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**Cybercommunities (unpublished entry for the Handbook on the
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Abstract: Cybercommunities have the potential to influence the broad societal, political, and cultural transformations that in recent decades have shaped China toward becoming a postmodern society. They can provide means of empowerment of and communication among civic and nationalist communities, marginalized groups, and the Chinese diaspora, and they could help narrow the socioeconomic and digital divide within China.

In 2011 one-third of China's population is online, and with the ongoing popularity of bulletin board systems (BBSs), cybercommunities have become one of the dominant features of China's Internet. These communities exist in the fields of civic engagement and nationalist endeavors; marginalized groups are present as well as users enjoying leisure and entertainment activities. Links to Chinese-speaking regions worldwide transcend national boundaries.

By the end of 2010 the number of Internet users in China had reached 457 million with an Internet penetration rate of 34.3 percent (CNNIC 2011, 5), and all the major portals, search engines, university websites, and many privately owned websites were offering BBSs and other Internet forums for a virtually endless number of cybercommunities. Users sharing similar interests ranging from the private sphere, such as dating and cars, to nationalist discussions, have been meeting in the virtual world and forming new and sometimes long-lasting relationships, thus defying the physical borders of the "real" world. While other applications of the Internet,

such as the social networks, are gaining importance, BBSs and Internet forums remain much more popular in China than elsewhere (CNNIC 2010, 3).

The article explores the potential of cybercommunities in China and beyond, taking into account Western and Chinese sources, and provides an introduction to the particular applications for community-building that are popular in China. It offers several examples of cybercommunities that have developed in the areas of civic engagement, commerce and trade, nationalism, and cultural interests, and highlights as well the broad spectrum of interests they represent. Finally, it examines what the boundaries of these communities will be, focusing particularly on transregional and transnational elements involving the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the global Chinese diaspora.

Cybercommunities and China's Transformation

Experts in the field often debate whether cybercommunities embody the potential to change China's political and social structures. Can they narrow the socioeconomic and digital divide between the developed urban areas and the coastal areas to help empower marginalized groups? Or do these cybercommunities reflect only the current situation in China, where the emergence of narrow interest groups precludes active social and political engagement in a postmodern society. Another question, therefore, is whether the sheer variety of different cybercommunities is congruent with the broad societal, political, and cultural transformations that have shaped China toward becoming a postmodern society. [The term "postmodern" is being used here as defined by Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (1997, 3): "[T]he coexistence of the precapitalist, the capitalist, and the postsocialist economic, political, and social forms represents a significant departure from the assumptions of a Chinese modernity, embodied above all in the socialist revolutionary project." A further reference is to the overcoming of societal expectations with

regard to clear-cut class and gender roles, which has led to the blurring of former distinctions such that individuals are able to make more deliberate choices in what they want to be and how they want to behave. This does not deny that ongoing enormous gaps in income and development have resulted in extremely uneven growth in China; this is mirrored in the so-called digital divide, which ranges from an Internet penetration rate of 15 percent in the southwestern province of Guizhou to 65 percent in the capital, Beijing (CNNIC 2010, 105).

It cannot be disputed that computer-mediated communication (CMC) has enabled new worldwide communities to form in cyberspace, which, at least for the participants, represents real communities (Watson 1997). “Cybercommunities” can be broadly defined as online virtual networks where social interactions take place between participants who share common ideas, interests, and hobbies so that a sense of community and belonging can develop. These online communities offer opportunities for a wide range of activities, from individual bonding (friendship, romance, dating, hobbies, and professional networking) to civic engagement (environmentalism, calls to political action). Ethnic and nationalist groups have formed virtual communities, as have fantasy and celebrity fan groups (Fernback 1999, 203).

Most authors agree that a certain level of commitment on the part of the cybercommunity participants is necessary. Howard Rheingold (1993, 5) defined cybercommunities as “social aggregations that emerge . . . when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relation in cyberspace.” Traditional communities are linked to certain places, whereas cybercommunities easily cross geographical, territorial, and national boundaries. More important than “cyber” is the term “community,” as described by Steve Jones (1998, 3): “[C]rucial to the rhetoric surrounding of

the Internet . . . is the promise of a renewed sense of community and, in many instances, new types and formations of community.”

In these cybercommunities it is possible, but not necessary, to obtain a particular identity within a community that is close to or identical to one’s actual identity in the real world, or to establish a completely new identity with regard to gender, age, ethnicity, and interests. The first online communities emerged in the Usenet (the oldest computer network communications system, which has been in widespread use since 1980) and later in BBSs and various related Internet forums. These are still very popular in China, but new forms of social networks have now come into existence, such as Facebook and its Chinese counterparts, which offer more sophisticated applications for building cybercommunities.

In Chinese, the term used for “community” is usually *shequ* or *shequn* (the latter being used more often in Taiwan); for specific reference to CMC communities, terms in use include *wangluo*, meaning “net” or “cyber” (in Taiwan: *wanglu*) and *xuni*, that is, “virtual,” and *zaixian*, meaning “online.” In the context of the social interactions and the perception of a cybercommunity as a symbolic form of community, the term *wangluo shequ* is probably the most useful and the most often employed. Baike Baidu, the Chinese equivalent of Wikipedia, defines a cybercommunity as an “online communications space, such as BBS/forums, Tieba (also known as “Baidu Paste Bar,” a Chinese communication platform provided by Baidu, the largest search machine in China), personal web space, dating, online chat, including value-added wireless services, focusing on participants with a common interest” (Wangluo shequ 2010).

In the Chinese world, the term *xuni shequ* (“virtual community”) places greater emphasis on its opposition to the “real” world and on anonymity, and also on the possibility of creating new virtual worlds, such as MUD (Multi-User Dungeon), computer role-play games set in a

fantasy world, and other gaming applications. The Chinese cybercommunities described here exist between the real and virtual worlds; for example, in the cybercommunity of the Chinese diaspora the boundaries between the real world and newly created online spaces are vague and the cybercommunity is more or less a borderless extension of existing networks.

Building Cybercommunities in China

Applications used to build cybercommunities in China differ from those used in the West in several ways. First, China's Internet policy, often referred to as the "Great Firewall," renders the use of Usenet, Facebook, and MySpace difficult and sometimes impossible inside the country. As a result, the Chinese versions of Facebook, such as the Renren Network (www.renren.com, formerly known as the Xiaonei Network, www.xiaonei.com), which is popular among college students, and Kaixin001 (www.kaixin001.com) are more popular in the People's Republic of China (PRC), than, for example, in Hong Kong and in Taiwan. Second, cultural differences between the West, Japan, Korea, and China have made certain applications and search engines more popular in the West than in East Asia; although they are often more censored than international versions, East Asian users prefer the local versions. **[AU5: The reviewing editor writes that this point requires elaboration or perhaps prominent examples could be included, and also notes that Baidu is censored]** Third, there might be a nationalist bias against Western products, particularly within the Chinese nationalist groups. Finally, in China as elsewhere, applications are changing rapidly from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, and different communities employ different applications that have their own characteristics, benefits, and drawbacks with regard to building and maintaining cybercommunities. Despite the fast-changing technology, however, the various cybercommunities and their user loyalty remain the same; cybercommunities, in particular, are less technology-determined than are other Internet features.

In spite of the existence of specific Web 2.0 applications, BBSs remain in vogue on China's Internet and are especially used for creating cybercommunities. Most Chinese web portals offer various forms of BBSs or the specific entity Baidu, called Tieba (tieba.baidu.com). These BBSs and forums are more important than social networks, although maintaining anonymity and coping with the sometimes-enforced name registration can pose problems for these kinds of communities, particularly when they are involved with politically sensitive issues. They do, however, offer more security than the new social network applications such as the Renren Network and Kaixin001. While the influence of blogs on the development of China's society and political system is frequently debated, the continuing influence of BBSs should not be underestimated and deserves equal consideration. Internet companies, search engines, universities, city governments, and even individuals have set up BBSs on their websites and these offer ample space for community building.

The first BBSs were set up at universities; the first was Shui Mu Tsinghua at the prestigious Tsinghua University in Beijing and others soon followed, such as Tianya and the Strong Nation Forum, both offered by the People's Daily Online. According to Yong Hu (2010), these BBSs differ in various respects: "Tianya, MOP, KDnet, Tiexue and other sites work on a 'forum + editor' model, while the Strong Nation Forum, Sina Forum, Sohu Forum, Phoenix Forum, Baidu Post and other such sites are important components of larger news forums." The major web portals and search engines, such as Baidu (www.baidu.com), QQ (www.qq.com), Sina (www.sina.com.cn), Netease (www.163.com), Taobao (www.taobao.com), and Sohu (www.sohu.com), have set up BBSs on their sites. QQ, an instant messaging tool that is second only to MSN in China, has gradually evolved into a large portal that contains, in addition to many other applications, one of the largest instant-message-based BBS forums. The web portal

Netease runs an alumnicentric BBS community, and the e-business site Taobao is well known for its commercial and business-oriented BBSs (Jin 2008, 11). MOP (www.mop.com), with its focus on entertainment, and Tianya (www.tianya.cn), with its focus on culture and social matters, are important BBSs with huge user-generated forums that account for about half of the BBS traffic in China. In addition to the all-embracing BBSs of the major portals, many smaller and more topic-oriented BBSs have survived and are frequently visited.

The specific mode of a BBS leads to community-building; the many-to-many communication capability coupled with the fact that users—unlike bloggers—cannot delete other users' comments make BBSs highly interactive (Jin 2008, 30). A greater proportion of the content of China's BBSs is related to leisure activities, such as dating, recreation, and entertainment than to public affairs or political issues. This encourages the creation of specialized cybercommunities that, although they bring together people with the same interests, are unlikely to create a public sphere where the exchange and discussion of different opinions is a precondition. The Chinese BBS sphere has probably not accomplished the critical functions of the Habermasian public sphere.

According to Jürgen Habermas, this “public sphere” refers to “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. ... Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matter of general interest” (Habermas 2001, 102). In the Chinese BBS sphere, however, the “homogenous space of embodied subjects in symmetrical relations” (Poster 2001, 265) is unlikely to occur because BBS moderators exercise their right to regulate the

information on BBS sites, and the hierarchical structure that gives preference to “opinion leaders” on BBSs overshadows the voices of the normal BBS participants (Jin 2008, 36).

Variety of Cybercommunities

To obtain a clearer picture of the various forms of cybercommunities in China and also to evaluate their potential influence on societal developments, a brief overview of groups of cybercommunities is now provided to explain the kinds of cyber communities that exist, the ways in which they have come into being and the participants who are involved in these communities. Furthermore, the specific characteristics of the different kinds of cybercommunities are spelled out and examined in order to investigate whether these differ from cybercommunities outside China. General features are explained to determine whether they are limited to a certain group or geographical region, whether these communities are more outward-oriented towards a general public or more inward-oriented towards the participants, and whether they possess transnational elements. This leads on to an analysis of the social, cultural, political and economic implications of the respective communities. There is a particular focus on the extent to which the geographical limitations of the PRC play a role, on the ways that these cyber communities affect relations with the Chinese diasporas worldwide (particularly in Southeast Asia, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand) and on their influence on relations between the PRC proper, Hong Kong/Macao and Taiwan. The literature of cybercommunities classifies the following groups, although many of these overlap and various other communities have recently come into existence. These cybercommunities could be further divided according to whether they are civic communities or are in the public sphere (political action, environmental protection, web-based NGOs), or are entertainment, relaxation communities, and private communities (also leisure, games, and dating) (G. Yang 2003, 2009).

Nationalist Cybercommunities

Benedict Anderson's 1983 concept of "imagined communities" makes cybercommunities suitable for nationalist communications (Fernback 1999, 211). The Internet offers Chinese nationalists, the Han ethnocentrists, the Uygur (Uighur) separatists, the Taiwanese independence activists, and similar groups the opportunity to create ideal forums for pursuing nationalist ideas beyond geographical limitations and boundaries; this activity has also helped to revitalize nationalist feelings in the Chinese diaspora. Recent emigrants from the PRC find each other in cyberspace, thus linking the new diaspora and the homeland in a hitherto unknown intimacy (Chan 2006).

The nationalist cybercommunity includes a large number of Chinese students studying abroad who have gained sufficient confidence to challenge the Western perception of China. The Internet serves as a tool to bring together activists living in China and activists living abroad to attack, in particular, American and Japanese media descriptions of China that they regard as misrepresentations. In 2007, for example, Chinese netizens launched a website named Anti-CNN (www.anti-cnn.com) that listed alleged distortions or misrepresentations that appear in the Western media. These new nationalist communities have also employed BBSs, forums, and the newer Web 2.0 social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, and they have gravitated toward certain blogs. Xu Wu, in "Chinese Cyber Nationalism: Evolution, Characteristics, and Implications" (2007, 23), showed that Internet technology has enabled the more formalized, advanced, and well-organized activists to build up power communities to carry this nationalism back to China. Furthermore, the Chinese government is in constant negotiation with these online activists, often trying to exert a calming influence when their nationalist policies show signs of endangering the foreign policy objectives of the PRC. Careful monitoring takes place in the

community of the People's Daily's Strong Nation Forum (*Qianguo luntan*, bbs.people.com.cn). Although it allows many discussions, it is probably one of the most highly controlled forums in China.

The essentialist stance of this nationalist community has been mentioned in connection with the anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia in 1998, which were probably the first of a handful of events that led to a drastic increase in Chinese cybernationalism. The riots against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia during the Asian crisis led to the formation of a vitriolic community of Chinese students in the United States, and this has also spread to the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia where Internet usage has just started to gain strength. Popular websites, such as the newly established World Huaren Federation (www.huaren.org), have employed essentialist approaches that do not acknowledge the various hybrid identities of Indonesians of Chinese descent in the simplistic discussions found online, which could be counterproductive for the rights of Indonesians of Chinese descent (Suryadinata 2007). This case, as Aihwa Ong (2003) pointed out, demonstrates the potential shallowness and one-sidedness of cybercommunities. Without taking any personal risks, Chinese nationalists from all over the world were able to criticize the Indonesian government in Indonesia, but the essentialized perception of "Chineseness" and even racist undertones also deepened the rifts within Indonesian society, where many Indonesians of Chinese descent suddenly began to be called Chinese again.

Another example can be drawn from the PRC itself: the protest against Japan's 2004 bid for permanent membership in the UN Security Council, which drew fierce online protests from the Chinese diaspora (for example, in Singapore) and from PRC Chinese, because both groups, with their memories of the atrocities of World War II, were hostile toward Japan. The subsequent political action extended the virtual space and led, in 2005, to huge street gatherings all over

China that were tolerated (to some extent) by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Tai 2006, 255–292).

Uygur (Uighur) leaders, often intellectuals and activists residing outside the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, have used the Internet to shape a borderless national identity for the Uygurs. This has probably also led to increased tension in the region and has hindered the reconsolidation of the various ethnic groups residing there (Petersen 2006). Uygur “cyber-separatism” together with exotic representations of the Uygur by the PRC has resulted in the simultaneous construction of a homogeneous, monolithic Han majority in conflict with an essentialized group of Uygurs (Gladney 2004). Although conflict here is certainly not a new phenomenon, the use of the Internet by nationalists on both sides seems to have brought the unbridgeable differences between the Uygurs and the Han, in terms of race, religion, language and culture, into even sharper relief. **[AU12: Please add a bit of historical context to this paragraph for the general reader, most especially because the ethnic minority and majority situation has existed long before the Internet.]**

The Taiwanese independence network also employs the Internet, but this is an extension of a much older network existing between activist groups in Japan and the United States which can be traced back to the 1950s. Because the promotion of Taiwanese independence has been more or less legally tolerated in Taiwan since the late 1980s, the Internet has not played such an important role in this regard; nevertheless, various websites and groups are active and promote specific Taiwanese communities (Chung 2003).

Other nationalist groups within China, such as the Muslim groups in Xinjiang fighting for an independent East Turkestan, and the Taiwanese independence activists arguing online against the claims of the CCP and the Chinese nationalists that Taiwan is a part of China, show that

cybercommunities tend to be “bonding” groups rather than “bridging” groups—a phenomenon that has been described by Robert Putnam (2002) [AU14: **Need a reference for this and please insert author’s first name here.**] and researched by Pippa Norris (2004). In this context, the term “bridging groups” refers to groups that bring together members of disparate communities and enable communication (approximating Habermas’s public sphere), while “bonding groups” reinforce close-knit networks of people sharing similar backgrounds and beliefs (Norris 2004, 31). More recently, nationalists have shown an increasing tendency to use blogs, media-sharing platforms, and personal communication tools, including social network applications (Nyiri, Zhang, and Varrall 2010).

Cybercommunities of Marginalized Groups

Although nationalist cybercommunities often spontaneously form and expand rapidly in response to certain events, such as the Japanese bid for UN Security Council membership and the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, cybercommunities composed of marginalized groups tend to be longer-lasting and often develop a sense of *Gemeinschaft* (Ferdinand Tönnies’s concept of “community”). In such communities the participants are oriented toward the group as least as much as toward their own self interest, and a “unity of will” can be observed (Tönnies 2001, 22).

With regard to sexual minorities such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people (collectively, LGBT), the Internet has led to shared communities in many places all over the world (Ho 2010, 13). In China especially, where sexual minorities are still shunned by the official media and society, LGBT cybercommunities are regarded as providing opportunities for empowerment (Martin 2009). Unlike the nationalist cybercommunities, the LGBT online communities are very localized and highly influenced by sociocultural specifics (Ho 2010, 108–

109); cross-border communities of sexual minority groups are seldom found. For example, the Taiwanese “same-sex” online spaces are very separate from the those of the Chinese; in Taiwan, universities established sexual minority cybercommunities with BBSs called MOTTs (“member of the same sex”) as early as 1994 (Damm 2001; Martin 2009; C.-C. Yang 2000).

Research on the use of the Internet by women in China shows that cyberspace serves as a kind of social capital and enables women to forge cybersocial networks and communities to facilitate their activities and needs (Kuah-Pierce 2008, 11). But Khun Eng Kuah-Pierce (2008, 15–16) goes on to observe that members of cybercommunities seldom develop offline relationships, with the exception of dating and some support groups that have reported personal contacts at a later stage. Other marginalized groups include Chinese migrants and emigrants who have established networks between their new locations and their places of origin. Through the use of Internet cafés, families are connected with the migrants working in the more prosperous urban and Western regions (Law and Chu 2008; Peng 2008).

Rural populations still lag in general economic development and largely lack personal computers, information and communications technology (ICT) skills, and Internet infrastructure. This has created an enormous digital divide that is only slowly being narrowed through various government-sponsored efforts to improve the infrastructure, and the Internet is still only beginning to offer opportunities to build up rural cybercommunities. The result is hierarchical use of ICT in rural regions (Zhao 2008, 137–141); only through state and individual initiatives can an ICT infrastructure be developed to enable the establishment of rural cybercommunities. These rural groups, which Jack Linchuan Qiu (2009) describes as the “information have-less,” are heterogeneous in terms of gender, regional origin, and ethnicity and have developed new methods to access the Internet, but financial restrictions and their often unstable living conditions

still obstruct the development of a truly active cybercommunity. Qiu argues that these groups are highly vulnerable to commercial exploitation and state control (Qiu 2009).

Ethnic groups are an interesting subset in the cybercommunity. One well-researched group is the Hakka, a subethnic Chinese group found in southern China (for example, in Guangdong) and also in Southeast Asia and in Taiwan. Unlike the nationalist discourses, which tend toward essentialism, the global Hakka community uses more Web 2.0 applications such as blogs, YouTube, and forums, and shows a high degree of hybridization. Online, the Hakka ethnic identity is continuously rearticulated and the Hakka cultural, linguistic, and historic heritage is experienced via the new technologies (Damm 2008).

An interesting case was researched by Weidong Zhang (2002), who observed the communications on a BBS of a Manchurian website to gain a clearer picture of how the identity of “Manchuness” has been articulated via Internet communication, and to what degree the Internet helped to revoke the identity of an ethnic group which today has largely been assimilated with the dominant Han Chinese. The specific Manchu language is almost extinct, and only small groups of mostly elderly people in very remote and rural areas of northeastern China are able to communicate in Manchu (Zhang 2002).

Leisure and Entertainment

The cybercommunities connected with leisure and entertainment are too numerous to count. Some of those found in the various leisure, hobby, and finance sections of typical BBSs on the larger web portals focus on culture and art, lifestyle (film gossip, pop stars, love and emotion, and night life), health, women, cars, real estate, finance, and the stock market (Damm 2007, 287–288). These communities are topic-oriented, but various BBSs also offer localized

cybercommunities; Sohu, for example, lists numerous BBS topics specifically for Beijing but lists fewer BBSs for provinces with a lower Internet penetration, such as Guangxi.

A very specific transnational cybercommunity is found in the online fan clubs, which often focus on celebrities from outside the PRC proper, in places such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea. For example, a transnational cybercommunity focused on Kimura Takuya, a highly popular Japanese singer and actor, has spread over fourteen countries, where participants define their gender, cultural, global, and hybrid identities through their mutual interaction; this has led to a complex process of virtual crosscultural identity formation (Darling-Wolf 2004). In various forums, soap operas and actors are discussed among the fans of this entertainment genre. According to Yuni Koyun Ko (2009), the shared affinity (widespread, at present) of many female participants with Korean stars or TV dramas develops into “a subject of their ‘play’ in the form of cyber-space communication.” Cultural and literary exchanges also take place on blogs and BBSs, and, as shown by Jia Liu (2010), cybercommunities are starting to play an increasingly significant role in the reception of popular novels.

Commerce

E-business– and e-commerce–related cybercommunities have expanded exponentially over recent years and both are widely expected to continue their rapid development (for example, bbs.taobao.com). They function primarily as communication channels between enterprises and users in the form of improved customer relationship management (CRM), but social networks also enable the enhancement, at many levels, of the relationships of enterprises with their customers and those of the business community in general (Thomas 2006).

Dissident Cybercommunities

The Chinese government has been investing heavily in developing an adequate Internet infrastructure as part of its increasingly successful strategy to overcome the nation's digital divide. At the same time, however, it has introduced one of the most efficient surveillance and control mechanisms in the world (Chase, Mulvenon, and Hachigian 2006; Hughes and Wacker 2003). Although computer experts might be able to override the censorship measures, normal users are denied access to regime-critical voices by the blocking devices set up on the Internet in China. Dissident voices involved in the current "big taboos" in China are thus often based outside of China and Hong Kong, and, while they might form a dissident cybercommunity, it is very difficult for them to reach users within China. The best-known examples of dissident groups are probably the Falun Gong, the Chinese Democracy Party, and the Tibetan exile groups. All these groups employ or have employed two-way communications to build up communities to coordinate political action and transmit information. The authorities in Beijing regard this information as politically sensitive or even subversive, which makes it difficult for PRC citizens to participate (Chase and Mulvenon 2002, 1–43).

Two-way communications via email and BBSs helped tremendously with the organization and development of the China Democracy Party (CDP), a short-lived party that was established in 1998 and was declared illegal by the CCP in that same year. Here, however, the Internet played a contradictory role (Zheng 2008, 147): without the new communication technologies, the rapid organization and coordination of the CDP within China and beyond would have been not possible but, on the other hand, the uncoordinated discussion on the Internet led to the CDP's apparent radicalization which, in the end, provided the Chinese authorities with the arguments they needed to crack down on the party.

The Internet played a significant role in coordinating the Falun Gong movement, a spiritual movement that was built upon elements of traditional Chinese qigong practices, but with a modern and hierarchical structure. The Chinese authorities launched a crackdown in 1999, declaring the movement an “evil cult” and issuing orders for its members to be prosecuted. Since the crackdown, relevant BBSs and chat rooms have been inaccessible or have been subjected to direct attacks by the Chinese authorities, so that today the Falun Gong community is more concentrated outside of China (Chase and Mulvenon 2002; Zheng 2008, 17).

Empowerment or Entertainment?

In recent years various forms of cybercommunities have come into existence in the PRC and greater China that are clearly much more than extensions of existing networks. Some of these cybercommunities have helped to develop the Internet itself as a medium of communication, while others possess social characteristics and features that may even challenge the existing structures of the state. From an optimistic perspective, cybercommunities may empower marginalized and scattered groups, may lead to transnational networks, and may also provide a new public sphere. These cybercommunities in China can therefore be seen as presenting something new and innovative—certainly much more than merely extensions of already existing networks. As participation in cybercommunities requires only limited levels of commitment, participants are able to enter and leave without using their real identities. Cybercommunities, by bundling interest groups together, can thus be seen as contributing to the fragmentation of society, as jeopardizing real communication and hindering the development of a Habermasian public sphere.

For the time being, cybercommunities are only able to exert limited influence on emerging political and societal discourses and on the creation of a public sphere. They are part of

an increasingly postmodern Chinese society with a very personalized use. Their transregional and transnational character, however, helps to link users in various parts of greater China, and also leads to new ideas and information being disseminated at an unprecedented speed. This is particularly true for the marginalized groups that are able to overcome societal and legal restrictions and to form virtual communities offering opportunities to disseminate news and grant each other mutual support; in this way, regional disparities can also be overcome. The nationalist groups on the Internet, however, can often be seen in quite a different light: these tend to ignore any voices raised in opposition and to form narrow-minded, ethnocentric, and to some extent, racist groups. Here a true public sphere with the participation of manifold voices would be especially desirable. In this context, the government blocking of certain websites and the censorship within BBSs can be regarded as one of the most crucial issues: women and LGBT members can easily reach their respective groups within greater China, while Chinese nationalists are cut off from the discussions of Tibetan and Uygur nationalists as well as Taiwanese independence activists.

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