

# The Internet and Civil Society in China: a preliminary assessment

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*This article assesses the preliminary impact of the Internet on civil society development in China. Based on survey data and in-depth case studies, three areas of impact are identified and analysed. First, with respect to China's public sphere, the social uses of the Internet have fostered public debate and problem articulation. The Internet has demonstrated the potential to play a supervisory role in Chinese politics. Second, the Internet has shaped social organizations by expanding old principles of association, facilitating the activities of existing organizations and creating a new associational form, the virtual community. Finally, the Internet has introduced new elements into the dynamics of protest. The article concludes after discussing the conditions and obstacles that influence the social uses of the Internet in China, cautioning against an overoptimistic view of the role of the Internet in civil society development while stressing the importance of the Internet as a new social phenomenon in China.*

## Introduction

The development of civil society in China has been a topic of great interest in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Most scholars agree that something of a civil society has emerged in China's reform era. Notable developments include the proliferation of social organizations, the expansion of the media, and the rise of various forms of popular contention. While affirming these developments, many scholars are concerned about the 'nascent' or 'incipient' character of Chinese civil society. In this article, I bring one important recent development—the Internet phenomenon—into the picture of Chinese civil society, and identify the concrete ways in which the Internet has facilitated civil society development in China. Such an endeavor is necessarily preliminary in nature, considering the rapidly changing landscape of the

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1. For an earlier overview of the field, see Xin Gu, 'A civil society and public sphere in post-Mao China? An overview of Western publications', *China Information* 8(3), (Winter 1993–1994), pp. 38–52. For a more recent review, see Guobin Yang, 'The study of civil society in China: a dynamic field', *China Review International*, forthcoming.

new information technologies in China as elsewhere. It is nevertheless a worthwhile endeavor, because after all the social implications of the Internet have attracted world-wide attention.

Since Internet connectivity was officially established in 1994, the Internet has developed at a fast pace in China. In 1994, there were only about 10,000 Internet users in China. Surveys conducted by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) show a rapid growth. From June 1998 to December 2002, the number of computers connected to the Internet increased from 542,000 to 20.83 million. Internet users had reached 2.1 million by December 1998 and 59.1 million by December 2002.<sup>2</sup> These developments are matched by the emergence of a lively Internet culture in China. Online chatrooms run by Netease.com attract tens of thousands of users at almost any given time of the day. Netbars have mushroomed throughout the country, despite government efforts to keep them under control. Online publishing has become so popular that several websites have organized literary award competitions to honor outstanding literary works initially published online. For one final example, newspapers like the popular *Beijing Youth Daily* regularly feature 'Net stories'—stories about personal encounters with the Internet.

With the rise of such an 'Internet phenomenon' come questions about its social impact. For researchers interested in Chinese civil society, the question is: how does this phenomenon bear on the various aspects of China's incipient civil society? The Internet is used for political activism and other civil society activities in other parts of the world. Are similar developments observable in China? I address these questions by examining the social uses of the Internet in China. I will argue that the Internet has been used in three key areas of Chinese civil society, namely, public sphere, social organizations, and popular protest. With respect to China's public sphere, the Internet has fostered public debate and problem articulation and demonstrated the potential to play a supervisory role in Chinese politics. In the realm of associational life, the Internet has facilitated the activities of existing organizations while creating a new associational form, the virtual community. Finally, the Internet has introduced new forms and dynamics into popular protest. My analysis will show that the Internet has become an important new area in China's civil society development. Understanding the changing social and political dynamics in contemporary China now requires an analysis of the possibilities and limits of the Internet and other forms of new information technologies.

Before I go on, a few caveats are in order. The first caveat is that the Internet is a contested area. Like other technologies, it is a double-edged weapon and may be used differently by different social actors. A study of the social impact of the Internet therefore does not draw a linear causal arrow from the Internet to civil society. Rather, it is a study of how agents in civil society use the Internet and in that process strengthen civil society. In other words, it requires an understanding of the social activities online.

Second, because the Internet may be used for different purposes, one field of

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2. CNNIC defines Chinese Internet users as Chinese citizens who use the Internet for at least an hour per week. For statistical information on China's Internet development, I rely on CNNIC's survey reports. These biannual reports are accessible at its website: <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/>.

struggle is about who may decide what technical functions it may have and how to obtain those functions.<sup>3</sup> These struggles may shape the future of the technology, making it more or less open to democratic practices. In appearance, ordinary Internet users are not directly involved in these struggles, yet how they use the Internet, what functions they favor and what meanings they attach to the Internet may bear on these struggles in important ways. The original designers of the Internet did not design it for democratic purposes. Had the Internet not been used for such purposes by millions of users, it would not have shown such a potential in the first place. All this suggests that even an understanding of the technical struggles surrounding the Internet cannot dispense with an understanding of the actual activities online.

Third, because of the ambivalent nature of the Internet in the social and political realm, it is imperative to examine its social impact in proper historical and political contexts. The same technology has different social implications under different historical and social conditions. In assessing the social impact of the Internet in China, therefore, it is essential to take a historical and sociological perspective, that is, to show the specific ways in which the Internet is used under specific conditions. To set the social and historical context for my discussion, I will start with a review of the recent developments and current conditions of civil society in China.

### **Civil society in China: recent developments and challenges**

The concept of civil society has four basic elements: (1) autonomous individuals and (2) civic associations in relation to the state,<sup>4</sup> (3) engaged in more or less organized activities in a (4) public sphere ‘outside the immediate control of the state but not entirely contained within the private sphere of the family’.<sup>5</sup> The four elements are interrelated. Individual and organizational autonomy are the basic conditions of public sphere; social organizations function to protect or extend the interests of individual citizens, often in the form of organized protest or social movements; public sphere functions with ‘a critical public willing and able to hold government accountable for its actions’.<sup>6</sup> A vigorous civil society is often taken to be foundational to democratic politics.<sup>7</sup>

3. This is a key thesis in Lawrence Lessig’s influential work *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

4. Adam Seligman emphasizes the idea of the autonomous individual as the basis of civil society. See *The Idea of Civil Society* (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. 179. Nevertheless, as Thomas Gold points out, autonomy is not an absolute thing. Rather, the relationship between civil society and the state is fluid and dynamic. See Thomas Gold, ‘Bases for civil society in reform China’, in Kjeld Erik Brodsgaard and David Strand, eds, *Reconstructing Twentieth-Century China: State Control, Civil Society, and National Identity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 164.

5. Craig Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 190.

6. David Strand, ‘Civil society and public sphere in modern Chinese history’, in Roger V. des Forges, Luo Ning and Wu Yen-bo, eds, *Chinese Democracy and the Crisis of 1989* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 54.

7. This assumption underlies most studies of Chinese civil society. I am aware, however, that some scholars are doubtful about whether there exists a necessary link between civil society and democratization. See Gordon White, Jude Howell and Shang Xiaoyuan, *In Search of Civil Society: Market Reform and Social Change in Contemporary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 5–6. See also Richard Madsen, *China’s Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

Studies of civil society in reform-era China have revealed three major areas of change that point to an emerging civil society:

- existing forms of social organization have undergone change, new associational forms have appeared, and social organizations in general have proliferated;<sup>8</sup>
- both social organizations and individual citizens enjoy more autonomy from state power than in the pre-reform decades;<sup>9</sup>
- with the changing functions of the media and the increase in spaces for public discussion, a nascent form of public sphere has emerged.<sup>10</sup>

Despite these achievements, Chinese civil society faces major challenges at the turn of the new century. First, as a civil society institution, the public sphere remains incipient and weak. Articulation of social issues and sharing of information are limited by the lack of institutionalized means of communication and public forums. Second, despite the proliferation of social organizations, these are mostly organizations of what Michael Frolic refers to as a state-led civil society.<sup>11</sup> They lack sufficient autonomy from the state to function as a routinized social base against state power on behalf of citizens. Gordon White, Jude Howell and Shang Xiaoyuan point to a new type of organization that they refer to as ‘interstitial or unrecognized’.<sup>12</sup> While these appear to have more independence from the state, for the very reason that they are unrecognized, they lack the necessary political legitimacy to function effectively. Finally, organized protest in contemporary China is under strict state control, which means that routinized social movement organizations that systematically fight social injustices and political power still do not have a legitimate existence.<sup>13</sup> Large-scale social movements have erupted in the past two decades in China. Yet, because of state repression and organizational

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8. For three book-length treatments of social organizations in reform-era China, see White *et al.*, *In Search of Civil Society*; Deborah S. Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton and Elizabeth Perry, eds, *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China* (Washington, DC and New York: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Timothy Brook and B. Michael Frolic, eds, *Civil Society in China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997).

9. For discussions of individual and organizational autonomy, see Wang Shaoguang, ‘The politics of private time: changing leisure patterns in urban China’, in Davis *et al.*, eds, *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China*, pp. 149–172; Michel Bonnin and Yves Chevrier, ‘The intellectual and the state: social dynamics of intellectual autonomy during the post-Mao era’, in Brian Hook, ed., *The Individual and the State in China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 149–174; and Ruth Hayhoe and Ningsha Zhong, ‘University autonomy and civil society’, in Brook and Frolic, eds, *Civil Society in China*, pp. 99–121.

10. On China’s nascent public sphere, see Craig Calhoun, ‘Tiananmen, television and the public sphere: internationalization of culture and the Beijing spring of 1989’, *Public Culture* 2(1), (1989), pp. 54–71. For a symposium on public sphere and civil society in China, see, among others, Philip Huang, ‘“Public sphere”/“Civil society” in China? The third realm between state and society’, *Modern China* 19(2), (1993), pp. 216–240; and Frederic Wakeman, ‘The civil society and public sphere debate: Western reflections on Chinese political culture’, *Modern China* 19(2), (1993), pp. 108–137. On changing functions of the media, see Hong Liu, ‘Profit or ideology? The Chinese press between party and market’; and Daniel Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics and ‘Thought Work’ in Reformed China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

11. By state-led civil society, Frolic refers to organizations and social groups created by the state and serving as support mechanisms to the state. B. Michael Frolic, ‘State-led civil society’, in Brook and Frolic, eds, *Civil Society in China*, p. 46.

12. White *et al.*, *In Search of Civil Society*, p. 106.

13. Protest and resistance are happening at a higher frequency in contemporary China, but these are likely to be ‘episodes and pockets of resistance’ instead of organized and sustained challenges. See Ching Kwan Lee, ‘Pathways of labor insurgency’, in Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, eds, *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 58.

weakness, these movements cannot develop long-term political goals and strategies. How may these challenges be met? Far from claiming that new information technologies are the solution, this article will show where the Internet has made notable differences.

### Studying the Internet in China

Studies of the Internet in China have focused on the physical networks, mechanisms of state control, and political impact. Given the technical features of the Internet, there is an intense interest in whether the Internet could help to democratize China. For example, Geoffrey Taubman argues that the Internet will reduce the influence of the party-state over the ideational and organizational character of China's domestic affairs.<sup>14</sup> Michael S. Chase and James C. Mulvenon reveal that despite the Chinese government's strong counterstrategies, dissidents both in and outside of China have made extensive use of the Internet in voicing dissent.<sup>15</sup> A recent article by Eric Harwit and Duncan Clark, while focusing on political control of the Internet in China, draws attention to the potential for independent group formation in light of the new technological tools. They conclude by noting the ambivalence of content control in China: 'As for content, in the short run, political controls will remain schizophrenic as the value of an open network conflicts with conservative political philosophies and as the nature of the Internet's audience makes it an unlikely tool for precipitating socially disruptive forces'.<sup>16</sup> This conclusion is highly instructive. While emphasizing control, it acknowledges its limits. This conclusion sounds a call for more systematic empirical research on the actual uses of the Internet in China. My work responds to this need.

While recognizing the role of the Chinese state in shaping Internet use in China, I concentrate on the social uses of the Internet. Such a view is consistent with an influential bottom-up approach to the study of contemporary Chinese society and politics. This bottom-up approach recognizes that the Chinese state is not an omnipotent entity, but has numerous permeable holes, not the least of which is the lack of interest or sincerity at the local level in implementing central policies.<sup>17</sup> This view is confirmed for the Internet by a June 2001 report in Chinaonline.com, which has this to say on Internet control in China: 'Internet regulations come from Beijing, but each province has a significant amount of control, and authorities in each city also have some local autonomy. Consequently, in different places, there is great variation in policy, regulations, service and price'.<sup>18</sup>

14. Geoffrey Taubman, 'A not-so world wide web: the Internet, China, and the challenges to nondemocratic rule', *Political Communication* 15, (1998), pp. 255–272. See also Kathleen Hartford, 'Cyberspace with Chinese characteristics', *Current History*, (September 2000), pp. 255–262; and Nina Hachigian, 'China's cyber-strategy', *Foreign Affairs*, 80(2) (March/April 2001), pp. 118–133.

15. Michael S. Chase and James C. Mulvenon, *You've Got Dissent! Chinese Dissident Use of the Internet and Beijing's Counter-Strategies* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2002).

16. Eric Harwit and Duncan Clark, 'Shaping the Internet in China: evolution of political control over network infrastructure and content', *Asian Survey* XLI(3), (2001), p. 408.

17. See Lynn III. White, *Unstately Power* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); Kate Xiao Zhou, *How Farmers Changed China* (Transitions: Asia & Asian American, 1996); Xueguang Zhou, 'Unorganized interests and collective action in communist China', *American Sociological Review* 58(1), (1993), pp. 54–73.

18. [http://www.chinaonline.com/issues/internet\\_policy/newsarchive/secure/2001/June/C01060150.asp](http://www.chinaonline.com/issues/internet_policy/newsarchive/secure/2001/June/C01060150.asp).

To study the social uses of the Internet and how the Internet influences civil society activities through these uses, I present survey data and in-depth case studies collected through participant observation and immersion in China's emerging Internet culture from February 2000 to July 2001. This methodology may be described as 'virtual ethnography'.<sup>19</sup> It includes extensive participation in online activities and interactions with fellow users in cyberspace, as well as regular monitoring and recording of Internet content. The case studies are not intended as a representative sampling of online activities. Rather they highlight issues of special relevance for an understanding of the influences of the Internet on Chinese civil society.

### **Using the Internet in China: user characteristics, control mechanisms and counter-control strategies**

Since October 1997, CNNIC has conducted 11 surveys on Internet development in China. The surveys consistently show that the profile of a typical Internet user in today's China is likely to be a relatively young person (between 20 and 35 years old) with some college education.<sup>20</sup> This profile sets limits to any attempt to over-generalize the social impact of the Internet in China, but it is an encouraging profile, because the relative young ages of China's Internet users imply a stronger likelihood that the impact of the Internet will keep growing.

The Internet offers a variety of applications. In China as elsewhere, e-mail and search engines are favorites. A notable phenomenon in China is the popularity of chatrooms, newsgroups and bulletin boards. Table 1 shows the most desired information by China's Internet users according to the eight CNNIC survey reports published from June 1999 to January 2003.<sup>21</sup> Table 2 shows the top ten most frequently used network services for the same period.

As the tables show, China's Internet users crave information. News is clearly the most desired information, but technological and educational information is also widely sought. As indicated by the relatively high percentages of respondents choosing email, chatrooms, newsgroups and bulletin boards as the most frequently used network services, China's users rely heavily on the Internet for personal expression and interpersonal communication. This point should be kept in mind in discussing the impact of the Internet on Chinese civil society.

The development of the Internet in China has posed a dilemma for the Chinese government. While supporting the growth of this new economic sector, the government has attempted to exert control over Internet content. Since 1996, more than a dozen regulations concerning Internet uses and services have been promulgated by various government agencies. For example, a five-chapter, 25-article regulation called the 'Computer Information Network and Internet Security, Protec-

19. Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2000).

20. The gender gap among users is clearly narrowing over the years, from about 7% female and 93% male in June 1998 to 40.7% female and 59.3% male in December 2002.

21. The three surveys conducted before June 1999 did not include such information.

**Table 1.** Most desired information among China's Internet users, June 1999–December 2002 (Multiple options, in percentage)

Types of information	June 1999	Dec. 1999	June 2000	Dec. 2000	June 2001	Dec. 2001	June 2002	Dec. 2002
News	84	65.5	82.0	84.38	63.5	74.0	75.7	78.0
Computer software and hardware	68	51.7	59.1	58.00	44.2	55.6	60.3	53.4
Entertainment	47	38.8	50.9	52.66	44.1	46.5	41.3	44.6
Electronic books	52	38.0	46.0	45.99	32.8	37.4	35.6	32.6
Science and education	41	31.4	40.2	35.77	31.4	31.8	28.8	30.1
Life and services	–	–	–	–	–	27.8	24.9	27.8
Sports	–	–	–	–	–	–	21.2	20.4
Job hunting	19	19.3	26.1	29.12	19.8	22.2	19.0	22.1
Society and culture	–	–	–	–	–	20.4	14.8	17.9
Financial information	26	21.2	31.1	22.88	19.0	16.4	11.8	11.0

Source: CNNIC survey reports: July 1999, January 2000, July 2000, January 2001, July 2001, January 2002, July 2002, January 2003.

Notes: The CNNIC survey reports contain a longer list of types of desired information. The ten types shown here are selected based on the survey published in January 2003. They are the top ten types of most desired information in that most recent survey.

tion and Management Regulations' was promulgated by the Ministry of Public Security on 30 December 1997, which outlines the duties and responsibilities of China's Internet service providers. Regulations specifically targeting bulletin boards were announced in November 2000, stipulating that users are responsible for the information they release, that they cannot release information harmful to national interests, and that bulletin board services should follow a licensing procedure.<sup>22</sup>

In reality, actual practices among users and dotcom companies vary in ways that often go beyond the parameters of these regulations. The management of bulletin boards, for example, varies in the degree of control and censorship. It is common for BBSs to publish disclaimers prohibiting the publication and circulation of information considered as against the law or the government. While these disclaimers may have only nominal effects, two censorship strategies are commonly used. One is to use computer programs, called filters, to automatically filter out pre-defined characters. The other is human labor. Except for some small BBSs run by individuals, most popular BBSs in China have hosts (*banzhu*) to run the day-to-day operations. Some hosts work as such in paid job positions; most are volunteers. Their main duty is to monitor and censor the postings. Theoretically, hosts are authorized to delete anything they consider as unfitting, and they often do so. In extreme cases, when it seems no longer possible to regulate the discussions, the forum may be closed down.

Despite censorship, popular forums maintain a level of lively discussion on a wide range of topics. This is possible for several reasons. First, both hosts and users

22. For a complete list of Internet regulations in China, see CNNIC's official website, <http://www.cnnic.net.cn>.

**Table 2.** Most frequently used network services among China's Internet users, June 1999–December 2002 (multiple options, in percentage)

Network service	June 1999	Dec. 1999	June 2000	Dec. 2000	June 2001	Dec. 2001	June 2002	Dec. 2002
Email	90.9	71.7	87.7	87.65	74.9	92.2	92.9	92.6
Search engine	65.5	50.4	55.9	66.76	51.3	62.7	63.8	68.3
Chat online	29.2	25.5	38.8	37.53	21.9	22.0	45.5	45.4
Software upload or download	59.6	44.2	50.7	50.56	43.9	55.3	51.0	45.3
Information inquiry	54.8	39.3	49.3	44.65	39.5	46.7	40.3	42.2
Newsgroups	21.4	17.0	25.4	19.33	10.7	13.4	20.4	21.3
Bulletin board systems	28.0	16.3	21.2	16.72	9.0	9.8	18.9	18.9
Games and entertainment	15.8	13.6	17.7	18.94	15.8	17.1	18.6	18.1
Multimedia entertainment	–	–	–	–	–	22.1	19.7	13.4
Online shopping	3.2	7.8	14.1	12.54	8.0	7.8	10.3	11.5

Source: CNNIC survey reports: July 1999, January 2000, July 2000, January 2001, July 2001, January 2002, July 2002, January 2003.

Notes: The CNNIC survey reports contain a longer list of types of desired information. Table 2 includes the top ten most frequently used network services according to the survey published in January 2003.

generally have an interest in keeping their forum up and running, so that both parties may exercise some degree of restraint. Second, if hosts arbitrarily delete posts, users may contest their actions. The possibility of arousing protest puts hosts under some constraint. Third, where filters are used, users have strategies to bypass them. This could be done with a simple symbolic device. For example, in May 2000, in the online protest surrounding the murder of a Beijing University student, users of the popular bulletin board 'Strengthening the Nation Forum' (*Qiangguo luntan*) found that posts containing the characters for 'Beida' (Beijing University) would be blocked. They beat the filters, however, by inserting punctuation or other symbols between the two Chinese characters for 'Beida', posting messages with phrases like 'Bei.Da', and 'Bei2Da'. Fourth, when verbal abuses and personal attacks happen, peace-making voices may intervene from among the users. In some bulletin boards, a community ethos may develop, which sanctions practices that violate forum rules while putting pressure on the hosts, since hosts may also be subject to collective castigation if they violate this ethos.

The above discussion suggests that while Chinese state agencies attempt to keep Internet activities under control, China's Internet users have counter-control strategies. The decentralized and interactive features of the Internet add to the difficulty of central control. The various uses of the Internet to be discussed below take place under these conditions of control and counter-control.

### The Internet and public sphere

As formulated by Habermas, the concept of public sphere has the following



elements: (1) publics composed of autonomous individuals that engage in rational debate; (2) spaces where publics may freely assemble for such debate; and (3) media of communication, such as newspapers and books.<sup>23</sup> Habermas is often criticized for his idealized conception of the public sphere, since in reality, power and inequality often creep in.<sup>24</sup> In this article, I emphasize public sphere as open spaces for communication. They may be spaces for public debate and problem articulation, or they may simply fulfill a social function by providing spaces for social interactions. The development of the Internet in China has given rise to online communication spaces, including chatrooms, listservs, newsgroups, electronic magazines, bulletin boards and so forth. There is abundant evidence that these spaces are fulfilling important functions in China's nascent public sphere.

In the broadest sense, China's online spaces are not restricted to websites supported by computer servers physically located in China, nor are they restricted to Chinese-language sites. Some popular news sites about China, such as *China News Digest* (cnd.org), are in English. This article, however, focuses on Chinese-language websites and network services. As long as access from within China is available, the actual server locations are not important.<sup>25</sup>

It is hard to estimate how many Chinese-language online spaces exist, not the least because new ones keep appearing while old ones may disappear. A rough estimate of the active bulletin boards would put the number in the thousands. Many Chinese universities have BBSs,<sup>26</sup> as do commercial portal sites. For example, as of 11 April 2001, chinaren.com maintained 33 BBS forums,<sup>27</sup> sina.com had 96,<sup>28</sup> and netease.com had more than 600.<sup>29</sup> Several websites maintain rankings of Chinese-language forums world-wide. As of 11 April 2001, www.creaders.net had a list of 244 popular BBS forums; www.geocities.com had 103, while www.cwrank.com listed 30 'most popular' Chinese-language forums. Topforum.com not only has a ranking of 60 Chinese-language forums, but also maintains a daily collection of about 300 frequently read posts. As of 18 June 2001, the posts were selected from among 1,007 forums.

Online 'publics' have proliferated along with online forums. Online publics tend to form around forums of different thematic categories, such as leisure and entertainment, romance, sports, science and technology, education, economy, art

23. Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

24. For an excellent collection of essays engaging Habermas's arguments, see Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

25. According to a recent survey, 76.2% of the websites used by Internet users in China are Chinese-language websites based in China, 14.61% are Chinese-language sites based outside of China, while 9.19% are foreign-language websites. See Guo Liang and Bu Wei, 'Report on the Conditions of the Internet in Five Cities in China in Year 2000. Conducted by the Social Development Research Center of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences', (2001).

26. BBSs enjoy great popularity in Taiwan. Yet because there is little evidence that users in mainland China access them, I have not included them in my discussion.

27. See bbs.chinaren.com.

28. See people.sina.com.cn/forum.

29. See knl.gz.163.com/cgi/main for forums in its Guangzhou club, knl.sh.163.com/cgi/main for forums in its Shanghai club, and knl.bj.163.com/cgi/main for forums in its Beijing club.

and literature, politics, news, and the like. They may reside in or outside of China, but are more or less interconnected. The Internet facilitates such connection—messages in one forum are often cross-posted in another, so that issues brought up in one forum may be rapidly broadcast to others. With the existence of numerous online forums and publics, a wide range of issues is brought into the forums and to public attention. Take the popular ‘Strengthening the Nation Forum’ (*Qiangguo luntan*, hereinafter QGLT) for example.<sup>30</sup> On 20 December 2000, topics brought up included relations with Japan, implications of Bush’s presidency for China, amendments to China’s marriage law, the passage of a homosexual marriage law in the Netherlands, corruption of Chinese government officials, the hardships of laid-off workers, end-of-year analysis of China’s stock market, debate about the rule of law and rule of man, complaints about growing tuition fees in China’s higher education institutions, and the history of China’s Cultural Revolution.

Not all issues stimulate discussion equally, and discussions may be as short as several threads<sup>31</sup> or as long as several dozen. Despite censorship, the discussions in QGLT are more wide-ranging and elaborate than in conventional media or other Chinese-language bulletin boards. In June 2001, I made an intensive study of four popular Chinese-language news and politics bulletin boards. Two of them, QGLT and Beida Online ([http://www.beida-online.com/list.php3?board=Beida\\_Forum](http://www.beida-online.com/list.php3?board=Beida_Forum)), are based in China; the other two are run by Muzi.com (<http://lundian.com/forum/normal/chinese/10001.html>) and Creaders.com (<http://www.creaders.org/cgi-bin/mainpage.cgi>) respectively, both based in North America. I found that QGLT not only has the most posts (2,321 for 11 June and 2,798 for 12 June), but also the highest percentage of responses (60% for both 11 and 12 June), indicating a high level of discussion in the forum.<sup>32</sup> One good example of such a discussion concerns the functions of this and other bulletin boards in Chinese politics. Many argue that it should be used to promote democratic governance, as a place ‘for hearing people’s voices and providing input for government decision-making’ (Beidou,<sup>33</sup> 24 February 2000). Others emphasized democratic participation: ‘The forum should become a people’s democratic square’ (New Leftist, 6 January 2000). A persistent demand is to use this space to promote democratic politics in China (Xingfu, 9

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30. Affiliated with the online edition of *People’s Daily*, QGLT was originally launched for public protest against the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. Apparently because of its official affiliation, QGLT has a more strictly enforced censorship system than other BBS forums in China. Contents are filtered while hosts maintain synchronous monitoring of posts. Discussion topics are supposed to be related to the strengthening of the Chinese nation. But this may be defined so broadly that basically any serious discussions about any issue may be considered to fall under the themes of the forum. In reality, then, the posts that tend to be deleted are those that have explicit anti-government messages. According to a news report of the *People Daily* (17 May 2000), QGLT had nearly 30,000 registered user names by early May 2000, with about 100,000 daily hits. From 9 May 1999 to 4 September 2000, it had a total of 1,258,720 posts, a daily average of 2,600 (<http://www.geocities.com/Paris/Lights/4323/top20.html>). As of mid-July 2001, QGLT still maintained a daily average of about 1,500 posts.

31. A thread is a sequence of responses to an initial post.

32. Creaders had 177 posts on 11 June and 443 for 12 June; Muzi had 57 posts on 11 June and 47 on 12 June; Beida had 82 posts on 11 June and 132 on 12 June.

33. ‘Beidou’ is the user name, followed by the date the message was posted. I will use the same citation format throughout this article. All posts were originally in Chinese. They are cited here in English translations of my own rendering.

November 1999). The debate also targets undemocratic practices in the forum. A user named Haohao rejected personal attacks:

Some net friends (*wangyou*),<sup>34</sup> for lack of a rational attitude to their own and other users' viewpoints, would become angry when they are stuck in their arguments. They cannot control their anger, thus resulting in personal attacks and slandering. These net friends have a superficial knowledge of the world. They thought they could shut others up with personal attacks. In fact, as soon as you launch a personal attack, you discredit both your own viewpoints and your character (Xiaohao, 1 February 2000).

Another made the following suggestion:

I think the key issue in the management of the forum is to establish a clear and precise set of rules. These rules should be publicized. Whether the rules are just or reasonable enough is not a big problem (after all this is a forum of a party newspaper—it cannot be free from its own biases). The important thing is to follow rules. Then net friends will not have so many complaints (New Great Wall, 28 October 1999).

This debate about democratic and undemocratic practices in online discussions is not an isolated example. Similar discussions are common in other forums, indicating a high degree of engagement with public issues among China's Internet users. In the middle of these online discussions, a new type of political action, critical public debate, entered contemporary Chinese life. In his study of political participation in Beijing, Tianjian Shi enumerates 28 political acts used by citizens in Beijing to articulate interests. With the exception of big-character posters, none of these involves public debate. Most acts, such as 'complaints through labor unions' or 'complaints through the bureaucratic hierarchy', involve the airing of personal grievances without the possibility of opening up these grievances for public discussion.<sup>35</sup> Only in extraordinary times, such as the student movement in 1989, did public debate occur. The Internet provides alternative spaces for public debate.

China's online spaces serve a second function: the articulation of social problems. Habermas underscores the 'problem articulation' function of the public sphere, noting that 'The communication structures of the public sphere are linked with the private life spheres in a way that gives the civil-social periphery, in contrast to the political center, the advantage of greater sensitivity in detecting and identifying new problem situations'.<sup>36</sup> Tianjian Shi's study discusses the political acts Beijing citizens may use to articulate their interests. The above-mentioned examples of 'complaints through labor unions' and 'complaints through the bureaucratic hierarchy' are such acts. Regardless of how effective these complaints are, it is clear that these channels can only reach a limited audience. Some complaints may reflect problems of general concern, yet there are no institutionalized channels to bring personal problems into public attention. Personal problems

34. The term 'net friend' is commonly used to refer to other net users; it does not denote friendship, but does sound more friendly than a mere 'user'.

35. Shi Tianjian, *Political Participation in Beijing*. In their recent book, Wenfang Tang and William Parish devote substantial space to the discussion of political participation and interest articulation. While they found 'incipient changes' in new, individualistic modes of political participation, their analysis makes no mention of how private interests may be channeled into public debate, indicating the lack of such channels in China's public life. See Wenfang Tang and William Parish, *Chinese Urban Life under Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

36. Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 381.

articulated on the Internet, if of sufficient social importance, are likely to attract more attention. One interesting example of how personal problems become widely publicized on the Internet is the online diary of Lu Youqing. Lu suffers from cancer. In the summer of 2000, the doctor told him he had only about three months left to live. At this point, he decided to record his feelings and experiences in diary form and publish the diary on the Internet. Lu's online diary quickly attracted a large online readership and aroused heated debate among readers on the meaning of life and death in contemporary life. As Duncan Hewitt reports from Shanghai, 'Mr Lu's very human and often philosophical account of dying fits in with a growing strand of confessional literature in China—which has challenged traditional taboos and the belief that personal matters should remain private'.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, China's online spaces have played a supervisory role in government affairs and public life. The importance of this supervisory role is in direct proportion to the nebulous nature of the decision-making process in China. Recently, the Internet has helped to expose a number of cases concerning serious bureaucratic problems. It was through the Internet, for example, that a November 1999 report spread on how mismanagement of over 200 blood donation facilities in Henan Province may have spread HIV to large numbers of people in the province during the early 1990s.<sup>38</sup>

The arguments just outlined are supported by recent survey data produced by social scientists in China. A survey of the Internet in five Chinese cities shows that China's non-Internet users rely heavily on TV and newspapers for information, while for communication and personal expression, they do not have effective channels. In contrast, for Internet users, although TV and newspapers are still important sources of information, the Internet clearly plays a prominent role. With regard to communication, Internet users enjoy an overwhelming advantage over non-users. Thus, as media of expressing personal views, 14.2% of non-users selected TV, 21.9% selected newspapers, and 10.9% selected magazines. Added together, the percentage of non-Internet users relying on these three dominant conventional media for expressing views is 46%, while 62.8% of Internet users chose the Internet as a medium of expressing views. The same pattern holds when it comes to exchanging views with others. Of non-users, 13.9% selected TV as a medium for exchanging views with others, 14.2% selected newspapers, and 6.8% selected magazines. These numbers are insignificant compared with the 73.4% of Internet users who find the Internet to be a medium of exchanging views with others.<sup>39</sup> Table 3 summarizes the percentage of Internet users relying on different media for purposes of information or communication. Table 4 shows the percentage of non-Internet users relying on different media for purposes of information or communication.

37. Duncan Hewitt, 'Online diary of dying man', [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/asia-pacific/newsid\\_1039000/1039309.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/world/asia-pacific/newsid_1039000/1039309.stm). Retrieved 11 October 2001. I thank Sun-Ki Chai for bringing the story to my attention.

38. Report of US Embassy in Beijing, 'Kids, cadres and "cultists" all love it: growing influence of the Internet in China'. Retrieved 10 May 2001 from <http://www.usembassy-china.org.cn/english/sandt/index.html>.

39. Guo Liang and Bu Wei, 'Report on the Conditions of the Internet in Five Cities in China in Year 2000'. The primary investigators of this project were partners of the UCLA Internet Project (<http://www.ccp.ucla.edu/pages/Partners.asp>). The research design was modeled on the UCLA project. The report is in Chinese and contains a detailed discussion of methodological issues. See <http://www.chinace.org/ce/itre/>. Retrieved 18 June 2001.

**Table 3.** Which medium can better meet which of your following needs? (*N* of Internet users = 1,045)

	TV	Newspapers	Magazines	Internet	Books	Radio	None of above
Learning about current affairs in China and overseas	86.5	69.5	21.1	61.9	15.0	23.4	1.1
Acquiring information for personal life (e.g., shopping, travel information)	56.6	52.6	32.7	58.9	14.5	11.7	3.6
Acquiring educational information	28.6	35.8	21.1	56.1	61.2	7.9	3.1
Entertainment or personal hobbies (e.g., games, music)	59.1	23.0	26.3	67.7	20.8	19.6	4.3
Expressing personal views and opinions or publishing writings	10.0	22.7	14.6	62.8	8.5	4.0	17.0
Exchanging views or information with others	8.8	9.4	6.8	73.4	4.6	4.0	15.5
Participating in social activities	19.8	16.8	8.2	44.5	5.2	7.1	34.6
Promoting personal emotions (e.g. making friends or maintaining relationships with friends and colleagues)	9.5	6.4	6.0	63.6	6.1	4.8	27.0

Source: Guo Liang and Bu Wei, 'Report on the Conditions of the Internet in Five Cities in China in Year 2000. Conducted by the Center for Social Development of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences', (2001). <http://www.chinace.org/ce/itre/>. Retrieved 18 June 2001.

While the Internet has provided new spaces for public sphere activities in China, it is important to emphasize that discourse in Chinese-language online spaces is not always or equally civil, as befitting the ideals of a *civil* society. The debate on democratic and undemocratic practices in QGLT attests to the existence of undemocratic practices. These undemocratic practices should sound a cautionary note to observers, but do not invalidate my argument about the role of the Internet in civil society activities. In fact, they probably reflect a greater degree of openness on the Internet. After all, one key difference between China's online spaces and offline public sphere is the greater diversity of the online spaces. As in other areas of social life, diversity entails differences, including differences that may appear offensive. When it comes to the freedom of speech in the public sphere, the famous dictum attributed to Voltaire carries a lot of persuasive force: 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it'. In China, the Internet has consolidated citizens' right to say what they want to say.

### The Internet and social organizations

Autonomous social organizations are important components of a civil society. Although social organizations have proliferated in China, they are mostly corporatist in nature and lack sufficient political autonomy. The impact of the Internet should be considered against this background.

**Table 4.** Which medium can better meet which of your following needs? (*N* of non-Internet users = 1,086)

	TV	Newspapers	Magazines	Internet	Books	Radio	None of above
Learning about current affairs in China and overseas	91.6	71.2	19.4	11.1	12.8	31.4	1.0
Acquiring information for personal life (e.g., shopping, travel information)	63.7	60.7	25.6	10.4	12.8	19.2	5.8
Acquiring educational information	43.0	44.0	20.1	12.0	48.7	12.9	6.5
Entertainment or personal hobbies (e.g., games, music)	65.2	26.5	18.6	14.7	14.3	24.0	13.6
Expressing personal views and opinions or publishing writings	14.2	21.9	10.9	14.4	6.2	4.9	50.2
Exchanging views or information with others	13.9	14.2	6.8	19.3	4.2	4.9	53.4
Participating in social activities	19.4	16.6	5.4	12.3	2.8	8.1	55.7
Promoting personal emotions (e.g. making friends or maintaining relationships with friends and colleagues)	14.7	10.0	5.3	17.3	5.6	4.4	58.6

Source: Guo Liang and Bu Wei, 'Report on the Conditions of the Internet in Five Cities in China in Year 2000. Conducted by the Center for Social Development of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences', (2001). <http://www.chinace.org/ce/itre/>. Retrieved 18 June 2001.

*Impact on existing social organizations*

The Internet reduces the barriers of geographical and social locations to voluntary associational life. People in different physical locations may now more easily find out about or join organizations. Existing social organizations use the Internet for publicity, recruitment, fund-raising, and public education. Of particular interest are the growing number of environmental groups and NGOs in China.<sup>40</sup> Most of them maintain active websites. Both types of environmental associations are a recent phenomenon in China. A review of the websites of two influential environmental NGOs and seven environmental groups<sup>41</sup> reveals some common characteristics in their uses of the Internet. First, they carry information about their organizations, including mission statements, membership information, events and activities.

40. By environmental groups, I refer to voluntary associations of individuals interested in environmental protection issues. They may be student clubs, or individuals linked together mainly because of the Internet. Environmental NGOs are non-governmental, non-profit, but officially registered associations. How independent of the Chinese government these organizations are is an empirical question requiring further research. In private correspondence with staff of some of the environmental NGOs, I was told that such independence is relative and it varies from organization to organization. Some self-proclaimed environmental NGOs are in fact government agencies.

41. The environmental NGOs are Friends of Nature ([www.fon.org.cn](http://www.fon.org.cn)), established in 1994 and Global Village of Beijing ([www.gvbchina.org](http://www.gvbchina.org)), established in 1996. The seven environmental groups are: Gong Shan Zoology Protection Association ([green-gong.com](http://green-gong.com)), Greenriver ([go2.163.com/manl](http://go2.163.com/manl)), Green Camp of University Students in China ([www.gbj.grchina.net/greencamp](http://www.gbj.grchina.net/greencamp)), Greener Beijing ([gbj.grchina.net/greenerbj.htm](http://gbj.grchina.net/greenerbj.htm)), Oasis Club ([www.cau.edu.cn/luzhou/int.htm](http://www.cau.edu.cn/luzhou/int.htm)), Tibetan Antelope Information Center ([ww.taic.org](http://ww.taic.org)), and Wetlands of Beijing ([www.wowcn.org](http://www.wowcn.org)).

Second, they publish news and other information about the environment and feature environmental problems in China. Third, they maintain links to other websites related to environmental protection, including websites of China's governmental environment protection agencies and international environmental organizations. Some websites have discussion forums; others maintain archives of government regulations on environmental issues in China. While serving to propagate knowledge about the environment, they also function as information centers for volunteers willing to commit time and efforts to their causes. In several cases, such as 'Tibetan Antelope Information Center', 'Wetlands of China', and 'Greener Beijing', the Internet is clearly indispensable to their existence. With a membership of more than 1,000, 'Greener Beijing' boasts of being 'the first and the most active Internet based environmental NGO in China'.<sup>42</sup>

### *The emergence of virtual communities*

Virtual communities are defined as 'social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace'.<sup>43</sup> Virtual communities tend to form in chatrooms and BBS forums. Chatrooms provide a space for self-expression and developing romance and love. They are categorized by topic of interest. Netease.com, for example, runs chatrooms for entertainment, sports, films, romance, and so on.

Bulletin boards may also foster social relationships and create virtual communities. One active virtual community has formed around a BBS forum called 'Forum of Chinese Educated Youth' (*Huaxia zhiqing luntan*, or HXZQ).<sup>44</sup> The forum was set up in June 1998 by two individuals interested in the historical experience of China's educated youth generation. By May 2000, it had attracted a daily average of 700 hits and ranked fifteenth in the list of top-ranking Chinese-language bulletin boards maintained by www.geocities.com. In July 2000, through online discussions, the core members of the forum established a 'China Educated Youth Internet Studio' (*Huaxia zhiqing gongzuoshi*), a collective management entity, to plan, develop and fund the operations of its BBS forum and associated websites.<sup>45</sup> The studio sets itself two missions: to build a virtual home for friendship, education, entertainment and mutual help and a 'Virtual Educated Youth Museum' for publishing and archiving documents about the 'Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside' (*shangshan xiexiang*) movement. While it has attracted some younger visitors, the forum is mainly a gathering place for a group of individuals of the 'educated youth' generation. Daily page views average 800.

42. <http://gbj.grchina.net/gbj/engfirst.htm>. Accessed 7 October 2001.

43. Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1993), p. 5.

44. The website for the bulletin board has migrated several times. A long-time serving board was at <http://www.zqsc.org/huaxia/wwwboard/index.html>. As of October 2001, this has been replaced by <http://bj.netsh.com/bbs/80472/>. The main homepage is <http://www.hxzq.net>, officially registered in July 2001.

45. Funds are needed to lease network space. They come from the annual dues of members of the 'Studio' as well as from donations. All other work—homepage design, collecting and uploading documents, serving as discussion moderators—is voluntary.

This virtual community has several notable characteristics. First, participants are intent on building it into a virtual home. Regular members come here to seek or provide news and information, discuss topics of common interest, publish a little poem or essay, or simply exchange greetings. To cater to the different needs of the participants, a chatroom and a virtual ‘Tea House’ were set up for more intimate and informal conversations. A sense of belonging is common among regular members. Second, while no artificial limits are put on the scope of conversation, conversation tends to gravitate toward several thematic clusters. Personal matters—travels, social gatherings, friendship, family and children—are favorite topics. At times, these matters are accompanied with photos, in which case readers may ask about who is who in the photos. Regular visitors thus soon come to know one another not just by the personalities revealed in texts, but also by the faces in pictures. Conversations on more ‘intellectual’ or social topics are also common. For a long period, some poetry lovers discussed the techniques of composing classical-style Chinese verse. Posts about official corruption, unemployment, education and social welfare appear quite often. They may simply report news about these issues, but sometimes critical discussions may develop.<sup>46</sup> A final popular topic is the Cultural Revolution and the ‘Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside’ movement. The two movements defined the historical experience of the ‘educated youth’ generation. For many of them, talking about these two historical events is a very personal experience. Most personal stories by community members have been archived in the ‘Virtual Educated Youth Museum’.

A third characteristic is style. The text-based nature of computer-mediated communication means that style and rhetorical skills may have more impact on the quality of communication than in face-to-face situations, partly due to the lack of visual and aural aids such as tones, voices, and gestures. As is common in unmoderated forums, misunderstanding is inevitable in HXZQ, sometimes leading to unpleasant verbal exchanges.<sup>47</sup> In the first half of the year 2000, HXZQ saw a period of quibbles and quarrels that eventually caused a few regular members to resentfully leave the forum. That crisis served as a lesson for all who cared for the forum and triggered some serious discussions about styles of conversation and debate. As a result, the discourse in HXZQ became more consciously civil.

Fourth, this virtual community does not operate online only. Social ties forged in the forum have extended into offline life. I have been a regular visitor to the forum since February 2000 and have read many stories about real-life visits among community members. At least two members residing in Southern California have visited their online friends in Guangzhou and Shanghai. One person in Beijing

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46. The following post illustrates the critical thrust of many of these discussions: It seems that the American President Kennedy once said: ‘Don’t ask what the country has given to you; ask what you have given to the country’. [Literal back translation from the Chinese.] Now [in China] it is the public servants who are the rulers. They ask the unemployed to behave like this and like that. The unemployed are not even guaranteed a salary! Not to say a salary that keeps doubling and redoubling! The public servants who live on the money of the taxpayers should ponder: what they should do for the people with the power in their hand, what they should think about for the country, what they should do themselves (<http://qzyd.iscute.com>: 17 February 2000, 13:04. Note that as of October 2001, this bulletin board has been replaced by: <http://bj.netsh.com/bbs/80472/>).

47. Beginning from the end of 2000, HXZQ began to invite its members to serve as volunteer moderators.



toured Guangzhou to see Guangzhou-based members. Another living in Wuhan visited Beijing-based members on a business trip.

Lastly, this community has a complex and transnational online network. HXZQ started with a bulletin board. It then added a chatroom, two more bulletin boards, and a well-designed, content-rich homepage. The homepage contains historical photos and music, archives on historical documents about the 'Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside' movement and recollective stories and current debates about the historical experience of the generation, links to personal homepages owned by community members, and as of 7 October 2001, an address book of 212 former educated youth. Of these 212 core members of the community, 97 listed their current country of residence. Nineteen of these 97 are in the US, three in Canada, three in Japan, two in Australia, one in New Zealand, one in Germany, one in Hong Kong and the rest in mainland China. Thus, HXZQ serves as a virtual nexus of an entire network of the educated youth generation in and outside of China.

The above discussion of HXZQ not only shows that virtual communities have become a reality in China, but also reveals some unique features of this new associational form. HXZQ was born in virtual space but then evolved into one with offline and transnational connections. Its members use the Internet as a home for social interaction, self-expression, and mutual support. They volunteer time and energy to build online archives of their historical experience. It is important to point out, however, that in this particular case, shared historical experience and a common generational identity contributed to the cohesiveness of this virtual community. Future research should examine whether and how virtual communities may form among individuals or groups with weak or no pre-existing collective identities.

### **The Internet and new dynamics of popular protest**

Protest has gone online in China as elsewhere. In China it happens on a daily basis in newsgroups and bulletin boards. At one level, such protest is simply a more radical form of public debate, articulating issues that would have eluded public attention without the Internet. Yet online protest is more than problem articulation. Because of high speed, openness and relative anonymity, the Internet is changing the dynamics of protest in various parts of the world. It has special significance for popular protest in China, where the mobilization of organized protest is relatively infrequent because of state sanctions. To illustrate the key features of online protest in China, I will examine the influential protest activities surrounding the rape and murder of Qiu Qingfeng in late May 2000.<sup>48</sup>

Qiu was a student in Beijing University. She was found raped and murdered on

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48. The following discussion is based on data I collected from six BBS forums based in China. They represent three main types of BBSs in China—university-based, commercial, and official. Three of the six are university BBSs (Beijing University, Shantou University and Xi'an Jiaotong University). The 'Strengthening the Nation Forum', affiliated to the *People's Daily*, has an official status. The other two are run by popular commercial portal sites (Sohu.com and Netease.com). From 23 May to 4 June 2000, I followed the discussions closely, spending an average of six hours daily to read the posts and download information.

20 May 2000, on her way back to the university's rural Changping campus.<sup>49</sup> Upon learning about the murder, university authorities convened an emergency meeting and decided to hold back the news about the murder. The case happened at a sensitive time—about two weeks before the eleventh anniversary of the repression of the 1989 student movement. Students in Beijing University had been among the most active in that movement. Clearly, university authorities attempted to cover up the case in order to forestall any unexpected turn of events around the anniversary date.

News about the murder first broke in Beijing University's 'Triangle' (*Sanjiaodi*)<sup>50</sup> bulletin board at 11:19 pm, 22 May. The posts quickly triggered a wave of protest in BBS forums across China. Beginning from 23 May, there was a dramatic increase in the number of visits to the 'Triangle' forum. The total number of hits in this forum was 408 for 21 May and 689 for 22 May. It jumped to 11,863 on 23 May. The number reached a record high of 12,073 on 24 May and tapered off after that, though still maintaining a level much higher than that prior to the protest.

While the number of visits to the 'Triangle' forum increased dramatically, so did the number of posts. The 'Triangle' forum was set up on 25 December 1999. From then to 22 May 2000, only 303 posts appeared. Beginning on 23 May, this number increased sharply. Altogether 423 messages were posted on 23 May alone. This number peaked to 1,842 on 24 May. Between 23 and 26 May, a total of 3,692 messages were posted, all related to the murder of Qiu Qingfeng.

News about the murder case shot through the country on the Internet. One of the first two messages that appeared in the 'Triangle' forum was cross-posted to the 'Perspectives on Current Affairs' forum of Shantou University at 8:44 am, 23 May, to the 'News' forum of Xi'an Jiaotong University at 9:29 am, to the 'Current Affairs and News' forum of Netease.com at 3:46 pm, and to the 'Focus' forum of Sohu.com at 10:19 pm. No posts about the murder appeared on 'Strengthening the Nation Forum' on 23 May, but 56 did on 24 May.

A focus on the patterns of diffusion of protest highlights two key features about online protest: speed and openness. In a matter of hours after the first message about the murder case was posted in Beijing University's 'Triangle' forum, the news had spread across China's numerous bulletin boards. This would be unimaginable without the Internet, because the conventional media remained reticent on the matter. During the period of online protest discussed here, major national and regional newspapers such as *People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily*, *Legal News Daily*, *Beijing Daily* and *Beijing Youth Daily* made no mention of the murder case. *Legal News Daily* usually carries some news about crimes, but it did not report this case. It was the Internet that provided Chinese citizens with a unique opportunity to make their voices heard.

Also interesting are the connections of online protest with campus protest

49. By the time the exam was over at 4:00 pm, the last shuttle bus from the main campus to the Changping campus had left. Qiu was last seen around 8:00 pm in a supermarket in downtown Changping, indicating she was on her way back to the Changping campus, probably by long-distance bus and then by foot, because there was no bus service from downtown Changping to the campus.

50. The news forum of Beijing University's BBS is called 'Triangle' (*Sanjiaodi*). It is named after the famous triangle area on campus, the unofficial center for information, public gatherings and protests in Beijing University.

activities. Such connections were manifest in the mutual influences between protest in online forums and campus demonstrations and sit-ins. In the protest period, the Internet was used to discuss and formulate goals and demands and organize campus demonstrations. One post demanded the resignation of university administrators responsible for the accident (fina, 23 May 2000, 'Triangle'). Another suggested that university authorities should compensate the victim's parents, improve security conditions on and around the campus, and show more respect and care for students (anew, 26 May 2000, Netease.com). A widely circulated third post announced a planned demonstration from the neighboring Qinghua University to Beijing University.<sup>51</sup> Another important connection between online and offline protest was the almost instantaneous online broadcast of campus events. Such broadcast kept interested users in other parts of the country informed of campus activities. Thus one post reports:

At 8:00, I checked out things online in the library. I thought people probably had already left [for the gathering]. I packed up my books and went in search of the crowd. In the small plaza in front of the big hall, quite a lot of people had gathered. White candle lights swayed and flickered. Students sat silently together in circles, in groups of 7 or 8 or several dozens. On the stairs near the Triangle area, a huge heart-shaped pattern was laid with flickering candles, with little white-paper flowers in the middle of the heart. I saw the following netfriends: caishen, hubing, xsy, littlefisher kansg, lhx, cc, bigfatcat, tiank (Young, 23 May 2000, 21:08, 'Triangle').

The Internet was not only used for protest, but itself became an object of struggle. This has to do with the specific conditions under which the Internet is used in China. China's Internet users tend to perceive it as a space for exercising their right of free speech, while the government tries to keep control. Where these interests conflict, protest may arise from among the users. Thus, despite its relative openness, the Internet is not a perfectly free space. In May 2000, China's Internet users were aware of possible social control efforts on the part of the authorities and consciously and sometimes tactically fought against control. For example, at the very beginning of the protest, in anticipation of possible control action by the university administration, posts appeared in Beijing University's BBS forums that asserted the constitutional right of freedom of speech in China and warned the authorities against containing protest by shutting down the BBS.<sup>52</sup> Knowing that explicitly hostile language could backfire, some users warned that the protest should proceed in a forceful but rational manner. Below is one example:

Please make good use of the BBS. At present, the BBS management has made positive responses to our sentiments. In case the management comes under pressure [of the authorities], please show your understanding (fina, 23 May 2000, 'Triangle').

Thus while protest developed in the BBS forums, its meanings expanded among

51. The message announced that demonstrators would meet in front of the auditorium in Qinghua University at 20:30 and then march from there to Beijing University's centennial hall. The message was posted by users in the following order: cind, 23 May 2000, 02:29, Qinghua University BBS; Rocktor, 23 May 2000, 08:40 Qinghua University BBS; onlooker, 23 May 2000, 08:55, 'Triangle'.

52. The BBS was not shut down, probably as a result of student warnings, but there were times when the system did not seem to be operating properly, making students suspicious of what was really happening.

discussions and debates. Although the protest was still about the murder case, it quickly became a struggle for freedom of speech on the Internet. As the following post shows, Internet users were excited about the possibilities of freedom of speech opened up by the new technology:

On the 22nd, the news began to circulate on the BBSs of Beijing University and Qinghua University. Out of indignation at the university leadership's response, the students in these two universities, with the online support of students from other universities, decided to hold memorial services for their schoolmate. This was in order to break through the deliberate control of information and suppression of memorial activities by the authorities. The information circulated on the Internet indicates that similar cases have happened in other universities, but have almost all been covered up. It may be believed that if it had not been for the Internet, and if it had not been because of the students' indignation, this case would also have been covered up ('Triangle Forum', 27 May 2000, cross-posted in Netease.com on 29 May 2000).

As an important component of civil society, popular protest is a powerful means of resisting political power and protecting citizen rights. Until recently, the major protest events in the PRC, from the Red Guard Movement to the student demonstrations of 1986, all happened because of some kind of state initiation. As sociologist Xueguang Zhou argued, this was due to a peculiar state–society relationship in China. This relationship was characterized by the state's penetration of civil society and by its dependence on political campaigns and mass mobilizations to deal with social, political and economic problems. Historically, this relationship turned the state into the unwitting initiator of popular protest. As Zhou puts it, 'Participating in state-initiated political campaigns provides an opportunity for individuals and groups to pursue their own agendas and exploit new opportunities. State-initiated political campaigns provide opportunities for unorganized groups and individuals to act together'.<sup>53</sup> The rise of online protest indicates the changing dynamics of popular protest in China as well as a change in the state–society relationship as examined by Zhou. As my discussion shows, the Internet facilitates if not completely satisfies the key conditions of the emergence of popular protest. It helps to disseminate information, formulate goals and strategies, identify opponents, and organize protest events. All this happens speedily, at low costs, and without incurring grave personal risks. Online protest has brought new elements into the art of protest.

### **Explaining the impact of the Internet on Chinese civil society: conditions and obstacles**

So far, I have examined the impact of the Internet in three areas of Chinese civil society. How to explain such impact? As I suggested at the beginning, the Internet is a bundle of technologies and technologies produce social effects depending on social conditions. I now sketch several conditions that have facilitated the social influences of the Internet in China and discuss several limiting factors.

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53. Xueguang Zhou, 'Unorganized interests and collective action in communist China', *American Sociological Review* 58(1), (1993), p. 61.

In his analysis of the historical emergence of the public sphere in early modern Europe, Habermas argues that trade economy and state institutions were the major determinants of the rise of the public sphere. Trade development needed the traffic in news and the political protection from state power; the growth of state bureaucracies needed the financial resources from trade as well as communication channels to publicize policies. Both conditions favored the rise of press institutions. The technological development of the Internet in China as elsewhere depends on government policy and economic incentives. Just as the Internet was initially developed as a government-sponsored military project in the United States, so its introduction into China was guided directly through government action. In both the US and China, market incentives brought the Internet within the reach of the general public, who then began to use it in ways not necessarily in the interest of political elites. It is fair to say that state and economy directly shaped the rise of the Internet in China.

For the Internet to exert influence on civil society, however, political power and market forces are insufficient conditions. People attach meanings to technology and these meanings shape how they use it. At the same time, what meanings they attach to what technology depend on a host of other factors. My discussions suggest that China's users value the Internet as a means of communication and expression, yet without an understanding of the history of political communication in China, the cultural meaning of the Internet could not be fully grasped. In this regard, suffice it to mention that political communication and dissent for much of this history depended mainly on the risky business of putting up big-character wall posters.<sup>54</sup>

If state power and market forces have given birth to the Internet as a new sphere of social and political life, will the same forces take away this life, as they did in Habermas's analysis of the eventual refeudalization of the public sphere? This is a key question for future research. Observers are clearly wary of this possibility but remain hopeful that this is not a preordained struggle.<sup>55</sup> To understand the future struggle over the Internet in China, it is necessary to understand the pressing obstacles. These obstacles are of two kinds, internal and external. By internal obstacles, I refer to those elements that hinder democratic participation in online communication. Participants in online forums want their voices to be heard, but there are 'bullies' who attempt to deprive fellow participants of their voice, for example by making them feel that they are inadequate discussants. Similarly, to carry on a meaningful discussion, participants should be able to articulate ideas, take positions, and inquire into interlocutors' positions. It takes time and practice to gain these skills. A final internal obstacle is stylistic and rhetorical indecencies: online discourse can be very uncivil. These internal obstacles are not insurmountable. As long as participants are prepared to engage in online discussions, it is likely that a culture or environment would evolve in the form of a community ethos to regulate conversations within reasonable bounds.

External obstacles are economic and political in nature. Politically, given that

54. For a historical survey of the use of wall-posters in Chinese politics, see Hua Sheng, 'Perspective on free speech in China: big character posters in China: a historical survey', *Journal of Asian Law* 4(2), (1990), pp. 234–256.

55. This is so even in the case of such an astute and generally pessimistic analyst as Lawrence Lessig, whose well-known book *Code* (1999) has cast gloomy shadows on the future of the Internet.

state elites are wary of the politically corrosive effects of civil society and of the Internet's role in it, they are likely to step up control. The economic obstacle has two sides to it. On the one hand, China has not developed to a stage where the Internet may be popularized. China's 59.1 million Internet users account for only a small percentage of its population. With continuous economic development, we may expect China's Internet population to grow steadily, a hopeful sign that this aspect of the economic obstacle will lessen and not worsen. On the other hand, with further economic development, the trend of commercialization of the Internet may become stronger. Commercialization represents a different kind of barrier to civil society development. As often happens in the conventional media, commercialization of the Internet may reduce it to a vanity fair of commodities and squeeze out the political action that now takes place there. In view of these two daunting obstacles, it is hard to foretell to what extent the Internet will continue to strengthen Chinese civil society. This will depend on how these economic and political obstacles may be reduced. At the same time, the possibility of the Internet's continual influence on Chinese civil society cannot be foreclosed either. How the political and economic obstacles may be reduced depends on whether and how China's Internet users will continue to use the Internet for such civil society activities as public debate, organization and protest. At this moment, there are no signs that they will abandon the Internet.

## Conclusion

I began this article with a review of the conditions and challenges of civil society in reform-era China. I have shown that the Internet has opened up new possibilities of meeting these challenges. First, the Internet has given rise to a new type of political action, online critical debate; it facilitates the articulation of social problems and has shown some potential to play a supervisory role in Chinese politics. Through the use of the Internet, citizens are becoming better informed about and more engaged in social and political affairs. Second, existing social organizations have developed an online presence while virtual communities have been built on the Internet. The use of the Internet by China's environmental groups and NGOs demonstrates some new possibilities for organized civil society action. It also indicates how elements of Chinese civil society may be linked with the global civil society in ways previously unimaginable.<sup>56</sup> Third, new forms and dynamics of protest related to the Internet have appeared in Chinese civil society. Collective protest relies on communication media to spread its message and organize activities. Historically, conventional media such as television and newspapers are under strict political control in China. Only in several extraordinary times in the history of the PRC did the media lend themselves to protest.<sup>57</sup> Evidence

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56. A prominent case in this respect is of course the use of the Internet by Falun Gong practitioners in and outside of China. This is a subject worthy of in-depth treatment, which I cannot embark on here. Nan Lin's recent book *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) contains an interesting analysis of how Falun Gong practitioners use the Internet to enhance their networking capacity.

57. An earlier example was the use of newspapers by student factions in the Red Guard Movement; a recent example was the brief loosening of media control during the student movement in 1989.

presented in this article shows that the Internet can facilitate protest activities in effective ways. Yet online protest is more than a new protest strategy. It is also a new field of struggle involving the uses and abuses of new information technologies. In this sense, online protest represents the growth of a contentious civil society in China.

Public debate, social organization and protest that take place on the Internet in China are linked in numerous ways with the global community, including the Chinese diaspora around the world. Despite government efforts to block selected sites, Internet users in China may access websites overseas, or 'link up' (*chuanlian*)—a term of heavy political import—with overseas individuals and groups for information exchange, solidarity building, or protest. The virtual community of the 'Forum of Chinese Educated Youth', for example, clearly crosses national boundaries. The porous and networked nature of the Internet thus ties China's civil society to the global community. Their interpenetration is a source of energy for China's incipient civil society. Such interpenetration enhances information flow critical to civil society activities.

Given the evolving nature of the Internet, these conclusions can only be preliminary. It is premature to generalize these conclusions beyond the specific issues addressed here, and there are important issues that I have not addressed. Foremost among these are the online constructions of personal and collective identities. Both personal and collective identities are tied to civil society, not the least because they directly affect what Chamberlain has called 'the *quality* of civil societal life'.<sup>58</sup> By this he means the internal solidarity of a civil society as communities of autonomous individuals. It is not that the autonomy of civil society from the state is not important, but that it is not enough, because 'What bonds civil society and its components are forces working from the inside out, not from the outside in'.<sup>59</sup> In light of these discussions, we may ask: how does the use of the Internet shape personal identities? In the long run, can Internet-based discourse and interactions contribute to a civic and participatory culture? How may the Internet be used to articulate collective identities based on class, gender, ethnicity, region and above all, the nation? How do the online constructions of various forms of collective identities impinge on civil society in China? Some scholars have already begun to consider these issues, particularly cyber-nationalism,<sup>60</sup> but the phenomena are new and questions are many. They are important areas for future research.

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58. Heath B. Chamberlain, 'Civil society with Chinese characteristics', *The China Journal* 39, (1998), p. 78.  
59. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

60. For example, Hughes examined how, during the riots against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia in May 1998, Chinese website activities led up to a demonstration against the Indonesia embassy in Beijing by students in Beijing University. See C. R. Hughes, 'Nationalism in Chinese cyberspace', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 13(2), (2000), pp. 195–209. Kluver explored online nationalism following the American spy plane incident in the South China Sea in April 2001. See R. Kluver, 'New media and the end of nationalism: China and the US in a war of words', *Mots Pluriels* 18, (August 2001). Available online: <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP1801ak.html>.





