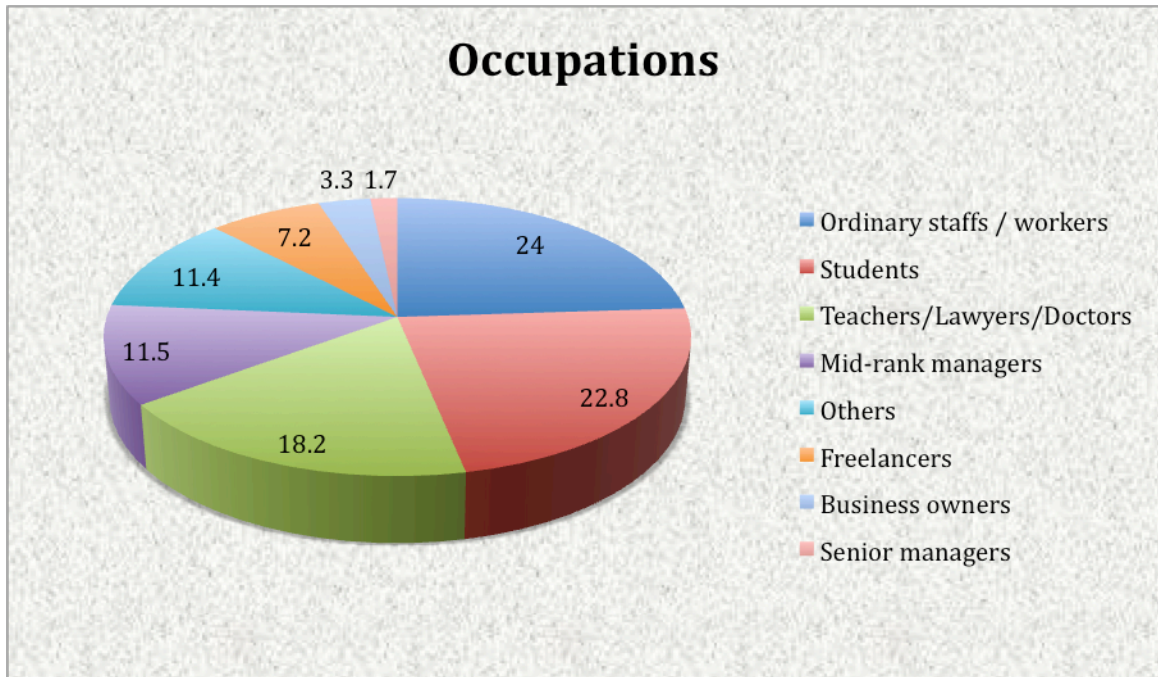


Fig. 1.5 The occupational distribution of Chinese online forum users in 2006

Fig 1.5 analyzes the population of online forum users by observing their professions. The majority groups are students, blue-collar workers, and professionals (including teachers, lawyers and doctors). Besides, most online forum users live in cities. In many rural areas, Internet access is still a luxury commodity.

Another survey reveals that 41.6% of the users use online forums between 9am to 12pm, and 30% of users use forums between 2pm to 6pm. Quite a large number of users visit online forums during their work hours in the daytime via office computers and Internet. More than 96% of users spend at least one hour in online forums every day and

almost 60% of users spend more than 3 hours. 25% of users spend more than 6 hours a day in online forums. From these figures, we can gain a clear idea about the important roles that online forums play in Internet users' life.⁸⁶

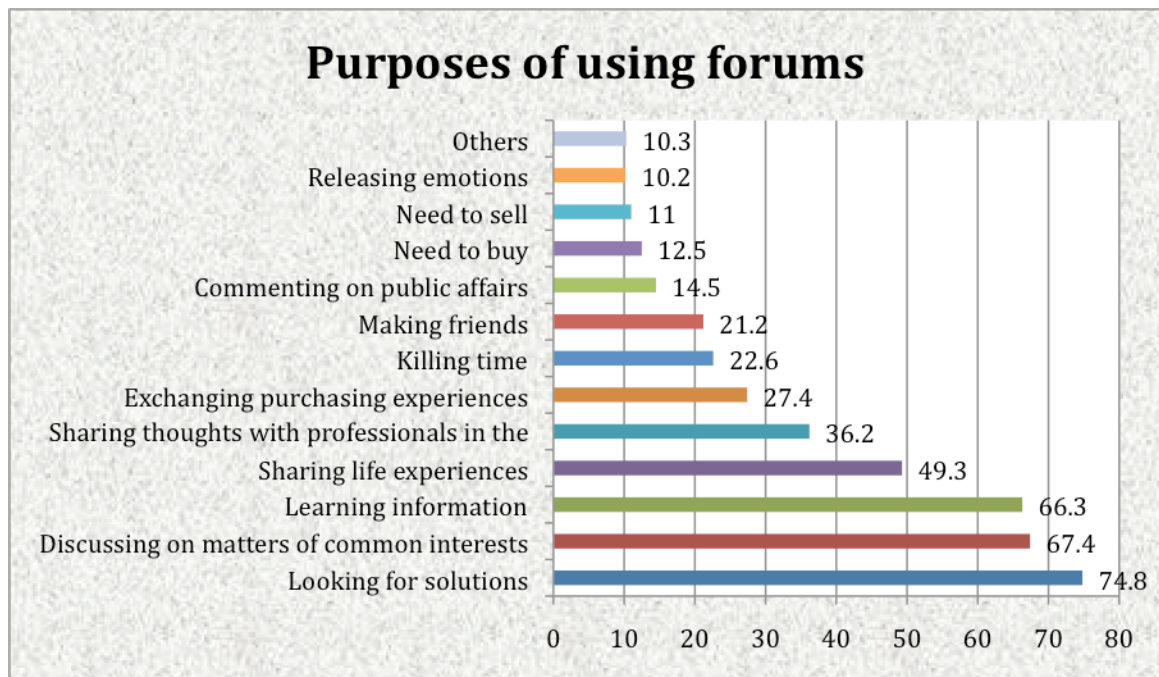


Fig. 1.6 The main purposes of using online forums (in percentage) in 2007

Fig. 1.6 lists the main purposes for users to use online forums. 74.8% of the users have a practical goal when using online forums. They are looking for solutions to the problems they encounter. The other two major purposes are to discuss issues users have common interests in, and to obtain information, news, and knowledge from online forums. 50% of users like to share their personal thoughts and experiences with others.

⁸⁶ Data for Fig 1.3 ~ Fig 1.5 collected from The 2nd Survey on the Development of China's Internet Communities (2006), available at <http://app.discuz.net/2006vote/>

Unlike their western counterparts, only a small portion of Chinese Internet users employs forums for monetary or business-related purposes. This is mostly because a mature credit appreciation system has not been established, and the online payment network is not ready from a technical perspective in China. Personal needs and interests are the primary forces that drive users to utilize online forums.

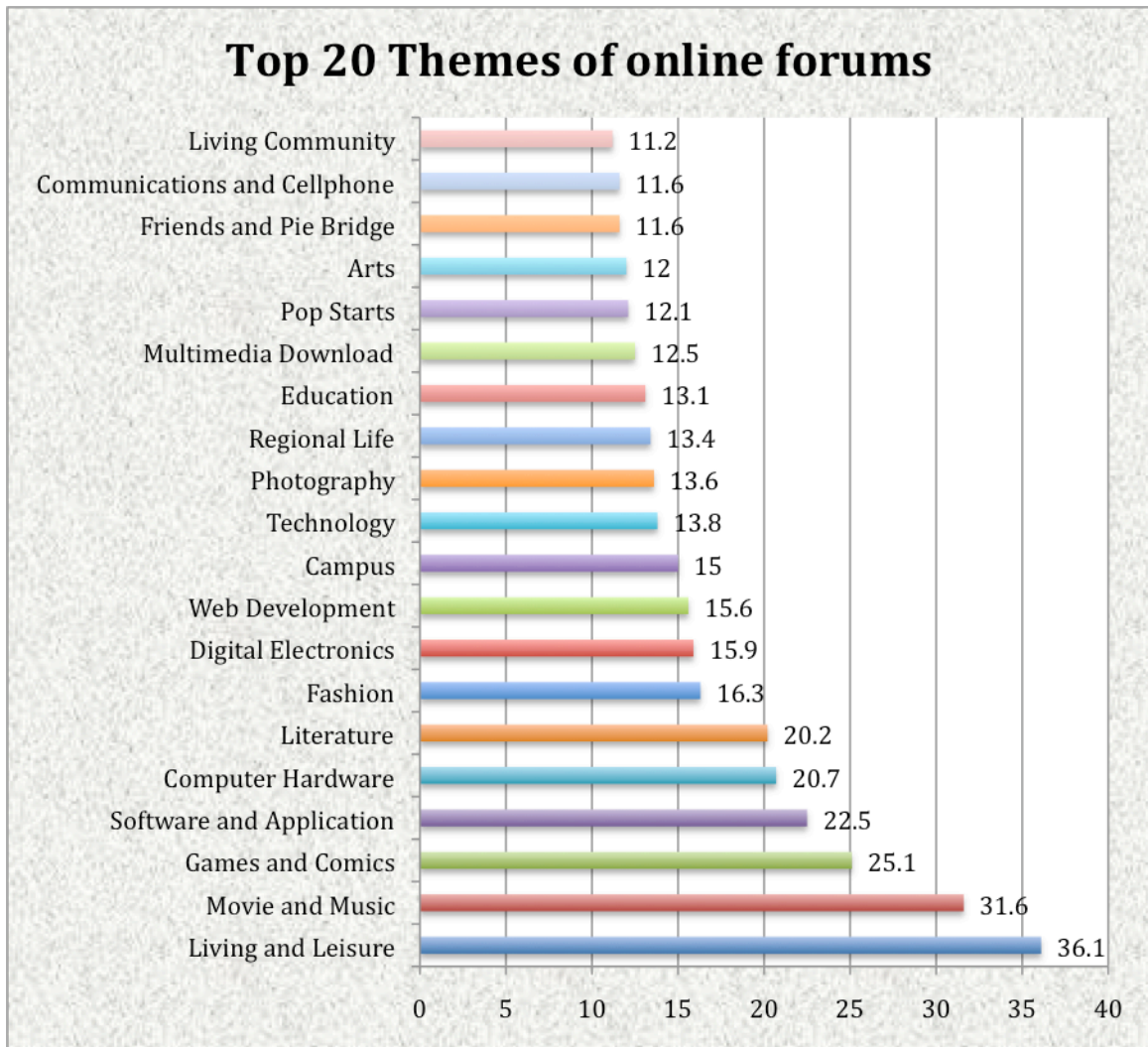


Fig. 1.7 Top 20 themes of online forums (in percentage) in 2007⁸⁷

Finally, from Fig. 1.7, we can see that forum users are most interested in discussing their personal life, entertainment, careers, etc. It is noteworthy that very few users discuss public affairs or politics on BBS. At least politics is not among the list of their top interests. However, as I will discuss shortly in subsequent chapters, once some social events arouse users' concerns, interests, and conscience, a mighty and influential force can be aggregated from these online forums.

1.4 Summary

In this chapter, we briefly review the history and development of BBS and online forums in the United States and in China. The definitions of BBS and online forums and their distinction are clarified and explained. In the United States, BBS experienced a short period of success and popularity. However, after the world entered the era of "WWW" and a flurry of innovative web services was developed in the late 1990s, BBS faded away rapidly. In contrast, BBS and online forums have received remarkable success and recognition among Chinese youths even after the buzz of Web 2.0 hit China in these two years. Traditional BBS accessed from a terminal program via a Telnet connection still stays popular among college students in schools. College BBS has become indispensable tools and platforms for students' campus life. In the same way, public online forums keep attracting a growing number of users. Regular reading, posting

⁸⁷ Data for Fig. 1.6 and Fig. 1.7 are collected from: A Brief Report of the study on China's Internet Communities (2007). Released by iResearch, a Shanghai-based Internet market research company. Available at <http://www.iresearch.com.cn/Report/Free.asp?classid=&id=1081>

and debate in online forums have become an important part of many Chinese people's Internet life.

Chapter 2 – Information Communication and Diffusion Mechanism on BBS

The importance of BBS to Chinese society can be observed from two points: the popularity of the platform (i.e. user population, the activeness of BBSers), and its social influence.

According to a report on China's Internet communities produced by iResearch, a Shanghai-based Internet Research Company, 80% of China's websites are running their own Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) in 2007⁸⁸. The number of daily page views across BBS totaled 1.6 billion, with average 10 million posts published every day⁸⁹.

In terms of its impact on society, a growing number of the issues emerging from the BBS sphere have now reached out to the offline world. The decentralized information flow structure on the Internet in general enables users to “conduct boundless ‘dialogue’ with a potentially unlimited number of other Internet users,”⁹⁰ which enormously assists large-scale information diffusion in cyberspace. However, among various Internet platforms, BBS seems to entail a “superior” communication system that best “facilitates the widespread exchanges of opinions and public discourse.”⁹¹ Such distinct communication mechanism gives buzz on BBS a great potential to top both online and

⁸⁸ A Brief Report of the study on China's Internet Communities (2007). Released by iResearch, a Shanghai-based Internet market research company. Available at <http://www.iresearch.com.cn/Report/Free.asp?classid=&id=1081>

⁸⁹ Gang Lu. (2008) “Old School BBS: The Chinese Social Networking Phenomenon”. Available at http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/bbs_china_social_networking.php

⁹⁰ Stauss, B. (1997) “Global Word of Mouth”, *Marketing Management* 6: 28.

⁹¹ Karsten Giese (2004). “Speaker's Corner on Virtual Panopticon: Discursive Construction of Chinese Identities Online.” *Cyber China: Reshaping National Identities in the Age of Information*. Palgrave Macmillan. November 4, 2004: 23

offline agenda. Furthermore, it can even mobilize a large number of users to conduct in-depth mining of specific information together, the behavior of which is sometimes called by Chinese netizens “human flesh search engine (*ren rou sou suo yin qing*).” This chapter will investigate the distinct information communication mechanism of the Chinese BBS platform compared to Blog and Social Networking Sites, and examine how information gets spread across the BBS space and finally tops the offline agenda. It will also touch upon the issue of information monitoring and filtering on BBS for us to better understand the pros and cons of this platform in terms of its potential to boost cyberdemocracy in China. I will base my analysis on a case study of the South China tiger scandal that occurred in December 2007.

2.1 Case Study: South China Tiger Scandal



Fig.2.1 The South China tiger photo taken by Zhou Zhenglong⁹²

On October 12, 2007, the Shaanxi provincial Department of Forestry held a press conference to announce the discovery of the precious wild South China tigers previously thought to be extinct in the forests of Zhenping County. Their evidence was based on the 71 photos of a South China tiger (31 film photographs plus 40 digital pictures) taken by Zhou Zhenglong—a local farmer and former hunter—on October 3rd. Zhou was rewarded 20,000 yuan (around \$2,857) for his contribution of the photos. After that, the news and the photos were posted to a variety of BBS sites. Dozens of netizens began to suspect that the pictures had been processed with Photoshop before release. On October 15, a post “*Shaanxi South China Tiger: another faked news*” was published on Tianya BBS—the second most popular BBS site in China. In that post the author enumerated several doubtful points of the photos such as the irregular effects of focus and illumination, and the unreal fur color of the tiger. The post immediately sparked heated controversy from netizens over the authenticity of the photos. Some of them doubted the tiger’s tame-looking expression: why the eyes of the tiger look so dull and mild but not frightening if it was a wild animal. Some speculated that the picture might be taken from another picture featuring a South China tiger because the skin and hair seem too shiny, without three-dimensional effect, and others even surmised that a tiger picture was actually enlarged, made into cardboard cut-out and placed in bushes before being photographed. On October 19, Fu Dezhi, a botanist at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, added that the plants were not to scale in relation to the tiger on the Yimei BBS. On October 25, China’s

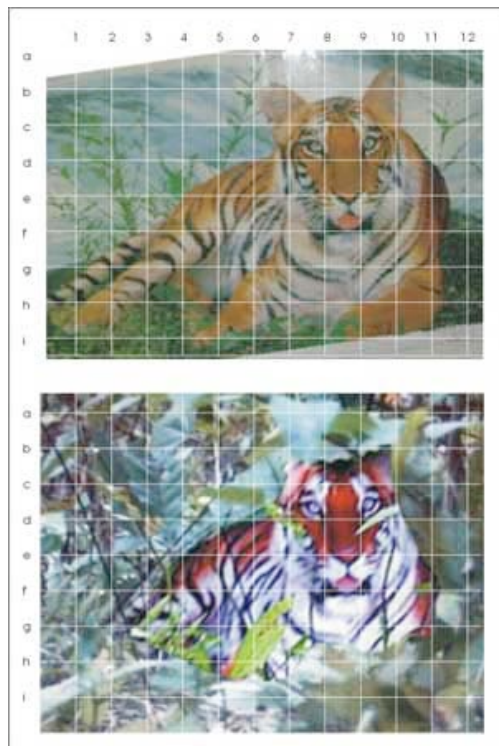
⁹² image source: <http://news.cn.yahoo.com/08-06-/1063/2j97p.html>

State Forestry Administration sent experts to verify the existence of South China tigers in Zhenping County after a significant number of netizens queried the photos, but they were not responsible for verifying the pictures. The Forestry Department of Shaanxi exhibited the film rolls, developed color photographs, and several digital pictures on October 29. However, on November 16, a netizen from Sichuan said the tiger image was cropped from a Lunar New Year poster. The second day, a series of BBS users in Beijing, Dali and Dongguan reported that they had found out the same tiger images. Meanwhile, the publisher of the tiger poster—a print company based in Yiwu, Zhejiang Province confirmed that the print was their product. On December 3, a panel of photography, zoology and botany expert claimed the photos were faked. On December 19, the State Forestry ordered Shaanxi provincial Forestry Department to appoint experts to authenticate Zhou’s photos. In February 2008, Forestry Department apologized to the public for “inappropriately announcing the discovery of the tiger without seeking approval” but made no comment on the authenticity of the photos. Finally, on June 29, Shaanxi Provincial government held a press conference and admitted that Zhou’s tiger photos were faked and announced that 13 local officials were sacked or punished, and Zhou had been arrested.⁹³

⁹³ The sources of the case are available at: http://zonaeuropa.com/20071019_1.htm, <http://tech.163.com/07/1123/09/3TVKO9GQ000915BF.html>, and http://news.cn.yahoo.com/08-06-/1063/2j97u_2.html



Fig. 2.2 The Lunar New Year poster⁹⁴



⁹⁴ Image source: <http://news.163.com/07/1116/12/3TE1A6D50001124J.html>

Fig. 2.3 The above image is from the Lunar New Year poster; the bottom is Zhou's South China tiger photo⁹⁵

This case provides us with rich materials to study how buzz is generated and diffused on BBS, gets further spread via traditional media, and finally tops the offline news agenda. Based on this case study, this chapter aims to identify the distinct communication mechanism of BBS for producing buzz and molding online and offline public opinion.

As we can see, there are two major steps for the photo scandal to eventually emerge as an important social issue: first, the scandal rose to salience in the BBS sphere; secondly, the scandal reached out to real life from virtual society. My analyses of BBS's communication mechanism will be constructed around these two steps.

2.2 How the scandal rises to salience on BBS?

1. Selection Mechanism

A typical Chinese BBS site has its own selection ecosystem. As we know, BBS usually contains hundreds or even thousands of categorized discussion boards that cover a variety of topics. For example LilyBBS, a small College BBS site, has 416 different discussion boards including almost every aspect of students' life. There are boards for campus student associations, job-hunting, matchmaking, environmental protection, online

⁹⁵ Image source: http://tech.china.com/zh_cn/science/news/154/20071119/14482428.html

gaming and for homosexual issues. Each day, tens of thousands of new posts are published on different boards. Overwhelmed by superfluous information, most Chinese BBS developed a dynamic selection mechanism for filtering out popular topics. On the main page of a BBS site, users are exposed to the most eye-catching area named “*Today’s top 10 topics (LilyBBS)*” or “*Recommended hot issues (Tianya BBS)*”. These top posts are in most cases automatically generated based on the click rate and total replies. When a post mounts to the “top 10” area, it will immediately attract exponentially growing attention from the whole BBS community. In the US, there are also thousands of aggregators that glean popular topics for target communities such as Digg. Yet, it seems to have little impact: people don’t go there just because it is the best visited. Even on the aggregation level, the US stays fragmented and marked by niche tastes, while the Chinese model skews towards “mass” interests. I will further illustrate this cultural difference in chapter three.

Such selection mechanism ensures the continuous birth of buzz on BBS. These top-agenda buzz are “selected” by BBS users themselves. In a mature and large-scale public online forums like Tianya which had already accumulated 20 million registered users by the end of June 2007⁹⁶, the top issues arising from there can be very representative of the interest of a large population in real society, though the population might . This justifies the phenomenon that a growing number of web portals and traditional media are now paying closer attention to the discussion content on BBS for the purpose of obtaining valuable news sources from there.

⁹⁶ Tianya user population: <http://article.tianya.cn/2005/ad/forty.htm>

When the South China tiger photos were first put on Tianya BBS, the post immediately invoked heated debate over the authenticity of these pictures within the BBS community. Skyrocketing click and replying rate swiftly brought it up to the “top agenda” of the Tianya forum. During those three months, snowflake-like posts about the tiger photos swept across Tianya, and quickly spilled over to other BBS, web portals, newspapers, and televisions.

Grassroots blogs are considered another popular online platform for shaping public opinion. In a recent article released on NY Times titled *Despite Flaws, Rights in China Have Expanded*, the author talked about the Weng’an case that happened in June this year, and commented that “Chinese blogs [have begun to] subvert propaganda [of the government].”⁹⁷

On June 28 2008, in a poor county in Southwest China’s Guizhou Province, over 10,000 people rioted and torched the government buildings and cars to “vent anger towards the local government’s cover up of an alleged rape and murder of a female student.”⁹⁸ When local authorities tried to suppress this news, a radio reporter Wu Hanpin who witnessed the riot put the pictures he took on his personal blog, which attracted “hundreds of thousands of visitors” and eventually caused his blog to be “closed by censors.”⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Howard W. French. *Despite Flaws, Rights in China Have Expanded*. August 2, 2008, online available at http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/02/world/asia/02china.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1

⁹⁸ News sources: http://tech.china.com/zh_cn/science/news/154/20071119/14482428.html and http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/02/world/asia/02china.html?_r=1&pagewanted=3&oref=slogin

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

We did see the “power” of grassroots blog in the case. The reporter’s blog made the riot visible to the public, which was not possible before the Internet age in China. However, the whole issue was still first raised to salience by the BBS community¹⁰⁰ rather than the blogosphere. After the news was broke on Tianya BBS, it aroused heated discussions about the girl’s “mysterious” death. Even after the board moderators began to remove all relevant posts, BBSers continued publishing updated information and news onto the BBS.¹⁰¹ The photos taken by Wu were also put onto a number of online forums, which stimulated further discussions among netizens. The public discussions and opinions on BBS drove the case to become the top agenda of real society, which in turn successfully forced the local government to conduct further investigation into the girl’s death. This case, in fact, provides us with another exemplar of BBS’s unmatched social influence in China.

As a matter of fact, the blog, as a kind of “we media,” entails the grassroots spirit that is supposedly able to dismantle Big Media’s monopoly, transforming it from a unidirectional lecture to an interactive conversation.¹⁰² However, the prosperity of celebrity blogs first initiated by Sina Blog in 2005 largely ruined the grassroots spirit of

¹⁰⁰ What does Guizhou’s Weng’an case tell us? Online available at <http://star.news.sohu.com/20080701/n257859978.shtml>

¹⁰¹ The Implication of the 6.28 Guizhou’s Weng’an Case, online available at <http://www.csuchen.de/bbs/redirect.php?tid=316701&goto=lastpost>

¹⁰² Dan Gillmor. (2006). *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People*. O’Reilly Media, Inc.

blogging¹⁰³, establishing a new hierarchy in China's blogosphere. The popularity of a blog became correlated in a positive way to the fame of the blogger in real life. Celebrity blogs overshadowed common people's voices, and discouraged ordinary people from debating with those "opinion leaders." Moreover, as I discussed in the introduction part, blogosphere is a scattered system, with individual blogs sporadically uttering personal thoughts. Each blog is a "one-to-many", "we media" communication system, with the blogger acting as the role of "gate-keeper¹⁰⁴," and readers as receivers. Even if readers can reply to the article, their comments are too dispersive, non-instant and non-interactive to form public discussions and shape public opinions. Neither does China's blog space provide a mechanism to let public netizens *select* their own top agenda. The "hot topics" on Sinablog's main page are selected by web editors based upon the fame of bloggers rather than by grassroots netizens. Except for these celebrity blogs which can sometimes top the offline agenda, a significant majority of grassroots blogs in China merely work as personal diaries for sharing stories and life experiences with friends.

SNS is predicted to have huge potential to initiate large-scale information diffusion. But SNS is a networking-centric instead of an opinion-exchange platform. BBS, in contrast, is an open and ever-changing system in terms of its continuously updated news and information. It keeps pulling up with current trends in real society, which thus allures users to stay and discuss with others on a variety of topics. With its

¹⁰³ Yu Yin and Jun Yin. (2006) "The Analysis of Celebrity Blogging Phenomenon (ming ren bo ke xian xiang fen xi)." Published by People.com at <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/22114/52789/69902/4738584.html>

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

ever-changing information environment, the birth and diffusion of new buzz from BBS has never stopped. On SNS, however, most posts are just daily greetings, with no juicy news updated or top agenda generated. Thus, SNS might possess the potential to *spread* message through its large interpersonal network, but in terms of *producing* buzz it seems to be still lagging behind BBS in China.

2. Anonymity

As I discussed in the introduction, apart from very few college BBS sites that are still requiring real name registration, almost all other Chinese online forums employ the anonymous system. Differently, most Chinese social networking sites require real name registration¹⁰⁵. SNS is essentially a networking centric platform. People on SNS do not care much about unveiling their real identities in China because they merely use the sites to make friends rather than to express opinions. The blogosphere of China has also witnessed the trend of the unification of online and offline identities partly due to the drive of celebrity blogs. Grassroots bloggers in China are usually used to share personal experience with others. Thus, bloggers will intentionally or unintentionally release their real life information on their blogs, information like where they live, which college they went to, what kind of jobs they are doing, and their personal photos, etc.

According to a survey conducted by IAC, a U.S. based interactive media conglomerate, and JWT, the world's fourth largest advertising agency, "Chinese [young netizens] were almost twice as likely as Americans to agree that it's good to be able to express *honest opinions* anonymously online (79 percent vs. 42 percent) and to agree that

¹⁰⁵ Real name registration: the trend of SNS, online available at <http://www.itcaogen.cn/web2/4810-1.html>

online they are free to do and say things they would not do or say offline (73 percent vs. 32 percent).”¹⁰⁶ It is evident that the forum users cherish the anonymity of this online platform. BBS is regarded a cyber public space where people can freely express and exchange opinions on a variety of social issues including social inequality and government corruption, even if the “free” discussion is still not applicable to Tibetan issue, Tiananmen Square protest, Taiwan independence, or other politically sensitive issues. The anonymity imparts the feeling of security to the users, which enormously encourages their participation in online public discussions and debates, and therefore accelerates the information flow and diffusion across a large number of users.

3. User ID Ranking System

Another distinct feature about China’s BBS is that it sets up a ranking system for its users. Each ID is assigned a “rank” according to the accumulated scores computed through the online hours, login times, and total posted articles of an ID. The ranking system can be customized, with various choices. For example, LilyBBS provides the military rank (soldier, lieutenant, captain, general, etc.), flower rank (unknown flower, flower spirit, lily fairy etc.), or common rank (common user, middle-ranked user, etc.) The “hierarchy” of BBS does take some effect in getting users attached to it and keeping them post new articles. “*Gua zhan*,” which literally means “hanging on sites,” is a jargon of the BBS community used to describe the activity of continuously staying on BBS for accumulating scores; “*guan shui*,” or “*pouring water*” in English, refers to the activity of

¹⁰⁶ The summary of the “Young Digital Mavens” study conducted by IAC and JWT is available at http://www.iac.com/index/news/press/IAC/press_release_detail.htm?id=8833

posting a great many articles for upgrading their rank. For some useful or valuable posts on a BBS site, only users with a certain rank will have the right to read them. Chinese BBS is very much like the online gaming in terms of the hierarchy mechanism. This system hooks the users on the site and further motivates them to take part into online public debates.

For the South China Tiger scandal, the information communication mechanism of BBS played an important role in generating and spreading the information. First, after the press conference, the skeptics “coincidentally” all chose BBS as the place to query Zhou’s photos¹⁰⁷ and challenge authorities primarily owing to the anonymity and the large user base of BBS. After that, a great many BBSers took participation in the verification of those tiger photographs, which further raised the issue’s visibility and salience. BBSers collected a myriad of evidence to either support or object to Zhou Zhenglong. On China’s BBS, the term “human flesh search engine (ren rou sou suo yin qin)” is used to describe this kind of phenomenon—tens of thousands of users are mobilized with one single goal—that is to dig out the facts and expose them to the glare of publicity. Different from technical Google or Baidu, the “ren rou” search engine, is a human-assisted search activity completely based on the “discussion (or gossip)” of the mass. This is not the same as the Western “wisdom of the crowd” concept because the topics that incur “human flesh search engine” activity on BBS are usually about privacy and recreation rather than public affairs or other serious issues. Zhou might never expect that netizens

¹⁰⁷ “The interactive agenda-setting between the Internet and traditional media (2008).” Published on online China Journalism Review, available at http://cjr.zjol.com.cn/05cjr/system/2008/02/28/009251400_01.shtml

could find out the old Lunar New Year poster he utilized to fake the tiger photos. As Xujun Eberlein, the Chinese-American writer and observer, said:

“China’s population makes it easy to mobilize a large number of netizens to participate in such a search, especially considering that there are many smart and reasonably well-educated people in China who are intellectually underemployed.”¹⁰⁸

This type of the large-scale truth seeking online activity rests with the unique cyber environment BBS provides. In general, users like to voice opinions and challenge authorities in the online community *anonymously*; they like to “*gua zhan*” and “*guan shui*,” through which they can accumulate their experience scores (ID ranking) and also vote their interested top issues in the community. This environment facilitates the birth and diffusion of buzz in the BBS sphere.

2.3 How does online buzz top the offline agenda?

The selection mechanism, anonymous registration, ID ranking system, combined with the large user base of China’s BBS guarantee the incessant birth of prevalent issues within the *online* community. However, to further top the *offline* public agenda in real society still demands the assistance of traditional mass media. From the case of the South China tiger scandal, we can clearly see the interactive agenda-setting relationship between the Internet and traditional media (including both newspapers and television).

¹⁰⁸ Human flesh search engines: Chinese vigilantes that hunt victims on the web, online available at http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/article4213681.ece

Before we continue our case study, it would be useful for us to first briefly review the theory of “agenda setting” in both the States and China.

In his 1922 book *Public Opinion* Walter Lippman sketched the power of traditional mass media to set a national agenda and to lead public attention to a few key issues. The mass media is the primary source of our perception about the larger world, a world that is “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind” for most of us.¹⁰⁹ In 1948, Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet published *The People's Choice*, an article analyzing the voters’ decision-making process in the 1940 presidential campaign. The study suggested that the mass media of radio and print unexpectedly had relatively minor direct effects on how people voted; rather, people tend to be much more effected by interpersonal communication with influential peers.”¹¹⁰ This result was further developed into the theory of “two-step flow of communication” and “opinion leadership” in the book *Personal Influence* (1955) published by Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld.

However, before opinion leaders exert their influence on group members’ decision making, they may have already been limited by the topics put before them. Bernard Cohen, who coined the term “agenda setting”, commented on the role of mass media: “The media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but they are ‘stunningly successful in telling people what to think about.’”¹¹¹

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw further investigated the agenda-setting function of

¹⁰⁹ Walter Lippman. (1922) *Public Opinion*. New York, Macmillan, 1922: 29.

¹¹⁰ Lazarsfeld, Paul F.; Berelson, Bernard; and Gaudet, Hazel. (1944). *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce.

¹¹¹ Bernard Cohen (1963), "The Press and Foreign Policy. " Princeton University Press, 1963, quoted in Charles Berger and Steven Chaffee, *Handbook of Communication Science*. Newbury Park, CA.: Sage, 1987: 105.

the mass media by studying the presidential campaigns in 1968, 1972 and 1976. They concluded that the mass media did exert a significant influence on what voters perceived to be the most critical issues of the campaign.¹¹²The landmark agenda-setting study by McCombs and Shaw also revealed “a high degree of correlation amongst the various media...[which] served as an important benchmark for future research on inter-media agenda setting.”¹¹³

In China, mass communication studies developed very slowly due to political reasons. The Cultural Revolution during 1960s and 1970s separated China from the outside world. In July 1978, the first journal on journalism from the Revolution *Foreign Journalism Materials* was published, representing the beginning of China’s communication research. In 1982, American Communication scholar Wilbur Schramm visited China. His book *Handbook of Communication* was translated and published in China in 1983. However, the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest suspended China’s communication research again. In 1997 after the communication study was resumed, Sun Xupei’s book *Chinese Communication Theories* was published, which represents the first attempt of Chinese scholars to localize the communication studies. In fact, one of the most attractive topics to Chinese communication scholars is the applicability of the agenda setting theory to the Chinese society.¹¹⁴ In 2001, the researchers of Fudan

¹¹² McCombs, M.E., & Shaw, D.L. (1972). The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36 (Summer), 176-187.

¹¹³ William R. Davie and T. Michael Maher. (2006). “Maxwell McCombs: agenda-setting explorer.” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, June, 2006, available at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m6836/is_2_50/ai_n24996027

¹¹⁴ Lidan, Chen. (2005). “The History and Current Situation of China’s Communication Research.” Available at <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/22100/28502/28503/3955362.html>

University did the sampling survey in Shanghai, and discovered that though on a macro level, Chinese media did influence the nation's agenda, on a micro level the public and mass media were disparate in the degrees of their attention to some issues. For example, the survey respondents ranked *environmental protection, corruption, job employment, and China's entrance into World Trade Organization* as their focused issues, while on the list of traditional media's agenda they were all lower-ranked ones¹¹⁵. This survey reflected the society's distrust of traditional media on a few issues at that time¹¹⁶.

Indeed, Chinese mass media have been serving as the mouthpiece of the government since 1949. However, the media reform started from the late 1970s deprived Chinese media of government subsidies. China's mass media thereafter bogged down into a dilemma: the party manipulates their news agenda while they have to finance themselves through the profits earned from circulation and advertisement¹¹⁷. In order to survive the increasingly more competitive media market, the media has to engage the audience when deciding what to report. The party and money are, thus, both acting as the driving forces for the media to decide their reporting agenda, just like what the editor of Shenzhen Special Zone Daily said, "the front pages are sold to the government, while the

¹¹⁵ Yu Ni. (2006) "Walk out of the Misconception about the interactivity between Newspapers and Readers." available at <http://media.people.com.cn/GB/22114/49489/76462/5220152.html>

¹¹⁶ Note that the survey was conducted in 2001. The top agenda perceived by the public nowadays can be greatly different from that in 2001.

¹¹⁷ Zhao, Y. Z. (1998). *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the party line and the bottom line*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

back (pages) are to the money.”¹¹⁸The party “sets the politically sensitive agenda [for] the media to guide public opinion,” while “the money takes charge of the non-politically-sensitive domain.”¹¹⁹

After the Internet was introduced into China in the late 1990s, it dramatically swept across the country and made itself a legend in the history of media of China. According to a recent survey released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the number of China’s netizens soared to 253 million by July 2008, surpassing the U.S. to be the world’s biggest Internet market¹²⁰. Some people regard the Internet as the virtual “public sphere” that has greatly promoted China’s democratization process¹²¹ compared to the pre-Internet era. Some began to become curious about the Internet’s agenda setting impact on the society. For example, after the China-US air collision incident occurred in 2001, Li Xiguang and Qin Xuan (2001) tracked the posts on Qiangguo (which means “strong country”) BBS of People.com.cn—a popular forum for discussing political issues, and found that many articles updated by BBS users were translated from western media while Chinese media still kept tight-lipped at that time. Li

¹¹⁸ Huailin Chen and Zhou He. (1998). *The Chinese Media: A New Perspective*. Hong Kong: The Pacific Century Press, 1998. Quoted in the Qiu Jin, “Resonance Effects: Online Public Opinion and Agenda-setting of Traditional Media in Today China,” available at <http://comm.nccu.edu.tw/wp-content/digiconf05/part9/9-3.doc>

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰ David Barboza. “China Surpasses U.S. in Number of Internet Users.” *NYTimes.com*, July 26, 2008, online available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/26/business/worldbusiness/26internet.html?ei=5070&en=68da0954805473a5&ex=1217736000&adxnnl=1&emc=eta1&adxnnlx=1217095389-KcN5XsvE+5qQyZFWX9F/FQ>

¹²¹ Yanan Zheng and Defeng Jiang. (2004). “Internet News Communication Promotes China’s Political Democratization Process (wang luo xin wen chuan bo dui zhong guo min zhu jin cheng de cu jin zuo yong).” Available at <http://www.uxiu.com/top/news/news.asp?id=275>

and Qin held that BBS has changed the basic information flow of China’s journalism; the state-owned official media had gradually lost their power of information control when the Internet brought to the public a relatively “free and transparent information environment.”¹²² Chen Tongxu and Deng Lifeng (2002) also studied how the issues arose and waned on BBS, through which they concluded that the public opinion on BBS was a “potential and intangible power” in China: BBS is “marginal”, but is a big “complement” to traditional media’s agenda setting¹²³. Now, let us turn back to the South China Scandal case study.



Fig. 2.4 Baidu Index of the keywords “South China Tiger” and “Zhou Zhenglong”

¹²² Xiguang Li and Xuan Qin. (2001). “Who is setting China’s agenda today? BBS’s Restructuring of the Agenda of Party-owned Newspapers on Big News Events.” Available at http://www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/wk_wzdetails.asp?id=1490

¹²³ Tongxu Chen and Lifeng Deng. (2002). “The emergence and waning of the issues of BBS.” *Journalism and Communication Research*, 2002. Available at http://www.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/wk_wzdetails.asp?id=1668

The above diagram compares the fluctuation of the attention from BBS users and from traditional media to the South China Tiger issue. The yellow curve stands for the degree of attention to the keyword of “South China tiger (hua nan hu)”, while the blue curve stands for the attention to “Zhou Zhenglong.” The above curves track the online public, which are compared to the bottom lines representative of traditional media. As we can see from the diagram, the peak of the top yellow curve points to the date of December 3rd 2007 when the Baidu index of attention degree soared to 14809¹²⁴. On almost the same day, traditional media also exhibited great interest and made intensive reporting on the scandal. The top and bottom curves almost move in lockstep, which indicates that the online community and mass media were greatly influencing each other.

The whole scandal originates from the news report of the press conference held up by the Shaanxi provincial Department of Forestry. Interestingly, all skeptics chose the Internet as the outlet for questioning the authenticity of Zhou’s photos. The scandal soon attracted large-scale attention from the BBS community. Traditional media quickly engaged themselves in investigating the issue. After Fu Dezhi posted an article online asserting that the photos were all faked on October 19, the *Southern Metropolis Daily* newspaper immediately published an article in which they quoted what Fu wrote in his post, titled *There is doubt about the South China tiger and further investigation is warranted*. On November 21 2007, the newspaper published another editorial, which talked about the new evidence found out by BBSers-the Lunar New Year tiger poster-that

¹²⁴ Baidu index provides search trends on Baidu search. Baidu provides an index of over 740 million web pages, 80 million images, and 10 million multimedia files. Available at: <http://index.baidu.com/>

had proved Zhou's photos to be faked, and also about how the government should react to the growing distrust of the public:

“It is believed that the discovery of the Lunar New Year poster has ended the South China Tiger scandal. All other things are awaiting the government to cope with...the surfacing of the Lunar New Year poster has posed an acute question [of credit to the Shaanxi government], but the government must confront it; the public opinions have progressed to the current phase...[the officials] have to give an answer and explanation [to the public].”¹²⁵

The editorial also commented that:

“The era when people blindly believe what the government tells them is over. Likewise, the era when the people are too afraid to speak out is also over.”¹²⁶

In this whole issue, news reporters kept tracking online public opinions on BBS. At the same time, they also went to the “frontlines” to conduct interviews with Zhou and local officials. The interviews released by newspapers and television programs were again posted to BBS, where netizens continued their discussions and debates on these news. For example, after a post “*Shaanxi South China Tiger: another faked news*” was published on Tianya BBS on October 15, *Southern Metropolis Daily* reporter Tan Renwei paid a visit to the Zhenping county Forestry Department five days later. He interviewed some workers there and brought back new tiger photographs taken by Zhou. These photos were put by Tan onto BBS, and immediately drove BBSers to heatedly

¹²⁵ The editorial on the South China Tiger scandal published on *Southern Metropolis Daily* on Nov. 21, 2007, online available at http://www.nddaily.com/A/html/2007-11/21/content_314921.htm

¹²⁶ *ibid*, and <http://www.wayodd.com/farmer-accused-of-fake-tiger-photo-returns-to-forest/v/8485/>

debate upon the tiger issue again. Miscellaneous sources from BBS and from traditional media freely flow to each other, which further enhances the “cooperation” between the two.¹²⁷

In this case, BBS and traditional media enjoy a mutual benefit: on BBS, users can express and exchange opinions in a relatively free and dynamic way owing to the lack of an almighty top-to-down “gatekeeper.”¹²⁸ However, without the “assistance” of traditional media, the message is still unable to reach such a large population in real society. Traditional media maintain the “natural advantage” of communicating with the government, and voicing the officials’ viewpoints¹²⁹, which can help bridge the gap between the government and public. Moreover, as I mentioned above, traditional media have to engage the audience in deciding their reporting agenda for the purpose of surviving the increasingly competitive Chinese media market. No sources could be much better than BBS, where a myriad of interesting topics continuously stream from public discussions and debates. Building upon the popularity of these top online issues, traditional media have the chance to attract more potential audiences if they can take full advantage of their own professionalism, capital, and networking.

2.4 Filtering and Monitoring Mechanism on BBS

¹²⁷ “The interactive agenda-setting between the Internet and traditional media (2008).” Published on online China Journalism Review, available at http://cjr.zjol.com.cn/05cjr/system/2008/02/28/009251400_01.shtml

¹²⁸ In mass communication theories, gatekeeping refers to the process through which information are filtered for publication. It was first brought up by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1947 (<http://www.tcw.utwente.nl/theorieenoverzicht/Theory%20clusters/Media,%20Culture%20and%20Society/gatekeeping.doc/>).

¹²⁹ See note 127.

A critical reason why the South China Tiger scandal is able to top the public agenda of both the BBS sphere and real society is that the incident does not touch upon any “sensitive” taboos (including politically sensitive issues, violence, crime, and pornography) in China’s society. But what will happen if a user attempts to post “sensitive” information such as Tibetan independence or Tiananmen Square protests onto BBS?

As I wrote in the introduction part, the Internet in China has been equipped with an advanced and sophisticated surveillance system- the “Great Firewall of China” that is utilized by the government to monitor online information. This system is applied to Chinese BBS in the following ways:

First, keyword censorship. Users are not allowed to publish any posts that contain “sensitive” words on BBS. Users will be alerted by the system that his/her post contains certain sensitive word, and will be sent to the site manager directly before gets published. This censorship is done by the machine automatically.

Secondly, the surveillance from BBS site managers/administrators and board moderators, which I have talked about in the introduction. These “gate keepers” will keep tracking of the posts and remove “inappropriate” information from the BBS. They also have the right to block or delete a user’s ID if the user keeps posting “sensitive” information. But it is noteworthy that this level of censorship is usually in an ex post facto manner, which means board moderators will not notice some “sensitive” content until the post has already grabbed extensive attention from the BBS community. For example, the Weng’an riot that I mentioned earlier in this chapter is a case to the point. When board moderators and site administrators began to remove all of the information

about the Weng'an case, the issue has been intensively and extensively discussed among BBS users. Users uncompromisingly kept posting new information onto Tianya BBS regardless of board moderators' clean-up. Under such circumstances, it is very hard for site regulators to cover up the issue on the Internet. This ex post facto censorship, therefore, cannot guarantee 100% regulation of the information flow on BBS. Furthermore, the delimitation of "sensitive issues" is very vague and ever-changing in China, which thus further enhances the difficulty of regulating user generated content by site managers. For example, the issues of "corruption" or "malfeasance" of local government are usually discussable on BBS. However, when the issue attracts too much attention from the public or even evolves into a "riot"(like the Weng'an riot) in real society, it will definite be banned on BBS.

Thirdly, self-censorship. Even if Chinese netizens are good at creating net jargons to circumvent keyword censorship, they are still very cautious of publishing "outrageously" sensitive content onto BBS because they are aware of the online surveillance system and are afraid of any potential sanctions.

The monitoring and filtering system on BBS ensures that all issues stirring massive resonance generated from the BBS community will not threaten the regime of China's central government. Furthermore, popular issues in cyberspace still need the assistance from traditional media in order to increase their social influences, which thus poses another restriction to the range of topics BBS generated popular content can touch upon because traditional media serve as additional "censor" when the buzz growing from BBS attempts to reach out into real society.

2.5 Summary

In conclusion, the information diffusion through BBS can be divided into two steps: the emergence and diffusion of “buzz” on BBS, and the reaching out of BBS generated buzz to real world. Compared to other online platforms, BBS possesses a distinct communication mechanism characterized by its selection system, anonymity and user ID ranking, which guarantees the incessant generation of popular issues from the online community. BBS plays an important role in providing “free” space for people to discuss public affairs and disclose social issues. Nevertheless, for further topping the public agenda of real society, it still needs to assistance of traditional media to disseminate the information. The case of the South China tiger scandal exemplified how the inter-media agenda setting between BBS and mass media works and how the two media “collaborate” with each other and eventually drive the case to be the top issue in real society.

However, not all top issues on BBS have the chance to get spread across cyberspace and/or real society. The monitoring system on China’s Internet keeps surveillance of user generated content and filters out all “sensitive” information from BBS. Nevertheless, the ex post facto regulation by site managers, plus the vague and ever-changing delimitation of “sensitive issues” enhances the difficulty of online censorship, which in turn gives some “sensitive” issues enough exposure and visibility before they get throttled down. This “bottom-up” information flow structure has contributed to China’s democratization. Before the Internet age, all media in China were tightly regulated and censored in a top-to-down way by the government. Today, the

decentralized online world has largely liberated user-generated content and information in many ways.

Chapter 3 – China’s “Post-80’s Generation” On BBS

Chapter two analyzes the unique communication mechanism of Chinese BBS in terms of how it facilitates information diffusion. However, the functional and structural properties of the platform are inadequate to justify the “peculiar” popularity of BBS in China and the “unusual” activeness of Chinese BBS users. This chapter will shift the focus toward BBS users, exploring who are using BBS in China and what are their social behaviors, values and identities.

3.1 Behind the enthusiasm of Chinese netizens towards BBS

As illustrated in the introduction and chapter one, Chinese BBS space is dominated by younger generation who have good educational backgrounds, with 68.9% of BBS users (including users on all forms of BBS) aged 18-30, and 79.7% holding college degrees or higher. The survey on China’s online communities by iResearch reported that 44.7% of Chinese BBSers spend 3-8 hours per day, and 15.1% are on BBS sites for over 8 hours each day.¹³⁰ Moreover, 69.7% of BBSers have been using online forums for over five years; 50.4% of the respondents agree that the hours they spend on BBS account for 20-60% of their total online time; 79.8% have even published or replied to BBS posts¹³¹. They are very active in posting articles and joining online public

¹³⁰ A Brief Report of the study on China’s Internet Communities (2007). Released by iResearch, a Shanghai-based Internet market research company. Available at <http://www.iresearch.com.cn/Report/Free.asp?classid=&id=1081>

¹³¹ The 2nd Survey on the Development of China’s Internet Communities.(2006). Available at <http://app.discuz.net/2006vote/>

discussions; they make aggressive comments and sometimes arrogantly debate with or even abuse one another. When we investigate the information diffusion on Chinese BBS, apart from the distinct functionalities provided by BBS, it is just as important for us to zoom in and examine these young BBS users within the specific societal and cultural context of China.

In fact, the fundamental reason why Chinese BBSers behave in a particularly aggressive and active way in online forums has yet been addressed extensively, even though it has intrigued many Chinese media scholars, IT entrepreneurs and venture capitalists. However, several hypotheses have been proposed.

First of all, China is regarded as a place lacking much civic participation in politics and public affairs due to its one-party authoritarian regime. The state-owned mass media are “strictly manipulated and controlled by the ideological organs of the party.”¹³² BBS, as the first computer-mediated virtual community where people are able to express their personal thoughts and exchange opinions, are deemed by some scholars to constitute the online “public sphere” of China¹³³. As keso, a well-known IT specialist and blogger in Beijing, said about China’s BBS, “China has historically lacked a *public sphere* — that is, a social space where ordinary citizens [can] discuss issues and form public opinion.

¹³² Qiu Jin, “Resonance Effects: Online Public Opinion and Agenda-setting of Traditional Media in Today China,” online available at <http://comm.nccu.edu.tw/wp-content/digiconf05/part9/9-3.doc>

¹³³ Su Chen, and Bing Chen (2005). “Internet: Virtual Public Sphere—take BBS’s agenda setting by example.” *Press Circles*, Issue 1, 2005, 58-60

The Internet in China, despite censorship, has filled much of this need; this explains...the enormous popularity of BBS in China.”¹³⁴

Secondly, the enthusiasm of Chinese youth towards the online forums also reflects various social, cultural and political constraints in real society. As Henry Jenkins has commented regarding a study on China’s digital mavens produced by IAC and JWT which reveals that Chinese youths are more engaged in the online world than their American counterparts, “it seems more useful to think about the different constraints on participation [youths] in each country face in their offline lives and the ways that online experiences may allow them at some limited experiences of transcending those constraints.”¹³⁵ Compared to American young people, Chinese urban youth (18-30), who are the dominant demographic group on BBS, seem to be receiving far more real-life constraints for a range of cultural and societal reasons.

The deep-rooted Confucianism and collectivism-oriented East Asian culture does not encourage people to voice personal opinions and behavior in their own ways. Rather, “the desire to conform translates into very distinct patterns of [Asian people’s] behavior.”¹³⁶ As Hellmut Schutte wrote in *Distinguishing Features of Asian Culture*:

“There are few situations in Chinese society in which an individual is allowed to behave according to his private feelings and moods...there

¹³⁴ Keso Speaks on the Ogilvy Beijing “Innovation Day.” Online available at <http://digitalwatch.ogilvy.com.cn/en/?p=217>

¹³⁵ Henry, Jenkins. “Field Notes from Shanghai: China’s Digital Mavens”, published on his web log at http://www.henryjenkins.org/2008/01/field_notes_from_shanghai_chin.html

¹³⁶ Hellmut Schütte and Deanne Ciarlante. (1998). *Consumer Behavior in Asia*. NYU Press, December 1, 1998: 40

exist more rules surrounding the display of emotions in Chinese (and Japanese) culture than in Western culture. The indoctrination of these rules is so strong during socialization that, even as adults, the Chinese react with less visible emotion than do Westerners to provocative events.”¹³⁷

These cultural constraints, in turn, make people tend to behave more actively and aggressively in virtual society since in cyberspace they are no longer subjected to the “uniformity” and “rigidity” required by their society.

Apart from cultural reasons, there are a lot more constraints from real society. Feng Xiaotian, the one-child research specialist in Nanjing University, and Tao Dongfeng, Professor of Chinese Literature in Capital Normal University, when they tried to demystify the distinct behavior of Chinese youths in real world and virtual society, mentioned the unique social environment characterized by “consumerism” and the “exam-oriented education system (*ying shi jiao yu*)” China’s younger generation are living in today.¹³⁸ Tao Dongfeng further explained that Chinese youths are growing up in an educational environment in which the ideology and politics they were taught in school (i.e. socialism, Marxism, communism, sacrifice of individuals to the country, etc.) are completely divorced from social actualities represented by fierce competition, market economy, consumerism and individualism, a situation conducive to the “dissociated

¹³⁷ Ibid: 41

¹³⁸ Xiaotian, Feng (2006). “zhong guo du sheng zi nv: gui mo, cha yi yu ping jia (China’s single children: scale, difference and valuation).” *Theory Monthly*, Issue 4, 2006: 10

Dongfeng Tao’s speech on 2006 Peking Literature and Art Forum, online available at <http://culture.thebeijingnews.com/0827/2006/12-20/015@092326.htm>

personality” of Chinese youths. They speak in one way that caters to officials or authorities, but behave in another way that seeks sheer interest for themselves. “The macro [socialistic] theories that supposedly guild our behaviors are believed in by no one, but the new value standard and norms that accords to real life have yet been established.”¹³⁹ Besides, the fierce, “twisted” and “unfair” competition environment has resulted in a genuine culture of “youth anger” in China¹⁴⁰. These angry youth need a space to vent their “anger” and freely utter their voices over various social issues including social inequality and government corruption.

In fact, these young BBSers, aged 18-30, who make up 70% of all Chinese BBS population, are referred to by Chinese society as the “post-80’s generation” (or *80 hou*). This generation was born in the 1980s, right after China established the single-child policy in 1979 to limit its population growth. Feng Xiaotian (2006) suggests that the members of the first single-child generation live in an unprecedented era of China’s history, characterized by swift economic growth, acute social structural transformation, liberated public thoughts, and multiple value standards¹⁴¹. Their online behavior, which reflects their offline experience, has been deeply “branded” by China’s “modernization” process.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Dongfeng Tao. “Addressing the questions of the features and nationalism of contemporary youths to the journalists of Southern Metropolis Daily”. Online available at http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_48a348be010097n1.html

¹⁴¹ see note 138: 6

¹⁴² *ibid.*

These offline constraints shape users' online behaviors in many aspects. Karsten Giese (2004), in his book *Cyber China: Reshaping National Identities in the Age of Information*, generalized some of the most prevalent topics on China's BBS. These topics, as a matter of fact, perfectly mirror the limitations from the offline world:

“Individual perspectives, for example, freedom to choose individual ways of life alternative to traditional role models and standardized biographies, struggles for privacy and freedom to develop as an independent individual without interferences by relatives, superiors, teachers or the state, omnipresent in the offline world, and the various limitations the participants are subjected to in their social settings, are some of the topics most prevalent in all the BBS [sites] we study...Self-realization and a good deal of narcissism and weariness are central issues.”¹⁴³

Therefore, the lack of a free media system, combined with the desire of young generation to express ideas and release their “anger” towards real life constraints, effectively encourages a large number of young netizens to join online public discussions on BBS.

3.2 Identity Construction of Chinese BBSers

¹⁴³ Karsten Giese (2004). “Speaker’s Corner on Virtual Panopticon: Discursive Construction of Chinese Identities Online.” *Cyber China: Reshaping National Identities in the Age of Information*. Palgrave Macmillan. November 4, 2004: 29.

Chapter Two discusses about the fact that the anonymity of the Chinese BBS, coupled with the “limited gravity of potential sanctions by site managers or moderators for one’s words and deeds”¹⁴⁴, has led to “a much more open and controversial discussion and a much more courageous positioning of individuals than in traditional offline settings.”¹⁴⁵ However, given “potentially omnipresent surveillance”¹⁴⁶ on China’s Internet, and a variety of constraints from the real society that have shaped users’ online experience, how are the identities of BBS users constructed over the Internet?

Based on his observation and investigation of five major Chinese BBS sites that cover subjects of “lifestyle, love and partnership as well as social and political issues,” Karsten Giese generalized several prevalent identity-related topics in the BBS sphere.

First, “self-realization and a good deal of narcissism and weariness are central issues.” Young participants on BBS “yearn for wealth, luxuries and power,” who “identify themselves with representatives of respective lifestyles but do not—or not yet—possess the necessary material means.” Many of them believe themselves to be “underprivileged and deprived of the fulfillment of their material desires without their own fault,” the feeling of which “makes a good breeding ground for numerous utterances of discontent against the rich and the powerful who are suspected of generally abusing their privileges and status.”¹⁴⁷ This finding is actually consistent with what I conveyed earlier in this thesis, that is, social inequality is always a popular topic on BBS, and

¹⁴⁴ As long as the BBSer does not instigate any crime or anti-government related activities on the net, the most severe sanction by the regulators is simply deleting the user’s ID.

¹⁴⁵ See note 143, 23

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ see note 143, 29

consistent with a web culture of youth anger that correlates to their belief that they are “deprived of the fulfillment” they are supposed to achieve due to social inequality. As a result, “individual figures within administration, government and the Party are often targeted usually.” But, “verbal attacks are mostly confined to those already fallen out of favor within the political nomenclature and widely criticized as scapegoats of...anticorruption campaigns by state media.”¹⁴⁸

Secondly, “gender and sexual relationships and identities” are also popular issues on BBS. “Polygamy, concubinage, and faithfulness are hot topics for widespread controversial discussion.” Interestingly, though many participants present their “individual and unique” viewpoints towards gender or sexual relationships, “the majority of relevant statements, nonetheless, reveals a high degree of uniformity and, most striking, many parallels with traditional or conservative models in regard to gender, sexuality, partnership or family and broader moral issues of individual orientation and behavior.”¹⁴⁹

Thirdly, BBSers identify themselves as “Chinese citizens,” “marked by shared culture, language, history, and traditions rather than by state borders, government or Party politics.” Under this national identity, “any bonds to localities sometimes ...gain the upper hand.” On almost all comprehensive Chinese BBS, there are sub-forums for people from the same areas. These strong regional or local affiliations “not only facilitate strong emotional bonds online, [but] also provide opportunities for participants to easily expand

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*

social interactions into the offline reality of the respective cities.”¹⁵⁰ There are many offline gathering activities organized by board moderators or normal users from the same discussion boards (especially those region/hometown/school oriented sub-forums such as “Shanghainese”, “Beijinger”, “NJUer”, etc.) for users to meet and chat in real life. This kind of activity is termed “ban ju (discussion board gathering)” on BBS.

Obviously, there are miscellaneous dimensions of individual and collective identities in the BBS sphere, which Karsten Giese defined as “an eternally incomplete patchwork-identity [constructed via online discourse]” in China’s online community. Chinese literature in this area is rather limited. The facets I quoted from Karsten Giese’s study, nevertheless, are closely related to the issue of users’ online behaviors and values that I will further explore in the following subsection.

3.3 Online Social Behaviors and Values of Chinese BBS users

1. Online Individualism or Conformity?

The collectivism-oriented culture encourages Chinese BBS users to behave in a more aggressive, active and probably individualistic manner than they do in the real society. The anonymity of the BBS community liberates individual users from a variety of cultural and social constraints in many ways. Moreover, the decentralized nature of cyberspace also provides an unprecedentedly “free” space for users to utter their individual opinions on a wide spectrum of topics.

¹⁵⁰ see note 143, 30

However, when we further explore the online behaviors of BBS users, we are exposed to the traces of collectivism that have been deeply rooted in the Chinese culture and Chinese people's social values and identities.

First, the strong national identity and regional or local affiliations on BBS. As I mentioned in the preceding subsection, almost all comprehensive Chinese online forums provide discussion boards (or sub-forums) for users from the same area, the same school, or the same neighborhood. This is rarely seen on western BBS.

Secondly, participants on Chinese BBS tend to cluster around clusters. In Chapter Two, we investigated how the South China Tiger scandal topped the agenda of both online and offline societies. After the faked photos attracted tens of thousands of users to debate upon their authenticity, and hit the "top ten" or "recommended hot issues" of the BBS, an exponentially increasing number of users immediately swarmed around the same issue, which thus grabbed the attention of traditional media. The whole snowball effect seems to be based upon one premise: people are interested in what others are paying attention to or are doing. In the West, people can easily find the "best visited websites" of any given moment via Digg or other online aggregators, yet this seems to have little impact: people don't go there just because it is the best visited; they seem to only aggregate around their own niche interest domains. The fact that so many people flock to posts simply "because" they are in the top ten in China implies a remarkably strong notion of socialization and group cohesion. This disparity towards popular issues or events in cyberspace justifies the reason why BBS can exert such a great influence on real society in China.

2. Online ultra-nationalism: angry youth in China

It is evident that the online ultra-nationalism is related to the strong national identity of Chinese young netizens. However, the consensual or group oriented nature of public discussions also plays an important role in generating and spreading the buzz of ultra-nationalism on China's Internet. I will base my analysis on the anti-Carrefour incident that occurred earlier this year.

In April 2008, a wave of anti-French protests spread across China, following the melee of the Beijing Olympic torch relay's journey through Paris. Throughout that month, Carrefour's stores and its internet site became a rallying point for activists in China seeking to protest what they perceive as French support for Tibetan independence and efforts to denigrate the Beijing Olympics. The issues started on April 10 with when an article titled *Boycott French Goods, Let us start with Carrefour* was posted to the MOP Internet forum (one of the most popular bulletin boards in China). The article urged a boycott of Carrefour because of supposed shareholder ties to the Tibetan independence movement. Postings in response to the article encouraged action against a wider range of French companies operating in China including: Auchan, Louis Vitton, L'Oreal and Danone. Three days later, a young woman with the online name of Kitty Shelley protested for a day outside the Carrefour hypermarket in the Shiqiaoji area of Beijing. She posted an article to the Shuimu Tsinghua Forum website titled *Let the color red be all over China*. Four days later on April 17th, Carrefour's Chinese website was subjected to an electronic attack which posted a message saying "Boycott Carrefour." For more than a week the website was shutdown to prevent further attached. Carrefour management posted a message proclaiming that the website was undergoing maintenance

and an upgrade. That same day, the internet campaign against Carrefour continued with images claiming that Carrefour's Hongshanjia (Wuhan) store had lowered the Chinese national flag to half-mast which is considered a sign of disrespect. At the Carrefour store in Kunming, 200 people tried to block the entrance to the store with a series of large Chinese national flags. The publicity from the Kunming protest and growing number of internet campaigns led to three days of protests against Carrefour across the country. Thousands of Hefei citizens protested in front of the Carrefour store in Anhui International Shopping Center. And the anti-French protests took place over that weekend all over China outside Carrefour stores in Qingdao, Wuhan, Shenzhen, Xuzhou, Zhengzhou, Luoyang, Jinan¹⁵¹.

The protest actually started from an online post about Carrefour's supposed shareholder ties to the Tibetan independence movement. The post was published three days after August 7, the day when the Olympic torch relay through Paris descended into chaos, with Tibet independence protestors repeatedly interrupting the relay. Building upon the growing anger among Chinese young netizens after they saw the photos of the torch relay in Paris, that post immediately aroused enormous hatred of young population towards Carrefour or all other related French brands. However, no individuals had ever bothered to seek out the truth of the alleged Carrefour shareholders' support of Tibetan independents. Besides, the images claiming that Carrefour's Wuhan store had lowered the Chinese national flag to half-mast had a great chance of being manipulated by netizens. The expressions of individual

¹⁵¹ The Analysis of the Internet Communication of the Carrefour case:
<http://maitian.blog.techweb.com.cn/archives/2008/2008420225140.shtml>

concerns got swamped by the prevailing anti-Carrefour hatred growing from the BBS community. It was more like a massive mob-like flocking that seemed largely uninformed rather than a rational patriotic behavior of younger generation. The information communication and diffusion channel provided by BBS is not only capable of stimulating the “collective wisdom” from the mass discussion of crowds, like the way South China tiger scandal represents, but also facilitates the spreading of rumors in cyberspace partly due to the conformity tradition embedded in the Chinese society and culture, like in the case of anti-Carrefour protests.

It seems that even in online communities Chinese netizens are still inclined to lose their rationality and follow the "emotional thought process" on any nationalism related issues. Some scholars thus applied Gustave Le Bon's theory about popular mentality of large gatherings of people to explaining China's ultra-nationalism phenomenon in the online forum community¹⁵²:

“The masses live by, and are ruled by, subconscious and emotional thought process. The crowd has never thirsted for the truth. It turns aside from evidence that is not to its taste, preferring to glorify and to follow error, if the way of error appears attractive enough, and seduces them. Whoever can supply the crowd with attractive emotional illusions may easily become their master; and whoever attempts to destroy such firmly entrenched illusions of the crowd is almost sure to be rejected.”¹⁵³

¹⁵² Yongzheng Wei and Wuhui Wei. (2008) The Power of “We Media”: a comparative study on the effect of Big-character Posters (Da Zi Bao) and Blog. Online available at <http://academic.mediachina.net/article.php?id=5768>

¹⁵³ G. Le Bon, *La Psychologies des Foules* (The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind) London, Ernest Benn, 1895/1952.

3.4 Summary

In this chapter, I explored Chinese BBS users' online behaviors, identities and values, which give us another perspective to examine the “potential” of BBS to build an online public sphere in China.

Apparently, the social structure and cultural background of these young users plays an important role in shaping their online behaviors and experiences. In China where mass media are still serving as the government's mouthpiece, BBS gives people a relatively free and open space to utter voices and exchange thoughts. At the same time, compared to their western counterparts, Chinese youths seem to be more socially and culturally constrained, which in turn makes them behave in a more pro-active, aggressive and individualistic way in cyberspace.

However, on the one hand, we see the trend of individualism on BBS in that every one has the chance to utter their own opinions; on the other hand, the inclination of Chinese BBSers to “swarm” around popular online topics, which is disparate from their western counterparts, reflects the conformity tradition that has been deeply rooted in the Chinese society. The flocking and conformity justifies the reason why BBS can exert such a great influence on society because the BBS community incessantly generates popular topics or issues that entail the potential to grab the attention of the whole society. This kind of online behavior-clustering around clusters, however, can sometimes result in

massive mob-like incidents, which is the reverse of a robust public sphere promoting rational argument among the community.

Conclusion

Since the Internet took off from the beginning of this new millennium, virtual communities arising from the Internet have been growing exponentially. Among various types, BBS is one of the most influential communities that has exerted a profound impact the Chinese society. It has been envisioned by some scholars as a potential East Asian parallel to the Habermasian public sphere due to its innovative communication mode and distinct functional properties, characterized by the “decentralization,” “anonymity,” “de-stratification,” “equality,” and “openness” of the platform.¹⁵⁴ Not everyone, however, is optimistic about the prospects of the BBS sphere in China. Dissidents argue that online censorship, “invisible” hierarchy on BBS, plus the “irrationality” of netizens’ discussions have prevented this online community from evolving into a robust public sphere. Both sides examine the democratic potential of China’s BBS sphere merely based on “single-factor analysis or reductionistic views of these new communication technologies.”¹⁵⁵ In this thesis, I employed the methodological approach that emphasizes a “full-dimensional” investigation into the whole issue of “cyberdemocracy on a continuum” instead of viewing it “from the extremist perspectives of either the utopians or the pessimists.”¹⁵⁶

“Rather than asking whether the Internet democratizes communication in general, we should ask in what areas certain Internet-based forms of

¹⁵⁴ Jie Chen (1999). “BBS: Dawn of China’s Public Sphere.” *China Youth Research*, issue 5, 1999, 52-54

¹⁵⁵ Zixue, Tai (2006). *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society*. Routledge, New York, 289.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 181.

communications are democratizing public communication under what circumstances, and in what context this has not happened, and more importantly why.”¹⁵⁷

As I mentioned in the introduction part, rather than sticking to the concept of public sphere and then testifying to the existence or nonexistence of a similar type of space in China, we should examine what particular type of the influential online community exists in China and what impact it has had or will have on real society.

Therefore, though this thesis did not discuss the Chinese public sphere per se, it explored different aspects of the influential BBS world as they relate to the potential of the public sphere in China’s cyberspace, from the perspectives of three major threads: the history of BBS in China, the information communication and diffusion mechanism provided by BBS, and the BBS user identity and behavior study within the distinct social and cultural background of China.

The Introduction and Chapter one walked through the history and development of the Internet and BBS in China. In general, though the number of Chinese netizens has surpassed the U.S. to become the world’s biggest Internet market this year, the Internet penetration rate is still low in China. “Two types of digital divide still prove to be a big hindrance to the development of the Internet in China: the gap between rural and urban areas, and the gap between economically geographically developed regions and underdeveloped regions.”¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, the overall online community is dominated by

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid*, 291

younger generation living in urban areas aged 18-30. This demographic structure determines the fact that the discussion topics and issues arising from the BBS community are usually only representative of a particular cohort of social groups rather than of the entire society. Given this constraint, however, BBS and the Internet are still providing people with an unprecedentedly free and open space to share, communicate and exchange opinions, if we compare the pre-internet era with the post-Internet age. The “peculiar” popularity of a variety of BBS sites in China, in fact, reflects people’s demand of free speech and diverse information sources on the Internet.

Chapter two looked into the communication mechanism of information diffusion on China’s BBS compared to other community-featuring online communities-Blog and Social Networking Sites. Owing to the “decentralized” structure on the Internet, user-generated issues or content on BBS are now endowed with great potential to top the agenda of both online and offline society. The selection mechanism and anonymity of BBS encourage users to choose their own interested top issues of the society. The bottom-up information flow on BBS, hence, completely revolutionized the information communication in China-the government originally had great power to control all information of the “centralized” state-owned conventional media.

However, the omnipresent surveillance and censorship on China’s Internet is also infiltrated into the BBS communication system: users are unable to publish any information that contains “sensitive” keywords; site administrators and board moderators play the role of “gatekeepers” to ensure the “orthodoxy” of user generated content on BBS. The ex post facto regulation by site managers, nevertheless, is impossible to 100%

control the information and curb the buzz diffusion on BBS because the message is posted by grassroots users, and it is not unusual on Chinese BBS that board moderators do not notice any “sensitive” content until the post has already grabbed extensive attention in the BBS community. Furthermore, except for some long-held (political) taboos in China, it is sometimes not easy to identify or judge what information is considered “sensitive” or not in China’s cyberspace. The delimitation of “sensitive” information seems to be ever-changing based upon new political and social environment in China, which again enhances the difficulty for site managers to regulate the content on BBS.

It is noteworthy of the fact that the “keyword” censorship does not always work well because Chinese netizens are very good at inventing net jargons or applying other sophisticated evasive strategies to route through those censorships. But even if we may see that users can sometimes discuss on some highly “sensitive” topics such as Falun Gong on BBS, “there certainly are taboos that even the most daring do not touch.” It seems that “[Chinese] participants in online communication know very well which topic has to be left untouched and how far they may go.”¹⁵⁹

Thus, the online surveillance from the regulators and the self censorship by users themselves reduced the potential influence of the BBS sphere to some extent. But, again, compared to the pre-BBS age and to the other online platforms, BBS still serves as a

¹⁵⁹ Karsten Giese (2004). “Speaker’s Corner on Virtual Panopticon: Discursive Construction of Chinese Identities Online”. *Cyber China: Reshaping National Identities in the Age of Information*. Palgrave Macmillan. November 4, 2004: 31

dynamic and active virtual space that has enough power to shape and mold public opinions on a variety of issues and affairs of the society.

Chapter three shifts the focus from BBS's information communication mechanism towards its users. It addressed two major questions: why these young netizens are enthusiastic about the BBS community, and what are their identities, social behaviors and values. Through this user study, we can get a deeper understanding of the existing BBS culture in China.

BBS is deemed the first computer-mediated virtual community where people are empowered to express their personal thoughts on a broad spectrum of topics. In a country like China where traditional media are tightly censored by the government, people will definitely cherish the free and open "virtual land" on BBS. Apart from that, it is believed that the extensive social, political and cultural constraint people receive from Chinese society also stimulate them to speak and behave in a more aggressive and pro-active manner.

This chapter also touched upon the issues of the identities, behaviors and values of BBS users, through which I find that though young netizens attempted to display their uniqueness and individualism on the net, their online behaviors still exhibit a strong tendency of group oriented culture of China. The inclination of Chinese BBSers to "swarm" around popular online topics, which is disparate from their western counterparts, reflects the conformity tradition that has been embedded in the Chinese society. This tendency, however, sometimes "deprives" people of their willingness to

express individual and rational concerns, but drive them to simply follow the “emotional thought process.” Hence, though the BBS platform empowers people to voice personal thoughts, the deeply ingrained group oriented conformity, nevertheless, seems to dampen down people’s “thirst for the truth”¹⁶⁰ and seduces them to follow “emotional illusions,” which sways the BBS sphere from the fundamental for generating the public sphere-rational-critical discourse: everyone is an equal participant and the supreme communication skill is the power of argument¹⁶¹. To conclude, China’s BBS sphere has already changed the society and democratized information communication in many ways, though it still seems to be far from the benchmark of the public sphere.

Under any circumstances, the Internet and the BBS sphere is “a volatile and fast-changing world,” thus, “its full dimension can be better understood through the examination of social trends over an extended period.”¹⁶² We believe in what Tai Zixue envisions at the end of his book that:

“As the Internet further penetrates every aspect of life in Chinese society and as it becomes deeply ingrained into the everyday life of ordinary Chinese citizens, the revolutionary effects of the Internet on Chinese civil society will be more earthshaking. Consequentially, its

¹⁶⁰ G. Le Bon, *La Psychologies des Foules* (The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind) London, Ernest Benn, 1895/1952.

¹⁶¹ Marshall Soules. Jurgens Habermas and the Public Sphere:
<http://www.mala.bc.ca/~soules/media301/habermas.htm>

¹⁶² see note 155, 292

overall impact on Chinese politics and society will be felt at a much fuller scale.”

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