Talking to Strangers: Chinese Youth and Social Media

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

by

Tricia Wang

Committee in charge:

Professor Richard Madsen, Chair
Professor Benjamin Bratton
Professor Barry Brown
Professor Jim Hollan
Professor Isaac Martin
Professor Christena Turner

2013
Copyright

Tricia Wang, 2013

Some rights reserved, refer to Appendix E.
The Dissertation of Tricia Wang is approved, and is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

______________________________

______________________________

______________________________

______________________________

______________________________

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2013
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page ........................................................................................................ iii

Table of Contents .................................................................................................... iv

List of Tables ........................................................................................................... ix

List of Figures .......................................................................................................... x

Dedication ................................................................................................................ xi

Epigraph .................................................................................................................. xii

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................. xiv

Vita ........................................................................................................................... xvi

Biographical Notice ............................................................................................... xvii

Abstract of the Dissertation ................................................................................. xix

Chapter 1 Introduction......................................................................................... 1
  1.1 Mr. Lee’s Scooter ....................................................................................... 1
    1.1.1 The Circle of Students .................................................................. 3
  1.2 Emotional Expression and the Situational Self ...................................... 6
  1.3 Social Shifts That Laid the Groundwork for an Elastic Self ............... 11
  1.4 The Internet Comes to China ................................................................. 17
  1.5 Going Online for Personal Interests, Not Political Reasons ............ 22
  1.6 An Identity Revolution ....................................................................... 25
  1.7 Outcomes of an Elastic Self ................................................................ 28
  1.8 Project Outline ...................................................................................... 32

Chapter 2 An Elastic Self ................................................................................... 34
  2.1 Introduction .............................................................................................. 34
  2.2 Chinese Identity: A Review ................................................................. 36
  2.3 Online Identity: A Review ................................................................. 43
    2.3.1 Western Youth ............................................................................ 44
    2.3.2 Chinese Youth ........................................................................... 49
  2.4 Elastic Self ............................................................................................... 55
  2.5 Who is Engaging in an Elastic Self? ................................................... 59
  2.6 Conditions in Which an Elastic Self Flourishes .................................. 61
    2.6.1 Modes of Interaction ................................................................. 61
    2.6.2 Affordances of Informal Modes ............................................... 62
    2.6.3 Platforms are Dominant in One Mode ....................................... 66
  2.7 Three Phases of an Elastic Self ............................................................ 71
# Chapter 3 Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Introduction</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Where I Went</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Who I Spent Time With</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.1 Migrant Lives</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.2 Talking to Students after the Wenzhou Train Accident</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Nuts and Bolts</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.1 Youth</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4.2 Other Groups of People</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 How I Conducted the Fieldwork</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 How I Spent Time with Participants</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 How I Documented My Fieldwork</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8 Techniques I Used to Gather Data and How I Analyzed It</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8.1 Avoiding “High Theory”</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8.2 Avoiding Politics</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8.3 Avoiding Technology</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8.4 Sensitivity to Word Choice</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8.5 Critical Role of Research Assistants</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8.6 Methodological Implications of a Modes of Interaction Framework</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.9 Conclusion</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# Chapter 4 Exploratory Phase: From Formal to Informal Modes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Introduction</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Lonely Youth</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Chinese Emotional Culture: A Review</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Anonymity on the Internet: A Review</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Meet the Characters: Liuliu, Taoge, Sammy, and Mimi</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6 The Stories</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.1 Liuliu, the Boy Who Doesn’t Need a Sex Change</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.1.1 A Background on “Homosexuality” in China</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.1.2 Finding Online Gay Communities</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.1.3 No Longer in a Village</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.2 Tao Ge, the QQ Flirt</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.2.1 Boarding School Life</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.2.2 A Future that Depends on the Gaokao</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.2.3 College Life</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.2.4 Tao Ge Looks to QQ and Beyond</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.3 Sammy, the Fandom Searcher</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.3.1 Joining Circles on Douban</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.6.3.2 Discovering Sexuality ....................................................... 178
4.6.3.3 Deleting a Profile ............................................................ 180
4.6.4 Mimi, an Ideal Party candidate ............................................. 186
  4.6.4.1 Joining the Communist Party ........................................... 187
  4.6.4.2 A Secret Weibo Account ............................................... 192
  4.6.4.3 Discovering Hidden Information ...................................... 194
  4.6.4.5 And Discovering More .................................................. 197
  4.6.4.6 Joining the Party as a Cynic and a Copier .......................... 200
  4.6.4.7 Maintaining Two Identities .......................................... 205
  4.6.4.8 A Less Cynical Mimi ..................................................... 208
4.6.4.9 ....................................................................................... 209
4.7 Analysis .................................................................................. 211
  4.7.1 Discovering Hidden Information, Whether It Is About Sex or Politics .................................................. 211
  4.7.2 Finding Hidden Information Relates to Identity ....................... 214
4.8 Conclusion ............................................................................. 217

Chapter 5 Trusting Phase: From Strangers to Semiknown Contacts ........ 220
  5.1 Introduction ........................................................................... 220
  5.2 Recap of Chapter 4 and Taking Us into Chapter 5 ....................... 220
  5.3 Trust: A Review ..................................................................... 221
    5.3.1 Online Trust and Evaluation Skills .................................... 225
    5.3.2 Trust in China ............................................................... 228
    5.3.3 Why Would Chinese Youth Trust Anyone Online? ............... 234
    5.3.4 How Do Chinese Youth Learn to Trust? .............................. 236
  5.4 Meet the Characters .............................................................. 242
    5.4.1 Han, the Shoe Thrower ................................................... 243
      5.4.1.1 College is a New World .............................................. 244
      5.4.1.2 The Shoe Throwing Event ........................................... 252
      5.4.1.3 Trust on Twitter ....................................................... 255
      5.4.1.4 Trust in Institutions .................................................. 258
      5.4.1.5 Analysis of Han ....................................................... 264
    5.4.2 Maimai, the Taobao Queen ............................................. 266
      5.4.2.1 Sharing on Renren .................................................... 267
      5.4.2.2 A Shopper Who Doesn’t Want to Share Her Shopping Tips .................................................. 268
      5.4.2.3 Why Taobao Is the Most Popular Online Shopping Site ...... 273
      5.4.2.4 The Unspoken Reasons of Why Taobao is Popular ............. 275
      5.4.2.5 Analysis of MaiMai ................................................... 282
  5.5 Analysis .................................................................................. 285
    5.5.1 New Connection between Trust and Information .................. 285
    5.5.2 Trust Transference .......................................................... 287
  5.6 Conclusion ............................................................................. 288

Chapter 6 Participatory Phase: From Private to Public Interests ............. 290
  6.1 Introduction ........................................................................... 290
6.2 Recap of Chapter 5 ................................................................. 290
  6.2.1 Participatory Phase ............................................................ 291
6.3 Citizenship: An Overview ...................................................... 296
6.4 Public Sphere: A Review ......................................................... 299
6.5 Building out Trust from Moral Me to Moral We ......................... 305
6.6 The Characters ........................................................................ 307
  6.6.1 Hooligan Sparrow, the Community Organizer ......................... 307
    6.6.1.1 Haiyan’s Experience in the Exploratory Phase ..................... 310
    6.6.1.2 Haiyan’s Experience in the Trusting Phase ......................... 312
    6.6.1.3 Signs of the Participatory Phase ....................................... 313
    6.6.1.4 Starting a Social Movement ............................................ 317
    6.6.1.5 Organizing for HIV/AIDS .............................................. 321
    6.6.1.6 And She’s Still Going ................................................... 329
    6.6.1.7 Analysis of Haiyan/Hooligan Sparrow .............................. 331
  6.6.2 Lily, the City Citizen ............................................................ 335
    6.7.2.1 Lily Decides to Go to the Protest ..................................... 340
    6.7.2.2 QQ Friends .................................................................. 346
    6.7.2.3 Derek, the Nonprotester ................................................. 350
    6.7.2.4 Analysis of Lily and Derek ............................................. 356
  6.7.1 Technodeterminism/Instrumentalism Not Correct ..................... 360
  6.7.2 Importance of the Exploratory and Trusting Phases of an
    Elastic Self ............................................................................... 364
  6.7.3 Communities of Choice ......................................................... 366
  6.7.4 Networks Are the Source of This Action—Not
    Hierarchical Organizations ....................................................... 367
6.8 Conclusion .............................................................................. 368

Chapter 7 Conclusion ................................................................... 370
  7.1 Youth Style Meme ................................................................. 370
  7.2 Summary of Argument ........................................................... 372
  7.3 A Third Liberation? ............................................................... 376
    7.3.1 Future Research .............................................................. 383
  7.4 Looking to the Future: The Importance of Informal Modes of
    Interaction ............................................................................... 385
    7.4.2 Flexibility and Responsiveness .......................................... 388
  7.5 Concluding Thoughts ............................................................ 391

Bibliography ............................................................................... 397

Appendix A Most Popular Online Platforms On The Chinese Internet .... 452
Appendix B List of Mandarin Chinese Characters from Each Chapter .... 458
Appendix C Title and Abstract in Chinese ...................................... 466
Appendix D  List of New Concepts .......................................................... 468
Appendix E  Creative Commons License .............................................. 469
Epilogue .............................................................................................. 479
LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.1</td>
<td>Modes of Interaction</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.2</td>
<td>Indicators of the Phases of the Elastic Self</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.3</td>
<td>Marx’s and Muschert’s Elements of a Sociology of Information (2007)</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Using the toilet</td>
<td>371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Wearing pants</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to everyone who has fostered my curiosity in the living world. My grandparents, 黃孫鏗 Sun Ken Hung (September 19, 1924–October 20, 2003) and 高為鳯 Wei Fong Hung (July 4, 1932) were the first to model a curious life for me. They continued to pursue knowledge despite not having the economic means or stable social conditions for a formal education. The world was their laboratory. And based on their experiments, my grandparents passed on their most important findings to me: have empathy for strangers, give more than take, and pursue health over wealth. I also cannot underestimate the importance of my uncle, Jim Chen, MD. From a young age, he never ceased to amaze me with his endless knowledge about everything. My grandparents and uncle provided me a template for the kind of friends, colleagues, role models, mentors, and heroes I gravitate towards. Adelante!

献词

这个研究献给每一个在这世上培育了我的好奇心的人. 我的祖父母, 黃孫鏗 Sun Ken Hung (1924.09.19-2003.10.20) 和高为凤 Wei Fong Hung (1932.07.04) 最先向我示范了什么是充满好奇心的生活. 尽管没有保障正式教育的经济手段和稳定的社会条件, 他们仍旧追求知识. 世界就是他们的实验室. 根据他们在实验室里的实验, 我的祖父母把他们最重要的发现传递给了我：理解陌生人的感受、给予多于索取，以及把追求健康放在追求财富之上. 我也同样不能低估我的叔叔, Jim Chen 医学博士, 对我的重要性. 从我的幼年开始, 他对一切的不休止的好奇心就一直让我感到惊讶。我的祖父母和叔叔为我提供了我倾向的朋友、同事、偶像、导师、英雄的榜样.
EPIGRAPH

For one to be free there must be at least two. Freedom signifies a social relation, an asymmetry of social conditions: essentially it implies social difference—it presumes and implies the presence of social division. Some can be free only in so far as there is a form of dependence they can aspire to escape.

—Zygmunt Bauman (1988)

How can we ascertain whether the state of ‘being free’ is in fact appreciated by most people in most places? The caveat here is that “if I ask someone whether he prefers to travel on horseback or by car, his reply is meaningless unless the respondent has at least seen a car and a horse. It is pointless to enquire about preferences vis-à-vis people who have never been offered alternatives, that is, anything to compare…. Innumerable people cannot prefer something to something else because they have no “else” in sight; they simply live with, and encapsulated within, the human (or inhumane) condition they find.

—Giovanni Sartori (1993)

I understand now, that boundaries between noise and sound are conventions. All boundaries are conventions, waiting to be transcended. One may transcend any convention, if only one can first conceive of doing so….separation is an illusion.

—David Mitchell, Cloud Atlas

Differences, borders, lines, surfaces and boundaries do not really divide things from each other at all, they join them together. All boundaries are held in common.

—Alan Watts

In the immediate as well as the symbolic sense, in the physical as well as the intellectual sense, we are at any moment those who separate the connected or connect the separate.

—Georg Simmel

Each person shines with his or her own light. No two flames are alike. There are big flames and little flames, flames of every color. Some people’s flames are so still they don’t even flicker in the wind, while others have wild flames that fill the air with sparks. Some foolish flames neither burn nor shed light, but others blaze with life so fiercely that you can’t look at them without blinking, and if you approach you shine in the fire."

—Eduardo Galeano
When atoms are traveling straight down through empty space by their own weight, at quite indeterminate times and places, they swerve every so little from their course, just so much that you would call it a change of direction. If it were not for this swerve, everything would fall downwards through the abyss of space. No collision would take place and no impact of atom on atom would be created. Thus nature would never have created anything.

—Lucretius 99 BC–55 BC
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Where should I begin!? GAHHHHH @%#$*!!! The biggest thank you is for all the people who have opened up their lives to me—THANK YOU! Even though this project documents my work in China, it builds on all of the fieldwork I have conducted around the world. From the families of rural Oaxaca to the teens of the South Bronx—your voices are always with me.

I have written a thorough acknowledgement on my website to friends, colleagues, institutions, and animals who have played a pivotal role in helping this project come to fruition: triciawang.com/synthesisnow-acknowledgements. Many of the people who have been critical to my journey have shown up throughout my documentation of my writing process1 and fieldwork.2

I have the best research team a sociologist could ever dream of: Pheona Chen 陈苇如, Reginald Zhu 祝进文, Iris Ruan 阮晓昱, Shayla Qiu 仇娟, Allemande Niu 牛兆弘, and Chris Chang 张旭平. You are all brilliant and special.

During my last year of research in China, I spent a lot of time with Professor Chou Changcheng 周长城 at Wuhan University’s sociology department. Professor Chou Changcheng thank you for making fieldwork a blast!

I would not have stayed in this program if I did not have the most amazing committee supporting my goals and vision. So thank you Richard Madsen, Christena Turner, Barry Brown, Isaac Martin, Jim Hollan, and Benjamin Bratton. In my attempt

1. http://blog.triciawang.com/tagged/synthesisnow - #synthesisnow is the tag I used to described the writing phase of this project
to break academic norms, you all have convinced me that I can stay in academia on
my own terms; intellectual rigor and curiosity can still happen in a public-facing
manner. For me, your support echoes Martin Schwartz’s view on academia:

I’d like to suggest that our Ph.D. programs often do students a
disservice in two ways. First, I don’t think students are made to
understand how hard it is to do research. And how very, very hard it is
to do important research. It’s a lot harder than taking even very
demanding courses. What makes it difficult is that research is
immersion in the unknown. We just don’t know what we’re doing. We
can’t be sure whether we’re asking the right question or doing the right
experiment until we get the answer or the result. . . . Second, we don’t
do a good enough job of teaching our students how to be productively
stupid—that is, if we don’t feel stupid it means we’re not really trying.
. . . Science involves confronting our ‘absolute stupidity’. That kind of
stupidity is an existential fact, inherent in our efforts to push our way
into the unknown. (2008)

Suffice to say, I always felt like I could be stupid in front of all of you whether it was
during long dinners or office visits where you continually pushed me to be open to the
unknown.

And Leah Muse-Orlinoff, thank you for your intellectual and emotional
support along the way—Verka forever Гоп, гоп, гоп. чіда, гоп, А я співаю. Гоп, гоп,
гоп, чіда, гоп, А я танцюю Gop, Gop, Chida, Gop, A ya spivayu.

And lastly, to the Wangs and Cheeses who have struggled for their children—
may our immigrant and diasporic backgrounds never be forgotten.
VITA

2002  Bachelor of Arts, University of California, San Diego
2009  Master of Arts, University of California, San Diego
2013  Doctor of Philosophy, University of California, San Diego
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE

Tricia Wang is a global tech ethnographer who researches how technology makes us human. She advises students, designers, organizations, and corporations on utilizing Digital Age ethnographic research methods to improve strategy, policy, services, and products.

Her research interests lie at the intersection of technology and culture—the investigation of how social media and the internet affect identity-making, trust formation, and collective action. A central theme in her work is the examination of how statistical reporting, software, and machines influence humans and organizations. Through extensive fieldwork in China and Latin America, she has developed expertise on digital communities in emerging economies, leading to the formulation of an innovative sociological framework for understanding user interactions online.

Tricia relishes on-the-ground, hyper-immersive ethnographic fieldwork, which has provided her with a unique understanding of the experiences of edge communities. For example, while living in internet cafes with migrants, she learned the value of urban “third spaces” to an economic underclass. Working undercover alongside street vendors, meanwhile, gave her a unique perspective on the growth of smart phone ownership in China and revealed the workings of informal markets. During her projects she has pioneered ethnographic techniques such as live fieldnoting, which uses social media tools to share real-time fieldwork data. She is a thought leader on integrative approaches of combining Big Data and what she terms, Thick Data.
A Fulbright Fellow and National Science Foundation Fellow, Tricia has been recognized as a leading authority by journalists, investors, and ethnographic and sociological researchers. Her research has been featured in *The Atlantic, Al Jazeera, Fast Company, Makeshift,* and *Wired.* She has presented at the Microsoft Social Computing Symposium, Lift, and South by Southwest. She has worked with Fortune 500 companies including Nokia and GE and numerous institutions from the UN to NASA. She is also proud to have co-founded the first national hip-hop education initiative, which turned into the Hip Hop Education Center at New York University, and to have built after-school technology and arts programs for low-income youth at New York City public schools and the Queens Museum of Arts.

Recent projects include co-founding and writing for blogs: *Ethnography Matters,* which brings ethnography issues to the attention of a wider audience; and *88Bar,* which focuses on technology, media, and arts in Greater China. She is a visiting scholar at New York University’s Information Telecommunication Program and Harvard University’s Berkman Center for Internet Studies. She is also an advisory board member of Rev Arts in New York City. She is currently writing a book about the internet in China as an expressive space in which users uniquely shape their identities in an otherwise rigid society, a phenomenon she calls the “Elastic Self.”

Her research philosophy is that you have to go to the edges to discover what’s really happening. She is the proud owner of an internet famous dog who balances stuff on her head, #ellethedog. For a full list of Tricia’s writings, clients, and projects, go to her website: triciawang.com.
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Talking to Strangers: Chinese Youth and Social Media

by

Tricia Wang

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, San Diego, 2013

Professor Richard Madsen, Chair

A new form of sociality is developing among Chinese youth: an Elastic Self. Changes in social media’s capacity to mediate information and interaction is creating new spaces for youth to shift the norms and behaviors of social relations in China in three ways: from self-restraint to self-expression, from comradeship to friendship, and from a “moral me” to a “moral we.” These changes have potentially transformative power for Chinese society as a whole because they are altering the way that people perceive and engage with each other on personal and social levels. Under semianonymous conditions, Chinese youth are able to bypass the low levels of trust
that characterize authoritarian societies and adopt broader forms of social trust that characterize more participatory societies. These new forms of trust enable them to engage in citizenship practices that expand the public sphere through online debates that, on occasion, connect to offline civic participation. Before they can do this, however, youth must pass through two critical phases—Exploratory and Trusting—during which they learn how to share information with and socialize with strangers in a low-risk context. Interactions with strangers provide Chinese youth with social distance from people they know, thereby minimizing the anxiety of being shamed for acting inappropriately.

While the West often characterizes China as a repressive surveillance state, my research reveals that Chinese youth are finding ways to connect to each other and to establish a web of casual trust that extends beyond particularistic guanxi ties and authoritarian institutions. For the most part, youth are discovering their social world, not a social cause. In doing so, youth are building the infrastructure of a civil society by establishing friendships with one another through relationships that start out between strangers. To be clear, this new form of sociality gives youth a way to navigate Chinese society, not to disconnect from or rebel against it. This new sociality is laying the groundwork for a public sphere to emerge from social ties primarily based on friendship.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Mr. Lee’s Scooter

Dragging our suitcases through the haze of sulfuric air, my research assistant and I ran across the intersection. Our driver’s scooter had run out of battery in the middle of traffic gridlock, and unless we found an available scooter in the next minute, we were going to miss our train.

Suddenly, a scooter pulled up behind us. The driver asked us, “How much do you want to pay?” We stuttered, “What did you say?” We were expecting the driver to name an exorbitant rate given that it was rush hour and that we were obviously desperate to get to our destination. He restated his question again: “How much do you want to pay?” I said, “20 kuai.” To our surprise, instead of doubling or tripling the fee, he accepted.

For the next ten minutes of our ride to the train station, Mr. Lee shared his life story with us as he weaved in and out of streams of bicyclists, crowds of pedestrians, unpredictable scooters, crumbling sidewalks, and mountains of trash from restaurants.

Mr. Lee grew up in Wuhan and graduated from the Science and Engineering University in Wuhan. He told us about what happened to his family during the Cultural Revolution and how he started working at a state-owned enterprise. He became very excited when he talked about his daughter, who studies finance at Wuhan University. He was effusively proud of her for testing into such a high-ranking university, but he said, “I don’t tell any of this stuff to the people I work with.” I asked
him why, and he said, “Because then people will think I am trying to show off, and I don’t want to look like I’m better than them.” He proceeded to explain that he doesn’t hang out with his co-workers. “They all go gambling and go online after work. I don’t want to do any of that. I chose to work as a black scooter driver.” I asked him if he was working to supplement his day income, and he responded, “Well my family thinks that, but no, the real reason is because picking people up is relaxing.”

I replied, “You know many people say that they go online for the same reasons, to relax.” He disagreed. “I don’t think going online has any meaning other than to look up information about work. I’d rather do stuff like this.” As we were approaching the station, I asked him why taking people around was so relaxing for him. He then said to me: “Look at you and I, we’re both strangers, but we can talk casually about anything, we can share whatever we want without worry of saying something wrong.”

Mr. Lee’s response echoed the beliefs of many Chinese people who had survived the horrors of the Cultural Revolution: keep your emotions and thoughts to yourself and trust no one, not even your family members (Kleinmen 2011). Even though Mr. Lee was a child during the Cultural Revolution, he still ascribed to the idea that he had to keep parts of himself hidden from people he knew. Mr. Lee, however, diverged from the script of silence because he needed to share his thoughts with

3 The term “black” is a direct translation of 黑 which is a colloquial word to describe someone who works in the informal economy.

4 His exact words: “我们是陌生人，随便可以聊，也不怕说错.”
someone. This person could not be a friend or co-worker, however; it had to be a stranger. It was only in fleeting moments—like the one I experienced on his scooter—that Mr. Lee felt safe sharing his inner thoughts.

When we arrived at the train station, Mr. Lee said to me, “Who knows, we could meet again, and you will already know everything about me. But then we would be friends, not strangers.” Mr. Lee’s response triggered memories of my time with Chinese students who echoed a similar sentiment: it is easier to share information with strangers, not friends.

1.1.1 The Circle of Students

In the mid-2000s, I successfully ran media programs for low-income teens in New York City. At that time, youth media received a lot of attention from US funders as a breakthrough model for teaching digital literacy skills and artistic forms of self-expression through videomaking. A nonprofit that created video exchanges between US and Chinese students reached out to me and asked if I could reproduce the programs I had run in several elite high schools in Beijing, China. While I had a lot of experience creating youth media programs for marginalized American youth, I had no experience with the “post 80s” youth balinghou (八零后), the name for the generation born in the 1980s in China. While I was up for the challenge, I did not expect that even the most basic tasks would prove to be incredibly difficult.

One of the most memorable moments was when I tried to conduct a storytelling activity that I had frequently run with students in the US. This activity
prompts students to share personal stories and is best carried out in a circle, so I asked my Chinese students to make a circle out of the rows of desks and chairs.

They responded to my verbal request with a blank face. They did not move out of their chairs. I drew a circle with my hands in the air. Silence. I traced a circle on my palms; still complete silence. Then, I picked up a chair in the front row and turned it towards them, sat down in it, and asked for them to move their chairs next to me. This made them even more confused. I drew a circle on the chalkboard. Again, silence. Then, I asked each student to stand up, pick up their chair and move it towards the walls. By the time we put the chairs into a circle, 20 minutes had passed. Furthermore, I was confronted with another problem: a circle of chairs with no students sitting in them.

I sat down in a seat near the back of the classroom to model for them what I wanted them to do: find a seat and sit down. Again, their initial reaction to my request was confusion. By now they had edged themselves against the walls of the classroom, looking at the circle as if it were a foreign object from outer space. I spent the next ten minutes encouraging the students to enter the circle. I physically nudged some students over with my hands, directing each them to an empty seat. By the end, two students were left standing with two empty seats in the circle, one on each side of me. I asked each of them to take the seat next to me. Everyone started to giggle while the two students’ faces turned red. They walked over with their heads down and slunk into their chairs.
My goal was to make it easier for youth to talk about themselves. To me, a circle communicated equality and openness. But for the students, it only communicated confusion and discomfort. Sitting in a circle did not help them share more. They did not raise their hands or speak up any more than they would’ve when they sat in rows. Instead, they just sat there, awkward and quiet. I sensed that I had forced them to expose a part of themselves, although I was not sure exactly what.

I shared the circle story with several colleagues. Some of them quickly concluded that the Communist Party had turned Chinese youth into robots without any capacity to have or express feelings. Others said that the education system had created so much pressure to succeed on the Gaokao (高考) test that youth could only memorize information, not share it. A few suggested that Chinese youth simply did not have stories because they are brought up in a family structure where their parents have shaped their entire identity. All of these ideas were possible, but I had my own theories.

I, too, thought the students I worked with were oddly robotic. That is, until I began chatting with them through QQ instant messenger.⁵ On QQ, they did not wait for someone to ask them to speak up and they did not exhibit fear—they just spoke. They transformed into different people. Online, they could articulate their own ideas about the world, their interests, and their dreams. Their QQ pages showed a range of interests in pop culture, Western movies, and hobbies. Then, I found out that all of my students had multiple QQ accounts for a variety of reasons. Some had accounts

⁵ refer to Appendix A for description of Chinese social media platforms
dedicated to flirting. Others had accounts for fandom communities. Most significantly, I realized that instead of chatting with each other, they were mostly chatting with people they did not know.

On the surface, students’ interactions with strangers was a casual activity. But when I found out what they talked about it, their interactions were anything but trivial. They told secrets to strangers that they could not openly express to anyone they knew. Strangers were an important source of companionship for them. However, none of their parents knew about it and certainly none of the students talked openly about it with each other.6

1.2 Emotional Expression and the Situational Self

In 2006, 9.5 million high school students took the Gaokao (高考), a three-day exam that determines whether a student will be accepted into one of the 5.3 million positions at a university (Wong 2012). Wu Wenwen had studied her whole life for the Gaokao.7 On the morning of her exam, the proctor denied her entry to the test site because her hair was not tied back. Wenwen went home and she drowned herself in a nearby lake.

Wenwen’s father attributed his daughter’s suicide to her being part of a generation that has not experienced the hardships of previous generations: “Kids these days haven’t been through what we went through,” he said in a press statement. “Their

6. Students found opportunities to go to their local internet cafe without letting any teachers or adults finding out.

7. For a more in depth look at the pressures of Gaokao testing, refer to Rabkin (2011).
hearts haven’t been toughened up and they’re distracted by all these other concerns.”

Popular discussions about the emotional weakness of Chinese youth, as reflected in Wenwen’s father’s statement, are common among the parents and grandparents of post-80s youth (balinghou, 八零后) and 90s youth (jiulinghou, 九零后).

However, Wenwen’s drowning followed multiple reports that had reported that suicide was the leading cause of death among youth in China (BBC News 2005). These studies cited emotional struggles with loneliness as the primary cause of this epidemic (Fei 2011). Suicide affects not only students but also migrants who suffer from poor work conditions, economic pressure, and distance from their families.

Most scholars agree that emotional expression is discouraged in contemporary China (Bond 1993). It is traditionally believed that freely expressing emotions leads to inappropriate judgment, which is a threat to authority (Potter and Potter 1990, 185). This understanding is captured in a popular story from the Confucian Analects of a civil servant who demonstrated no signs of happiness when he was given a high government position three times and showed no signs of sorrow when he was fired from that position three times. The civil servant is considered to have acted this way

---


9. A China Daily (Wang 2007) article states that researchers suggest that “the pressure on individuals in a transitional society, frustrations in love, a cultural unwillingness to discuss feelings and the lack of channels for exploring one’s identity were some of the leading causes of teenage suicide.”

10. Foxconn, one of the largest employers of young migrants, is popular referred to as the Suicide Express (Chan and Pun 2009).

11. 子张问曰:“令尹子文三仕为令尹，无喜色；三已之，无愠色。旧令尹之政，必以告新令尹。何如？”子曰:“忠矣.”
because he did not allow himself to express emotions that could have led him to rash behavior. Teachers recount this story to students, telling them that they should model themselves after the civil servant.

Chinese youth learn that restraining themselves from emotional expression is part and parcel of fulfilling relationships. They are taught that *guanxi* (关系), the notion that personal relationships are built through favors, requires one to judge each person based on a history of obligations. As such, every relationship requires that each individual be treated differently. This whole cultural order is maintained through good and clear judgment, requiring youth to vigilantly maintain self-restraint (*胸有城府*). As such, expressing emotions is a sign of weakness, not strength.

These teachings of *guanxi* and self-restraint can be summarized as part of the practices and norms of the “situational self,” a self that learns how to adjust one’s self appropriately for each relationship (Chu and Peng 2012). This self learns how to treat each person differently; this differs greatly from the West where relationships are widely understood to be based on ideals of equality. Interactions within this cultural model are not based on egalitarianism; this is because since no two people are the same, no two relationships can be the same. Key to understanding China is that people are often emotionally tied to relationships, but they are not supposed to express those emotions. Rather, they are supposed to demonstrate their commitment to their relationships by fulfilling the obligations dictated by that relationship.
When the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949, they viewed *guanxi* and the individual as an impediment to the Party’s objective of transforming China into a Communist society. The pursuit of self-interest was not only prohibited, but moralized as an undesirable and despicable trait (Madsen 1984). The belief that “individualism as a capitalistic idea and a threat to the Party’s authority” undergirded Mao’s reorganization of China (Zhou 2003). To carry out the Communist plan, Mao broke down individuals’ emotional affiliations to their social circles—personal ties, such as family and friends—and rebuilt them around the Party (Perry 2002).12

The Party encouraged people to express their loyalty to the Party in many different ways. One such way was for people to become informants, turning on their family and friends in order to identify traitors, rightists, and capitalists (Perry 2002).13 As a result, personal relationships disintegrated under Mao’s regime. This transformation led to what Vogel calls “friendship to comradeship” (Vogel 1965). As the result of fear-based campaigns, people became scared of having private conversations with friends. Individuals stopped trusting people within their social circles, and casual conversations of any kind became a risk:

From the view of the individual, the change in personal relationships arises principally from the uncertainty as to whether private conversation will remain private or whether it will in some way be

12. “Emotion raising” *tigao qingxu* (提高情绪) events employed a variety of techniques from theatre to rallies to recruit new cadre members, denounce landlords, and identify capitalists and intellectuals. Mao’s regime effectively legitimized a new emotional outlet: patriotism.

13. During the Cultural Revolution, the Anti-Rightest Movement sent hundreds of thousands of people who were considered to be critics of the Party or to have an educated background to the countryside for labor camps (Pye 1999).
brought to the attention of the authorities. When one no longer confides in a friend for fear that he might pass on the information, either intentionally or unintentionally, an element of trust is lost. When a person no longer invites a friend to his home for fear the friend might see something that he would later be called upon to describe, the nature of the relationship is altered. When a person begins to watch carefully and think about what he might be revealing to his friend and wonders under what circumstances this information might be brought to the attention of the authorities, friendship as a relation of confidence and personal commitment is weakened. (Vogel 1965, 47)

The pressure the Party put on individuals to supply information on friends broke the trust needed to sustain the emotional bonds in personal relationships. Friendships, and even the family unit, disintegrated under Mao’s regime (Yan 2003).14

In post-Reform and Opening China, fear based campaigns to identify anti-Communists no longer exist. But collective memories still circulate and remnants of these practices still persist. When authorities investigate an individual, they still call upon friends for information, a practice known as dayimieqin (大义灭亲). In many rural areas, entire families can be punished if one person is accused of breaking the one-child-policy (Watts 2006).15 Parents and grandparents still tell stories of how their friends betrayed their trust. Gold (1985) also argues that the perception still remains that friendships are made for instrumental reasons. This is illustrated by a popular quote: “Making friends out of self interest, disbanding when the benefit is exhausted.” (666).16

14. In a well known case, Hu Feng, a well known literary critic was betrayed by a friend who gave private letters exchanged between the two of them to the Party. Hu was sent to jail and given life imprisonment (Goldman 1966).

15. This practice, extending back to an ancient population control technique, lianzuozi, the mutual punishment on all related members, still influences the law in China (Guo 2008).

16. 以利相交 利尽则散
Youth are not immune to these stories. Like their parents and grandparents, they have also developed a fear of friendships. They, too, withhold personal information from their peers. Confucian principles of emotional restraint, combined with the Communist legacy of emotional attachment as risk, have created a cultural milieu where youth have limited opportunities to explore identities other than those sanctioned by the three primary institutions that oversee their lives: the family, the school, and the state.

1.3 Social Shifts That Laid the Groundwork for an Elastic Self

When the Communists won the control for China in 1949, they implemented a series of severely restrictive policies. These policies controlled internal migration with residency permits hukou (户口), gathered information in personal files dang’an (档案), and organized people’s everyday lives around the workunit danwei (单位). These forms of control regulated nearly every aspect of an individual’s life from where they bathed, where they ate, who they married, and when they could reproduce. Most significantly, the danwei was the “mainspring of a social identity” in the socialist system (Bray 2005). During this period, a person’s identity was institutionally legitimized through an “introduction letter” jieshaoxin (介绍信), a letter with a red seal that stated one’s danwei details. There was no way for an individual to prove their

17. I am not suggesting that institutions are unnecessary. As Bellah et al. (2011) reiterate, “We live in and through institutions. The nature of the institutions we both inhabit and transform has much to do with our capacity to sustain attention. We could even say that institutions are socially organized forms of paying attention or attending, although they can also, unfortunately, be socially organized forms of distraction” (256).
identity without this letter. As Li explains, “it doesn’t matter if you are taking a train or living in a hotel or even going to other villages to visit relatives, you need a *jieshaoxin*. The *jieshaoxin* is the person’s identity” (2009).

In post-Reform and Opening China, many of Mao’s policies have been disbanded or are only loosely in effect. The *jieshaoxin* has been replaced with national identification cards. Loose enforcement of the *hukou* system has also followed suit, and the *danwei* system was mostly dismantled in the 1980s. The Party introduced these changes after Mao’s death as part of a larger effort to introduce capitalist principles into China’s economy.

The introduction of free-market reforms has created new social spaces for identity-making that did not exist in Mao’s era. First, capitalist reforms triggered massive waves of urbanization. Now that migrants can move more freely around the country with relaxed *hukou* enforcement (The Economist 2010), China’s urbanization rates have doubled over the past two decades (Zhang 2008). Unlike the first and second waves of migrants, younger migrants do not express the same desire as their parents to eventually settle back in their village. At the same time, many of them feel lonely as the result of long work hours and physical distance from their families (Chan 2010).

Similarly, an improved education system has led to a spike of youth testing for the *Gaokao* with the hope of studying at a university. Institutions focusing on higher education doubled between 2000 and 2007, and registered students jumped from 3
million to 19 million the same period (Lafraniere 2009). Scholars and journalists have documented the intense pressure that comes with Gaokao preparation (Liu 2008a, 2010a), and during this period of their lives, students’ schedules are highly regulated with little free time for socialization.

Overall, young migrants and students experience a high degree of social isolation. While the nature of their pressures vary greatly, they both feel similar levels of loneliness. Researchers have noted that consumption is one of the ways that post 80s and 90s youth cope with loneliness (Cockain 2012, 38; Jacka et al. 2013, 182). Youths’ new preferences for nostalgic products such as the “Service the People” series or Lei Feng clothing, is linked to their search for stability and security (Zhou et al. 2013).

In my fieldwork, youth often told me that they would browse e-commerce sites when they feel lonely. However, consumerism is not only a genuine source of comfort, it also plays a critical role in their identity making process (as I will show with MaiMai’s story in section 5.4.2). Scholars around the world note how youth use consumption as a way to mark identity (Allison 2006; Hebdige 1979; Latham 2007; Miller 2008, 2013; Miller ed. 2011; Osgerby 2004, 61). It is no different in China. What is unique about China is that consumption was for period of time stigmatized and outlawed, and only became an approved activity in recent decades.

Consumption in the free market started in 1978 with Reform and Opening, the institution of a series of policies that signaled a new era in modern China (Naughton
This began an era where individuals were encouraged to be less dependent on the state and to be more entrepreneurial. At the same time, the government also receded from people’s lives; this included control over their economic decisions. “In granting market principles new legitimacy to coordinate economic transactions, the reformers became increasingly indifferent to how citizens used their new commercial freedoms. And in this more lightly censored terrain, urban residents initiated networks of trust, reciprocity, and attachment that differed from the vertical relationships of obedience between subject-citizens and party or government officials” (Davis 2000, 3). The Party legitimized new forms of relationships that existed independently of the state. Davis (2000) regards this as the incipience of the Consumer Revolution: no longer a morally despicable act, consumption became a morally sanctioned act.

In *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*, Davis documents how the sudden introduction of free-market reforms in an authoritarian government has led to a unique outcome where Chinese people have more rights as consumers than citizens (2005). The Chinese consumer identity flourished in the absence of tight government control, and soon individuals started to demand that the government provide them with protection against fraud and unfair practices. (Davis 2005). In 1993, the government passed series of consumer protection law: Consumer Protection Law, Law Against Unfair Trade, and Advertising Law (2005). Within the first five years of these acts, there was a fifty percent increase in consumer filings for damage (2000). Success

---

18. Such as the entrepreneurial self discussed in Miller and Rose (1990) or the desiring self discussed in Rofel (2007)
stories of compensation for consumer activists circulated throughout the press. Within their newfound consumer identity, many people learned how to demand and exercise rights through consumption.

As China’s economy continued to grow in the 2000s, globalization provided another social space emerged for Chinese citizens: Western media and culture in the form of DVDs, fashion, and CDs. With greater access to foreign sources of media, Chinese youth started to learn about other cultures and models for sexuality and gender through movies, sports, music, TV series, and advertising; they also began exploring their identity through these entertainment products. (Chan and McNeal 2004; Lee 2004; Morris 2002; Paek and Pan 2009; Zha 1996).

The introduction of the internet accelerated this identity-through-entertainment exploration process as media could now be streamed and networked. Self-organized translating communities kept up with the latest television series and movies. There was an explosion of online groups organized around brands, shopping, pop stars, celebrities, and sports.¹⁹ Youth joined online communities to share information about mundane topics such as shopping and pop culture, but this exposure to global pop and media culture catalyzed youth to examine new ways of thinking and expressing (Schroeder 2012). Even though Chinese youth were not directly interacting with Western youth, they were getting to know highly mediated versions of Western identities. In their consumption of Western media, Chinese youth were not a passive

---

¹⁹. For example, Shuyu Kong (2013) discusses how a dating television show became a popular topic of debate on BBS.
audience, but an active audience trying to make sense of themselves in light of these
new ways of thinking.

As Chinese society has undergone several massive social shifts, so have
conceptions of the self. Under Communism, the self was a vessel for the nation, and
the nation filled it up. Under capitalism, the self was a vessel for the market, and the
market filled it up. Under globalization, Chinese youth started to ask, who am I? What
are the resources to help me figure out who I am?

Some scholars (Bauerlein 2009; Postman 1993) may dismiss the role of
“lightweight” forms of communication play in helping youth develop a sense of
personal identity. However, like Davis (2000) and Cockain (2012), I see it as an
opening and a safe space for youth to practice new forms of identity construction. In a
society where the self is subsumed under the traditional beliefs of Confucianism and
the collectivist ideology of the Communist party, the exploration of identities outside
of institutions is a radical yet socially approved first step in self-expression. These
social transformations spark changes in self-expression because as the dominant
norms of society change, so do the norms for self-expression (Reddy 2001).

China’s shift from a planned central economy to market economy has triggered
socially acceptable outlets for self-differentiation that align with economic reforms
(Farrer 2002; Rofel 1994; Yu et al. 2006). In a “highly suppressed unitary society”
(Zhao 2001, 45) differentiation becomes a subversive act. With the government
condoning consumption as a safe space for expressing difference, it plays a symbolic role in training youth to set themselves apart from the group.

Free-market reforms in China have produced new social spaces for identity exploration. Urban spaces allow youth to explore identities beyond their family; capitalistic spaces allow youth to explore a consumer identity; and global spaces allow youth to explore their identity through Western narratives. These three spaces are allowing youth to reconfigure their relationships to each other; the state is no longer the ultimate container for all relationships and identities. The introduction of new mediated technologies, such as the internet, also ushers in changes in identity making.

1.4 The Internet Comes to China

When China joined the WTO in 2001, it agreed to a set of policies to expand its telecommunication networks. In one of the largest infrastructural build outs in history (Harwit 2008), China networked its entire nation with mobile towers and broadband cable. Since 2001, it has also implemented the world’s most sophisticated content filtering system, commonly called the “The Great Firewall” (Barme and Ye 1997). It uses a combination of “patchwork technological barriers” (Open Internet Tools Project 2013) from internet service provider “ISP” blocking to key word blocking and forced corporate self-censorship (MacKinnon 2012). The first method prevents websites outside of China from being accessed; it also prevents words from being searched within China. The second method requires companies to enforce blocking through a combination of algorithms and human detection. Google infamously left China after it refused to participate in self-censorship (Thompson
Both of these methods are not impenetrable: people still find ways outside of the firewall through the use of circumvention tools such as proxies and virtual private networks “VPN” (Chase and Mulvenon 2002; Giese 2006; Hachigian 2001; MacKinnon 2008). However, it is estimated that less than 2% of China’s internet population uses them (MacKinnon 2012).

Even though the internet is heavily censored, censorship has also encouraged users to be creative in other respects. Chinese netizens have come up with innovative ways to overcome censorship through memes, creative word play and playful images (Mina 2012a; Perry and Qiang 2013; Yang 2009). An Xiao Mina has documented one of the most popular memes in recent years, Grass Mud Horse Cao Ni Ma (草泥马).

Started by Aiweiwei, an internationally known artist and national hero for Chinese youth, he posted pictures of himself naked with a mythical llama covering his genitals. Below the image was the caption “Grass Mud Horse Covering the Center” (草泥马挡中央) which, phonetically in Chinese, sounds like “Fuck your mother Communist Party” (Mina 2012a). The Grass Mud Horse meme became so popular that millions of people were buying sweaters made from alpaca fur, cute stuffed Grass Mud Horse dolls, and mugs. The censors eventually picked up on the double meaning of Grass Mud Horse and censored the word, but Chinese netizens made a simple change, calling Grass Mud Horse a “Working Mud Horse” Gannima (幹泥马). When that was censored, people changed it to “Rolling Mud Horse” Gunima (滾泥马). In each case,
it was the adoption of phonetic variations of the phrase “fuck your mother” that kept this meme alive despite the censors.\textsuperscript{20}

But the use of Grass Mud Horse is only one example of the wide repertoire of internet use among Chinese youth. For the most part, my research finds that Chinese people do not use the internet for political purposes, although the topic of the internet as a political tool continues to dominate research on the Chinese internet.\textsuperscript{21} These studies are not necessarily incorrect, but the overwhelming focus on the political use of the Chinese internet provides an incomplete picture of how Chinese people are really using the internet. As Davis argues, “By restricting the field of vision to politically well-institutionalized activities, we may overlook alternative locations of and pathways to structural change and underestimate the ability of increased sociability in nonofficial activities to incubate loyalties that ultimately generate the actions capable of weakening or toppling an authoritarian state” (Davis 2000, 21).

A more flexible and open approach to study the Chinese internet could even enrich our understanding of the political uses of the internet. When studies lead from a political angle, it takes us away from understanding how Chinese people make sense

\textsuperscript{20} My research is not about how Chinese youth evade censors as that only comprised a very small part of the wide range of their activities online. But a very helpful framework to understand emergent practices among Chinese netizens’ attempt to evade censors is Philip E. Agre’s (1994) distinction between two models of privacy. A surveillance model is based on the panapticon, which extends from Michel Foucault’s writings on how actors are induced into a state of constant fear when they live in a pantopicon-like society. Agre proposes a second model that makes room for both users to enhance their privacy and for machine to enhance their surveillance powers, through what he calls the “capture model.”

and internalize censorship and moves us closer to how Westerners expect the internet to be used as a tool for democracy. This results in two issues that reflect a gap in the research to understand the moral underpinnings and effects of censorship.

First, censorship in China is primarily portrayed through functionalist frameworks as a method of political control. There has been no cultural analysis of the moral motivations for censorship; such an analysis would help us understand the cultural underpinnings of why censorship offers the most viable form of social control in China. What functionalist accounts fail to take into account is that information control in China is based on a moral imperative, a set of assumptions about how information should be perceived, managed, and applied. This moral imperative for information management in China, what I call Information Paternalism, is the belief that too much information is harmful to society and that it is the state’s job to be a gatekeeper that protects citizens from harmful information. This moral position on information is consistent with China’s historical approach to information management: information has mostly been controlled through institutions for institutions to use, not for people to use.

---

22. I deploy the term Information Paternalism as a discursive strategy to counter Western perceptions that there is a united agreement within the Chinese government on censorship and furthermore, that the motivations are always malicious. Paternalism implies that the Chinese government takes on the role of an all-knowing parent who tells itself and its citizens that censorship is for the good of the people. In essence, the government positions censorship from a paternalistic point of view instead of a dictatorial or evil point of view. The officials I spoke to were ambivalent about the role of censorship. The government oscillates between seeing the internet as beneficial and harmful for society (Bakken 2000). My thoughts on this are informed from my fieldwork with government officials who work at the Chinese Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), which I elaborate on in Chapter 3. The term “paternalism” also links China’s contemporary surveillance practices to a political analysis that characterizes China’s leadership styles as paternalistic, as many scholars have noted and debated (Chen et al. 2011; Chen and Kao 2009; Pelligrini 2008; Sheer 2010, 2012).
This rhetoric of Information Paternalism is presented as a benevolent and harmless way that the state is looking out for its citizens, to maintain what they call a “harmonious society.” But this view ostensibly also maintains the power of the state to decide what is “bad” and “proper” information. In my fieldwork with internet policy makers and discussions with public intellectuals, they often justified censorship of the internet with the moral sentiments of Information Paternalism. They argued that, for the most part, Chinese people are too uneducated to use a free internet and that for the time being, it must be controlled in order to maintain a stable society. They often compare China to the West, saying that the West can have a free internet because people know how to think independently, whereas Chinese people think en masse. Even those who said that they don’t believe in censorship touted this point of view. Their responses reflect an institutionalized justification for censorship that positions the state as a benevolently paternalistic figure who is helping its children by preventing ”bad” information from entering into their lives.

The way Information Paternalism is being internalized and reinterpreted by youth is more complicated than scholarly and popular media depictions of either direct acceptance or total rebellion. My research shows that when youth encounter censored information, it leads them to question existing beliefs about how they obtain and come to trust information. But ongoing internet use, among college students in particular, increases the chances of contact with open information. In the West, the belief that “information is free”23 extends back to the origins of the internet, and positions it as a

23. This is phrase was coined by Steward Brand, a writer who pioneered many of the early
network of peer-to-peer, not top down, information access. This belief is supported by constitutional guarantees of equal access to information for all citizens. The moral imperatives of open information conflict with Information Paternalism. Recognition of this conflict leads to discussions and reflections about the moral role of information among Chinese youth.

This moral pivot from Information Paternalism to what open information represents is transformational. For many youth, encountering an uncensored internet opens up a new emotional space, ultimately reshaping their identities and perceptions of what suffices as “legitimate” information. For some, it completely disrupts their sense of self and their sense of trust in the government. However, while the outcome of this disruption is a more reflective and politically aware self, the impetus for this shift is not political, but personal.

1.5 Going Online for Personal Interests, Not Political Reasons

Even though censors continue to monitor the Chinese internet and shut down sites that are deemed as too “sensitive,” the capitalist imperatives of a free-market economy play an important role in distancing the internet from total government oversight.\(^\text{24}\) Entrepreneurial efforts and innovative individuals have created

compelling online spaces for Chinese citizens. Social media sites, message boards, and instant messaging apps are all commercial services that not generate revenue for their owners, but also make the Chinese internet a lively place for members of the Internet Generation to inhabit. The “potent combination of commercial media and internet” in China create a much more complex picture of the outcomes of censorship (Shirk 2010, 1).  

Ongoing censorship of political content means that most web services in China focus on entertainment, such as games and content about celebrities (Yang 2012). Western journalists report that “entertainment trumps politics on the Web in China” (Barboza 2012). Even Liu (2010a), a scholar who studies internet use among urban youth reports that youth indicate that they use it as a “tool for entertainment” (168).

However, just because sites are designed for entertainment purposes, that doesn’t mean that people are only using it for fun and games. My research reveals that youth are not just using the internet as a form of entertainment, rather they are using the platforms as form of socialization; they are interacting with other youth and creating meaningful relationships within these communities. Youth turn to social media platforms to express ideas about themselves and their society. While social

25. This is a major point in Shirk’s (2010) edited volume. In particular, look to Hu Shuli’s The Rise of the Business Media in China (2010) and Qian Gang’s and David Bandurski’s China’s Emerging Public Sphere: The Impact of Media Commercialization, Professionalism, and the Internet in an Era of Transition (2010). Also John Lagerkvist (2006) provides an excellent analysis of the tensions between commercial bulletin boards (BBS) and the government’s propaganda department.

26. In the same article Barboza (2010) cites Yang Guobin who says that the internet is also used for socializing, but the overall focus of the article is on how the Chinese web is for entertainment.
media apps and QQ instant messaging chat services make it easy for friends and family to stay connected in China, it also makes it easy for them to expand their social circles.\textsuperscript{27}

The internet is commonly understood to be a tool that connects users to people they already know. However, Chinese youth are not only using social media platforms to converse with their offline connections, they are also interacting with strangers. The primary activity of American and other Western teens’ social media behavior is what boyd calls “friending,” or searching for their preexisting friends (2008a, 213). Chinese youth, on the other hand, are engaging in the opposite activity: looking for strangers.

In the company of strangers, Chinese youth feel freer to explore a self that is the realm of their own imagination, but beyond the realm of what they can exhibit in front of people they know. This is the same kind of freedom that Mr. Lee felt when he picked up strangers on his scooter—freedom to express one’s self without shame or judgment. In online social media networks with strangers, Chinese youth develop new social networks of support that give them the confidence to form ideas about themselves outside of the primary institutions that have shaped their life: family, school, and state.

Contrary to reports that youth are going online for political reasons (Herold and Marlot ed. 2011) or primarily entertainment purposes (Liu 2010a), I have found that youth predominantly do not go online to hide from, or mobilize against, the

\textsuperscript{27} For more on QQ practices in China, refer to Hjorth and Arnold (2012) and Koch et al. (2009).
government. Chinese youth are going online to socialize with people they do not know. They seek out online spaces where they can express themselves to strangers within online communities organized around lightweight subjects, not political topics. While some youth do eventually become involved in political action, it is not intentional. As I discuss later, forming friends online is in itself an apolitical interaction that can evolve into political interaction for some youth.

1.6 An Identity Revolution

While many in the West argued that the internet and democracy are positively correlated (Mungo and Clough 1992, Rheingold 1993; Wired 1996), and that the internet would eventually destabilize and democratize authoritarian regimes such as China (Perrit Jr. 1998; Qiang 2011), what is happening on the ground is a revolution of the self.

The sudden availability of the internet combined with open-market capitalism has made it possible for a new conceptualization of identity to emerge. I refer to this new set of expressive practices as an Elastic Self. The Elastic Self is both

28. More authors who support this view: Abramson et al. (1990), Alexander and Pal (1998), Budge (1996); Davis (1999); Ferdinand (2000); Ferdinand ed. (2000); Hague and Loader (1999); Hoff, Horrocks, and Tops (2000); Loader (1997); Noveck (2000); Schroeder (1997), Schwartz (1996), and Tsagarousianou et al. (1998). In particular, Lipset (1959) noted the role of telephones and radio, Huntington (1993) highlights the roles of television in Eastern European revolutions, and Dahl (1989) goes as far as saying that inequalities in wealth and the economy can be a bigger threat to democracy than access to knowledge (via IT).

Ferdinand (2007) states that Charles Swett, a Pentagon Official, cited a Rolling Stone article in his report, Strategic Assessment: The Internet (1995) to support his argument that the internet has a democractizing effect: “The Internet is the censor’s biggest challenge and the tyrant’s worst nightmare... Unbeknown to their governments, people in China, Iraq and Iran, among other countries, are freely communicating with people all over the world.”

Dean Henry Perrit Jr. (1998) states that “New information technologies threaten sovereigns that depend on maximum political, economic, and cultural control over their peoples... no longer can totalitarian regimes ensure themselves a safe environment by controlling the newspapers, radio and television stations because the World Wide Web remains beyond their control and manipulation.”
the *feeling* that one’s identity is malleable and the *action* of trying on different identities. This Elastic Self is experienced through informal interactions that provide a sense of social distance from existing social ties and relative anonymity. In the presence of unknown others (strangers), Chinese youth feel liberated to experiment with different identities without the pressure to commit to a single identity. They feel comfortable taking greater risks in expressing ideas or emotions, and trying on identities that are reversible, easy to abandon, and impermanent.

Drawing on over seven years of ethnographic fieldwork, this dissertation will introduce readers to ordinary Chinese youth who, in their own extraordinary ways, are trying to make sense themselves in the face of a nation undergoing massive changes. At the broadest level, my research asks whether new social spaces give rise to new forms of sociality. I argue that yes, there is a new form of sociality in China. The expressive and hidden lives of youth reveal that they are actively envisioning not just a new self or a more individualist self, but a more Elastic Self. This is a new self that is not simply rejecting institutions such as the collectivist state or the family, but reexamining those institutions and creating personal identities that are free from institutional control.

Through a selection of participants from my fieldwork, I show how Chinese youth who are engaging with an Elastic Self are learning how to express their emotions. I preserve their experiences by sharing their stories in narrative form. It is essential to point out that my participants are not learning how to engage in emotional
expression in traditionally intimate contexts—with family or friends. Instead, they are learning how to communicate their feelings with strangers in a digital context, and they are doing so because they feel free to explore desires, feelings, or information that people they know would typically deem to be shameful.

Chinese youth invest a lot of time and effort in quasi-anonymous interactions. A majority of their time online is spent looking for ways to distance themselves from people they know: *guanxi* relationships and institutions. The anonymous nature of these interactions unfold in the informal mode of interaction, a framework that I propose in section 3.0 to illustrate that engagement with unknown others is an important form of sociality for identity making. In addition to self-expression, they are learning a multitude of skills, assessing trust amongst strangers in a digital context, searching for censored information, and engaging in civic participation.

An Elastic Self unfolds over three phases: Exploratory, Trusting, and Participatory. Youth enter into an Elastic Self through the Exploratory Phase. Here, they are looking to share their emotions with strangers in quasi-anonymous contexts. All my participants are in the Exploratory Phase and they are representative of the experiences of a broader swath of Chinese youth who are beginning to interact with strangers online. A majority of youth in the Exploratory Phase eventually transition into the second phase, Trusting, where they learn how to assess trustworthiness in a

30. Quasi anonymous interactions are interactions with unknown contacts that become semi-known contacts through ongoing contact.
digital context and begin to strengthen their connections to communities and individuals. As youth move up through the phases of an Elastic Self, their social networks widen and they engage in more risky interactions.

A small subset of youth who were in the Trusting Phase reached the Participatory Phase where they took part in networks of civic action. These youth are outliers among Chinese youth as most do not leave the Trusting Phase. Within the groups I interviewed, the biggest proportion is in the Exploratory Phase. The numbers of participants in each subsequent phase decreased as the risks increased. Based on the thousands of hours of fieldwork I did across 30 cities in China over the last 10 years, the experiences of the participants in each phase are representative of other people who are in the same phase.\textsuperscript{31}

1.7 Outcomes of an Elastic Self

The emergence of an Elastic Self produces several outcomes that reflect key shifts and concrete outcomes among Chinese youth. Below, I summarize the main outcomes that I explore in greater detail in my data chapters.

First, members of the Internet Generation who explore an Elastic Self become more social and feel less lonely. This is a shift from an isolated to a more connected self. Chinese youth feel alienated from their peers and society at large. Forming relationships with strangers enables them to feel more self-aware and connected. For

\textsuperscript{31} In Chapter Six I compare the stories of two youth, one who entered the Exploratory Level and one who did not.
Chinese youth, an impersonal connection with a stranger presents the greatest chance for a meaningful connection.

Second, in exploring an Elastic Self with strangers, Chinese youth are introduced to the idea—and the practice—that membership in communities is voluntary and that the decision not to join, or to leave, does not carry heavy consequences. Membership in communities shifts from something that is forced in a top-down manner through pressure from adults to a voluntary, and arguably enjoyable, activity.

The third outcome is that Chinese youths’ participation in apolitical online communities generates the necessary skills for them to ease into more complex and civically oriented action. Chinese youths’ interactions in communities organized around apolitical and lightweight topics, such as pornography, shopping, or celebrities, can be easily overlooked or dismissed by scholars because these communities are ostensibly not concerned with substantive social issues. Yet it is in voluntary membership in these communities that the idea of free association is developed. This is the where the shift from nonengagement to civic engagement happens.

Through apolitical interactions in the Exploratory and Trusting Phases, youth acquire digital literacy skills that can be used to evade censors. This is where youth learn important skills that are necessary for the Participatory Phase such as assessing the trustworthiness of information; searching for like-minded people, becoming comfortable interacting with strangers, and meeting online contacts in offline contexts.
Several of the key figures I interviewed became politicized; however, their political activism was an unexpected outcome of their basic human desire for human connection and self-expression. These universal desires were most effectively fulfilled by building relationships with strangers and becoming part of online communities in the Exploratory and Trusting Phases.

New forms of trust are being created through the Elastic Self. Some scholars suggest that in tight networks such as social circles (people we already know), “general norms of cooperativeness,” not social trust, govern interactions (Hardin 2004, 183). Scholars of trust argue that in dyadic one-on-one relationships that emerge from our social networks (people or entities we do not know), trust—not norms—dictate the expectations for future interactions. An Elastic Self is helping Chinese youth shift their perception of strangers, which will eventually help China’s evolution from a low-trust society to a higher-trust society.

The two different ways that trust is established in circles and networks reflect two competing norms of community in China. The former relies on the existing notion of established guanxi ties that are based in preexisting social circles, while the latter relies on the individuals’ notions of community that are based in the social networks they choose to affiliate with. Chinese youth are creating loose online affiliations outside of guanxi networks that are generating the foundation for a “casual web of public trust” (Jacobs 1961). They are developing skills for assessing trustworthiness in

32. or what anthropologists and sociologists call generalized reciprocity
online contexts; this in turn helps individuals strengthen relationships with people outside of their personal social circles; this creates new norms that value interaction with people outside of one’s preexisting ties.

The final outcome of an Elastic Self is that youths’ discovery of “hidden information”—such as corruption and censored material—undermines youths’ trust in institutions. This moral dissonance instigates the shift from Information Paternalism to open information. Forced to make moral judgments in the face of information that conflicts with their beliefs, youth are required to fashion a new moral compass. As Yan points out: “By making moral judgments these individuals also redefine what it means to be a proper person in today’s China and how to live up to it.” (2011, 40).

Part of this process involves making a moral shift from a “moral me” to a “moral we” in the Participatory Phase when youth recognize that their identity is tied to a community that they strongly support and want to improve.

These micro shifts reflect an identity that is not divided, but an identity that is under negotiation. Overall, youth are imbued with a sense of agency when they engage in an Elastic Self. The expression of an Elastic Self signals a massive—yet under-recognized—social shift. Chinese youth are defining themselves and creating new networks outside of institutions that have long dominated personal identity: family, school, and the state.

As youth become more comfortable expressing their emotions, reaching out to strangers, and participating in online networks, they are adopting a new mentality that
is increasingly independent of societal institutions. This shift reflects a deep transformation of individual consciousness and an emergence of a new kind of Chinese citizen: highly skilled at socializing in online environments with strangers, confident in assessing trustworthiness with large number of people online, and able to join or create massive networks that use the internet to augment existing social dynamics. These citizens, while they may be rare, have the potential to deeply transform their country.

1.8 Project Outline

The remainder of this project is organized into six additional chapters. The next two chapters provide the background to my data chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the concept of an Elastic Self and current discussions of self and identity. Chapter 3 is an overview of the data collection methods used to answer the research questions.

The following three chapters explain the three phases of an Elastic Self in greater detail through the perspective of my participants’ narratives. Chapter 4 illustrates the Exploratory Phase of an Elastic Self. Youth turn to the internet as an expressive space for mutual exploration of an Elastic Self with strangers; this exploration primarily involves the exchange of personal narratives and emotional expression. Chapter 5 explains the Trusting Phase. Chinese youths’ interactions with strangers create not only personal trust, but a “casual web of public trust” (Jacobs 1961). Chapter 6 describes the Participatory Phase. It explains why only a subset of participants became involved in civic activities that they perceive to improve society overall. Their involvement in apolitical online communities generates the necessary
skills for them to ease into more complex and civically oriented action. Tying these three data chapters together is a consistent set of themes around self-exploration, sexuality, emotional expression and leisure activities that illustrate how the Chinese internet is a unique social space with a set of qualities that make an Elastic Self possible. Chapter 7 concludes this project with a discussion of possible constraints on an Elastic Self as well as future research questions.
CHAPTER 2
AN ELASTIC SELF

2.1 Introduction

A new paradigm is needed to explain the transformation of identity in modern Chinese society. Current conceptualizations of identity and self in China do not adequately capture the dynamic ways that social media platforms are enabling personal changes that have large societal implications. Most scholars either ignore the critical affordances of social media and digital devices or they overemphasize its role as a political tool for democratization. As Susan L. Shirk has observed, “foreigners tend to dwell on the way the Chinese propaganda cops are continuing to censor the media, but an equally important part of the story is the exponential expansion of the amount of information available to the public . . .” (2010, 4–5). Instead of using the narrow lens of political change, it is critical to examine how Chinese youth who are coming of age are using the internet in their everyday lives as it relates to their identity, sense of belonging, and morals.

In this chapter, I engage with several literatures that help us understand how identity and self is changing in China. Then I review literature on self and identity as it relates to the internet, and then I close the chapter with a discussion of an Elastic Self, a concept I introduce from my fieldwork. The framework of an Elastic Self shows how Chinese youths’ online interactions are not peripheral ways of enhancing offline interactions or manifestations of trivial engagement with entertainment. Rather, this new self looks for different modes of interaction. The formal mode is socially
restrictive, while the informal mode allows many Chinese youth to experiment with different aspects of themselves.

Throughout my project, like many of the authors I cite, I use the terms self and identity interchangeably. I adopt Moshman’s definition of identity as the foundation of the Elastic Self: “an identity is, at least in part, an explicit theory of oneself as a person” (2005, 89). Moshman’s definition lines up with late modernity theories of self formation (Giddens 1991; Bauman 1993). Anthony Giddens posits that the self is always being made and remade; it is both a reflexive personal project and a practice of establishing a narrative that is consistent with one’s self (1991). Zygmunt Bauman conceives of individuals in contemporary society as having a “liquid” sense of self associated with individualism as opposed to a solid sense of self attached to traditional institutions (1993, 2000).

I also rely on Richard Jenkins’s description of identification as a baseline activity for any kind of interaction on a personal to group level: identity is “the basic cognitive mechanism that humans use to sort out themselves and their fellows,

33. I refer to identity in the plural and singular form loosely. Identity and self is a socially constructed process that is the outcome of social interactions; as such there is no such thing as a “single” identity or self. The concept of identity and self is a source of great academic debates. Some academics have proposed for the term, identity, to be completely abandoned because of its overuse has caused more confusion than coherence. (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Jenkins agrees with Brubaker’s and Cooper’s observation that the concept of identity is overused, but he disagrees with their suggestion to discard the term because “it [the term] is not only an item in sociology’s established conceptual toolbox; it also features in a host of public discourses…” (2008, 14). In agreement with Jenkins, if sociologists were to abandon a popularly used concept in the world beyond academia simply because of its theoretical and discursive problems, then we create more divides than opportunities to dialogue. For a good review of past work on identity and self-formation theory in psychology, see Stryker and Burke (2000).
individually and collectively” (2008). I consider Goffman’s use of the term self as interchangeable with the way Moshmann and Giddens frames identity as an ongoing project of self-presentation (1999 [1959]).

2.2 Chinese Identity: A Review

A quick glance at the news reveals alarming predictions that China will soon collapse from an identity crisis: Confucianism versus Maoism, collectivism versus individualism, or nationalism versus modernity. One article in the Wall Street Journal claims that China is still plagued by an “inferiority complex” (Yuan 2010). The New York Times says that the Communist Party has a “mounting identity crisis” (Rosenthal 2002). Another article predicts that these multiple identities may cause China to “soon buckle under the weight of its own contradictions” (Hill 2012). This narrative portrays the contemporary Chinese self as trapped in a moral crisis between tradition and modernity.

While popular media narratives like the ones referenced above belies a tendency to skew and exaggerate moral panics, scholarly research on the Chinese identity echoes a similar story. Academic writing frames conceptualizations of modern Chinese identity in opposition to those of the West. Within the humanities, Chinese identity is “problematic” (Denton 1998) and caught between the “traditional Chinese way of life” and the “modern Western way of life embodied by the self” (Jia 2001). These studies often draw upon textual representation from historical periods such as the May Fourth Movement, Qing Dynasty, and Maoist Era; they also frequently use Western theory, such as Foucault, as the primary analytical lens (Liu 2010a). These
essentialist interpretations take functionalist\textsuperscript{34} perspectives, such as the Fei’s situational self (1992) or King’s relational self (1985) to the extreme. In these accounts, the cultural legacy of the collectivist social structures of Communism and Confucian stunt the capacity of the Chinese self to become a fully developed modern self.\textsuperscript{35} Both popular media and scholarly research focus on the two conceptions of the Chinese self that are the most relevant to this project: the situational self and the collectivist self.

According to Confucianism, the “situational self” engages in “differentiated modes of association” \textit{chaxugeju} (差序格局): it acts accordingly to the relationship, not the person (Chu and Peng 2012; Fei 1992). The individual is “embedded in social relationships and emotionally tied by the personal obligations defined by those relationships” (Chu and Peng 2012: 205). The Confucian system positions self-oriented needs—such as expressing one’s personal needs or personal identity—as inappropriate, and consequently discourages exploration or fulfillment of those needs (Hwang 1999; Hsu 1981; Whitman 1985). As such, individuals are expected to exercise self-restraint, with the goal of contributing to the overall social stability of society. This creates a strong sense of one’s self as embedded in an exclusive group of relationships that form the primary institution of everyday Chinese life—the family.

\textsuperscript{34} My reference to functionalism refers to theories that explain how a stable social order is maintained. In sociology the roots of functionalism are in Emile Durkheim (1995).

\textsuperscript{35} For more discussions look to Ames et al. 1994; Chan 1963; Chong et al. 2003; Kipnis 1997.
During Mao’s regime, the Party instituted practices that replaced the traditional Confucian structure with a Communist structure (Perry 2002; Vogel 1965). Communism appropriated Confucianism to carry out its own project of recreating the individual: the situational self was co-opted into a collectivist self. Many scholars argue that Confucianism’s idea of the situational self overlaps greatly with Mao’s idea of a self that serves the state (Bakken 2000; Perry 2002). Both ideologies emphasize the importance of fulfilling one’s designated role in the system and encouraging self-sacrifice and selflessness (Bakken 2000, 105). Mao’s policies led to an institutional shift in identity: a person was no longer embedded in the family, but in a collective. Although loyalty and deference to the family shifted to the Party, the overall social structure still remained the same: the individual was still under institutional control (Hsu 1981, Yan 2010; Perry 2002).

There is minimal research on contemporary Chinese identity. However, a sophisticated argument about the Chinese self has been offered by Arthur Kleinman et al. in Deep China: The Moral Life of the Person, What Anthropology and Psychiatry Tell about China Today (2011). Kleinman et al. argue that the contradiction between a collectivist and individualist self creates a divided self (2011). This collectivist self is heavily shaped by the influence of Confucian principles\(^\text{36}\) that emphasize obedience to authority, adherence to hierarchy, and maintenance of order and boundaries. Kleinman et al.’s research concludes that Chinese people feel psychologically divided. They

\(^{36}\) Look to these scholars for more discussion on this topic Chong (2003), Finagarette (2003), and Lo (2003). My discussion of Confucianism does not aim to explain Confucius’s teachings; instead, it aims to reflect how scholars have over time interpreted his teachings.
argue that an internal schism results from the moral obligation to be an individual in a society that continues to emphasize collectivistic values.

*Deep China* opens with an interview with Mr. Yan, an educated Chinese man, who was sent to the countryside to do hard labor during the Cultural Revolution, resulting in the suicide of his wife. He said:

To survive in China you must reveal nothing to others. Or it could be used against you. . . . That’s why I’ve come to think the deepest part of the self is best left unclear. Like mist and clouds in a Chinese landscape painting, hide the private part behind your social persona. Let your public self be like rice in a dinner: bland and inconspicuous, taking on the flavors of its surroundings while giving off no flavor of its own. Too strong a personal flavor and you may entice others to jealousy or hatred . . . (6)

Mr. Yan’s story is an example of how Chinese people have internalized the trauma from the Cultural Revolution. The authors of *Deep China* conclude with an interview from Mr. Wu, a fifty-three-year-old educated engineer who discloses his fears around sharing his feelings:

There is a feeling of an inner self that you can express to others, and another part that you cannot, or you feel you shouldn’t There is a sense of contradiction. . . . It used to be you couldn’t talk about self-interest: you know, building a career, making money, and the like. That has all changed. But you still cannot talk about what really bothers you about what’s going on around you. I keep secret my criticism of the hypocrisy in government pronouncements; the inequality that challenge the very idea of a communist or socialist society the collusion between powerful people: cadre and businessmen. Once you go public, your words come back to affect what you do…If you’re going to get ahead, you accept all that: the lies, the hypocrisy…you cannot trust your own feelings. You lose your idea of what is right and what is wrong. So inside yourself, even, maybe you keep one eye open on advancing yourself-interest but the other eye is closed to your pain, the feeling you have that is wrong and you should not be part of it. That’s the contradiction, the division inside. (287)
Both Mr. Yan’s and Mr. Wu’s sense of a divided self reflects the experiences of those in their generation who directly or indirectly experienced the psychological trauma and physical hardship of the Maoist Era. During this period, the Party deemed self-awareness to be immoral and anti-patriotic (Madsen 1984). Even worse, individualism was associated with capitalism, which led to heavy punishments. Although capitalism is no longer a crime in post-Reform and Opening China, Mr. Yan and Mr. Wu still feel alienated from the Party because like many others, they feel that it is now morally corrupt.

Although my research is focused on Chinese youth, to understand them I have also conducted years of research on older generations of Chinese people. My work aligns itself with Kleinman’s observations of a divided sense of self existing among older generations who directly experienced the most harrowing periods of Communist rule and the transition to a market economy. These individuals have minimal access to social spaces that are removed from their personal connections. Limited to interactions only with people they know, their social circles reinforce norms of emotional restraint. This outcome, however, is limited to the generations that experienced Mao’s policies as teens or adults.

Post-80s and post-90s youths’ identities are only partially shaped by the same memories of Mr. Yan’s and Mr. Wu’s generation because they have grown up in post-Reform and Opening. Even though they did not experience the Cultural Revolution and other events, they still learn from collective memories of the Maoist era that
circulate through family stories and other unofficial channels. These stories teach youth to not trust people they know. So, like Mr. Yan and Mr. Wu, they also feel similar fears about speaking up and sharing personal information with a friend. They develop a similar sense of low personal trust in people they know. According to Wang (2006), the lasting effects of the Cultural Revolution continue to influence perception of interpersonal trust: “Although the Cultural Revolution has become a historical event, its long-lasting impact is still felt today regarding the moral standards held by the society at large, and tensions in interpersonal relationships in general. A weak sense of justice, as well as a certain lack of friendliness, trust and sympathy signals not only a loss of traditional virtues and morality, but also an establishment and perpetuation of negative social norms” (Wang 2006, 235).

Under this context, it is easier to trust a person with an existing personal connection.

Chinese youth, however, are finding ways to overcome the low personal and social trust that is pervasive within older generations of Chinese society. This is because they are growing up with something that Mr. Yan’s and Mr. Wu’s generation did not have: the internet. Through the internet, youth have access to new forms of relationships that can help them manage the same contradictions that continue to paralyze Mr. Yan’s Mr. Wu’s generation. Youth respond to the tugging of collectivism and individualism by actively trying to make sense of it with the help of strangers

---

37. Official public discussions about people’s experiences are still censored and limited to constructive outcomes. For example, in history books, the Maoist period of China is still presented in a beneficial light.
online. While Kleinman et al.’s (2011) conclusions hold up for pre-Reform and Opening generations, any discussions of the Chinese self that do not account for digital spaces cannot make claims about the Chinese self for the generations that have and are coming of age with the internet.

A generational perspective of the Chinese self allows us to capture the subtle ways that each cohort comes of age: with a different set of experiences and morals that affect how they see themselves and the world. It also allows us to see particular communication platforms and social spaces that are available to each generation. Most of the research on Chinese identity still contextualizes China in terms of practices from the Maoist period. Chinese youth are coming of age in a time where they do not have shared experiences or personal memories of Mao’s regime, and yet scholars still make sweeping arguments about the debilitating affects of the Communist Party on Chinese youth.

The processes for contemporary identity making among Chinese youth can no longer be explained through a shedding of collectivist morals or Confucian ethics; nor can it be explained in the pursuit of an individual-centered self that is struggling between the demands of modern individualism and traditional collectivism (Yan 2011).38 Contemporary conceptions of the Chinese self as either or individualistic or collectivist tend to essentialize these categories. Instead of asking, “What is the

38. For example, Kleinmen et al.’s convincing work on a divided self is entirely based on ethnographic research on individuals in their 40s and 50s who grew up during the most intense periods of Communist rule and who are not first adopters of internet applications.
Chinese self?” we should be asking, “What are the emergent *shared ideas* about the self and identity among Chinese youth?”

Furthermore, it is critical to understand that any discussions of “individualism” must be framed as a fundamentally collective process. As Greenwood (2003) argues:

All societies appear to have collectively-grounded representations of individuality, which differ in their collective conceptions of individuality and norms associated with it. Some take the collective, and others take the individual, as the normative object of an individual’s moral projects. These sorts of differences to not appear to be distinctly Western as opposed to Chinese (or opposed to non-Western culture in general . . . All conceptions of individualism are shared social representations” regardless where they originate, which makes “all conceptions of individuality fundamentally collective in nature . . . different cultures (and the same cultures at different historical periods) differentially value the individual in relation to the social group or collectivity.” (165–169)

A sociological and generational perspective of the self places the Chinese individual in a cultural context that accounts for the role of the internet as a social space.

**2.3 Online Identity: A Review**

The internet arrived in the U.S. and China through academic institutions around the same time. However, due to policy, historical, and structural differences, the internet became commercialized much more quickly in the U.S. than in China (Goldsmith and Wu 2006). Since the establishment of the internet, users have turned to it to express themselves with strangers on message boards, news groups, and LiveJournal, to name a few (Kolko 1999, 1998; Kendall 2007; Leshed and Kaye 2006; Veale 2003). Later on, more complex internet worlds emerged, including Multi-User Dungeons (MUD), Second Life, and massively multi-role playing gaming sites.
(MMORPGs) (Adams et al. 2008; Au 2009; Bardzell and Odom 2008; Ducheneaut 2010; Ducheneaut et al. 2007; Ducheneaut and Moore 2008; Malaby 2006; Moore et al. 2009; Varvello 2008; Yee 2006; Yee et al. 2009). Users came to these sites not only because they were designed to be socially engaging, but because they could socialize with new people and present different sides of themselves. Much of the early scholarly research on online interactions were optimistic about computers freeing people from the offline restrictions of identity formation (Kendall 2003; Stallabrass 1995; Turkle 1995, 2005). Some researchers even predicted the declining significance of persistent structural inequalities such as gender, race, and income (Barlow 2005; Reingold 1992; Turkle 2005). While most of these claims have proven to be overplayed, the significance of the internet as an agent of major social and economic change cannot be denied.

2.3.1 Western Youth

In recent years, identity and youth have continued to be important topics for scholars. As the web has matured and become more widely used, many have abandoned the utopian vision of the online realm as a more ideal space for identity work. Youths’ mainstream online practices have expanded beyond the early days of blogging, Usenet, Livejournal, peer to peer networks, and message boards to include

---

39. Criticism of utopian race-free internet can be found in Nakamara (2002, 2008), Kolko et al. (2202), and Tu et al. (2001). Nelson (2001) provides an excellent critique of techo-utopianism and cites several texts that tackle this issue. According to (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel (2012), Šmahel (2003) is one of the earliest scholar to outlines different meanings of “online identity.” Lori Kendall (1998) provides a more nuanced claim about race: participants feel that race matters less in online interactions but Kendall emphasizes that is certainly not an escape from their offline lives.
social media sites, community websites and mobile apps. \footnote{40. See these scholars who did early work on identity and the internet: Baker (2001), Bayam (2005), Giesler (2002), Kolko (1999), Leshed and Kaye (2006), Lindemann (2005), Pearson (2007), and Simpson (2005).} Researchers have followed suit, asking how identity work looks in the Web 2.0 era.

A group of scholars are finding that youth appropriate the internet in a variety of ways for identity making purposes. Recent scholarship such as boyd’s seminal work on Facebook and MySpace reveals how youth adopt social media as way of “marking identity” and at times presenting an “idealized self” (2008a, 133,128). Gray’s work on rural gay youth reveal the strategic identity work they do in “boundary publics”—online sites that give them a sense of place and resources (2009). Marwick’s work reveals that young people turn to social media sites to “self-brand” a strategic identity, an “edited self” to be sold and promoted (2010). Coleman’s work on software hackers shows online communities develop a shared set of valued as embodied in a “hacker identity” (2012). These scholars view online practices as more or less consistent with the offline. They illuminate the emotional and social affordances that come with mediating identity in these platforms. In their accounts, youth have a sense of agency and awareness of what they are doing and how they are utilizing a site.

Some scholars propose a more functional view of the self. For example, Rainie and Wellman propose that in the Digital Age, we have a “networked self” that is a “a single self that gets reconfigured in different situations as people reach out, connect, and emphasize different aspects of self” (2012, 126). Their definition of singular and
fully formed self is on the opposite end of the spectrum from Giddens (1991) who argues that there is no self or single self. For Giddens, the self is a constructed reflexively and the role of institutions weighs heavily on this process:

A person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor—even though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual’s biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing “story” about the “self.” (Giddens 1991, 54)

Giddens’s theory on the reflexive project of the self suggests that identity is not a stable process or even necessarily identifiable as a set of traits, but cultivated through ongoing interactions and narrative making. danah boyd’s (2008a) research on identity making among youth echoes Giddens’s theory.

While boyd has a wide body of work, most relevant to my argument are her findings on the social practices of American teens (2008a). For the most part, she found that teens’ online interactions focus on “friending,” the act of finding and adding a person on a social media platform with whom they have an established relationship. She argues that youth are not looking for strangers. The majority of her participants maintain their Facebook and MySpace for friends. The youth who do collect strangers are “not interested in developing friendships with these people” (215). “By and large, teens talk to people they know and have little interest in developing connections with strangers” (71). They do not approve friend requests from strangers. Even youth who create fake profiles are only doing it as “a form of entertainment, not as a genuine form of socialization” (215).
A stark contrast to boyd’s findings is research that proclaims a foreboding outcome: social media and digital tools are alienating youth (Turkle 2011) and making them impoverished (Bauerlein 2009; Carr 2011). These authors argue that users’ online interactions are not only inconsistent with their offline selves, but also harming their ‘real’ selves. Sherry Turkle, one of the most well-known proponents of this view, offers a strong sense of doubt that youth are able to develop the skills to negotiate a digital world.41

In her most recent book, Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other (2011), Turkle argues that the process of treating “individuals as a unit” takes over “naturally” when humans encounter too much digital communication (i.e., text messages, emails, and messages) (168). As a result, digital devices make it hard for youth to “cultivate” self-discovery, self-reflection, and downtime (172). She is worried that youth are too dependent on the internet to make the time to develop an identity for themselves.

Turkle conceives of “real life” as one that is composed of a consistent “everyday identity.” Although she recognizes that youth use social media to be themselves, she sees these “online selves” as easily disconnected from the ‘real’ self:

41. Turkle’s analysis of social media’s effects on youth is an extension of her earlier thinking of the “online self” as the “second self” that is fictional and disconnected from embodied reality (1995). Her early work established that advances in computer-mediated communications have created a “cyberspace” for people to interact and develop relationships with other people (1997). This cyberspace facilitates the creation of multiple identities. Her work captures the multiple identities that youth can craft online at the same time. While her early captures the multiplicity afforded by the internet, her later work reveals a problematic framework that results from privileging the offline and online as hard boundaries and a meaningful division for youth.
“We use social networking to be ‘ourselves,’ but our online performances take on lives of their own. Our online selves develop distinct personalities. Sometimes we see them as our ‘better selves.’” (160). For Turkle, the online self echoes cyber dystopian fears of computers and machines becoming uncontrollable rogues—“[taking] on lives of their own” (160). She goes on to suggest that teens are most susceptible to this outcome because they do not have the maturity and restraint to untether themselves from a digitally connected society.

While Turkle’s interviews with the participants in her book capture some of the ways youth manage self-presentation in the Digital Age, she sorely misinterprets their stories through the lens of digital dualism. Media theorist Nathan Jurgenson (2011) argues that “digital dualists believe that the digital world is ‘virtual’ and the physical world ‘real.’” He elaborates that “[they] argue that the problem with social media is that people are trading the rich, physical and real nature of face-to-face contact for the digital, virtual and trivial quality of Facebook. The critique stems from the systematic bias to see the digital and physical as separate; often as a zero-sum tradeoff where time and energy spent on one subtracts from the other. This is digital dualism par excellence. And it is a fallacy” (2011). Turkle’s dualistic interpretation has led her to make alarming claims that technology is creating more harm than good and alienating youth from “real life” (2011, 288, 192). This claim has come to dominate the way many adults, youth advocates, and policymakers think about technology’s affects on youth. However, this approach is not relegated to the West; a
digitally dualistic approach can also be found in literature on internet use in other regions of the world.

### 2.3.2 Chinese Youth

Research on the Chinese internet is overwhelmingly concentrated on political use, or what Tsui calls “sociopolitical diffusion and development” (2005). Most of this research is focused on the effects of internet censorship, the capacity of the Party to become more open or closed, or people’s capacity to be more or less politically active and aware (MacKinnon 2012; Jiang 2009, 2010; Lagerkvist 2010; Mengin 2004; Qiu 2000; Qiang 2007; Yang 2009; Zhang and Tomlinson 2012). While these studies have contributed greatly to our understanding of the Chinese internet, we have a limited view of how the internet is used in everyday life without an equally wide body of scholarship on its social uses. One need only think about Western internet use to see how political activity comprises a small portion of a wide variety of online practices. This overly political focus has dominated the corpus of literature on Chinese internet use to the detriment of the bigger picture.

In recent years, this imbalance in the literature has started to change; some scholars have begun studying marginalized communities such as migrants (Qiu 2007a, 2007b).

---


43. This does not mean that scholar should abandon political analysis of the Chinese internet. Rather, I am arguing that when we do the analysis, it need to take into greater consideration how it is being used and internalized by a broad spectrum of people and avoid a politically-centric lens for interpreting people’s interactions.
2007b, 2009), laid-off workers (Cartier et al. 2005); migrant women (Wallis 2008), and rural users (Oreglia 2012). However, they are part of a small minority. Many of these studies focus on a particular device, namely the mobile phone (Fortunati et al. 2008; Hjorth 2008; Oreglia and Kaye 2012; Qiu 2007b; Wallis 2012). Or, they focus on specific spaces of access such as the internet café (Qiu 2005; Liu 2009), or practices such as gaming (Golub and Lingley 2008; Hjorth 2007; Hjorth and Chan 2009; Qiu 2005; Lindtner and Szablewicz 2010).

In aggregate, these studies form a very complex picture of the Chinese internet. But there is a dearth of scholarship that examines the holistic use of technology across multiple devices, spaces, and practices. Youth do not limit their use of the internet to just game; similarly, migrants do not only use the mobile phone. Segmenting research for particular devices, places of access, and practices made sense during the incipience of the Chinese internet when usage was stratified along economic lines. But in recent years, the affordability of laptops, tablets, and mobiles—coupled with the desire among even low-income users to save up months of earnings for expensive devices—has radically reshaped the Chinese technological space. Usage is no longer segmented by devices, but by particular modes of interaction (I explain this concept in section 2.6.1). For the most part, Chinese youth, even though they make the largest population of internet users in China, receive little research attention beyond a political focus or a particular practice.

44. Kluver and Yang (2005) provide a review of research on the Chinese internet, but as this was conducted in 2005, it does not contain recent research and is out of date.
There is scant work that holistically investigates how they make use of mediated tools.45

Two dissertations address the lack of work on contemporary Chinese youth and identity making. Marcella Szabelwicz’s fieldwork with Chinese youth who game at internet cafes captures the complexity and endless shifting of identity making in contemporary Chinese society (2012). She even refuses to claim that there is such thing as an agreed upon “gamer identity” because the gamers themselves do not always relate to that label depending on their changing social position. Silvia Lindtner’s work on urban youth who identify with the DIY culture shows the complex pathways and cultural narratives they draw upon to navigate government resources and personal interests (2012). Like Szablewicz, Lindtner’s analysis resists classifying people into a unified identity.

Both Lindtner’s and Szabelwicz’s research are valuable in that they position identity work amid multiple cultural and political processes. They not only illustrate how people’s conceptions of self change over time, and they also show how the internet is embedded in their everyday lives. Most notably, their commitment to representing how their participants experience the world prevents them from making broad claims, dualistic arguments, or adopting Western theoretical models to explain

45. For example, danah boyd (2007a, 2007b, 2008a) has been pivotal in directing research attention to Westen youth’s social media and broader digital practices. But research on Chinese youth and social media is still in a nascent phase with some scholars focusing on particular devices, specific services, or well-defined segments on the population. In most of this research, social media and digital platforms are reported as incidental observations, not as central social platforms that mediate interaction.
their observations. Unfortunately, aside from Lindtner’s and Szabelwicz’s research, there is very little ethnographic work on the intersection of technology and Chinese youth that does not replay staid conceptualizations of Chinese youths’ identities. Much of the current scholarship on Chinese youth is messy, inaccurate, or too generalizing, as I will illustrate below.

The majority of contemporary research about Chinese youth falls into four false claims. The first is that youth have a dualistic sense of self. The second is that youth use the internet mostly as a form of escape from their offline lives. The third is that youths’ online communication is consistent with their offline lives. The fourth is that youth always want to be anonymous online.

Both Kleinman et al. (2011) and Liu (2010a) present a dualistic Chinese self, albeit for different reasons. Kleinman et al. suggest that individuals in Chinese society are divided between collectivist and individualistic tensions while Liu argues that urban youth have a dualistic approach to identity construction that is informed by the tensions between government expectations for a “neoliberal subject in the free market” and “communist-collectivist values of a socialist subject” (2010, 30). Even though I do not agree with Liu’s overall findings or theoretical framework, her copious research on government discourse and youths’ reactions to social pressures is an incredibly valuable contribution. But Liu, like Kleinman et al., does not accurately capture the new sociality that youth are engaging in. Both of them position identity as a duality, with processes of modernity fracturing identities.
Other scholarship argues that youth have online lives that are separate from their offline lives. Many quantitative and qualitative studies emphasize that the major difference between China’s internet and the Western internet is that Chinese users browse the internet for entertainment, not for instrumental uses such as information searching. Liu (2008a, 2010a) argues that Chinese youth primarily go online to escape the social pressures of offline life, and Herold (2011b) puts forth that Chinese youth see the internet as a “different and separate space” from the offline (13).

Some scholars have proposed that Chinese youths’ internet use does not differ greatly from findings on Western youth: their online lives are consistent with their offline lives. Liu argues that Chinese youth spend their time online primarily with “their own circle of friends, acquaintances and families” (2010a, 168). The last set of literature diverges from previous claims by suggesting that not only is the internet separate from the offline, but Chinese youths’ “fear of prosecution” leads them to use anonymous accounts (Farrall and Herold 2011, 166). These five arguments summarize much of the current literature on Chinese youths’ online practices. My findings do not confirm any of these studies.

My research reveals that a new sociality is emerging in the post-80s and post-90s generation. Furthermore, this sociality looks very different from what other scholars have documented. In talking to Chinese youth for the past seven years, I have

46. The exception to Herold et al.’s (2011) compilation is Lintdner’s (2012) and Stablewicz’s (2012) ethnographic study on gaming communities. Both authors do not claim that games are separate from offline life.
found that they do not experience identity as a bi-polar opposition between forces as Kleinman et al. (2011) or Liu (2010a) have portrayed. My findings offer a different perspective that emphasizes cohesion over division. They do experience paradoxical tensions, but that does not lead to a dualistic or divided identity construction process. While they feel restrained by the all the situational selves that they have to constantly maintain, Chinese youth are turning to platforms where they can be free from these restrictions.

The youth I spoke to do not conceive of their social world as split between the online and offline, as Herold (2011) suggests. As such, they are not turning to social media platforms to escape their offline lives, or using them exclusively for entertainment purposes. Instead of looking to particular sites, they look for particular modes of interaction that allow them to informally socialize, make friends, and/or share emotions. Most remarkably, they are learning all of these new forms of interaction with strangers; they are not going online to recreate preexisting social ties with friends and family. In fact, they are explicitly looking to avoid their existing social circles. Contrary to Farrall’s and Herold’s (2011) findings on the use of

---

47. There are also some additional issues with Farrall’s and Harold’s study that misinterpret youths’ online practices. First, they do not recognize that youth have more than one QQ account. In my 10 years of research, I have never encountered a user who has not had more than one account. They also claim that Chinese youths’ anonymous interactions reflect their desire to not stand out. Standing out implies that youth do not know how to be “individualistic” and are afraid of attention. My research shows that they want attention, but they simply were not emotionally and socially equipped to handle the potential shame they would bring to their social circle if they were to openly express anything socially transgressive. Youth fear speaking out, not standing out. Once they are on informal platforms with strangers who provide them the social and emotional support that they need, they are ready to speak out.
anonymity as a political act, my research shows that youth use anonymity as a strategy to distance themselves from people they know—not from the government.

My findings diverge greatly from the current research on Chinese youth. I have not found any evidence espoused by the current research that claims Chinese youth are divided, separating the online from the offline, using the internet only for entertainment, communicating only with their existing social circles, or engaging in fear-based anonymity practices. Instead, I observed youth experimenting with a range of identities, integrating the internet into their everyday lives, using it as a form of socialization, spending a lot of time with strangers, and using anonymity to express themselves. All of these interactions that I observed point to a new form of sociality among Chinese youth.

2.4 Elastic Self

My research reveals that a new form of sociality has emerged among Chinese youth: what I am calling an Elastic Self. An Elastic Self is both the feeling that one’s identity is malleable and the action of trying on different identities that are beyond the realm of a prescribed self. A prescribed self is composed of identities that are dictated by one’s existing social structural categories, such as ethnicity, gender, nationality, or family, and are externally imposed on the actor according to generally accepted beliefs about how someone should be. The prescribed self emerges from

48. I employ the term Elastic Self as a grounded theoretical concept to explain what I observed, it is not a term that youth used.

49. Another way to understand the prescribed self is Sennett’s (1977) work on the ascribed self. He argues that in ancient times, identity was entirely ascribed self: people were born into an occupation, class, or social category, and they could not change what they were born into.
interaction with and pressure from existing social ties, whereas an Elastic Self emerges out of new ties created by the individual through informal modes of interaction.

For Chinese youth, the prescribed self consists of the situational self: a self who is constantly aware of the appropriate ways they are expected to act in an interaction. “Elastic” and “elasticity” conveys a state of malleability. “Elasticity” refers to the potential—both psychological and sociological—for individuals to feel—and to express—themselves in new ways and to new people. *A la* Giddens (1991), the more elastic one’s identity, the more capacity one has to engage with one’s social surroundings, to react to unfamiliar people and situations, and to reflexively incorporate the new interactions into their own personal narrative about themselves.

An Elastic Self is a distinctly new process of identity formation and sociation in China. Individuals who are engaged in an Elastic Self seek to develop a personal identity and fulfill private interests through social interactions with unknown people. An Elastic Self evolves out of micro-interactions that reinforce a new set of values around self-expression, transparency, and egalitarianism. Most notably, this new identity is unfolding in the company of strangers, not with one’s existing contacts.

Identities and conceptions of the self are not predetermined or inherent, but “given shape in the interactions that occur in language and in action” (Poster 1995). The self is socially constructed through ongoing interaction (Mead 1913; Berger and Luckmann 1967). For Chinese youth, interpersonal interactions with strangers initially begin out of boredom; however, they eventually become a form of socialization that
helps youth forge a personal identity. Conversations with strangers give Chinese youth fresh insight and energy. This energy is not being put to use against the government or the families of these youth; it is being used to navigate the everyday paradoxes of growing up in Chinese society.

An Elastic Self stands in contrast to the collectivist and situational self which requires the suppression of personal identity and emotions. However, while an Elastic Self diverges from the prioritization of self-sacrifice and selflessness that characterizes collectivist and situational selves, it does not embody a wholesale rejection of traditional Chinese values. Instead, an Elastic Self reflects the attempts of Chinese youth to create identities that help them better negotiate the social norms that come with the collectivist and situational selves. They are trying to formulate a sense of self that is not solely dictated by dominant norms.

I chose the word “elasticity” to describe this new identity because it emphasizes the “stretchiness” of identity. It also allows me to entirely avoid creating distinctions between rigid and distinct forms of self or identity—such as a ‘real’ self, a ‘single’ self, or an ‘online’ self—that are often found in scholarly conceptualizations of the self (Amichai-Hamburger 2013; Cavanagh 2007; McKenna 2002; McKenna and Bargh 1998; Markham 1998; Myer 1987; Raine and Wellman 2012; Turkle 2005, 2011). I also chose the word “elasticity” because it reflects the malleability that I observed in Chinese youths’ identity work.

50. Earlier work from psychologists framed youths’ identity work as “identity achievement,” where some youth are able to successfully decide and commit to a single self (Erikson 1968; Marcia 1966, 1976).
An Elastic Self also stands in contrast to research that delineates identity as a process marked by a dichotomized view of online and offline processes.\(^{51}\) My research shows that Chinese youth do not assign a meaningful division between the ‘offline’ and ‘online’ or ‘real’ and ‘unreal.’ Nor are their identities static or dualistic. For youth who have come of age with the internet, the internet is so integrated into their ways of seeing the world that like many other prior forms of technology, it “become[s] common to the point of banality” (Thompson 2013, 177).

The internet affords more opportunities for the ongoing reformulation of self-presentation; users can engage in many identities concomitantly across several platforms and devices. Chinese youth gravitate to social media platforms that make it easy for them to create malleable identities by posting content they relate to in that moment, but they also make it easy to delete and abandon these identities.\(^{52}\) Self-expression can be momentary. Chinese youth are not always trying to give information that “accurately” reflects themselves. Identity can be elastic and inaccurate because it can be playful; it does not have to be purposeful. Chinese youth who engage in an Elastic Self are responsive to social conditions, shaping and reshaping themselves.

---

51. Subrahmanyam, Šmahel, and Greenfield (2006) were some of the earlier scholars to note that identity exploration happens online and offline. While this observation was novel in the early years of the internet, it no longer reflects how youth make meaning of the world. As I argue in section 2.6.1, youth look for modes of interaction, not spaces of interaction.

52. The act of maintaining multiple identities is not foreign to Chinese youth. The norms of a situational self already dictate the maintenance of different identities depending on who they are interacting with. So when they go online, the practice of keeping identities expressed for strangers separate from the identities they express for people they know, is not an entirely new practice as they already do it in their situational self with existing relationships.
depending on the combination of the social context, their own intent (needs or desires), and social norms. This reshaping involves the creation of new identities and abandonment of phased out identities.

The idea of a self with multiple facets is not new in the field of internet research. Early on, internet researchers have found that digital environments afford youth the ability to craft multiple identities with multiple accounts and platforms (Markham 1998; McKenna and Bargh 1998). Even before the internet, scholars have developed other models to explain a nonstatic self: kaleidoscope self (Deaux and Perkins 2000), looking glass self (Cooley 2012 [1902]), “I” and the “Me,” “taking the role of the other” (Mead 1913), multiple self (Meadams 1999), minimal selves (Hall 1987), and backstage and front stage self-presentation (Goffman 1999 [1959]). However, these theories do not address how identity making, a personal process, connects to a more public interest process. These concepts also do not offer an explanation for how non-Western youth engage in identity making under the rule of an authoritarian government that censors the internet. An Elastic Self offers a framework for both of these scenarios, addressing gaps in the literature and giving us a way to understand identity making with a combination of digital platforms and strangers.

2.5 Who is Engaging in an Elastic Self?

An Elastic Self commonly appears in two cohorts, the post-80s and post 90s generation. The youth who engage in an Elastic Self tend to feel that they cannot confide their emotions to people they know. Their social circles, consisting of friends, peers, family, and teachers, restrict their self-expression and offer limited sources of
self-fulfillment. They feel that the risks of sharing private interests or emotions with people they know are too high: they do not want to be seen as weird qiguai (奇怪) if they openly express personal thoughts. These youth are seeking alternatives to the thick guanxi relationships that they are embedded in. They want to find spaces where they do not always have to worry about acting ‘appropriately.’ They often find their existing relationships to be tiring because they have to constantly manage a situational self, which prevents them from openly expressing ideas that may counter dominant norms.

An Elastic Self reflects Chinese youths’ desires to negotiate a self that is not structured by institutions. A common trigger for the turn to an Elastic Self is when they find out that the institutions that have fundamentally shaped their identity and morals have not been honest. They begin to doubt the credibility of institutions and to seek alternative sources of information. When this happens, Chinese youth become more comfortable relying on strangers, many of whom transform from anonymous to semi-known contacts, because some of the information they are seeking is socially transgressive.

Chinese youth are not trying to create a new world; rather, they are developing new forms of engagement that they can iterate in their social circles with people they know. Before doing that, however, they search for safe spaces where they can safely and anonymously practice new ways of thinking and being. These interactions offer them freedom and distance from their existing relationships. They eventually use the
experiences, relationships, and practices cultivated through their Elastic Self in other areas of their life. The more elastic they become, the more skills they gain; eventually, this results in youth engaging with strangers both online and offline. However, it is important to note that the absence of a hard division between the offline and online does not signify the absence of boundaries all together.

2.6 Conditions in Which an Elastic Self Flourishes

2.6.1 Modes of Interaction

In my fieldwork, I discovered that Chinese youth do not adjust their interactions based on whether they are online or offline. They adjust their behavior depending on who they were interacting with, not where they were interacting. They made great efforts to keep the self they presented to known people separate from the identities they presented to unknown people.

Chinese youth made a distinction between what I call formal and informal modes of interaction. Formal modes of interactions unfold with people that youth know. Informal modes of interaction unfold with strangers. The word “mode” conveys that youth are actively choosing a particular method and way of interacting, selecting the most appropriate mode depending on their needs or intent. Youth choose to go into the informal mode when they want to express parts of themselves that they are not comfortable showing to people they know.

A large part of becoming comfortable with social media platforms involves learning the particular social norms and cues that guide each mode. While all interactions are governed by social norms, norms in the formal mode are more
in institutionalized and prescriptive while norms in the informal mode are more negotiable and undefined. Friendships established with strangers through the informal mode of interaction reflect _mutually agreed upon_ norms as opposed to the institutionalized or prescriptive norms that govern interaction in the formal mode. This difference contributes to the fundamental reason that interactions with strangers can be unpredictable, yet also deeply rewarding: youth do not have to worry about shame when they are communicating with strangers.

### 2.6.2 Affordances of Informal Modes

The informal mode offers several affordances\(^5^3^\) that Chinese youth cannot find in the formal mode: malleability in identity, access to strangers, and anonymity. Without the presence of these conditions, they cannot step outside the formal mode of interaction. I review each of these conditions in greater detail below.

Interaction in the informal mode produces a wider spectrum of malleable identities because youth are socializing with people they do not know. Without the presence of known contacts such as friends or family, they have less fear that what they say or do will be attached to their given name. In some cases, they merge identities or migrate them from one platform to another; in other cases, they generate and abandon identities as needed. They do not feel the need to always be consistent in their identity because they are interacting with people they know. As such, sociality in

---

53. The affordance literature avoids simplistic explanations of technological determinism that attributes outcomes to technology and staunch social constructivism that attributes outcomes to people. An “affordance” perspective lies in between technological determinism and social constructivism: both people and technology have the social power to shape an outcome (Baym 2010, 44)
the informal mode veers towards the exploratory, performative, and even fantastical because they are not worried about feeling ashamed for breaking social norms or acting inappropriately. In contrast, formal modes of interaction tend to produce prescriptive, singular, and discrete identities because youth are socializing with others who they already have a connection with. As such, social interaction tends to mirror or extend existing interactions.

The second affordance that the informal mode offers is access to unknown people. An Elastic Self flourishes in the presence of strangers. I consistently heard from participants that they spend a great deal of time online with people they do not personally know. Furthermore, they prefer to explore, experiment, and express themselves through interactions with strangers because they feel that what they share with strangers cannot be traced back to their given names or passed onto people they know. In the presence of unknown others (strangers), individuals feel liberated to try on different identities in their interactions. As such, they can take greater risks in expressing ideas or emotions, and to try on identities that are reversible, malleable, impermanent, and easily abandoned.

In the early twentieth century, sociologist George Simmel observed the emergence of a new social category of The Stranger (1971[1903]). He noted that Strangers can take on “objectivity” because they are not embedded in a person’s social circles. Their objectivity makes them an ideal confidante—one who can listen without

54. This does not mean that bounded sites such as Renren became less important or obsolete. For most of my participants, they play an important role in helping users maintain existing ties.
judgment and without the need to pass on the information.\textsuperscript{55} The social category of
The Stranger still plays an important role in Chinese youths’ identity making.
Simmel’s description of the Stranger fulfilling the role of the intimate information
receiver is an analog version of the online stranger that Chinese youth look for online.
The Stranger, socially distant from one’s existing ties, makes for an ideal partner in
the informal mode of interaction where secrets can be more readily shared.

The third affordance of the informal mode of interaction is anonymity. An
Elastic Self flourishes in the informal mode because interactions are initiated and
developed anonymously and remain untraceable to their given name. I rely on Bernie
Hogan’s definition of these terms: “Anonymity is a state implying the absence of
personally identifying qualities. Pseudonymity is a practice, which is often meant to
facilitate non-identifiable content” (Hogan 2013, 293). Hogan’s distinction reveals that
anonymity and pseudonymity are not synonymous and should not be used
interchangeably.

We need further conceptual clarity to understand that on the Chinese internet,
pseudonymity is the normative practice on most platforms (with the exception of

\textsuperscript{55} According to Simmel, strangers are not:
radically committed to the unique ingredients and particular tendencies of the group, and
therefore approaches them with the specific attitude of “objectivity.” But objectivity does not
involve passivity and detachment; it is a particular structure composed of distance and
nearness, indifference and involvement...[The stranger] often receives the most surprising
openness--confidence which sometimes have the character of a confessional and which would
be carefully withheld from a more closely related person...[The stranger] is freer, practically
and theoretically; he surveys conditions with less prejudice; his criteria for them are more
general and more objective ideals; he is not tied down in his action by habit, piety, and
precedent.” (1950, 403-405).
Renren which is modeled off of Facebook). As a result, practice of pseudonymity cannot be conflated with a state of anonymity: one can use a pseudonym but still reveal identifiable information. Most Chinese users, by default, use pseudonyms, but this does not automatically designate their account as anonymous. Chinese youth create multiple accounts under pseudonyms, marking some for formal modes and others for informal modes depending on whom they add. They only add strangers to the accounts that they assign for the informal mode, which remain an anonymous state.

Lack of clarity around these terms has lead scholars to make incorrect claims about Chinese youths’ motivations for using pseudonyms. For example, Farrall and Harold claim that Chinese youths’ online interactions are always anonymous (2011). They base their argument off of their observation that Chinese’s youth always use a pseudonym for their QQ accounts. While Chinese youth use pseudonyms for QQ accounts, only some accounts reside in a state of anonymity. By restricting an account only for communication with strangers, it is rendered into an anonymous state for engagement in the informal mode of interaction. But if users add people they personally know, then interactions fall into the formal mode.

Chinese youth use this strategy to manage their online connections and maintain a boundary between strangers and known people. On their anonymous accounts, they reveal details they do not feel comfortable exposing to people they know. They can only imagine expressing their emotions in the informal mode because
they are shielded from the risks of being shamed by their friends—or, by extension, their friends’ friends. Chris Poole, founder of 4chan, a popular site where users use pseudonyms to interact anonymously, echoes this point: “the cost of failure is really high when you’re contributing as yourself” (2011). Distance from known contacts allows Chinese youth to feel safe to express themselves because their identities are not attached to what they are expressing. Anonymity allows them to feel freer to interact in ways that are inconsistent with the identity they present in the formal mode.56

These three affordances—malleability in identity, access to strangers and anonymity—are critical for informal modes of interaction. The combination of these three affordances creates the conditions that make Chinese youth feel safe enough to engage in informal modes of interaction. Furthermore, these three conditions often show up on platforms that have been explicitly designed to encourage an informal mode of interaction.

2.6.3 Platforms are Dominant in One Mode

While users ultimately designate an account or platform for use in the formal or informal mode, platforms are often designed to encourage a particular mode of interaction. Three key features heavily contribute to whether a platform is dominant in the formal or informal mode of interaction: suggested contacts, terminology for contacts, and adjustability in usernames.

56. For a sociological discussion on anonymity, refer to Marx (1999). Anonymity has been a topic of discussion among researchers since the early days of the internet (Lee 1996).
Social media networks are designed to connect people with other contacts. Broadly, platforms that are designed to connect users to preexisting relationships are dominant in the formal mode. When a platform offers the option for users to “find” people in their address book or to add friends of friends, it suggests that they should be interacting with people who they are familiar with. On the other hand, platforms that encourage users to add unknown contacts are dominant in the informal mode. These platforms give users a greater range of options to add strangers. Algorithms in platforms for the formal mode tend to suggest new users based on overlapping social ties whereas algorithms in platforms for the informal mode tend to suggest users based on overlapping interests.

The terminology that social media platforms use to describe a contact reflects that service’s preferred mode of interaction. Platforms dominant in the formal model tend to refer to contacts as “friends” while platforms in the informal mode tend to refer to contacts with a wider array of creative terms that do not necessarily indicate a prior relationship. A platform’s language for contacts reveals the kinds of interactions that users are expected or encouraged to have.

Another way that platforms encourage formal or informal modes of interaction is through the username. Sites that are dominant in the formal mode require users to register with their given names. Users are expected to create one account using their “real” information, such as education, religion, and relationship status. If Facebook’s algorithms determine that a name is not real, they will not allow the account to be created.
expectation is that users are not changing their names. In contrast, sites that are dominant in informal modes are not concerned with people creating false identities because all identities are within the realm of possibility.

I illustrate how these features are implemented on Renren and Douban, the most dominant platforms for formal and informal modes of interaction, respectively. Renren is dominant in the formal mode because users are mostly interacting under their real names with people they know. Its algorithms suggest known contacts to be added as “good” haoyou (好友), not new contacts. The use of the term good friends suggests that people already know their online contacts in some capacity. Youth do not regularly change their names on Renren.

In contrast, Douban is dominant in the informal mode because users are mostly interacting with people they do not know under anonymous states. Douban contacts refer to each other as a “douban friend” douyou (豆友) or neighbor youlin (友邻). Douban users do not sign up for an account with their given names nor do they add people they know. On Douban, users can change their screen name at least once a month. While this makes it hard for Douban contacts to keep track of each other, Douban users have the freedom to change their identity when they want to abandon an outdated username. The norms for using pseudonyms and maintaining a state anonymity are so strong on Douban that when douyou/youlin contacts meet offline, another example of this is Weibo (modeled off of twitter), a social platform where the informal mode is the dominant form of interaction. On Weibo, users add each other as “fans” fensi 粉丝. The word “fans” is neutral, new adds can be known or unknown contacts.
they still refer to each other by their Douban names and do not ask each other for their given names. Douban users consistently told me that even Douban users who live in the same dorm room do not add each other to their Douban networks. In rare cases, youth follow someone they know or allow someone to follow them, but most of the time youth follow the norms for maintaining informal modes of interaction on Douban.

Youth who spend their time on multiple social media platforms become sensitive to quickly detecting the features that make a site more appropriate for either the informal or formal mode. In most cases, platforms are dominant in one mode of interaction. But in some cases, both modes of interactions unfold on the same platform at the same time, such as QQ or Sina Weibo. These are not strict boundaries; most platforms that are dominant in the formal mode can also host informal modes of interaction depending on what users decide (and vice versa). The three features that I outlined do factor into whether the dominant mode of interaction on a platform is formal or informal, but they do not determine it. While social media sites may be designed intentionally to encourage a formal or informal mode of interaction, it is ultimately the users who determine how they want to use the site.

Table 2.1 summarizes the main differences between the formal and informal interactional modes. The mode of interaction that youth use to engage online is highly significant, because it reflects the degree to which they can express themselves, meet new people, and join communities of interest. Platforms that foster an informal mode
of interaction are youths’ refuge from people they know. They are the secret hiding places where youth are not tied to fulfilling any situational self; these are the places they feel safe to engage in an Elastic Self.

Table 2.1. Modes of Interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Properties</th>
<th>Formal mode</th>
<th>Informal mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>identity</td>
<td>singular, traceable, attached to “real name”/give name</td>
<td>malleable, impermanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social ties</td>
<td>strong ties (social circle), guanxi 关系</td>
<td>impersonal, weak ties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trust between users is:</td>
<td>based on past interaction and a preexisting relationship</td>
<td>built over time through rituals of trustworthiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attitude towards strangers</td>
<td>closed</td>
<td>open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shame is:</td>
<td>present</td>
<td>not present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>practices and norms</td>
<td>institutionalized and prescriptive</td>
<td>negotiable and evolving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communities</td>
<td>closed, exclusive, based on social circle</td>
<td>open, more inclusive, formed through social network</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Engagement in the informal mode of interaction has social consequences: users develop a series of skills that build upon each other, resulting in new types and forms of social exchange. In section 3.8.6, I discuss methodological considerations for why it is imperative for researchers to distinguish between modes of interaction to properly sample and analyze social media practices because required. In the next section, I discuss how interactions in the informal mode progress over three phases.


2.7 Three Phases of an Elastic Self

An Elastic Self consists of three phases that progressively build upon each other: Exploratory, Trusting, and Participatory. In each phase, Chinese youth learn digital and socialization skills through their interactions with strangers, which then enables them to move into the subsequent phase. As they progress through each phase, their identities become increasingly elastic.

Chinese youth enter into an Elastic Self by starting out in the Exploratory Phase. They look for opportunities to engage in informal modes of interaction that revolve around personal interests. Recognizing that they have emotions and thoughts that are too risky to share with people they know, youth turn to strangers. Through sustained communication with strangers, they engage in emotional sharing, engage in “momentary self-expression” of potential identities, and learn core socialization skills (Leavitt 2013). Youth share aspects of themselves that they cannot imagine sharing with people they know or with their given name. These interactions give them the confidence to imagine and to play out identities that are beyond their prescribed self.

After Chinese youth build up the skills to express themselves in the informal mode, they move into the Trusting Phase. This is where they aim to deepen their relationships with strangers into friendships or semi-known contacts (people who are not strangers, but not yet friends). A central part of the Trusting Phase is the discovery of “hidden information,” information that the government suppresses or hides. This triggers a moral awakening and shift as youth come to realize that the people and the institutions that they have always trusted are neither transparent nor trustworthy. In
their search for explanations to help them make sense of this hidden information, youth approach new contacts and become loosely embedded in networks of shared interests. Youth accumulate the skills to assess trustworthiness of both information and contacts within a digital context. The key outcome of the Trusting Phase is that youth end up transferring the trust they once had in institutions—such as the state, and their families—to their online, interest-based networks.

A subset of youth move from the Trusting Phase to the Participatory Phase. This entails becoming involved in networks of civic participation. Once youth enter the Participatory Phase, they no longer maintain an anonymous identity to advocate for social change through online posts (as they may do in the Trusting Phase). In the Participatory Phase, youth disclose their opinions and actions to their existing social circles and engage in offline actions, requiring them to reveal their given names. Their high level of commitment to generating attention for the civic issues of their choice indicates that youth are willing to risk engaging in potentially sensitive action. However, this is not inherently or overtly political: youth feel inspired to engage in civic action because the communities they are involved in are linked to their personal interests. Youth do not view these acts as explicitly political, but as a personal expression of their identity and their commitment to their community. This engagement in citizenship practices, conspicuously absent from other Chinese generations, is creating a nascent foundation for a public sphere.
Table 2.2. Indicators of the Phases of the Elastic Self

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What they are doing:</th>
<th>Exploratory</th>
<th>Trusting</th>
<th>Participatory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exploring their emotions and private interests with strangers through the informal mode of interaction</td>
<td>Learning “rituals of trustworthiness” to minimize the risks of becoming more embedded in communities of unknown people</td>
<td>Participating in networked civic participation with social media</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shifts</td>
<td>Self-expression shifts from restrained to uninhibited</td>
<td>Relationships with strangers move into semi-known contacts and friends Transfers trust in institutions to networks</td>
<td>Expands private interests to public interests Expands from moral me to moral we</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New values gained</td>
<td>Creativity, independence, tolerance, sharing, and playfulness</td>
<td>Enjoying leisure activities, accountability, transparency, and community</td>
<td>Egalitarianism, solidarity, community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills gained</td>
<td>Gains information search skills, sharing emotions, how to be anonymous, navigate informal modes of interactions, interpersonal interaction skills</td>
<td>Manage their reputation, ability to assess credibility in online sources of information and contact, interpersonal interaction skills, join online communities</td>
<td>Leads and participate in social action offline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicators</td>
<td>Regularly hangs out in platforms that are dominant in the informal mode</td>
<td>Engages in rituals of trustworthiness.</td>
<td>Moves seamlessly between known, unknown, and semi-known contacts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.2 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exploratory</th>
<th>Trusting</th>
<th>Participatory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>States that they are unable to share emotions or relate to people they know</td>
<td>Engages in and confidently assess information acts</td>
<td>Tries to carry out action or participate in action in one’s community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creates multiple accounts and segments social media accounts for people they know and strangers</td>
<td>Expresses belief that membership in the communities they are involved in are voluntary and that the decision to not join or to leave does not carry consequences</td>
<td>Seamlessly moves between offline and online in a common sense way without treating either realm as inherently meaningful; participation in offline activities uses learned models of action from the online and vice versa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creates social media profiles for the informal mode that reflect a sense of playfulness in profile picture and self-description</td>
<td>Loosely embedded in online communities</td>
<td>Has compassion for and identifies with issues that are unfamiliar with her/his upbringing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintains a strict boundary between interactions in the formal and informal mode</td>
<td>Youth feel a sense of belonging in their communities that are in the informal mode</td>
<td>Tries to spread (recruit) and activate other individuals to become involved in social action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>Trusting</td>
<td>Participatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refers to strangers as “internet friends”</td>
<td>Strangers become semi-known contacts, with some evolving into relationships that are just as strong as existing friends.</td>
<td>Relies on semi-known contacts for emotional and moral support to carry out social action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can quickly and easily reformulate a self for an informal mode of interaction</td>
<td>Extends their interactions with <em>wangyou</em> (internet friends) from the informal platform to other forms of communication and situations such as talking on the phone, meeting online, and texting</td>
<td>Can confidently assess information from a variety of sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describes their primary social circles as restrictive, limiting, or boring</td>
<td>Developing meaningful relationships with people outside of their primary social circles by becoming skilled at assessing trustworthiness.</td>
<td>Has experienced the Exploratory and Trusting Phases of an Elastic Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to recognize people who have similar interests as them.</td>
<td>Prefers to share and acquire certain kinds of information from their informal modes of interactions.</td>
<td>Gives up on anonymity or merges some of their identities for formal and informal modes without disruption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relies on semi-known contacts for accurate sources of information.</td>
<td>Has awareness of the power of media attention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.2 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why this phase of important:</th>
<th>Exploratory</th>
<th>Trusting</th>
<th>Participatory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They are learning fundamental socialization and self-expression skills. Sharing their emotions with someone makes them feel less lonely and gives them a sense of agency that permeates into formal modes of interaction.</td>
<td>Maintains a boundary between formal and informal social media sites.</td>
<td>Mediates and segments self-presentation for formal and informal modes at the same time</td>
<td>They feel empowered to participate in public interests is central for developing a civil society.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These phases are the building blocks for a self that starts out with the desire for full anonymity in the Exploratory Phase to a self that is willing to take the risks of attaching socially transgressive or sensitive actions to their given identity in the Participatory Phase. In practice, the boundaries between each level blur and overlap. But what becomes clear is that the interactions in each level build on the prior level, leading eventually to a more open and elastic identity that is able to participate in citizenship practices.

2.7.1 Benefits of a “Phase” Perspective

Understanding the Elastic Self as a series of phases in which youth move through highlights several important aspects of the process. First, identity work happens in stages. The skills youth gain from each stage enable them to progress onto the next stage. Case in point, Chinese youth do not skip to the Participatory Phase because without the experiences from the Exploratory or Trusting Phase they do not have the confidence to engage in civic action. Second, emotional awareness opens youth to opportunities to learn how to build trust with strangers. Third, emotional expression is the gateway for more complex forms of interaction. The agency that Chinese youth gain from developing a sense of self-awareness from self-expression can transfer into more community-oriented actions that unfold most intensively in the Participatory Phase.  

59. Ethan Zuckerman’s (2008) “Cute Cat Theory” posits that widely used digital platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) are best for spreading information and activating citizens because their everyday use, such as sharing cat photos, renders them to be relatively benign. Like Zuckerman, I agree that most people do not want to be activists and my research shows that youth want to go online for leisure and emotional, not political reasons. My Elastic Self framework complements his theory by answering how youths’ mundane interactions online with strangers can transform into more complex
Lastly, a phase perspective avoids a common sampling bias found in politically-centric studies on the Chinese internet. By only investigating the Chinese internet from the perspective of people who are most visible online, researchers are often unaware that they are sampling people who are already in the Participatory Phase—the most civically active group of people online but also the least representative group of Chinese internet users (only a small subset of youth reach this phase as explained in section 1.6). By only speaking to a limited group of vocal and visible respondents, many researchers conclude that the Chinese internet is mostly a tool for political expression. In reality, these conclusions are correct for people who are already in the Participatory Phase but inaccurate when applied to users who are in other phases or have not even entered the first phase. A phase perspective provides a context for what youth are doing before the reach the Participatory Phase and a corrective to a common sampling error.

2.7.2 Links to Simmel’s Theories on Web of Group Affiliations and Secrecy

Central to the concept of an Elastic Self is the notion that youths’ identities become more malleable as their social circles expand. This malleability is the outcome of interactions with an increasingly diverse set of contacts that start out as strangers. This notion is similar to Georg Simmel’s theory of Web of Group Affiliations (1964)

---

civic interactions in the Participatory Phase. My research looks at what happens before become civically aware and what kinds of identity shifts must happen. Sarah Kendzior (2012) provides a balanced counterpoint on the limits of Zuckerman’s Cute Cat Theory for authoritarian regions such as Central Asia. An Xiao Mina’s (2013b) TED talk globalizes and refines Zuckerman’s theory by showing that the desire to share a particular animal is culturally situated. For example, she explains that Ugandans share photos of chickens, not cats.
that argues that as society becomes more complex, so do people’s networks. Simmel claims that emotional involvement undergirds all personal affiliations. For Simmel, emotion was not just a psychological process, but also a sociological process: the level of emotional investment in an interaction reflects the strength of the bond. Simmel’s theory is compatible with an Elastic Self framework: as youth move up through the phases of the Elastic Self, their social ties expand to include new contacts, generating new weak ties. With each phase, Chinese youth become more emotionally invested in relationships with unknown people. This entire process is catalyzed through emotional expression.

Simmel also links the evolution of secrecy with increasingly complex social orders. In The Sociology of Secrecy and Secret Societies, (1906, 441–98) Simmel viewed secrets as a unique form of information control in contemporary society (Marx and Muschert 2009). Marx and Muschert (2009) make a strong argument for research on secrecy as a way “to understand new forms of sociation emerging in a rapidly developing information society.” The form of association that I address is identity making in a context of extreme emotional repression and information paternalism in contemporary China.

My theoretical scaffold of the Elastic Self, modes of interaction framework, and three phases of an Elastic Self seek to explain not only why people have secrets, but under what conditions they feel comfortable sharing them. Taking a cultural approach, I focus on how norms create constraints but can also generate new forms of
sociality and practices when new spatial forms emerge. Whereas Georg Simmel paid attention to the city as a new social space, I am looking at the internet. While the site of our inquiry differs, both Simmel and I are asking the same question: do new social spaces give rise to new forms of sociality?

My theoretical scaffold of an Elastic Self fulfills several points in Marx’s and Muschert’s conceptualization of the elements of a sociology of information (2007, 382), which appear in Table 2.3. For example, the modes of interaction framework identifies the particular digital platforms where formal and informal modes of interaction unfold (element 5). As an inductive ethnographic project, my frameworks are not hypothesis driven; instead, I generated theoretical frameworks by my observations of what information my participants managed, how they managed it (element 6 and 7), and how they made meaning from it (element 8). The three phases of the Elastic Self define “a family of concepts encompassing personal, group and organizational information” such as anonymity, pseudonymity, secrets, trust, confidentiality, and sharing (element 1). My analysis identifies user-driven and institutional methods to manage data (element 2).
Table 2.3. Marx’s and Muschert’s Elements of a Sociology of Information (2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.8 Conclusion

Post-80s and post-90s youth are coming of age in time where the options for informal modes of interaction have increased online in Chinese society. Despite censorship, the internet is a space where youth can carve out informal modes of interactions. Chinese youth are able to develop a personal identity because they know
how to find spaces that are socially distant from people they know. In doing so, their interactions make the Chinese internet a lively space for socializing.

Post-80s and post-90s youth are also the first two generations who are coming of age with the internet. They do not make a meaningful distinction between the online or the offline. This is not to say that Chinese youth are fulfilling Sherry Turkle’s fears of the internet destroying their capacity to distinguish between being offline and online, but moving from one realm to the other does not feel like a hard switch for those who are engaged in the Elastic Self. To them, they are just being.

Where older generations perceive separate online and offline spaces, youth see a fluid continuum of existence. This reflects the elastic “structure of feeling” that commonly appears for youth who grew up with the internet. Raymond Williams describes the “structure of feeling” as:

... a particular sense of life, a particular community of experience hardly needing expression, through which the characteristics of our way of life ... are in some way passed, giving them a particular and characteristic colour ... a particular and native style ... it is as firm as “structure” suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. In one sense this structure of feeling is the culture of a period ... and it is in this respect that the arts of a period ... are of major importance. (1961)

In Marxism and Literature, Williams refines the concept by explaining its relationship with institutions as "the distilled residue of the organization of the lived experience of a community over and above the institutional and ideological organization of the society" (1977, 130). This structure of feeling in regards to the role the internet plays in youths everyday lives is difficult for them to articulate, as it is something they just
do. A literal interpretation of the language they use to describe their interactions, such as offline xianxia (线下) or online xianshang (线上) can mislead scholars to interpret their interactions as existing within a dualistic offline/online boundary. However, during my immersive fieldwork, I noticed that the way youth move fluidly between different online platforms reflects a “structure of feeling” that they are experiencing but do not have the words to articulate. This is partly because so much of what they do online is not openly discussed. In my data chapters, I give this “structure of feeling” shape by articulating the specifics of the three phases of the Elastic Self. In the following chapter, I describe my methods for observing the Elastic Self.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

3.1 Introduction

The recent rise of social media as a communication platform means that as practices among users are evolving, so are the practices of understanding users. As such, researchers have to draw on an innovative set of methodologies and a deep technical and cultural understanding of the platforms and the users. In the Digital Age, traditional ethnographic methods that have primarily relied on face-to-face interactions have to be reconsidered, not abandoned. This chapter outlines my fieldwork process and my approach to fieldwork.

3.2 Where I Went

Technology’s capacity to mediate information often intersects with youths’ identity making practices. The question of how those practices change when technology changes is globally relevant when studying any group of youth who are coming of age with a variety of social media platforms. China in particular is an ideal country in which to ask this question. Not only does China present an opportunity to understand a non-Western context, but it also presents a unique set of conditions: a history of a repressed self, an authoritarian government that encourages a quasi-free market, and a sudden influx of information permeating a censored environment. These create a situation where both information and emotional expression of the self are constrained and unrestricted in contradictory ways.
Chinese youth are an ideal group in which to examine the results of these conditions. They are the largest category of internet users in China. 30.4% of China’s 591 millions users are between 20 and 29 years old (CNNIC 2013, 24) with students making up the largest occupational group of users at 25% (CNNIC 2013, 22).

I’ve been interacting with Chinese youth closely for eight years, starting with the first time I worked with Chinese high school students in a classroom setting (as referenced in section 1.1.1) and ending with my latest period of fieldwork in 2011-2012. Most of the stories in this project draw upon the data I collected over fifteen months (from March 2011 and July 2012) along with shorter trips in Beijing and Shanghai during the winter of 2006, as well as the summers of 2008 and 2009. Much of my understanding has also been informed by the considerable amounts of time I have spent in China since 1996.

On my last field visit in 2011, I logged over 80,000 miles on planes, scooters, donkeys, trains, taxis, bicycles, subways, and buses through Northern, Middle, and Southern China. With the exception of the Western regions, I spent time in Northern, Middle, and Southern China. I stayed in 11 out of 23 provinces, and in 30 cities. Though I traveled extensively, I still anchored myself to a home base as a primary fieldsite, where I spent four months of time overall. I chose Wuhan, Hubei as this anchor for several reasons.

Most research on Chinese youth and technology use unfolds in coastal cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong; these tend to be more cosmopolitan and
affluent. Even my own understanding prior to 2011 was from fieldwork done in Beijing. I wanted to get the perspective of people living in one of China’s much more common second-tier cities, which is much more representative of urban China than the rich, coastal, first-tier cities. Wuhan is an economically stable second-tier city undergoing an intensive phase of urbanization. Most of the major railway lines cross through Wuhan, making it easy for me to come and go to almost any major city on an overnight train. The city attracts many migrants and students as it has over 30 universities and ongoing urbanization projects.

Even though I was based in Wuhan, I allowed my field location to be fluid and based on the networks in which I embedded myself. To do this, I did not anchor my research in any region or city; rather, I anchored it in my participants’ connections. By doing this, I was able to see that their connections and movements span cities and regions. Similarly, they do not fall along dominant conceptual boundaries’ of online/offline or real life/online life.

Understanding the mechanisms of complex mediated networks requires a level of stealthy embeddedness; I felt like I had to be everywhere because my participants moved quickly in-between multiple online platforms and offline locations. A traditionally bounded fieldsite would not work for my research questions, so I embraced the methods of multi-sited ethnography (Burrell 2008, Marcus 2009). The everyday is not fixed in practices or spatial scale, and neither should ethnography be (Smith 2002).  

60. Ethnographers’ interests in communities that span beyond a single field site have been
I spent a good majority of my time on the road with participants traveling throughout China. Once I established a connection with a participant, they referred me to their friends, who were often based in other cities. I traveled with my participants to see their friends or to go with them back home to their hometown. I went to first-tier cities and a variety of rural areas, spanning impoverished regions of the countryside to more prosperous villages. My decisions to not limit my field sites to anyone locale (physical or virtual) was common sense: I could not imagine any other way to understand the cultural logics of my participants lives other than to experience the lives they lived.

3.3 Who I Spent Time With

3.3.1 Migrant Lives

When I started the last phase of fieldwork in March of 2011, my plan was to continue with my formal research on migrants, the topic I have been investigating since 2006. I was familiar with migrants’ lives. I knew how to find them, connect with them, and establish trust with them. However, upon settling into everyday life calling for ethnography to grapple with the reality of the transregional flows of people, goods, communication, and more. Ethnographers in migration studies (Fitzgerald 2006; Gallo 2009), geographic information systems (Schienke 2003), environmental studies (Krauss 1009), science and technology studies (Hine 2007), and transnational studies (Hovland 2009; Mazzucato 2009; Weissköppel 2009) have begun documenting the processes required for a multi-sited ethnography. Recent ethnographies of global poker (Farnsworth & Astring 2010) and sushi consumption (Bestor 2001) speak to a world where practices span beyond traditional borders. Cook et al (2009) call for an “un-sited field” (Cook, et al. 2009). Anthropologists and sociologists have begun asking this question for an offline world where everyday lives are spread beyond one place (Falzon 2009; Fortun 2009; Hannerz 2009; Horst 2009; Ito et al. 2009; Leonard 2009; Marcus 1998, 2009).

61 As an ethnographer, I follow many lines of research. I refer to migrants as my formal research. In addition to researching migrants, I have been following youth from a all economic classes since 2006.
back at my fieldsite, I realized that the Chinese internet that I had been most familiar with in 2006 was very different from the Chinese internet of 2011. Based on these changes— in particular on youths’ reactions to a train crash in June 2011 in Western China—I expanded my analysis beyond migrant networks.

Two years had passed since my last field visit in 2009 and a lot had changed in China— in particular, the internet. Social media applications (“apps”) had become a central aspect of the Chinese web. While some of the apps I saw in use were direct copies of services from the West (e.g. Renren is very similar to Facebook), other apps had creatively iterated off of US services to build in its own unique features. Sina Weibo, often referred to as the ‘Chinese Twitter,’ falls into the latter category. Similar to Twitter, it is one of many Weibo microblogging platforms that allow for people to post and share text in 140 characters. However, it also contains so many unique capabilities that it is inaccurate to classify it as a Twitter copycat. A turning point for weibo services unfolded during the first few months of my fieldwork that would radically alter the direction of my research.

3.3.2 Talking to Students after the Wenzhou Train Accident

In June 2011, the second deadliest high-speed rail accident in the world happened in Wenzhou, China. The crash ignited the entire country into an intense debate about the Party’s responsibility to report information to citizens. The government initially claimed that lightning caused the crash, but the media and the

---

62. Look to Brown (2013) for further commentary on how the government’s response to accidents reflects patterns from the Maoist era.
nation started to become suspicious of the explanation when pictures surfaced online just hours after the crash of officials burying the wreckage before a full investigation could be conducted. Soon after, the government issued a media blackout to censor discussions about the crash.

Netizens relentlessly posted images and videos on social media, demanding answers from the government. Almost every conversation that I had during that summer would eventually lead back to the crash. People of all walks of life, from street vendors to factory workers and professors, were outraged at how the government was handling the investigation. In person, I listened to conversations that revealed their anger at the government for not being honest with them. Online, I witnessed the multiple ways netizens creatively skirted censorship, including the emergence of a meme that captured citizens’ frustrations with the government’s handling of the crash.

During a press conference with the Ministry Railway, a spokesperson justified the Ministry’s actions to bury the train wreckage because it expedited the rescue work. Journalists responded to his explanations with heckles to which the spokesperson replied, “Whether or not you believe it, either way, I believe it.” His response became an instant meme: netizens would make broad, often absurd claims, ending with the phrase “whether or not you believe it, either way, I believe it.” For instance,

63. Even state-owned and controlled media defied the media blackout, some issued a blank pages for the stories that censors did not approve.

64. 至于你信不信，我反正信了
one netizen wrote: “There is no traffic in Beijing today. This is a miracle, but that is how it happened. Whether or not you believe it; either way, I believe it.”

While young migrants knew about the crash and were just as articulate in person about their anger as everyone else, I did not see them on any social media platforms. Instead, I only saw young white-collar workers and college students talking about the crash on Sina Weibo, Douban, and Renren. I witnessed outcomes similar to boyd’s observations that social media use in America is structured along economic classes (2007a). The more time I spent with students and on Chinese social media platforms, I realized that the practices I was seeing were so new, so different, and on a totally different scale than anything I had ever witnessed before in China. I made the decision in the summer of 2011 to expand my sample from migrant youth to include university-educated youth, allowing my research agenda to be “set by the setting” (Hine 2000, 48). Even though altering my field research after years of building up networks with migrants felt daunting, it also felt exciting.

When I decided to expand my research to students, I originally conceived of my study to understand how inequality was embedded in internet practices across class. I feel that this is still a critical direction to explore, and the data I gathered can still be analyzed through a class framework. However, the stories that emerged from my fieldwork were consistently pointing to a pattern among migrants and students: they were developing deep relationships with strangers. I was fascinated by this

65 I even started seeing it on advertisements for cars. Ding (2011) provides more details about this meme.
commonality, and increasingly saw how it was connected to the overall reports of loneliness and emotional practices of this generation. This is the direction and analysis that this dissertation pursues.

3.4 Nuts and Bolts

3.4.1 Youth

Between 2008 and 2012, I conducted participant observation with 214 Chinese migrant youth and students across 11 provinces, and conducted informal interviews with 110 of them. As I iterated in section 1.6, all participants are all in the Exploratory Phase and are representative of other youth in the same phase. Roughly half of my participants came from rural areas while the other half came from urban regions. They are divided into two groups:

- 90 students or recently graduated students between the ages of 15 and 28 years old
- 124 migrants between the ages of 18 and 37. I have longitudinal data that spans eight years with 15 migrants and 10 students. All of the fieldwork with students took place between March 2011 and June 2012.

My youth participants ranged between the ages of 15 and 37 with the median age of 24 years old with a mean of 23 years old. I included both males (118) and females (106). I am aware of the differences that may emerge due to the structural

---

66. In Chapter Six, I tell a story that compares two youth and one of them is not in the Exploratory Phase.

67. I had already started speaking to students before the crash.
factors of gender, class, and hometown in the participants’ identity work; however, an in-depth analysis of these is beyond the scope of this project. That said, it is fair to say that my informants spanned different social groups in China.

I would like to make a note about ages and my definition of “youth.” The concept of youth is not universal, it is socially constructed (Buckingham 1993; Hine 1999; Jones and Wallace 1992; Seiter 1995). The definition of youth *qingnian* (青年) in China is different than the West. Liu provides an overview of two primary points of differentiation from common Western understandings of youth (2010a, 50). First, in China, the term *qingnian* refers to wider age range that can be as high as age 38, whereas in the West it refers to a more narrow range from teens to early twenties. Second, *qingnian* has a positive connotation that is associated with a young generation that has the courage to carry on Chinese society. This view is in contrast with the West where youth is a temporary and precarious stage for rebellious and dangerous activity between childhood and adulthood. Liu also notes that the positive notion of *qingnian* is connected to the “ideological aims” of the Communist Party (ibid). Mao viewed youth as the central source of the revolutionary movements that created the Party and the Cultural Revolution. As my research strives to understand Chinese youth from a Chinese perspective, I default to the Chinese definition.

I specifically sought out participants who are representative of the ways in which Chinese youth use the internet in their everyday life to navigate through—and out—of restrictive social circles and institutions. Public spheres are made up of a
horizontal community of disparate members (Habermas 1991 [1965]). As such, I looked for people with different backgrounds and interests. The purpose was not to control for any variables, nor was the purpose was look for outliers. Rather I looked for people who seemed to be disparate based on their interests, sexuality, education, career goals, family background, class, and age in order to gain a representative sample of youth in Chinese society.

To meet students, I worked through my social networks and those of my research assistants. I met migrant youth throughout my everyday life in places such as the supermarket, outdoor vegetable market, shopping malls, black taxi gathering spots, and on the street. The participants in all of the stories that I present in chapters four, five, and six, (with the exception of Hooligan Sparrow) I met through my research assistants.

3.4.2 Other Groups of People

My focus on youth does not mean my ethnographic work is limited to youth. I pursued two different avenues of research to give me a stronger understanding of the social forces that shape youths’ mediated experiences. First, I spent time with individuals, groups, and organizations that could help me understand the complexities of the social components of Chinese society. I conducted participant observation and informal interviews with the following groups:

- 18 people who work in the internet industry, from entrepreneurs to *shanzai*\(^68\) cellphone makers and programmers

---

\(^68\). Shanzai mobiles are affordably hacked together outside of the dominant” group of state
- 12 cellphone vendors at formal and informal markets
- 8 researchers at CNNIC and Internet Society of China
- 25 adult schoolteachers, administrators, and parents.

In addition I also spent time with the following groups of people: sex workers; masseuse girls in massage parlors; taxi cab drivers; journalists; café owners; nonprofit organizers; lawyers; and citizen reporters. While the data that I present does not focus on any of my fieldwork with these groups of people, my analysis is informed by what I learned from them.

I also conducted ethnographic research at China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) 中国互联网络信息中心, a government agency that manages all of China’s internet affairs from administering technology policies that facilitate the expansion of digital technology to creating statistical reports about internet usage patterns. Spending time at CNNIC gave me an opportunity to speak directly to internet policy makers and to researchers. This fieldwork of CNNIC gave me an insider’s point of view on the moral logic of the censorship regime. Their moral vision corroborates Liu’s finding that the government promotes a “proper” wired self that uses the internet in a “harmonious way” (2010b).

---
69. In the summer of 2008, I was a National Science Foundation Fellow at CNNIC. I was the first and to date still the only Western scholar to have conducted fieldwork at CNNIC. I was in the research department where official statistics about the Chinese internet are released bi-annually. I investigated how China’s digital network architectures and internet policies shape ICT practices among two of the fastest growing groups of users in China, youth and migrants.
I took a very nontraditional approach to my research. This was absolutely critical because I did not want to generate research on youths’ use of technology without taking into consideration all the other forms of interactions they engage in and how the social structures of contemporary Chinese society influence meaning making. I wanted to find out how technology can be both controlling and empowering, depending on the social context (Agre 2002; Chomsky 1998; Grosswiler 1998; Harwit and Clark 2001; Koopama 2000; Wellman 2001; Yang 2003b; Yu 2004). My approach is in line with a strong urge from Pink and Leder (2013), Couldry (2012) and Moore (2012a, 2012b) for social scientists to use nonmedia centric and nonrepresentational approaches to research on media. In agreement with their calls, I deployed several strategies that enabled me to create a holistic account, instead of a media-centric account of Chinese youths’ everyday lives.

3.5 How I Conducted the Fieldwork

To explore this new social space of the Chinese internet, I immersed myself into the lives of youth. I not only observed the outcome of their actions, I also tried to understand their motivations for their actions. Why were they too scared to share their emotions? How did they create a sense of coherence and belonging in their lives? What were they not getting from their existing friendships that would make them turn to the internet for deep relationships? After 10 years of working and researching China, I had solid hunches of what the answers could be, but to really understand their motivations, I had needed to be in their world.
In doing a study of complex networks with a set of trust issues that are particular to China’s history (as explained in section 1.3), I needed both a wide overview as well as the ability to go deep into specific cases. I followed the tradition set by previous ethnographers and brought together different streams of research methods to properly answer my research question (boyd 2008a; Burrell 2012; Brown & Laurier 2002; Coleman 2012; Ford 2012; Geiger and Ribes 2011; Hsu 2012; Phillips 2012a, 2012b; Postill and Pink 2012). Given all of my concerns about youths’ capacity to share their emotions, I designed my project to address these concerns by being attentive to how I established trust with them.

I drew on ethnographic methods to produce “thick descriptions” (Geertz 1977) in order to research a unique swath of participants from a variety of socioeconomic, demographic, and technical positions. According to John van Maanen, ethnography is the “practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one’s own experience in the world of these others” (1988, ix). Essentially, ethnography is the art of repeatedly stepping in and out of someone else’s shoes. While researchers and different disciplines use ethnography in widely divergent ways (Horst et al. 2012), I used participant observation and informal interviews, which are generally agreed upon as the central methods for understanding meaning making.

Before entering into the field, I adopted a set of values to guide me in how I would draw on ethnography as both a set of empirical methods and a conceptual discipline of ethnography (Willis 2000:iii). I turned to Paul Willis, who speaks of
ethnography as an art form: “What happens if we understand the raw materials of everyday lived cultures as if they were living art forms?” (ix). He proposes that meaning making, like art making, is a form of cultural production: “At least for those who have moved out of economic subsistence, perhaps the balance has tipped from instrumental to expressive struggle, is that humans now are concerned more with the making of their cultural world than with their material world” (xiv).

To get good quality data when studying field sites where participants are on multiple sites and presenting different facets of themselves, I needed to be broad and fast. I drew on the previous experience of researchers who have also had to cover a geographically and socially wide range of participants (boyd 2008a; Coleman 2012; Phillips 2012a, 2012b). I immersed myself in the lives of students and migrants in a range of class positions. I lived in cities as well as in impoverished and affluent villages. I spent time in a variety of settings including city slums, university dormitories, internet cafes, trains, and shopping malls. I also conducted formal interviews with internet entrepreneurs, teachers, and parents and then went out and sang karaoke with them and drank hard liquor baijiu (白酒) with them in order to bond with them and create a set of shared memories.

I have also been conducting digital ethnography on the Chinese Internet since 2005. I did not treat the internet as a separate space from youths’ life, rather I treated it as another additional space where they hung out. This approach is in line with what Hine calls the “internet as a cultural artifact” where the internet is situated in
participants’ everyday lives (Hine 2000:27-38). My online experience with the Chinese web began in 2005 when I created my first QQ account and added over 100 high school students to my account. I continue to sign up for new services on the Chinese internet on my mobile phone and online.

I aimed to become as embedded in Chinese society as possible through deep immersion. I aimed to understand the practices and the context of Chinese youths’ lives. Following other ethnographers, I viewed social media interactions as a set of practices that are culturally embedded in Chinese society (Bräuchler and Postill 2010; Couldry 2012). Understanding the affordances of a platform requires a deep understanding of the social, cultural, and political context in which practices unfold (Coleman 2010; Horst and Miller 2012; Tacchi 2012).

At each site, I followed most of the normative practices for interaction and self-presentation. I only broke the practices when I felt that my interactions could border on being deceptive. For example, I always used a picture of my face because I did not want to mask my identity and assume full anonymity.

In dominantly formal modes of interaction I used my name (Renren) and in dominantly informal platforms I used a pseudonym (QQ, Douban). For sites like Weibo that are used in both the formal and informal modes, I treated it as a default dominantly formal mode so I used my real name. On platforms that are dominant in the formal mode, I only followed youth who I have met face to face.
On platforms that are dominant in the informal mode, I followed profiles that I found to be interesting. I was only active on the sites that my participants used as their primary social space: QQ, Twitter, Douban, Weibo, and Renren. These sites are also central to my research (although I did not limit myself to these sites).

My window into youths’ lives was very restricted through these mediated environments. I relied on the online interaction as a way to stay in touch with youth, but not as a way to get to know them in-depth. I was able to learn specific details about their online interactions, but the crux of my understanding and interaction evolved in face-to-face fieldwork.

3.6 How I Spent Time with Participants

My finding that youth spend a lot of time online with strangers is a departure from existing research on Chinese youths’ online interactions to date (referenced in 2.3.2). Given that youth hide this part of their lives from people they know, it is not a surprise that youth do not openly talk about it to most ethnographers. For the most part, it is difficult to observe this new sociality that I discovered because youth actively hide this part of their lives. This kind of fieldwork—observing behavior that participants do not even divulge to people they know—is very difficult for even the most skilled of ethnographers and writers.

I did not, however, encounter barriers to connecting with youth about their private and hidden side of their lives. Overall, migrant youth and students opened up to me with ease. Once they started sharing their stories, they didn’t (at times it seemed as if they couldn’t) stop talking. Some of our hangouts lasted for a whole day through
three meals while others unfolded over several meetings over a few weeks or months. I understood that the information a participant shared with me depended on his/her trust in me—not as me an ethnographer, or a sociologist, or an academic—but me, Tricia Wang. So I did everything possible to be relatable to them. Here, I reflect on several ways that I think helped youth open up to me.

I believe that much of Chinese youths’ openness with me can be attributed to my personality; specifically, the fact that I do not deem any topics to be shameful (or not shameful). This helped many youth to talk about topics that are socially transgressive, such as sexuality, pornography, depression, and politics. I have also spent many years in China, developing a sensitivity to know when and where I can prod for more answers. Additionally, being able to speak Chinese fluently prevented any language barriers. I could easily pick up on and respond to subtle cues and double meaning in their stories. I could easily empathize and relate to their Chinese upbringing as I was raised in a traditional Chinese household.

I also adjusted my fashion choices to make myself more relatable. I wanted to blend in with the population I was studying so that my appearance would not remind them that I am from the West, or an academic. Sometimes I wore knock-off Coco Chanel tops to blend in with migrant girls; other times, I wore dresses with bunnies on them to shop with college students. In the cases where I lived with migrants, I explicitly dressed like a migrant worker because I did not want to stand out or bring
any unnecessary attention to them; this was often because they were doing precarious work such as selling food or objects on the street.

All of these reasons—my personality, familiarity with Chinese culture, ability to speak Mandarin, and blending in through my clothing—do not trump what I deem to be the most important factor that helped youth open up their hidden lives to me: being present. I believe that the most important reason why youth could talk to me is because I listened. I listened so intently and so presently that they genuinely felt like they were being heard. Many youth told me that they had never had an opportunity to share their lives with someone before. They often told me that they felt better after chatting with me. In a way, sometimes our time together looked a lot like Western therapy sessions, where they talked and I asked questions. In a way, I played the role of Simmel’s Stranger (1971 [1903]). I was not in these students’ social circles and I did not have any connection to authority figures in their life. Consequently, I was someone they could openly share with.

In other instances, our time together often looked like two good friends hanging out. I shared just as much about myself as they shared about themselves. I think it was clear to them that I felt that they were good company. I rarely felt like I was doing “research” because fieldwork is something I enjoy doing, and I believe that my participants could sense this. Conversations with migrants and students were always deeply personal for me. I was never the distanced observer a la Malinowski, but the “vulnerable observer” that Ruth Behar speaks of: an ethnographer willing to be
vulnerable to the personal transformations that happen in the field (1998). After each hang out session, I felt much more deeply connected to my participants on an emotional level, not just on an intellectual or research level.

I believe that, over time, I was able to make my participants feel like they were just hanging out as opposed to being researched—that I was just chatting with them instead of looking for specific pieces of information from them. The reality is that while I was looking for particular indicators of an Elastic Self, I never limited myself to the indicators I was looking for; had I done that, I would’ve limited the knowledge I was able to acquire and closed myself off to their experiences.

Our conversations usually unfolded in noisy, crowded publics spaces such as fast-food restaurants, coffee shops, and malls. My participants and I created our own bubble as they told me their stories. We usually started out talking about their jobs or school, their favorite entertainers, and hobbies. When we started talking about their online interactions, they showed me the social media platforms where they spent time, who they were connected to, and the history of their relationships to each contact. They told me who they talked with online and why they talked to a particular person. Conversations also spilled into their thoughts on the government. Through these intensely deep hangouts, I learned about all the things they did online with strangers under anonymous accounts. Our conversations always meandered into the emotional realm where they talked about sexuality, their fears and hopes, pressures from their family, and anxieties.
I spent a lot of time with my participants. I went with them to look for jobs. If they played games, I would join in or watch. If they went shopping, I would shop with them. I often slept overnight with my participants at internet cafés, not showering for days. I spent a lot of time on the road with my participants, as I found these trips to be great bonding experiences and opportunities to talk at length about their emotions. Sometimes I lived with them in their homes with their parents, and other times I worked alongside them.

A typical day would include me managing multiple conversations with participants on text messaging, voice calls, and online services including QQ, Weibo, QQ Wechat, Twitter, Renren, and Douban. These conversations flowed in between my mobile phone, my laptop, and in person. Jokes that started on Weibo would finish in person over a drink at a bar. An informal interview with a group of students at a nearby restaurant spilled into participant observation at an all night karaoke bar that ended with us sleeping over at an internet cafe. A shopping trip with a migrant to buy a cellphone at an electronics mall led us to an informal interview with a cellphone vendor to an afternoon at an air conditioned KFC. During all of these moments, I, like my participants, used QQ, Weibo, QQ Wechat, Twitter, Renren, and Douban on our mobiles as part of our interaction. I integrated them into our hangouts the same way that my participants did.

I rarely conducted any fieldwork with more than one youth at a time. Given that that I wanted to learn what Chinese youth do not share with their friends or
family, the only way they could discuss their anonymous interactions online was if no
one else they knew was present at the interview. The only interviews that I did with
pairs were two interviews with two pairs of students who had met on Douban and then
became friends. Interviewing them together made sense because they met as strangers.

While my project is not about Chinese politics, the unpredictability of
fieldwork put me in precarious situations with participants whom the government
considered to be sensitive. I never sought out sensitive participants, but it turned out
that many of them were—or had become—engaged in political activities and
associated with groups that the authorities were watching. I had to be protective of my
participants at the same time. I did not want any of them to be accused of interacting
with a foreigner, especially an American, which could have put them at greater risk for
authorities questioning them about their relationship with me.

To address this, I came up with several strategies to minimize digital traces of
our interaction while I was in the field. My research assistants arranged the meetings
from their cellphones. If I had to contact my participants from my cellphone, I used an
unregistered SIM card, and I called instead of texting. I always asked them if meeting
me would put them at greater risk for trouble. I wanted to ensure that they had fully
considered the potential consequences. I transferred all recordings and pictures
immediately to a hard drive and deleted them from my mobile devices (audio recorder,
camera, iPhone). If I traveled to meet them, I would find ways to stay at friends’
apartments in order to avoid staying at hotels, which would have required me to use
my passport to get a room.

3.7 How I Documented My Fieldwork

During my fieldwork, I used a variety of recording methods depending on the
context of the interview. I switched between the voice recorder app on the iPhone, a
digital audio recorder, and handwritten notes in a notebook. Sometimes I just
listened if I felt that the content being shared was particularly emotional and attempts
to record would prevent the participant from sharing too much. In these cases, I sat
down to write out the content of the conversation as soon afterward as I could.

I followed examples set by previous ethnographers who came up with new
methods while on the ground. I created an ad-hoc methodological innovation, which
I call live fieldnoting: the incorporation of social media tools to openly and publicly
share a portion of my fieldnotes online (Wang 2012). Live fieldnotes are real-time
observations that an ethnographer shares from a fieldsite through a mobile photo
social networking app, to tactically establish and maintain the ethnographer’s

70. When I initially moved to China in 2011, I followed my typical fieldwork protocol by
using a cheap Nokia feature phone as my primary mobile device. Most of my fieldwork has always
been in immigrant and lower-income communities so I was always careful to use the technology that
my participants used and to avoid using technology that was associated with being an elite and
unaffordable device. However, not using an iphone became an impediment to fieldwork because by
2011, the iphone was a device that even lower-income migrants and urban residents could afford or at
least were saving up for China. After I started using my iphone, I could more easily initiate
conversations with Chinese youth because the smartphone became a common topic of interest.

71. I looked to Geiger’s and Ribes’s (2011) trace ethnography, Burrell’s (2012) “field site as a
network,” and Ford’s (2012) three principles of building trust with participants in digital contexts. boyd
(2013), and Phillips (2012a) also offer excellent reportings on their non-traditional field methods. For
more on multi-sited ethnography: Faubion et al. (2009) and Marcus (1995).
relationship with her/his participants and audience. This method allows social media ethnographers to both study the users of social media and the affordances of social media to connect with users in ways that follow the normative behaviors of the specific social media site. Since the fieldnotes are posted on social media platforms that participants may also use, this means that participants can see and comment on the notes.

Fieldnotes have traditionally been shrouded in mystery amongst academic and industry ethnographers. Inside academia, they are produced for “an audience of one” and are treated as “sacred text” (Sanjek 1990, 92; Wolf 1992, 86). Their sacred status renders them untouchable by anyone else but the ethnographer. Live fieldnoting is the practice of sharing a select portion of the ethnographer’s fieldnotes. This breaks down the traditional view that holds all fieldnotes as private. It also opens up the idea that the public can watch the fieldwork unfold from afar without having to be in the fieldsite with the ethnographer.

Live fieldnoting demonstrates two central ethnographic research activities: 1) the ethnographer’s participation in a social world, and 2) the ethnographer’s written account of the world through her/his participation. Live fieldnoting takes after the

---

72. The term “sharing” also encompasses a broad set of social media practices, such as liking, posting, broadcasting, pushing, tagging, favoriting, indexing, and forwarding.

73. The live fieldnote is created with an image-sharing app on a mobile phone. The app can push the post to other social networking services. Images are accompanied by a description of the image with relevant meta-data (tags and location). The description includes context: the nature of the interaction itself, the objects in the picture, an explanation of the meaning of the interaction to participants, the ethnographer’s interpretation of the interaction, and an analysis of the interaction. All live fieldnotes are time stamped with a unique url, and contain meta-data (hashtags and location geo-data making them searchable, archivable, and filterable).
practice of liveblogging, a continuous text-based coverage of an event, like a televised live awards ceremony or a sports game. As such, live fieldnotes are more descriptive than a “scratch note” but not as thorough as “fieldnotes proper” (Sanjek 1990b). Individual live fieldnotes are brief, but the accumulation of many live fieldnotes creates a “thick description” (Geertz 1993:16).

The researcher documents both the participation and observation visually and via text. Live fieldnoting is what Postill and Pink call “internet (related) ethnography,” fieldwork that encompasses social media practices along with face-to-face interactions (2012). Live fieldnotes produce new forms of publicly available data. While Geertz

74. Various visual forms precede live fieldnotes. Jan Chipchase was one of the earlier ethnographers to post pictures of his fieldwork to his blog with text (his website: http://janchipchase.com). He provided design observations while on the move. His posts tended to be a mix of raw observations, compelling questions, and high-quality pictures. You see early examples of this work on his blog in 2002, but it wasn’t until 2005 that he really started getting into it. In 2007, danah boyd shared results from her fieldsite on her blog while her fieldwork was still in progress. She was one of the first formally trained ethnographers in academia to use the internet to engage the public at large with anthropological/sociological fieldwork (2007a).

75. I used Instagram, a photo-sharing app for Androids and iPhones, as my primary live fieldnoting app. Instagram made photo sharing effortless: the app was free; it was easy to use; it connected to other social media services; and a lot of other people were already using it. Instagram’s ease of use, wide adoption, and social features made it an ideal research app to quickly share real-time fieldwork updates. Instagram, users create public or private accounts and can upload photos in square format with the choice of applying filters that change the colors and qualities of the photos. Users can follow other accounts and view, comment, and like other photos. Using Instagram led to many discussions with colleagues about my fieldwork and my use of Instagram to document it. For one thing, I realized that my use of Instagram was similar to other well-established Web 2.0 practices, such as live blogging and live tweeting. When other ethnographers also started to use Instagram for live fieldnotes, I realized that we were creating a new form of ethnography. Look to An Xiao Mina @anxiaostudio and Zach Hyman @SqInchAnthro as ethnographers who are using Instagram to live fieldnote. In particular, the ability to share my photographs simultaneously across multiple social media platforms, such as twitter, foursquare, or tumblr (a principle known as COPE, “Create Once, Publish Everywhere”) made Instagram an ideal platform to experiment with sharing fieldnotes Karen McGrane talks about NPR’s COPE model on her website (2012). Her philosophy of COPE can be traced back to the early days of video blogging when early pioneers of the form worked on universal embeds that prioritized views on any platform over views on the creator’s site. More recently, scholars such as Pink (2011) are noting the role of photography in ethnographic representation.
and many other ethnographers textually established their presence and authority in their fieldsite, live fieldnoting emphasizes the ways ethnographers visually establish their presence and authority in the fieldsite.

I employed a set of guidelines for how I would interact with my participants in the live fieldnote. I never live fieldnoted private conversations. I did not live fieldnote my time with sensitive participants. If they did not post images or updates to their respective social media platforms, I did not live fieldnote. I did not take pictures of my participants. A lot of my live fieldnotes are pictures of objects and places with my observations.

From the day I landed in China to my last day of fieldwork, I posted at least one live fieldnote every day, totaling 500 photos by the end of my fieldwork. I estimate that I only shared 1% of my fieldnotes online. The overwhelming majority of my fieldnotes remained private. Even so, live fieldnoting helped me establish and maintain relationships with participants. In being able to access the fieldnotes, the transparent and open nature of live fieldnotes allowed my participants to feel as if they were participating in my research instead of being studied. It also decreased the psychosocial alienation I, like many ethnographers before me, experienced when in the field. At the same time, live fieldnoting brought a wide audience with me into the fieldsite in real time. Being public about a portion of my fieldwork created valuable

76. Instagram then pushed my photos to Twitter, Flickr, Facebook, and Tumblr. Each Instagram contained a picture and a text description. My first Instagram from China documented the reaction I had when I stepped into the arrival hall at Shanghai Pudong International Airport. http://blog.triciawang.com/post/4155329699/you-know-youve-landed-in-shanghai-when-you-see
opportunity for me to engage in dialogue with an audience of non-ethnographers and specialists.

### 3.8 Techniques I Used to Gather Data and How I Analyzed It

#### 3.8.1 Avoiding “High Theory”

The particular social context of China makes youths’ experience of the internet unique (as I have outlined in section 1). Accordingly, we should not analyze this generation’s internet practice and experiences solely through the lens of existing social science literature that has predominantly studied Western or Japanese internet use. In my analysis, I do not draw on one overarching theory or what Behar calls “high theory” that “produces accounts that are starkly unpeopled about concepts like neocolonialism, transnationalism, and postmodernism, among other ‘isms’” (Behar 1996, 25). Avoiding high theory prevented me from ethnocentrism, which is common in analyses of Chinese internet practices. For example, Herold describes the Chinese internet as a “wild place” (2011c:200). While an outsider, such as I, may perceive the Chinese internet to be “wild,” that is a wholly subjective assessment based on one’s unfamiliarity with the Chinese internet. To Chinese youth, the Chinese internet is just the internet.

#### 3.8.2 Avoiding Politics

In the same way that my research direction and field data emerged *in situ*, so do the theories that I draw on to analyze the Elastic Self. In line with Deborah S. Davis’s approach, I actively avoided looking for a political angle, much less any specific angle in my discussions (2000). Any mentions of politics emerged through
conversations with my participants. I never asked directly or pushed the conversation in a political direction. After years of doing fieldwork in China (and other parts of the world), I’ve come to learn that any long conversation with Chinese people inevitably crosses into the territory of politics. But they only feel comfortable sharing their genuine and unfiltered thoughts on politics when they bring up the topic. Davis’s insight guides much of my approach in following youths’ unofficial activities. In the process of doing so, I gained an even better understanding of their relationships to official institutions and themselves.

3.8.3 Avoiding Technology

I implemented the same approach with topics of technology. I did not force the conversation to address digital platforms but I did do my part to pick up on existing interactions that would allow me to guide the conversation. For example, I never asked, “what apps do you use on your phone?” without a particular context to frame the question. I would wait until my participant picked up her/his phone to send a text. Since they were already holding their phone, I then took advantage of the opportunity to initiate a conversation about the apps on their phone. Overall, most of my time and conversations with participants did not revolve around technology. I did not want to create a false social account or even a tech-centric account of their lives.

When topics of technology did come up with participants, I did not try to just find celebratory or positive uses of it. I employed Jeremy Ravetz’s (2004) analytical principle that says every device has an “intended use, creative new use, incompetent misuse, malevolent abuse” (2010). I strived to understand the range of implications of
a particular platform in participants’ lives. Following scholars who have also employed similar strategies in the field, I aimed to understand the full social context of digital platforms and related digital devices (Ames 2013; boyd 2008a; Burrell 2012; Coleman 2012; Horst 2006; Ito et al. 2009; Orgad 2006; Postill 2008; Schüll 2006; Taylor and Harper 2003; Wang and Brown 2009). I asked questions that would get them to reflect on how the meaning of a platform changed over time for them. And again, these conversations emerged organically.

3.8.4 Sensitivity to Word Choice

I also adopted a similar attitude in conversations around specific themes that I wanted to understand. Before spending time with a participant, I identified (on my own) several topics that I hoped my participants could speak to, but I never shared this information with them as I was very conscious of doing everything possible to allow all discussions to emerge organically.

In particular, I was very attentive to the vocabulary I used because I did not want to lead my participants into answers. I provide two examples of this below. To find out how youth conceptualized their relationship to information, I was careful in how I described information gathering. When I asked how they find information, I simply said, “how did you know about it” (你怎么知道) which is a typical and neutral question to ask. If I wanted to get more specific answers, I asked, “if you want to know more about that, what do you do?”

By asking these questions in a neutral way, I noticed a pattern in responses among my participants. Educated youth used active words to describe how they...
gathered information: search *sousuo* (搜索), acquire *huoqu* (获取), find *zhao* (找) and investigate *cha* (查). Migrant youth tended to say it jumped out *beng chulai* (蹦出来) or that they saw it (看到了) or discovered it *faxian* (发现了) but are unsure where they saw it. Clearly, both groups’ vocabulary to describe information online varied greatly, which reflected their ideas and practices around it.

Another example where I was sensitive to language was in discussions about strangers. I wanted to find out youths’ relationships to strangers. But I didn’t want to use the formal translation for strangers, *moshengren* (陌生人), because I wanted to understand how youth conceptualized and talked about strangers. By avoiding this term, I allowed my participants to use their own words to describe strangers. They used terms such as “internet friend” *wangyou* (网友) or a platform-specific friend such as “Douban friend” *douyou* (豆友). In some cases they said that the people they talked to online were “unknown people” *bu renshi de ren* (不认识的人). But youth never said that they talked to *moshengren*, which has a more negative connotation than “unknown people.” Upon further discussion, they told me that their “internet friends” were people that they had never met in person; they met through the internet, and they didn’t know their given names. This technically qualified their internet friends as *moshengren*—but to these youth, this was a person they had a deep relationship with and trusted. Being attentive to the contextual uses of the word “stranger” was critical for my fieldwork.
3.8.5 Critical Role of Research Assistants

Part of my sensitivity to vocabulary and context is due to Mandarin being my first language, as I grew up speaking it. But the Chinese language is full of double meanings, hidden references, and insider terms. As someone who has done research in China and lived there for a long periods of time, I still relied on locals to help me decode many terms. My research assistants provided a lot of help in this area and were invaluable to my field collection and data analysis process. Shayla Qiu 仇娟, Pheona Chen 陈苇如, Reginald Zhu 祝进文, Allemande Niu 牛兆弘, Chris Chang 张旭平, and Iris Ruan not only helped me find my first set of students to interview, they also became my cultural guide to the Chinese internet. Later on, they also became co-researchers in the analysis phase.

As my cultural guides, my research assistants helped me navigate the Chinese web. Their guidance was critical because they helped contextualize so many mediated cultural practices. They became a living, breathing social media dashboard. They pointed out important topics and helped me gain a more nuanced understanding of the

77. For an excellent and accessible description of the Chinese language, see Deborah Fallows (2011).

78. I created a research center, The Bytes of China Lab, to train several students in the methods and theories of ethnography. I only invited undergraduate students to apply because they are closer to the age of the students I wanted to speak to and they have more time than graduate students to work on projects like this. Over 200 students applied to join my research center. I chose 10 students from the social sciences who demonstrated potential as open-minded ethnographers. I created a training program that included in-field training, theoretical discussions, and self-directed research. I selected assistants who were already a part of many of the informal platforms I was studying and active in a range of student groups from the Communist Party to LGBT advocacy. Since they were going to introduce me to people in their networks, ensuring their student club affiliations were diverse was important because I did not want to create a non-representative sample of participants (such as extremely liberal or extremely conservative students).
Chinese web. There were many jokes and memes that I could not and would not have understood without their constant guidance. They directed me to specific platforms, showed me how to sign up, and explained the normative behaviors of a given platform. Their insights shaped the questions that I asked and the details to which I paid greater attention. I could not have immersed myself as deeply and quickly into youths’ lives without their help.

I started analyzing my data while I was in the field and I shared all of my hypotheses and major elements of my initial analysis with my research assistants. I did this for several reasons. First, I wanted to prevent any misinterpretations of the data. Second, my analysis became stronger with the input of members of the population being studied. Third, my research assistants were expert consultants in the areas I was studying because they also engaged in similar practices of the three phases of the Elastic Self. My findings are not based on my word as the final analysis, but based upon iterative feedback with members of the population being studied.

In particular, I initially felt terrified that my research findings had not yet been observed or reported by any other scholar. I reviewed my fieldnotes and recordings several times to confirm that I had indeed understood my participants correctly. I also reviewed and discussed the data with my research assistants. My research assistants grounded my observations and gave me confidence in my analysis of the data. Having well-trained research assistants was intellectually and psychologically rewarding: long stints of fieldwork can get lonely. Without any witnesses to the fieldwork, it is usually
the ethnographer’s word as the final analysis. In my case, I was never alone in my fieldwork. My research assistants were central to my fieldwork and analysis. Like other ethnographers, I see my analysis as a product of co-creation with my assistants as they confirmed, corrected, and refined my findings (boyd 2008a).

Roger Sanjek (1993) argues that a large yet unspoken problem among ethnographers are all their research assistants who are invisible because ethnographers do not credit them openly for their assistance or often downplay their role. I agree with his assessment and I find that the invisibly of research assistants in ethnographic text often contributes to the “cult of personality” problem in the social sciences: the audience perceives the ethnographer as a person who can seamlessly navigate and analysis their fieldwork without essential support from locals. In dedicating a section that explains how my research assistants were critical to not only my fieldwork but also my analysis, I address some of Sanjek’s concerns (1993).

3.8.6 Methodological Implications of a Modes of Interaction Framework

While my research is about digital platforms, I did not predetermine a particular set of platforms to inquire about. Instead, I strived to get participants to share with me every platform they used, what they used it for, and the meaning they ascribed to it. As a spoke to more participants, I generated a visual map of the most popular digital platforms among youth. Then I identified the platforms’ unique features, practices, and demographic of users, which can be found in Appendix A. By doing this, several patterns emerged. I noticed that youth felt more liberated to share their emotions on platforms (such as Douban) where they primarily interacted with
strangers. I also observed that youth felt most anxious about exploring their sexuality on platforms (such as Renren) where they primarily interacted with people they knew. I realized that youth created multiple accounts on some platforms (such as QQ), and then designated some accounts to connect with known people and other accounts to connect with unknown people.

The outcome of my holistic approach is the modes of interaction framework, which I explain in section 2.6 (formal modes are interactions with known people and informal modes are interactions with unknown people). I analyzed my data using this framework. It provided a macro scaffold in which I could understand the way my participants made meaning of a range of platforms, as opposed to a single platform.

This framework provides several analytical and methodological contributions. First, it reveals how digital platforms afford different types of interactions. While researchers and the media often lump social media platforms into one homogenous set of apps, it’s much more accurate to see platforms that fall in more formal or informal modes of interaction. But as I iterated in section 2.6.3, this division is not static or universal.

Second, it provides a methodological framework that prevents researchers who study digital platforms from creating a sampling bias. If I only looked at platforms in the formal mode of communication, such as Renren (the equivalent of Facebook in the West), then I would only been able to claim that youth are not doing anything

---

79 While I generated this framework to understand digital platforms in China, one can also generate a similar framework for digital platforms in other regions.
radically new on Renren and are only interacting with people they know well. This finding would not have been surprising given that that my framework tells us formal modes of interaction unfold on platforms dominant in the formal mode, which primarily involve relationships with people they know. To find new forms of sociality, we have to look at how users interact on platforms that are not dominant in the formal mode – and in fact, this is where interactions with strangers become prevalent.

My framework also bypasses the false dichotomy of “digital dualism” (Jurgenson 2011) or offline/online. Instead, it discerns interactions by the mode instead of the place. This framework does not seek to locate an interaction in offline or online space; rather it seeks to identify interactions based off of the mode of interaction. Focusing on the mode of interaction avoids technological determinism, a problem that frequently characterizes analyses of human and machine interaction. For example, I characterize my participants’ interactions as either unfolding in the formal or the informal mode, not in the offline or the online space. When salient, I still identify when actions happen online or offline, but I do not frame this as a meaningful division for my participants. Lastly, as explained in section 2.7.1, a multi-phase approach is a corrective to a common sampling bias in studies on the Chinese internet where researchers primarily speak to people in the Participatory Phase.

---

80 Over-attributing meaning to the offline/online divide is based off of a digital iteration of Cartesian Dualism, a problem that is common in internet and new media studies. I am not saying that the offline and online division is not valid, but for younger internet users, it is not as meaningful of a marker. As such, researchers need to consider the boundaries that users deem salient.
3.9 Conclusion

The main purpose of this research is to deepen our understanding of how Chinese youth make use of the cultural and technical resources available to them as they make sense of themselves and their world. While I have tried to understand how the major components of Chinese society fit together to create the reality in which Chinese youth grow up, my research design comes with its own set of challenges. In attempting to understand the broad phenomena I was witnessing, I could not go deep into any one community. Unlike scholars who have generated rich ethnographic work on specific groups of people or communities in China, I focused on a wide range of youth.

But even with the weaknesses of my method, I aimed to surface the difficulties that Chinese youth have in expressing parts of themselves that they do not dare even tell someone they know. Ethnography produces contestable knowledge (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Like Zhao, I believe that any social science theory should be based on high-quality empirical evidence (2001:348). The theory should be simple and understandable. Others should be able to propose alternatives and/or build on it. And it should be based on superb data. I have tried to document and describe an Elastic Self in such a way. My hope is that I have contributed to a public conversation that expands beyond the academic world. My belief is that anyone knowledgeable about Chinese society should be able to contest, argue, and refine the Elastic Self framework I have deployed. Good research is generative; it uncovers emergent properties in situ. I

81 Such as Lindtner (2012), Qiu (2009), Szablewicz (2012), and Wallis (2013).
hope that future scholars will build on this work, because we now have more questions that need to be answered.
CHAPTER 4
EXPLORATORY PHASE:
FROM FORMAL TO INFORMAL MODES

4.1 Introduction

In the first phase of the Elastic Self, Chinese youth are exploring their emotions. They are seeking a way out of relationships with people they know. They gravitate towards social media platforms where they can engage in the informal mode of interaction with strangers under anonymous circumstances. These exchanges not only help them become more comfortable sharing their emotions, it also enables them to explore socially stigmatized sides of their identities. In the process, they also discover “hidden information”; this leads to an internal moral shift as they come to realize that the institutions they trust are not transparent.

4.2 Lonely Youth

Even though my participants could not articulate why they felt lonely, they used many different words to describe their loneliness: jimo (寂寞) gudan (孤单) gudu (孤独) guji (孤寂). When I asked if they talk to their friends, family and loved ones about their feelings of isolation, they typically think that to do so would be risky, impractical, and counterproductive: “Why would I burden someone with my feelings? They’ll think I have a mental problem.” This is a common concern among Chinese youth. Their fear of burdening someone else with their emotions limits a more open discussion of important aspects of their emotional, intellectual, social and even sexual

---

82. All these Mandarin Chinese words translate to “lonely” in English, but when spoken in Chinese, there is a subtle difference between the words.
identities. However, after spending much time with Chinese youth, I discovered that they established new spaces where they could freely share these important aspects of themselves without anxiety.

In their own quiet ways, Chinese youth are carving passages out of a stifling world, a world that reinforces a collective moral message to conform to mainstream norms. Consequently, they explore alternative pathways. They often do not know where they are going or what they are searching for: all they know is that they have to keep exploring. Some are running away from their parents, some are running from traditions, and some are running away from institutions. But they all end up in the same place—the internet.

Participants spoke about their online experiences as if they were explorers mapping a new land. Like sailors, they searched for new sites by navigating away from the familiar and into the unknown, learning how to find alternative social spaces that were out of the reach of their families and even their friends. Using online accounts that were untraceable to their names, they did things that they were not brave enough to do with their given names. They told secrets. They flirted. They shared dreams. They invented stories. They asked sensitive questions. They did all this—and more—under anonymous online identities in the company of strangers who were also doing the very same thing.

Accumulating the technical skills to navigate the unfamiliar, they developed a sense for sites that were ideal for meeting strangers. In the informal mode of
interaction, their sense of the world expanded from one chatroom to hundreds of thousands; from a few websites, to hundreds more; and from several accounts to follow, to thousands more. They dropped anchor when they synced with someone or a group, but they did not settle for too long. Without the social pressure of reciprocity, they felt less constrained by social norms. Out of a desire to find the unfamiliar, they moved to new sites in the search of something they could not articulate, but could only feel—freedom.

These newly acquired freedoms are achieved by “breaking loose from older moral horizons” and adopting new morals that reflect their more elastic identities (Taylor 1991, 3). In exploring socially stigmatized aspects of their identities with strangers, youth tend to discover “hidden information”; this leads to an awakening that unfolds as a moral shift as they come to realize that the institutions they once trusted are not transparent.

4.3 Chinese Emotional Culture: A Review

The expression of emotions is culturally situated (Edelstein and Shaver 2007; Haidt and Keltner 1999; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Wallboot and Scherer 1995). They emerge out of social relations (Fiske 1992) and impact self-esteem and relationships (Fischer, Manstead, and Mosquera 1999). According to social scientists, emotions “serve to help the individual act according to group norms” and thus enforce norms (Goetz and Keltner 2007, 154).

As referenced in section 1.2, emotions do not help the Chinese “situational self”; they cloud instead of providing clarity. Expressing emotions is commonly
viewed as a sign of weakness, not strength. Shame as both an emotion and a strategy plays an important role in situation-centered cultures such as China. While shame (like any emotion) differs across cultures, in the broadest sense it is easiest to understand shame in contrast to guilt, two closely related feelings that relate to the transgression of social norms. Shame, is an “external orientation, where as guilt is an “internal orientation” (Wong and Tsai 211). Shame “is the fear of exposing one’s defective self to other” while guilt “is the fear of not living up to one’s own standards” (Wong and Tsai 2011). Researchers find that shame occurs more frequently and is experienced more intensively in front of other people (Smith et al. 2002).

Collectivistic societies tend to use shame, not guilt, to regulate social norms (Bedford and Hwang 2003; Bedford 2004). As such, shame is a socially acceptable emotion for the situational self. Chinese youth experience shame from a young age. Parents use shaming techniques as a socialization strategy to encourage good behavior in their children (Fung 1999). In order to teach children that certain types of behavior are not acceptable, parents will speak openly and tell others about their child’s ‘bad’ behavior. Perhaps unsurprisingly, researchers of contemporary Chinese culture reveal a “hypercognized” experience of shame (Russell and Yik 1996). In one study, participants came up with 113 shame-related terms, which suggests that Chinese people have a complex conceptualization of shame (Li et al. 2004).

One way shame manifests itself in Chinese society is through the maintenance of “face” mainzi (面子) (Hu 1994). Actions that cause shame cause the loss of face

83 ‘Face’ is captured in the popular proverb, “people need face like a tree needs bark.”
for one’s self and one’s extended social circle. A recent incident online incident involving a woman, Grace Wang, illustrates how mainzi works.

Grace Wang was a Chinese national studying at Duke University. In 2008, videos and pictures of her standing in front of Free Tibet student group surfaced online. Even though she was not part of the group and was trying to act as a mediator, A brief look at the reactions against her reveal that online comments were not just directed at Grace herself, but at those related to her in her social circle: namely, her parents and her schoolteachers. Chinese netizens deemed her a traitor.

Netizens collaborated on a Human Flesh Search84 on Grace, putting all of her personal details online. Her parents’ house was layered in excrement and “Kill the whole family” was painted in the hallways. One netizen suggested cutting her schoolteacher’s throat (Cheng 2012, 17). Those who were close to Wang were also held responsible for her act—not just Wang herself. The angry netizens argued that her act made those close to her lose mainzi: she brought shame not only herself, but her family, her teacher, and by extension, her nation. According to the situational self, Grace failed to understand the different modes of association that her individual actions would bring to everyone in her social circle.

Cheng (2012) argues that when a child is socialized into a situational self, he or she is taught that “one’s identity” is “established by the notion of behaving according

---

84. Human Flesh Search, a literal translation of the Chinese internet phenomenon, renrousousuo 人肉搜索. It involves the collaborative and decentralized gathering of information about a specific person or event and posting it online (Levine 2012).
to li (propriety)” (17). The practice of being aware of li requires children to learn how to assess at every moment their own interactions and its subsequent effects on everyone in their social circle. Because there are no socially sanctioned opportunities for emotional expression under this social order, post-80s and 90s youth find the worldview of mianzi and li to be emotionally restrictive. This feeling is greatest among youth who have desires or ideas that counter social norms.

My participants expressed great desire to find alternatives to their social circles. The anxiety that their actions could be perceived as inappropriate—or that they could bring shame to everyone they are connected to—is paralyzing. Furthermore, emotional expression is discouraged and viewed as an undesirable vulnerability. Children are told from a young age that any expression of emotion will give people an opportunity to take advantage of you. Parents often emphasize the important of maintaining a face without emotion, the equivalent to a “poker face” in the West. Further exacerbating these feelings of loneliness is the fact that most urban Chinese youth are only children, and do not have siblings to talk to or play with (Liu 2011).

However, some scholars have noted the social openings for emotional expression that the internet brings in China. Cheng has pointed out that the internet...
To clarify Cheng’s contribution, it is not the internet in and of itself that is creating this open space, but engagement in the informal mode of interaction. It is this that gives people the necessary distance from situations where they are socially and morally accountable for their interactions. Young people may be actively using new types of information technology to fulfill their desires by engaging in the informal mode, but it is the anonymous nature of those interactions that creates that openness, not the technology. Anonymity provides a reprieve from the pressures that come with interacting with people they know.

Cheng goes on to suggest that “Chinese netizens may hold indifferent attitudes towards” strangers online because they “do not have exact and concrete social relationships on the internet” (2012, 18). I extend Cheng’s suggestion to argue that this “indifference” is not problematic—it is libratory. When interacting anonymously with strangers, Chinese netizens feel more free to say what they want; they no longer have to worry about the potential consequences that their words and/or actions could not only bring to them, but also to their entire social circle.

A libratory perspective of Chinese netizens’s online interactions moves us away from what Western scholars such as Herold perceive as a “wild” internet (2011c, 200) separate from society and closer to the reality of an internet deeply embedded and tangled in the tensions of Chinese society. Chinese youths’ online practices can only make sense when we understand that their existing relationships are either mired

85. I define desire as “wide range of aspirations, needs, and longings” (Rofel 2002, 57l).
in a labyrinth of obligations or wrapped up in rigid social conventions. Emotional restraint is a requisite for interacting with one’s social circles in Chinese society. Engaging in the informal mode on the internet is how Chinese youth can safely express their emotions while mitigating any potential shame and discordance that could come to their social circles. Interaction with strangers frees people from having to constantly worry about the appropriateness of their actions.

It is worthwhile to consider that, within this cultural paradigm of the situational self, there is little possibility for a stranger to enter into a new relationship unless someone who is already in that person’s social circle makes the introduction. The absence of a record of “concrete obligations” created through a history of interactions (King 1985, 63-65) absolves a person from any accountability to treat a stranger well or even interact with them. This creates a tautological system that reinforces particularistic ties of guanxi: only existing relationships are strengthened. But interestingly, this also creates new opportunities for social interaction.

With no history of prior interaction, strangers are free to decide their own terms of engagement outside of the dominant social norms. In an anonymous, mediated context, youth can be themselves because they are liberated from the formal social pressures that bind them to structured forms of self-expression in front of people they know. They feel free to explore their identity with strangers who are totally disconnected from their social circles.
Along with emotional expression, information is also constrained in ambivalent ways in Chinese society. Massive institutional efforts to conceal and monitor information exist alongside new social networking tools that make information more widely available than ever before. State-led discourses in the media promoting ‘morally upright’ netizens collide with the individual’s desire and curiosity for information that may not align with state-defined ‘moral’ internet use. Parental anxiety about the internet interfering with studying clashes with youths’ desires to go online for recreational purposes (Liu 2010a, 2011). The strict parameters regarding the kind of internet consumption constituted within a “proper wired self” (Liu 2011a) not only affects how users access information through their digital tools, but also how they think about information, search for information, see themselves in relation to information in their everyday lives.

I observed that even though youths’ online interactions in the Exploratory Phase are primarily recreational, they toggle between two activities that they cannot do easily with people they know: expressing emotions and finding “hidden information.” In the process of meeting strangers to work through personal matters, youth encountered information that provided not only answers, but also more questions. Chinese norms around self-expression are so restrictive that youths’ fear of shame prevents them from asking these questions and having these discussions with people they know. As a result, self-expression—in terms of norm-defying emotions and
inquiry into hidden information—are two activities that youth can only engage in with strangers.

**4.4 Anonymity on the Internet: A Review**

Scholars have long explored the role of anonymity in mediated environments (Baron 1984, Danet 2001; Kiesler, Lea and Spears 1991; McKenna and Bargh 1998; Siegel and McGuire 1984; Standage 1998; Walther et al. 1994; Walther and Boyd 2002). As reviewed in section 2.6.2, pseudonymity is a practice while anonymity is a state (Hogan 2013). Anonymity is not just an individual’s choice, but also an affordance of a platform. Some platforms, such as QQ, allow users to be anonymous; conversely, some, such as Renren, require given names. On some platforms—such as Douban—users have the option of using their given name, but the normative practice is to use a pseudonym. While anonymity can encourage creativity, honesty, and curiosity, Chinese netizens can also utilize anonymity to engage in abusive behavior like bullying, trolling, and stalking (Cheng 2012; Cheung 2009). While I have witnessed such negative behavior, I also observed my participants taking advantage of anonymity to develop their personal identity.

Strangers are ideal partners for anonymous interaction. Without any prior social obligations to honor, Chinese youth have to decide for themselves how they want to interact with a stranger. My stories show how Chinese youth come to trust strangers with their emotions, talking about things they could not process with their

---

86 refer to Nancy Baym (2010) for a more detailed review of literature on anonymity
friends or family. These decisions reflect a bottom-up moral compass that defines interactions with unknown people outside of their guanxi circle. Chinese youth are redefining who they are, who they want to associate with, and how they want to live. They are producing a new set of identity practices in the informal mode of interaction.

They are playing with identity and throwing away the social constraints that bind them to the predictable behavior and expression that is deemed to be acceptable by an authoritarian and rigid society. This exploration process is full of ambiguity; it is by no means a clear escape from social pressures found in the formal mode. However, this is what the work of self-realization looks like for Chinese youth. The internet becomes a place of fiction, where, in the words of David Foster Wallace (2012), “not all paradoxes have to be paralyzing.” It is the place where tensions are negotiated and anxieties are shared among a company of unknowns. In a society where personal connections are too emotionally restrictive, impersonal connections may present the greatest chance of creating new forms of sociality.

4.5 Meet the Characters: Liuliu, Taoge, Sammy, and Mimi

In Chapter 4, we learn how, and why, youth turn to the informal mode to carry out the Exploratory Phase of the Elastic Self. We meet four characters: Liuliu, Tao Ge, Sammy, and Mimi who each reflect a different motivation for entering into the Exploratory Phase. Liuliu discovers his sexuality; Tao Ge practices flirting with girls; Sammy connects with people she cannot find in her social circles; and lastly, Mimi negotiates her role in the Communist Party. These youth come from very different class backgrounds. Both Liuliu and Tao Ge come from the rural countryside. Liuliu is
the first person to go to a top tier university in his village. Tao Ge is the first person in his family to go to college. Sammy is from an educated family: both of her parents are professors. Mimi comes from a middle-class family: her mother works as a civil servant and her father works as an engineer. Despite their varying backgrounds, their stories echoed the same thing that I heard from all of my participants: they explored their identities through interactions with strangers.

While their motivations for going online to informal platforms were different, they all explored socially transgressive aspects of their identities in ways that were not permissible with their existing social contacts. They all developed relationships with strangers who helped them develop the confidence to speak up. In the end, they all returned back to their social circles changed from the process.

Throughout each of their stories, they demonstrate the indicators of the Exploratory Phase of the Elastic Self (corresponds with Table 2.2):

- Describes their primary social circles as restrictive, limiting, or boring.
- States that they are unable to share emotions or relate to people they know.
- Feels more comfortable sharing emotions with strangers.
- Regularly hangs out on platforms that are dominant in the informal mode.
- Maintains a strict boundary between interactions in formal and informal modes.
- Creates multiple accounts; segment social media accounts between people they know and strangers.
- Creates social media profiles for the informal mode, reflecting a sense of playfulness in profile picture and self-description,
- Can quickly and easily reformulate a self for an informal mode of interaction.
- Refers to strangers as “internet friends.”
- Able to recognize people who have similar interests as them.

In their own ways, Liuliu, Tao Ge, Sammy, and Mimi each feel socially and emotionally marginalized from people they know. Unwilling to explore their identities within existing social circles, they turn to the informal mode of interaction where they can anonymously explore their identities and interests in ways that they cannot with their given names. We follow Liuliu, Tao Ge, Sammy, and Mimi as they learn to distinguish and create boundaries around social media platforms as dominant in the formal or informal mode.

4.6 The Stories

4.6.1 Liuliu, the Boy Who Doesn’t Need a Sex Change

When I’m using my [QQ account] small number xiao ma (小马) I will not tell others my real name.

— Liuliu

Liuliu has at least four QQ accounts. But he only uses his name and picture on one of them, which he calls his dama (大马), the popular word for one’s primary QQ account. His other accounts are anonymous: on one of his profiles, his avatar is a female cartoon character. He uses three different words interchangeably to refer to his anonymous accounts: xiaoma (小马), majia (马甲), and nyma (女马). None of the
people he has added to his *dama* are on the *xiaoma*, and none of the people on the *xiaoma* are on the *dama*. Liuliu enforces strict boundaries about who can be added to which account. His *dama* QQ account is for people he knows. The *majia* QQ account is only for strangers.

There are parts of Liuliu’s life that he wants to keep secret. He feels safer and more comfortable exploring those aspects of himself with strangers, so he has created anonymous instant messaging QQ accounts. In doing so, he has marked those particular QQ accounts for the informal mode so that he can be more open to spontaneous and random interactions. In his anonymous interactions, he is not seeking online friendships. Rather, he seeks out ephemeral exchanges through which he may explore his sexuality outside the purview of people with whom he has an established connection.

Liuliu grew up in a rural part of Anhui Province in Eastern China. As with most youth from rural areas, he had few opportunities to interact with people outside of his village. His parents were the center of his world. They told him that they lived for him and for the day that he would carry on the family name by marrying a woman. Like generations of men who had come before him, he was told that his destiny was to continue their family lineage and to produce a son.

Liuliu told me that when he became a teenager, he knew something made him different from the other boys in his village. He was attracted to other boys. His feelings made him scared; he thought that there was something wrong with him. How
could he carry out his filial duty if he did not want to be with girls? He thought that the only possible explanation was that he was born into the wrong gender: otherwise, why would he be attracted to males? “I did not think that I was gay at that time, I did not even have an idea about that concept. I fell in love with a man. I knew that we could not stay together, but even if we did, one of us would’ve needed to get a transsexual operation. We both were not rich, but we thought we could reach this goal if we studied hard. The cost of the operation is high and it can shorten how long you live, but I can ignore that to pursue love. It doesn’t matter if I live a shorter life.”

Liuliu came up with a plan. He reasoned that if he studied really hard in high school, he would have the chance of getting into college; then, he could get a good job where he could save up a lot of money for a sex change. Then, as a woman, he could at least carry out his family’s expectations to marry a person of the opposite sex.

When I met Liuliu, he had already carried out the first part of the plan—he got into a top tier university, which is not easy. In 2012, out of nine million Gaokao testers, only 8% tested into a top tier university—and only one-quarter of those students were from a rural area (CNR 2012; EDU.QQ 2012). Getting this far was already an accomplishment. Liuliu studied very hard during his first semester, but he also discovered that he had a lot of free time. For the first time in his life, he had some time to himself. So he did what other college students do with a lot of their time—he spent it online.
4.6.1.1 A Background on “Homosexuality” in China

While popular attitudes towards homosexuality have opened up in the last decade in China, the degree of openness varies by generation and urban and rural areas. Sexuality in general has not been openly discussed until the last decade. It was only in the post-Mao era that translators “need[ed] to differentiate between sexuality from sex” (Zhang 2011, 106). According to Zhang, the need to find an appropriate word for sexuality reflects the processes unique to “China’s sexual revolution,” part of which has “expanded sexual relations and desires.” This has led to a “number of positive effects for individuals, entire groups of people, and for the society (143-145). One of these groups is people who identify as gay.

Historically, same-sex love has been an integrated part of Chinese everyday life, with wealthier males maintaining a coterie of young male sex partners. There was no word for homosexuality because it was not “not a lifestyle choice or an identity or something that could be psychologically as it in the West…it was not so much a matter of love but of status and power” (Burger 2012, 123-124). Confucianism never stated that homosexuality was a sin, as it was only concerned with the male carrying out his social obligation to marry and produce children (124). This level of openness was sustained—with occasional periods of repression—until the end of the Qing Dynasty, the last dynasty. During this time, Western ideas of homophobia entered in China from Christian missionaries who deemed it a sin and translated texts of English laws that made it a crime (Burger 2012, 133). When the Maoist era started, the government didn’t institute laws against homosexuality (Zhang 2011, 120), but it was
pathologized as a mental disorder and criminalized as a form of “hooliganism.”

Homosexuality was associated with Western “spiritual pollution” (Burger 2012, 137).

In 1997, the Chinese state removed “hooliganism” as a crime, and in 2001, the official 
Diagnostic Manual of Psychiatric Disorders also removed it as a mental disorder.

Despite these two formal changes to the law and the field of psychiatry, Zhang argues 
that Chinese society is still far from being a place where gays can live openly (122).

Not only do they risk being labeled “other” (122), they also risk familial discordance.

According to Confucius thought, filial piety is the expression of a child’s duty 
and obedience to her/his parents. One of the ways that children express their filial 
piety is to fulfill their role in carrying on the family name by marrying a person of the 
opposite sex and having children. To have desires for the same sex can be considered 
anti-filial because same-sex couples are unable to biologically produce a child, 
preventing the family line from being carried on. As Burger notes, “filial piety and the 
pressure to have children remain intact, and for most gays, coming out is simply not 
viewed as a possibility (2012, 142).

In particular, attitudes towards gay people tend to be even more closed in rural 
areas; families and villages have little to no opportunity to encounter a diversity of 
sexualities in person or in the media (Burger 2012, 147). Liuliu, raised in a rural area, 
did not know that there were others who experienced feelings like his. Burger points 
out the realities of rural gay life: “options for expressing one’s sexuality are far more 
limited: their only hope is to meet other gays over the internet” (Burger 2012, 147).
These are topics that are familiar to the complexities of being a tongzhi (同志), the Chinese colloquial word for gay (which is appropriated from the original meaning, comrade). On bulletin boards (BBS) dedicated to this topic, dealing with angry parents, abandonment, and shame are all widely discussed. Part of Liuliu’s crisis was trying to make sense of how he would fulfill his filial duty to produce a child to carry on his family’s name. The internet, specifically BBSs, play a critical role in helping youth negotiate the pressures that Chinese parents put on their children. Boxu Yang argues, “filial piety formed the core of the socialization and was rarely questions among the public until the coming of BBS” (2012, 144). Suddenly, the role of parents was no longer sacred, but open to critical discussions between anonymous netizens. According to Burger (2012), “nothing has transformed the gay and lesbian community in China more than the Internet (148), a point also echoed by Banfe’s research on BBS’s effects on social relationships (2011). Liuliu experienced this transformation when he started going online in college. He discovered whole communities of males like him, who also were negotiating their filial piety in terms of their sexuality.

4.6.1.2 Finding Online Gay Communities

Sitting in a second story cafe on a velvet purple seat, speaking in a soft-spoken voice, Liuliu told me about what he did online with his free time. Using an anonymous QQ account, he discovered QQ chat rooms specifically for men who are attracted to other men. At first, he searched on Baidu. “I searched for the term homosexual (同性恋) in Baidu Baike…at that time I did not know the word ‘gay,’ but there was not a lot of information on Baidu.”
Then, in a random search through students groups at his university, he came across the contact information for a group called Rainbow, as well as several other student groups. None of these groups used the word “gay” in their club names, but during one of the group meetings he learned about the word. He then went home and created an anonymous QQ account (his majia) to search for the word “gay.” He uploaded the picture of a female and identified as a female, creating a new identity online. He gave this identity a name: Liu He Yi. As Liu He Yi, he found thousands of groups for gay males. He met hundreds of men who did not feel like they were born into the wrong gender: they were just gay. These were the people who taught Liuliu about his own sexuality, and, for the first time, he did not feel abnormal. He joined more QQ groups for gay males, questioning males, and queer males. He started connecting with some of those people in person, with both parties using their online names. On the most popular instant messenger site, QQ, Liuliu searched for the word gay in English and found close to 400,000 groups.

He found sites like Feizan, a social network for gay people (City Weekend 2010). He joined groups on Feizan such as the gay news club (同志新闻), a weight loss group, (飞赞减肥小分队), a reading group (读书会), and a marriage equality group (飞赞婚介所). Liuliu uploaded a picture of himself on Feizan. I asked him if he was worried about people finding out his identity considering that he went to great lengths to mask it on his second QQ account, and he replied, “Not really. Normal men [straight men] will not browse a site like Feizan. People come here to make friends,
find lovers, like good friends.” Feizan was his favorite gay social network. He explained,

The penis pictures on other websites take up a lot of space and there are many pictures of men. The characters are also quite large. Feizan’s interface is nice, there are fewer pictures of males, and the difference is so big. You can chat with friends on Feizan. . . . I like Feizan mostly because of the interface, and you can find events easily and look through other people’s blogs. . . . I do not use Feizan to find a partner, it’s not fun to find a boyfriend on it. I like to view the photos, leave messages, and draw cartoons and comics.

Liuliu found Baidu Knows, where he joined groups for people who asked and answered questions about being gay. Started in 2005, the site uses a credit system to reward users who pose and answer questions. The person who asked the question can select the best answer, which will show up as the first answer result underneath the question. As of 2012, over eleven million questions have the word gay (同志) in the subject line. A typical exchange on the gay forum looks like this:87

Question: What should I do as a gay? I want to find a boyfriend, but I’m afraid that my secret (of being a gay) will be disclosed.

Best Answer: We are gays, too. Do not be worried too much. Secret could be disclosed more or less. Do not hide it and do not be afraid. Just be yourself. You’re young. Get yourself a boyfriend.

87. In Chinese: 提问：整天想找朋友但是心里有很矛盾，担心自己的秘密被公开
最佳回答：
我们都是GAY，不管你是准备做个GAY还是要做任何事情，过分多心总没好处。

既然是秘密就不可能有永久保密的一天，总是被人知道或者挖掘。藏得越久越隐秘的秘密终究会成为最惊天的事情。所以，做你自己，想交往就去交往，想咋样就咋样，毕竟你不是老头子，不是过了今天没明天的人。日子长着呢

每个GAY都有自己的生存方式，只要你选择好了，就不会担心了，就算发现，现在GAY在社会上也很多，不要太担心了。自己的人生自己去把握
Liuliu read through hundreds of questions exactly like the one above. He was not the only one in the world who had questions about being gay.

Looking through other people’s questions and answers was a crash course into the Chinese gay identity and lifestyle for Liuliu. He quickly uncovered words that were particular to the gay community. All of a sudden, references to “1” and “0” made sense: these were explicit references to sexual positions, and used by men to communicate the position they preferred. 1 is for a man who prefers to penetrate and 0 is for a man who prefers to be penetrated. He noticed a pattern that in Feizan, QQ groups, and Baidu Knows, that men quickly list 1 or 0. Like gay men globally, this preference is a part of people’s identities. He also learned other terminology used by men seeking sex with other men, including what 419 means—a booty call or a one-night stand.

4.6.1.3 No Longer in a Village

If Liuliu had grown up in an urban area, he likely would have encountered gay people or information about being gay through the media or the internet. But Liuliu was born in an isolated village and had little opportunity to interact with people or information from outside of his village. Despite the rapid rate of urbanization in China over the last few decades, around 47% of China’s population continues to live in rural areas (Shan 2011). Increasingly, internet cafes and 3G mobile access are becoming available in rural areas, but access is typically limited to towns that serve as a hub for

88. Similarly, lesbians refer to this dichotomy at P and T.
several villages. A seamless and constant internet connection is far from reality in most rural parts of China.

Village life offered little variety in social spaces for Liuliu. He was always either at home or at school. The only time he had alone was the ten-minute walk between his village and his school. Otherwise, he was always surrounded by people. The university was the first social space where the possibility of bumping into someone connected to his family or village was minimal. Everyone at the university started out as a stranger. Over time, he became familiar with the other students in his classes and dormitory. They added each other to Renren, the Chinese equivalent to Facebook, which targets college students. As he spent more time with his friends on Renren, they got to know each other better through wall posts, public comments, and private messages. He started to share more about himself on Renren and, in some ways, it was easier for him to introduce himself on Renren than in person.

When he finally accepted that he did not need a sex change and was gay, he started to consider life as a gay man. His online contacts regularly shared their “coming out of the closet” stories. They talked about the sense of freedom and release they felt by telling other people. Liuliu sensed that they felt proud of their sexuality, and he wanted to feel the same way. The pressure of keeping his sexuality a secret became more stressful than the idea of being open about it.

He wanted to tell his coming out story. He decided that he would start by telling his friends on Renren, a context that felt safer than having to tell classmates
face-to-face. Then he would tell his family face-to-face on the next trip home. But to his shock, people who he thought were good friends mocked him on Renren. They wrote *tongxinlian* (同性恋), the homosexual, on his Renren wall. Liuliu told me, “those words are usually bad. In my village we use those words to make fun of people and to be mean to them.” Even though Renren was a web platform, the comments felt real—because they were. In response, Liuliu deleted his Renren account. This experience started to feel like village life all over again—restrictive, rigid, and closed.

But instead of wallowing in his rejection, Liuliu turned to social media platforms with other gay males where he knew he wouldn’t be mocked. He reached out to his online contacts in QQ chatrooms, Baidu Knows, and Feizan to tell them about what happened on Renren. His friends consoled him and told him that they had had similar experiences. Liuliu felt that the only people who truly understood him were his gay online friends—most of whom he had not—and would never—meet in person. They offered him more support, information, and acceptance than the acquaintances and friends that interacted with him in person. At first, these places were initially sites for self-discovery; now, these places had become his refuge.

He managed several identities through his accounts. On QQ alone, he actively maintained three accounts, one of which was linked to his real name. On Renren he originally had two accounts until he deleted the primary account with his real name, electing to only keep the anonymous one. Feizan is the only site on which he uses his
real name and also photos of himself. He links his anonymous QQ account to Baidu Knows.

Liuliu demarcates which accounts are for people he knows and which accounts are for new contacts. He seeks out new contacts with his anonymous account, not his primary account. Liuliu felt that he could not engage in self-exploration on his primary QQ account because he felt that the risks for being shamed were too high. Liuliu’s fear made sense given that he received criticism of his homosexuality when he did so under his given name. By creating anonymous identities on QQ, he carved out a space disconnected from people he knew in formal social media sites.

Liuliu was already going on the internet before he went to college in 2010, but he only used it for instrumental purposes, such as verifying addresses or submitting forms. It was not until Liuliu became involved in chatrooms filled with strangers that he began to imagine a self outside of his family and a self that was free from the judgment of his friends. Liuliu, like many other youth, came to see the web as divided between platforms for informal and formal modes of interaction. He started to develop the digital literacy skills to distinguish between platforms that are more ideal for the anonymous interactions that are more conducive for exploring an Elastic Self.

Over time, Liuliu developed deep friendships with people on these websites. He learned how to narrow searches for chatrooms by location so that he could meet people in the same city. For example, in Beijing, there are currently 564 QQ groups for gay males. He even met one of his boyfriends from a QQ group.
After one of his relationships ended, Liuliu knew for sure that he was gay. His desire to tell his family about his sexuality conflicted his desire to be dutiful. In particular, as the only son in the family, his parents would be devastated. But through more discussions in his online communities, and with and his growing sense of confidence as a gay man, he decided it was time to tell his mother. On one of his trips home, he sat her down in the kitchen and asked her to watch *Mama Rainbow* (彩虹伴我心), a documentary of a speech by a Wu Youjian (吴㓜坚), a woman who is known for publicly stating that she loves her gay son.89 After his mother watched it, he told her that he was gay. Liuliu told me that his mother cried, and that to this day, one year later, they have not talked about it. He knows that she told his father, but he has not mentioned it. They have not talked about it to anyone in the village or in their family because they see this as loss of face mianzi.

I was quite amazed by Liuliu’s transformation: within three years, he went from being someone who thought he needed a sex change to someone who disclosed his sexuality to his family. I asked him why he did chose to do this, considering that many gay men still live in secret. He told me that all the people online told him that his parents might as well know now that they will not have a grandchild, and that it’s better to tell the truth than to live a lie. It pained Liuliu to tell his parents the truth, but he did not want to live a lie. His online community helped him make a moral shift

89. Wu Youjian’s Weibo account is @三色堇吴幼坚

http://www.weibo.com/3sj?topnav=1&wvr=5&topsug=1. The documentaries are on Youtube and Youku: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jFaKcCQCxKE

http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNDQ2ODM2MDAw.html
from the principles of closed and hidden information to transparency and openness in information. Liuliu had crossed the threshold of keeping his identity a secret. Even though it went against his duties as a filial son, by telling the truth, he worked his out the “paradox of wellbeing and pressure” that characterizes Chinese youths’ online interactions (Liu 2011, 71).

Disclosing their sexual identity to their parents is still not widely practiced among gay men in China. Sexology and gay rights supporter Professor Zhang Beichuan puts estimates of gay men in marriages at 16 million (Burger 2012, 141). Often both the husband and wife are complicit in upholding the marriage because they want to remain filial to their parents and/or social circles. Burger reports that a gay website in 2010 organized “fake marriage markets” in Shanghai for people who wanted to find a heterosexual partner to marry. This market exists because gay men and lesbians do not want to disclose to their parents that they are gay. But these stories and statistics reflect an older generation. It is unclear how youth born in the 80s and 90s are handling their sexual visibility, statistics-wise. However, with the internet, gay youth are now connected in ways that no Chinese gay people could connect before now. They are able to share narratives and advice that reinforce a common identity (Friess 2001; Jacobs 2012; Qiu 2003; Wallis 2011). While it is exceptional that Liuliu came out to his parents, it is also an indicator of role that online communities play in providing support for his identity work. Liuliu formed his identity in the informal
mode of interaction, where he learned, shared and discussed strategies of visibility with other gay men.

In Mary Gray’s study on gay youth in rural America, she argues that, unlike their urban counterparts, they have to deal with a different set of politics of visibility because they lack the resources to “sustain queer difference” (2009, 3). Without discounting the myriad of cultural differences between Chinese and American gay youth or mapping a Western rural and urban divide onto Chinese youth, Gray’s study helps identify the importance of public spaces for gay rural youth to build community and assert visibility. She calls these spaces “boundary publics,” “entities that meet the distinct expectations of different social groups” because they are “malleable enough to adapt to local needs while sustaining a common identity” (Gray 2009, 95). But these public spaces in which gay rural youth organize are fragile, because they are subjected to social conservatism.

The boundary publics that Liuliu engages in are commercial social media sites that have become ideal places for Chinese youth to connect en masse. The sheer numbers of QQ groups and Baidu groups to discuss gay life attests to the support these sites offer for people who are still marginalized in everyday life. The groups echo a larger gay identity but also offer a literal way for gay people to connect locally. These are the spaces where Chinese gay youth are negotiating visibility. With the help of strangers, these online communities become their online ‘gayborhood,' a general term for an online community for gay people.

90. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay_village
While Liuliu doesn’t know everyone in his online gayborhood, he knew that he could turn to them for encouragement. Emotional support did not have to come from people in his preexisting social circles. Seeing other people’s narratives of coming out, dealing with their families, and struggles did not portray being gay or coming out as an easy process, but it reassured him that he was not alone, and that was enough to make him feel like he belonged to the online gayborhoods where he spent his time.

Liuliu not only gained practical information from his online gayborhood, he also learned how to express emotions. He transferred the confidence gained from his online interactions with strangers to his formal social circles online (Renren) and offline (family). Most importantly, he learned through strangers that should not be ashamed of his identity, but proud of it.

4.6.2 Tao Ge, the QQ Flirt

When I met Tao Ge, he told me that, until college, he thought he was destined to be alone. Like Liuliu, Tao Ge was also born in a rural village. In village life, gender norms are established early on: boys do boy things and girls do girl things. Even though he went to a mixed gender school, he did not interact with any girls outside of the classroom. All of his male friends left the village after junior high to work as migrants in the city. Most of them married one of the village girls and had a baby. But Tao Ge did not follow the path of a typical migrant worker: he had a different destiny.

In junior high, Tao Ge’s teachers convinced his parents that their son had the potential to make it into college. So instead of continuing his studies at the local rural high school, his parents decided to send Tao Ge away to a boarding school to prepare
for college. To finance their son’s education, his parents dipped into the family savings, continued to work their land, and his father took another job as a highway construction worker. In rural China, parents are willing to borrow and spend well beyond their means to send their children to boarding school in order to improve the chance that their children will get into top universities and escape the life of a farmer or migrant worker.

4.6.2.1 Boarding School Life

While boarding school gives children like Tao Ge a chance to focus on their studies instead of doing farm work or working in the city, it does not help them with their socialization skills. Their schedules and entire lives are tightly controlled, watched over by teachers and administrators who not only oversee their studies, but also their personal lives. Students are punished and publicly shamed for socializing.

Boarding school life is highly regimented. For three years, Tao Ge lived in a room with the same seven boys. They all woke up at 5:30am, walked to the playground to start the morning calisthenics at 5:40am, walked to the classroom by 5:50am to read out loud Chinese poetry and essays for the Gaokao tests, and then walked to the cafeteria at 6:40am for breakfast. Morning self-study began at 7:20am and the first class began at 8:10am. Each class was 45 minutes and students had 10-minute breaks between each class. Lunch started at 12:35pm and students had two hours to sleep and study during this time. Afternoon classes began at 2:35pm and ended at 6:35pm. Students walked to the cafeteria for dinner and by 7:10pm they started self-study night session. At 10:10pm they walked to the dorms. If teachers
were to catch males and female students walking together, they would accuse students of being in love, criticize them in front of their classmates, and speak to their parents. At 10:30pm, the lights were turned off. Other than the monthly visit home, this was Tao Ge’s schedule every day for three years.

Tao Ge excelled in boarding school and was at the top of his class. Teachers knew him to be one of the best students in his cohort. He was also known for following the rules: he woke up on time, showed up to every class, participated in every self-study session, and never left campus to use the internet cafe. Tao Ge described himself as having been an incredibly obedient child. He learned from a young age that teachers were recording his actions and behavior in a document called the *dang’an* (档案), a detailed personal file that supposedly includes everything from school grades to perceived unpatriotic behavior and any crimes committed.

Every Chinese citizen has a *dang’an*. Instituted by the Communist Party in 1949, the *dang’an* system ties an individual’s action to an institution. The record moves with the individual in a sealed brown envelope that may not be opened or viewed, except by the authorities.\(^{91}\) Tao Ge told me that teachers often reminded students to follow the rules by threatening to report any misbehavior in their *dang’an*: “If I were to get into a fight at school, the teachers would put the information in my *dang’an*. Warnings (jinggao 警告) also go in there. All students know this. Teachers will have a big meeting and then they meet with the students to tell them that if you do something

---

91. An individual’s *dang’an* also includes the parent’s information. So if the father is a criminal it also shows up their children’s *dang’an*. 
wrong, then everyone will find out and it will go into your dang’an.” The big meeting happens twice a year. During the meeting, the teachers give awards to individuals and classes, and they give criticism to ‘bad’ individuals.

Tao Ge further explains how he reacted to these meetings and knowledge about the dang’an as a teenager: “Two things happen when you do something wrong. You get scared so you never do it again. Or, if you do something wrong once, then you think, ‘Fuck, I guess I have no chance of redemption since it is already in my dang’an, so I’ll just give up and keep doing that.’ There is no chance to redeem yourself, it is not like a credit score. Your dang’an is with you forever, it is never erased.”

The one time Tao Ge tested the rules was in pursuit of a childhood crush. Tao Ge had his heart set on a girl with whom he had grown up in his village. When Tao Ge went to boarding school, she moved to Beijing to become a migrant worker like most other youth in his village. Every year, Tao Ge wrote several letters to her. Thinking he could evade his parents, he sent letters through the administrative office at his school, not knowing that his teachers intercepted every letter. When he graduated high school, his teachers handed him a box, containing four years of letters to the girl in Beijing. Tao Ge explains what he believes to be his teacher’s motives: “Teachers are stricter in rural areas. They know we have to work harder. They believe their biggest responsibility is to prevent us from being in a relationship. So students in rural schools
are so repressed. We know nothing about the world and we are not allowed to do anything.”

Boarding high schools in rural China typically implement strict rules banning relationships, internet cafes, and any form of external information. Tao Ge recalled, “They would take a magazine away if they caught you reading one. We weren’t allowed to read anything that was not assigned to us in a textbook.” Card games were prohibited too: “If you are caught playing a card, you are automatically kicked out.” The logic behind these rules is that any activity that could potentially distract students from studying for the Gaokao test should be banned. Teachers and school administrators become de facto guardians of their students as parents entrust the schools to not only watch over their son or daughter for several years, but to ensure that their child obtains high test scores on the Gaokao. A teacher’s performance is tied to their students’ performance on the Gaokao. Teachers who have students test into a top university are recognized at the annual Commendation Meeting (表彰大会) through awards and ‘red envelopes’ that contain money, trainings, and gifts.

Teachers are also aware that the Gaokao testing system places rural students at a disadvantage. Rural schools have a lower-quality level of education compared to urban schools. Rural families also do not have access to—or cannot afford—the costly after-school tutors and Gaokao training preparation programs that urban students often attend. These social disadvantages make it very hard for rural students to test into a top tier university. So teachers rationalize that total and constant oversight of student’s
lives will increase their chances of success in university application. Rural students like Tao Ge feel even more pressure because they usually are the first person in their family to go to college.

Regardless if a student is in rural or urban China, they still experience a highly regimented and controlled high school life. There is very little informal time for students to socialize amongst themselves. Even though most schools are mixed-gender, teachers prohibit relationships between students. While high school is also a time when young people go through puberty, questions about sex, the body, and sexuality, none of their classes address sex education and any expression of curiosity in these areas is prohibited and stigmatized.

Other than the minor crush derailment, Tao Ge’s teachers were confident that if he continued to focus, he would be accepted into Peking or Tsinghai, the top two universities in China. So, Tao Ge studied hard. He did not know of life beyond his school walls. His family rarely called him, fearing that they would distract him from test preparation. Even when he did go home for monthly visits, his family did not allow him to do any work on the land or in the house. Other than mealtimes, he had little interaction with his family as he studied the entire time in his grandfather’s room. For the first time, a member of the Tao family had a real chance to go to college. If Tao Ge got into college, it meant that he could marry someone with an equal level of education and together, they could pull the Tao family out of rural poverty. They did
not say this to Tao Ge, but they did not have to. Their actions alone reminded him of his duty.

While there is no doubt that Tao Ge was gaining core competencies for the Gaokao test, he was not gaining important socialization skills. Basic interactions, such as looking at people in the eye when talking, working in groups with people of the opposite sex, and hanging out for fun, are not allowed or valued in boarding school. Learning inside the classroom is an individual process with no teamwork opportunities. Students’ morning physical activity involves running and no team sport. Girls and boys never eat at the same table in the cafeteria. They even walk separately and stand in line separately. A mixed-gender boarding school still offered few opportunities to socialize with students of the opposite sex. While his family expected Tao Ge to eventually marry once he got into college, they—like the teachers—supported the idea of limited interaction with girls until after the Gaokao.

4.6.2.2 A Future that Depends on the Gaokao

The Gaokao test is spread over two days. On the first day is the mathematics and Chinese history section, and the second day is for English and integrated subjects.

---

92. Some provinces have two days of testing while others have four and examination subjects are arranged in varied ways. For example in Guangdong, Guangxi, Henan and Liaoning province, the Gaokao lasts for four days: on the first day are the Chinese section and Mathematics sections; on the second English and Integration; on the third, Physics, Geography and Politics; and on the last day Chemistry, Biology and History. Refer to http://edu.sina.com.cn/l/2003-03-01/38749.html 2003/03/01
Tao Ge panicked on the first day for the mathematics and Chinese history section. By the second, he was more relaxed for the English and integrated subjects section.

When Tao Ge took the test along with over six million students in 2003, his province gave students the option to find out their test scores earlier online. 14 days after taking the Gaokao, his father drove him in their three-wheeled motorcycle through dusty, unpaved roads to a nearby town with an internet cafe. It was Tao Ge’s first time at an internet café, and there were few people there during the day. He logged in to see his test scores, which were not as high as he had hoped for because of his panic on the first day of testing. But he would have to wait another 17 days until he could find out the scores required for the 337,000 students from his province for each university. When the data was released online, he went to the internet cafe with his father and found out that he did get into a top tier university, but it was not the university his teachers had expected. A total of 154 students were accepted into Peking.

---

93. For integrated subjects, Liberal arts students will take tests on History, Politics and Geography; science students will take tests on Physics, Chemistry and Biology.

94. Tao Ge is a science student, so the second day for him were English and Integration section (Physics, Chemistry and Biology tests)

95. I cannot find the exact year that students could start seeing Gaokao scores online. But the earliest information that I could find was that in 2001, students in 12 provinces and cities could access their Gaokao scores online – Beijing, Tianjin, Shandong Province, Liaoning Province, Shanghai, Jiangsu Province, Sichuan Province, Jiangxi Province, Guizhou Province (students needed to pay money for online checking), Hainan Province, Henan Province and Jilin Province.

96. Among 6,130,000 students taking the test, about 337,000 students were from Hebei Province, out of which 68 students entered into Peking University in 2003. (http://gaokao.chsi.com.cn/gkxx/heb/200503/20050328/5472.html 2005/03/28 http://bbs.pku.edu.cn/bbs/bbscon.php?board=GoToUniv&file=M.1058603738.A&num=88&attach=0&dig=0)
and Tsinghai University, but he was not one of them. He got into Wuhan University. Students feel ashamed if they do not test well because it also reflects badly on their teachers and it disappoints their parents who have made sacrifices for them (Sudworth 2012). While Tao Ge did not test badly, he also did not test as high as expected.

His family was disappointed, but they were still confident that with a degree from Wuhan University, he could find a good wife. On a visit home with Tao Ge to his village, his parents enlisted me to help them find Tao Ge a wife. I asked them what kind of wife they wanted to find, and they said, “We do not mind where she is from, as long as he is happy.” Like most mothers in rural China, Tao Ge’s mother had already begun preparations for his future wife. The summer before Tao Ge went to college, she had sewn special blankets for her son and his future wife. She worked quickly enough to start on his future wife’s house slippers, asking Tao Ge which color he thought his future wife would prefer. Tao Ge had a hard time answering questions about his future wife’s preferences because he had a hard time imagining himself with a woman.

He told me that starting in middle school he began to worry that no girl would ever like him. In junior high, he woke up to unbearable pain in one of his testicles. He went to the hospital and the doctors told his family that they would have to remove it. They were unsure if this would affect his ability to reproduce. Then, in high school, he started to wake up with wet pants. He thought he had a urination problem. He wanted to find out why this was happening, but he did not know where to turn for help. He
was not sure if this was connected to his missing testicle. He was too embarrassed to talk about it with his dorm mates. There were no libraries at his school. Talking his teachers or parents was not even a possibility. Although there were internet cafes nearby, teachers had warned that only bad students went online and that using the internet when they had the entire school at their disposal was disrespectful. Without any answers to his medical and sexual questions, Tao Ge was uncomfortable talking to girls that he liked.

Adding to his awkwardness about sexuality was an “educational” visit arranged by his parents to a nearby farmer’s house that made him even more confused. The last summer before university, Tao Ge was at home in the village when his parents did what many parents in villages would, perhaps, do early in a young man’s life: they brought their male son to watch how the female pig gets impregnated. This is what sex education looks like in rural China. Like any other teenager around the world, Tao Ge was curious about sex, but pig sex just made him confused.

Tao Ge felt the same way as Liuliu: he could not talk to his parents or friends about anything that he was feeling, especially sex. Even though Tao Ge spent his teen years at a boarding school in a dorm room with 7 other boys, they were all too focused on their studies to think about anything else; the penalties were too high. There was no opportunity for accessing information about sex or sexuality. Tao Ge just accepted the path that his parents had outlined, because like most other Chinese youth, they had grown hearing and believing that “parents are never wrong.”

97. 父母是不会出错的 is a common phrase in Chinese families and it extends back to
could ask questions of his own volition never crossed his mind in high school when his entire life was organized around the Gaokao. Now that his future seemed to be set, he looked forward to college. For the first time, he would not have a regimented schedule.

4.6.2.3 College Life

When he finally made it to college, Tao Ge was shocked to see that girls and boys could openly hold hands on campus. He saw couples kissing, hugging, and hanging out. He wanted to do all of that, but he was nervous: “I thought no one would ever like me. I do not know how to talk to a girl.” He thought that perhaps if he joined student association clubs, he would have more opportunities to interact with females.

In his first year he joined over 10 associations, including the photography club, Deng Xiaoping Theory club, and the News Club. He rose quickly through the ranks of the News Club, which is monitored by the Propaganda Department of the Party Committee (党委宣传部). He joined the technology team at the News Club and was responsible for maintaining files. He started to come across a lot of internet traffic leading to massive amounts of pornography, all stored on the school’s servers. This discovery coincided with his first encounter with pornography, which was facilitated by his dorm mates.

Tao Ge lived in a dorm room with six students who were all from different parts of the country. No one knew each other’s parents or past, which allowed them to

Confucian values of filial piety to the parents.
talk more openly about many things, including sex. They also did other things very
openly, like watching and sharing porn. Tao Ge never even knew what heterosexual
sex between humans looked like until he watched porn with his roommates. He
explained to me that when he started college in 2002, laptops were not yet affordable.
One of his dorm mates came from a higher income family and brought with him the
dorm room’s only two desktop computers. “Back then, you could not hide what you
were watching. It was all in the open - the desktop computers made it easy for
everyone to see your screen.” Porn viewing for many college men was a social, not an
individual, experience (Wang 2012). “We all knew everyone’s preferences and tastes,
so we would help each other find specific kinds of porn. Like some guys really like
Japanese girls or a specific star.” Like many Chinese men, Tao Ge preferred Japanese
porn stars: “The AV star in Japan are really high quality. They act well and dress up.”
Thanks to being in a room full of men, Tao Ge learned rather quickly how to search
for porn, download it, and watch it himself.

He learned specific techniques for accessing porn, because finding porn in
China isn’t as easy as finding a movie or an MP3. Authorities have capriciously
enforced a pornography ban since 1949, but when China connected to the World Wide
Web in 1994, authorities found themselves with a new challenge: censoring the
relentless onslaught of pornographic websites. Over the last 18 years, police stations
have staged assemblies to warn youth of the dangers of porn and the internet. Anti-
pornography posters with cartoon figures of schoolboys are in practically every cyber
café. There are routine announcements of large sting operations closing down tens of thousands of pornography sites at a time. A few times a year, the government-controlled media reports large-scale arrests of pornography site administrators. Teenagers are warned of incidents in which people are jailed for watching porn. However, all the denunciations, moral policing, and incarcerations have not deterred a nation of males (the gender ratio at birth is about 120 males to 100 females) (Li 2007) from porn consumption.

Accessing porn is not difficult; it is simply a matter of finding out the most current URL, because sites often change their URL to evade the censors. But college students quickly figured out that it was better not to depend on any specific porn site that might disappear. Downloading porn files works better than viewing them online because, as Tao Ge explained, “You never know when a site will go down and come back.” At the same time, without having expensive hard-drive storage space, it becomes impractical to download lots of porn. College students began to realize that they could anonymously store files on university servers, where data storage space is abundant (Wang 2012a).

An early internet user who was attending Beijing University in 1995 told me that he had set up the first FTP porn storage space in China. “We were not connected to the World Wide Web yet. We were using the intranet at the university, but bandwidth was so slow. Our computers were also slow and did not have a lot of
storage space. So we digitized the porn from DVDs and we all uploaded the porn to the university server.”

By the early 2000s when Tao Ge was in school, male students across Chinese universities configured their school’s servers to store porn using File Transfer Protocol (FTP), a network protocol that allows users to transfer files over a network. Tao Ge describes the convenience of FTP: “No passwords are needed, and we used an FTP search service that only searched .edu sites at universities. Peking University (北大天网) has a lot of good porn that we could find very easily.” In a social context, where sex was treated as an informal matter, Tao Ge also came to view sex as a noncriminal activity. He too, began to upload porn via FTP. “I wanted to contribute to the collection—the more people upload, and the more we have to choose from.” Tao Ge understood porn to be a collective activity.

He also learned through communal porn watching that his dorm mates masturbated after watching porn. After he tried this for the first time, he finally made the connection that having nocturnal emissions did not make him abnormal. “No one masturbated back in high school. I mean where would we have done it? We’re always in a room full of people and there was not any time to even try it out. We were all so focused on preparing for the Gaokao. Plus, it would be seen as very abnormal, like you have a disease or psychological problem. I never knew that it is normal for males to ejaculate at night. I just thought something was so wrong with me—maybe the operation made me unhealthy.”
Having a testicle removed was traumatic enough, but not having access to information about sex education exacerbated Tao Ge’s low self-esteem. Anyone caught watching pornography, much less masturbating, in high school, would risk the information showing up on their dang’an: “We were all so behaved back then because we really took the dang’an seriously.” Now that Tao Ge was no longer in high school, his attitude towards the dang’an had radically changed from deference and fear to indifference. The threat of something “bad” being put on his dang’an no longer scared him.

I asked Tao Ge what happened with his job at the News Club and whether he had told someone about the porn he had found. He said, “I realized that no one cares that there is porn on the school’s website. I did not say anything when I discovered the porn at my job with the school’s propaganda department.” Tao Ge did not feel conflicted about failing to report his discovery because for the first time, he began to learn about sex in a context where shame was removed. Porn is definitely not the best way to learn about important things like safe sex, treatment of women, and nonnormative sex. However, because of the university’s internet and FTP services, Tao Ge finally had the opportunity to educate himself about sex. Being online with thousands of other people who had the same interests also made him less lonely.

For Tao Ge, his dorm room and the FTP servers are far removed from the life he had at boarding school. His dorm mates were strangers and not connected to his village, unlike his high school dorm mates who had all lived within a half hour radius
of the high school. It was not until Tao Ge moved away from his village and into a
dorm room full of strangers that he felt free to explore his sexuality.

4.6.2.4 Tao Ge Looks to QQ and Beyond

By his third year of college, Tao Ge became known as the computer-fixing guy
in this dorm building. His motivation to learn about computers started after his first
year where he spent all that time online searching, downloading, and organizing porn
on his university’s server. During the second year of college, his dorm mates went to
the electronics mall to buy parts to build their own PC. From that point on, Tao Ge
kept teaching himself how to build and fix computers. Each time he came across an
issue he could not solve, he looked it up online.

His computer knowledge became useful. He developed a reputation on the
women’s’ floors of his dorm building for being the nice guy who fixes computers. He
was happy to do this because it gave him chances to interact with girls in person. With
every girl he met, he considered whether she would make a good wife: “I really
wanted to marry someone, but no one liked me.”

Throughout his college years, his parents and grandfather kept pressuring him
to find a girlfriend. His grandfather became so anxious about the matter that he had to
go to a doctor: “My grandfather sweats a lot and breathes hard when he thinks about
my future and their search for a good wife for me.” Oddly, his family did not realize
how hard it would be to find Tao Ge a wife because he had a college education. There
were very few girls from his village or nearby village who also had a college
education. “Our guanxi does not extend do many people with a college education. So
my family has to build their guanxi and look for someone with a single daughter who went to college and is my age. But that’s very hard for them because my father is working the fields all day, he doesn’t meet new people very often.”

His family’s anxieties only added to Tao Ge’s awkwardness around girls. He tried to flirt with girls several times, but when they found out that he was from a village, many of them stopped talking to him. Tao Ge explained, “Girls really want to find a guy who can buy a house. No one cares about land, but land is valuable. They just do not know it yet.” Unfortunately, the interactions with the girls whose computers he fixed remained more of a transactional relationship. He felt more comfortable talking to girls online.

Tao Ge continued to explore his sexuality on QQ instant messaging. He signed up for several anonymous QQ accounts where he added girls—all who were strangers. “On QQ, I felt very comfortable initiating contact with girls,” he said. “I did not even know if someone was a cat or a dog or a man, but then after a while you could find out. I met a girl in Poland and we were together for a while on QQ.” Being able to chat with someone who lived outside of China gave him a new perspective because that person was not caught in the social structures of urban or university life in China. Every other day for a year, they chatted with each other on QQ. He said to her things that he wished he could say to women in face-to-face situations. He told me that it felt so good to have someone to talk to at night. They talked about their families, college classes, and shared interests.
Tao Ge created several additional QQ accounts where he could practice flirting. He felt the need to better understand girls, so he became a girl on one of his accounts. He added other females and eventually started talking to them about intimate matters such as their relationships and menstrual cycles. “This one girl would talk to me about the pain she felt when she got her period. I did not know what it was and I had to search for it online. Then I told her that I, too, got a period. We talked about her crushes on other guys and her heartache.” Tao Ge did not know how to talk to girls face-to-face, but he could become a girl virtually online.

On QQ, girls did not ask about his family’s income and his background. He said, “I can just talk freely online. It’s just fun and relaxed. It’s not serious like real life when girls want to know how much money you will have and where you will work.” Tao Ge felt more comfortable flirting online than in person. He acted more confident. In one message he wrote, “Hey pretty girl, I am drunk right now, but not with alcohol, but with feelings for you.” With an anonymous identity, Tao Ge tapped into a part of himself that he was too scared to express in person.

Up until his experience with girls on QQ, the only available options in his mind were the instructions his parents gave him: find a woman to marry, produce a son. But their goal was so narrow and specific, that he did not have any practical conceptualization of any intermediary stages before marriage, such as talking, flirting, meeting up, sharing, becoming intimate. These are all activities that his family did not prepare him for: he had to learn them on his own, which then made him aware that his
parents’ vision was quite narrow and undefined. Flirting with girls online violated his parents’ vision, but now that he was far away from them, Tao Ge started to realize that his parents’ expectations were no longer sacred. He could challenge them by engaging in these actions in the informal mode of interaction and they would never find out.98

Tao Ge is not alone. It would be easy to categorize him as a provincial boy, but many youth who go through intense Gaokao prep are lost when it comes to dating and expressing their sexual desires. They fear rejection and face-to-face interaction. The combination of college and informal platforms like QQ create new spaces for youth to explore themselves, which initially unfolds in a recreational context.

“Online, I talk about my dreams with my QQ friends.” Tao Ge had many dreams, one of which was to open up libraries across the country in rural villages. He told me that he did not realize until college how naive he was about the world. “All we did was study for the Gaokao. I think migrants from villages are smarter than village kids like me who to go to college. There is a saying in my village among the migrants, ‘You go to college, I go to the city to work. When you graduate, then I will hire you.’ We college kids do not have practical knowledge about the world. We are not forced to socialize so we are just so awkward.”

Tao Ge’s insight speaks to the tensions between rural and elite cultural values in formal education. Historically, education was not available to peasants in the countryside; only elite and financially well-off families knew how to read and write

98. William Jankowiak (2013) details contemporary dating practices in urban China through surveys and interviews.
(Zhou et al. 1998). Communism changed that, with Mao making peasants the foundation of society (Chen et al. 1984; Deng & Trieman 1997; Murphy 2004; Price 2004; Wu & Trieman 2004). Through their classes with the Communist Party, peasants learned how to read, decreasing the literacy rate from 80% to 10%. (Leung 2012). During this time anyone labeled a capitalist or intellectual was punished and sent to the countryside.

In post-Mao China, the state made education up through X grade available to everyone. Unfortunately, the wide disparity in the quality of education leaves many rural families to view continued education as too costly or unnecessary for success. Some see it as a waste of time since exam testing does not actually prepare students to be entrepreneurial, a quality that is valued highly in rural areas in post-Reform and Opening China. Consequently, narratives (such as the one Tao Ge shared) circulate within villages and families, valorizing practical skills that lead to wealth accumulation.

However, the chaos of Mao’s reforms has created very complicated village histories. Not every rural family comes from a peasant background. Many urban youth were sent to the countryside to work, with some of them marrying local villagers. Others, like Tao Ge’s family, owned land and were educated. Tao Ge’s grandfather used to be a teacher before the Cultural Revolution. His grandfather told him that their family owned a lot of land in the past: “My father is very uneducated because During the Cultural Revolution, no one got a good education. But my grandfather was very
educated. He used to teach calligraphy and Chinese history. But then the Communists came and made him suffer, they took away all of our land and redistributed it to the entire village. They marched him around, made him suffer, they called him names.”

His grandfather did not bring up this past a lot, but his parents would occasionally bring it up in an effort to remind him why it was so important for him to do well on the Gaokao: it would bring back honor and an appreciation for education that skipped his parents’ generation—the “lost generation”—due to social turmoil.

Now that Tao Ge was in college and had access to the internet, he searched for more historical information on the internet about this period of history that changed his family’s fate. He could not find any satisfactory links on Baidu. From his experience searching for porn, he knew that Google would be more reliable. And with several VPNs, he dug into links that were blocked on the mainland. He uncovered a great deal of history that he had only heard about in passing from his Grandfather. Online, he discovered the extent of information that was actively hidden from the people. He told me, “Peasants are the most naive because we have been so poor that we do not have time to look for information.” Tao Ge was becoming acutely aware of the inequalities between urban and rural life: “At first I believed that the government always said that they always serve the people. But after all the things I’ve seen online of past and current corruption, I am convinced that the government is only here to serve themselves. We are left to be on our own.”
Discovering censored information intensified Tao Ge’s search for more information. He used Google to read about China’s history and learned that past emperors treated people very horribly and actively kept information from people, just as the Communist Party does:

In the Qin Dynasty, the Emperor officially selected all books and all other books were burned. They cut your head off if you owned a book that was not part of the officially approved list of books. During the Qing Dynasty, at some point all books were burned and then intellectuals were burned too. And then the Cultural Revolution locked up books and burned books. Books had to be hand copied, but you could get in trouble if you were caught. You see the current Party is no different from the past emperors who controlled information.

He also learned about oppressive governments outside of China. In particular, he was concerned about individuals having their own agency. During one of our walks, he told me a story about a soldier who shot a guy who had tried to climb over the Berlin wall. After the wall fell, the soldier was put on trial. The Judge asked the soldier why he did it, and the soldier told him that his superior had ordered him to shoot anyone climbing the wall, to which the judge replied, “Everyone has agency, you had the agency to miss his body, you did not have to kill him.” Tao Ge discovered this story when he was searching on Google. He said, “I think everyone has an opportunity to go against the system, even if you are stuck in it.” This story resonated with him because Tao Ge realized that he, too, had a choice. Even though he lived in a society with constraints around information, he did not have to accept those constraints. This was the beginning for his moral shift from a closed to an open paradigm regarding information.
I could not help but think back to Tao Ge’s discovery of all the porn at his university—how he could have reported it to his superiors, but he decided to not follow orders. After Tao Ge told me this story, I asked him if he was still scared of information ending up on his dang’an, like being caught watching porn. His response was telling: “Ha Ha. No one cares about porn, you just have to not announce it to your supervisors, but really the government doesn’t care. They are more concerned with you saying bad stuff about them. I used to think my dang’an would control my life, but now I realize the teachers were just using my dang’an to control me.”

Tao Ge became obsessed with searching for historical events that could explain the tendency for China’s rulers to embrace what I’ve termed Information Paternalism. He used VPNs to search for censored information. He came to admire Google because “they care about information openness.” Tao Ge adopted a new vocabulary to describe information as either closed or open. He also adopted a new interest that reflects his switch from Information Paternalism to open information.

After one year of surveilling internet traffic at his university, he quit the cyber surveillance club and started to network with librarians across the country. He joined local QQ clubs for community-based librarians who created private libraries in residential buildings. He then created a QQ group to organize librarians around the country. He received an alert from QQ groups that he had reached the limit of 500 contacts for his librarian group, and so he created another group, and when that one maxed out, he created another. He was very proficient administering QQ. At any one
time, he had five different accounts opened on his screen: his primary account
(dahao), his anonymous accounts (majia), and the group’s accounts (qun). His
dedication to making information more accessible through community libraries
reflects the moral significance of his switch from Information Paternalism to
information openness. He believes that everyone, especially rural people, needs access
to alternative resources to information.

Tao Ge’s transformation within a few years of college is remarkable. Despite
lacking critical socialization skills when he entered college, he made up for it by
finding spaces online where he could practice. He did not just practice with a single
social media account, he created several across multiple platforms and managed all the
accounts at one time. While he did not intend to discover ‘hidden information’ about
China’s history, the confidence and search skills that he gained from searching for
porn helped him locate historical information about China beyond the firewalls.99

His personal shift in devaluing his parents’ instructions for marriage and his
intellectual shift in recognizing his government’s censorship radically altered his

99. For a perspective that differs from my interpretation of consumerism and mundane
activities such as pornography leading to social change, refer to Zhang (2011) in who says that:

pornography constitutes an exercise of individual freedom and self-expression, it does so in a
way that prefigures that freedom as a consumer choice rather than a political right, and
transforms self-expression into the monologic demands for personal gratification, rather than a
social and/or political recognition of the legitimacy of one’s subjective sense of self…hence
because is constitutes an apolitical and privatized means by which to exercise choice and self-
expression, the consumption of pornographic media arguably does not engender civic
consciousness and interpersonal networks that may be required to built powerful social and
political reform movements for the democratization of China’s political sphere. In fact, it may
impede the emergence of such movements by isolating the act of self-expression and
relegating it to the consumer realm (114-115).
beliefs. For Tao Ge, his family was the primary institution in his life. Prior to college, his entire world was centered around their wishes. He never questioned their word until the combination of moving away and meeting new people through college and in informal modes online introduced new ways of thinking. He no longer deems his family to be the primary decision makers in his life. Part of this transition is connected to his recreational online experience in the informal mode, where he socialized with strangers and learned how to search for hidden information, all of which contributed to a moral shift in his views on information from being closed and hierarchal to open and decentralized.

4.6.3 Sammy, the Fandom Searcher

While Tao Ge’s childhood was sheltered, Sammy’s childhood was anything but that. She could go online whenever she wanted to, walk to and from school on her own, and found time to watch movies and TV shows. She was also one of the earliest users of Douban, a social networking site that started out as a place where fans reviewed movies, books, and music.

With over 2,000 contacts on Douban, Sammy had spent years building up her credibility in fan fiction groups such as Doctor Who, Star Trek, and Big Bang Theory. She invested weeks on end translating fan fiction essays from English to Chinese. Followers came to rely on her for new ideas about the world as she often wrote essays about culture and literature. Group moderators welcomed her into their inner circles. Her fans admired her. They knew about her love for the Beatles, Stephen Fry, and Lupius. Her fans even created a group called, “We adore Sammy.”
As Sammy told her story, she spoke so quietly that it was difficult to hear her voice above the loud café music blaring Britney Spears and Chris Brown pop songs. She dressed like a stereotypical art curator—her grey scarf seeming bright compared to her monochromatic black outfit. Her presence was like that of a young adult who had traveled the world and had just returned to a small town. She had a deliberately cosmopolitan quality to her even though she was not one of those youth who had spent their summers in Europe at high-end summer camps.

Consistent with her Douban profile, Sammy’s style seeks to reiterate her independence from trends. Sammy describes her style as being about “making things up with your own will.” “I’m not interested in wearing the same clothes as everyone else. I wear what I want to wear.” She rejects popular fashion: “I do not look good in Lolita style.” She doesn’t wear skinny pants, and she considers the ubiquitous UGGS brand “practical but so ugly.” However, she does have discriminating tastes, preferring a more vintage style: “I like steampunk.” She only shops in first tier cities or on Taobao where she can find stylish or vintage fashion.

Sammy is defiantly, perhaps refreshingly, independent. While most Chinese youth have highly regimented lives, Sammy had relative freedom as a child. Her parents divorced in 2000, when she was just ten years old. They spent most of their time at work and did not push her to study, which meant that Sammy was not enrolled in intensive after-school programs like most children her age. As a result, Sammy spent a lot of time on her own.
She filled her alone time with foreign movies and television. Vendors selling pirated Western DVDs lined the streets on the route between her home and school, allowing her to buy copies of *Harry Potter* and *Friends*. She also became a Japanese anime fan. Her favorite series was, *InuYasha, A Feudal Fairy Tale*, a successful global anime hit with over 200 episodes. Unlike most middle school girls, Sammy already knew how to use the computer and internet. She began using a computer when she was five years old (1995) and by the time she was 13 years old (2003), her parents had subscribed to broadband access at home. Both of her parents were professors and in China, like the US, early adopters of technology are often people who work at educational institutions.

Sammy started using the internet when it was only lightly censored, but by 2005, internet censorship was in full effect. Domestic internet providers had no choice but to comply with the government’s guidelines for self-censorship. Pornography did not disappear, but it became harder to find. International sites like YouTube were blocked. Yahoo, Google, and Microsoft all agreed to censor search results (Thompson 2006). Yahoo even helped the Chinese government prosecute journalists (Thompson 2006). Many Chinese internet entrepreneurs followed the footsteps of the tech industry in the US, building social networks for Chinese users. One of these entrepreneurs, Bo Yang, created a travel-focused social networking site in 2005, Luzong. The site attracted many younger users who also started to form groups around similar interests in movies and books. Within that year, Luzong was revamped into Douban, a site for
media reviews. Douban became very popular among urban youth who had specialized interests in Western or Japanese entertainment.

Sammy knew that her interests were so specialized that people in her offline social circles would not share them. Without the fear or the need to manage her identity with friends, Sammy felt more comfortable listing all of her interests. To maximize the likelihood of interactions with strangers that shared common interests, Sammy included an expansive list of her favorite film characters, directors, and writers on her profile: “Jeffrey Combs, Frank Sinatra, 織田裕二, Russell Tovey, Anthony Head, James Marsters, Robert Carlyle, Linus Roache, Anthony Perkins, Jack Lemmon, David Thewlis, Simon Pegg, Simon Amstell, Buster Keaton, Zachary Quinto, Hugo Weaving, Laurence Olivier, Steve Buscemi, Thure Lindhardt, Leonard Nimoy, Stephen Fry, Thora Birch, Lauren Bacall, 深津绘里, Alyson Hannigan, Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland.” She felt it was necessary to describe herself as clearly as possible as to increase the chances that a stranger would see the commonalities in their interests.100

4.6.3.1 Joining Circles on Douban

In the informal mode, joining or leaving a group of strangers becomes the process by which youth search and discover their elastic self. Youth actively search for shows that help them better understand themselves and the world. Sammy likes

---

100. Like boyd’s (2008a) work on American youths’ social media use, Chinese youth also mark their identity through fandom. Douban users actively seek out other users who share similar interests in the shows, movies and genres.
films and shows that resonate with her values. She describes herself as a “queer, leftist feminist” who opposes militarism. She found Star Trek’s values particularly appealing: “It’s utopia. The creator of the series wrote the first season with the idea that humans could conquer war and disease, and that humans would get along well with aliens. He was already proposing a utopia and sex equality in the 1960s, that’s not easy.”

She also appreciated the political messages in the more dystopian Star Trek episodes in the later years, particularly as it “became darker, [and] showed what happens when technology doesn’t bring happiness to people.” Sammy struggled to make sense of her desire to represent her identity through technology. She often referenced fantasies of living off of the grid, a topic she regularly explored in her essays on Star Trek, which have been circulated widely within Star Trek fan fiction groups.

There are many groups dedicated to Star Trek, but to join the inner circle of the most popular group is quite difficult because Star Trek media is so extensive: over 20 movies, hundreds of novels, and more than 700 television episodes. A lot of fans just watch the movies, but Sammy felt that “If you only watch the movie you cannot call yourself a Star Trek fan.” She wanted to distinguish herself from average fans so she watched every episode of the original Star Trek series on Mtime, a science fiction website that organizes subtitled translations of popular Western television shows and movies. She then watched each episode again in English. After that, she read the wiki
for each show in English. She went through the same process with the *Star Trek* books.

But consuming *Star Trek* media would not suffice. She wanted to understand Trekker culture. She spent a lot of time on established English language fan groups, such as Startrek News, where she thought the fans were more knowledgeable than on Chinese websites. She used a VPN to search on Google for fan fiction groups in the West, finding fans on LiveJournal, Tumblr, Blogger and more.

After a few years, Sammy finally made it into the *Star Trek* circle. The group had around 3,500 members of which only 100 members were considered inner circle members, called Big Hands *dashou* (大手). Big Hands are responsible for supplying resources for the group: new story plots, new character relationships, translations of English language fan-fiction, and subtitling reedited plots. Without new resources, members become bored, leave the group or join competing fan groups.

Sammy became very well known for the “resources” she brought over from English-speaking fan fiction groups. Her *Star Trek* fan circles created a designated QQ group where “everyone draws a piece of paper and there is a primary person who is responsible for putting the articles together.” She translated essays and stories and wrote detailed and engaging reviews, becoming well known within the Douban community. Sammy drew on her extensive knowledge of movies extending back to

---

101. The most organized and popular fan fiction groups on Douban were composed of an inner circle of knowledgeable fans who contributed fan fiction resources. Each fan circle comes up with their own system to delegate tasks, but they usually involve 4-5 people in a circle who are responsible for writing.
her early days of watching DVDs by herself in middle school. Sammy took her job very seriously: “I always finish what I start” and “I always ask for permission.”

For Sammy, Douban was not a social site, it was a self-expression site. She wrote articles in fan fiction groups as a way to express her ideas. She wrote about how characters related to the world. In one of her articles, she expressed her ideas about feminism and leftist politics through Star Trek, a show that promoted equality in gender and sexuality. She contrasted these worlds with contemporary Chinese politics, which she considered to be repressive. Sammy received many comments on her articles, but Sammy rarely replied to them: she was not interested in responding to others’ comments.

In 2009, Douban added a diary feature. Users had the option of the diary status being public or private. Since most users were anonymous, a good portion of people kept their diaries public. Sammy’s diary entries became very popular among her followers. She wrote diaries complaining that she saw many on Douban who were joining groups just to be cool. She wrote about being a child of divorced parents. She talked about what it was like to be queer. She wrote an entry about her failed attempts to give sex education classes at her university. She complained about the shallow interests of her classmates and how they did not share the same things she did. She wrote about her dreams of becoming an NGO worker and eventually a leader of an NGO in six years. She wrote about volunteer experiences at LGBT organizations. She wrote about her aspirations to become a writer. She also wrote about leftist politics,
concerns about the military build-up, and feminism. When she felt depressed, she also wrote about those feelings.

Sammy poured her entire life onto Douban. When she was feeling suicidal, she posted those feelings to her diary. Her Douban friends immediately created a group just dedicated to Sammy, the “We Adore Sammy Group.” They left supportive messages telling Sammy why they liked her: she was unique, she was a great writer, and more. Sammy came to rely on this group whenever she felt depressed or suicidal, telling me, “This group prevented me from committing suicide. When I wanted to kill myself, I looked at the content and then I no longer wanted to kill myself.” Sammy confided, “I was so moved that they created a group for me. They did not even tell me they were going to do this.” Sammy isn’t sure how followers of her group found the group, as most people do not know each other and she does not know the people in it. Even though Sammy considers herself to be anti-social, her actions reveal that she also wants to be social and actually values the support of her online community when she feels down.

4.6.3.2 Discovering Sexuality

For many youth—like Liuliu and Tao Ge—who grow up in sexually repressed cultures, the internet provides sex education in a society that doesn’t discuss the subject openly. Sammy recalls the early years of the Chinese web when she could go online regularly to find sexual content. She soon discovered that it was easier to find straight and gay pornography online than it was to buy illicit DVDs from street vendors.
It was so fun. We were children and we just did what we wanted. There were no restrictions on the internet back then. We browsed pornography websites all the time. Those girls and I, we definitely became mature much earlier than most girls. We were only in sixth grade but we became enlightened about sex. I know many people who do not learn about sex until their second year in junior high school or some in the senior year or even some in college. We all saw so many genitals. I admit, we were a little embarrassed.

Sammy and her classmates in high school shared what she called “heavy taste stories” every night with each other on QQ. They sent each other links to sex scenes and watched them together at the school’s computer lab. Sammy was part of a generation of internet users who experienced the early Chinese web before the later, more expansive and heavily censored version.

Sammy was particularly interested in what Henry Jenkins believes to be the first slash fiction pairing—Spock and Captain Kirk or K/S. While the official storyline of Star Trek never showed Captain Kirk/Spock in a sexual relationship, Sammy and many other fans delved into alternative plot lines that they wanted to see happen and she actively sought out writing about her favorite fan fiction character Captain Spock because “he came out of the closet.”

Douban groups on gay slash fiction led to debates and conversations among fans on sexuality. On Douban, Sammy explored conceptions of her sexuality and learned about the concept of queerness. Douban users have also created numerous fan groups specifically for LGBT youth, where sexual identity can be freely discussed. She determined that she was not gay or straight, but queer. Douban allowed Sammy to

---

102. Slash fiction is the sexual pairing of characters on a show and now specifically refers to same-sex pairings.
interact anonymously with others who share her queer identity, making her more comfortable with her own sexuality and reinforcing that she was not alone in identifying as queer.

4.6.3.3 Deleting a Profile

Sammy and many other youth spent most of their time on platforms dominant in the informal mode like Douban or Baidu Zhidao because group participation is based on the individual knowledge that they can contribute to the collective. Sammy explains that if she wanted to join a group, she could do so as long as she felt that she qualified and accepted the group’s rules: “I just have to accept their system.” Sammy could exercise her independence and her desire to contribute to a group at the same time, but joining was ultimately her guilt-free and shame-free decision. Users are attracted to the informal mode because some things can feel less arbitrary than in formal modes. An exchange of knowledge feels more meritocratic than in other group processes that are based on personal connections. Even though the barrier for entry involves sustained interaction and knowledge about the show, the process for joining a Douban fan group involves a clear path—watch the show and read fan fiction.

For youth, acceptance into a group of strangers on platforms dominant in the informal mode is a process that involves independence and individuality. The decision to join in and of itself reflects one’s own choices, and acceptance into a group reflects one’s abilities to accumulate enough knowledge and skills to secure group approval. As we learn from Sammy, joining a group of strangers is a matter of exercising
independence: it is easier to join and leave groups of strangers than groups of familiar contacts.

As involved as Sammy was in fan fiction and sports groups, Sammy did not consider her Douban use a form of socializing. It was her space to acquire and share information related to her interests. She used Douban to find information about books and movies. “I am not some crazed person who likes to socialize. I use Douban to know more about books and videos. I only reach out to someone if they post good resources, not to find out how they are doing. “She only messaged users if they posted relevant information about the fan groups she was interested in. She did not use Douban to make friends. She even emphasized that unlike QQ, Douban is not a chatting platform. She saw Douban as a low-maintenance social media platform into which she could log in whenever she wanted to and leave comments without being pulled into a conversation: “... the idea of being social does not exist on Douban. Douban is not about talking. Douban is not a chatting platform, it is a dialogue and debate platform. When a person posts something, I will comment and then leave the thread. I will not participate in the conversation with the person, I just say write a little something. So there isn’t a lot of social interaction on Douban. You just have to show up occasionally.” On Douban, she did not feel obligated to be accessible: “I can reply to someone and just say one thing. It’s not some social network. I only need to be present occasionally.”
Like most Douban users, Sammy used a pseudonym. But unlike most users, Sammy was not active on platforms dominant in the formal mode. She explained that “some people have dual-identities online, but I do not.” To understand why Sammy used the phrase “dual-identity,” it’s important to know that unlike most Chinese youth, Sammy does not use QQ or Renren. These social networks are dominant in the formal mode: they connect users to people they already know. Sammy preferred to spend all of her time on Douban where she could disconnect from familiar people. If she were to allow people she knew to add her, then she would be giving them access to her entire self—a self that she felt most comfortable expressing with strangers.

Even though users are strangers on Douban, they can quickly assess whether they have overlapping interests by looking at each other’s profiles. Sammy started getting followers who did not share her interests and this made her uncomfortable. Without shared interests, she was unsure what the follower’s motives were. “I do not know why they follow me and only me. It’s terrible, don’t you think?”

Sammy also started to feel overwhelmed with her existing followers. Sammy experienced what I term “friend creep” in informal mode of interaction. Friend creep is when interactions with strangers evolve into relationships that start feel more reciprocal, like a friendship. Some youth welcome friend creep while others, like Sammy, feel constrained by it. Sammy had built up relationships with people on Douban, but she did not know how to navigate the social consequences of the unfollow: “If you follow someone for a long time and then you do not like what she
likes anymore, you cannot stop following her because you know her. Then you are stuck with having to see her information everyday.” Sammy felt *buhaoyisi* (不好意思) to unfollow people she knew. *Buhaoyisi* is a term that I often heard my participants use: it means to feel embarrassed, but the term is widely used.

The people she wanted to unfollow had shared their entire lives with Sammy. Many of them were fans who read all of her diary entries, and some of them were even in her “We Adore Sammy” group. She could not delete followers in her own fan group, but what about everyone else? She tried to implement a deletion policy. If people did not write good posts, she deleted them. During big events, like matches or previews, she deleted people in the hopes that they would not notice. Putting all this effort into follower management was an additional level of work on Douban that Sammy did not have to do a few years ago.

When Sammy first started using Douban, she had a “no follow” policy for people she knew: “In the beginning I did not allow anyone to find out about my Douban.” But by her second year of college, everyone she knew had a Douban account. She eventually allowed a few classmates to connect with her. She was not sure if this was the right decision, but again she felt *buhaoyisi* saying no to people, especially people she had known for several years.

For over a year, Sammy had contemplated deletion of her Douban account. She did not know how to handle her obligations to people who had become friends and her desire to remain anonymous. She could technically change her Douban ID
without having to delete her account, but she thought that she could be too easily 
rediscovered because her fans were familiar with her interests. Abandoning Douban 
conflicted with her commitments to her fan circles. But Sammy really wanted to 
disappear. “I just wanted to start all over.” Then one day she started receiving 
messages from her mom warning her to not stay up too late. Sammy was not even sure 
how her mom had found her, but when this started happening, Sammy no longer felt 
that she could share her feelings on Douban.

She deleted her account. She did not back up any of her essays. Everything 
was gone. I asked Sammy why she did not save anything. She explained that she tried 
to save her writings, but it was too troublesome. At first, it sounded like she did not 
save anything because of a technical problem—Douban did not make it easy for users 
to export their content. She stayed silent for a while, and then she started talking again. 
“I did not save it because sometimes you see the stuff you posted, and you will feel so 
annoyed. How could I have posted such stuff? Sometimes you look at that stuff you 
wrote and you will think, I hate myself.”

Sammy did not save her blog entries not because of a technical difficulty, but 
because she did not want to see or be reminded of her blog entries. Looking at past 
entries made her feel buhaoyisi about herself. “How could I have written that? I really 
do not get it. I mean, I took the time to write that, why? Everyone else is doing 
meaningful things with their life, only you are doing these useless things.” Sammy 
elaborated on what she considered to be meaningful: “Reading books, writing papers.
I shouldn’t be involved in all this drama. Maybe there is something more important for me to do. Like maybe I can need to learn how to live an unplugged life without internet access.”

We then talked about what an unplugged life would look like, and by the end of the conversation she added, “One of the reasons why I cancelled my account is because I became too predictable. Everyone had a preconceived impression about me, thinking I was like that and that kind of person.” Sammy wanted to remain unpredictable.

The identities Sammy explored on Douban are no longer the identities she wanted to be associated with. She started to feel boxed in by them and limited by other people’s ideas about her. Interacting with people who had certain preconceived ideas about her made her feel constrained, and she wanted a clean slate. Unattached to her identity on Douban, she treated it as an ephemeral expression of herself.

For a long time, Sammy used Douban in the informal mode to express herself with strangers, but she eventually developed deep relationships with the people she tried to remain distant from. She felt obligated to those relationships, but at the same time, these interactions reminded her of a self she no longer wanted to see. She became more vulnerable as she became more connected to her online fans, but at the same time, her vulnerability made her feel more constrained in her relationships. She felt that she was now bound to respond to all their messages. Her friends from the informal mode started to blur into formal modes of interaction.
Sammy struggles with the tensions between belonging and novelty. Her desire to find people who could appreciate her specialized interests in Star Trek led her to find a community in Douban, but her desire for new experiences also prevented her from becoming too emotionally invested in those communities. At the same time, Sammy was aware that on Douban, she can express interests that would have caused her to be shunned by people she knows.

While it is clear that talking about her media interests around strangers is liberatory for Sammy, it is not clear whether or not she feels any less lonely. She is not just an average group member as she is one of the few dashou experts in a TV series that has high standards for expertise. Her fame as a contributor makes her feel loved by her fans, but she also creates new markers of exclusion that prevents her from seeing all her fans as equals, which creates even more distance between her and her online contacts.

Without her Douban community, Sammy could not explore the socially stigmatized sides of herself. Through anonymous interactions, she built up a fan base that adored her. But their adoration created new social pressures on Sammy, and, in response, she implemented many rules that determined whether she followed or unfollowed a contact. Sammy’s story illustrates the potential constraints that come with a more Elastic Self.

4.6.4 Mimi, an Ideal Party candidate

As we walked into Starbucks at 8:00 P. M., students on laptops filled the room, couples slowly sipped their coffees on leather couches, and a line of people blocked
the entire dessert display case. Lady Gaga’s *Bad Romance* was barely audible over the workers making frozen frappuccinos and smoothies in the loud blenders. This Starbucks had just opened a few months ago, but the wood was already scratched and the couches were starting to tear at the seams.

I spotted Mimi in the far corner of the room. Mimi was a fourth year history student and she looked the part: she wore a shirt buttoned-up to her neck, black-rimmed glasses, and short hair cropped at her chin. Over a cup of coffee, she told me about how she had joined the Communist Party and eventually became the Party Secretary of her department. It’s very difficult to join the Party, much less to become the Party Secretary, so I was very curious as to how Mimi obtained this status.

4.6.4.1 Joining the Communist Party

For a member of Communist Youth League of China, to joining the Communist Party of China (CPC) takes 4 steps.

1. CYLC member (共青团员): The Applicant officially writes an application for the Party Committee.

2. Party Activist (入党积极分子): If the party committee accepts the application, they talk to the applicant and hold an election to accept or deny the application to become a Party Activist. The Party Activist then receives a training about the Party’s history and takes a final test on it. If he or she does not pass the test, the test score is recorded in their personal file *dang’ an* (档案). The Party Activist is supervised by the Qun Zhong (群众), the
public, like other classmates). If the Party Activist engages in improper behavior, such as cheating or fighting with others, they lose their position as Party Activist and it is recorded in his or her personal file.

3. **Probationary Party Member (PPM) (预备党员):** After one year of a probationary period, committee members select some Party Activists to become Probationary Party Members. The Probationary Party Member fills out an official party application which includes their family members, their work, personal experiences, two recommendation letters from two full party members and Qun Zhong’s identification. The Probationary Member then pledges the following oath to the Party flag: “I volunteer to join the Communist Party of China, uphold the Party’s program, compliance with the Party Constitution, fulfill the duties of party members, and implement the Party’s decisions, strictly observe Party discipline, the Party’s secrets, be loyal to the Party, and actively work for the communist struggle for life, ready to the party and the people to sacrifice everything, and never betray the Party.”

4. **The Party Member (党员):** After at least one year of supervision, if the Probationary Party Member does not do anything improper, he or she will be enrolled in the Party.

---

103. “我志愿加入中国共产党，拥护党的纲领，遵守党的章程，履行党员义务，执行党的决定，严守党的纪律，保守党的秘密，对党忠诚，积极工作，为共产主义奋斗终身，随时准备为党和人民牺牲一切，永不叛党。”
Mimi came from the right background. From a young age, there was no question that Mimi would join the Communist Party. As a young child, her mother had told her that she, too, would one day join the Party, provided that she worked hard in school and showed good character. Like most Chinese youth, she took part in the Young Pioneers program for children between the ages of 7 and 14. Established in 1949 with the founding of the Party, and then replaced by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, the Young Pioneers program was reinstated in 1978. She remembers all the group activities: singing songs with her classmates, tying a red scarf around her neck, and chanting songs such as the Young Pioneer’s theme song, “We Are the Successors of Communism”:

We are the heirs of communism,
Inheriting the glorious tradition of the forbearers of the Revolution;
[To] love the motherland and the people,
[While] the crimson red scarf flutters [or waves] at [our] chest.
[We] do not fear hardship, nor the enemy,
Studying hard and struggling with resolve;
Towards victory, [we] courageously advance,
Towards victory, [we] courageously advance,
Towards victory, [we] courageously advance;
We are the heirs of communism.

We are the heirs of communism,
Along the glorious path of the forbearers of the Revolution;
[To] love the motherland and the people,
“Young Pioneer Members” is our proud name.
Ever be prepared, to contribute [i.e. to the cause],
[And] to destroy completely the enemy.
For [our] ideal, [we] courageously advance,
For [our] ideal, [we] courageously advance,
For [our] ideal, [we] courageously advance;
We are the heirs of communism.
Emphasizing the importance of taking care of her country and fellow citizens, Young Pioneers memorize this song and sing it a few times a year at ceremonial events. By middle school, Mimi joined the Communist Youth League of China (CYLC) (共青团员)104. For most students who aim to join the Party, membership in the CYLC is sought after because it facilitates full membership in the Party.

By the time Mimi reached high school, she knew that if she continued to test well and to show her love for her country, she would eventually be asked to join the Party. In 2008, during her third year of high school when the Sichuan Earthquake had killed over 68,000 people, the government declared a three-day period of national mourning. All TV stations canceled regular programming to focus on earthquake coverage. Many websites, including the largest internet portals, paused advertisements, changed their logos to black and white, and only showed earthquake coverage. Mimi remembers this period very clearly: “After the earthquake, the whole nation, like the whole atmosphere was focused on saving lives. Wen Jiabao went to the disaster area very quickly and the news broadcasted about the earthquake for three days…All the online games and entertainment were shut down. No movies! It was all about the earthquake…For three days we could only watch news on TV about Sichuan. It touched my heart.”

104. One of the Party’s recruitment methods is to identify and invite high-performing students in high school and college to join the Communist Youth League of China (CYLC).
Mimi, like almost everyone else in China, was consumed with news about the earthquake and relief efforts. News stations and party leaders encouraged the public to donate money. Mimi donated 300RMB, all of the money she had saved. Donations from the Chinese public totaled 10.7 billion yuan (approximately US$1.5 billion), making it the largest national and international relief effort ever in China.

Not too long after the earthquake, her high school principal invited her to join the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This was the moment Mimi had been waiting for—she was one of two students out of a class of 52 that were selected to join the CCP. Part of the membership process requires all CCP hopefuls to fill out a long application that asks a bunch of questions such as “Why are you applying?” “What are your views on the Party?” and “What is your family’s background?” Her parents told her that her answers would be critical because they would all be saved in a file that would be reviewed at a later point when she would receive an invitation to join the Party as a full member.

Mimi spent a long time filling out the application. She had prepared for this moment for a long time. She gave examples of her dedication to her country. She cited her donation to the Sichuan Earthquake relief efforts and her willingness to help her fellow classmates with their homework. Mimi was eager to show the party her impeccable sense of honesty. She wrote about how she never cheated or lied. She told

105 Many people noted that this was the first national mourning for a group of people instead of an individual state leader, and the largest public mourning since the death of Mao Zedong.
them how her parents loved the Party, and how she never wasted time online on games, entertainment, or celebrity gossip. She answered each question properly.

4.6.4.2 A Secret Weibo Account

By our second cup of coffee, Mimi told me something that she did not want anyone inside the Party to know. She confessed that when she started college, she had created a secret Weibo account to follow entertainment news, celebrity gossip, and pop singers’ personal lives. Her interest in entertainment extended back to her childhood. One of her earliest memories involving the internet was from China Central Television (CCTV), the dominant state broadcast network. She recalled the host inviting viewers to visit their website after every show: “Haha, I remember that advertisement so clearly. The internet was becoming really popular and after every performance on CCTV the host would say that line, ‘We invite you to visit our website, cctv.com for additional programming information,’ and then I would go to the website to look up the TV schedules to see if there were any good shows.”

Mimi was living at home at the time, but she did not have a computer there. She used the computer at her school to look up the CCTV schedules and, while doing that, she played games and signed up for a QQ account. Her interest in entertainment only grew in high school when she learned how to download songs as MP3s from Baidu.com and QQ. Mimi’s earliest experiences with the internet involved entertainment.

In college she had the freedom to go online anytime. She could view, forward, or post entertainment news on her Weibo account with her cellphone and laptop
whenever and wherever. However, as a soon-to-be full member of the CCP, she was still being vetted for Party membership. She was convinced that she had to keep her account a secret because if anyone were to find out about her account, her chances of joining the party could be jeopardized. It would be very easy for someone to claim that while her interests in celebrity gossip are not politically sensitive, wasting time on trivial information is unpatriotic.

After joining the CCP as a provisional member in high school, her teacher warned of the importance of managing public perceptions. “My teacher told me to be more careful about my words and behavior. He told me to never say anything sensitive or cynical because it will get me in trouble.” Mimi explained that once you enter the Party, people start treating you differently. Her parents and teachers warned that people will watch her more carefully now. She discussed some of her concerns: “If I am chatting in an office about whatever, and some classmates overhears my conversation, then they will hurt me with their words. They will say, “You’re just trying to be different from other people.” I know that for sure someone will do that. They would say that I’m hypocritical because when I hold the Party meetings I come across as an honest person but then after the meeting I live another life, doing things that counter my beliefs.”

Mimi felt that she could not let her guard down. To prevent people from making claims that would affect her eventual Party membership, she had to keep her interests, including her celebrity Weibo account, a secret. “I will not use my real name
to forward that [celebrity] stuff. If they know it’s me it would not be good. I do not have the freedom to use my real name.” She continued to join Weibo groups that tracked singers’ lives, she kept up with their travels, and talked with other people in the groups who had similar interests. But she could only express her interest in celebrities to strangers.

4.6.4.3 Discovering Hidden Information

Maintaining a secret gossip-filled Weibo account conflicted with Mimi’s devotion to the Party. When I asked Mimi why she risked the Party membership for which she had worked so hard and that she seemed to want so badly, she became silent. She put her hands underneath her legs and squeezed her thighs together. I could sense her whole body tensing up as she curled her lower lip inward, revealing a dimple on the left side of her face. “Actually, when I was in high school, I was very pious. I really wanted to join the Party. At that time, I thought it was a honor. Only a few can have this honor in every class. Only two in my class were chosen.”

I asked Mimi if she believed in the Party more in high school. “Yes,” she said. “Very much, but it was not about whether I believed in the government. I just thought it was an honor to join the Party. Not everyone can have this chance.” However, after she joined the Party during her third year of high school, several events happened that made her question whether Party membership was truly the honor that she had thought it would be.

While studying for the Gaokao tests, the national college entrance exam, a teacher told her class that they did not need to know anything about the Cultural
Revolution. “The teacher said to us, ‘History about the Cultural Revolution is not a focal point in the examination. You do not need to learn it.’ If the teacher says that the examination doesn’t cover a part of history, then that means we do not have to learn it.” As in the West, Chinese high school teachers spend a great deal of classroom time preparing students for college entrance tests. Mimi liked studying history, so she thought it was odd that her teacher had told them that the tests did not emphasize such knowledge. Then, she began to notice that whole time periods of Chinese history were ignored: “For example…we get to the part about our country’s foundation, and then the part on Socialism reformation, and then the part on the Cultural Revolution is skipped, and the teacher will say, ‘Let’s move on to the next part.’”

I asked her how she even knew about the Cultural Revolution if it was not reviewed in class. “Our teacher talked to us about it in private during self study, he told us about the Cultural Revolution and the June 4 [Tiananmen Square] Revolution.” By discussing the June 4 Massacre, an event that is rarely discussed in the home or classroom, Mimi’s teacher had clearly strayed from the approved Party curriculum.

Mimi’s teacher was one of hundreds of thousands of students who engaged in the countrywide protests that had erupted in the spring of 1989. When Hu Yaobang died on April 15, 1989, students gathered on university campuses across China to mourn his death. On April 17, several thousand students marched to Tiananmen and put forth the Seven Demands, calling for freedom of press and greater transparency.

106. Hu Yaobang was a senior leader in the Communist Party who implemented free-market reforms and attempts to increase government transparency in the 1980s.
The protest in Beijing spread to other cities around China, including Wuhan (Link 2010), where Mimi’s teacher had been a student at a local university. He participated in the public mourning and protests, which eventually subsided in May. But, then, news of the Tiananmen Massacre spread throughout the country. Enraged students took to the streets again, but this time, they disrupted transportation and everyday life. In Wuhan, Mimi’s teacher and his classmates marched to the Yangtze River Railway Bridge, joining several thousand students in a protest that blocked the bridge. He told Mimi that the army had killed thousands of students, but that the government would never admit it.

Mimi tried to find more information about the June 4 event. She knew from the way her teacher had discussed the event it would be too sensitive to ask anyone else about it. She turned to Baidu, but the searches did not produce any information. She could download the MP3 for any singer that she liked or find any CCTV schedule online, but she could not find any mention about such an important event. Was her teacher lying? Why would the government do this to their citizens? How could this be true if there was no mention of it anywhere?

Mimi liked and respected her teacher very much. She started to think that maybe her teacher was not lying. She said, “when information is hidden, it’s better to get the information from people who’ve been through the event” instead of other sources such as the internet, or books. For Mimi, the absence of information was an indicator of ‘hidden information.’ Not being able to find any mentions of the June 4
Massacre reinforced her belief in her teacher’s story. When she graduated high school, he told a group of students, “All the history in high school texts books is fake. There is no need for you to remember any of it. You guys can forget all that you have learned.” That is when she began to realize that the history in her textbooks was different from people’s lived experiences.

**4.6.4.5 And Discovering More**

When it came time to choose a college, Mimi’s grades were high enough for her to have several choices. She decided to go to Wuhan University because of her teacher’s stories about his involvement in the protests of 1989—Wuhan seemed like a magical place where all his secret stories had unfolded. By the time she started college, she had already begun to see that, contrary to the claims in its history books, the government was not an infallible ruling body.

Mimi spoke very openly about her change in perception. She gave me several examples. In her first year of history classes in college, she started thinking about what her high school teacher had told her about all that hidden history. She observed that all of the books she had ever read, including the ones in college, were part a preapproved list. “There are still many books that are not allowed [in China], they are hidden, so we have to find them in Hong Kong, maybe in Taiwan, but definitely not on the Mainland.”

One particular public intellectual on Weibo, Zhang Yihe, introduced Mimi to the unfamiliar history of the Cultural Revolution. Zhang Yihe\(^\text{107}\) is the second

---

\(^{107}\) Zhang Yihe’s Weibo is [http://weibo.com/u/1907616172](http://weibo.com/u/1907616172)
daughter of Zhang Bojun, who goes down in history as the man Chairman Zedong declared as “China’s number one rightist.” Zhang Yihe wrote a moving biography of their family story, Wang Shi Bing Bu Ru Yan, documenting her father’s life from his early education in Germany to his political ambitions, as well as his horrible experiences during the Cultural Revolution. She also described other tragedies during the Revolution. When the book was published in 2004 in Hong Kong, it was immediately censored in China, which only created more curiosity. The people she followed on Weibo referred to the book enough times that she wanted to read it herself. She knew that she could trust her friends who were studying in Hong Kong to quietly bring a copy of the book to her. Of Zhang Yihe, Mimi said, “She writes books that make me think…what we’ve learned all these years, the history in history books is so unreal. It’s full of slogans. But what she writes is real. She includes a lot of details. It’s different from the history books in school that like write, ‘This is a mistake because blah blah,’ some formula with official words that make it very hard for me to believe.” When Mimi read the book during her freshman year of college, she was horrified, saddened, and shocked at what had happened in China at the hands of the Party she had joined.

108. Zhang was the Secretary of Transportation in the Department of the People’s Republic of China from 1949 to 1958. He was identified as a public enemy during the Anti-Rightest movement between 1957-1959. Rightists supposedly preferred capitalism over communism.

109. 往事并不如烟

110. Since 2004, the book has been reprinted 4 times and has sold over 300,000 copies. On the Baidu Knows entry, it says that “This book has been speculated to be one of best works of literature in mainland China since the founding. It is of both literary and historical value, and in Taiwan, Hong Kong and other overseas Chinese circles it led to a strong response.”
She asked her friends in Hong Kong to bring back more books about China’s history and critiques on Communism: “Books about liberty. Those kinds of books cannot be found in China, so I ask my friends in HK to buy them for me. It costs a lot.” In one of her college classes, a professor assigned a reading from Vaclav Havel, a Czech dissident and thinker who published political theories about Communism. Mimi started to wonder why China did not have thinkers like Havel, commenting, “We do not have people like Havel [in China]. But in Eastern Europe, they have a strong sense of introspection about their history, while we hide some history that is harmful to the Party in power.” Her doubts about the Party were solidifying. During her second year of college, a friend told her about another disturbing historical event. “A friend was telling me about the Great Chinese Famine, it was a three year natural disaster…my friend told me [that the death toll was] three million, and I did not believe him at first, because there’s no evidence online.”

Her initial reaction was disbelief. How could such an awful event happen? Just like the June 4 Massacre, she tried to verify the story online, but could not find reliable information. She could not talk to anyone she knew: “I never talk about this kind of information with other people. I just know it and I keep it to myself.” She worried that friends and teachers would think that something was wrong with her if she were to start asking them to explain the famine and how people had died. Mimi felt that, again, the absence of detailed information was proof that the event happened. She explains, “But later, I chose to believe in it because there’s no information about it online. Sure,
the number could be higher or lower, but I believed it because I know him [the person who told her the story]. I guess he may have read it in some books that are forbidden on the mainland. Actually I have doubts about the event, but he is my only information source I have about this topic.”

After several failed attempts to follow up on stories like the one her friend shared with online searches, Mimi concluded that the government was actively hiding information from the public. The absence of information made her believe that her friend was telling the truth. At this point, she was not concerned about accuracy in the number of deaths, but whether the tragedy had ever happened in the first place. Even though she did not use VPNs to access blocked sites where she could have easily found information about Tiananmen Square, the Cultural Revolution, and The Great Famine, she still was able to recognize that the government was lying because of its lack of transparency. This recognition conflicted with her commitment as a member of the Party to treat it as an infallible institution.

4.6.4.6 Joining the Party as a Cynic and a Copier

By the time Mimi was asked to join the Party in college, she was no longer excited or honored by the prospect. She was still confused as to why the government was hiding information from its citizens. She was also disenchanted upon finding out through her Weibo that a large number of donations to the Sichuan earthquake, including her donation, may have been used for corruption. But because the party and media could not be trusted, there was no way to verify the allegations as true or false.
Filling out a long application and answering questions about her dedication to her country seemed tedious. Mimi was already balancing several student clubs and a full load of classes. Her mother noticed Mimi’s lack of enthusiasm. She knew that if Mimi did not write an impressive application, the Party would not accept her. Party membership is difficult to obtain: only 5.6% of China’s population are Party members. In 2011, only 14% of the 21 million applicants were accepted for recruitment (Hunt 2011).

Her mother took over the application process. As the Deputy Secretary of the Communist Party at her job, Mimi’s mother could access all of the company files, which contained applications from successful candidates. Her mother not only wrote Mimi’s application, she plagiarized it. “[My mom] brought the records back [home], she got a good number of samples from Party members, she analyzed how they wrote them [the application], and she copied their applications for me.” Mimi’s plagiarizing was not unusual. In fact, many online forums advise students to ask their parents to fill out their applications.111

Many Party applicants do not actually fill out their own application. They search on Baidu, China’s largest search engine, for applications uploaded by people who have successfully joined the Party, and then like Mimi’s mother, plagiarize them.

111. These are several forums that students use to plagiarize applications: 
http://fanwen.chazidian.com/rudangzhiyuanshu/
http://www.eduzhai.net/shehui/882/
A search on Baidu for the term “Communist Party application” (入党申请书) “turns up close to one million links.\(^{112}\)

Most applications start off with the same few lines: “I voluntarily join the Communist Party of China, because the Communist Party is the vanguard of the Chinese working class, the faithful representative of the interests of the people of all ethnic groups in China and the core of leadership of China’s socialist cause.”\(^{113}\)

Considering that she was so excited to fill out her own application in high school, I was curious how Mimi felt about her mother’s actions. “Oh, nobody writes their own application. It seems that I was the only one who wrote my own Party application in high school because I really thought it was an honor to join.” Mimi did not seem conflicted about her mother’s involvement and plagiarizing.

The local Party accepted Mimi’s application. Mimi was required to participate in a year of work-study courses and to submit reports to a supervisor who would oversee her membership process. If her supervisor deemed her to be a good candidate by the end of the year, Mimi would become a full member of the Party.

However, Mimi was no longer the idealistic Party hopeful that she was in high school. If she could not bring herself to write her own application, how would she manage to submit the monthly reports to her supervisor? She did the same thing that her mom had shown her to do: she plagiarized them. “There are many reports online

\(^{112}\) as of 2012

\(^{113}\) 我自愿要求加入中国共产党，因为共产党是中国工人阶级的先锋队，是中国各族人民利益的忠实代表，是中国社会主义事业的领导核心。
you can find them on Baidu—do not use Google—just search for ‘work summary’ and you will find lots of pages.” She found many reports online, for example:

Under the leadership of the Party, I stay in accordance with the standards of the party’s leading cadres strict demands to pay close attention to the party’s information, learn the party’s policies, regulations, firm ideals, and beliefs in a timely manner. I take concrete actions to practice the “Three Represents” to contribute my own efforts to building a harmonious society. During the year, even when times are hectic, I can live a full and meaningful life. Now I report to the Party from the following aspects. Firstly, in terms of ideals and beliefs, I stay adherent to the Party’s ideology and manage myself.

As soon as she thought that she had found a solution, she quickly discovered that her superior could identify plagiarized reports. “You just cannot do a straight repeat,” Mimi said. “Or else they will catch you and your superior will put you through a self-criticism.” Her supervisor had called Mimi in several times for copying. “I’ve been criticized many times. They caught me. They’re so sharp. They just know it because their job is to see our reports and if they see that there is too much common writing or not enough specific detail about a comrade, then they will show me all these reports that are good, but they are horrible, full of slogans.”

I asked her what happens when she gets caught. She told me, “He will say to me, look these are repeats copied from the internet. Actually, he is kind of nice to us. He will say, if you keep copying next time, it will be difficult for you to join the Party, do not blah blah.”

——

114. 工作总结
I then asked if she was afraid of her superior and of him denying her entry into the Party. She declined: “No, because I know for sure that we can join the Party, or they will get in trouble. The development of Party members is hard work, if we are not fit to join the Party, he has to find and develop new applicants...this is hard work and it is more trouble to find new applicants.”

Her nuanced understanding of the power dynamics impressed me. Mimi had no desire to put in the effort to write quarterly Party reports. The Party at the university level did not want to go through the effort to replace her; her superior had a quota to meet. There is an equilibrium at work: each side allows the other to get away with just enough so that neither side has to do any more work than necessary. The local Party leader allowed Mimi to copy; in turn, Mimi allowed the Party to criticize her. The criticisms, however, were not taken too seriously. “We’ll restrain ourselves from copying for a while,” Mimi explained, but then everyone eventually goes back to copying. She appeared to be more annoyed than scared: “I am afraid of being bothered. Once I spent a whole afternoon listening to a criticism. First our superior criticized me. Then he took me to the school’s Party Committee to criticize me.”

As Mimi had predicted, her copied reports did not affect her Party membership. She was eventually accepted and promoted to the Secretary of her university’s local Party. Mimi took the job very seriously. Under her guidance, the supervisor was more pleased with students’ reports. Mimi coached probationary party members to submit at least one report a quarter, but they can also submit more if they want to.
applicants who are on their way to joining the Party in best practices for copying reports.

I do not want the members I oversee to be subjected to this criticism, so I remind them to do well. I do critique them a little. I tell them what I’ve learned from the self-criticisms, to make sure not to copy repeats. I always copy a little, like the main structure of the report. Then I write a lot of details in the report. This way is faster. When I copy, I spend a lot of time drawing from several different reports. It’s such a waste of time. But now I copy skillfully.

According to other students, she was generous with her advice and they greatly appreciated her guidance.

Considering the fact that Mimi had already become disillusioned with the government, I was curious as to why Mimi joined the Party. Without a pause she replied, “Maybe it’ll be helpful later on in my life.” Mimi is right—being in the Party can open many doors. Party membership makes one a more favorable civil servant. Promotions at institutions are prioritized for Party members over nonmembers. Joining the Party does not mean she does not have doubts about it; it simply means that she has found a way to rationalize her participation. She is invested in the Party for instrumental reasons rather than ideological reasons.

4.6.4.7 Maintaining Two Identities

After Mimi told me about her copying strategy, she revealed another secret. She also uses her celebrity Weibo account to forward sensitive information about the government. If copying Party reports did not jeopardize her chances to enter and remain in the Party, why would posts about hiding information bring her trouble?
However, I soon learned that it had nothing to do with the Party, the government, or even politics per se.

After years of doubt about the government building up inside of her, she was ready to share her thoughts with her friends. She waited for a good moment to do this. When Václav Havel died in December 2011, she was devastated. She thought it would be a good time to share her thoughts about democracy through his words. She prepared a post on Renren in memory of Havel. Looking carefully for a good quote from him about democracy, she composed a wall post on Renren, pasting in Havel’s quote; she even typed out her thoughts about the quote. She did not dare say that China should become a democracy, but she implied that China could learn a few things from Havel’s theories.

Now all she had to do with click “post” on Renren, and all of her 755 friends would see her post on their wall and learn more about her political beliefs. Her voice shook a bit as she recalled the moment. “…My classmates wrote irrelevant things on my post. They asked me, ‘Did you eat lunch today? I’m playing, would you like to join us?’ Those questions are unrelated to my topic.” Mimi was annoyed that no one responded to her thoughts about Havel and the responses she received were unrelated to Havel.

She also noticed that her friends thought it was odd for her to post this kind of information. When I asked Mimi how she could tell her friends were discussing her post, she said “It’s easy, you can guess from chatting with your friends, well I cannot
remember the exact thing, but I am careful about this now. I try to avoid arguments with them. And I’m very careful with my behavior. Yeah.” Mimi appeared to be very upset as she recalled the memory and it was the first time I heard her say that the post led to an argument, so I asked her what argument came out of it, “No, I just mean that I am more careful. I did not think deliberately enough about posts before that or what would happen. Because I used to think ok it’s normal, nothing special. But now I have to be careful to avoid a bad argument with others.” We talked a bit more about the post and at no point did Mimi say that there was a direct confrontation or even face-to-face acknowledgment of the post. Even though there was no identifiable argument from Mimi’s post on Havel, she sensed that her classmates had judged her for it; she was close to starting an argument. This feeling alone led her to reevaluate her use of Renren. She concluded that she had to exercise more restraint with her Renren posts. “It’s better not to comment on anything about policy because it may bring trouble. Er…It may bring me trouble, if I say something too excessive. With the post about Havel’s death, I’ve already heard unfriendly words about me, saying that I’m the Party secretary, which is me, so blah blah blah.”

She decided that she would only use Renren to “post things that I’m familiar with and that both sides know to be true in life.” Renren was full of people she already knew, whereas Weibo was full of strangers. This made a difference to her. “On Weibo, there is some social distance [between users] but there’s nothing to avoid. I can post anything on Weibo….Weibo is where we can express our thoughts and
advice. There’s no need for others to forward it. Even I know I’ll get more fans when someone famous forwards my post online. But the number of fans is meaningless. I do not care much about the number of fans.”

Mimi stopped posting about politics on Renren because she felt social pressure from her classmates, not political pressure from her Party superiors. Mimi saw a clear dichotomy between the platforms that were dominant in the informal mode of interaction, and the ones that were dominant in the formal mode. It became clear to her that Renren is dominant in the formal mode, as she already had preexisting relationships with all of her Renren contacts. Weibo is dominant in the informal mode: she did not have to worry about what other people thought of her because she had no preexisting relationships with any of her contacts. She could post about celebrities or about her thoughts on democracy. On Weibo, where her fans were mostly strangers, she was not concerned about starting an “argument.” I recalled what she told me earlier in our discussion when her teacher warned her to be careful of her words now that she was on the road to becoming a Party member—that people will look for ways to claim that you’re being different.

4.6.4.8 A Less Cynical Mimi

At one point Mimi wanted so badly to be accepted by Communist Party members. As we already know, Mimi did not plagiarize her first application, but she eventually allowed her Mom to copy her college Communist Party application and she even started copying her reports. Despite her willingness to challenge the Party with plagiarized reports, she worried that any publicly discoverable, direct criticism would
be too risky. She still wanted to join the Party, so she hid this side of her by creating two online identities. Her first Weibo account used her real name where she followed people she knew, along with famous party leaders. Like many others, Mimi felt that she could only show the nonpublic side of herself with strangers. She eventually closed down her secret account and used her primary account that was more public, but still filled with strangers.

When we ended the interview, Mimi told me she knows that Party superiors could be watching at any time. “Teachers help your studies... but superiors, they care about your political thoughts. I always tell myself: be careful.” Mimi expresses her Elastic Self in several ways, primarily through her secret Weibo account on which she can forward and post information with minimal risks. By creating the secret Weibo account, posting her ideas about politics on her Weibo, and forwarding sensitive Weibo posts, Mimi deliberately managed her identity in every online act. Mimi presented one identity to the Communist Party, another self on Renren, and another self on her secret Weibo.

Though both Liuliu and Mimi engaged in the informal mode of interaction, they had opposite formulas for an Elastic Self. Both tried to express their feelings on Renren: Liuliu expressed his sexuality while Mimi expressed her political thoughts, and both encountered resistance from their friends. But Liuliu refused to segment his identity and cancelled his Renren account while Mimi resorted to only talking about safe subjects on her Renren account.
Mimi is less willing than Liuliu or Tao Ge to just abandon the institutions that she doubts; she still want to be involved, albeit with more distance and awareness. She chooses to stay in the Party because the connections will be useful later for her career goal to become a professor: “I want to get a PhD degree, work in school, and share my opinions with undergraduates in the future… I want to help make connections with students and NGO or a charity.” Mimi’s future plan is, we could say, a tribute to her connection with her high school teacher who told her about Tiananmen Massacre. Even though the moral superiority of the Party is diminished in her eyes, Mimi still believes that Party membership will help her best achieve her goals to become a professor. She chooses to make changes from inside the institution.

Mimi only realized after posting her favorite Havel quote that Renren was not a place to share her political thoughts. Even after being socially shamed for her post, she did not cancel the account. What is remarkable is that Mimi did not emotionally shut down after feeling ashamed (丢人) for sharing: she continued sharing her thoughts with strangers. In the process, Mimi became more aware of where she could do it and who she could do it with. While Mimi initially experienced context collapse\textsuperscript{116} but overtime she found ways to create and uphold context by marking new boundaries.

This new sociality is neither perfect nor seamless. It is filled with mistakes and regrets, but youth do not become damaged when they misread a cue or collapse a

\textsuperscript{116} According to boyd, “the lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries makes it difficult to maintain distinct social contexts” online. (boyd 2008a, 34).
context. Their apprehensions are not around technology or spatial boundaries of “offline” or “online” but rather social interactions—the mixing of contacts and the blurring of informal and formal modes of interaction. Mimi’s worry is how others will perceive her. She is initially ambivalent about how to manage a particular self in a specific interaction. Her decision to become silent on politics on Renren was the result of social pressure, not political pressure. She learned that the norms of the formal mode of interactions do not permit her to openly share her feelings.

While Mimi’s moral shift is initiated by a contact in her social circle—her teacher who gives her information about the Cultural Revolution—the shift is carried out with the help of strangers on Weibo. Her teacher had already communicated that the topic was too sensitive to talk about openly, so Mimi could not ask around about it. On Weibo, however, China’s history was an open topic. Despite censorship, she learned the code words that people used to talk about censored events. On Weibo she felt more free to talk about policy matters and even recreational interests. Seeing so many other people expressing themselves on Weibo reassured her that she was not alone and that it is a place where she will not be shamed.

4.7 Analysis

4.7.1 Discovering Hidden Information, Whether It Is About Sex or Politics

Each of the stories in this chapter show a different pathway to the Exploratory Phase of the Elastic Self. While each participant exhibited different reasons for turning to the informal mode of communication, their stories all involve a search for
information that was unavailable in their preexisting social circles. Liuliu wanted more information about sexuality, Tao Ge wanted more information about sex, Sammy wanted more information about Western media culture, and Mimi wanted more information about entertainment and history. While all of their information needs were different, they are united under a common search for ‘hidden information.’ The very act of looking for ‘hidden information’ is empowering because they gain a greater sense of agency from accessing information that is not available through formal modes of interaction.

An important part of the Exploratory Phase is learning the difference between platforms dominant in the formal and informal mode. The process of exploring informal modes is filled with trial and error. Initially, Chinese youth are not necessarily familiar with the indicators that distinguished a platform from being dominant in the formal mode from one that is dominant in the informal mode. Liuliu had to find out the hard way after announcing his sexuality on Renren. Mimi’s Renren post on Havel and democracy did not generate the kind of political discussion she had hoped for. Both of them quickly learned that sharing their unconventional feelings and ideas on a site with people they know could have unpleasant consequences.

Incorporating social media sites into their lives is a process fraught with friction for many youth. As they explore their sense of self, they often find that social media platforms dominant in the formal mode are simply limiting for a variety of reasons (psychological, intellectual, civic, emotional). In turn, they seek social media
platforms dominant in the informal mode; these offer malleability, anonymity, and impermanence in their self-expression and interaction.

The discovery of an informal mode of interaction provides an expressive space, but it doesn’t make their problems go away. Liuliu’s family pressure did not dissipate and neither did the judgment of people he knew at his university. However, at least he knew that he was no longer confined to a rigid self and had spaces to explore a more flexible identity. Tao Ge’s worry that he could not interact with girls was not resolved, but he found spaces where he could practice interacting with them without the watchful eye and interference of people he knew. Sammy’s attempt to remain distant from people she knows still conflicts with her desire to be part of a group, but mediating her interests through informal interactions led her to discover her nerd identity. Mimi still feels that she has to be more rigid around her Party comrades, but creating an anonymous account where she could practice posting sensitive information prepared her to create her semi-public account.

Uncovering ‘hidden information’ leads to a moral shake-up. It disrupts the confident sense of selfhood that comes from having stable beliefs in one’s society. It leads youth to experience what Yan calls “institutionalized immorality” (2011, 56), the concept that an institution that was once deemed to be infallible is actually wrong. As my participants uncovered information that conflicted with what they have been told by the authority figures in their life, it not only triggered psychological discordance and bewilderment, it also forced them to readjust their worldviews to make room
for—and to make sense of—this new information. Consequently, they began to develop a moral compass that reflects the moral paradigm of open information.

As much as China has tried to create a highly filtered and surveilled internet, virtual borders are porous. Blocked information is still able to enter into China. With access to the internet, individuals are bypassing authoritarian controls and accessing a world of information modeled on open information. The availability of social media platforms dominant in the informal mode has catalyzed the accessibility of “hidden information,” bringing greater visibility to much of what would have remained hidden in a predigital era.

This visibility leads youth to a more open model of information: post-80s and post 90s are recalibrating their moral compasses as they come across new worldviews on the internet. Liuliu became more open about his sexuality and started to answer other peoples’ questions about being gay. Tao Ge overcame his social awkwardness by creating alternative accounts to flirt with girls. Sammy expressed her unique cultural perspective through online fan forums. Even conservative Mimi, after establishing rebellious online identities, started advising probationary Communist Party members on how to cheat the system. Encountering sites where information is accessible and searchable introduced these subjects to the moral enterprise of open information.

4.7.2 Finding Hidden Information Relates to Identity

By entering into the Exploratory Phase, Liuliu, Tao Ge, Sammy, and Mimi have started to stretch the rubberband of the Elastic Self. Interactions with strangers
empower them to try out new forms of self-expression that differ from what they see others doing in their social circles. They are learning how to express and form their own ideas and interests. In doing so, they are addressing a common fear among Chinese youth: speaking up.

Chinese youth grow up hearing a popular proverb, “The bird who sticks out his head gets shot.”117 This story imparts the importance of conformity to children. In their own ways, Liuliu, Tao Ge, Sammy, and Mimi, learned how to stick their necks out. They were motivated to do this for personal reasons. For Liuliu, it was traditional expectations around marriage; for Tao Ge, it was intense familial and social pressure that created social isolation; for Sammy, it was the boredom and constraints of being around people she knew; and for Mimi, it was the authority and righteousness of the Communist Party. While their reasons are different, they were all trying to get away from their social circles.

But being the first bird brings its own set of risks. In their own ways, they discovered that they could not openly broadcast a more open-minded self. There are consequences for expressing ideas that are against the norm. When Liuliu tried to

117. 抢打出门鸟 This proverb comes from an ancient Chinese book, 增广贤文 (Zēng guǎng xián wén). The book was first written in the Ming Dynasty and intellectuals during the Ming and Qing Dynasty added more Chinese proverbs to it. Zeng Guang Xian Wen was written in classical Chinese and includes philosophical theories of life, such as Confucianism and Taoism thoughts. This book was used in Ancient China to enlighten children. Many believed that by reading Zeng Guang Xian Wen, one would know how to act properly in society. Popular beliefs about knowledge absorption through reading were also attributed to another book, 读了增广会说话，读了幼学走天下” (Chen et al. 2006; Yingyu.com 2009; Baidu Baike 2013; Wikipedia 2013). Some other popular proverbs: The bigger the tree, heavier the wind 树大招风; People are afraid of being famous, like pigs are afraid of being fat 人怕出名猪怕壮.
come out of the closet on Renren, his friends harassed him. When Mimi tried to talk about democracy on Renren, she was shunned. But none of them responded by emotionally shutting down; rather, they learned the best spaces to stick their neck out: informal modes of interaction.

They retreated to informal modes of interaction where they could minimize the risks of exposing their vulnerability and individuality. In the process, they discovered hidden information. Youth who view the world through the lens of open information become active information searchers instead of passive information consumers. Instead of feeling resigned when they cannot find an answer to a pressing question, they become resourceful: asking people and using search engines. Instead of just accepting a piece of information, my participants used the internet to actively search for links that confirm or discredit information. They developed protocols for citing and assessing the credibility of online sources. When they were unable to find a piece of information, I witnessed users engaging in a variety of strategies to share and obtain blocked information. This blocked information is not necessarily always political: Sammy’s search for media sources was not sensitive, but many of the fandom communities are on Tumblr, a site that is occasionally blocked.

The ability to find a piece of information made youth feel a great sense of agency. They all arrived at a similar outcome: a moral shift in their views to credible sources of information. While they all unquestionably trusted institutions (family,
school, and state) by the end of each story, they not only questioned their trust in them, but also their credibility.

Chinese youth are creating their own emergent codes of conduct, which contain a new set of rules that instruct people how to conduct themselves. In doing this, they are also creating a new moral order that prioritizes the values of transparency and honesty. These values are not only connected to youths’ expectations regarding information, but also in regard to themselves. In each story, we see a parallel development of openness towards new ideas and information openness. The key to starting the moral shift is uncovering hidden information, but before any of my participants could be receptive to that information, they all had to be willing to engage with strangers to explore self-expression. The openness to new people preceded openness to new information.

4.8 Conclusion

Simplistic understandings of Eastern cultures as collectivist and Western cultures as individualistic paint Chinese individuals as having no sense of personal self (Greenwood, 2003). Contrary to this, Chinese youth are quite aware that they have to manage a different self for each relationship. They are, in a sense, dealing with multiple situational selves. Socialized into this culture, they have internalized the stakes for acting improperly in a particular context. Doing anything that would lead to a loss of face brings real emotional pain for those who are connected to them.

Maintaining situational selves is an emotionally exhausting process. Youth are constantly toggling between different identities for each relationship and assessing the
most proper way to exercise an emotionally restrained self. As restrictive as their situational selves can be, they are not trying to abandon all interactions in the formal mode that require a more prescribed self. But through the internet they learn new cultural scripts and modes of interaction, all of which introduce to them new spaces and repertoires of thought and interaction.

The elasticity of platforms dominant in the informal mode provides them a new space in which they can negotiate these situational selves and to develop identities that are based on entirely new contacts. None of my participants decided to shut themselves off from society, but they learned how to better handle the pressures that come from their situational relationships. An Elastic Self helps them better deal with their situational selves—selves that still have to be maintained because those relationships are still in place and constitute their social world.

Once youth begin to express themselves in informal modes of interaction online, it begs the question: will they be able to reconcile their digitally mediated identities in formal modes of interaction? Is Chinese society full of individuals engaging in informal interactions who are trying to get away from people they know, preventing themselves from making any long-term connections? If the story ended here, the answer might be yes. But the story does not end here.

In the next chapter, I illustrate the second phase of the Elastic Self, the Trusting Phase. Youth who embarked on an exploration of the self had to use an anonymous identity to remain safe from being shamed by people they know. Over
time, some of their interactions with strangers developed into more meaningful attachments, which required a new set of skills to assess trustworthiness in this new digital environment. The moral shift that began in the Exploratory Phase is carried out in full in the Trusting Phase.
CHAPTER 5

TRUSTING PHASE: FROM STRANGERS TO SEMIKNOWN CONTACTS

5.1 Introduction

In the second level of the Elastic Self, the Trusting Phase, Chinese youth learn how to assess trustworthiness among strangers to develop more meaningful relationships with them. Sustained interactions with unknown people transform casual engagements into friendships and communities with which youth strongly identify. These interactions are a radical departure from social norms that point to a low-trust society where trust is reserved for guanxi relations, not strangers.

5.2 Recap of Chapter 4 and Taking Us into Chapter 5

In the previous chapter, youth who engage in the Exploratory Phase of an Elastic Self experience the beginnings of a moral shift. This opening introduces them to new sources of information, leading them to question their trust in institutions that they thought were credible. These youth transition into the Trusting Phase where they make a concerted effort to learn how to filter and sort through new sources of information, as well as contacts.

The two stories in this chapter demonstrate how Chinese youth evaluate trust in sources in different contexts. Both Han and Maimai are fairly representative of Chinese students. They both have studied all their lives for the Gaokao and tested into good universities. Their parents would consider them to be obedient. While their families are from different backgrounds—Han lived in a rural village and comes from
several generations of farmers while Maimai comes from a middle-class family—they are all grappling with issues of trust in different contexts.

Han learns how to assess trustworthiness in unknown sources to engage in a political act that is covered by the international news. Maimai develops the skills to assess trustworthiness among vendors in her economic interactions on Taobao. Even though the context of their stories varies, they share a common behavior: they engage in risky actions with strangers that require high levels of trust. Han and Maimai, like the participants in the previous chapter, turn to the informal mode of interaction to explore their identities. In this chapter, however, we learn how their online experiences involve ritual interactions around information exchanges that lead to more meaningful friendships.

5.3 Trust: A Review

Trust is an abstract concept that is often used interchangeably with other concepts such as social capital, credibility, reliability, reputation, and confidence (Hardin 2004; Wang and Emurian 2005). I draw on Hardin’s explanation of common slippages around trust to gain definitional clarity around a concept that has been discussed since the founding of sociology. Hardin points out that when we are talking about trust, we are usually talking about trustworthiness. We look for clues to judge trustworthiness, and then we look for more clues to act upon that perceived trustworthiness. If an action fulfills our expectations, then trust is established. The process becomes iterative because more trust makes a person more trustworthy, and so forth. Trust is an outcome of trustworthiness.
Much of the literature around trust is framed in terms of risk minimization. According to Hardin, risk is not an outcome of trust: trust does not produce risk; acting upon trust is the risk. As such, the ability to form trust depends on information—the amount of knowledge a person holds about a situation. For example, Person A can have information about what makes Person B trustworthy (or not), but Person A may choose to not act upon that information. Person A engages in risk when s/he acts upon the information. As such, information is part and parcel of trust formation.

Hardin also specifies that all actions that result from trust are context dependent; behaviors of trust cannot be transferred to other contexts, because all actions of trust build on knowledge/information that is socioculturally situated. The lack of familiar social and cultural cues make it difficult to form trust in unfamiliar contexts.

I follow Wang’s and Emurian’s (2005) review of online trust and employ their four primary characteristics that provide a vocabulary and framework for us to use in examining trust in an online context:

*Trustor and Trustee*: All online interactions involve at least two entities, a trusting entity (trustor)—typically a person, and a party to be trusted (trustee)—typically a person, organization, service, or product.

*Vulnerability*: When individuals are interacting in contexts (offline or online) without people they know, they are vulnerable because they face greater uncertainty
and risk. Online interactions in the informal mode involves a particular set of risks that come from anonymized interactions.

Produced Action: Trust produces action. When two parties trust each other, they have to have the confidence to accept the risks of carrying out those interactions. Online interactions can lead to tangible actions, such as meeting offline or the exchange of presents through the mail system, as well as intangible actions such as reposting a website address.

Subjective matter: Personal histories and experiences (offline or online) influence an individual’s ideas about trust. Every trustor requires (and looks for) a different set of conditions to carry out a produced action.

Using these four characteristics and Hardin’s conceptual clarifications to analyze my participants’ stories, we will see how, as trustors, they put themselves in vulnerable positions with trustees. While the particular context of their stories varies, they all engage in interactions that are more meaningful than just fleeting online exchanges. Their stories also show the highly subjective nature of assessing trust. Some participants need extra verification, others were more comfortable relying on other people’s opinions about a trustee, and others relied on the degree of overlapping interests with the trustee.

In the Trusting Phase of the Elastic Self, youth are less inhibited to interact with strangers precisely because they are not subject to the familiar cues that they typically rely on in the formal mode of interaction online or offline. They opt to put
themselves in situations with random contacts because to stay in a secure, stable, and predictable environment would lead to the greatest risk of all—to feel like no one understands them.

An Elastic Self is not an isolated monad. Millions of youth are engaging in the Trusting Phase on the Chinese internet. They are connecting with each other and forming loose networks of strangers. Unlike hierarchal guanxi relations, interactions with strangers in the informal mode operate as decentralized networks: flat, bottom-up, and peer-to-peer.

Over time, their serendipitous micro-interactions create what Jane Jacobs (1961) calls a “casual web of public trust”: “The sum of such casual, public contact at a local level—most of it fortuitous, most of it associated with errands, all of it metered by the person concerned and not thrust upon him by anyone—is a feeling for the public identity of people, a web of public respect and trust, and a resource in time of personal or neighborhood need. Its cultivation cannot be institutionalized. And above all, it implies no private commitments” (55-73).

Like the city folk of Jacobs’ New York City, Chinese youths’ online exchanges with strangers build a web of casual trust. This kind of broad trust is emergent and genuine, because in the absence social pressures of reciprocity, youth determine who they want to interact with based upon their own private interests. Through interactions with strangers, they learn how to respect, care, and empathize with those who are not within their guanxi circle. They are learning how to become a friend. As they learn
how to trust unknown people online, they form and join communities that are independent from the state, turning new ties into weak ties. Transforming weak ties of friendship into bridging ties creates the foundations of a more sustainable public sphere. Throughout this process, the self becomes more elastic as it interacts in the informal mode, meets more strangers, and joins more communities.

5.3.1 Online Trust and Evaluation Skills

Even before the internet became a popular medium for interaction, scholars were interested in how particular media, such as teleconferencing, affected people’s ability to communicate and interact (Baym 2010, 52). Baym summarizes this area of research in *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (2010). “Reduced cues” scholars argued that mediated environments are constrained spaces for interpersonal interaction (Walter et al. 1994; Short et al.1976). One group of scholars argued that the lack of social norms in mediated environments allowed users to embrace an “anything goes” attitude, making people meaner or riskier online than offline (Baym 2010, 57). They predicted that emotional expression becomes stunted in a digital environment, preventing people from sharing their feelings. Their studies echo the same message: face-to-face interactions are safer than computer-mediated environments.

Another spin on the “reduced cues” argument proposed that the absence of cues allowed people to engage in riskier behavior online than offline (Eveland 1993; Eveland & Bikson 1988; Finholt & Sproull, 1990; Garton & Wellman 1997; Huff, Sproull, & Kiesler 1989; Rice 1994; Sproull & Kiesler 1991).118 This version of the

118. List of citations from Garton et al. (2006).
reduced cues theory suggests that Chinese youth engage in risky interactions with strangers because they feel bolder and freer online. My findings show that this theory is incorrect. Aside from privileging text and offline as “the norm against which other kinds of communication could be compared” (Baym 2010, 51), there are several faulty assumptions in this argument.

First, a “reduced-cues” framework fails to see how users are capable of creating a new set of social cues in a virtual context. Second, the “reduced-cues” theory is technologically deterministic view. It ignores how cues are determined through social interactions, not just by the technological platform. Lastly, it treats the entire internet as a homogenous space of depersonalized interactions.

My research shows that the degree of cue reduction and cue affordance depends on the mode of interaction. As I explained in section 2.6.1, the internet allows for both formal and informal modes of interaction. Social media platforms dominant in the formal mode contain relatively familiar cues because youth are socializing with people they already know. Whether online or offline, social familiarity is the result of socializing with known contacts. On the other hand, there are fewer predictable social cues in the informal mode than platforms dominant in the formal mode because interactions unfold primarily between strangers. Users do not have as many familiar cues to rely on in the informal mode because no prior relationships exist between users: everyone is a stranger in the informal mode, thereby contributing to the lack of familiarity in the interactions.
My research shows that Chinese youth are less inhibited in their interactions with strangers precisely because of the lack of cues in the informal mode of interaction. Youth feel more uninhibited when they are not around people they know—people who project and enforce norms that feel restrictive or that make them feel weird 奇怪 (qiguai). My participants also reveal that in the absence of familiar cues, users create new cues to carry out supportive exchanges (Goffman 1997). Goffman argues that in interpersonal rituals, individuals provide cues and signals to communicate “involvement and connectedness to another…creating a ceremony of a ‘supportive exchange’ that uphold social encounters.” To engage with strangers in the informal mode, users learn how to rely on a network of cues (web features, social, and information) to assess and signal trustworthiness.

With time, youth learn the normative behaviors of the informal mode of interaction and become familiar with the social cues that help them navigate such anonymous contexts with greater ease. In the Trusting Phase of the Elastic Self, youth organize the emergent cues in the informal mode of interaction into a more coherent set of rules of conduct. These rules then become what I term the “rituals of trustworthiness” with strangers. These rituals provide a more orderly and coherent way to stretch an Elastic Self from the exploratory the level with strangers to more sustained social interactions in the Trusting Phase.

According to Goffman, the ability for an individual to pick up on social cues is central to the “moral career” of a person, “the progressive changes that occur in the
beliefs that he has concerning himself and significant others.” (1961b, 24). Moral orders are affirmed through rules that morally constrain an individual to appropriate actions and indirectly communicate expectations to others that they are morally bound to appropriate responses (1956, 473-74). Goffman builds on Durkheim’s ideas about ritual-as-medium for regulating morality by illustrating how moral orders are created out of micro-interpersonal exchanges. Ritual consists of rules. Rules create a moral order between strangers. “Rules of conduct impinge upon the individual in two general ways: directly, as obligations, establishing how [one/]he is morally constrained to conduct [her]himself, and indirectly, as expectations, establishing how others are morally bound to act in regard to [her] him” (1956, 473).

The rituals in the Trusting Phase involve learning the rules around what I term “information acts”: communicating information and social cues in an online context, In social media, the cues are communicated through hashtags, tags, links, and @s. Rules, when exercised collectively, propagate a moral code. In Han’s story, the moral code consists of interaction with institutions and verifying the information of unknown sources. In Maimai’s story, the moral code is based on the expectation that information and service vendors in a consumer economy will provide honest value for money.

5.3.2 Trust in China

Many scholars characterize contemporary China as a low-trust society (Liu, Li 2007; Fukuyama, 1995; Gudykunst et al., 1996; Redding, 1993) with personal and
social trust having been in limbo for several decades (Vogel 1965). However, in post-Reform and Opening, personal relations have slowly been reconstructed in spaces that are increasingly independent from the state, such as the family (Yan 2003). Other scholars continue to highlight the tenuous and risky relationships in the economic sphere between consumers, vendors, entrepreneurs, managers, and workers (Gold 1985; He 2013), with many emphasizing the role of guanxi and bribery.

My research reveals that Chinese youth are developing trusting relationships with each other under conditions of anonymity, some of which even evolve into friendship. This development is extraordinary given that institutionalized norms and shared memories from Maoist era render friendships a risky relationship to pursue (Vogel 1965).

As referenced in section 1.2, Mao’s politics destroyed personal relationships because there was no guarantee that anything shared between two friends would remain private (Vogel 1965). Even though Chinese youth have no direct experience with the Cultural Revolution, collective distrust of friendship as an institution looms large in Chinese society. In particular, older generations are still haunted by the fear that someone they know will share information that will get them in trouble. Adults pass down these fears through stories that socialize children into thinking that strangers are not to be trusted. A quick search on the Tianya BBS reveals thousands of discussions about the risks of trusting strangers, much less friends. Many of these stories are linked to the Cultural Revolution. One netizen shares her mother’s advice:

119. Chinese’s people’s reluctance to talking to strangers is an observation made by many
She always said, no matter how well you know a friend, do not tell everything to him or her. Even if one is a husband or wife, or friend, sister, brother. In this world, only parents can be trusted, the rest of the people are not hundred percent trustworthy. During the Cultural Revolution, the couple disclosed each other, friends, classmates disclosed each other and colleagues discovered each other. . . This sort of thing were everywhere. . .”

The writer’s account of her mother’s advice is a very common message that parents impress on children. This idea is reinforced through popular proverbs that children learn, such as “Sweep the snow off of your own doorstep, but do not mind the frost on your neighbor’s roof.” The underlying idea in this proverb is to look out for your family, but not your neighbors or friends.

The social practice of the situational self (Chu & Peng 2012) also creates what Kleinman et al. (2011) explains as individualism “with a traditional appeal: by lifting yourself up, you will also lift up your whole family” (38). This approach validates poor treatment of strangers because there is no obligation to treat them well. This variant of the situational self morally justifies rampant corruption within Chinese people who have lived in China. For example, in the first chapter of Peter Hessler’s Stranger Stones: Dispatches from the East and West (2013), he comments that Chinese people are in general weary of strangers.


121. 各人自扫门前雪，莫管他人瓦上霜
society. A person involved in corruption can believe that their gains at others’ expense are not for selfish reasons, but for the benefit of their family. In this sense, cheating a stranger is justified for a larger moral purpose (Yan 2011). As a widespread practice, corruption becomes socially legitimized; this, in effect, is the legitimization of mistreating people outside one’s circle of social obligations.

It is not a surprise that Chinese youth would grow up thinking and doing the same things as their parents: maintaining social distance from friends, staying away from strangers, and relying primarily on people they know. Every youth I spoke to could name endless stories of their parents warning them to prepare for strangers to take advantage of them in the workplace, the classroom, and everyday life. In particular, parents stressed the importance of emotional restraint. They told their children that any display of emotions put them at risk of being manipulated, as evidenced in the common phrase “taking advantage of your emotions” (利用你的情绪). The only way to avoid this outcome is to maintain social distance and keep colleagues and peers out of one’s social circle.

And yet, youth who engage in an Elastic Self are discovering that trusting a stranger in China with their emotions involves a lower level of risk than trusting a personal contact. Given the nature of trust relations in China, this would seem counterintuitive: the least likely source of trust in Chinese society is now seen as the most appealing source. While it would be easy to say that the internet makes this possible, the story is more complex than a technologically deterministic narrative; it
requires to understand the difference between personal and social trust. Conceptual clarification allows us to better understand the gap between personal trust and social trust in China.

Giddens has argued that a central feature of modern societies is the expansion of personal trust to social trust (1991). Social trust is the broadly based public trust that individuals place in social institutions, such as Jacob’s “casual web of public trust” (1961). Personal trust is the focused trust that individuals place in people who are in their social circles.

While the broadly accepted definition of personal trust includes family, friends, and local community, this is too broad when applied to Chinese society. We need more conceptual clarity. Scholars note that trust in particularistic ties—ties that make up one’s guanxi circle, primarily family and people with whom there is a history of interaction—is high in Chinese society (Chen and Chen 2004; Farh et al. 1998; Tsui and Farh 1997). This form of trust produces strong ties that characterize guanxi circles—people in the circle are trusted while strangers are not. Chinese scholar Peng notes six different kinds of distrust in China, including distrust of friends and even relatives (Kleinman et al. 2011, 60). This means that existing models for interaction in China encourage suspicion of strangers and emotional distance from friends. There is little room in this model to expand personal trust to social trust.

Scholars have argued that in a society of mobile strangers, social trust is more important than personal trust. But in societies like China where both personal trust and
social trust is low, where do new forms of trust begin? At first glance, it might seem next to impossible: differentiated modes of association do not allow for strangers to easily enter into a relationship with a stranger, Maoist Regime practices have left a legacy of low personal trust in friends and strangers, and contemporary corruption and distrust in social institutions exacerbate low social trust. So where is personal trust and social trust growing?

In this chapter, I argue that both personal and social forms of trust are being seeded with strangers in the informal mode of interaction. The most likely channels for friendships are emerging outside of one’s social circles (strong ties) and/or networks (weak ties): strangers who have no connection back to the individual whatsoever. Given the low levels of public trust within Chinese society, it may seem surprising that Chinese youth can connect so easily on a personal level with strangers online. Yet, in a context where friendships are risky, Chinese youth look beyond strong ties and even weak ties as sources of friendship. Instead, they look to completely new ties: strangers.

Before message boards and QQ, widely accessible anonymous spaces for the informal mode of interaction did not exist in China. The widespread availability of platforms dominant in the informal mode make it possible for youth to make themselves vulnerable in what is otherwise a risky act: trusting a stranger with personal information. Under anonymous conditions, the risk of interacting with strangers is radically minimized.
In the US, popular discourse such as “stranger danger” continue to circulate fears about strangers seducing people to go online and causing harm in the process (Pain and Smith 2008). The recent adoption of the word “catfished” into the English lexicon \(^{122}\) and the media attention around Manti Te’o’s\(^{123}\) virtual girlfriend death hoax, reflect a particular set of fears about the internet that do not exist in China. In China, the fear is personal connections. During Maoist China, friends, not strangers, informed on each other. As Vogel agued, making friends, which involves the exchange of information, became a risky act in China (1965).

Different kinds of trust are possible. In *Restless China*, Ding Xue Liang argues that extreme levels of low social trust among wealthy entrepreneurs perpetuate corruption (2013). The fear of being discovered drives many business people to flee and to move their wealth out of the China. The people I am talking about are not doing corrupt deals. My participants are young people who have not fallen into corrupt relationships. They are creating new forms of trust outside of the standard *guanxi* relationships, and they are doing this with strangers in the informal mode of interaction.

### 5.3.3. Why Would Chinese Youth Trust Anyone Online?

Even though the anonymity of informal modes minimizes the risks of sharing emotions and developing a friendship with strangers, engaging with strangers is still a

---

122. Catfish refers to two strangers dating online and one of them is lying about their identity.

123. Manti Te’o is a well known professional football player in the US who thought his girlfriend, who he had met online, had died. But it was later revealed that his online girlfriend was a hoax (Zeman 2013).
risky act. But as I discussed in section 1.0, Chinese youth want to share their feelings. Once they experience the liberation of sharing their feelings in the Exploratory Phase, they feel that the risks are worth the alternative of feeling perpetually disconnected and misunderstood.

Parents do not offer Chinese youth an emotional outlet. The popular saying “parents are never wrong” underscores the Confucian family model with the parents at the top of the hierarchy. However, there have been shifts in recent years. Parents and youth are starting to have less hierarchal relationships and parents are valuing the need for their children to become independent (Yoshikawa 2012). While some parents emphasize strictness, others propose friendship as a parenting strategy. The fact that parenting styles are becoming part of the public conversation reflect that even parents themselves are trying to make sense of a post-80s and 90s culture where filial piety has new meaning.

Chinese youth no longer live in a Communist society where the pursuit of self-awareness is socially shameful and life endangering. Unlike their grandparents, they will not be sent to prison for watching a Western television show. But Chinese youth who engage in the Exploratory and Trusting Phases of an Elastic Self still feel that it is necessary to remain anonymous. To be clear, practices of the Elastic Self are not underground, but they are not the norm. We are witnessing Chinese youth in an in-

124. People are still haunted by the fear was that someone they knew would share information that would get them in trouble.

125. This is based off of my own observations of discussions in the media and television talk shows in China.
between stage where they are not fully ready to be totally transparent and open with their given names but ready enough to express themselves with strangers in the informal mode of interaction.

While they are pursuing personal interests, they are also in search for a new moral paradigm. The disintegration of trust in institutions such as the family and the government has led youth to question the moral vision these institutions offered. This new sense of ambivalent creates an opening for self-exploration that is not dictated by prescribed norms. In this opening, youth from different classes and educational backgrounds are coming together. They are developing new practices in the informal mode of interaction and increasing their desire for connections to new sources of information. Exploration of this new space is not easy; youth still have to figure out whom to trust. However, in the absence of overbearing adults and judgmental friends, they ‘feel’ their way around, developing rituals and honing their senses to ensure they interact with the most trustworthy people.

5.3.4 How Do Chinese Youth Learn to Trust?

The transition from the Exploratory Phase to the Trusting Phase involves what I call the “rituals of trustworthiness,” a set of repetitive behaviors that build a sense of familiarity and security with strangers in the informal mode of interaction. In these rituals, Chinese youth learn the practices involved in “information acts,” mediated interactions that use a social media platforms’ features (such as a Weibo microblog post, QQ profile update, or a Douban update) to communicate credibility and legitimacy. For example, URL links, updates, hashtags, tags, and @ replies are all
information acts. These are more than just digital data; they communicate a whole host of social messages such as the sender’s credibility, familiarity with the site, political affiliations, age, gender, and more. Information acts contain social cues, such as a person’s interests, digital literacy skills, personality, or attitude.

Youth do two things with information acts. First, they decode information acts from strangers to assess their credibility. Second, they deploy information acts to present themselves as a credible person to strangers. They do all of this to minimize the risks of interacting with people they don’t know. Information acts are inextricably linked to rituals of trustworthiness.

There are several steps involved in the rituals of trustworthiness. The first few steps begin with minimal emotional investment in the interaction; eventually, there is a build up to more complex interactions. Throughout the rituals, youth learn new social cues to navigate the informal mode of interaction. The first set of rituals requires a minimal investment of time and emotional energy. This involves looking for commonalities that can be gleaned from a user’s social media profile. Youth look for overlaps in personal information such as hometown, province, age group, horoscope sign, or gender; youth are more likely to talk to strangers with similar backgrounds. In fact, some youth will only talk to strangers who are in the same age group or who come from the same province.

The second act is the search for specific shared interests such as entertainment or consumption preferences. When youth find someone with a similar interest, it
increases the chances that s/he will reach out to that person. Both of these rituals offer Chinese youth an easy way to initiate conversation with strangers through message boards or groups on social media platforms. Once youth establish a connection, they share personal details such as a birthday, or an emotion. The recipient can respond by sending emoticons or a typed message. This part of the ritual can last for a few weeks—sometimes years—as it mostly involves chatting and exchanging personal information.

Some online interactions do not involve the exchange of personal details but instead the exchange of information. This is a critical step that youth use to assess whether or not their sources, such as a URL or link, are accurate. If the information provided by a source is accurate, then youth increase their trust in the source/network. By putting in great effort to verify contacts with no background history or prescriptive ties, Chinese youth create a sense of trust. This way, they can feel reassured that the personal information they share will not spread beyond the interaction.

The next series of rituals transition a relationship from that of anonymous contact to semi-anonymous “internet friend.” To advance the relationship, youth perform a series of visual verifications. They ask each other to send pictures as a way of confirming each other’s gender and profile details. If a relationship passes the picture test, then youth complete the ultimate verification: the 30-second video check. This is where both sides turn on their video cameras for 30 seconds to ensure that the person in the video matches the profile and the picture. Passing these visual
verification tests move youth into the stage of sharing offline information that can be traced back to their given name, such their cellphone number and home address. Participants in this stage call each other “internet friends.” At this stage in the ritual, they send each other birthday presents and text messages. Participants text each other reminders to have a good day or to feel better.

The very last ritual involves meeting up in person. If women meet up with men, they usually bring another female friend with them while men usually come alone. All meetings happen in a public space. Sometimes youth reveal their given names, but frequently they still refer to each other by their pseudonyms.

These rituals do not always happen in this order. Sometimes participants skip a step. But for the most part, Chinese youth learn that there is a rhythm to establishing a friendship with a stranger. No one I spoke to jumped straight into an in-person meeting offline without having gone through several other steps of the ritual. In each step of the ritual, they learn how to read social cues communicated in the information acts.

Carrying out a ritual is significant because it means that Chinese youth are becoming “involved in the maintenance of a rule” (Goffman 1956). These rules are not institutionalized or predefined; rather, they emerge out of the interaction and through ongoing practice. In maintaining a rule, an individual . . . become[s] committed to a particular image of a self [who carries out his obligations in the ritual] and becomes dependent upon the assumption that others will properly perform such of their obligations as affects him, for their treatment of him will express a conception of him. In establishing himself as the sort of person who treats others in
particular way and is treated by them in a particular way, he must make sure that it will be possible for him to act and be this kind of person. (Goffman 1956, 474–75)

My participants recognize the obligations that come with fulfilling rituals. Part of the reason why the initial rituals of trustworthiness begin with minimal effort and emotional investment is because it allows youth to abandon the relationship if they no longer want to commit to the image that they have presented of themselves. In the informal mode, anonymity permits a person to engage in ephemeral interactions; without a record of the relationship, both parties are absolved of any obligation to each other. As such, before an interaction with a relationship evolves into an “internet friendship,” either party can stop communicating with the other person by removing the contact from their account, deleting their own account, or making themselves invisible when they sign on. Neither party is too deeply invested in traditional social conventions that prioritize other people’s needs over their own needs.

While rituals are created out of repetitive action, rituals are not static. Rituals can shift over time because of emotional changes (Collins 2005). The crux of Randall Collins’s (2005) theory of Interaction Ritual Chains is that individuals carry emotional energy from one context to another, forming a chain of practices and experiences. The emotions and practices that youth gain from the Exploratory Phase of their Elastic Self are carried over into the Trusting Phase where they learn how to interpret and assess information acts as indicators of trustworthiness. Reading group symbols becomes tacit cultural knowledge, and this forms the invisible threads that hold loose networks of individuals together, turning them from strangers into known contacts.
Below, I list several indicators that can be seen in the Trusting Phase of the Elastic Self (corresponds to Table 2.2):

- Engages in rituals of trustworthiness.
- Is able to engage in—and confidently assess—information acts.
- Loosely embedded in online communities.
- Expresses belief that their membership in communities is voluntary and that the decision to not join or to leave does not carry consequences.
- Youth feel a sense of belonging in their communities that are in the informal mode.
- Strangers become semi-known contacts, with some evolving into relationships that are just as strong as existing friends.
- Internet contacts meet up in person with their online friends, or they talk on the phone.
- Relies on semi-known contacts for accurate sources of information.
- Prefers to share and acquire certain kinds of information from their informal modes of interactions.
- Maintains a boundary between formal and informal social media sites.
- Mediates and segments self-presentation for formal and informal modes at the same time.

These indicators will be seen throughout the two stories of this chapter.
5.4 Meet the Characters

In this chapter, we learn about Han’s and Maimai’s interactions with online communities that unexpectedly come to play an important part in their realization that key institutions in their lives are not reliable. In both of the stories in this chapter, I trace how the rituals of trustworthiness support the transition from low-risk activities (such as chatting) to a high-risk action (like meeting offline). Their engagement with these communities is a totally new form of sociality in contemporary Chinese society. Their parents and grandparents grew up in a China where making friends—which involves sharing information—could ruin a family. People regularly informed on their friends, neighbors, co-workers and even parents. But as Han and Maimai illustrate, they develop the capacity to socialize with and befriend people they do not know. Sharing personal information will no longer get a person killed or sent to a labor camp; instead, sharing makes youth feel like they are understood, that they belong somewhere, and that they are not alone.

This new sociality is possible because the new networks that youth are developing are nonhierarchal and based on the principles and practices of peer-production\(^{126}\). These loose networks share several criteria in common. First, interaction and participation does not depend on social status; what matters is the quality of information and knowledge provided. Secondly, members can discuss socially transgressive topics without shame. Thirdly, these communities develop

\(^{126}\) Peer-production, often referred to as “commons-based production,” is when self-organizing communities of individuals create outcomes or goods in a decentralized method without financial compensation as the primary goal (Benkler 2006).
specific symbols and practices that indicate membership. Lastly, at least in principle, these communities are inclusive.

5.4.1 Han, the Shoe Thrower

Han grew up in rural China. Like many of the youth I interviewed over the years, Han loved the Communist Party. However, a series of discoveries during his first year in college made him realize that he and the Party were not morally aligned: the Party had lied about many historical events. All of these discoveries unfolded over Twitter, where he had made new friends and developed a support network that enabled him to continue his search for “hidden information.” This helped him realize that not only did he no longer trust the Party, but his family. As he found his own moral direction, he became involved in an event that made international news and threw him in between several institutional tensions.

Han’s parents dreamed of having a son graduate from college. When it became clear that his older brother did not have the grades for college, Han had to fulfill his parents’ expectations. Han had the grades and the Gaokao scores to do just that, and got into a decent second tier university in a large city a few hours from home. He never skipped classes, he memorized Communist edicts, and he stayed away from the internet cafe. As long as Han continued to follow the script like millions of other Chinese college students, he was destined to become a civil servant or a white-collar worker. But then, something changed.

In his third year of college, Han made international news. Media outlets, including The Guardian, The New York Times, and the BBC all reported that a
Chinese college student with the Twitter handle @hanunyi had thrown a shoe and some eggs at Fang Binxing, a government official. Commonly known as “Father of China’s Great Firewall,” Fang Binxing is both famous and reviled for designing the underlying architecture of internet censorship in China. He’s very proud of his work, frequently giving public talks about the dangers of the internet and the importance of controlling it. It was at one these talks where Han ended up throwing his shoe at Fang Binxing. Han found out the details of one of Fang’s talks from his Twitter stream and it was there where Han had his infamous encounter.

Publicly embarrassing a high-level government official put Han’s name on the government’s radar. With the Chinese government’s history of reacting harshly to acts of dissent, the Chinese authorities were expected—by Western news outlets at least—to punish Han heavily. Surprisingly, that did not happen. How could a kid from rural China end up making international news for humiliating the man behind the largest censorship system in the world and live to tell the tale? Han’s story presents an opportunity to understand how people create and manage trust in situations where trust can be difficult to foster. His story also allows us to understand how—and why—he engaged in this act based upon information from Twitter contacts who he has never met.

5.4.1.1 College is a New World

As a child, Han witnessed the side effects of several social policies. His parents often reminded him of the sacrifices that they went through to have him. Han is a rarity: a second child. Even though his mother became pregnant before the one-child
policy was put into effect, Han was born afterward and his parents were fined 10,000RMB. His father was a policeman and therefore avoided paying an even heftier fine. He remembers the one-child slogan: “If one person exceeds the one child policy, then everyone has their tubes tied.” Some villagers would try and break the rule by running away and giving birth secretly, but they would often return to find that their home had been destroyed. Han’s grandmother, even though she was already in her 40s, was forced to have her tubes tied. His mother said that the doctor botched the operation, almost killing his grandmother; from that point on, her health never recovered. He also remembered that his teacher wasn’t allowed to have a second child. In the end, none of this affected Han’s childhood: “All my memories were pretty good. I knew bad things happened, but I didn’t know why so I didn’t think about it.”

When Han moved to the city to attend college, he was a patriotic student. Whenever his dorm mates made fun of Mao or the Communist Party, Han became defensive: “When I came to college, I was a person who loved my country aiguoderen (爱国的人). I thought it was perfect. At school, we learned about the wonderful accomplishments of China. Ever since I was a child, we were told to love the people, the country, and the Communist Party.”

An aiguoderen is someone who loves the Communist Party. Children learn this phrase from a young age and are told that they should do their best to be an aiguoderen. Han was so protective of Mao that, during his first year of college, he

127. 一人超生全村结扎
stopped his roommates from defacing a picture of Mao. He told me, “My roommates brought back a picture of Mao to the dorm for us to draw bad pictures on it, but I saved Mao’s picture and prevented them from doing that. I hung it up on my wall above my bed.” His commitment to Mao and the Party only encouraged his roommates to antagonize him. They sent QQ instant messages to Han, pasting in texts of censored information because the claims contained within them could not be verified without going outside of the Chinese internet. His roommate was getting an uncensored perspective of China through Twitter. He convinced Han to sign up for Twitter under the pretext that they could both learn more about their major, architecture.

Han’s roommate created Han’s first Twitter account for him and told him to follow the Chinese architect Aiweiwei. Through Aiweiwei, Han started hearing about the “black stuff of society.” He quickly realized that Aiweiwei was not a conventional architect.128

When I first got on, my dorm mate (@xuranuo) told me to look at Aiweiwei account because he’s an architect.129 We study architecture, but our school does not teach us anything so I thought I could learn more about architecture from him. But after a while, I realized that he wasn’t really an architect. He did a lot of different things and wrote about many things I had never heard of before. He taught me many things . . . I then started following all the people he was @ing, and I found a lot of other people who also talked about similar things.

128. 社会的黑暗的东西

129. Aiweiwei’s twitter handle is @aiww.
When Han realized that Aiweiwei was tweeting information that was censored in China, it created cracks in the trust that Han had placed in the Party. Han clicked on the links in Aiweiwei’s posts, following up on all the information Aiweiwei was sharing. He also started following some of the people Aiweiwei followed. They too, posted similar links about the “black stuff of society.” On Twitter, Han found regular folks who talked freely about the things that they found interesting, from silly memes to politics. Han realized that there was no place like Twitter in China.

Han tried to share some of the information he had found on Twitter with his friends on Renren and QQ, but a lot of his posts disappeared without any explanation. His friends scolded him for sharing the information, pejoratively calling him an “anti-revolutionary” (反革命). Han remembers his roommates telling him, “You should fit into society, and you should adapt to society. You need to understand how the world works. You should blah…blah…blah…that’s the typical response I received.” Even though they once teased him for being a patriotic person (爱国的人), his roommates were more uncomfortable with Han sharing all this sensitive information. One of his dorm mates even threatened to report Han for his posts.

Unable to gain wider interest among his friends, Han along with his roommate who had introduced him to Twitter, retreated from QQ and Renren and spent more time on Twitter. Han created a new account, this time choosing an anonymous name. He purposely kept his gender unknown, choosing a gender-ambiguous user name and never mentioning if he was male or female. If people asked him, he would not answer.
He searched for the word “beauty” *piaoliang* (漂亮) in Google images and used a picture of Chinese female celebrity. To hide his identity, he says, “I played with words, I read books in high school, so I occasionally play games with words.”

With his new account, Han started to follow up on the information he was absorbing. Han met people who had experienced the dark side of China—people who participated in the Tiananmen Square protest; people whose families were killed in the Cultural Revolution; people who had fled China as dissidents. These people did not just tell him what had happened, they explained why these events had occurred. “For the first time in my life, people started to explain things to me, like why those bad things [in China] happen. They did a good job.” He liked Aiweiwei because he gave Han encouragement. “If you post something good, Aiweiwei will praise you,” Han said. “But not every time.” Aiweiwei was active with his followers and posted useful links.

By his second year of college, Han’s perspective of the Chinese government had completely changed. Han told me that the major turning pointing for him was when he watched *Lao Ma Ti Hua* (老妈蹄花), a documentary that Aiweiwei made to investigate the deaths of thousands of children during the 2006 Sichuan earthquake. Authorities detained and beat Aiweiwei in an attempt to prevent him from carrying out his investigation. After seeing several people tweeting about the documentary, Han

130. Around 4,700 children were killed in the 7,000 schools that collapsed. Citizens accused the government and construction companies of corruption as many of the new school buildings collapsed while older ones did not collapse. The government censored discussions in the media and prevented angry parents from filing lawsuits (York 2008).
said, “I asked Aiweiwei to send it to me, and he sent it to my school by courier. I fell asleep the first time I watched it, but, then the second time, a major change happened…all the things I read about became very real…It greatly shocked me. I couldn’t believe that the government would do this.” The documentary was clear proof to Han that the government purposefully kept many things vague: “[After] I watched it, it made me think. All these people [on Twitter] say whatever they want on Twitter, but we cannot say what we want, Aiweiwei couldn’t help out the children.”

After watching Lao Ma Ti Hua, Han started to see things that made him question a lot of his beliefs about social equality. He wondered why his grandfather, a farmer who had worked so hard for 20 years, could only save up the equivalent of 2000 US dollars. Why was it that migrants with white hair and wrinkled faces, who should have already been retired, were working jobs in the city that not even city people would take on? Han told me, “At first, I just thought something is weird in our society. Something isn’t right, but those things do not happen to me directly. But, then, after Twitter, I realized that there are even more weird things that I didn’t know about.” All the institutions in his life—from family, to school, to the government—emphasized the rewards of hard work, but, to him, it seemed that the hardest working people in society remained the most poor.

Han’s discovery of ‘hidden information’ made him aware of the Information Paternalism paradigm. This awareness catalyzed a search for more information, which subsequently inspired the realization that there was information beyond China’s
internet. He recounts, “. . . I found out very shady things that [the government] never tells us. I do not know why it was all kept from us, so I kept looking every day for more details.” He wanted to search sousuo (搜索) for information as opposed to letting information “appear” beng chulai (蹦出来).

Unlike most users who were signing up for Weibo as their microblog, Han’s new awareness for ‘hidden information’ led him to believe that Sina Weibo was a mouthpiece for the CCP: “Weibo is too deceptive. There are people on Weibo who actually know what happened, but they will pretend that they do not know anything.” Han wanted to use a site where he could find quality information that would not be deleted by government censors: “From the perspective of quality of information, I prefer Twitter. All quality information that makes it to China comes from Twitter first, and then people put it on Weibo. People post on both their Weibo and Twitter accounts because they know that their Weibo posts could be deleted, but at least their tweets will always be saved on Twitter.”

However, all the information that Han wanted to read was beyond China’s firewall. Since 2009, the only way to access blocked sites and censored information—including Twitter—is by crossing the firewall with a Virtual Private Network, a VPN. However, it is not easy to get a VPN; only an estimated 2% of China’s 510 million internet users cross the firewall, and only an estimated 20,000 users have Twitter accounts. Fortunately for Han, he did not have to figure out how to use a VPN on his own. The Twitter community taught Han how to use VPNs to become a more
proficient online information searcher. They instructed him to get a Symbian phone on which it would be easier to install a mobile VPN. “I use Gravity on my Nokia E71,” he told me. “The developer is based in Germany.” Equipped with a reliable VPN, Han started to learn how to actively search for information on Twitter. He eventually became more comfortable posting links to his own Twitter.

Twitter became a sacred space for Han. His conversations were not traceable back to his given name. He could share and access censored information in a safe space. Unlike on Weibo, posts were not deleted on Twitter. At the time, he believed that he and his roommate were the only students on Twitter at his university. “There were very few people on Twitter [in China], but the quality of ‘hidden information’ being passed around was very high.”

Han’s support network on Twitter enabled him to transition from his personal interests around his major to more political interests involving ‘hidden information.’ Twitter reaffirmed Han’s new politicized self. Renren was filled with people he knew and made him feel unwelcome. Han was unwilling to maintain social solidarity with his dorm mates who pressured him to conform to their social practices and who threatened, even if jokingly, to tell the dorm supervisors\textsuperscript{131} that he was watching anti-government videos. They didn’t want to discuss politics or be in contact with censored information. He started to realize how different he was from his dorm mates. When Han came to school, he was like them, but with access to Twitter, he was becoming much more like the individuals he admired in his online community.

\textsuperscript{131} (officially called the Security and stability information work staff 安全稳定工作信息员)
5.4.1.2 The Shoe Throwing Event

As it is for many Twitter users who finally get a stable VPN, the practice of constantly checking Twitter soon became a ritual for Han. It was no different on the morning of Friday May 19, 2011. Just as he had gotten out of a lecture, Han pulled out his phone and checked his Twitter stream, only to find that Fang Binxing, the Father of the Great Firewall, would be speaking at a university in the same city that he was living in. Han wanted to be a witness to what students were going to do to Fang and he also felt a responsibility to his followers to report on what was going to happen:

I really want to see what people were going to do to him. He’s the one guy who makes it impossible for me to go online, so I wanted to see him in person and then tell my Twitter followers what happened. So I went back to my dorm room, put my backpack down, and changed into a t-shirt with Aiweiwei’s face on it. I took a bus to Wuhan University. When I arrived at room 405 in the building that Fang Binxing was scheduled to speak at, I only found a few students in the room, some freshly cut watermelon, but no sign of Fang.

Han then walked downstairs and bumped into two students holding eggs and tweeted: “I see students with eggs in their hands, not sure what they’re for.” He started chatting with the students and found out that they were planning to throw the eggs at Fang Binxing. Han was relieved to have found the right location, and so he hung out with the students, waiting for Fang’s arrival.

Han was ready to tweet about the egg throwing at a moment’s notice, but when the other students spotted Fang Binxing approaching, they saw that their professor was walking next to him and became too nervous to carry out the plan. The students panicked and shoved the eggs into Han’s hands:
I all of sudden felt the eggs in my hands and they said, ‘That’s our professor. We cannot do it.’ As Fang walked past us, I turned to my left and threw two eggs at him. But I missed, both of them didn’t hit. So I took my shoes off and then threw them at his chest. The first one hit him, but then a woman blocked my second shoe. Fang looked very surprised, he looked at me, in my eyes, and I cursed at him. Because of this man, I have to spend money every month on a VPN. He makes getting on the internet difficult.

At this point, Han knew that he had to get out of there quickly. He bolted out of the building, shoeless, with security and several teachers chasing after him.

When he thought that he had outrun security, Han stopped to give his bare feet a rest from the hot pavement. He tweeted to his audience, “Security have arrived. More than ten people are chasing me.” He started running again and when he made it off of campus, he started posting more updates to Twitter, including photos of his shoeless, blistered feet.

By the time that he got back to his dorm room, he checked Twitter to find a deluge of retweets with messages cheering him on, many of which were accompanied by two hashtags: #fuckFang and #fuckgfw (gfw is short for Great Fire Wall). A famous blogger, Isaac Mao, captured online reactions in his tweet: “student @Hananyu at Wuhan U hit Fang Binxing, father of China’s Great Firewall, threw a shoe during his lecture, netizen’s cheering online now.”

Another Twitter user, Charles Custer, noted that a Wikipedia entry for Fang was updated within an hour of the event: “Wow, the shoe incident is already on Fang Binxing’s Wikipedia page. That was FAST http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fang
_Binxing. The love for the shoe-thrower on Weibo right now is MASSIVE. This is going to lead to some hilarious GT editorials. #FuckFANG #fuckgfw.”

By that afternoon, the shoe throwing had become an international news story with coverage from the New York Times to The BBC and The Guardian. The press and Twitter users dialogued about his impending detention with references to a “manhunt.” @rudenoon’s tweet summarizes many people’s views on Twitter about his fate: “@Chinageeks Unfortunately, shoe thrower is destined to be toast. Reeducation is in his future. Or a semester @ an insane asylum.” 24 hours after the event, Han reassured his Twitter followers that he had not been arrested: “So far, not yet. Just woke up. Thank you.”

Over the weekend, messages from all over the world continued to pour in on Twitter, thanking Han for his heroic actions and for carrying out such a risky act. He started getting offers of hundreds of gifts on Twitter, including sexy girls, Apple products, VPNs, a vacation to Thailand, a one night stand, a bag of American pistachio nuts, and, of course, a new pair of shoes.

Han, an ordinary village kid who didn’t even own a computer, had become an international symbol for the freedom of information while Fang Binxing became the center of many internet censorship jokes. To understand how Han participated in the event and was able to still send updates about his safety, we have to understand the changing geography of trust in China.
5.4.1.3 Trust on Twitter

I met with Han four times in 2011 and 2012 after the shoe-throwing incident. He looked like an average college student: glasses, acne scars, and lose fitting clothes. His skin is dark, indicating that he is from a village. He spoke with a heavy accent from his hometown as he told me how he started to trust his Twitter sources.

Before the shoe-throwing event, Han had already participated in the rituals of trustworthiness to gain the level of trust that he needed to believe the tweets being sent out about Fang Binxing’s talk. Han actively kept what he called a “good ratio” of followers and people he followed: “I have around 200 followers and I follow 200 people.” Over the course of the year, he learned several methods to choose which accounts to follow.

Han is very selective about who he follows. He relies on a set of indicators to help him decide if a user is follow-worthy. “This is how it begins. It’s a process about getting to know them. If someone follows you, it’s really encouraging. But I look at what they post and see if it’s interesting.” Han does not immediately follow anyone who follows him. He wants to find people who share similar interests with him in politics and uncovering ‘hidden information’ from the government, but he avoided the extremists. “I do not follow people who want revolutions now,” he said. “I follow people who have reason and understand reality of China.” Even after determining the level of interest he had in a follower’s posts, he checks to see if other people retweet that person’s posts: “I follow people who post good information, and who other people retweet.” He was specifically looking for people who provided good sources of
information: “When people include links in their posts, I can find their information source.” If followers did not include links to sources, Han did not follow them back.

Before following other Twitter users, Han usually will retweet a few of their posts. He says, “I do not follow someone on the first time I retweet them, even if they post good information. I wait to see if they post more good information.” Thus, just one or two retweets by Han, does not necessarily mean that he endorses the trustworthiness of the source. Han needs to see a series of tweets to be convinced that an account is worthy of being followed. He also relies on interaction with other Twitter users to test their trustworthiness. He explains how he starts conversations with other Twitter users: “I reply to people a lot, asking them questions. If we have a good conversation, I will follow them.” Han would usually follow people that responded to his tweets. Han used engagement as an indicator for trustworthiness.

In determining the reliability of the Twitter accounts that he follows, Han examines how often a user tweets, if the information being tweeted is reasonable (i.e., not extreme), and whether an account is being followed by any of the sources he already trusts. Han’s rules for following someone on Twitter form the foundations of his Twitter community. His selectiveness ensures that the people he follows are people he can trust for accurate information.

Han feels connected to this collective group of strangers who share a common goal in uncovering ‘hidden information’ about the ‘dark side’ of China. On Twitter, he is not prohibited from expressing a politicized self and he does not feel weird about
speaking his mind. His shared interests with his Twitter followers create a mutual identity: a community that bonds together in the knowledge that they are all crossing the firewall for a common goal—to find forbidden and quality information that is blocked in spaces controlled by the Chinese authorities.

Han explains: “Most of the stuff I read on Twitter cannot be found in China, or if people talk about it, they have to be careful and use code words and do it in bulletin boards, but even those get discovered and deleted.” His sense of connection to a web of like-minded people on Twitter has led to a sense of responsibility to his community. His followers are his audience and he, too, wants to tweet and retweet what he considers to be good information, especially information that cannot be found on China’s internet. This sense of responsibility has motivated him to become a “popular surveillance” weiguanzhe (围观者) as he intends to report on information from the scene. The word weiguan (围观) refers to a grassroots concept of people actively becoming observers to surveil the state or any given power.

Han couldn’t remember the Twitter account on which he first read about the information on Fang BinXing’s speech, recalling, “I walked out of class and saw a stream of tweets from people I followed.” Even though Han didn’t know the source of the information, he believed it because he saw the people he followed retweeting the same thing. The sheer level of redundancy in the information contained in the retweets from his followers was enough to convince him that Fang’s speech and the collective efforts to harass him were real events. Information redundancy increases trust because
the aggregate of the entire community’s retweets reinforces the perception that the information is accurate. The Twitter users Han followed already had met his prerequisites: they shared similar interests in politics, they interacted with him when he wrote to them, they provided clear transparent links to information, and they posted links to “‘hidden information’” that is not publicly available in China.

Thousands of people beyond Han’s immediate network of followers were involved in forwarding on the call to harass Fang at his talk. Furthermore, this was all accomplished with no formal chain of command, no organizational charts, and no personally known sources. In self-organized events lacking a leadership structure, there is a reliance on decentralized methods of information authentication. This decentralized, informal network confounded the institutions that were responsible for investigating the shoe-throwing event.

5.4.1.4 Trust in Institutions

Around the time Han threw his shoes at Fang Binxing, the Arab Spring was just starting to end, but Chinese authorities were still on edge. Netizens had noticed increased surveillance online and it was hard not to notice the increased presence of plainclothes policeman in public areas. National security guard personnel, all the way down to the local police, were on the look out for subversive activities. So, when Han made his protest, several agencies beyond the local city police became involved because it had become an international story. The authorities were worried that Han was part of a larger and more organized group.
Three different institutions investigated the fracas. Initially, none of them spoke to Han. When the Ministry of State Security (国家安全部) sought to put pressure on Han, they did not contact him directly. They put indirect pressure on him through the institutions with which Han was involved. First, they contacted his university because it was responsible for his personal detailed record dang’an. Han describes how the government investigation began: “They called my university, and notified my professor. Then my professor said that I might not graduate because of this.” I asked if he was scared and he said, “What is there to be scared of? They do not want to keep me behind, that would create more work for them. They are just saying that because they feel pressure from the police.” The university told him that this shoe-throwing act would be on his dang’an and he might never get a job again. His professors asked Han to write a self-criticism, explaining his regret for his actions.

Then the Wenbaoju (文保局), the branch of government that is responsible for state security at universities, asked the university to set up a meeting with Han. The bureau assumed he was part of some organized effort and wanted to know about his collaborators:

They called me into the station and asked for who I was collaborating with. They thought I was the head of some rebel group. They kept asking for phone numbers, then they wanted all my contact info, like my cellphone number. But I do not know why they asked me that, because they already have it. They can have access to anything they want. They kept saying, who do you know on Twitter. I am sure they already know who I talk to because there are undercover Twitter users who work for the government. They try to incite you with talks about democracy so that they can have evidence you are against the Communist party.
The Ministry did not understand that there was no single person to name. Hundreds of people had sent tweets about the location of Fang’s speech and thousands more had tweeted messages of support to Han for his act. Unlike traditional organized protests that do not use the internet or social media, there was no central command for the police to go after. The self-organizing qualities of online collectives can be baffling to bureaucratic organizations like the Chinese police.

The Ministry of State Security contacted Han’s university because the police trusted that the university would reprimand and fix the situation that he caused. In China, institutions trust other institutions to get things done. In the dang'an system, if an institution needs to locate an individual, the protocol is to locate the institution that is responsible for the individual’s dang’an. This system extends back to when government officials made all decisions for individuals using the information presented in their dang’an (Wang 1998). The dang’an system sees institutions as the legitimate representatives for individuals, removing specific people from the process. To handle Han’s case, the Ministry of Security acted according to institutional ritual. Furthermore, the Ministry of State Security and the police assumed that the university would correct Han because, like most bureaucracies, institutions only see people as existing within other institutions.

However, being embedded in a university is what kept Han safe. Neither the security bureaus nor the police could just take Han and throw him in jail. They needed the approval of the university first because it was overseeing his dang’an. Without a
consistent and representative rule of law, institutions can provide safe havens in which individuals can hide.

The bureau then tried another method of getting to Han. Instead of demanding information, one of the officers told him that he was close to ruining his chances for a stable life. Han recounts the interrogation: “There were three of them, two of them were over 40 years old and another one was between 20 and 30. When they met me they said, ‘You’ve done something very famous’ and they asked about my future plans. They warned me with metaphors, they reminded that Teng Biao could have had a good life, but he gave up by trying to protect other people’s rights.”

Then, the younger officer shared his personal story with Han. The officer said that when he was young, he did not realize the important of stability. But as an adult he is happy because he has a car, an apartment, and a stable job. He said to me, “Do not you want these things? Do not want to have a family and give them a good life? Take care of your parents? He thought he was being convincing, but I do not care for those things. My grandfather never even used money. In our society, everyone wants to buy things, but I do not want that.” Han nodded during the police’s lecture, but inside he knew that he did not share the same values as the police. The officers, meanwhile, did not believe that Han was responding adequately to pressure from the university or the police authorities, so they contacted his family members.

The police contacted his uncle, father, and brother, asking them to supervise Han as he was about to graduate. Han recalls his father’s reprimand that “No company
or government office would employ me if I continued to do sensitive things.” Yet, Han continued to be emboldened and expressed that he was not worried about pressure from his family, the police or the university. He was already disillusioned with their promises and their limiting ideas about the kind of life he should live: “After [the police] contacted my father, he is always scolding me. He just says the same thing, ‘The communist party defeated 8,000,000 Nationalist soldiers, so what are you going to do? You’re just one person.’ Then I say back to him, ‘I am shocked that you would connect me to something so serious. You and I do not have the same values.’” No one around him seemed to understand the China that he had come to know through the Twitter community.

Now that Han had become comfortable expressing his fully realized and politicized self, he was receiving resistance from his parents, his friends, and even his brother, who Han had thought would support him. His brother, he says, “now tells me the same thing as everyone else, but he then says It’s ok to have dreams, but we are all helpless.” Han felt that his father, his brother, and everyone around him lived in a different world, a world that was less authentic than the one he found on Twitter and other online communities.

Han spoke about this revelation and the whole experience with annoyance rather than fear: “I didn’t do anything wrong. The police visited me because it became a big deal in the press. They are annoying, they took me out to tea and they got me really drunk. They invited my whole family out to dinner; my uncle and brother were
all there. But I got so drunk that I started cursing at the police officers that my brother had to drag me out of the room.”

Han experienced moral uneasiness. He no longer was a nationalist Communist Party lover who could be easily swayed with Party rhetoric. From Twitter, he learned about methods of being asked by authorities to “drink tea.” He was in regular contact with dissidents and other citizens who were also invited out to tea. He was no longer scared for his family. The rituals and institutions, rooted in the government’s power on which his family had relied, no longer held power over Han.

Institutions are not only centers of power, but also moral enterprises (Madsen 1984). The police went to the institutions Han was embedded in—his university and his family—in the hopes that they could make a moral case to Han to reform and to stay away from Twitter and inappropriate, censored information. A policeman went so far as to share his own personal story about being a reformed wayward youth in an attempt to sway Han to become a nationalist person aiguoderen again. However, Han’s new moral paradigm of openness, transparency, and freedom fundamentally contradicts the precepts of the Communist Party. He came to trust Twitter because the platform is not censored. He looks up to role models such as Aiweiwei because they are committed to putting out information that is hidden by the government in China. The values that Han learned from the Twitter community are in conflict with the values of his family and of the government. The government associates Twitter with a community of people who are anti-party, but for Han, it had become a reliable place to
find information although he did not personally know the people there. Although his family and the Party were all familiar sources to him, he could not trust them for reliable advice and information. He felt the need to seek out new sources, and in order to do that, he had to reach beyond his personal ties and engage an online community of strangers.

5.4.1.5 Analysis of Han

Even though Han acted alone, it was his network of trust that enabled him to act on the information from Twitter. The details of Fang’s talk, its location, and the encouragement and gifts from netizens all came from unknown sources. Even the two students who gave him the eggs to throw had found out about Fang’s talk from sources on Twitter. While Han had not originally planned to directly take part in the act of dissent, he was already feeling so constrained by Chinese society that his only option in that moment was to take action. When the students with the eggs got too scared to carry out the plan, Han took on the responsibility of carrying it through. He was committed to act because he already had ascribed to the morals embodied in the proposed act against Fang Binxing. He no longer related to the rules and norms of being an aiguoderen; he deemed the government and the practices of Information Paternalism to be morally corrupt. When the officers tried to talk rationally to him, Han couldn’t fulfill the interaction that would have affirmed the moral superiority of the Party. His refusal to give deference to the officers indicated that he no longer felt bound to the rules of conduct that the Party expected of him.
According to Goffman (1961a), every action contains rules of conduct that have a direct obligation and an indirect expectation. Individuals are morally constrained to directly carry out an appropriate action and morally bound to respond appropriately. In Han’s case, all the officers and the school officials who tried to speak to him were morally obligated to act in the interest of the Party. However, as Han no longer believes in the moral superiority of the Party, he did not see himself as morally bound to respond appropriately to the officers or to Fang Binxing during his talk.

Han refused to indulge in the rituals of being a proper aiguoderen because his Twitter community was helping him become his own person zijideren (自己的人). The Party was no longer sacred to Han: he had transferred his trust in the Party to his network of Twitter contacts. The key shift is not that these networks exist in China. The key shift is that people like Han have made a moral shifts from Information Paternalism to open information. Without this transition, Han would not have been able to transfer trust from old institutions to his Twitter networks.

Understanding how Han acted on his Twitter sources reveals the “rituals of trustworthiness” in the informal mode where all sources are anonymous. Analyzing the aftermath of Han’s story reveals a great deal about how trust operates online, as well as the changing context of the relationship between individuals and institutions in modern China. Han spent a lot of time cultivating a trusted network of Twitter sources by analyzing their information acts. He didn’t immediately follow a contact, but
examined the quality of information in their links. He also looked at that person’s was connections, and he only followed people who consistently posted reliable sources.

As individuals negotiate trust with unknown sources online, institutions also struggle to adjust to the new ways that information is passed around by decentralized, nonhierarchal, and temporary collectives. Bureaucratic institutions are slow to recognize emergent systems with radically different trust mechanisms, command and power structures, and protocols. This became very obvious when Fang demanded to know why no one at the university informed him about what people on Twitter had been conspiring to do to him. The reply of the university officials was that there was no way that they could have known, because Twitter is across the firewall—the firewall that Fang built.

Even before Han showed up at the university room that day, he was part of a large community of people sharing information, information that exposed new ideas that eventually would lead to new behaviors. While none of these people were physically there with him for the event, Han had already felt empowered by his Twitter community to carry out the act. While the shoe-throwing event in no way became a social movement in China—nor was he trying to turn it into one—this isolated event provides an opportune glimpse into how individuals come to trust the decisions they make based upon information from unknown online sources.

5.4.2 Maimai, the Taobao Queen

Maimai is third year student at a top tier university. Like many Chinese youth, she loves to shop. She is known among her friends as the online shopping expert of
Taobao, China’s largest online shopping market. She is confident in her abilities to assess trustworthiness among vendors by reading comments and conversations between buyers and sellers. While on the surface it may seem that Maimai is just another college student who spends her parents’ money buying stuff online, she also has developed a moral vocabulary to describe the online shopping world as an egalitarian space where she has the agency to make preferred outcomes a reality. She prefers to spend her free time “hanging out” on Taobao even if she is not buying something, because for her, Taobao is a place for emotional development, community engagement, and belonging—not just shopping.

5.4.2.1 Sharing on Renren

Maimai has 317 friends on Renren. Her profile has been viewed 1,554 times. She has 14 journals. She lists her QQ instant messaging account and her cellphone number. Her favorite music is Britney Spears, Elva, and China Di, and Xiao. Her favorite movies are Gone with the Wind and romantic comedies from America.

Among her listed hobbies—online surfing, watching movies, singing, fashion and gardening—fashion is her favorite one. She dedicates a whole photo album, “I Love, Oh So Cool,” to pictures from fashion shows from Helmet Lang to Marc Jacobs. She belongs to two popular shopping groups, Chu Chu Street (楚楚街) and Online Shopping Expert (网购达人).132

132. Chu Chu Street posts links to fashions shows and has over five million followers. Online Shopping Expert is a group for people who, “Love fashion, love online shopping, love hot women and handsome guys.” With over half million followers, the group’s moderator explains that he/she is an “online shopping expert who loves sharing happiness with other online shoppers!” 爱时尚，爱网购，爱美女，也爱型男，我就是爱分享快乐给大家的网购达人！
Her Renren wall is filled with updates about the things she buys and when packages arrives:

Today I bought two beautiful hats 🌸

Oh the flower seeds that I bought online are here. I am so glad! 😍

Oh the flower vase that I bought online arrived!

The snacks I bought online are here. I feel so relieved.¹³³ 😊😊😊😊😊

Her updates about her hats, flower seeds, and vase leave out an important detail: the name of the store. She uses the vague phrase “bought from online” wangshangmaide (网上买的) to indicate how she purchased her items, but she does not share where she bought them. She intentionally keeps the vendors a secret from her friends.

5.4.2.2 A Shopper Who Doesn’t Want to Share Her Shopping Tips

Maimai’s flushed cheeks matched her red sweater with yellow yarn around the collar. Her hair was pulled half back with shorter pieces framing her round face. As we sat in the coffee shop surrounded by people walking in from the mall, Maimai was willing to share with me her shopping source. She told me that she bought all her online items on a website called Taobao: “Oh I’ve bought almost everything I own on Taobao, like food, just a couple of days ago I bought snacks. . . . I buy clothes, hats, shoes. I buy seeds because I love gardening. I bought a hyacinth tulip. Hmmm I also

¹³³. Note that original message contains the following emoticons: animated rose icon, animated pink rise icon , three square happy faces eating an egg and two square happy faces smiling
buy baking tools, cosmetics…oh yeah I bought pomegranate once and I liked it so much.” She started to get more excited as she named more items. “I cannot find nonsalty butter in supermarkets, I can only find it on Taobao. . . . I can buy mid-grade and high-grade flour at the supermarket, but I can only buy low-grade flour on Taobao.”

She buys new clothes several times a month on Taobao. She is constantly reviewing fashion magazines like Elle and Vogue for the latest trends, and then looking for similar pieces on Taobao: “If you look through Vogue [magazine] and you feel that Emma Roberts clothes are beautiful, then you would think, ‘Oh that’s nice.’ But then if you know that the clothes could be found on Taobao, then you will go look for the same clothes. Sellers will advertise that they are featuring some clothes from a magazine or model.” Maimai has bought so much clothing on Taobao that she has VIP cards from six Taobao clothing stores.

With over 500 million of users and over 800 million listings, Taobao is China’s largest and most successful e-commerce site and one of the largest in the world. Taobao is not a boutique shopping site or secretive site, but many boutique sites use Taobao. Maimai does not tell anyone she knows what she does on Taobao. Even though she announces her purchases and deliveries on Renren, she does not divulge the seller’s details or the platform. Maimai has strong beliefs about sharing one’s shopping activity with friends. “It’s better for Taobao to protect one’s anonymity. There is no need to get real-life relationships involved in Taobao.”
goes on to explain: “... Shopping on Taobao is a private matter. You do not want others to know what you have bought. For instance, if I buy underwear, I think it is an awkward thing. I may feel embarrassed if my friend knows I buy what underwear in what shop, and my size, etc.”

Maimai is not alone. Taobao does have an API feature that allows users to link to their Weibo and Renren and see which of their contacts are on Taobao. However, like most users, Maimai does not link the social media platform she uses for formal modes of interaction, such as Renren and her primary QQ accounts, with Taobao, a platform dominant in the informal mode of interaction. She is most comfortable expressing her consumer self anonymously. I asked her why she did not tell her friends about her shopping habit, and she explained: “If my other friends learn about how good the shop is, they what if they wear exactly the same clothes as me or what if they use exactly the same things as I do? If that were to happen, that would be so weird qiguai. This could happen. But for some other shops I think it’s OK to recommend it, however for those really unique shops, they really are my personal experience that I don’t want anyone else to know about it.”

Maimai put so much effort into discovering “unique” clothes that if someone else were to also wear the same clothes it would make her unique clothes appear to be “normal.” Maimai’s use of weird qiguai in this consumer context refers to the uneasiness she would feel if her backstage work in creating a “fostered appearance” would be exposed (Goffman 1997, 104). Maimai has previously experienced this
before: “I bought a new outfit at a store, and then the same day I came across another two girls in Wuhan University wearing the same outfit as me. I felt so ashamed.”

Maimai used the word *diuren* (丢人) for the word shame, revealing the deep humiliation she would feel when seen wearing the same outfit in a public space. One time, she bought a sweater at a store only to find that many other girls had the same one. After that, she said, “I just didn’t want it anymore.”

Another time, Maimai was shopping with a friend who complimented her on fashion style and wanted to know where Maimai bought her skirt. Maimai told her, “I do not like others wearing the same clothes as me” and that if they go shopping together “she can buy whatever she wants as long as it’s not the same thing I buy.” I asked Maimai why it would be so shameful *diuren* to wear the same outfit as someone. She replied, “It’s too risky. If someone wears the same clothing as you, but she looks more beautiful than you, then you will never wear that clothing again.”

To avoid the risk of wearing the same outfit as someone else, she keeps her shopping sources a secret: “When you buy a product on Taobao, or when you discover a really good small shop, you might want to maintain your own uniqueness.” The ritual of keeping Taobao vendors a secret is an unspoken rule among women who shop online: “I think it’s weird if someone were to ask me where I bought my

---

134. Diu Ren (丢人) is similar to the word Diu Lian (丢脸), which means lose face and shame. As I found so far, this word has been used since Qing Dynasty. Last modified 17 July, 2013. http://www.zdic.net/c/2/13e/307995.htm
clothing.” Maimai’s friends rarely ask her on Renren—or in person—where she bought a product.

The don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy about one’s shopping sources is not only enforced online, but also offline. Picking up and unwrapping the weekly deliveries of online shopping is a ritual among female college students: “I tell my friends in advance when I buy something and then when I receive it we all get excited and we show it to each other. Sometimes we get the package together as a group, it’s really nice to do that. And we all open the packages together back in the dorm. We all do that. Others come by and ask, ‘What did you buy?’ and they check out the stuff. And I go look at what my roommates bought. Sometimes we allow each other to try our clothes on.” Even though picking up and unwrapping a package is a shared experience among female college students, everyone knows to refrain from asking each other where they bought a product unless it is a food item.

Since Maimai kept her online shopping sources a secret from her friends, she also did not share her Taobao username with her friends. Similar to Douban users who do not ask friends for their Douban name, young Taobao shoppers also do not ask friends for their Taobao user name or for the details of the vendors where they shop. Maimai still relied on shopping and fashion advice, but instead of turning to people she knew, she turned to strangers on Taobao.

Interestingly, Maimai was insistent that she was not the kind of internet user who talked to strangers. When I asked Maimai who she shared her shopping tips and
sources with, she said that shared it with Taobao internet friends *wangyou* (网友) and community *qu* (区). I then tried to confirm her sentence asking, “So are these internet friends *wangyou* strangers?” For strangers, I used the Chinese phrase “*burenshideren*” which translates directly to “people you do not know.” She replied,

I am conservative. Strangers are always trying to add me to their QQ, but I do not approve of them unless I know them. It’s a waste of time to chat with strangers. I do not need to chat with people a lot. I only chat with my friends in real life. I do not think I have any common interests with strangers. I know I can know more about others through chatting but without any experiences together there is less to talk about. I used to accept other people’s requests on QQ but not anymore. A while back I accepted a QQ invite from a QQ and then he kept trying to talk to me, but we didn’t have much to talk about so I just pretended to be offline.

Even though Maimai articulated that she did not talk to strangers, it became clear over the course of our conversation that strangers were actually the only people she felt comfortable sharing the details of her shopping experiences with. However, Maimai did not consider the people she interacted with on Taobao to be strangers; she called them her internet friends *wangyou* and community *qu*. To understand why she does this, we have to explore further about how she sees Taobao as a community, and not just an online shopping site fulfilling her needs for clothes, food, and baking tools.

### 5.4.2.3 Why Taobao Is the Most Popular Online Shopping Site

Many studies have identified trust as the single most important factor when it comes to online purchasing behavior (Grabner-Kräuter & Ewald 2003; Riegelsberger et al. 2005; Riegelsberger & Sasse 2003). Online shopping can be daunting because buyers cannot rely on traditional methods of purchasing. They cannot touch or see
objects, they cannot go directly to a storefront, they cannot speak directly to a salesperson, and they cannot judge a store based on its cleanliness.

I was curious how Maimai came to be so good at assessing trust on Taobao without any previous internet experience. Like most high school students who take the Gaokao, her earliest experience of consistent internet use started after she finished the test: “We were so busy with the Gaokao that I never even browsed Taobao until that summer before college.” For Mimi, her primary experience of the internet was not information searching, gaming, or watching movies; it was shopping. She went to Taobao everyday and started to buy stuff. By the time she started college, she was familiar with the Taobao platform. She now shops on Taobao more than she shops at offline stores.

According to Maimai, there are several aspects that make Taobao a “fantastic platform” for shopping. She likes that every stores state their return policy. She feels that the payment system is secure because they use Alipay, a third party verified PayPal-like system that also uses phone code verification.135 She can easily search for items, and she can typically choose from several vendors for the most competitive price. She can easily see the ratio of comments to purchase for each vendor and product. For example, if a vendor receives a lot of comments but the purchase rate is not high, then she suspects the products are not good. She can see comments on all the products; if a product does not have a lot of comments then she does not buy it. By

---

now she has specific vendors she trusts more, so if their prices are higher than vendors she is unfamiliar with, she is willing to pay more because she trusts them.

So far, all of the reasons that Maimai provided are predictable and have been confirmed by existing studies: online shoppers prefer sites that provide trust-inducing cues. The combination of third party assurance and verification, security, production information, and comments all lower information asymmetry and therefore reduce what Clemons et al. calls the “trust penalty,” cues that discourage purchase (Clemons et al. 2013; Chen and Dibb 2010). These reasons are not unique to Taobao.\footnote{Like most online shoppers, reputation is one of the most important factors of online purchases. Clemons et al. identifies reputation as the most important factor for buyers in Chinese e-commerce sites (2013).} If this is the case, it is still unclear as to why Maimai would consider Taobao to be a community filled with internet friends.

5.4.2.4 The Unspoken Reasons of Why Taobao is Popular

As we chatted more, Maimai tells me about the others things she does on Taobao, and a new story starts to emerge: Taobao is a micro-world for her to retreat to. On Taobao, she is safe from the harshness of everyday life: “Taobao provides a sense of intimacy. In reality, people can be so vicious or rude to each other, but on Taobao, they sound, well of course there is no sound, but you can get this feeling from their tone in their language, that they are nice.”

Taobao sellers are known for their responsive and amiable customer service among buyers. In 2008, Taobao implemented an instant chat feature for buyers to
contact Taobao customer service officials in real-time through a browser chat window.

“Every shop now has a customer service, they’re always giving me a flower [emoticon] and saying sweetie. I say thank you and they say ‘sweetie, you’re welcome, you do not have to be so polite! Blah…blah.’” Sometime in 2010, Taobao customer service agents started to universally address the buyer as sweetie qin (亲).

The character qin means a close relative, and it signals a term of endearment. This word is usually reserved for people who are personally close, such as a husband and wife or children.

Up until recently, however, the word was not part of the colloquial vernacular. Taobao customer service workers popularized qin and now the term is used ubiquitously in everyday life, especially among younger people. Maimai notes the ubiquity of the phrase on Taobao: “Everyone now says “sweetie” or “dear sister” gewei jiemei (各位姐妹). If I ask a people on Taobao about a dress, they will comment, ‘Dear sis, nice dress, you must buy it sweety!’ Or they will say, “If you like it, just take out your purse, dear!’” Customer service agents also address female buyers as “chick” niu (妞) and “MM,” all of which are terms of endearment that have traditionally been reserved for close friends, not unknown contacts. Maimai feels comforted by these words. She tells me that some people will use Taobao instant chat when they are lonely or when they want to flirt with a girl. She even admits to having done this.
When I moved back to China in 2011, I started to hear the word qin in television and radio advertisements and among my young, urban, white-collared, and migrant friends. The word was no longer stigmatized as an intimate label. Maimai and others referred to this style of communication as Taobao Style (淘宝体). The police, transportation bureau, and universities all started to use Taobao Style in their communication over the last year. A Weibo for a local police precinct used qin in a wanted poster; in Chengdu, a traffic sign that asks people to slow down uses qin; even some university admission letters are prefaced with qin.

The popularization of the word sweetie is the reflection of a group symbol that reinforces a sense of identity with those who also use it (Collins 2005). Maimai is very proud that Taobao users speak to each other in a more intimate tone. “The tone that everyone uses is so pretty, so soft, I think people are aware of the hidden rule of Taobao: be polite and respectful.” Maimai perceives Taobao as a place where interactions are guided by an implicit rule of civility and kindness. She feels that “in reality, people can be so unreasonable,” where as on Taobao, people treat each other with compassion: “Sometimes the comments are so good. I mean all the comments are

---

137. In a blogpost, a netizens explains that Taobao’s friendly language warms the iciness of everyday life: “淘宝体则是建立在这层面上的温暖关系，人们通过言语的亲切来缓解内心的疑虑” July 22, 2011 http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_54d5b04c0102drlu.html). In another post, netizens debated about proper and improper uses of qin. One commenter wrote that wanted posters for criminals should not use qin or any taobao style. (“it is too kind and is not serious enough” “亲近有余而严肃不足” 5 June, 2012 http://news.paidai.com/10517)

College admissions addresses students by qin: (“We sent the taobao style SMS admission notice is to make the students feel more close to the university.” “发‘淘宝体’录取短信，就是希望拉近学校和新同学之间的距离” 19 July, 2011 http://news.jschina.com.cn/system/2011/07/19/011257677.shtml)
so sincere or just soooooo nice and kind. In fact, it’s very seldom that I see a negative comment on a product.” Even when there is a negative comment, sellers are so worried about it that they usually reply to the buyer’s comment asking for another chance in the hopes that the buyer will update her/his comment. Sellers appeal to buyers to update their comment by offering them exchanges and replacements.

“Sellers will even call you on your cellphone to add to the comment.” Maimai explains: “You cannot change your original comment, you can only add to it. So the seller cannot ask you to change what you wrote, they can only ask you to add to it.”

But when buyers refuse to change their comment, sellers usually make a moral appeal to buyers by asking, “Buyer, where is your consciousness?” Maimai says that buyers then will reply: “There is a lot of back and forth. Prospective buyers can read the opinions from both sides and make their own judgment about which side is more reasonable and which side is just lying to people.” These exchanges are helpful because the conversational transparency between the buyers and sellers increases the social trust in Taobao as an entire platform. The seller’s interaction with the buyer also decreases information asymmetry, giving buyers more information about the seller.

Maimai notes the egalitarianism in the open comment system: both sides can openly give enough information so that a third party could assess the situation. Taobao comments showed a side of people that Maimai rarely saw in “reality,” which refers to brick-and-mortar shopping experiences.

138. This was a common response amongst all my interviewees on Taobao shopping.

139. “买家你有良心”啊.”
Even though China passed the Consumer Protection Law in 1993, consumers still have difficulty adjudicating their grievances (Davis 2005). If a store has a return policy, it is inconsistent and reliable. Almost all of my participants who used Taobao agreed that the customer service and return policy on Taobao is more consistent and reliable than in offline stores. Maimai believes that “Taobao has had a significant effect on sellers, the commenting system has forced them to improve their attitude. This is such a huge contribution. It forces the seller to treat the buyer really nicely.”

Maimai perceives Taobao to be a platform that benefits customers, creating the transparent conditions that require sellers to treat buyers with fairness and respect. One of her earliest experiences with returning a nail polish on Taobao made her feel like she had agency. Maimai had purchased a nail polish that arrived in a broken bottle when she unpacked the box. Maimai tried to contact the Taobao shop’s customer service but no one replied. So, she left a comment on the store stating the problem. The seller immediately called her and apologized for being too busy to reply, asking Maimai to amend her comment if the seller sent her a new bottle. Maimai agreed and explained the whole conversation with the seller in her comment. She was able to resolve the nail polish situation on her own and now expects a better level of customer service after this experience. In obtaining consumer justice, it not only made Taobao feel more trustworthy as a platform for Maimai, but it also made her feel empowered that she could exercise her rights as a consumer.
Taobao was not just a shopping site for Maimai. It was also a place for her to hang out with her community qu. She explained, “Taobao is a form of entertainment. Because sometimes, I just want to hang around on the site even if I do not have anything to buy.” Instead of asking her dorm mates about how to apply makeup, she joined makeup communities that give tips and instructions on how to put on eye-liner, match lipstick with an outfit, and find the best brands. Users can ask each other questions, post videos, and attach before-and-after pictures. On the community forums, Taobao users are not just looking for cosmetic sales, they are also there for noneconomic exchanges: “Taobao has its own communities shequ (社区), it has its own forums, it tells you about make-up, what’s popular this year, internet friends wangyou (网友) will post about the good stuff they’ve found in a store. There are communities just for this.”

She goes to Taobao when she is bored or when she wants to know how to be cool. She asks questions of the community that she cannot ask her friends. She can talk to her internet friends on Taobao without the risk of feeling ashamed for asking stupid questions about fashion: “I can ask anything and someone will answer.”

She relies on Taobao to help her balance two competing desires: to be unique, and to not appear to be qiguai. She spends a lot of time browsing through Taobao and when she notices a particular trend, she’ll imagine herself wearing the outfit. Maimai explains: “I’ll change myself gradually if I know something is popular on Taobao.” She gives me an example: “I never thought I would wear a skirt with suspenders
because I am fat. But then I saw many people wear it on Taobao, people of all different figures. So I thought, ok, I could wear it too. Taobao can influence me.”

Browsing through clothes is an opportunity to visualize herself being more daring and experimental. Seeing photos of strangers in outfits creates an imaginary space where she can try on different the same style without having to commit to it. Even though the people she sees are strangers, their pictures inspire her to try out the look. Being around people in an informal e-commerce environment gives her the confidence to try out styles that she would have thought were too weird for her at another point in time.

Maimai often turns to her Taobao community for questions about outfits and products. The community forums contain hundred of threads dedicated to helping buyers assess if a product is real or fake. Taobao has two community features that are very popular with users. Try It Out is a program where users apply to be selected by sellers to try out a product and write a review. Sellers only chose users who leave a lot of comments. Maimai comments on all the products she buys, so she was an ideal candidate. Out of 25 applications, she is proud to have been chosen twice: “Tens of thousands of people apply, it’s really good I was chosen!” She reviewed a facial lotion and massage cream and crafted a 300 character comment.

Programs like Try It Out reward users for commenting, but they also socialize users into a commenting ritual. Users feel incentivized to comment for several reasons. First, for every comment they post, they are rewarded with T-coins (T stands for Taobao) that they can use for purchases. Second, comments are permanent, so
buyers feel reassured that sellers cannot manipulate buyers to change their comments. The most important reason, however, is that buyers know that their comments will be useful for other buyers: “Yes, that is, in fact, I think, if you, the buyer, gives detailed comments on a particular product, it will encourage the next buyer to leave a comment and help the buyer. For instance I will not buy a product with zero comments…when a new buyer discovers the product with so many comments; it increases their confidence to purchase.” Maimai feels that her comments are being valued. She is motivated to contribute to the community because she perceives Taobao to be a community where everyone is equally invested.

Another feature that also encourages interaction among Taobao users is the Help Me Pick function where users can ask other users to help them decide on a product. Users are not able to opt out of the program, but they can ignore requests. Because Maimai has bought so much stuff online, she often gets requests from buyers: “They will ask me, which patterns, which one should I buy, questions like that.” Programs like this make buyers feel that their opinions are not only being valued by many buyers, but by a specific buyer about a specific product.

5.4.2.5 Analysis of MaiMai

Maimai’s story of trust building in an economic context draws out the process of online trust as a three-way relationship between the trustor, trustee, and the community. The trustor is the buyer, the trustee is the vendor, and the community is the Taobao qu that users rely on to help them make decisions. Trust in this context is
not a matter of reputation or usability features; it is the degree to which the community, as a network, cooperates to maintain their norms and rules.

Maimai’s story is not unique among Chinese youth. While exerting fashion choices is an important phase for individuation among youth globally, Chinese youth tend to enter into this process after they finish high school. Most students who are on a college path have attended schools that require uniforms from a young age, and college is usually the first time in their lives where they do not have to wear a uniform. Since this process is so new for these youth, they are unsure about what looks good on them, what is in style, and what reflects their tastes. Fashion becomes a heightened space for decision-making, and symbolic of crafting a public self. For many youth, shopping for clothes becomes an activity in which they can exert their independence and identity: they can now physically distinguish themselves through fashion choices to create a unique image.

In China’s ongoing “opening up” (Farrer 2002), youth like Maimai are experimenting with new forms of identity and association through consumerism online. “Booming consumerism is not merely a reflection of a booming economy. Rather it also reflects the changing social system and facilitates further changes in the system, such as redrawing boundaries around social groups, creating social spaces outside of the state control and forming new ideology.” (Yan 2000). While Maimai’s interactions on Taobao are largely apolitical, it is still a platform for her to engage in ways that are not possible with people she knows. Maimai is fairly representative of
many young people I spoke to. They are not engaged in politics and have no desire to be, but they speak very adamantly about consumer rights and getting fair treatment from vendors. They have long conversations about which stores have the best return policy, which ones have the best customer service, and which ones treat them the best. They are learning that Chinese society is not fixed, not all of it is corrupt, not every vendor is trying to squeeze more money out of them, and not every interaction with unknown people is transactional. The morals that attract them to Taobao reflect a new society that they want to live in: an egalitarian world where people are trustworthy and emotionally supportive of each other. They want to live in this world completely, but for now, this world is only available online.

My participants did not use Taobao in a vacuum. Like the homeowners of Davis’s study (2006), Maimai speaks about her Taobao practices in relation to other parts of her life. She sees Taobao as an ideal microcosm of civility that cannot be found in offline China. She now has higher expectations for service; she has a language and a moral vision for justice and fairness for consumers; she sees the value in an open commenting system. The Taobao community makes her feel validated. She trusts Taobao for purchases, and she also trusts the Taobao community for advice and inspiration. Using Taobao is a ritual that teaches her core lessons about interacting with people outside of her immediate social circles.

Deborah Davis’s research on the “consumer revolution” in China argues that the state sanctions and continues to promote consumer activity among citizens (2000).
Shopping has become a safe space for citizens to explore themselves and exert their unique identity. The Chinese have more rights as consumers in China than they do as a citizens. As a state-sanctioned area of public and legal discourse, it is not surprising that consumption is a safe space for citizens to learn about justice, fairness, civility, and compassion.

Much like the homebuyers who talk about their decorating and buying their homes in terms of their social circumstances (Davis 2006), young shoppers’ use of Taobao is also situated in terms of their social context. Where the homebuyers were trying to design their home to prevent it from looking like the staid housing from their danwei, youth are trying to style themselves to look different from their friends. While the desire to look unique and nonmainstream is global (Hebdige 1979), what’s different in this context is that Chinese youth feel more comfortable exploring certain aspects of the consumer side of themselves with strangers, not friends.

5.5 Analysis

5.5.1 New Connection between Trust and Information

In the previous chapter, we saw Liuliu, Tao Ge, Sammy, and Mimi exploring the world and discovering new aspects of themselves in the company of strangers. In this chapter, we see Han and Maimai enter into more meaningful and sustained relationships with internet friends. To do so, they figured out new ways of assessing trust.

In the second phase of the Elastic Self, my participants show that they did not freely enter into trusting relationships with just anyone. They engaged in rituals to
help them assess the credibility of online interactions. This was not a directionless assessment; rather they were guided by a moral vision for a more open and fair society, one that is more in line with the ideals of open information. They sought out different kinds of people that reflected their ideals. Han sought out connections on Twitter who could point him to “hidden information.” Maimai sought out interactions on Taobao that were more kind and predictable than everyday life. While these contexts differ, we see how both Han and Maimai developed a new sensibility for interacting with strangers in the digital space.

This sensibility is a new relationship to information and trust. The etymology of the character “information” has always been closely connected to people. The first character in information (信息) is composed of two separate characters: people and words. Combined together, it means “what people say.” The first character of information is also the second character in trust (相信), which literally translates to “what people say is real.” The rituals of trustworthiness bring people back to their central role in the dissemination of information and the building of trust. In the Maoist Era, people could not trust each other because they were afraid of sharing information that could put themselves or others in trouble. To survive in this system, people refrained from sharing information. During this period, information was not transparent—it was dangerous. There was no way for people to verify or deny any information that had been collected about them and put on their dang ’an.
5.5.2 Trust Transference

Moral visions legitimate institutions: Confucianism legitimates the family and collectivism legitimates the Communist Party. When moral guides no longer hold the same meaning and power, there is a perception of a moral crisis. Yan (2011) argues that “the moral landscape of post-Mao China has undergone a profound shake up” from a collectivist-centered morality to “moral practices that are individual-centered yet tending toward more universal values…” (40). My research confirms that this perception of a moral crisis is pervasive, but that post-80s and 90s youth are handling this crisis in vastly different ways than older generations.

For one, Han and Maimai illustrate that youth are experiencing a moral shift in the company of strangers, not friends. They feel less lonely as they find that they have more in common with people they meet online than with their offline friends. Second, as their trust in old institutions decrease, they transfer that trust to the new networks that they are building with strangers. Unlike older generations who do not have access to the informal mode of interaction and are constantly surrounded by the same narrow social circle, Chinese youth are spending a lot of time online ‘messing around.’ At the same time, this ‘messing around’ leads to more serious forms of sociality such as friendship and community.

Han’s social circle, which consists of his family, expects him to simply trust them based on their existing relationship. Instead, Han chooses to develop trust with new ties in his social networks, which requires him to develop new standards for assessing a contact’s trustworthiness. Han’s moral shift begins in his discovery of
‘hidden information’ about Chinese society that make him question his trust in the Party and in his family. His Twitter network becomes a more reliable source than any Chinese network. Han’s affiliations with the Twitter community strengthens as he continues to lose trust in the institutions that he used to believe in.

Maimai grapples with a different context of trust; her story is really about her sense of low social trust, as well as her personal trust in friends. She did not trust vendors to treat her well, and she didn’t trust her friends to not copy her style. Her moral shift begins on Taobao, a platform where she develops her identity as a shopper and experiences a more egalitarian society. Maimai perceives a fundamental kindness in the way Taobao users communicate with each other that makes her feel like it is a true community. Her ties to Taobao strengthen as she comes to trust the vendors and other users on the site. Her ties to Taobao are no longer transactional, but emotional.

In both of their stories, the outcome of a moral shift is a transference of trust from institutions to informal networks. Han’s trust in his family and the Party moved to his Twitter network. Maimai’s distrust of shopping vendors in offline China is transformed into trust in the Taobao network of reviewers. The transformation is significant: Chinese youth are becoming more trusting of their social networks than of institutions.

5.6 Conclusion

Through interactions in the informal mode, individuals can gain a great sense of agency that was previously unavailable to them. Possessing the ability to read the cues represented by information acts, my participants navigate the informal mode of
interaction with relative ease. Individuals can carry out their interactions without institutionalized and prescriptive norms dictating their interactions. Han and Maimai feel like they have the ability to decide the terms of interaction with their contacts and networks on Twitter and Taobao. This differs greatly from the other relationships in their lives that they cannot control: those with their families, the state, and their schools. The Trusting Phase gives way to a self that is involved in communities of their choosing that, first and foremost, reflects youths’ own identities.

The Trusting Phase is where youth begin to negotiate the tensions between a “moral me”—the individual as the source of a moral vision, and a “moral we,”—the group of people come up with a shared morality that benefits everyone in the group. This process leads to changes that are expressed in the Participatory Phase. While youth in the Trusting Phase are acting on their own to figure out trust, in the Participatory Phase youth are acting as a group in the hopes of achieving a particular social outcome together. Establishing trust in networks allow youth to create a web of public trust that initially resides in a digital space but then can be parlayed into producing actions that unfold in offline contexts. As we will see in section 6.0, a subset of Chinese youth are becoming engaged in civic participation, transferring skills learned from the Exploratory and Trusting Phases and putting them into use in the service of civic action.
CHAPTER 6
PARTICIPATORY PHASE: FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC INTERESTS

6.1 Introduction
The previous two chapters introduced aspects of an emergent web-based sociality in China. This chapter argues that youths’ inspiration for exploring private interests with strangers can expand to public interests. The Exploratory and Trusting Phases of an Elastic Self create the relationships to the self and unknown others that make the interactions in the Participatory Phase possible. In this third phase of the Elastic Self, youth engage in emergent communities organized around public civic participation. Whereas youths’ motivations to use social media in the previous chapter were more closely linked to serving personal needs, in this chapter it is more aligned with wider social needs.

6.2 Recap of Chapter 5
Three things happen as a result of undergoing the Exploratory and Trusting Phases of the Elastic Self. First, youth gain practical skills and confidence in assessing trustworthiness with strangers in the informal mode of interaction. Second, they develop a moral commitment to open information. They develop strategies to outwit Information Paternalism, such as creating and/or reading coded language, learning how to cross the firewall, and searching for information online. Third, by engaging with apolitical, ‘lightweight communities’ in the informal mode, they become more comfortable meeting unknown people offline. These three outcomes prepare and inspire youth for the Participatory Phase of the Elastic Self, a self that is engaged in
civic participation with socially disparate, yet likeminded, individuals. Those who are comfortable exploring private interests in the informal mode are also more likely to explore public interests when opportunities present themselves. These youth are more able to participate in more complex acts of solidarity.

The Participatory Phase requires the highest level of risk. A variety of factors heighten the level of trust required in this level. First, civic action typically involves large groups of strangers. Some activities are borderline politically sensitive or socially transgressive. Engagements can unfold offline, increasing the chances of one’s given name becoming exposed. All of these factors make it imperative for youth to quickly evaluate trustworthiness.

The social and trusting skills that youth gain from the Exploratory and Trusting Phase enable youth to more easily navigate large, complex networks in the Participatory Phase. As such, only a subset of my participants engaged in the Participatory Phase. They could not leapfrog to the Participatory Phase without traversing the Exploratory and Trusting Phases where they learned the social skills to navigate mundane, dyadic, or small-scale interactions. Engagement in the Participatory Phase is a culmination of the online experiences and self-growth youth develop through interactions with strangers.

6.2.1 Participatory Phase

In the Participatory Phase of the Elastic Self, Chinese youth are creating what I term “emergent communities,” self-organized, loose\textsuperscript{140} collectives of strangers using

\textsuperscript{140} Christian Fuchs (2006) suggests that the concept of “self-organized” protests is important
social media tools in ad hoc ways to band and disband for short term or sustained civic action. I use the term emergent to describe the unexpected occurrence of these communities that often show promising signs of becoming something more cohesive and sustainable. However, these communities can also be easily disbanded. As Shirky suggests, when “people are given the tools to do things together, without needing traditional organizational structures,” groups can begin “organizing without organizations” (2008).¹⁴¹

Chinese youth are attracted to emergent communities because they offer a sense of solidarity, a feeling that youth are part of a larger group that is dedicated to a shared cause that often has personal significance. Initially, youth are not engaging in the informal mode for any explicit purpose other than to express their emotions; however, over time they start to build up more meaningful relationships with strangers. As these relationships between individuals intensify, a shared identity arises to create ties that form an emergent community. When a group of individuals perceive themselves to be a community, they can act in coordinated ways that reflect the values and identity of the group. These actions reflect the commitment of each member to the community.

---

¹⁴¹. Human Flesh Search is an example of a type of emergent community where members’ efforts to uncover political corruption can fortify and expand the public sphere. But this behavior can also encourage vigilantism and political extremism (Levine 2012).
Robert Putnam’s (1993) seminal work on civil society revealed the importance of community associations that he refers to as “networks of civic participation”: multiple community organizations that produce three beneficial outcomes: the stimulation of generalized reciprocity between members, the facilitation of communication and coordination of activities, and the circulation of repertoires of successful action as models for future action (174). For Putnam, the proxy for networks of civic participation are associations—voluntary community organizations.

The contemporary version of Putnam’s “associations” in China are emergent communities, because they are the places where youth perceive community engagement to be voluntary. These communities do not look like formal associations with official membership processes, such as the Communist Party, neighborhood groups, or student clubs. They look more like the loose networks of individuals in Han’s twitter community, in Sammy’s fan fiction groups, or in Maimai’s Taobao shopping groups. Furthermore, emergent communities are appealing because Chinese youth do not feel that their identity is bounded to any single online group. This is consistent with what Rainee and Wellman (2012) term “networked individualism” where “people function more as connected individuals and less as embedded group members”: they have “partial membership in multiple networks and rely less on permanent membership in settled group” (12).

However, the deeper ties that come with community-based action require youth to collapse some of the boundaries between the formal and informal mode of
interaction. In the Chinese context, where public organizing is politically risky, emergent communities that are coming together online and offline for social action require participants take the risks of revealing their given identity. Where youth in the Exploratory and Trusting Phases wanted to keep their informal affiliations with communities and individuals anonymous, youth in the Participatory Phase want to broadcast their affiliations and opinions. They recruit people to join their causes, and they are more open to revealing their given identity. As a result, youth become more public in the Participatory Phase.

Youth who engage in the Participatory Phase may not always be able to articulate their commitment, but the indicators are observable in their actions that demonstrate their commitment to the community. Below I list several indicators of the Participatory Phase of an Elastic Self (corresponds with Table 2.2):

- Moves seamlessly between known, unknown, and semi-known contacts
- Moves seamlessly between offline and online in a common sense way without treating either realm as inherently meaningful; participation in offline activities uses learned models of action from the online and vice versa
- Tries to carry out action or participate in action in one’s community
- Has compassion for (and identifies with) issues that are unfamiliar with her/his upbringing.
- Tries to spread (recruit) and activate other individuals to become involved in social action.
- Relies on semi-known contacts for emotional and moral support to carry out social action.
- Can confidently assess information from a variety of sources
- Has traversed the Exploratory and Trusting Phase of an Elastic Self
- Gives up on anonymity or merges some identities within formal and informal modes without disruption
- Has awareness of the power of media attention

These indicators help us identify when youth are exhibiting the Participatory Phase of their Elastic Self.

Unlike the Trusting Phase where youth like Han acted on his commitment to his network alone, youth in the Participatory Phase are not acting alone: they act in concert with many other individuals. They also recruit individuals to join their community, defend their values and actions when they are under threat, and rally together to carry out social action. In doing this together, they see themselves as agents of social change with other individuals.

But Chinese youth are not motivated by a revolutionary spirit to engage in conversations with strangers. Instead, they are initially interested in talking about things that make sense to them and closely tied to their personal experiences. While many of the interactions start our as trivial and mundane matters, for some of them, these interactions develop into a broader set of public interests as their online contacts introduce to them to new moral codes. Youth have to experience a sense of agency
and empowerment on an individual level before enacting social change. In the words of Vanessa L. Fong and Rachel Murphy (2006): “The agency of marginal individuals seeking self-transformation could also lead to broader social transformations” (4). I observed youth becoming more involved in activities that benefited not just themselves or another individual, but an entire community. While they did not join a group with the goal of engaging in citizenship practices, as their shared identity cohered, they started to act in the group’s best interest.

6.3 Citizenship: An Overview

Broadly speaking, citizens are members of a political community that are bounded through a set of rights and obligations (Goldman 1994). Citizenship is both a legal status and an identity, “therefore [it] represents a relationship between the individual and the state, in which the two are bound together by reciprocal rights and obligations” (Heywood 1994, 155). But as Margaret Somers reminds us, citizenship is a “contested truth”; it is socially and historically constructed (1994, 65). The way states and individuals conceive of and practice citizenship changes overtime depending on a myriad of social factors.

Merle Goldman’s and Elizabeth’s J. Perry’s (2002) work puts forth that Chinese people are transforming political citizenship in modern China.142 Like Goldman and Perry, my work confirms that a subset of Chinese youth are engaging in political citizenship practices. But my work strongly underscores that Chinese youth

142. Goldman and Perry define political citizenship as the “duties, obligations, claims, and/or rights that connect members of a society to the state” (2002, 2).
are not advocating for some abstract sense democratic government such as free speech or democracy. Instead, they are trying to make specific changes in areas that are directly connected to their everyday life. Interactions with strangers in the informal mode play an important role in widening youths’ worldview from personal interests to public interests as they introduce new ideas.

For example, I witnessed one group of 20 to 30 participants band together to stage public takeovers of men’s bathrooms to create greater awareness of the lack of female stalls. Their posters cited statistics from model countries with a higher ratio of women’s bathroom stalls to men’s bathroom’s stalls, such as Taiwan and the US. Their narratives emphasized fair bathroom access as an important public service. They used social media to organize their meet-up, contacted journalists, and to stage the protest.

With the understanding that organized protests are illegal in China, the organizers had to evade the local authorities. While protests are commonly known for their ability to gain mass attention, the organizers were selective and discrete about the kind of attention they received: they wanted media attention, not government attention. The organizers focused on getting journalists to attend the protest in order to increase the publicity of the protest instead of getting people to participate in the protest. They did not send out the locations of the protest on QQ and Weibo until one hour before the event; within an hour, the protest was over. They protested just long
enough for the journalists to capture images and quotes, but not long enough for the local authorities to arrive on the scene.

The bathroom protest was a complex, temporary, and ad hoc group undertaking that was made possible through the combination of students’ ability to imagine themselves as citizens capable of making change through the informal mode of interaction. Even though they knew that their actions would not spur the government to build more stalls in women’s bathrooms, they believed that their participation, albeit temporary, would create an incremental awareness for the issue. For them, success was not in scale, it was in the avoidance of authorities.

The bathroom protests and the stories in this chapter back up Merle Goldman’s arguments that since Tiananmen, the relationship between the Chinese people and the state are changing once again (2005). She says that ordinary people are starting to interact as citizens, not comrades. My work reveals that to find examples of citizenship practices, we need to look beyond formal associations and communities and to groups that have been made possible through web-based forms of interaction—emergent communities organized around casual and mundane issues. These are the places where strangers have the potential to become the bridging ties that are needed for a sustainable civil society. These are places where youth are learning that membership in communities is based on free will, not fear.

143. Madsen (1993) suggested that we look for leaders outside of the mainland and at partially autonomous groups from the state such as associations for the elderly, religious groups, and criminal rings. Written in the early 1990’s pre-internet, Madsen could not have predicted the invention of mass adoption a decentralized, global communication network: the World Wide Web.
The practice of exploring their Elastic Self leads youth to discover hidden information, which triggers them to look for more information. Moving from a censored to transparent information landscape, their expectations about information availability and accessibility are transformed along with it. Changes in technology’s capacity to mediate information can shift people’s expectations regarding the rights that they have to information. People begin to form opinions about themselves and the world that are independent of their social circle and the state. Their ideas and expectations about information are reflected in their participation in public interest issues. While these networks consist of strangers, ongoing interaction between members transforms the networks into an emerging public sphere, a consistent and stable place of interaction around common interests outside of the state.

6.4 Public Sphere: A Review

The interactions in the informal mode resemble the process Jurgen Habermas calls the “structural transformation of the public sphere” (1991 [1962]). Habermas

144. Citizenship scholar Michael Schudson has argued that over time, the core concept of citizenship in the U.S. has changed (1998). He traces four broad shifts in what an ideal citizen looks like and how it is connects to changes in information access. Schudson argues that depending on the time period of citizenship, different sets of concerns, and in effect, rights, were at the forefront of popular discussion in politics. In early U.S. history, the deferential citizen was the first model of a good citizen. This kind of ideal citizen deferred to the voted leaders. There was little talk in this period about citizens being informed as they yielded to their political representatives. This “politics of assent” gave way to the early 19th century’s loyal citizen, where loyalty to one’s political party was valued. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century’s progressive era gives way to the informed citizen. It is in this period that the right to information became salient in American history, hence why Schudson refers to this model as a “politics of information.” It was believed that information and news should be made available and produced independent of party papers so that citizens could formulate opinions independent of political parties, as parties were seen as corrupt political machines. Complimenting the informed citizen is the newest model, the expressive citizen. This is a rights conscious citizen who demonstrates, litigates, sues, and advocates. Schudson puts forth that as the concept of a “good citizen” has changed in the US, so has the kind rights that citizens have fought for.
argued that capitalistic mass media influenced the development of a bourgeoisie public sphere that was independent of the state.\textsuperscript{145} For Habermas, this transformation was linked to what individuals perceived as the source of legitimate governance. New forms of thought emerged: religious pluralism, the scientific method, bureaucratic and labor differentiation, the weakening of the church as the source of legitimate rule. Habermas argued that in place of the church’s declining power was the growing influence of the public sphere. This process unfolded over centuries and eventually led to the founding of the modern legal system as a new source of legitimate governance through a rights framework.\textsuperscript{146}

Like the informal mode of interaction, the “bourgeois public sphere” was not only a political space to exchange ideas about the state, it was also a social space to exchange ideas about things that were personally meaningful, such as family, art, literature, and business. Habermas believed that the exchange of many different ideas in venues all around European towns—ranging from personal to social and political—transformed society altogether. Individuals came of their own will and through discussion, they gained respect: not from their social status, but from their ability to contribute ideas and demonstrate potential for leadership in group undertakings.\textsuperscript{147}

\textsuperscript{145} Like Yuezhi Zhao (2008), I invoke Habermas’s public sphere but I do not ascribe to an “idealized notion” of a fair public sphere free of conflict (13).

\textsuperscript{146} Habermas (1991[1962]) goes on to say that rights are abstract, and each society has to define what forms of rights make sense for their context.

\textsuperscript{147} As Oldenburg reminds, bars and libraries are third places that “serve to sort people according to their potential usefulness in collective undertakings” (Oldenburg 1999: xix).
These conversations started out as private matters, not public matters, and they unfolded in informal, not formal places. Habermas argued that these informal spaces are critical because, over time, the exploration of personal matters in privately run venues such as salons, coffee-shops, print newspapers, and journals generate stable spaces for the public sphere to emerge.

Similarly, I argue that the exploration of private interests on commercially run social media platforms dominant in the informal modes of interaction are creating a public sphere in China. The modern day venues for this public sphere, however, are no longer the casual gathering grounds or discursive spaces mentioned in Habermas’s studies, but digital spaces that are conducive to the informal mode of interactions—chatrooms, posts, threads. Chinese internet users view commercial social media sites that are dominant in the informal mode as relatively safe spaces where they can build a community. Individuals using these platforms initially see them as a safe social space for self-transformation, but some come to also see it as a safe social space for civic transformation. In the context of China’s censorship system, it is precisely the

148. For additional reading on public sphere and commercial media platforms in China, read Qian Gang’s and David Bandurski’s “China’s Emerging Public Sphere: The Impact of Media Commercialization, Professionalism, and the Internet in an Era of Transition” (2010). For more general theory on media and the public sphere, see Thompson (1995) and Isin (2000).

149. For Habermas, individuals entered into these spaces to dialogue about ideas as equals. Much like Oldenburg’s third space, Habermas’s spaces of the “bourgeois public sphere” is where individuals came to mediate their private interests outside of home (first space) and work (second space). While Oldenburg’s concept of the third space is largely apolitical, for Habermas the “bourgeois public sphere” was a discursive spaces to share not only private trivial matters, but also opinions on capricious state power.

150. My view is a stark contrast to scholars such as Lynch (1999) who deems commercial forces in the media and tech industry China as a great impediment to the development of a public sphere. For a more updated and nuanced argument, refer to Mackinnon (2012) who argues that both US
apolitical nature of their topical focus that keeps these communities safe from internet censors. Such communities are topically lightweight, but structurally resilient. Within these benign spaces of expressive interaction, youth learn skills that can be later deployed for civic purposes when the opportunity arises.

Contemporary spaces that are dominant in the informal modes of interaction still fulfill the two primary functions of the spaces and sites of Habermas’s public sphere. First, platforms dominant in the informal mode are reserved for relatively anonymous interactions where individuals practice and learn how to listen to and voice their opinions and develop relationships with unknown people. They went to cafes to read newspapers and purchased journals without having to necessarily divulge their identity to do any of these things. We see youth doing this today in the Exploratory Phase of the Elastic Self: creating anonymous accounts and venturing into chatrooms; lurking, asking questions, and interacting.

The second function of spaces that are dominant in the informal mode of interaction is that individuals have a space of relative independence to debate issues under semi-known to known identities. Once youth gain confidence from sharing ideas anonymously, they will be more likely to engage in public dialogue about issues they identify with, and might even switch between the formal and informal modes of

and Chinese companies are complicit in censorship. While I agree with MacKinnon’s point, my view is more in line with Zheng’s (2008) analysis that the internet empower multiple stakeholders, making it difficult for any one stakeholder to “win.” The internet has affordances for both companies, the state, and users. And most importantly, it the introduction of commercial forces that have created a more open internet than a just a solely censored one.
interaction. Interactions of both kinds—anonymous and more identified—lead to the emergence of a public sphere. Informal modes of interaction provide a safe training ground for self-expression and social engagement.

Contemporary platforms that are dominant in the informal mode of interaction in China also share a similar factor with the public sphere of nineteenth century Europe: both are class-based. Only bourgeois white males were socially positioned to participate in the public sphere because they were educated, literate, and involved in the market economy. They could move freely in between the home, work, and the public sphere. Engaging with an Elastic Self is also largely dependent on class. Fomenting an Elastic Self takes a lot of time. University students, who are mostly from middle-class families, have the greatest chance to progress from the Trusting to the Participatory Phase where social change is activated. Migrant youth rarely move beyond the Trusting Phase of the Elastic Self. Migrants, who work long hours, are mostly engaged in the Exploratory and Trusting Phase because the interactions can be more easily integrated into their work schedules.

An Elastic Self also requires digital literacy skills. Migrants have a lower level of education and information literacy than middle-class students. While access to

151. While migrant students like Liuliu and Tao Ge have additional pressures to find a white-collared job to support their families, for the most part, their experience of an Elastic Self does not differ from their urban counterparts.

152. Without an urban city hukou and financial support from their family, their lives are much more unstable than the educated.

153. The average level of education of migrants is middle school (Li and Li 2007).
the web is not an issue in urban areas, migrants and students use the web for very different reasons and under different circumstances. Both groups use the internet for recreational purposes, but students also use it to search for information related to their schoolwork or intellectual interests. Their different internet practices is reflected in how they articulate the way they describe online information. Students use active words that reflect an information awareness and accessibility while migrants use passive words (as discussed in section 3.8.4).

My findings suggest that an Elastic Self better prepares educated youth to participate in the public sphere. White, educated men were the primary beneficiaries of Europe’s public sphere; similarly, educated students are the primary beneficiaries of this emerging public sphere in China. Like bourgeois white men, Chinese university students have more time and literacy skills to engage in deeper practices of the Elastic Self. Students have much more leisure time than migrants to explore the informal modes of interaction. They also have a greater chance of coming across ‘hidden information’ about China’s past through teachers or fellow students. As we saw in the previous chapter, this discovery leads them to doubt the credibility of institutions they once trusted. Youth become more open to interrogating the actions of the Communist Party. This enables a moral pivot from the “moral me” to the “moral we.”

154. Migrants often say that information “jumped” 奔出来 at them or that they saw it, “看到” or that a service told them “告诉我”. The words they use are passive while students who have enter the Exploratory Phase and discover hidden information say that they found it “找到了” or that they searched for it 搜索. For more detailed discussion, refer to Chapter Three.
6.5 Building out Trust from Moral Me to Moral We

In the previous chapters we saw how an Elastic Self helps individuals, but how does an Elastic Self serve Chinese society? Essentially, how do youth balance an individualistic model—what I term the “moral me,” understanding social code and the world through private interests—and a collectivistic model as encapsulated in the “moral we,” understanding social code and the world through public interests? The “moral we” is different from guanxi ties as it is not based on blood ties or selected relationships to favor, but rather it is based on social ties that emerge from being in a community.

We know that an Elastic Self helps youth make moral judgments that reflect their values and beliefs about what it means to be a person in society. But how does an Elastic Self help youth act on their moral judgments with groups of people that benefit society? To answer questions that concern a “renewed civil society and the development of a democratic public sphere” (Madsen 1993, 189) in China, Richard Madsen suggests that we look at interest groups as communities of memory and assess them for the “quality of the moral commitments that gave them their vision and their strength” (1993, 190). Moral communities, communities bound by common symbols, beliefs, and purposes, undergo the “process of interpreting common symbols—asking what they mean for people today, arguing about them, putting them into new words, portraying them in imagery and performance” (Madsen 1993, 193).

155. For more discussion on moral communities, look at Durkheim (1995[1912])
The moral communities of contemporary China can be found in emergent networks where members are negotiations a new moral vision.

In this chapter, I select two stories that demonstrate how the Participatory Phase of the Elastic Self generates interactions that build a civil society. In each story, participants became involved in emergent communities through informal modes of interaction and are driven by a moral vision to carry out a social action. Haiyan, an advocate for sex workers and people with HIV/AIDS, draws on a narrative of rights and egalitarianism to explain why she engages in public actions with other individuals. She is a “purposeful actor,” an individual or organization who “assert(s) new public values, form new relationships rooted in those values, and mobilize(s) the political, economic, and cultural power to translate these values into action” (Ganz 2010, 1). Purposeful actors not only carry out social change, but also lead the charge.

In a protest against a chemical factory in Dalian in the summer of 2011, participants drew on the narrative of sharing a sense of shared city identity to protest environmental destruction. I visited Dalian in January of 2012 to interview ten youth who had participated in the protest and those who had opted out. By telling the Dalian story through Lily (who participated in the protest) and Derek (who chose not to do so), I illustrate how some Chinese youth become involved in local protests and also demonstrate that not all Chinese youth are engaging in an Elastic Self.

156. A point also underscored in Rochon (2000).
These stories highlight how social engagement plays out on a very local and personal level. Haiyan and Lily are “accidental activists,” people who do not set out to create social change but end up doing so anyway. Their public actions also give us insight into how identity evolves as membership in emergent communities strengthens. It also shows us how online interaction moves offline, and what motivates youth to become socially engaged. These stories allow us to examine why—and how—some participants became involved in an offline event and moved from the Exploratory and Trusting Phases to a more participatory Elastic Self.

The stories in this chapter are not about technology helping people to protest against the system; rather, they are about people who have developed a common identity around a public interest and acting in defense of that interest. Temporary group undertakings organized through the web are not only the result of technology, but also of the capacity of Chinese youth to imagine themselves as part of a community that can act together.

6.6 The Characters

6.6.1 Hooligan Sparrow, the Community Organizer

Haiyan, also known as Hooligan Sparrow, is emblematic of someone who discovers the expressive freedom of the informal mode of interaction. She forms trust with strangers who then become people she sees as fellow citizens. Unlike the participants featured in previous chapters, Haiyan is not a university student. She is a migrant from a poor rural village with very few economic resources. While she is an outlier among migrants, her process of becoming involved in civic participation is
similar to others who are involved in public action: they develop a self through expressive interactions and further hone their skills by building trust that they can then deploy in the Participatory Phase. Her story is exceptional in that a series of moral shifts lead her towards rejecting the values of her family—and even society at large—and becoming an ‘accidental activist.’ Haiyan does not see herself as a political activist, but as a community representative of disenfranchised people. Haiyan enters the public sphere through her own journey as a divorced woman in society where marriage is the norm.

Haiyan is what Marshall Ganz (2010) calls a “purposeful actor”—people who bring public awareness to a hidden issue by creating new relationships with people (2010). These individuals generate publicity through their work, which increases their public reach. Ganz’s theory tells us what these strategic actors do, but it does not tell us how these actors become socialized into being public figures that represent social causes. My research shows that Chinese youths’ turn to public interests are marked by a series of apolitical actions that are more closely linked to self-expression than political transformation. Through repeated encounters with strangers, Haiyan eventually came into contact with people who helped her grow emotionally and socially. It was only after years of self-expression with strangers that she became more receptive to being a purposeful actor.

I met Haiyan in 2008 through Jinge, a graduate student in the US who moved back to China to link up with grassroots activists. They initially met on Twitter and
then met up in person in Wuhan, where Haiyan was based at the time. I wanted to meet her because, like Jinge, I was fascinated with Haiyan’s transformation from a poor farm girl to a well-known activist for sex workers.

Haiyan is internationally known as a key advocate for sex workers and people with HIV/AIDS in China. The foreign press—from the Washington Post, to CNN and The Economist—have all covered her activism. Recently, she gave a TEDx talk about her efforts to change people’s perception of sex workers and people with HIV/AIDS. Nude pictures of her and Aiweiwei poking fun at the Communist Party can be found online. She has traveled to conferences in India and Hong Kong to speak about HIV/AIDS advocacy. In the summer of 2012, the US State Department invited her, along with several other health experts from China, to tour health organizations in the US.

On Ye Haiyan’s twitter profile, she describes herself as a “feminist, member of the prostitution movement and sex worker.” She has almost 20 thousand followers and has sent over 27 thousand posts. Her Twitter profile lists her cellphone number, her two email addresses (Hotmail and Gmail), her location, and her website (chinese38.com). She has a Taobao store that once sold sex toys and now sells grooming products such as combs, as well as local food specialties.


158. 叶海燕(liumanyang) on Twitter.” Twitter, https://twitter.com/liumanyang
Haiyan did not go to college; she did not even finish high school. Raised in a village, Haiyan excelled in middle school, but her family could not pay the monthly tuition—650 yuan—for high school. She followed other young people in her village to cities in the search for work. She worked at a karaoke bar for a few years; this required her to sing with men, serve them drinks, and talk to them. She was very good and popular at her job, bringing in 2000 to 3000 yuan a month, most of which she sent home to her family.

6.6.1.1 Haiyan’s Experience in the Exploratory Phase

Even though Haiyan did not go to high school, she found her education elsewhere: the internet. In 1999, she saw a sign outside a store in Guangxi, “Typing Classes, 5 yuan.” Her friend said that they could both work as secretaries if they knew how to type. After the class, they couldn’t find office jobs, but Haiyan found something else unexpected—a space to share her emotions.

She started going to internet cafés after work. Like most Chinese internet users, she started chatting with strangers online with her QQ account. She shared things that she had never shared with anyone she knew, such as her recent divorce from her husband and the social consequences that came with it. After discovering that he was sleeping with other women while she was pregnant with their child, Haiyan asked for a divorce. Her family and village shunned her for being a single mother. She shared all of the pain and loneliness that came with her decision to many strangers she encountered online.
She spent the first few years of her time on the Chinese internet on Tianya online forums writing poems under the alias, A Lone Flying Sparrow 雨燕单飞. She openly posted on her profile that she was divorced but still searching for love. Her writing were mostly about unrequited love:

You are on the left
I’m on the right
Facing each other across the street
Shadows of crowds
Softly, you
Disappear in a crowd
Speechless waiting\textsuperscript{159}
For the night to come

She started to gain notoriety online for her essays. She spent days at the internet café, replying to commentators, often getting into fights with them. A lot of people told her that she was filthy. Others confessed that they felt the same way. Both kinds of comments fueled her energy to share more of herself online. With each essay and each comment, she strengthened her voice and confidence to speak back.

Up until this point, Haiyan’s expressive actions are similar to what many youth do in the Exploratory Phase: express emotions that they are unable to share with people they know. She created multiple QQ accounts, used anonymous identities,

\textsuperscript{159} 你在左边
我在右边
隔街相望
人影纷纭
悄然的你们
没入人群
无言的等待
夜的来临
http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-culture-86367-1.shtml
shared emotions with strangers, and maintained strict boundaries between her social circles and contacts generated through informal modes of interaction.

6.6.1.2 Haiyan’s Experience in the Trusting Phase

Haiyan was ready to enter into the Trusting Phase of the Elastic Self. She started to stay in consistent contact with strangers, many of them becoming her online friends wangyou. Through their online exchanges, she learned the rituals of trustworthiness to figure out which people she wanted to keep as contacts. Like Han and Maimai, she learned how to read people’s profiles for symbolic messages, to look for consistency in their stories or information, and to identify those who shared a common identity or set of values. While she still responded to commentators who attacked her morals, she did not interact with them over the long term. She looked for other people who were like her or could relate to her story.

She met other divorcees on Tianya. She also met other women who wanted to divorces but were too scared. Haiyan started to offer them advice and tips. She also met other men who told her that she was still sexy. All of these interactions helped her feel less lonely. She felt closer to her online friends than to people she had grown up with, many of whom stopped talking to her after she divorced her husband. Conversations with men gave her hope that she could find love again. All of these things collectively supported Haiyan’s moral shift from seeing her family and village as the main source of moral guidance to searching for something new.

So far, Haiyan’s story is similar to every other youths’ Elastic Self story. They enter in the Exploratory Phase, which then gives them the skills and confidence to
move onto to developing deeper relationships in the Trusting Phase. But several events unfolded that catapulted her from the Trusting Phase into the Participatory Phase.

6.6.1.3 Signs of the Participatory Phase

In 2005, Haiyan became one of the top search terms on Baidu under her alias Hooligan Sparrow 流氓燕. She posted nude pictures of herself to Tianya. She did this to express her new views on sexuality and transparency in information. “Why cannot a divorced woman do this? I have desires, and I have a good body even I have already had a child.” Haiyan wanted to normalize women’s bodies and sexual desires. As Hooligan Sparrow, she could speak to the repressiveness of being a divorcee without shame. The popularity of the pictures solidified her alias, Hooligan Sparrow, as her primary identity on the Chinese internet.

Soon after this period of publicity, many of her online friends told her that the values she was promoting around sexuality and sex were called feminism:

My online friends said, sister Hooligan Sparrow, you are a feminist. So I started looking online and found all these very academic writings about feminism. I didn’t exactly understand it, but my friends said if you think men and women are equal, then you are a feminist. So I started doing work as a feminist from a grassroots perspective. The academics at Tsinghua and Peking University ignored me, probably thinking I was too low class to talk about feminism.

She began to self-identify as a feminist. One of her first acts as a feminist was to create the first grassroots website for feminists in China in 2005. She called it, China Grassroots Women’s Rights Website (中国民间女权). She wrote essays about gender equality and hosted a message board for the community.
Haiyan then moved onto writing essays about sex, her desire to find a good husband, and the loneliness of being a divorcee. In an essay posted to her QQ page in 2007, she pondered the morality of divorce: “When a men’s love towards his wife is not from his heart but from the kindness and ritual, although he does not mean to hurt his wife, he will be wanting to have a divorce. His wife, on the contrary, loves him so much. Do you think they should get a divorce? A marriage without love? Is it ‘moral’? I understand the desire for love. I am a love addict too. But I would say ‘Yes!’”

Individuals and organizations started reaching out to her. Zi Teng, an organization for gender equality based in Hong Kong, invited her to attend a conference about sex worker rights. The organizers asked her to publicly support their cause on her website, but she could not do it. At the time she “was very traditional about this. I couldn’t accept sex service as a career. In fact, I decried it from the bottom of my heart.”

She was so against sex work as a career that when she befriended sex workers, she tried to persuade them to leave the sex industry and get regular jobs. She even found jobs for several of the women; however, they soon quit when they told her that they couldn’t support their family on the income the jobs provided. As Haiyan came to


understand the women’s financial needs, she started to sympathize with them.

Hooligan Sparrow started to change her mind: “Zi Teng taught me a sentence that is on their brochures, ‘Being a sex worker is also a worker,’ but I was afraid to say it. I was worried that the government would give us trouble if I were to advocate this publicly.” She then learned about the concept of ‘rights’: “By 2009, I fully understood the concept of ‘sex worker rights’ and that in fact I learned that many countries give rights to sex workers.” The problem, she concluded, was that society did not treat all forms of labor equally. She explained to me: “Sex workers are needed in China. We have too many men, and this is social wide program. Sex workers help stabilize our country by having sex with all these men who cannot find wives. But the sex workers are treated like trash, they have no rights, no access to health care.”

Her moral commitment to equality among women made her realize that all women, regardless of the kind of jobs they have, are equal. “I finally had the courage to challenge the law in 2009 because the law really needed someone to be courageous to challenge it,” she told me. “Before, we never dared question the legality of the law.” She started to speak and write about this issue publicly. She wrote hundreds of blog posts, appeared in the news, and did more field research. Her activities reflect her commitment to civic participation. Haiyan became a moral compass for the cause of health issues, particularly those related to sex. Even though she was initially unfamiliar with the needs of sex workers, she developed a sense of compassion for
them, urging the public to care for their plight of and for people infected with HIV/AIDS. Her public turn started with a personal transformation, not a political one.

However, by engaging in public actions, she started blurring the boundaries that once separated Hooligan Sparrow from Haiyan. A key example of this blurring process happened when Hooligan Sparrow designed black t-shirts with “I’m a sex worker and I respect myself” printed in large white font. She wore the shirt out in public, and whenever she met a sex worker, she encouraged them to go to her website where she offered advice and wrote essays about sex worker rights.

She also set up a telephone hotline for sex workers to call in anonymously for advice, reaching her target demographic by advertising it online. “I felt that I should focus on the web to reach them because so many sex workers surf the internet all day. It was really effective.” Hooligan Sparrow became an emotional outlet for her callers who told her stories that they did not dare share with people they know. While her callers remained anonymous, Hooligan Sparrow’s ongoing civic participation collapsed the boundaries that she had previously maintained, boundaries that previously separated strangers from people she knew.

Haiyan’s activities turned her into a purposeful actor, but in doing so she had to merge several of her online identities with her given identity, Haiyan. She could merge her identities because in transitioning from a “moral me” to a “moral we,” she

162 To be clear, separate does not mean that she was divided. Like other youth I interviewed, she reserved her more open and expressive self for strangers where there was minimal risk of being shamed.
reshaped herself. She didn’t abandon her anonymous Hooligan Sparrow identity, but she reshaped her personal identity to reflect her goals as a purposeful actor. She stopped using some of her other identities, such as A Lone Flying Sparrow. She considered those to be ephemeral identities that represented a specific period in her life.

Identity shape shifting unfolds dramatically in the Participatory Phase: sustained civic participation requires youth to take the risk of giving up anonymity. Haiyan could make this transition because of her new moral vision and the support of online friends and communities. To reach more sex workers and to change people’s minds about sex work as illegal and immoral, she felt it was necessary to commit to sustained social action online and offline. In the Exploratory and Trusting Phases of the Elastic Self, it is easier for youth to maintain the boundaries between the formal and informal modes of interaction. But in the Participatory Phase, social engagements that bring youth into a more public and offline space destabilize the strict boundaries of self-presentation in informal and formal modes of interaction.

6.6.1.4 Starting a Social Movement

As Hooligan Sparrow, an advocate for sex workers, Haiyan began doing more public organizing. She successfully applied for funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2010 to open Women’s Health Center of Hubei Province 湖北省妇女健康中心, an advocacy program for sex workers and HIV/AIDS testing and prevention in Wuhan.\(^{163}\) Her organization started a condom distribution program for

\(^{163}\) The first organization of this kind in Hubei Provence.
sex workers that handed out condoms to sex workers, and educated them about the dangers of contracting HIV/AIDS and STDs if they did not wear them.

In August of 2010, under the auspices of her NGO, she staged a protest in Wuhan to collect signatures for a petition to legalize prostitution by asking supporters “to take a stroll” sanbu around East Lake with red umbrellas. Censors block characters that are involved with protesting, so people use the word “stroll” in place of protest. Around a couple dozen of people showed up and it was the first documented episodic protest for sex workers in China. In her essay about the protest, she wrote that she was sick of seeing “sex being criminalized everywhere across the country.”

It is common practice for police to arrest sex workers and then shame them publicly either by calling their family, who usually do not know about the line of work their daughter is in, or parading them on the streets along with their names, hometown, and other personal information (Watts 2006).

---


165. The term was first used in Xiamen PX Protest in 2007. Xiamen citizens called their acts “Collective Walking/Sanbu (集体散步)” instead of a protest. It’s a kind of strategy not to be too sensitive. The Xiamen citizens were selected as one of the “10 persons of the year in 2007” by Southern Weekly, one of the largest and most speaking-free newspaper office in mainland China.

166. Even though the Ministry of Public Security banned the public shaming of prostitutes in July 2010, just a month before Hooligan Sparrow’s protest in Wuhan, local authorities were still doing it.

167. As several of my informants have explained to me over the years, there are three levels of sex workers in China. The city mayor goes to his brothels and these are the most expensive and protected places. The police go their brothels, which are considered to be in the middle-range. The low-end brothels are for lower-income males and migrants. When the police arrest prostitutes, they usually go to the low-end brothels because the brothel owners are unable to give enough money to the police to protect their workers.
She also reported in her essay that when she told a newspaper vendor that they were protesting to decriminalize sex work, the vendor replied, “Society is already messed up, and officials, all they know how to do is make money for themselves, why would they give a crap about us? Who are you? A student?” Hooligan responded:

I told her that I’m a community organizer, that I’ve been at this for five years. I also told her that I don’t expect immediate change, and the fact that officials are so corrupt is precisely the reason why citizens need to stand up and monitor them, make their voices heard, that only then will they change. A year from now, if nothing has changed, then we’ll spend five years fighting; if five years does not change anything, then ten years, or a hundred years if necessary; things will change eventually.

Identifying as a community organizer, (社会组织的负责人) 168 reflects Haiyan’s recently acquired views as a spokesperson for the disenfranchised. Her use of the term “community organizer” (社会组织的负责人) includes the characters for responsibility. She internalized the cause of sex worker legalization as an issue she not only identified with, but was responsible for. Having a sense of responsibility for a social outcome—not personal outcome—is an indicator of Haiyan becoming a citizen: showing concern for equal treatment of other people in the community, standing up for a broader moral commitment, and participating in social change. She was no longer an individual who only expressed her feelings online, but a citizen who was committed to taking part in social change.169 The participatory side of her self

168. 社会组织的负责人 This term is used by people who know social organizations well. The word “social organization (社会组织)” is not widely known by the public. The word “organizer (负责人)” is commonly seen in a social organization because people within the organization don’t call anyone a “leader (领导)”.

169. According to Shirky’s model of group undertaking, developing a sense of commitment to a group moves people up the ladder of group undertakings from simple sharing group activity to more
becomes clear in this stage, particularly as she actively recruited people to become involved in social action.

After launching the protest, the police took Haiyan out to tea (hecha 去喝茶), which means that they asked to question her under informal conditions (Kennedy 2010). They police invited her to a local restaurant, got her drunk, and asked her questions about the event. They asked her why she called people to go on a stroll sanbu: “They wanted to know if I was working with foreigners, they wanted names.” For several days, the police initiated a “reeducation” process. They stood outside of her apartment, followed her if she left her home, cut her internet off, told her that she could not leave Wuhan, and that she had to report all visitors to them. “I cannot talk or use the Internet right now, I am with them,” Haiyan told Reuters via text message (Beijing newsroom 2010).

When Haiyan recounted their questions, she seemed to be amused that they would show such interest in her: “I told them if you’re so interested in what I’m doing, and if you don’t believe me, just go and look at my QQ and Twitter. You look at everything I do any ways, always waiting for me outside. So just go find out yourselves, why ask me?”

Her policy with the police is to be as clear as possible. Once she embraced full publicity, she felt that the only way to move forward in her work was to adopt a policy of radical transparency with the government: “I cannot hide from them, they can see complex and large-scale group activity (2008).
everything I’m doing anyways. As long as I am not breaking the law, what’s wrong with what I’m doing? I’m not scared of them seeing anything I write. They might get too turned on reading my exchanges with other men. Who knows. They are so bored with their jobs.”

She accepted censorship as part of her everyday life. She even came to see surveillance as a sign that she was doing something right. As she explained to me, she was pleased that the police thought she was important enough to invite out to tea. “If we didn’t do anything special, then they wouldn’t be curious about our actions. Anyways, talking to them gives them an opportunity to learn more about these women.”

After being detained and harassed by the police, I noticed that Haiyan did not become more fearful. She felt more emboldened by the international press attention from her red umbrella organizing. After a few weeks, the men in plainclothes disappeared from her apartment. She started posting regularly to Twitter again and speaking more strongly as a community organizer.

6.6.1.5 Organizing for HIV/AIDS

Hooligan Sparrow found out that she was on the local police’s top 10 list of sensitive people in Wuhan. “Can you believe I am on that list?” she laughed. “Ha! Some uneducated girl from a village is now sensitive. I wonder who else is on it.” At first, being on this list seemed like a fun game, but then the police increased their presence in her life. They kidnapped her for a weekend on a forced vacation, they constantly harassed her outside of her home, and they monitored her movement in and
out of the city closely. The police did not leave her alone. They annoyed her to the point where she felt that she couldn’t do her job properly anymore. “They never told me to leave, but they just kept giving me problems.” Haiyan closed down her NGO and moved to Bobai, Guangxi, where she had relatives who could help take care of her now adolescent daughter.

From Bobai, she felt that she could operate more freely. She opened up a local sex shop selling condoms. Her online friends donated over 10,000 yuan to help her get started. She found a Twitter friend who lived in the same town as her. The man is a sanitation worker. They met up in person when she announced on Twitter that she had moved to Bobai: “He was already following me on Twitter and when I announced that I was moving to Bobai, Guangxi, two people @ed me, ‘Ah Sister Yan! You are so close me.’ I was so surprised and excited! We met up the same night and they treated me to dinner.” Haiyan’s local Twitter friends went from being semi-known to known friends over night. They pinged each other on QQ, worked together at her shop, and met up regularly in person.

Although Haiyan was living in Bobai, which is in the southern part of China, she did not abstain from participating in social engagements. She was still very active in her work to bring greater awareness to sex workers and HIV/AIDS. In December of 2011, she engaged in her the most direct standoff with the police.

“Fair Treatment of People with HIV/AIDS,” a Google Group she was part of, asked Haiyan to join a group of petitioners in Beijing on December 1, Global
HIV/AIDS Day. Every year, people with HIV/AIDS and their supporters traveled to the Petition Office in Beijing to petition for better social services. This year, a patient, Wuling, had just been released from jail. Wuling has HIV/AIDS and had asked her local hospital to compensate her for giving her HIV/AIDS from a blood transfusion. The local government ignored her pleas and put her in jail. Haiyan was particularly worried about Wuling. “I thought she was going to commit suicide, so I wanted to see her in Beijing, let her know and everyone know that I am here, and I will support them.”

On December 1, 2011, Haiyan took a 26-hour train from Guangxi to Beijing. She arrived in Beijing on November 30. When she tried to check in to a hotel with her identification card, the manager refused to allow her to stay. Haiyan was familiar with this process—the Beijing police had already alerted hotels to turn her away: “I was very angry. I called 110, that is the police. I asked them why I wasn’t allowed to check in. I came to Beijing and now I have no where to stay. Then the police asked me which hotel I was, and said that he would all the hotel to resolve it.”

She did not trust that the police would resolve it. So she found another hotel where to her surprise, the manager allowed her to stay a night. The next morning, she was about to walk out of the hotel to join the petitioners when the manager called her over to tell her that she could not stay another night. She knew the police had called the hotel. Then she thought, if the police were creating the problem, then this was their problem to solve, not hers.
She walked out of the hotel and into a loud alleyway. It took her an hour to find the nearest police station. “The whole time I was searching for the station all I could think about the whole time was how hungry the petitioners were.” She stomped into the yard and threw her luggage. The policeman yelled, “Hey, how could you be so unreasonable? How could you possibly leave your things here?” She shouted back, “I don’t know why you are so unreasonable,” pointing at him and the station, “Why don’t you allow hotels to check me in? You tell me?” The policeman looked flustered: “I said to him, ‘If you don’t allow me to stay in a hotel, then I will stay in the police station.’” She stomped out of the yard as he was yelling at her.

She navigated her way out of the alley onto a main street and hailed a cab to take her to Bei He Yan Street 北河沿大街, where the Ministry of Civil Affairs was located. She spotted the group of petitioners in front of the building; they had blocked off the metal gates that were over 12 feet high. They waved her over. She knew they had been there since sunrise and hadn’t eaten breakfast yet. She bought 100 pancakes from a street vendor and handed each person two pancakes. Not too long after distributing the pancakes, several police cars pulled up. Several policemen walked up to them and tried to push them away from the gate. A verbal fight broke out between the policeman and the petitioners. Haiyan, as she always does, took charge. She stepped into the middle of the fight, yelled at the policeman for being inhumane, and told them that they were exercising their rights. She told them that policemen are supposed to help citizens, not hurt them. After an hour of this, the police suddenly
stopped engaging with them. They walked away. The petitioners and Haiyan felt like they had won and were surprised that the officers left so suddenly. (Haiyan later on told me that one of the policeman told her that they left because it was lunch time and that they were hungry.)

For the next hour, the situation remained calm. Haiyan hung out with the petitioners. She spoke to Wuling and consoled her. Then a loud voice called her name. She looked up and saw plainclothes policeman motioning her to enter a car with darkened windows. “He opened the car door and said come here sister Haiyan, we want to have a word with you.” Haiyan panicked: “I started to run and I grabbed onto a nearby telephone pole as two men came after me and tried to pull me into the car. I struggled to hang on to the pole and I just screamed and screamed.”

When the HIV/AIDS petitioners heard her screaming, they ran over, pulled the men off of her and formed a protective ring around her. They stared down the men, yelling at them to go away. By then, a few rows of curious pedestrians walking by had stopped to look at them. The undercover police did not want to create more commotion so they just walked away. Both the petitioners and Hooligan Sparrow felt good about scaring the police and the secret police away. They sent out posts on Twitter, QQ, and Weibo about their success.

Near sundown, the undercover police returned again. They trailed Hooligan Sparrow, taking pictures of her from the car and asking her to go with them. She ignored them. But they would not go away. She realized that if she didn’t go with
them now, the police would follow her to dinner, make everyone even more uncomfortable, and possibly bring harm to other people. At this point, she felt that she had no choice but to go with the secret police. She turned to the petitioners and spoke loud enough for the police to hear, “if something happens to me, please make sure the news about me spreads online. Tell everyone that I am in trouble.”

Haiyan was relieved when the undercover cop brought her to the same police station where she stored her luggage. At least she was not going to be thrown directly into a black jail. They confiscated all of her belongings and put her in a room with a table. Then a uniformed policewoman entered the room and asked her to take her clothes off so that she could search her. The woman took Haiyan’s weight and measured her height. Then the interrogations started. Two policemen entered the room and asked her questions throughout the entire night. They repeated each question several times, recording her answers with an audio recorder and a pen. They wanted to know why she organized the HIV/AIDS petitioners. “I told them I that I didn’t organize anything, they [HIV/AIDS petitioners] contacted me. They accused me of blocking traffic into the building, I told them that I didn’t even stand in front of the gate.” The police were trying to get her to confess to organizing a protest, but when they failed to produce a confession, the undercover cops came into the room and demanded that she admit that she was anti-Party: “He kept saying to me, ‘you have anti-regime sentiment. You want to be anti-regime right? Answer.’ But I refused to answer. I didn’t speak nicely to him because he was rude to me. I replied over and
over, ‘all I want to do is call her [Haiyan’s daughter], nothing else. My child is alone at home, keep me here as long as you want, just as long as I can talk to my daughter. Whatever.”’

They checked her bank account and asked her to admit that she was accepting money from foreigners. “I told the truth, and that is why they let me go because they had all my information and they couldn’t find anything…I have no secrets, even my private DMs [direct messages] are just about dating and social welfare.” Then they accused her having connections to famous people in Beijing who could be giving her funds. She denied it all.

In addition to questions about her political affiliations, both the police and undercover police were very curious about her sex life after finding nude pictures of her and another male having sex on her phone. “They had a lot of questions about the picture of me and my lover.” When the police found the photos of her and her lover, they tried to shame her, asking her how she could take such photos and claim to be a leader for sex workers. But Haiyan was not intimidated. “I said [to the police], do what you want with them, I don’t care. But don’t try to set me up.”

If anything, Haiyan would’ve welcomed the attention if the police had leaked her sex photos. She was already a public figure and was comfortable with putting her personal sex life up for public view. She even openly asked for sex. Upon arriving in Beijing, she had posted to Twitter, “Oh I am so tired tonight, who will keep me company?” and several men Direct Messaged her to meet up for a one night stand.
One of them wrote, “Sister Yan, I want to see you. Sex. Sleeping.” Hooligan Yan replied, “Yep, come on over.”

Her openness with sex confounded the police. None of their tactics were working at producing a confession: “They wanted me to sign a paper saying that I contacted all of the HIV/AIDS people who showed up in Beijing, but I didn’t—they contacted me on the Google Groups and asked me to come help them. I yelled at the police, I said you have to write down what I say. You record the facts, don’t try to set me up. If you don’t follow my instructions, I will stop speaking to you. If you want me to cooperate, you will also have to cooperate.”

I told her that she was courageous to speak to the police this way: “It’s nothing because he’s an office worker. He has a job, and he has to do his job well. So I’m not afraid of him. There is no reason to be afraid. I didn’t do anything to break the law. I think my work is meaningful to society. He too also thinks that his profession is good for society.”

I asked her what made her feel so strong in speaking back to the police, a situation that many would find terrifying. “At that time, I was so full of energy because of all the support of my internet friends. For example, when they all believe I’m doing something meaningful, then I won’t be afraid and I won’t be afraid to do something I view as important, even if it is a sacrifice.” She continued, “They are always online, on QQ I can find a variety of vices, and my number is online so they will call me. Many internet friends express their support for me on Phoenix Web and
found that their words were deleted, so they will call me and tell me what they wrote even though it was deleted. . . . I receive so many different kinds of support from people . . . but the main things I that I have to persist, not matter how strong the force you are facing.”

I wondered out loud if Haiyan had always felt this way. She replied, “Sometimes I am weak, I will think I need to turn back. I don’t want to be trapped in these troubles. But from the beginning, I have always stuck to the things I view as right, no matter what I’m facing. We should continue doing things that are right.”

The police eventually allowed her to leave at 3 PM after 24 hours of questioning. She went back to Bobai and continued posting to Twitter, QQ, and Weibo:

I have a responsibility, I feel like I’m part of a group . . . after some time, especially after people starting following me on Sina Weibo, I felt like I had a duty, I mean everyone, actually should have a duty to focus on other people. Many people are now following me online. My words are heard by more and more people. So I think I need to say meaningful things because when people pay attention to you, you have to be responsible with your words. For example, many internet friends follow me online and send me things about their romantic stories. So they share their lives with me. I would be so sorry if I didn’t reply to them, I wouldn’t deserve their attention then. I feel sorry for them, they are so lonely, nobody comes to help them.

6.6.1.6 And She’s Still Going

Hooligan Sparrow has not been able to change the legal rights for sex workers. But she has raised the public awareness and dialogue across the nation for a group of people whose work is widely practiced and yet suppressed at the same time. As Wasserstrom (2002) and Goodman (2002) emphasize, the experience of practicing
citizenship, even if unsuccessful, can lead to valuable skills and repertoires that can be activated for other contexts.

Within the last year, Haiyan has stopped organizing or participating in public protests. She has focused more on getting media attention for the plight of sex workers. She went undercover to become a sex worker for a day and reported on the brothel’s payment practices, as well as the and sex workers’ routines (Lam 2012).

During the entire time she was having sex with her male clients, she posted the details to her Sina Weibo account (Sina Weibo deleted her posts, but she also cross-posted to her QQ Weibo). Below are a few excerpts:

Today I conducted investigative research at a 10-dollar sex shop and witnessed the arrest of a sister by police. These sisters are paid between RMB 10-20 (USD 1.5-3) for having sexual intercourse with their customers.

Beginning now, I am providing free sexual services for rural migrant workers. First of all, this is to prevent them from being caught and legally robbed by police. Secondly, this is to serve the sexual needs of the grassroots and help relieve social pressure. Thirdly, I want to create a sharp contrast between my love for the grassroots and the cruelty of the government. I hope that they will be touched by my action, which will end tomorrow.

I provided free sexual services to 4 people. One of them was in his fifties.

My first sexual service was given to an 18-year-old boy from a rural village.

Master Meng Jianzhu:170 Hope you can understand the pain of the grassroots. Don’t exploit administrative fees from sex workers, especially the poorest among them. I wish that the Public Security Bureau could issue an internal notice and ask the police officers to stop

---

170. Meng is China’s Minister of Public Security.
raiding poor sex workers, particular as the new year approaches. A humble plea from Ye Haiyan, Chinese grassroots women’s rights defender.

She discovered through her own undercover experience at the brothel that most male clients refused to wear a condom, even if she asked them to. In an effort to create more publicity about sexual health, she opened up a shop that sells condoms and takes the proceeds to fund sexual health workshops. She called it the “The Duckweed Health Service Studio.” I asked her to explain the name, and she replied: “Sex workers are like away from their home, they have no roots, they have no back, they are like homeless. But they are a strong vital force and they can thrive anywhere. The plant can grow as long as there is water. This plant like a sex worker, weak and strong, but they can live on very little.”

6.6.1.7 Analysis of Haiyan/Hooligan Sparrow

6.7.1.7.1 Citizens as Accidental Activists

Unlike dissidents or pro-democracy organizers, Hooligan Sparrow never made revolutionary claims that the Party should be dismantled. Rather, she defended the Party, stating that they simply are governing a big country with many issues, some of which she wanted to help them with. So with this logic, she advocated for social change within the existing system, starting with the legalization of sex work through the expansion of labor rights protection. Hooligan Sparrow was learning how to be a citizen. Her actions demonstrated that individuals like her assumed that rights are achieved through community action, not given by the government. Similar to the observations in Goldman’s and Perry’s (2002) seminal collection of essays on modern
changes in citizenship in China, I, too, am seeing that individuals are demanding—not waiting for—rights that are founded on values of egalitarianism.

But unlike the participants in Goldman’s (2005) study, Hooligan Sparrow did not jump from comradeship to citizenship. She spent many years online talking with strangers and transforming some of those ties into weak ties. When she was ready to reshape her identity, those very same weak ties transformed into a ready audience of supporters in her public cause.

6.7.1.7.2 Participatory Phase of Elastic Self Needs Exploratory and Trusting Phases

By seeing how her story unfolds over a period of thirteen years, we can how Hooligan Sparrow’s Elastic Self expanded and contracted in ways that made sense for each period in her life. When she was more worried about being ashamed of her actions, she resorted to more strict boundaries between the formal and informal modes of interaction. During the time of her early internet use in the 2000s, this was a division between online and offline. Later on, when Haiyan wanted to create social change and reach a wider audience, the boundaries between the formal and informal modes became more fuzzy. As she became more involved in public interests as a purposeful actor, her Elastic Self stabilized as she used one identity: Hooligan Sparrow.

If we did not know how Hooligan Sparrow became a purposeful actor, it would be easy to categorize her story as one of emergent grassroots activism. However, the fact remains that she honed her skill in interacting with strangers before she was even
interested in public issues. If we did not know that Hooligan Sparrow had gone through a series of events that enabled her to reshape herself in the service of becoming a purposeful actor, it would appear as if she had a divided identity, that was split between her desires to be simultaneously individualistic and collectivistic. However, she exercised agency in managing a range of identities before she merged several of them.

Hooligan Sparrow learned how to use the internet as a platform to develop her capacity for self-expression. She gradually shifted from an unknown to semi-known person on the Chinese internet. Publicly stating her views online, opening up a hotline, giving interviews to the news, and wearing the t-shirt were all symbolic of her transition from anonymity to being a public figure. By being more public with her opinions, she was able to achieve greater reach for her agenda and message; the transition to a more public persona was simply commonsense.

6.7.1.7.3 Strength from the Audience

In the Exploratory and Trusting Phases, anonymity minimizes the risks of shame. In the Participatory Phase, anonymity can increase the risks that come with speaking up about sensitive issues. Transparency brought Haiyan more public attention, which then brought her safety. It became progressively easier for her to speak up as she gained online audience.

Grassroots purposeful actors with an online following of semi-anonymous individuals are a new entity in Chinese society. By pushing the boundaries on a local level with the police, authorities were forced to respond not only to Haiyan, but also
all the people who follow on her online. While Haiyan’s online audience cannot entirely protect her from their capricious ways of the police, her audience can incite the police to reconsider the public relations ramifications of harming her. In their interactions with Hooligan Sparrow, the police also recognized the limits of their power with purposeful actors. Authorities realize that individuals who act like citizens are often networked to other citizens; consequently, they have to be more cautious when treating them with negligence.

Individuals who are networked to an online audience create offline pressures on local government officials to be less reckless in their interactions with an active citizenry. In *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society*, Tai argues that the emergence of “networked public opinion” is expanding civil society in China; “responses and opinions from Chinese citizens are increasingly becoming an important factor in China’s political arena” (2006, 205). Hooligan Sparrow’s story demonstrates that Tai’s assessment is accurate. However, it is important to remember that Haiyan could not have arrived at the Participatory Phase without the informal mode of interaction that allowed her to cultivate and practice various skills that she uses as a civic participant.

Purposeful actors like Hooligan Sparrow are changing the social landscape of China. Typically, public intellectuals initiate public debates about civil rights and legal justice.¹⁷¹ Even though Hooligan Sparrow has no elite education or connections to

people in positions of power, she is still able to command the police’s attention.

Hooligan Sparrow draws her strength from everyday people who she does not personally know. In the Exploratory Phase of the Elastic Self, she opened wrote essays about divorce, sex, and loneliness resonated with hundred of thousands of readers.

Many women reached out to her, asking her for advice. In the Trusting Phase of the Elastic Self, she learned the rituals of trustworthiness to assess who to associate with, such as lovers or new friends. In the Participatory Phase, she learned how to become a citizen. As she became more aware of the social plight of sex workers, Haiyan realized that she would have to publicly state her support. This process transformed her into a public persona online *wanglu hongren* (网路红人).

### 6.7.2 Lily, the City Citizen

In this story, we learn about how Lily decided to join a protest against a chemical factory in her hometown. Unlike Hooligan Sparrow, Lily is not a well known purposeful actor; however, both of them are ‘accidental activists’ who went through the Exploratory and Trusting Phases of an Elastic Self before engaging in the Participatory Phase. Lily’s story reveals that ordinary students who spend time expressing their emotions learn interaction skills with strangers that can be activated for public action at a later point. For both Lily and Hooligan Sparrow, this activation comes from a personal motivation. “Serve the people! PX get out of our city! I love Dalian, give back our homeland; Fujia Dahua, get out of Dalian!”

They chanted all day. By official estimates, around 12,000 people gathered in Dalian, peacefully marching to these slogans starting at 9 am on August 14, 2011.
Protesters demanded that the government close down the Fu Jia Da Hua PX Program. The program was a government-approved project funded by two private investment groups to open a factory that produces paraxylene, a toxic chemical used in a variety of polyester products.

Dalian residents started worrying about gas leaks and explosions from the factory when reports emerged that Typhoon Meihua had broken the dyke between the ocean and the plant. When reporters from China Central Television (CCTV)—a government media arm—arrived at the factory, workers beat them and refused to comment on the situation. Reports of the reporters being beaten leaked online. The factory’s refusal to be transparent about the accident added to residents’ anger, triggering them to organize a protest on message boards, social media, emails, and text.\(^\text{172}\)

Calls for a protest first appeared on local Dalian bulletin boards. On Bo Luo, a message board, a netizen named Qing Feng posted a call for people to meet at Renmin Square on August 14, 2011:\(^\text{173}\)

\begin{quote}
Thanks to Meihua, we know about the power of typhoon;  
Thanks to the violence of Dalian Fu-Jia Da Hua (The group who invested Fu-Jia PX program), we realize we are almost dying;  
Thanks to the destiny, we survived from the disaster;  
For ourselves, and for our children,  
Let us meet at Renmin Square on the morning of Aug 14th.  
Only people can promote the development of history.
\end{quote}

\(^\text{172}\) Su Xiaokang and Perry Link (2013) provide an excellent overview of environmental projects that worry Chinese citizens, including a description of megaprojects such as the PX factory that concerned the citizens of Dalian.

\(^\text{173}\) The original link can be found here: http://bbs.aboluowang.com/thread-47208-1-1.html
Let us learn from the people in Xiamen and show our respect to them. Only if we do this, we will not have nothing to say when we get older. When children ask us: why is Dalian so beautiful? We can tell them proudly: because of the people in Dalian. We dare to contribute our blood and tears to this city.\textsuperscript{174}

Mailing lists circulated even more detailed calls for the protest; messages included specific slogans and advice to not panic on the day of the event. Posts on Weibo and Renren were vaguely titled “take a stroll” sanbu (散步)\textsuperscript{175} or “Flying a Yellow Ribbon in the North City” to evade the censors.\textsuperscript{176}

On the day of the protest, people gathered peacefully at 9am in front of Renmin Square as planned. The police presence was high, but they were not provoking the marchers. By noon, the city’s mayor came out to announce that the government would move the PX plant out of the city. The city’s Community Party 

\textsuperscript{174} 感谢梅花的来临，让我们知道了台风的威慑力
感谢大连福佳大化的暴力，让我们知道了曾命垂丝微
感谢我们能躲过灾难，重新获得生存的权利。
为了我们，为了儿孙，
来吧，让我们在8月14日的清晨，无论怎样的天气，到人民广场散步，
去感受人民的呼吸，
人民，只有人民才是推动历史前进的动力，
向厦门人民学习，向厦门人民敬礼。
只有这样，人到老时才不会无语，
孩子问我们：大连为何如此美丽。
我们可以骄傲的说：因为人民。哪怕付出血和泪滴

\textsuperscript{175} 感谢梅花的来临，让我们知道了台风的威慑力
感谢大连福佳大化的暴力，让我们知道了曾命垂丝微
感谢我们能躲过灾难，重新获得生存的权利。
为了我们，为了儿孙，
来吧，让我们在8月14日的清晨，无论怎样的天气，到人民广场散步，
去感受人民的呼吸，
人民，只有人民才是推动历史前进的动力，
向厦门人民学习，向厦门人民敬礼。
只有这样，人到老时才不会无语，
孩子问我们：大连为何如此美丽。
我们可以骄傲的说：因为人民。哪怕付出血和泪滴

\textsuperscript{176} 黄丝带飘扬-城市之北
secretary stood on top of a car, underscored the mayor’s message, and asked the protesters to go home. The crowd continued chanting and sang the Chinese National Anthem. Some individuals carried blow horns and screamed curse words at the program, with surrounding people cheering then on.

Throughout the whole event, people were posting updates with pictures and videos online. Any posts containing the characters Dalian (大连) and PX were deleted on Renren and Sina Weibo. Even though those characters were blocked, people found a way to update their social media by using other vague words or simply posting photos with a description.

Media reports portray access to social media as the primary contributor to the success of the protest. The New York Times emphasized the popularity of mobiles and social media: “China’s embrace of wireless communications—first cellphone text messages, then Internet chat rooms and Twitter-like microblogs—has fueled such protests, allowing the disaffected to share grievances in a way never before possible. Dalian’s protesters flooded microblogs with photos, reposting them as fast as censors could delete them” (Lafraniere and Wines 2011).

China Digital Times reports that the internet is a new force, “The protests against a chemical factory in Dalian – which ultimately achieved their goal of having the plant closed – provide another crucial example of how the Internet is changing the dynamics between the rulers and the ruled in China” (Beach 2011). These reports make it seem as if Chinese citizens have been ready all along to protest their
grievances, and that the onslaught of networked technology was the key factor in citizens carrying out public demonstrations.

Reports from Western media about the Dalian protest are in line with the theses of many scholars who argue that the emergence of networked technologies allows people to organize large groups (Rheingold 2002; Shirky 2008). Castells (2013) goes so far to claim that the online network has become the singular material support for political participation. While most researchers are not as technologically deterministic as Castells, digital tools are usually given too much credit for the success of protests while people’s cultural practices are given too little credit (or none at all). Technology is part of the story, but only to a certain degree. The increase in civic participation is not merely a reflection of the widespread use of technology; rather it also reflects that changing conceptions of identity and people’s relationships to the government. Participation in civic action in China is preceded by interaction in the Exploratory and Trusting Phases of the Elastic Self. This is where youth are learning the skills needed to become citizens and to become comfortable with taking the risk of connecting engaging in offline action.

177. Jenkins et al. in Spreadable Media: Creating Meaning and Value in a Networked Culture, make a similar point in explaining the success of Susan Boyle’s youtube video. The authors argue that it’s not just a simple story of technological tools making Bolye’s video a global success:

We must consider the integrated system of participatory channels and practices at work that support an environment here content could be circulated as widely. For instance, use of particular services should not be viewed in isolation but rather in connection, as people embrace a range of technologies based on if and when a particular platform best supports the cultural practices in which they want to engage. But more fundamentally, we have to understand the cultural practices have both fueled the rise of these sharing technologies and evolved as people discover how these platforms might be used (11).
6.7.2.1 Lily Decides to Go to the Protest

Although none of us knew each other, we all sang loudly and very passionately. I was almost moved to tears. When I was in high school and junior high school, we raised the National Flag every Monday morning and a group of students sang the National Anthem. But I never saw them really singing the National Anthem, they just kind of said the words. But this time, I could feel all of us singing the National Anthem from the bottom of our hearts. We were one large group, and even though I couldn’t see each person in the group, we all knew that we all felt the same way because we all love Dalian so much.

—Lily

Lily excitedly recounted to me the energy of the protest. Her father, a policeman, told her not to go, but Lily and her mother were very concerned about what the PX program would do to Dalian, so they went to the protest.

Lily is a third-year college student studying finance at a university in Dalian that is only a 10-minute bus ride from her childhood home. Lily found out about the protest through several communication channels. She saw friends and semi-known contacts posting about it on their Renren wall. Her Renren is filled with people she knows from school and also strangers she has added throughout the years who have now become semi-known to her; for Lily, Renren functions as a social media platform for both the formal and informal modes of interaction. She also received messages about the protest through her QQ account for friends and her QQ accounts for semi-known contacts from Dalian. Like most people, Lily used QQ for both formal and informal modes of interaction. Excited to recruit more friends to go to the protest, Lily forwarded on the protest information on Renren and QQ and encouraged them to join her.
Separately, her mother also received an email about the protest through a website for local Dalian residents. When they started talking about it, Lily told her mom that she was going to the protest. She told me, “Although I couldn’t make much of a difference, I still can do something by going out to support the protest.” Her mom decided to go with her as they were both upset that the government did not inform or ask for the people’s consent to open up the factory. Lily became very agitated as she recounted the sequence of events to me: “The PX program must have thought that the people of Dalian people are stupid, but no one even knew about it, we didn’t have a chance to object to it. Let alone the government never even told us about the program or asked us whether we agreed with it or not.” Lily’s and her mother’s reaction is quite remarkable given that local governments usually do not engage in an open feedback process and citizens do not usually fight back. 178

Lily became even angrier when she found out that the same factory moved to Dalian after city residents successfully protested the government to close it down in Xiamen, Fujian. Information about protesters’ success in closing down the factory made Lily feel more confident that collectively, Dalian residents could also succeed. As Yang argues, repertoires of collective action spread easily online (2011). Many of the emails and calls for the protest looked to the success of the Xiamen protest as one

178. Wasserstrom (2009) also notes that the wave of protests in recent years are led by the urban middle-class. “When these protesters gathered outside a government building, they were not voicing outrage at specific officials or complaining about general developments. They simply claimed that they should have been consulted more fully about a project that would have a profound impact on their lives” (30).
that Dalian residents could replicate. The Xiamen story circulated online and spread to Dalian, even though these cities are nowhere near each other.

Lily marched to Remin Square along with thousands of people, singing the Chinese National Anthem. People around here wore face masks with the words, “PX get out of Dalian.” She said that most of the protest was peaceful, except for one part when she heard people screaming at the police, “Why are you beating them? Let them go!” It was too far away for her to see exactly what was going on, but she said that she could see that the crowd was able to break through the wall that the police had created and they eventually let the protesters go.

By noon, it was hot and several young female protesters around them took out their umbrellas; it is a custom in China for women to shield their faces from the sun. People around them asked them to put their umbrellas away, chiding them, “Do you think that you are on a vacation?” Lily was also annoyed. “Those women were afraid of the sun’s rays and their skin becoming dark... It was weird, we were all sitting and there they were holding their umbrella.”

Throughout the day, Lily updated her Renren with photos of the protest. “I also saw lots of other people around me doing it.” She sent her photos to an album titled, “Phone Album,” to avoid being censored. She also shot a lot of video on her cellphones, but “people told me that I couldn’t upload videos to Tudou or Youku, so they suggested another site to me, Ku 6.” During the protest, Lily successfully uploaded her videos to Ku 6. “I deliberately changed the titles so that they would be
accepted, like I didn’t write ‘march,’ that would be too obvious, so I wrote ‘stroll.’ They could all be seen online at that time but then later when I tried to link to them, all my videos were gone.”

By the time Lily returned home that night, people were actively passing around photos and commenting about the success of Dalian protest. On several of the threads, one user left negative comments. Lily told me, “He was attacking Dalian people, saying that we were silly to stage a protest, he said a bunch of stuff. He’s insane.” Lily felt very offended. “I didn’t use that many bad words, but I wrote to him harshly. I saw that hundreds of people were refuting him and he was writing back. After that night I felt very good about what I did, sticking up for Dalian. I was so angry. A lot of people added me on Renren after that, telling me that I did a good job telling that guy off.” Lily approved of the strangers and her Renren contacts grew from 300 to 310 that night.

Participating in the protest and in conversations on Renren felt seamless for Lily because she already had the skills from the Exploratory and Trusting Phases to negotiate these interactions. She already felt comfortable assessing credibility in online links and sources, judging the trustworthiness of strangers, expressing her emotions online, bypassing censors, and using social media as medium of communication. These skills enabled her to express her identity and emotions with her real name in the company of others.
Starting with her desire to participate in the protest to defending Dalian against the Renren troll, Lily was engaging in networks of civic participation and, in the process, learning how to become a citizen. However, for Lily and the residents of Dalian, the nature of the political citizenship that they were enacting was not tied to abstract notions of citizenship to a nation-state, but to a city. City citizenship (shimin 市民), is the identity that Dalian residents were defending.

There are many accounts for the varying development of citizenship in China. The concept itself is tricky because many Chinese words are translated to “citizen”: guomin 国民, gongmin 公民, shimin 市民. In Goldman and Perry’s review (2002), they suggest that citizenship in China be viewed as an “uncertain and irregular process which is shaped by past history, contemporary challenges, and international influences” instead of an evolutionary model as established by T. H. Marshall’s (1950) account of citizenship in Western Europe as an expansion of rights (18).

Relevant to our discussion is the concept of citizenship that Dalian residents identify with: city citizenship (shimin 市民). Scholars noted the emergence of this identity in the mid-nineteenth century amongst Shanghai’s new urban class who started to advocate for municipal reform. These reforms argued to the right of self rule as encapsulated in the practice of city citizenship. They engaged in public protests, created an independent press, and established civic associations (Goodman 2002; Wasserstrom 2002). Citizenship was not limited to the elite, and industrial workers also joined (Perry and Goldman 2002). While the citizenship process in China has
been episodic and ultimately did not result in institutionalized democracy, it was critical for introducing the concept of citizens’ rights (市民权) (Goodman 2002; Wasserstrom 2002).

In contemporary China, people often identify very strongly with a city. Especially in larger cities, residents are proud of their hometown. Dalian residents have a particularly strong sense of commitment to their city. Most of the protesters, who were middle to upper class, are proud that their city is known throughout China as a clean city with fresh ocean air and temperate weather. Many new residents have moved to Dalian because of the image and lifestyle for which it is known throughout China. There is a discernible Dalian identity that revolves around environmental awareness. Consequently, when city residents found out that the PX program would threaten the city, they also felt that their lifestyle was being jeopardized.

The Dalian protest was the first time Lily had ever participated in a collective event, telling me, “I have never attended any activity like this. It was a large-scale and spontaneous activity to show opposition. And then when I went there, I felt this feeling, I love Dalian. And I really do have this feeling.” For Lily, her willingness to participate in and share the information about the protest was a demonstration of her identity as a Dalian citizen.

Clay Shirky’s ladder of group undertakings is a helpful framework to understand why some youth were able to participate in the protest (2008). Shirky argues that collective action, such as a protest, is difficult to achieve because it
requires a shared sense of responsibility that occurs “by tying the user’s identity to the
identity of the group...action that is undertaken in the name of the members meant to
change something out in the world, often in opposition to other groups committed to
different outcomes” (50). Youth, like Lily, who had a clear sense of a shared identity
as a Dalian citizen, felt compelled to participate because she felt that the city’s
decisions were tied to her life. As she told her mother, even though her attendance at
the protest would not make the factory go away, the least she could do was show her
support.

6.7.2.2 QQ Friends

Upon further conversations with Lily, I discovered that she was able to make
the transition from taking information online and enacting it offline because this was a
familiar process to her. She had experienced the Exploratory and Trusting Phases of
her Elastic Self. She had a primary account (dahao 大号) for known people such as
friends and classmates. She also had several other accounts, one to add strangers and
another to chat with her mother. Lily didn’t want her mother to see her daily diary
entries or mood updates, since, after all, “you know everyone has their secrets.”

With her anonymous account, Lily added strangers and built up long term
interactions with them. She also joined several QQ groups, including one for fans of
Xu Song, a singer who used to release songs on the internet. Users took the first letter
of a city’s license place as a prefix for the QQ group and one’s username. There are so
many fan groups for Xu Song that his QQ groups were organized by provinces. When
Lily joined the Xu Song fan group, it was the group for fans in Liaoning province.
When the group size grew, they self-organized themselves into sub-QQ groups for fans from the same city:

In Dalian, the car sign is named after “Liao B.” “Liao A” stands for Shenyang. “Liao C” stands for Anshan. And then your name in the groups starts with a Liao B and then your name. This way, you know where everyone is from. This is the one piece of information in your identity that distinguishes you from a person in the A, C and D areas of Liaoning Provence. When I entered the group, I like to talk to people from B, and then we all added each other to the subgroup.

With her anonymous identity, Lily shared her life with her QQ Xu Song fan group. They called each on their birthdays and they sent each other gifts. The Dalian B group eventually started meeting in person offline. She went to people’s houses to cook, they went out to watch movies, met up for dinner, and met up to listen to new releases together. Through these friends, Lily learned the values associated with being a friend: reciprocity, reliability, and openness.

When Lily joined the group, CDs were still a commodity among music enthusiasts. Before the dominance of MP3s, an important component of music fan activity in China was CD collection and exchange. Since Lily was in high school at the time, her parents did not allow her to buy or listen to CDs. Her mother prohibited her from doing anything that would distract from the Gaokao tests, which included listening to music, hanging out with friends, or engaging in any activities outside of school. Lily couldn’t have the CDs sent to her house because “my Mom would blame me for not focusing on studying. She would say that I was listening to music again or ask where I got the money to buy the stuff.”
Lily’s group helped her work around her mother’s rules by devising an elaborate CD chain. When Xu Song released CDs online, she could not buy them online because she did not have her own bank account. So she asked people in her QQ Xu Song B group to buy the CD for her, and then set up a time and place to meet to give them the money. Sometimes, she couldn’t find a person in Dalian who had a bank account; instead, she would have to reach out to members in other cities. She told me, “That person bought the CD and sent it to his friend in Dalian, who would then contact me to make an appointment time to meet up for me to give him the money and for him to give me the CD.” Through this process, Lily met a lot of other Xu Song fans outside of Dalian and became friends with many of them. “If we have something to do, we sometimes ask each other to do it,” she told me. Her friends helped her find ways to work around her mother’s strict rules. In return, Lily also helped out her friends in other cities with CD exchanges.

Lily spent her early years online with strangers who became semi-known and then known friends. Lily felt that she could trust all these people because they not only had a common interest, but they were also from the same city. She established the rituals of trustworthiness with each person. She initially felt awkward about it, telling me, “I used to be worried about meeting people from the internet, but it was a just a slight concern, because when we meet we have so much to talk about.” As she interacted with more people online, the more comfortable she became.
While Lily’s online interactions revolved around private interests in entertainment, they provided her the training ground to become confident in assessing information and sources online and taking those interactions offline. By the time Lily received information about the Dalian protest, she was ready to express the Participatory Phase of her Elastic Self. She had already experienced what it was like to be a part of a community of people and to have her identity tied to the group. She was confident in assessing online information and skilled at navigating anonymous sources and informal modes of interaction. The casual context of her Xu Song group that connected her to more Dalian fans also reinforced her identity as a Dalian citizen.

When the calls for protests emerged in the summer of 2011, Lily was primed for offline action because she had already been meeting people offline for several years. The technology was not new to her, as Lily had been using Renren and QQ for several years. What was new was her sense of awareness as a citizen who could show support for her city in solidarity with other people. She learned that solidarity meant showing up even if she couldn’t make change. This “moral we” was something that she learned through her QQ interactions with Xu Song members; even if she felt anxious that they would have nothing to talk about, showing up was a way of showing her commitment to the group. She applied the same logic to the Dalian protest.

Lily’s time in the QQ group prepared her to participate in the protest. She did not have to learn new skills, she just had to reapply them in a new context. She already knew how to assess information, talk to strangers, deal with censorship, and move
relationships from online to the offline. These skills contributed to her high comfort level when it came to acting upon her identity as a city citizen of Dalian. It took away the fear of doing something that could have been potentially dangerous. Youth who do not have these skills do not have confidence to move from the online to the offline, much less even interact with strangers online. In the next section we meet Derek, a young man who had the same information as Lily, but did not participate in the protest.

6.7.2.3 Derek, the Nonprotester

Even though Derek received the same information, had access to the same technology (mobile phone and laptop), and shared the same identity as a Dalian city citizen as Lily, he did not go to the protest. His decisions reflect a more rigid sense of self. Unlike Lily, Derek did not possess the skills necessary to engage in civic participation because he had not experienced the Exploratory or Trusting Phases of the Elastic Self, the critical stages that are necessary before an individual can feel comfortable in civic participation.

While Lily was singing the Chinese National Anthem and marching towards Renmin Square on the morning of August 14, 2011, Derek was with his parents in their apartment that was less than 10 miles away from the protesters. He logged onto Renren to find a slew of updates about the protest in his feed. He found out about the protest on a local soccer message board on Baidu Tieba in mid-July. He saw 20 - 30 messages about the protest every week for a month on various message boards that he visited regularly. He also saw a flood of messages about the same protest on his
Renren feed. It was hard to ignore it, he told me. “Every big website posted info about it.” He even saw it on his anonymous Douban account.

Unlike Lily, Derek did not fully trust the content of the messages because the official media—CCTV and major web portals—did not report it. As a result, he did not believe that the information about the PX program harming Dalian was real. Derek saw other friends forwarding the protest information, “But I didn’t comment.” He was even too scared to forward it on Renren in fear of getting in trouble with the authorities. “I feel that I would be disturbing social stability. And Renren belongs to the real-name system, anything that you post, they can discover you quickly. If the situation were to escalate, they will charge you with disturbing the peace.” The real-name system that Derek was referring to is not a government enforced system, but a voluntary one where users on Renren tend to provide their real names, similar to Facebook users. Around the time I spoke to Derek, Sina Weibo introduced a real-name system that required users to give their national identity card number; the national legislature had also just approved a real-name system to be implemented by all major web portals by June 2014 (General Office of the State Council 2013).

I asked Derek to explain exactly what kind of trouble he would get in if he were to forward information about the protests. “If you disturb national security, they will arrest you. You will stay in a jail. The jail restricts your freedom.”179 Derek was

---

179. He then proceeded to provide an example from the UK. “You know the riot that happened in London? Well it was organized through Facebook, but then later the leaders were arrested. Then were arrested by the police in UK.” The 2011 England Riots, otherwise known as The Blackberry Riots, had happened a few days before the Dalian protests in the UK. The Chinese press were happy to report that the organizers were arrested, but they press referred to the riots as a protest 抗议, giving Chinese
unclear about what kind of trouble he would get into, who would punish him, and what laws he was breaking. Nonetheless, he had enough doubt that he did not feel safe sharing, forwarding, or commenting online about the protests. Derek’s use of “they” referenced a vague group of authority figures. When I asked him to name the exact people who would find him, he would sometimes say the police, the government, or the Ministry of Security. It was never clear, however, just exactly who “they” were.

Derek then explained to me, “I just have this feeling that, it is better to not present my viewpoints openly on the internet, personal information I don’t want it out there. Leaking personal privacy is troublesome.” He then cited Edison Chen’s 2008 sex photo scandal in Hong Kong as an example of why it is best to not put any personal information online (Bradsher 2008). Unlike Lily, Derek was very conservative about sharing his feelings online with strangers, much less someone he knew. He used Renren and QQ mostly in the formal mode. He has an anonymous Douban account but he does not use it actively. He is not part of any community online where he contributes his thoughts. He has never made friends with strangers online and he does not chat with people he does not personally know. He told me that he uses Douban with an anonymous name, but he is primarily a lurker as he does not dare put up information. “Anything you put online, they will find you and your IP address.” Again, the use of the vague “they.”

media consumers the impression that protesting in the UK is illegal (Jones et al. 2011).
He felt that as long as he lived in China, he would not be comfortable sharing his thoughts online. He compared China to the US and said that US is a place where people can openly stage protests and boycotts. “The news reports that people in the US boycotted the Iraq War. When I found out, I thought that Americans are very passionate. They are good at caring about the big issues in the country. They participate, participate by themselves and with others.” Derek does not see China as a place where individuals can exhibit the Participatory Phase of their identities. His response was very similar to others who told me that Chinese society makes it difficult to care about public issues.

Derek went on to commend the U.S. for having voting rights, equality between citizens, and freedom. He wants to go to the USA to study and carry out his dreams. I asked him to tell me about his dream, and he said, “I want to expand myself abroad. It’s a better place.” He then became silent. I asked him what he wanted to expand, “Oh how to express it, it’s just that I want to feel myself, I want the feelings that I can change the world.” I asked him what exactly he would change, and he said, “Well, society.” I asked him to elaborate, and he responded,

In America, Obama, his skin color, whatever it is, Obama could be President of the USA. I feel that if it were in USA, if you had a dream, you could achieve it. But some things in China, you may have a dream, but it is difficult to achieve. Compared to USA, it is still very difficult to achieve. If you were in USA, you can by yourself, you can use your own ability in technology to develop and improve society. If you want to do this in China, like if build a product, it is quite difficult. There would be a lot of interpersonal relationships that you have to adjust yourself to.
I tried to get Derek to define what exactly he would change in society, but he did not get any more specific. He kept referring back to why it was difficult to change society in China. He thought that China was too based on *guanxi* relationships, and that only people with access to powerful relationships can make social change. He cited a job search as another example of an unfair playing field for those without the right networks: “If you apply for a job at a company, your qualifications look great, but you don’t get hired, instead they hire someone who is less qualified than you. In many cases, even though you cannot be sure, the person they hired probably knows one of the managers.”

Derek cited a common issue in Chinese society, *guanxi* relations. *Guanxi* is also one of the reasons why protesters were upset about the PX program in Dalian. Many citizens argued that the factory opened quietly and quickly because the investors had access to the right administrators in the city who would also profit from the deal.

Hao Tang, a scholar at South China Normal University argued that the PX program in Dalian is a case of “interaction without rules” in China (2011). In the absence of a strong rule of law, the government implements projects—such as the construction of new buildings, dams, or transportation—without consulting the people who are affected by them:

180. Discussions on Renren about CCTV censoring news about the protest: http://blog.renren.com/share/192069798/8040750670

181. 无规则互动

182. Rule of law, established in 1990 in China, is still in development and largely controlled by the party (Guy 2000).
“interaction without rules” (无规则互动) normally goes through three stages: First, local interest groups and local governments push ahead with a polluting project in violation of environmental regulations. Second, local people spontaneously organize mass protests against the project in question, an activity supported by neither law nor policy. And third, in response to the threat to social instability created by the protests, local government halts the project—again, breaching laws. At every stage, the existing rules are lightly cast aside by all participants.

Derek’s discussion about his inability to carry out his dreams in China alludes to Hao’s “interaction without rules.” Derek feels that decisions are arbitrarily made to accommodate those with power. As Derek explains, “People makes decisions based on their relationships, not according to some specific rules, regulations and things like that.”

Derek could not envision being a part of social change because he does not feel that change is possible within the current system. “In China, only when you have enough power at a certain level do you have the power to change things.” China is not “transparent enough” and “as an ordinary people there is no possibility for you to know the truth on any matters.” For him, the only option was to either “get accustomed to it” or to go abroad to the U.S. It is not even within the realm of Derek’s imagination that his participation could contribute to any kind of political change or elicit a positive response from the government. While Lily also recognized that her participation in the protest would not change the outcome, it would least show solidarity. Derek is not a member of any online communities. He goes online to consume information, not to contribute or share. His fear of vulnerability is so strong that he does not even feel comfortable joining an online community, where the risks of
expressing one’s self are lower than expressing one’s self offline. For Derek, the transition from receiving information about the protest online to actually going to the protest offline is too big of a leap to make: he does not even have the basic digital skills or confidence to share information, no less meet up with ‘internet’ people in an offline context.

6.7.2.4 Analysis of Lily and Derek

Both Lily and Derek use the internet, but they use it in vastly different ways. Though this could be partially attributable to their personalities, the differences between them are made more salient by the kinds of interactional modes they are embedded in.

They both use Renren and QQ, but Lily uses both of them for both formal and informal interactions. While Renren is mostly a platform for the formal mode, Lily blurs the boundaries when she approves of strangers that she conversed with about the protest. She approaches the platform with a degree of malleability, allowing herself to talk with strangers on it and adding them to her network. For Derek, both Renren and QQ are *always* platforms in the formal mode.

Derek does not interact with the internet or social media as a social space. He is only comfortable navigating platforms that are dominant in the formal mode. Even though he is connected to his friends through Renren and QQ, he avoids talking to his friends online. He rarely leaves comments, forwards information, or shares links. His fears about sharing personal information online prevent him from engaging in deeper
interactions with friends and strangers. While he checks in regularly to QQ and Renren, he is mostly a passive user.

When we consider Lily’s and Derek’s comfort level with sharing information online, the gulf is quite expansive. The opportunity to protest against the PX program in Dalian did not seem like a big leap for Lily, whereas for Derek, it was inconceivable. Lily is comfortable navigating informal modes of interaction, exploring relationships online, and taking some of them offline. Lily has several years of experience in taking online interactions to the offline and back again. Youth like Lily, who participate in sensitive public interest events, continue to build upon their skills to evade the censors and become more comfortable trying again even when they do not succeed. She was not fazed that her videos had disappeared even after she made an effort to give vague titles.

On the other hand, Derek continues to worry about authorities putting him in jail simply for forwarding information. Derek feels that he has to protect himself from the authorities by putting the least amount of information online, but he is unable to articulate what exactly the ‘authorities’ will do to him. His perspective reflects the success of the Party in indoctrinating fear into peoples’ lives. As he told me, “using Google makes me uncomfortable. Every time I get the message that I am searching for a term that is blocked makes me feel like I’m breaking the law.”

His ambivalence stems from an inability to judge the veracity of online information. Even though he and Lily received the same calls for the protest, Derek
did not trust that the information was real. On the other hand, Lily was confident in what Rheingold calls “crap detecting,” a skill she also put to use when her friends sent her posts that Dalian police beat many protestors: “I knew that information wasn’t real, so I didn’t forward it.” Lily was right, it was a peaceful protest. Lily had enough of what Rainee and Wellman call “skepticism literacy,” “the ability of individuals to evaluate what they encounter online” (2012, 273-274). Without this skill, the internet can appear to be chaotic, leaving a user to feel overwhelmed instead of empowered by information. Derek’s fear of sharing and gathering online information comes from low skepticism literacy.

Lily does not share the same fears as Derek; she is much more carefree about her online interactions. For Lily, the informal mode of interaction is a training ground for civic participation. She built up her skills interacting with strangers online and offline in a safe and apolitical context around private interests. Her transition to a ‘moral we’ was seamless; she had already experienced the feeling of being a part of a something bigger than her—her social network of QQ fans.

Lily’s and Derek’s social networks differed greatly. Lily, a “networked individual,” is loosely embedded in multiple communities online (Rainee and Wellman 2012). Lily had accumulated new ties from her time spent socializing with her QQ contacts. While she only developed and/or met up with some of them in person in Dalian, her network from the group was quite extensive, as there were

---

thousands of people in the QQ group. Derek is not embedded in any informal communities: his fear of online communication prevented him from meeting new ties in the informal mode. His only opportunity to expand his network was through other students at his university, a formal context. A person’s social circles and networks are not only sources of information, but also sources of change (Sinclair 2012). Sinclair argues that a person’s social network can change one’s behavior. Lily had access to more information as her social network was much bigger and diverse than Derek’s.

Their stories reveal the different outcomes for people who are engaged in an Elastic Self. Derek’s story is common for youth who have not engaged in an Elastic Self. He could not graduate to the Participatory Phase because he had not yet engaged in the Exploratory and Trusting Phases of the Elastic Self. His interactions online were primarily limited to formal modes. Without any skills from the first two phases, he did not have enough familiarity with informal interactions or the social capabilities to become involved in networked civic participation.

Lily demonstrates how an Elastic Self that can be activated for civic participation. Interacting with strangers, creating social spaces beyond the purview and approval of her parents, working around censored information, and becoming embedded in a loose community of fans—these are all interactions that prepared her to feel confident to exercise her identity as a citizen of Dalian. While not all youth engage in the Participatory Phase, those who do engage in the Exploratory and
Trustingly creating a reservoir of skills that may be potentially activated when a public issue emerges that aligns with their personal interests.

Lily’s and Derek’s stories also illustrate that technology alone is not what made the Dalian protest possible; otherwise, there would’ve been many more people at the protest. To participate in a public action means that one has to be able to conceive of one’s self as part of a community and as an agent of change. If someone does not have any experience with belonging to a community, then it is difficult to carry out collective practices that contribute to a larger social good.

Derek is unable to imagine a society that would be responsive to citizens’ needs. However, when pressed further, Derek is unable to specifically articulate how he would change society if he could participate. In an authoritarian country like China where participation in collective action for public good is discouraged, the informal mode of interaction is an ideal opportunity to create communities around more mundane and less sensitive matters that fall in the private realm. Platforms that are dominant in the informal mode provide spaces for people to engage in citizenship practices.

6.7.1 Technodeterminism/Instrumentalism Not Correct

There has been a lot of speculative writing since the 90s and early 2000s that discusses the development of a civil society in China (Brook and Folic 1997; Davis et al. 1995; Kluver and Power 1999; Madsen 1998; Perry and Selden 2003; White et al. 1996). With the popularization of the internet, some scholars believed that it would fast-track the development of a civil society, empowering citizens to challenge and
overthrow authoritarian and dictatorial governments.\footnote{Overthrow authoritarian and dictatorial governments.}

They reasoned that an extremely decentralized network facilitates anti-government activists. A belief aligned with pro-democracy ideology, Western governments have even crafted foreign policy based on this seductive line of reasoning; Hillary Clinton’s Internet Freedom speech of 2010 is a prime example (Wang 2010).\footnote{Wang 2010.} This “instrumental view” of the web, as Shirky has argued, is “politically appealing, action-oriented, and almost certainly wrong” because among several other reasons, it “underestimat[es] the value of media that allow citizens to communicate privately among themselves” (2011). As many previous studies have shown, people adopt new communication technologies when they integrate them into their everyday lives (Bijker 1997; Fischer 1994; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Rakow 1992; Wellman 1999). The internet is not an exception.

Yet, the field of Chinese research at large focuses on the political uses of the internet with little attention paid to how people are connecting to it in everyday life and what it means for them. In The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online, Guobin Yang (2009) proposes that “online activism is a new social formation in the making” and is expanding an activist sense of self in a global movement (19). While Yang is correct to argue that online activism is a new form of interaction in China, he is incorrect to assume that online activism defines and motivates Chinese internet users. My research dispels popular claims that Chinese youth are turning to

\footnote{I list authors who fall in this group in section 1.0}

\footnote{For an excellent analysis on how the Chinese internet has changed the way the Chinese government deals with foreign policy, read Susan Shirk (2010).}
the internet to carry out online activism. As I have already shown, participants turn to
the internet to explore private interests for self-expression and emotional sharing, not
to become stronger activists or to connect with marginalized groups in China.

Yang goes onto to argue that the Chinese internet circulates repertoires of
collective action and revives a Chinese revolutionary spirit. My research confirms the
first half of his argument: information about collective forms of action does spread
quickly on social media sites despite censorship. But my participants were not trying
to become revolutionaries, nor did they speak of a revolutionary narrative to
democratize China. They had no visions of overthrowing the government. Yang also
concludes that online activism is the seedbed for a social movement in China. Perhaps
to the chagrin of Western scholars and pundits who continue to predict that the
internet will destroy the Communist party, this deterministic prognosis is
unfounded.\footnote{186} I did not see signs for a social movement; rather, I saw signs of social
engagement with particular public issues that related to personal interests.

I adopt an environmental view, espoused by Clay Shirky (2011), that frames
the internet as a platform that strengthens the public sphere and civil society as
opposed to empowering activists. Shirky emphasizes that the origins of a civil society
are in the mundane everyday tensions that citizens interface with, not in abstract ideas
of political change. This view underscores the importance of dialogue over access to

\footnote{186. For example, Joshua Kurlantzick’s (2004) *The Web Won’t Topple Tyranny* reflects a great
sense of disappoint among Westerners but then goes on to portray the internet as a anti-social tool that
empower dictators and passifies users.}
information: “Access to information is far less important, politically, than access to conversation” (2011). This approach emphasizes the slow and long-term development of a “public sphere, where public opinion relies on both the circulation and spread of media and conversation.” (2011).^{187}

Shirky highlights the significance of conversation in a networked environment to spread a discussion about issues that would have otherwise remained private. This means that even youth like Derek, who are not engaged in the informal mode of interaction, will still see their contacts posting about public interest issues. This creates an awareness that was not previously there. Social media not only increases the ease in which people share and discover information within groups of strangers, but also join and follow conversations among people they know.

While youth like Derek are not engaging in any of the phases of the Elastic Self, his comments already reflect a shift in values among post 80s and 90s youth. Derek wants access to rights that will guarantee him freedom of speech, equal treatment, representation, and intellectual property protection. But unlike Hooligan Sparrow or Lily, he is not ready to carry out action offline. While Derek did not go to the protest, he saw discussions and links that his friends forwarded on Renren. Even though he spends most of his time on social media platforms in the formal mode, as long as he is not isolated from other youth who are engaged in an Elastic Self, he will come across conversations about civic participation. Derek represents a growing

---

187. See Yu (2006) for discussions on media leading to a greater rights consciousness. Also see Perry’s (2009) edited collection of essays on this topic.
majority of youth who are critical to creating the support necessary for networks of civic participation. Even though this group of “inelastic youth” are not experiencing big shifts of the self, they are still important because they are watching their friends—or more public figures—engage in the most public level of an Elastic Self. This has the potential to seed the desire for participation in youth like Derek, particularly as they see civic participation becoming more normalized.

6.7.2 Importance of the Exploratory and Trusting Phases of an Elastic Self

Youth who have a less elastic sense of self were less likely to participate in the offline protest. While youth who did not attend the protest told me that they supported the cause, their reasons for not going were similar: they all expressed a variety of concerns around the legitimacy of the information they saw online and expressed fear about forwarding it on. I only heard this set of concerns and fears from the youth who did not go to the protest. One student told me that he was worried that “my university will not allow me to graduate.” His professor warned the class that they were prohibited from going. “I knew about it, and wanted to go, but I didn’t want to get in trouble.”

Derek viewed spending time in informal interactions or chatting with strangers as “a waste of time.” I spoke to other nonparticipants who echoed the same sentiments. These students adhered to normative ideas about being a “proper wired self” (Liu 2011a). One student said, “People who talk to strangers online are qiguai, what is there to talk about?” This student did not see value in speaking to strangers. She, like many other youth who felt the same way, often used the word moshengren
陌生人 to describe “stranger” instead of burenshideren 不认识的人, which is a more casual, neutral, and less harsh way of referring to a stranger. These youth are not in touch with the Participatory Phase of their Elastic Self; they have not accumulated enough interpersonal experiences in the Exploratory Phase and many of them have not entered into the Trusting Phase. Without engaging or building up long term and meaningful relationships with strangers, they also did not experience a “casual web of public trust” (Jacobs 1961).

Youth who were not engaged with their Elastic Self also tended to be more conservative in assessing online information and relied on what they deemed to be official sources, such CCTV and popular web portals. While they may have recognized that ‘hidden information’ exists, they did not actively try to uncover it. For example, Derek said that he trusts official sources, not information from his social circles. Without a wide or heterogeneous network like Lily or Hooligan Sparrow, Derek and youth like him have not transferred their trust from traditional institutions to their social networks.

Those who are engaged with the Participatory Phase use digital tools in a different way from people who are not engaged with it. After spending time with youth in Dalian, I learned that youth who have built up dense networks online and are familiar with the cultural practices of the informal mode of interaction are much more comfortable taking their online interactions into the offline realm. Youth with the most elastic sense of self participated in the offline protest. They were comfortable with
assessing information from a range of sources. They were not scared to forward
information about the protest. They had adopted a moral framework of open
information and were adept at finding ‘hidden information.’

6.7.3 Communities of Choice

In exploring an Elastic Self with strangers, Chinese youth are socialized into
the idea and the practice that membership in communities is voluntary and that the
decision to not join or to leave does not carry consequences. The “moral we” emerges
when people feel that the communities of which they are part result from their own
decisions. Initially, youth join communities that are aligned with a moral we: a basic
human desire for human connection and self-expression. This desires was most
effectively fulfilled by building relationships with strangers and becoming part of
online communities. They did not just feel like they were joining a community, but
actively taking part in a community. Over time, these communities taught them social
codes that benefited the community, not just themselves.

Youth engaged in the Participatory Phase of an Elastic Self are rallying
together as citizens, not comrades; they are addressing the state as citizens, not
subjects. They are adopting collective identities such as ‘city citizen’ shimin (市民)
and ‘community organizer.’ From passive subjects to active citizens, my participants
bypass restrictive guanxi circles and top-down institutions to seek out the informal
mode of interaction to socialize with people outside of their immediate social circles.
6.7.4 Networks Are the Source of This Action—Not Hierarchical Organizations

Emergent communities are where new forms of citizenship are unfolding, not in traditional institutions that offer few opportunities for participation. As we saw in chapter 5, decentralized, diverse, and loose networks are becoming the loci of trust transference. These are the places where people are realizing that they are unable to trust institutions. Both Hooligan Sparrow and Lily realized that the government was not serving their or their community’s needs. Despite the immense barriers their communities faced, they demanded rights instead of waiting for rights to be granted by the government. Even more significantly, both they and their communities expected for the government to engage in dialogue with them. Lily’s mother was upset that the government didn’t ask Dalian residents about the factory. Hooligan Sparrow expected local authorities to treat her and her fellow citizens with respect. In both their stories, they advocated on behalf of their community, which is an act of citizenship.

Some say the internet will make public interest actions, such as protests, more collective and less isolated in China because social actors will have greater access to information (Yang 2009). Critical of this voice, Etling et al. (2010) argue that “political change in authoritarian regimes is more likely to be enabled by more decentralized associations with loose networks” (38). In China, these spaces are dominant in the informal mode of interaction where users can create ad hoc communities around their favorite singers and when needed, around a social cause. Without institutional interference, individuals are free to decide what parts of themselves to reveal and which skills to bring to the table. Networks, not institutions,
are ideal spaces for people to learn repertoires of action (Eisinger 1973). My research suggests that it these are the spaces that hold the greatest potential for citizenship making.

Using social media, ordinary individuals such as Hooligan Sparrow and Lily are able to quickly network with other likeminded individuals. These are spaces where discussions of rights consciousness are unfolding, “in which savvy protesters frame their grievances in officially approved terms in order to negotiate a better bargain with the authoritarian state” (Perry 2009, 20). But these dialogues need the informal mode of interaction where decentralized networks can emerge. As long as youth are connecting to each other on social media, there is opportunity for these networks to grow.

6.8 Conclusion

Hooligan Sparrow’s story and The Dalian Protest illustrate that profound social changes are happening in China, but it’s happening with people who aren’t explicitly trying to create social or political change. The youth I spoke to are not engaged in an organized political struggle for more censored information. While a small subset of my participants became politicized, their political activism was an unexpected outcome of their initial desire for an emotional connection with people who would not see them as weird qiguai. Their desire to be understood by a likeminded group of people were initially fulfilled by engaging in the Exploratory Phase of the self with strangers (chapter 4) and the Trusting Phase of the self with groups of like-minded people (chapter 5).
Neither Hooligan Sparrow nor Lily were aspiring activists. Hooligan Sparrow became a community organizer by accident. Her path to civic participation started out as an emotional desire to be understood as a single mother who had been shamed for her decision to divorce her cheating husband. Lily’s participation in the protest is connected to her love for her hometown and her anger that Dalian could be destroyed. For both of them, years of apolitical engagement with strangers who fulfilled their desires to be understood and to connect with likeminded people preceded their actions as citizens.

The stories in this chapter stories illustrate that to engage in the Participatory Phase, youth need fundamental skills in emotional expression and trust evaluation. By the time youth enter into the Participatory Phase, they have already built up a repertoire of skills from time spent in the Exploratory and Trusting Phase. The continued use of social media, even if only for private reasons around self-expression and leisure, make it hard for a growing number of Chinese youth to avoid learning about political issues that directly affect their lives. However, youth are entering into civic participation through apolitical means that widen their social circles to strangers who become friends and then fellow citizens. This path to citizenship practices is building a public sphere through informal, not formal modes of interaction.  

188 A fruitful interpretation of increased social media interaction comes from Yu (2006) who suggests that active audience engagement with media creates what she calls, “media citizenship” in China. She describes media citizenship as a set of practices with the television, internet, and mobiles where “people can turn themselves from media consumers to media citizens. As media citizens, people are not fully informed citizens, capable of open and direct political engagement with the state. Instead, they are simply one step beyond being merely active consumers and audiences of the media” (304).
7.1 Youth Style Meme

In both the East and West, internet memes have emerged as a popular form of personal expression. They are a cross-culturally portable and easily accessible media format that allows users to personalize or change the media by adding text or images. Creators use internet memes to express their thoughts and feelings through a commonly recognizable form. Youth around the world are taking to memes in droves, and this is particularly true on Chinese social media platforms (Mina 2011, 2012b, 2013a).

In October 2011, the meme “Regular Youth, Romantic Youth, and Stupid Youth” (普通青年，文艺青年，二逼青年) became a phenomenon on Douban, where it was commonly referred to as “Youth Style” (青年体). The meme consisted of three self portraits—each one illustrating different behaviors. The first image is of a “regular” youth who acts appropriately according to society. The second image is of a “romantic” youth who is idealistic and impractical. The third image is of a “stupid” youth who is uninhibited. The regular youth adheres to expected social norms, the romantic youth acts according to idealistic norms, and the stupid youth behaves in a way that is contrary to social norms.

In three months, users uploaded close to 7,000 unique images; by April 2012, the meme had spread to other social media platforms, receiving over 57 million mentions on Baidu Tieba and over 5 million on Sina Weibo. The meme created a
space for youth to deliberate about themselves, generating thousands of comments on discussion thread:

I am moving between the three modes. I could be any of the modes and could be none of them.

I feel that I’m not romantic often enough. Sometimes I am regular and most of time I am just stupid.

I am a regular youth who wants to be a romantic youth but at last I’ve become a stupid youth in others’ eyes.

These comments reflect a sense of elasticity between several modes of self-presentation. It also exposes a marked level of self-reflection among Chinese students, demonstrating a layered sense of self-awareness and an ability to be playful with their identities.

Figure 7.1. Using the toilet. For the purposes of not revealing youths’ identities, I have chosen Youth Style photos that do not include any youths’ faces.
The meme highlights the social pressures on Chinese youth to conform to mainstream expectations and the desire to explore an unrestrained self. The fact that youth can laugh at the pictures (and in effect, at themselves) shows a deep awareness of their personal identity as under construction. Most remarkably, it reveals that they are able to imagine themselves in multiple contexts that defy mainstream social expectations.

7.2 Summary of Argument

My participants seem to be moving in and out of multiple Chinese societies. They use their prescribed self in relationships with people they know (family and friends). When they want to express emotions or ideas that may counter dominant norms, they look for informal modes of interaction to engage with an Elastic Self. To Chinese youth, moving between the prescribed Self and Elastic Self can seem like entering into different societies, but China, like any other society, oscillates between open and closed.
Even though youth do not experience the social and political anxieties that weighed down on—and, at times, debilitated—previous generations, they still feel pressure from their peers and family. Nevertheless, they find themselves able to consider acts that weren’t previously imaginable in China—talking about emotions, finding girl/boyfriends without family networks, and discussing politics. They are doing these things across an array of digital devices and platforms. They find solace and joy in talking to strangers, a form of emotional support that they can’t find in their social circles. They learn how to navigate the internet to find formal and informal modes of interaction, learning the normative behaviors, cues, and rituals that make the informal mode so lively. They do all of this under a state of anonymity as way to protect themselves from people they know, not the government. This is the focal point with which my research is concerned.

An Elastic Self enables Chinese youth to step outside of their social circle to interact and build relationships with semi-known people. This broader social transformation signals new values that Chinese youth have accumulated in their journey of self-discovery, values that help them move forward through Chinese society. In the exploratory level, youth learn creativity, independence, tolerance, sharing, and playfulness. In the Trusting Phase, youth learn how to enjoy leisure activities, as well as accountability, transparency, and community. The values and skills gained from the Exploratory and Trusting Phases ease youth into the Participatory Phase where they experience egalitarianism and solidarity.
Each of the individuals that I have chosen to highlight in chapters 4, 5, and 6 represent stories that would be familiar to most Chinese youth. While the details of their experience and the paths they have chosen sharply differ, they all share a common desire to follow normative expectations of Chinese society. They want to be a filial son/daughter. They do not want to break laws. They are not looking to disconnect from institutions. But at the same time, they do not necessarily want to conform entirely to institutional norms dictated by their family and the state, especially when these norms conflict with the internal moral compass that they have developed outside of their social circles.

The participants in chapter 4 are primarily concerned with their private interests and exploring emotions that they are unable to share with people they know. The participants in chapter 5 have already spent time talking to strangers and are now ready to develop more meaningful relationships with the ones they can trust the most. They are still concerned with private interests, but it is in this act of establishing a connection through rituals of trustworthiness that they become more open to new people who expand their worldviews and initiate them into new forms of interaction. The participants in chapter 6 actively engage with public issues that are of personal interest to them. These youth are unique and are most definitely outliers as social action requires high levels of trust and sophisticated digital literacy skills.

189. A study from Liu (2008b) who says that young people for the most part still want to be filial.
Current research shows that Chinese youth are using the internet for either political or entertainment purposes, are primarily socializing in ways that are similar to Western youth, and are mostly interacting with people they know. The variety of stories presented in this project calls for a reexamination of these claims. Once we move beyond a narrow focus on political action, we see a wider range of behavior that illustrates how apolitical interactions can foster interest in civic participation. Chinese youths’ interactions on recreational sites are not superficial; rather, they are participating in communities and sharing and expressing their emotions, usually with strangers. Their primary interests are not political, but personal.

Central to youths’ interactions with strangers is the self-transformation that comes with the recognition of Information Paternalism. The sense of agency that comes from discovering and continuing to uncover hidden information generates a greater awareness of social issues. With the help of strangers, and through the communities in which they’ve become embedded, youth develop a common moral vocabulary and practice around the Chinese self and awareness of Information Paternalism. This moral vocabulary reflects a turning point when they realize that the moral vision they grew up with conflicts with the emerging morality that they are negotiating.

When Chinese youth begin to realize that institutions that they trusted— institutions that were a core part of their identity—are not transparent, they begin to imagine an alternative world. These realizations are happening on an individual level,
slowly exposing the hidden parts of the Chinese political system instead of strengthening it. The desire to live the truth is appealing to a growing population of Chinese youth who are becoming aware of Information Paternalism.

As my participants have shown, living a life of truth does not begin as a political statement against the government. It begins as a desire to express one’s private interests and emotions. For Liuliu it was expressing his sexuality, for Maimai it was expressing her thoughts on gossip, and for Hooligan Sparrow it was expressing her feelings as a divorcee who still values her sexuality. It was in the process of networking with other likeminded some individuals leveraged their newly acquired digital literacy skills in the service of civic action.

However, youth can only engage in an Elastic Self if the conditions for the informal mode of interaction are present: malleability of identity, anonymity, and access to strangers. This analysis suggests that private interests in the form of self-expression and identity making can influence future participation in the public sphere. If Chinese youth continue to find ways out of restrictive social circles and institutions and into more inclusive communities based on voluntary membership, then they are slowly accumulating the values and weak ties needed for a nascent civil society.

7.3 A Third Liberation?

The fact that Chinese youth are living their emotional lives online with strangers indicate that the internet has profoundly influenced the way that youth make sense of themselves. Chinese youth certainly feel more free in informal modes of interactions. However, this doesn’t mean that their problems are solved. Liuliu is able
to openly embrace his sexuality, but it doesn’t mean that his family can. Han has uncovered the Party’s layers of hidden information, but he is unsure of what to do with this new awareness. Hooligan Sparrow advocates for sex worker rights, but she doesn’t have an open channel with the government to formalize her request. A more Elastic Self does not mean that youths’ problems are solved, that the risks surrounding self-expression have disappeared, or that they are free of peer pressure to conform. Ongoing transformation, reformulation, and negotiation comes with its own apprehensions.

One way to view this Elastic Self is to see it as the beginning of a “Third Liberation.” In the epilogue to The Consumer Revolution in Urban China, Richard Madsen notes that the first Liberation, the Communist Party’s political revolution of 1949, freed people from political instability and hunger (2000). It also gave Chinese people the freedom for “collective building of a strong and proud nation and freedom for personal fulfillment through an expansion of one’s capacities for serving the people” (2000, 312). But the freedoms from the first Liberation were unevenly distributed and only made possible through fascist methods of control, “resti[ng] on a foundation of constraint” (213). The Second Liberation freed people from the political chaos and hunger that plagued the last half of Mao’s regime. Ordinary people could exercise consumer choice; they could also engage in self-expression and a private life (315). But Madsen notes that two constraints accompanied the consumer revolution. First, economic expansion was made possible through a repressive state. Second, peer
pressure emerged in the form of a “thick web of social norms” which “determine what kinds of choices” a consumer is supposed to have (2000, 213). This consumerist rigidity can hinder social acceptance, creating a “Keeping up with the Joneses” effect where the peer pressure to keep up with material accumulation exacerbates social inequality.

If an Elastic Self signals a “Third Liberation” where individuals are freed from institutional constraints on identity, we need to examine the possible constraints that come with this liberation. The benefits of a more Elastic Self are clear for individuals. They are able to explore interests with strangers that they cannot explore with people they know. The experiences of being able to voluntarilyaffiliate with—and then leave—communities is a basic freedom of association. Chinese youths’ capacity to express their emotions has expanded in the absence of social shame. They are boosting their knowledge about the world and China’s history, especially censored information. All of these gains enable the individual a greater sense of personal emotional and social movement in everyday life. But how does an elastic sense of self serve Chinese society?

We only have to look to the Second Liberation to get a sense of what may happen. Madsen argues that the freedoms of the Consumer Revolution came with a new form of constraint: peer pressure to conform to the material expression of class (2000). This new pressure was oppressive for the individual, leading some people to settle into exclusive lifestyle enclaves and feel less connected to their communities
Those who were economically excluded from lifestyle enclaves often mourn for the old days of Mao’s era when everyone was equally poor.\textsuperscript{190}

The participants I spoke feel most weighed down by the pressure to conform one’s identity to institutional expectations, namely the family and their peer group. While social media makes it easier for youth to connect with likeminded people, the relationships they are building may not transcend group interests. For example, Lily is friends with QQ contacts who are fans of pop singer, Xu Song. But what happens to Lily’s friendships if she is no longer a fan of Xu Song? Will she have to fake her interest or can she still take part in the group activities? Will the peer pressure to conform to the interests of the group prevent youth from joining and leaving groups freely?

Lifestyle enclaves also come with another downside—being loosely embedded in multiple communities can leave an individual feeling untethered to any one community. Interest based communities have rituals that guide one on how to interact in a group, but it doesn’t guide one “how to live in an actual society” (Bellah et al. 2008, 81[1985]). Unanchored to anything institutionally meaningful in society, the individual only has to respond to her or himself. This could lead to what Bellah et al. calls radical individualism, “a self free of absolute values or ‘rigid’ moral obligations”\textsuperscript{190}. During fieldwork, I often heard this perspective from people who grew up and had stable jobs during Mao’s era. Individuals who identify with the “New Left” often express these views (Hook 2007; Lu and Wang 2012; Youyu 2003). In addition, Bo Xilai, the corrupt ex-mayor of Chongqing tried to revive this populistic spirit (Spegele 2012).
(2008, 77 [1985]). This individual “must be its own source of moral guidance, then each individual must always know what he wants and desire or intuit what he feels” (77). This may not necessarily be a good thing because it puts more pressure on the individual versus the collective. Bellah et al.’s warnings for America are also relevant to Chinese society, as youth who are engaged in an Elastic Self are first and foremost concerned with self-expression. The ongoing exploration of the self could lead to the feeling that youth do not share any common connections with society at large.

An even greater constraint that comes with the Elastic Self is the possibility that in youths’ efforts to be unique, they may have no incentive to interact with people who are not “unique enough.” We see signs of this in Sammy’s story where she leaves a group once she feels that it has become mainstream or too popular. In the absence of social tethers, individual can leave groups when their novelty wears off. Madsen suggests that this reaction is a common experience of post-Liberation periods: “What at first seems marvelously liberating eventually becomes taken for granted and finally banal. As this happens, one can feel the constraints underlying one’s freedom becoming more and more oppressive, even if the objective level of constraints remains the same” (2000, 213).

Limited engagement with communities may lead youth to cycle in and out of groups with no pressure to work problems out when relationships become conflicted or even boring. Charles Taylor argues that in the US, the quest for an authentic identity has led to a loss of purpose where people no longer see those that they
disagree with as fellow citizens. This “expressive individualism” contracts civil society because in the narrow focus to be unique, individuals do not see negotiation with dissimilar people as a central interaction of the public sphere (1991). He worries that the processes of expressive individualism that “liberated all sorts of energy that had incredible force” are now preventing people from seeing each other as “equal citizens…in the same enterprise” (1991). In the Chinese context, the very processes of an Elastic Self that open youth to strangers could close youth to people who do not share similar attitudes and beliefs.

Taylor also points out another possible constraint for the Elastic Self. He argues that modern consumerist society magnifies the most narrow and narcissistic aspects of expressive individualism. Constant attention to one’s emotional and personal needs can create self-absorbed citizens who are too busy with maintaining their economic standing to participate in civil society (1991, 9). In the long run, people with a more Elastic Self may be more expressive, but they may have little incentive to interact with people who do not share the same lifestyle. This could solidify social stratification based on material wealth, preventing Chinese people from building solidarity outside of their own lifestyle enclaves. As Taylor reminds us, the public sphere is a way to work out conflict, but this means that people still need to be open to debating with people who are not like them. If consumerism continues to be an important way for Chinese youth to assert their identity, there is a danger that an
Elastic Self will fulfill Taylor’s concerns and Madsen’s warning about the consumer revolution.191

In the end, the biggest potential constraint for an Elastic Self may be the Chinese government. As youth develop new expectations for how to interact with the government, they may not want to just express their ideas; instead, they may want the government to be more responsive to their ideas. The last time young people demanded social change was in 1989 during the Tiananmen Square protests. They tried to create a social movement for democracy. However, without previous experience in coordinating citizenry, they did not have the capacity to adequately organize people and their attempt to create a civil society ended in tragedy. In contemporary China, youth are not trying to create a pan-social movement, but they are trying to engage in local civic action.

Since Tiananmen, the government actively discourages citizens from initiating civic activities that fall outside of the Party. It is accurate to say that China has been experiencing a suppression of civic membership and thus has an under-developed civil society with little institutional capacity for effective action.192 Social media gives them an opportunity to connect to public interests on a local level, which could be a more realistic and safe way to build out a civil society.193

191. Taylor (1991) argues that democratic processes are complex—rule of law, representation, deliberation—and without this set of procedures it is difficult to contain conflict.

192. “The confidence of selfhood that comes from membership in a society which we believe, where we both trust and feel trusted, and to which we feel we securely belong: this is exactly what is threatened by a crisis of civic membership” (Bellah et al. 2008, xvii)

193. Similar to what Huang (1993) calls the “third realm” where citizens collaborate with the
More than 20 years after Tiananmen, young people like Han, Hooligan Sparrow, and Lily are becoming emboldened to speak up against the government. While they have better organizing skills and more emotional maturity than their counterparts from 20 years ago, this does not guarantee a different outcome. In the face of a repressive government that wishes to maintain political control and is unwilling to have an open dialogue, Chinese youths’ desire for an open dialogue may lose momentum. This could lead to sense of apathy and disillusionment as youth have nowhere to channel their new desire for civic participation; instead, their newfound freedoms will be limited to personal and private expression.

### 7.3.1 Future Research

While my research has documented a new form of sociality among Chinese youth, the Elastic Self, more research needs to be done. The freedoms that come with an Elastic Self introduces new questions and paradoxes:

- How is an Elastic Self explored and expressed differently depending on class? As migrants join the emerging middle class, how will they express an Elastic Self?
- Can nationalistic youth engage in the Elastic Self, or do more patriotic and conservative youth have their own identity work process? Is there a bifurcation state instead of against it, I suggest that the oppositional history of activism in the West will not work in China. Any advances in citizenship must be made with not against the state.

194. *Fenqing* (愤青), ‘angry youth,’ are Chinese youth who are very nationalistic and tech savvy (Wu 2007). It is reported that many of them go on to be hackers for the Chinese government (Tang and Darr 2012). Lagerkvist (2010) provides a great background on the political role of *fenqing* in Chapter 6, “A Nationalistic Information Sphere.”
point where youth can either become more nationalistic or more elastic in their identity?

- Will an Elastic Self offer a way for people to work out conflict? Are people only searching for strangers who are ‘like me’? If so, will they develop the skills to work out conflict with people who are ‘not like me’?

- How does an Elastic Self influence the worldviews of Chinese youth? In the U.S., students who experienced sexual and emotional liberation during the 1960s became the conservative yuppies of the 1980s (Waldman 2008, 142). Will Chinese youth follow a similar pathway?

- To what degree will these Elastic Selves contract? What will trigger that, and what will it look like?

- Is an Elastic Self an exclusively Chinese phenomena or do youth elsewhere segment their online interactions across formal and informal modes? Although I focus on China as the source of my empirical evidence, an Elastic Self can also be tested in other areas with a mature internet culture.

- In face of continued government censorship and repression of public action, will the character of the Elastic Self—expressive, experimental, and receptive—endure?

The constraints that come with an Elastic Self are deeply embedded in social structures that have great power over people’s lives. This is not to say that youth do not genuinely *feel* freer when they are engaging with an Elastic Self in the informal
mode. However, even newfound liberations come with their own corresponding constraints. As Madsen notes: “There is indeed a relativity built in to all experiences of freedom. There is not such thing as pure, absolute liberty. Living a coherent life in a complex society always entails constraints. The experience of freedom entails leaving behind one set of constraints while accepting another. The experience tends to be transitory. It often happens that relentless political and economic logics tighten the constraints on members of society” (Madsen 2000, 218).

As youth find ways around the constraints placed on them by their family and peers, they are also leaving the stable social structures that give them a predictable sense of belonging. Belonging is no longer a given. By trading in predictability for freedom, they risk encountering new forms of alienation.

7.4 Looking to the Future: The Importance of Informal Modes of Interaction

The development and maintenance of an Elastic Self is dependent on informal modes of interaction. In contemporary China, all of the features necessary for an Elastic Self are present—malleability of identity, anonymity, and impermanence. However, these features and conditions are in danger.

Recent efforts to better control the Chinese internet are threatening the viability of the informal mode of interaction (Wang and Mina 2012). There is a movement towards real-name registration in China. For years, the government has been trying to find ways to track netizens’ online behavior and connect it to their given names on their dang’an. The popularity of Sina Weibo as a valve for public opinions has intensified the state’s efforts to implement an internet-wide policy.
The Elastic Self is difficult to surveil. The affordances of informal modes of interaction (malleability in identity, access to strangers, and anonymity) do not lend itself to creating an easily trackable identity online. The government’s solution for this problem is to create a persistent real-name system that follows a person everywhere they go online; this would work in the same way that a dang’an also follows a person everywhere they go offline. This policy, reminiscent of Maoist regime practices, has been met with a lot of resistance from netizens. While a real-name system serves the government, it creates many potential problems for the new forms of personal growth that Chinese youth are experiencing.

The implementation of a real-name policy could make it too risky for people to openly engage in the informal mode of interaction in any meaningful way. Space for self-expression around personal and public interests would disappear. Anonymous interactions would be highly restrained or eliminated. The risks of having—or knowing—hidden information would increase; furthermore, any circulation of it may become less digital and more analog, resembling a contemporary version of Samizdat. Accessible channels for involvement in communities of interest would gradually disappear and all communication would be attached to a given name. Lastly, opportunities to build new ties with strangers would end. People would no longer feel comfortable being qiguai (奇怪) or saying anything potentially transgressive. In a

---

195. Companies have no choice but to comply because they are effectively renting bandwidth and cable space from the state (Herold 2011a, 1; Jiang 2012).

196. During the Soviet bloc people hand copied texts as a grassroots attempt to work around institutional censorship
persistent, real-name Chinese society, individuals have to uphold emotional self-restraint and constantly think about whether what they share will get back to them or people they know. Chinese youth would be limited to socializing with people they already know, restricting them to the formal mode of interaction. Without opportunities to turn new connections with strangers into weak ties—the very basic foundation of civil society—the nascent web of social trust would slowly disappear.

A pervasive and all-encompassing real-name system would effectively destroy the trust that users have been building up in informal modes of interaction. It would discourage people from expressing their emotions and ideas. It would also prevent hidden information from surfacing. Essentially, China would look more like the Maoist Era that it has been slowly moving away from since Reform and Opening. If this policy is implemented as planned in 2014, where will youth turn to mediate their Elastic Selves if spaces for the informal mode of interaction disappears?197

197. It’s important to note that Western scholars portray China’s attempts of tracking to be a unique feature of an authoritarian surveillance society, but the policy is similar to the vision and practices of Facebook and Google. Both Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and Eric Schmidt of Google have publicly stated that users should not expect to have privacy online. In 2009, Zuckerberg said, “You have one identity… The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly… Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity” (Kirkpatrick 2010). In an interview with CNBC, Schmidt said, “If you have something that you don’t want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn’t be doing it in the first place” (2009). At a Techonomy panel, he recommended action that sounds very familiar to China’s justification for a real-name policy: “the only way to manage this is true transparency and no anonymity. In a world of asynchronous threats, it is too dangerous for there not to be some way to identify you. We need a [verified] name service for people. Governments will demand it” (2010). Many scholars are concerned and critical of the assumptions about privacy norms in Zuckerberg’s and Schmidt’s statement (boyd 2008b; boyd and Hargittai 2010; Dwyer 2011; Fuchs 2012; Jones and Soltren 2005; Liu et al. 2011; Pariser 2011; Rosen 2011).
7.4.2 Flexibility and Responsiveness

Chinese institutions need to understand an Elastic Self so that they can find a way to speak to Chinese youth again. If they want to improve their relationship with youth, they have to relate to the group and individuals in a different way than they are doing now. One possible way for institutions to interact with an Elastic Self is to become more flexible in how they relate to a more malleable individual. Institutions need to understand that they are interacting with individuals who have identities of their own choosing, not identities that have been given to them by institutions.

Another way for Chinese institutions to engage with an Elastic Self that is becoming more vocal is to be more responsive to them. While the previous political system under Mao was not responsive, it was dependable. The danwei provided an “iron rice bowl” (铁饭碗), a stable occupation with social security benefits. This generation did not need the government to be responsive because there was nothing to respond to—life was more or less predictable. Everyone ate the same food, wore the same clothes, and had the same jobs, forever.

When the Party dismantled work units—along with many other of Deng Xiaoping’s reforms in the 1980s—individuals who thought that they had a life long job were suddenly danwei-less—they had to shift from being a work unit person (单位人) to a society person (社会人). All of sudden, people were expected to make their

198. American fiction writer David Foster Wallace argues that when a form of expression becomes marginalized, “it’s because it’s not speaking to people.” Wallace said this in an interview with Miller (1996), published in Salon. While Wallace comments here about writing as a form of art, this also applies to how institutions connect with the people within them.

199. These terms, work unit person (单位人) and society person (社会人), are not used in everyday language; they are academic terms.
own way in society, to become their own person (自己的人). Many people who had grown up in the iron rice bowl did not expect this or adjust well to a Communist Party that no longer offered a dependable social system, economy, or career path.

Since youth born in the post-80s and 90s did not experience being a work-unit person, their identities are not as embedded within institutions as the generations before them. They do not expect for the government to provide for them in a capitalistic economy. However, economic unpredictability creates anxiety when people feel that they have no way to create stability in their lives. While people have freedom to move in the labor market, they also want the freedom to improve their society. The rise of middle-class protests attests to their changing expectations; some want to maintain their lifestyle and at the same engage in social action (Weber 2011, Yang 2009).

Recent policy could reflect what a more responsive Chinese government looks like. In 2010, the Party released a white paper that deemed the internet to be an acceptable place for citizens to communicate their opinions with the central government. Since then, Herold (2011a) suggests that the central government looks to—and relies on—citizen feedback to monitor local officials and ensure “good governance.” In place of an unevenly enforced rule of law, Herold believes that this

---

200 Herold provides summarizes the points outlined in a paper about the internet from the state: “The Paper argued for the internet’s importance by pointing to its contribution in three areas, namely the ‘development of the national economy,’ the need to ‘meet people’s increasing demands for information,’ and the creation of an ‘e-government while enhancing the capability of governance,’ calling the internet ‘an important infrastructure facility for the nation’. (Information Office …, 2010). Herold cites a section from the report: “The authorities attach great importance to […] public opinion as reflected on the Internet, which has become a bridge facilitating direct communication between the government and the public. […] The opinions expressed by the public online are receiving
form of “active citizenship” reflects the Party’s encouragement of citizens to help them patrol local government officials with social media: “This allows the central government to exert more control over local officials, while the citizens of China gain the right to supervise the government at the local level and have their complaints heard and acted upon. It permits government and citizens to engage in political interactions aimed at improving the governance of the People’s Republic of China, while ostensibly focusing on solving apolitical, local problems” (2011a, 2).

As citizens have turned to social media to monitor local officials, local officials have also turned to social media by creating government accounts. In 2011, there was a noticeable spike in local government agencies and officials signing up for Weibo accounts. By December 2012, there has so far been a 249.5% increase in government accounts on the top four Weibo platforms with a total of 176,700 accounts (Li 2013).

Rebecca MacKinnon describes the rise of government Weibo accounts as a “cybertarian” system of governance (MacKinnon 2009a), an offline authoritarian government that allows citizens the freedom to give feedback online while ostensibly

unprecedented attention. The leaders of China frequently log onto the Internet to get to know the public’s wishes, and sometimes have direct online communication with netizens to discuss state affairs and answer their questions. It has become a common practice for governments at all levels to consult the public via the Internet before formulating policies of particular importance. The public’s opinions have been sought through the Internet during the annual sessions of the NPC and CPPCC. For each of the past three years, as many as several million items of advice and suggestions have been received through the Internet, providing valuable reference for the government to improve its work” (2011a).

201. But government officials have long been aware of public opinion, as Lagerkvist carefully (2005a) documents.
curtailing their offline freedom. MacKinnon’s explanation captures a likely strategy by the government, although it does not detract from the remarkable change that officials now feel the pressure to actually respond to citizens instead of simply ignoring them as they did before.202

All of these government changes reflect the Party’s attempts to reform itself, but it is unclear to what degree and how fast these reforms are being implemented. Zhao has argued that in the Party’s shift from an “ideology-based totalitarianism regime” to a “performance-based authoritarianism regime,” the only way for it to stay in power is to continue upward economic growth, which is inherently an unstable model (2001, 336). With youths’ trust in the government already wavering from discovery of “hidden information,” any economic slowdowns that will affect their jobs could speed up their sense that institutions are losing legitimacy. This could result in the further decline of the moral significance of the Party.

7.5 Concluding Thoughts

With social media surfacing many of China’s internal public debates and turmoil, there is a lot of interest about the Chinese internet. Some see the Chinese internet as another way the authoritarian government is extending its reach into everyday life (MacKinnon 2012) while others are more hopeful that it is empowering citizens to become activists (Yang 2009). A recent headline in The Economist from Gady Epstein calls China’s internet “a giant cage” and asks “whether the internet is an

202. Lagervist’s (2005b) research on e-governmet projects in the early 2000s provides a great sense of history of how the government has shifted its use of the internet.
inherently democratizing force” for Chinese society (Epstein, 2013). The politically-oriented perspective of the Chinese internet as either repressive or liberating continues to dominate mainstream discourse. The questions researchers are asking in these articles are important, however, the overwhelming concentration of research on the political implications of the Chinese internet creates a narrow perception that most Chinese people’s everyday online experience is either primarily shaped by their frustrations regarding political change or by their ignorance of the degree to which the internet is censored. In an era where China’s superpower global status intersects with US foreign diplomacy and policy, and global markets, there is a great need to understand what the internet means for ordinary Chinese people.

We still do not know enough about the social uses of the Chinese internet. Analysts need to continue generating more ethnographic, methodologically rigorous, and theoretically grounded research. As I have explained with the three phases of the Elastic Self in section 2.7.1, many studies on Chinese internet users commit a sampling bias by only speaking to citizens who are already civically active in the Participatory Phase. Other studies commit a sampling bias by only speaking to users in either the formal or informal mode of interaction (as explained in section 2.6 and 3.8.6). More substantive and longitudinal ethnographic data would complement the wide range of macro political analysis on the Chinese internet.

This project has documented that a growing majority of Chinese youth feel incredibly restrained not by their government, but by the people they know; by the
everyday rules, codes, and rituals that they are supposed to fulfill in their relationships. This particular form of constraint is fundamentally emotional and moral, not political. Even for the participants who did become politicized, they started down their path through a moral awakening to become their own person zijideren, not to become a ‘democratic person’ or something equally politically abstract. What becomes clear in all the stories presented is that individuals who are engaging in an Elastic Self no longer hold the rituals and moral superiority of dominant institutions to be sacred.

The practice of anonymous interactions reflects a deep yearning among Chinese youth to explore and express a self that is rarely acknowledged by people they know. They discover and illuminate unknown parts of themselves that they are uncomfortable sharing with friends and family. But it is precisely these secrets and hidden parts of themselves that become what strangers respond to and also want to share.

For the time being, the social risks are far too high for Chinese youth to openly explore a more elastic sense of self in the formal mode of interaction, but that does not mean that their inner, elastic identities will be relegated to anonymity forever. Through rituals of trustworthiness, they become friends, meeting up offline and joining communities. The things that Chinese youth do everyday with information acts (as referenced in section 5.3.4) may seem simple, but they are filled with deep meaning. They communicate rules, ideas, and morals, which inspire youth to not only explore themselves, but to also interrogate the institutionalized norms of society.
While these interactions can start with a simple whisper, share, or an @, a Tweet, or Weibo post, that’s not where they end.

Playwright and politician Vaclav Havel has described the structure of Communist rule as a system built on a culture of lies. While the system’s survival depends on the complicity of individuals, its destruction depends on the honesty of individuals. In such a system, telling the truth becomes an act of subversion: “If living within truth is an elementary starting point of every attempt made by people to oppose the alienating pressure of the system, it is the only meaningful basis of any independent act of political import” (1985). According to Havel, every act, even the search for the truth about one’s sexuality, the expectation for sellers to honor a buyer’s consumer rights, the act of finding pornography—all of these are inherently political acts because they are based upon individuals being forthright about fulfilling their personal desires.

The Chinese internet is not a pathway to democracy or a superficial entertainment space—it is an expressive environment with multiple affordances. The unique tensions of capitalism along with Informal Paternalism do not lead to a single trajectory that is often touted in the binary trope of the internet as either liberating or alienating. While the internet was designed with general ideas of open protocols, China still built a highly monitored system around it. But a closed internet doesn’t necessarily mean that people are going to be repressed or not know how to express themselves. My time with Chinese youth shows that they find ways to route around
social norms, technical protocols, and government policies. A growing number are deeply committed to an unspoken yet widely practiced desire to explore themselves in informal interactions that are autonomous of the family, educational institutions, and state. The new Chinese citizen is adept at navigating and creating online communities that are semi-independent of institutions, and engaging with people they do not know and would not recognize in offline settings.

By engaging in an Elastic Self, Chinese youth are stretching themselves out in all different directions. They aren’t abandoning their worlds or even calling for a political revolution. But they are saying that they no longer want to be fixed to traditional expectations, outdated moral codes, and emotionally restrictive relationships. Becoming their own people does not mean that Chinese youth deny the social tensions of collectivism and individualism; rather, it means that these tensions become cultural resources in a toolbox they can creatively draw from as they make their way in the world (Swidler 2007).

Social changes bring out new identities (Reddy 2001). While Mao destroyed the idea of the individual by instilling fear in strangers and friends, Chinese youth are rebuilding the idea of the individual by reimagining themselves with the help of strangers who give them the confidence to speak the truth about themselves and then eventually, about their society. The journey through the three phases of the Elastic Self

---

203. Thomas Bayrle (2012), an artist who works with Communist tropes, says that his underlying approach is to “let things fall, from one hierarchy to another, and then you put them together again. The world is not a fixed image.” His philosophy speaks to the nature of modern identity work as a grand artist project. Identity is ultimately a creative endeavor (Willis 2000, xiv).
is filled with contradictions, but as artist Salvador Dali said, “Anything that is contradictory creates life.” Negotiating these contradictions requires Chinese youth to adopt new forms of trust, which are achieved through being elastic, not rigid.

The agency that comes from expressing their emotions and sharing information with strangers through informal modes of interaction spill into other aspects of their lives—learning how to be a friend, a member of a community, and a citizen. As they make their way through what Bauman calls a “liquid modernity” (2000) full of ambivalence and risk, they come to realize that the Stranger is not an escape from society, but a source of connection to society. The internet is enabling a quiet revolution: the transformation of the fear of strangers in Communist China to the kindness of strangers in digital China. In the process, Chinese youth are learning that the internet does not change you; it reveals you.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


CNNIC. 2008a. “年中国网民奥运媒体消费行为研究报告. CNNIC.”
——. 2008b. “中国互联网络发展状况统计报告. CNNIC.”
——. 2009. “中国互联网络发展状况统计报告. CNNIC.”
——. 2010. “中国互联网络发展状况统计报告. CNNIC.”
——. 2011. “中国网购市场交易额达 7566 亿元.” CNNIC.


Golub, Alex, and Kate Lingley. 2008. “‘Just Like the Qing Empire’: Internet Addiction, MMOGs, and Moral Crisis in Contemporary China.” Games and Culture 3: 59–75.


Herold, David Kurt. 2011a. “Supervision for the Middleman? – Active Citizenship as Basis for Good Governance in the P.R. China.”


Li, Peilin, and Wei Li. 2007. “农民工在中国转型中的经济地位和社会态度.” 社会学研究 3 (11).


Moores, Shaun. 2012a. *Media, Place and Mobility (Key Concerns in Media Studies)*. Palgrave Macmillan.


Williams, Raymond. 1975. *The Country and the City*. Oxford University Press, USA.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>platform</th>
<th>type (bbs, IM, SNS, weibo)</th>
<th>users</th>
<th>use of pseudonym the dominant norm</th>
<th>interaction primarily anonymous</th>
<th>primary interaction with strangers</th>
<th>dominant in formal or informal mode of interaction</th>
<th>terms for contacts</th>
<th>Interesting features or practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tianya</td>
<td>BBS</td>
<td>all age groups and socio-economic classes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>informal</td>
<td>好友 (good friends/haoyou)</td>
<td>Anonymity and multiple accounts: Most users register with pseudonyms. Tianya does not have a real-name policy. Based on these features, users generated a new word, maja (骂架), describing anonymous accounts. Multiple sub-forums covering a wide range of topics: The most popular three sub-forums are Entertainment and Gossips (Yule Bagua 娱乐八卦), Tianya little-tattle (Tianya Zatan 天涯小谈), World of Emotions (qingtian 天涯情天). Water Army (shuijun 水军): This refers to the accounts that are created by an anonymous person to influence opinion. Sharing personal stories: Users anonymously share very intimate stories, in particular users talk about sex a lot. There is a famous phrase on Tianya: &quot;for matters about your sex life, ask Tianya&quot; (fangshibuju weyian Tianya 房事不求问天涯). Popular stories: Many big media stories are first shared on Tianya anonymously, such as the Guanxi civil servant exams.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBS</td>
<td>young male users</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>informal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>好友 (good friends)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Clear navigation & user friendly design:** The site's two columns page design makes it easy for users to click on other posts in the left column while reading a post in the right column.

**Da Za Hui subforum:** Da Za Hui (hodgepodge 大杂烩) is the main part of Mop where people can post anything, creating a very lively homepage.

**Internet language:** Mop is known as a platform where new vocabulary are created, such as BT. BT means "abnormal" and is short for BianTa (变态).

**Human flesh:** Human flesh first became widely known on Mop through the Cat Cruelty Case of Heilongjiang Province. There are sub-forums named "human flesh" on Mop.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BBS</th>
<th>students, fans of celebrities/sports/entertainment, youths</th>
<th>yes</th>
<th>yes</th>
<th>yes</th>
<th>informal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>粉丝 (fans)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Tiaba Fans:** It is easy for anyone to create a tiaba about a topic. For example, there are over 70,500 tiabas about celebrities.

**Internet languages:** This is a also a place where user generated internet language emerges. For example, users created diaosi ("屌丝") from e-pals on liyiba (李毅吧). Diaosi refers to youth from low-income backgrounds who still strive for a life of leisure leading to Diaosi Culture (diaosi wenhua 剩丝文化).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QQ</th>
<th>IM</th>
<th>depends</th>
<th>depends</th>
<th>depends</th>
<th>Linked to other QQ products: Users can easily get to their QQ mail, Tencent Weibo, QQ zone, QQ space and etc. <strong>Multiple accounts</strong>: QQ does not have a real-name policy. Users can also be logged into multiple accounts at the same time. <strong>Sharing Info</strong>: Users can share the horoscope sign, blood type, and geographic location. <strong>Multiple Chat Features</strong>: Users can chat with individuals or with QQ groups at the same time in the QQ messenger client.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| QQ (600 million users) QQ is the mostly widely used instant message client in China. Games, music, blogs (QQ space) are integrated into the QQ messenger. For many users, their first experience on the Chinese internet is through QQ. | all age groups and socio-economic classes | yes | depends | depends | 好友 (good friends)
| | | | | |
| 腾讯微博 Sina Weibo | weibo | All ages of users. Particularly for students and young white collar workers. | yes | depends | depends | 粉丝 (fans)
<p>| Sina Weibo (287 million users) Sina Weibo is the most popular weibo service in China. Many public celebrities are Sina Weibo users. The company puts a lot of effort into covering news from famous sports stars, corporate executives, and members of the media. It has become the newest birth place for internet celebrities and languages. It is also a place where unofficial news spreads quickly. | | | | |
| | | | | |
| 长微博: This is a third party service for users to paste texts of any length and pictures into the long weibo to generate a jpg file. <strong>Weibo Star (weibo daren 爱微达人)</strong>: This is a title on Sina weibo for users who have successfully applied for a star. <strong>Verified (jia v ranzheng 高V认证)</strong>: For users who have successfully applied for their account to be verified, a V will appear on his or her ID. <strong>Tag limit (biaoqian 标签)</strong>: Weibo limits users to 5 tags in each post |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tencent Weibo</th>
<th>Micro Channel: Users can view different groups of information according to topics. Micro Managers (weiguankan 微管家): A tool that helps users to filter out spam messages and advertisements.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(277 million registered users) Similar to Sina Weibo, Tencent Weibo is also a popular weibo service. Among users, Tencent Weibo is known as a service that receives more lenient censorship than Sina Weibo.</td>
<td><strong>weibo</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fanfou</td>
<td><strong>API:</strong> Fanfou can be connected to Twitter, Tumblr, and other social media. <strong>Fanfou Microwave:</strong> This service makes it easy for users to easily connect with other Fanfou users anonymously.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 million registered users in 2009) As the first Chinese version of Twitter, Fanfou quickly gained popularity in 2009 but the government censored it and forced the company to shut down the service. The company offered the service again in 2010.</td>
<td><strong>weibo</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RenRen</td>
<td>SNS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(172 million registered users) Renren is a Chinese version of Facebook.</td>
<td>Recent visits (zú jiān lái fāng 最近来访): Users can see a log of people who have recently viewed their profile. <strong>VIP account:</strong> Users with a VIP account can anonymously visit other Renren accounts without leaving a record. They can also decorate their home page.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platform</td>
<td>Type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douban</td>
<td>SNS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaixin</td>
<td>SNS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fezan</td>
<td>SNS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>App</td>
<td>Type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WeChat</td>
<td>IM &amp; mobile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Momo</td>
<td>mobile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PengYou</td>
<td>SNS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taobao</td>
<td>e-commerce</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

微信 Wechat
(300 million registered users)
Wechat is the most widely used mobile chat software in China. Users can easily connect with friends and strangers.

陌陌 Momo
(50 million registered users)
Momo is a mobile chat software that is known as the ‘flirting app.’

朋友 PengYou
(259 million registered users)
Pengyou is a Tencent service that allows users to extend their QQ contacts into a social network site.

淘宝网 Taobao
(500 million registered users)
Taobao is the largest C2C online shopping website in China.
# APPENDIX B

## LIST OF MANDARIN CHINESE CHARACTERS FROM EACH CHAPTER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese Characters</th>
<th>Pinyin</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>喜怒不形于色</td>
<td>xi nu bu xing yu se</td>
<td>do not show one’s anger and happiness on face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>八零后</td>
<td>ba lin hou</td>
<td>the post 80s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>九零后</td>
<td>jiu lin hou</td>
<td>the post 90s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>高考</td>
<td>gaokao</td>
<td>National Higher Education Entrance Examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>关系</td>
<td>guan xi</td>
<td>relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>胸有城府</td>
<td>xiong you cheng fu</td>
<td>To not expose one’s thoughts or emotions. To make it difficult for someone to read one’s emotions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>提高情绪</td>
<td>ti gao qing xu</td>
<td>emotion raising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>户口</td>
<td>hu kou</td>
<td>residency permits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>档案</td>
<td>dang an</td>
<td>personal files</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>单位</td>
<td>dang wei</td>
<td>workunits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>以利相交，利尽则散</td>
<td>yi li xiang jiao, li jin ze san</td>
<td>making friends out of self interest, disbanding when the benefits are exhausted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>介绍信</td>
<td>jie sao xin</td>
<td>introduction letters used during the Maoist Era</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>大义灭亲</td>
<td>da yi mie qin</td>
<td>in order to maintain justice, to report the relatives of the person who committed a crime so that the relatives will get their deserved punishments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Pinyin</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>草泥马挡中央 (操你妈党中央)</td>
<td>cao ni ma dang zhong yang</td>
<td>grass mud horse covering the center (phonetically sounds like fuck your mother, communist party)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>干你妈</td>
<td>gan ni ma</td>
<td>fuck your mom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>滚你妈</td>
<td>gun ni ma</td>
<td>fuck your mom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>差序格局</td>
<td>chaxugeju</td>
<td>differential pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>奇怪</td>
<td>qiguai</td>
<td>wired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>关系</td>
<td>guanxi</td>
<td>social relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>人人网</td>
<td>Renren wang</td>
<td>a popular Chinese social networking service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>好友</td>
<td>haoyou</td>
<td>good friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>豆友</td>
<td>douyou</td>
<td>good friend on Douban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>友邻</td>
<td>youlin</td>
<td>good friend on Douban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>豆瓣</td>
<td>Douban</td>
<td>a popular Chinese social networking service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>至于你信不信，我反正信了</td>
<td>bu guan ni xin bu xin, fan zheng wo xin le</td>
<td>whether or not you believe it, either way, I believe it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>中国互联网络信息中心</td>
<td>zhong guo hu lian wang xin xi zhong xin</td>
<td>China Internet Information Center (CNNIC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>青年</td>
<td>qin nian</td>
<td>youths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>白酒</td>
<td>bai jiu</td>
<td>hard liquor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>你怎么知道</td>
<td>ni zen me zhi dao</td>
<td>how do you know it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>搜索</td>
<td>sou suo</td>
<td>search</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>获取</td>
<td>huo qu</td>
<td>acquire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Pinyin</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhao</td>
<td>zhao</td>
<td>find</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cha</td>
<td>cha</td>
<td>investigate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ben chu lai</td>
<td>ben chu lai</td>
<td>jump out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kan dao le</td>
<td>kan dao le</td>
<td>see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mo sheng ren</td>
<td>mo sheng ren</td>
<td>strangers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wang you</td>
<td>wang you</td>
<td>internet friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dou you</td>
<td>dou you</td>
<td>Douban friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bu ren shi de ren</td>
<td>bu ren shi de ren</td>
<td>unknown people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Pinyin</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>jimo</td>
<td>jimo</td>
<td>lonely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gudan</td>
<td>gudan</td>
<td>lonely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gudu</td>
<td>gudu</td>
<td>lonely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guji</td>
<td>guji</td>
<td>lonely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mianzi</td>
<td>mianzi</td>
<td>faces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hexie</td>
<td>hexie</td>
<td>harmony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>li</td>
<td>li</td>
<td>courtesy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gaokao</td>
<td>gaokao</td>
<td>national exam for college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiaoma</td>
<td>xiaoma</td>
<td>primary anonymous account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dama</td>
<td>dama</td>
<td>secondary anonymous account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>majia</td>
<td>majia</td>
<td>anonymous account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nvma</td>
<td>nvma</td>
<td>female anonymous account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tongxinglian</td>
<td>tongxinglian</td>
<td>homosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tongzhi</td>
<td>tongzhi</td>
<td>colloquial word for homosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Word</td>
<td>Pinyin</td>
<td>English Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>飞赞</td>
<td>feizan</td>
<td>a Chinese social network for people who identify as gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>百度知道</td>
<td>Baidu zhidao</td>
<td>a website for people to ask and answer questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>档案</td>
<td>dang’an</td>
<td>personal document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>警告</td>
<td>jinggao</td>
<td>warning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>表彰大会</td>
<td>biaozhang dahui</td>
<td>annual commendation meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>党委宣传部</td>
<td>dangwei xuanchuanbu</td>
<td>propaganda department of the party committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>北大天网</td>
<td>beida tianwang</td>
<td>Peking University intranet network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>大号</td>
<td>dahao</td>
<td>primary account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>群</td>
<td>qun</td>
<td>groups account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>杨勃</td>
<td>yangbo</td>
<td>founder of Douban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>驴宗</td>
<td>lvzong</td>
<td>a travel-focused social networking site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>大手</td>
<td>dashou</td>
<td>people who has essential positions in fan groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>不好意思</td>
<td>buhaoyisi</td>
<td>embarrassed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>共青团员</td>
<td>gong qing tuan yuan</td>
<td>a member of communist youth league of china</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>入党积极分子</td>
<td>rudang jijifenzi</td>
<td>party activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>群众</td>
<td>qunzhong</td>
<td>the public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>预备党员</td>
<td>yubei dangyuan</td>
<td>probationary party member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>党员</td>
<td>dangyuan</td>
<td>the party member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>温家宝</td>
<td>wen jiabao</td>
<td>former prime minister of the People’s Republic of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>毛泽东</td>
<td>mao zedong</td>
<td>former president of the People’s Republic of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>胡耀邦</td>
<td>hu yaobang</td>
<td>a former senior leader in the Communist Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Name</td>
<td>English Name</td>
<td>Translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>章伯钧</td>
<td>zhang bojun</td>
<td>the Secretary of Transportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>in the Department of the People’s Republic of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>China from 1949 to 1958.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhang yihe</td>
<td></td>
<td>the second daughter of Zhang Bojun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wangshi bingbu ruyan</td>
<td></td>
<td>family story about Ahang Bojun written by Zhang Yihe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rudang shenqingshu</td>
<td></td>
<td>Communist Party application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gongzuo zongjie</td>
<td></td>
<td>work summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tiananmei shijian</td>
<td>tiananmei shijian</td>
<td>Tiananmen massacre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diuren</td>
<td>diuren</td>
<td>ashamed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qiang da chutouniao</td>
<td>qiang da chutouniao</td>
<td>a Chinese popular proverb, “the bird who sticks out his head gets shot”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese Name</th>
<th>English Name</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>陌生人</td>
<td>moshengren</td>
<td>strangers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>方滨兴</td>
<td>fang binxing</td>
<td>creator of China’s internet censorship system,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>known as the Great Firewall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yiren chaosheng</td>
<td>quancun jiezha</td>
<td>a one-child-policy slogan: “if one person exceeds the one child policy, then everyone has their tubes tied.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aiguo de ren</td>
<td></td>
<td>a person who loves her/his country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shehui de heianmian</td>
<td></td>
<td>black stuff of society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fan geming</td>
<td></td>
<td>anti-revolutionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>piaoliang</td>
<td></td>
<td>beautiful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>老妈蹄花</td>
<td>lao ma ti hua</td>
<td>a documentary made by Aiweiwei to investigate the deaths of thousands of children during the 2006 Sichuan earthquake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>搜索</td>
<td>sousuo</td>
<td>search</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>转发</td>
<td>zhuangfa</td>
<td>retweet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>围观</td>
<td>weiguan</td>
<td>a grassroots concept of people actively becoming observers to surveill the state or a any given power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>围观者</td>
<td>weiguanzhe</td>
<td>a popular surveillancer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>国家安全部</td>
<td>guojia anquanbu</td>
<td>the Ministry of State Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>文保局</td>
<td>wenbaoju</td>
<td>The branch responsible for state security at universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>喝茶</td>
<td>he cha</td>
<td>refers to political sensitive people being called by the authorities to questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>自己的人</td>
<td>ziji de ren</td>
<td>a person of his own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>网上买的</td>
<td>wang shang mai de</td>
<td>bought online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>淘宝网</td>
<td>taobao wang</td>
<td>a popular online shopping site in China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>网友</td>
<td>wang you</td>
<td>internet friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>区</td>
<td>qu</td>
<td>community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>不认识的人</td>
<td>bu renshi de ren</td>
<td>people you don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>支付宝</td>
<td>zhi fu bao</td>
<td>a third party verified paypal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>亲</td>
<td>qin</td>
<td>sweetie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>各位姐妹</td>
<td>gewei jiemei</td>
<td>dear sisters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>妞</td>
<td>niu</td>
<td>chick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>淘宝体</td>
<td>taobao ti</td>
<td>a communication style started from taobao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Pinyin</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>社区</td>
<td>she qu</td>
<td>community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>单位</td>
<td>danwei</td>
<td>office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>信息</td>
<td>xinxi</td>
<td>information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>相信</td>
<td>xiangxin</td>
<td>trust</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter 6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Pinyin</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>新浪微博</td>
<td>xinlang weibo</td>
<td>Sina microblog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>看到</td>
<td>kan dao</td>
<td>see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>告诉我</td>
<td>gao su wo</td>
<td>tell me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>找到了</td>
<td>zhao dao le</td>
<td>found it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>搜索</td>
<td>sou suo</td>
<td>search</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>雨燕单飞</td>
<td>yu yan dan fei</td>
<td>an lone flying sparrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>网友</td>
<td>wang you</td>
<td>online friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>流氓燕</td>
<td>liu mang yan</td>
<td>Hooligan Yan, a character in this project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>中国民间女权</td>
<td>zhong guo min jian nv quan</td>
<td>The China Grassroots Women’s Rights Website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>紫藤</td>
<td>zi teng</td>
<td>an organization for gender equality based in Hong Kong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>湖北省妇女健康中心</td>
<td>hu bei sheng fu nv jian kbang zhong xin</td>
<td>Women’s Health Center of Hubei Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>散步</td>
<td>san bu</td>
<td>To take a stroll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>社会组织</td>
<td>she hui zu zhi</td>
<td>social organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>负责人</td>
<td>fu ze ren</td>
<td>person in charge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>领导</td>
<td>ling dao</td>
<td>leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>博白</td>
<td>bo bai</td>
<td>Bobai, a county in Guangxi province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>网路红人</td>
<td>wang lu hong ren</td>
<td>internet popular person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Pinyin</td>
<td>Translation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>大连</td>
<td>da lian</td>
<td>a city in Liaonin province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>市民</td>
<td>shi min</td>
<td>citizen, city resident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>国民</td>
<td>guo min</td>
<td>national</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>公民</td>
<td>gong min</td>
<td>citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>市民权</td>
<td>shi min quan</td>
<td>citizens’ right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>无规则互动</td>
<td>wu gui ze hu dong</td>
<td>interaction without rules</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Pinyin</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>普通青年</td>
<td>pu tong qing nian</td>
<td>regular youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>文艺青年</td>
<td>wen yi qing nian</td>
<td>romantic youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>二逼青年</td>
<td>er bi qing nian</td>
<td>stupid youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>青年体</td>
<td>qing nian ti</td>
<td>youth style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>百度贴吧</td>
<td>bai du tie ba</td>
<td>Baidu BBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>奇怪</td>
<td>qi guai</td>
<td>weird</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>愤青</td>
<td>fen qing</td>
<td>angry youth, nationalistic youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>铁饭碗</td>
<td>tie fan wan</td>
<td>“iron rice bowl,” a stable occupation with social security benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>单位人</td>
<td>dan weir en</td>
<td>a work unit person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>社会人</td>
<td>she hui ren</td>
<td>a society person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>自己的人</td>
<td>zi ji de ren</td>
<td>one’s own person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C

TITLE AND ABSTRACT IN CHINESE

和陌生人说话：中国青年和社交媒体

摘要：一种新型的社会性正在中国青年中发展：一种弹性的自我。社交媒体在传达信息和互动的能力上的变化正在为年轻人改变中国现有社会关系的规范和行为创造着新的空间。这些改变主要体现在以下三个方面：从自我限制到自我表达，从同僚之谊到友谊关系，从“道德的我”到“道德的我们”。这些方面的变化拥有整体转变中国社会的潜在能力，因为不论是在个人层面还是社会层面，它们都改变了人们相互理解和交流的方式。在半匿名的条件下，中国青年能够避开威权式社会中的低信任问题，获得更广泛的社会信任形式，这恰恰是参与式社会的特征。这些新形式的信任能使他们（中国的青年人）通过线上辩论和不时的线下公共实践活动，参与到拓展公共空间的公民实践中来。然而，在青年们能够做到这些公民实践之前，他们必须通过两个重要的阶段——探索阶段和信任阶段。从中他们能够学会如何分享信息、如何与陌生人在低风险的条件下交往。与陌生人的互动让中国的年轻人们得以和他们认识的人保持一定的社会距离，从而将因为不恰当行为而感到羞愧的焦虑感降到了最低。

虽然通常西方将中国看作是一个监视无处不在的专制国家，但我的研究揭示了中国的青年们正在寻找相互连结和建立非正式信任网络的方式，这种非正式的
信任是超越了特殊性的关系（差序格局）和专制机构之上的拓展。大体而言，青年人是在发现他们自己的社会世界，而不是社会目标。在这个过程中，青年人正在通过与陌生人建立友谊的方式建造着公民社会的基石。明确地说，这种新的社会性给予青年一种航行于中国社会的途径，而不是与社会断开联系或者反抗它。这种新的社会性正在奠定公共空间的基础，以便产生基于友谊继而基于公民身份的社会关系。
## APPENDIX D

**LIST OF NEW CONCEPTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elastic Self</td>
<td>An Elastic Self is both the <em>feeling</em> that one’s identity is malleable and the <em>action</em> of trying on different identities that are beyond the realm of a prescribed self. An Elastic Self emerges out of new ties created through informal modes of interaction. The Elastic Self is a distinctly new process of identity formation and sociation in China. It is unfolding among Chinese youth who have come of age on the internet. Most notably, it evolves out of interactions with strangers, not with one’s existing contacts. For further explanation, refer to section 2.4.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescribed Self</td>
<td>A prescribed self is composed of identities that are dictated by one’s existing social structural categories, such as ethnicity, gender, nationality, or family, and are externally imposed on the actor according to generally accepted beliefs about how someone should be. The prescribed self emerges through interactions with and pressures from existing social ties. For further explanation, refer to section 2.4.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E

CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE

Creative Commons’ Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, version 3.0.204

License

THE WORK (AS DEFINED BELOW) IS PROVIDED UNDER THE TERMS OF THIS CREATIVE COMMONS PUBLIC LICENSE (“CCPL” OR “LICENSE”). THE WORK IS PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT AND/OR OTHER APPLICABLE LAW. ANY USE OF THE WORK OTHER THAN AS AUTHORIZED UNDER THIS LICENSE OR COPYRIGHT LAW IS PROHIBITED.

BY EXERCISING ANY RIGHTS TO THE WORK PROVIDED HERE, YOU ACCEPT AND AGREE TO BE BOUND BY THE TERMS OF THIS LICENSE. TO THE EXTENT THIS LICENSE MAY BE CONSIDERED TO BE A CONTRACT, THE LICENSOR GRANTS YOU THE RIGHTS CONTAINED HERE IN CONSIDERATION OF YOUR ACCEPTANCE OF SUCH TERMS AND CONDITIONS.

1. Definitions

a. “Collective Work” means a work, such as a periodical issue, anthology or encyclopedia, in which the Work in its entirety in unmodified form, along with

204. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/legalcode.
one or more other contributions, constituting separate and independent works in themselves, are assembled into a collective whole. A work that constitutes a Collective Work will not be considered a Derivative Work (as defined below) for the purposes of this License.

b. “Derivative Work” means a work based upon the Work or upon the Work and other pre-existing works, such as a translation, musical arrangement, dramatization, fictionalization, motion picture version, sound recording, art reproduction, abridgment, condensation, or any other form in which the Work may be recast, transformed, or adapted, except that a work that constitutes a Collective Work will not be considered a Derivative Work for the purpose of this License. For the avoidance of doubt, where the Work is a musical composition or sound recording, the synchronization of the Work in timed-relation with a moving image (“synching”) will be considered a Derivative Work for the purpose of this License.

c. “Licensor” means the individual, individuals, entity or entities that offers the Work under the terms of this License.

d. “Original Author” means the individual, individuals, entity or entities who created the Work.

e. “Work” means the copyrightable work of authorship offered under the terms of this License.

f. “You” means an individual or entity exercising rights under this License who has not previously violated the terms of this License with respect to the Work,
or who has received express permission from the Licensor to exercise rights under this License despite a previous violation.

2. Fair Use Rights. Nothing in this license is intended to reduce, limit, or restrict any rights arising from fair use, first sale or other limitations on the exclusive rights of the copyright owner under copyright law or other applicable laws.

3. License Grant. Subject to the terms and conditions of this License, Licensor hereby grants You a worldwide, royalty-free, non-exclusive, perpetual (for the duration of the applicable copyright) license to exercise the rights in the Work as stated below:

a. to reproduce the Work, to incorporate the Work into one or more Collective Works, and to reproduce the Work as incorporated in the Collective Works; and,

b. to distribute copies or phonorecords of, display publicly, perform publicly, and perform publicly by means of a digital audio transmission the Work including as incorporated in Collective Works.

The above rights may be exercised in all media and formats whether now known or hereafter devised. The above rights include the right to make such modifications as are technically necessary to exercise the rights in other media and formats, but otherwise you have no rights to make Derivative Works. All rights not expressly granted by Licensor are hereby reserved, including but not limited to the rights set forth in Sections 4(d) and 4(e).
Restrictions. The license granted in Section 3 above is expressly made subject to and limited by the following restrictions:

a. You may distribute, publicly display, publicly perform, or publicly digitally perform the Work only under the terms of this License, and You must include a copy of, or the Uniform Resource Identifier for, this License with every copy or phonorecord of the Work You distribute, publicly display, publicly perform, or publicly digitally perform. You may not offer or impose any terms on the Work that restrict the terms of this License or the ability of a recipient of the Work to exercise the rights granted to that recipient under the terms of the License. You may not sublicense the Work. You must keep intact all notices that refer to this License and to the disclaimer of warranties. When You distribute, publicly display, publicly perform, or publicly digitally perform the Work, You may not impose any technological measures on the Work that restrict the ability of a recipient of the Work from You to exercise the rights granted to that recipient under the terms of the License. This Section 4(a) applies to the Work as incorporated in a Collective Work, but this does not require the Collective Work apart from the Work itself to be made subject to the terms of this License. If You create a Collective Work, upon notice from any Licensor You must, to the extent practicable, remove from the Collective Work any credit as required by Section 4(c), as requested.

b. You may not exercise any of the rights granted to You in Section 3 above in any manner that is primarily intended for or directed toward commercial
advantage or private monetary compensation. The exchange of the Work for other copyrighted works by means of digital file-sharing or otherwise shall not be considered to be intended for or directed toward commercial advantage or private monetary compensation, provided there is no payment of any monetary compensation in connection with the exchange of copyrighted works.

c. If You distribute, publicly display, publicly perform, or publicly digitally perform the Work (as defined in Section 1 above) or Collective Works (as defined in Section 1 above), You must, unless a request has been made pursuant to Section 4(a), keep intact all copyright notices for the Work and provide, reasonable to the medium or means You are utilizing: (i) the name of the Original Author (or pseudonym, if applicable) if supplied, and/or (ii) if the Original Author and/or Licensor designate another party or parties (e.g. a sponsor institute, publishing entity, journal) for attribution (“Attribution Parties”) in Licensor’s copyright notice, terms of service or by other reasonable means, the name of such party or parties; the title of the Work if supplied; to the extent reasonably practicable, the Uniform Resource Identifier, if any, that Licensor specifies to be associated with the Work, unless such URI does not refer to the copyright notice or licensing information for the Work. The credit required by this Section 4(c) may be implemented in any reasonable manner; provided, however, that in the case of a Collective Work, at a minimum such credit will appear, if a credit for all contributing authors of the Collective Work appears, then as part of these credits and in a manner at least
as prominent as the credits for the other contributing authors. For the avoidance of doubt, You may only use the credit required by this clause for the purpose of attribution in the manner set out above and, by exercising Your rights under this License, You may not implicitly or explicitly assert or imply any connection with, sponsorship or endorsement by the Original Author, Licensor and/or Attribution Parties, as appropriate, of You or Your use of the Work, without the separate, express prior written permission of the Original Author, Licensor and/or Attribution Parties.

d. For the avoidance of doubt, where the Work is a musical composition:

i. Performance Royalties Under Blanket Licenses. Licensor reserves the exclusive right to collect whether individually or, in the event that Licensor is a member of a performance rights society (e.g. ASCAP, BMI, SESAC), via that society, royalties for the public performance or public digital performance (e.g. webcast) of the Work if that performance is primarily intended for or directed toward commercial advantage or private monetary compensation.

ii. Mechanical Rights and Statutory Royalties. Licensor reserves the exclusive right to collect, whether individually or via a music rights agency or designated agent (e.g. Harry Fox Agency), royalties for any phonorecord You create from the Work ("cover version") and distribute, subject to the compulsory license created by 17 USC Section 115 of the US Copyright Act (or the equivalent in other jurisdictions),
if Your distribution of such cover version is primarily intended for or directed toward commercial advantage or private monetary compensation.

e. Webcasting Rights and Statutory Royalties. For the avoidance of doubt, where the Work is a sound recording, Licensor reserves the exclusive right to collect, whether individually or via a performance-rights society (e.g. SoundExchange), royalties for the public digital performance (e.g. webcast) of the Work, subject to the compulsory license created by 17 USC Section 114 of the US Copyright Act (or the equivalent in other jurisdictions), if Your public digital performance is primarily intended for or directed toward commercial advantage or private monetary compensation.

**Representations, Warranties and Disclaimer**

UNLESS OTHERWISE MUTUALLY AGREED TO BY THE PARTIES IN WRITING, LICENSOR OFFERS THE WORK AS-IS AND ONLY TO THE EXTENT OF ANY RIGHTS HELD IN THE LICENSED WORK BY THE LICENSOR. THE LICENSOR MAKES NO REPRESENTATIONS OR WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND CONCERNING THE WORK, EXPRESS, IMPLIED, STATUTORY OR OTHERWISE, INCLUDING, WITHOUT LIMITATION, WARRANTIES OF TITLE, MARKETABILITY, MERCHANTABILITY, FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE, NONINFRINGEMENT, OR THE ABSENCE OF LATENT OR OTHER DEFECTS,
ACCURACY, OR THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE OF ERRORS, WHETHER OR NOT DISCOVERABLE. SOME JURISDICTIONS DO NOT ALLOW THE EXCLUSION OF IMPLIED WARRANTIES, SO SUCH EXCLUSION MAY NOT APPLY TO YOU.

**Limitation on Liability.** EXCEPT TO THE EXTENT REQUIRED BY APPLICABLE LAW, IN NO EVENT WILL LICENSOR BE LIABLE TO YOU ON ANY LEGAL THEORY FOR ANY SPECIAL, INCIDENTAL, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR EXEMPLARY DAMAGES ARISING OUT OF THIS LICENSE OR THE USE OF THE WORK, EVEN IF LICENSOR HAS BEEN ADVISED OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGES.

**Termination**

a. This License and the rights granted hereunder will terminate automatically upon any breach by You of the terms of this License. Individuals or entities who have received Collective Works (as defined in Section 1 above) from You under this License, however, will not have their licenses terminated provided such individuals or entities remain in full compliance with those licenses. Sections 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, and 8 will survive any termination of this License.

b. Subject to the above terms and conditions, the license granted here is perpetual (for the duration of the applicable copyright in the Work).

Notwithstanding the above, Licensor reserves the right to release the Work
under different license terms or to stop distributing the Work at any time; provided, however that any such election will not serve to withdraw this License (or any other license that has been, or is required to be, granted under the terms of this License), and this License will continue in full force and effect unless terminated as stated above.

Miscellaneous

a. Each time You distribute or publicly digitally perform the Work (as defined in Section 1 above) or a Collective Work (as defined in Section 1 above), the Licensor offers to the recipient a license to the Work on the same terms and conditions as the license granted to You under this License.

b. If any provision of this License is invalid or unenforceable under applicable law, it shall not affect the validity or enforceability of the remainder of the terms of this License, and without further action by the parties to this agreement, such provision shall be reformed to the minimum extent necessary to make such provision valid and enforceable.

c. No term or provision of this License shall be deemed waived and no breach consented to unless such waiver or consent shall be in writing and signed by the party to be charged with such waiver or consent.

d. This License constitutes the entire agreement between the parties with respect to the Work licensed here. There are no understandings, agreements or representations with respect to the Work not specified here. Licensor shall not
be bound by any additional provisions that may appear in any communication from You. This License may not be modified without the mutual written agreement of the Licensor and You.

**Creative Commons Notice**

Creative Commons is not a party to this License, and makes no warranty whatsoever in connection with the Work. Creative Commons will not be liable to You or any party on any legal theory for any damages whatsoever, including without limitation any general, special, incidental or consequential damages arising in connection to this license. Notwithstanding the foregoing two (2) sentences, if Creative Commons has expressly identified itself as the Licensor hereunder, it shall have all rights and obligations of Licensor.

Except for the limited purpose of indicating to the public that the Work is licensed under the CCPL, Creative Commons does not authorize the use by either party of the trademark “Creative Commons” or any related trademark or logo of Creative Commons without the prior written consent of Creative Commons. Any permitted use will be in compliance with Creative Commons’ then-current trademark usage guidelines, as may be published on its website or otherwise made available upon request from time to time. For the avoidance of doubt, this trademark restriction does not form part of this License.

Creative Commons may be contacted at http://creativecommons.org/.
EPILOGUE

The demons haunting and harrowing the twentieth century were gestated in the course of the resolute efforts to complete the task at which the modern era aimed since its very beginning: to bring the world of humans into order.”

—Zymunt Bauman (2012)

Communism was not defeated by military force but by life, by the human spirit, by conscience.

—Vaclav Havel (1992)

The web is people connected by technology. It’s about people, not technology.

—Tim Berners-Lee (2013)

Over the last few years, I’ve watched as teens have given up on controlling access to content. It’s too hard, too frustrating, and technology simply can’t fix the power issues. Instead, what they’ve been doing is focusing on controlling access to meaning.

—danah boyd (2013)

We’re not thinking big enough or weird enough. A tool’s most transformative uses generally take us by surprise. For example, when the mobile phone was expensive and in the hands of the few, it was purely a corporate mechanism; when the price dropped and everyone had one in their back pocket, it became a vehicle for sousveillance, for self-organizing bar crawls, for inventing rebuslike short forms of expression, for staying in ambient contact with the world.

—Clive Thompson (2013, 285)

Determination is a real social process, but never (as in some theological and some Marxist versions) a wholly controlling, wholly predicting set of causes. On the contrary, the reality of determination is the setting of limits and the exertion of pressures, within which variable social practices are profoundly affected but never necessarily controlled. We have to think of determination not as a single force, or a single abstraction of forces, but as a process in which real determining factors—the distribution of power or of capital, social and political inheritance, relations of scale and size between groups—set limits and exert pressures, but neither wholly control nor wholly predict the outcome of
complex activity within or at these limits, and under or against these pressures."

—Raymond Williams (2003, 133)

Where we hope to land (and where we do land, though only for a fleeting moment, enough for tired wings to catch the wind anew) is a ‘there’ which we thought of little and knew of even less.

—Zymunt Bauman (1997)