Crafting Self Identity in a Virtual Community: Chinese Internet Users and Their Political Sense Formation

By: Yan Wu¹ and Robert G. Tian²

ABSTRACT

To study the process of constructing self identity by Internet users is a challenging task for social scientists, while the use of ethnographic method in studying the interactions among individuals in an online virtual community is by no means of easy job. Employing qualitative studies as the main research approach, the authors conducted a case study of the Qiangguo Luntan, a virtual community for the mainland Chinese, with a focus on its users’ identities constructed politically. The paper examines the users’ pennames, signature files, online behaviours such as lurking and flaming and political clusters formed on different ideological viewpoints and argues that Internet bulletin boards as virtual communities in China are used as social institutions in the public sphere although this virtual public sphere still has its limitations in terms of inclusiveness, autonomy, and people’s public use of their reason.

KEY WORDS: internet bulletin boards, political sense, public sphere, self identity, virtual community

INTRODUCTION

It is in recent years that scholars in social science have identified the virtual communities or online communities as a new arena for their academic interesting while both social and practical importance of the virtual communities has been probed world widely. The virtual communities are defined as places where social interaction takes place over the Internet. More specifically, researchers, practitioners, and the media have used the term virtual community to refer to vastly different computer-mediated communication (CMC) groups (Baym 1998, Bieber, Engelbart, Furuta, & Hiltz, 2002, Blanchard 2004, Boyd 2002, Evans, Wedande, Ralston, & van 't Hul, 2001, Kardaras, Karakostas, & Papathanassiou, 2003, Rheingold 2000, Rothaermel & Sugiyama 2001).

Virtual communities depend upon social interaction and exchange of
information among Internet users online, which emphasizes the reciprocity element of the unwritten social contract among community members (Baym 1998, Rheingold 2000). Different virtual communities have different levels of interaction and participation among their members, which could range from adding comments or tags to a blog or message board to competing against other people in online video games. Not unlike traditional social groups or clubs, virtual communities often divide themselves into cliques or even separate to form new communities. Kim (2000) discovers a potential difference between traditional structured online communities (message boards, chat rooms, etc), and more individual-centric, bottom-up social tools (blogs, instant messaging buddy lists), and suggests the latter are gaining in popularity.

Today, virtual community or online community can be used loosely for a variety of social groups interacting via the Internet. Although Rheingold (2000) argues that in virtual communities form when individuals carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, personal relationships can be formed; it does not necessarily mean that there is a strong bond among the members. Some community analysts might argue that calling any online group a virtual community represents yet another example of the overuse of the term “community” to the point that concept has lost any real meaning (Harris 1999).

The traditional definition of a community is of a geographically circumscribed entity (neighbourhoods, villages, etc). Virtual communities, of course, are inherently dispersed geographically, and therefore are not communities under the original definition (Rheingold 2000). Nevertheless, if we consider communities in terms of simply possessing some sort of boundaries between the members and non-members, then a virtual community certainly fits into the definition of a community. The notion of neatly bounded communities is also being critiqued, since communities are fluid just as much as they are static, with members joining and leaving and even being part of different communities simultaneously (Bieber, Engelbart, Furuta, & Hiltz, 2002, Blanchard 2004, Boyd 2002, Rotheaermel & Sugiyama 2001).

The idea that media could generate a community is not at all a new concept to the academic world. Progressive thinkers such as Charles Cooley, early in the 20th century in the United States, envisioned a nation whose members were
united strongly because of the increased use of mass media. Also well-known is the term community without propinquity, coined by sociologist Melvin Webber (1963, 1973). Social Anthropologist Benedict Anderson (1983) in his widely cited book *Imagined Communities* describes how different technologies contributed to the development of a national consciousness among early nation-states. Particularly relevant is his analysis of how national newspapers, which collected and presented news from a certain geographical area, soon made it natural to think of that geographical area as comprising a single entity. In other words, national newspapers contributed to the idea of a nation, and from thence to the construction of a nation-state.

Wiszniewski and Coyne (2002) raise the concept of the relationship between mask and online identity when examine the building process of virtual communities. They explore the philosophical implications of online identity with a particular attention to the concept of “masking” identity. They point out that whenever an individual interacts in a social sphere they portray a mask of their identity. This is no different online and in fact becomes even more pronounced due to the decisions an online contributor must make concerning his or her online profile. He or she must answer specific questions about age, gender, address, username and so forth.

The findings by Wiszniewski and Coyne made some constructive contributions to the social identity theory developed by Tajfel and Turner. The social identity theory is a diffuse but interrelated group of social psychological theories concerned with when and why individuals identify with, and behave as part of, social groups, adopting shared attitudes to outsiders. It is also concerned with what difference it makes when encounters between individuals are perceived as encounters between group members. Social Identity Theory is thus concerned both with the psychological and sociological aspects of group Behavior (Tajfel 1981, Tajfel & Turner 1979, 1986, Turner 1984).

The public sphere in late eighteenth century Europe refers to a public space which ‘was casting itself loose as a forum in which the private people, come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion’ (Jürgen Habermas 1989: 25). As a vital part of it, a public challenging the ruling authorities had been regarded existing in uniformity and in liberal societies only. However, this Habermasian concept
of the public sphere neglects some other forms of public discourse and activities which were not included in or even opposed to that of the dominant bourgeois sociability.

Development of the public sphere theory focuses on the emancipatory nature of the alternative and oppositional public spheres such as a ‘radical’ plebeian public sphere during the French Revolution (Geoff Eley 1992: 305), the ‘proletariat public sphere’ demonstrating ‘the experience specific to workers’ (Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge 1993:28) and a feminist public sphere in the nineteenth-century North America when women had not been given suffrage (Mary Ryan 1990, 1992). These critics argue that even in the absence of formal political incorporation into the public sphere, the suppressed social groups in society still worked out their own political identities and participate in social political life. The public sphere in reality is constituted of exclusion, multiplicity of public arenas, contesting meaning and competing publics (Ryan 1992, Eley 1992, Keane 2000).

The notion of a multi-tiered, interconnected public sphere is central to understanding the societal-political situation in contemporary post-Communism China when an antagonistic public arise in real life and in the cyberspace. The Communist Party’s control has constructed, to borrow Karol Jakulbowicz’s (1991) phrase the ‘official public sphere’, as the dominant tier in China. Yet the ‘alternative public sphere’ and the ‘oppositional public sphere’ have long been in existence marginally. The emergence of the middle class and re-construction of social strata following economic reform from the late 1970s heralded an emerging public power in the social political life in China (Meng Jian 2000). Since traditional media are still largely controlled by the government, this contested public power is mainly displayed on the Internet bulletin boards which, as Rheingold (2000) believes, are grassroots media that have the potential of revitalizing “citizen-based democracy”.

THE STUDY AND METHDOLOGY

Although the Internet connected China to the world in earlier 1990s the major steps for building online community were not achieved till August 1995 when the influential campus bulletin boards *Shuimu Tsinghua BBS* were set up,
which is run by the students from one of the leading universities in China. Sixty-two bulletin boards emerged in Mainland China by the end of 1996 as the result of online virtual communities’ growth (Huang Shengming and Ding Junjie 2001:610-614). From then on, Internet bulletin boards have flourished from university campuses to the rest of the society and became a vital forum for students and professionals to present themselves and craft virtual identities. Public access to Internet in China has grown in a quick fashion. Research on whether Internet bulletin boards contribute to democracy in China shows both a celebration of cybertopia and a loathing of cyberghetto.

Min Dahong (2001) argues that bulletin boards entitle Chinese citizens a ‘right to express’ over current issues in a virtually relative freedom environment, thus breaking down the ‘uniformity of public opinion’ presented by the mainstream official media. The studies conducted by Li Xiguang and Qin Xuan (2001); Tang Dayong and Shi Jie (2001); Chen Tongxu and Deng Lifeng (2002) endorse Min’s argument and find out that due to the fast growing of online virtual communities the official media no longer play a dominant role in shaping public opinion, as the result the members of those online communities change the relationship between the official media and public opinion. Internet users start to construct their own narratives over current affairs, and online public opinion even aimed to influence the official agenda. Meanwhile, scholars also detect that as the development of Internet communication technologies in China as well as the fast growth of the online communities can cultivate xenophobia and nationalism, which may meet the communist party’s need to legitimate its own hegemony (Zhou He 2000, Christopher Hughes 2002, Yu Huang and Chin-Chuan Lee 2003).

What is nevertheless lacking in the existing literature is a depiction of the emerging Chinese “public” as represented on bulletin boards and other online interactive communities. The construction of virtual community identities among Chinese Internet users and their motivation for lurking, posting or flaming still remain largely unknown, which draws the attention of the authors of this paper. This study proposes some initial answers to the above questions through a case study of users’ construction of virtual community identities in Qiangguo Luntan (QGLT) (http://people.com.cn/bbs/start), one of the most popular Internet bulletin boards in the Chinese world for current affairs.
discussion. It is planned to present the findings on the identities construction process by the netters who registered with QGLT and interact with others QGLT users through a detailed examining of their pennames, signature files, clusters within the community, and discuss the potential of Internet bulletin boards in building a critical public in China.

Taking QGLT as our online study site the authors apply an ethnographic approach for the research, a method that is becoming more and more favourable by scholars in study virtual communities. The data gathered are mainly through participant observation and in-depth interviews. The participant observation consists of the authors’ experience both as registered users under a few pennames since early 2001 and personal interactions with the directors of QGLT, as well as one of the authors’ fieldworks working as an intern moderator with QGLT in 2004 for about 10 weeks. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with twenty-two QGLT users were conducted for this research. The sampling process is a combination of maximum variation sampling and snowball sampling due to the sensitive nature of the research perceived by the respondents.

### Table 1 Tools used for conducting interview with QGLT users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools Used</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face interviews</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face interview + Instant Messenger* + Online phone talk</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone interviews</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone + email</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone + Instant Messenger</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instant messenger</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instant messenger + email</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emails</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>22</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Instant messenger used including MSN, Skype, and QQ.

The authors sent emails with questionnaires attached to QGLT users’ personal email addresses that are accessible through their registration information as pre-selection process in May 2004. The questionnaire consists of
three sections of multiple choices. Section I is the demographic features of QGLT users. Section II is about QGLT users’ media consumption including their Internet using behaviour. Section III aims to gain a general understanding of how users perceive QGLT online discussion. Totally 115 emails were sent out initially but only 35 recipients replied. Among those 35 participants 22 individuals agreed for intensive interviews according to the maximum variation principle. The interviews were conducted either through long distance telephone calls (11 out of 22) or through face to face dialogues (3 out of 22), or though emails and instance message communications (9 out of 22).

All the interviews were tape-recorded with the voluntary agreement by the interviewees, and the recorded tape transcripts were done immediately upon finishing each interview (see table 1 for detailed information). Based on the questionnaires received and also users’ voluntary participation, 22 of them selected for intensive interviews (see Appendix 1 for the composition of interviewees). The interviewees were chosen according to the following criteria:

- They were ‘encultured informants’ within QGLT. American anthropologist Spradley uses this term (1979:47) to describe those individuals who know the local culture well and take it as their responsibility to explain it to others. All interviewees had been encultured in QGLT for at least 1 year up to the interview date and were quite familiar with this virtual community. Apart from one lurker recruited from researchers’ off-line friend circle, all the rest of the QGLT interviewees were heavy posters and played active roles within the community;

- They were chosen purposefully to yield as many different and varied situations as possible. The selection of interviewees varied in its composition in terms of gender, education, age, profession and other demographic elements. By doing so, we attempted to present a range of views from QGLT users;

- They were willing to talk about their experience. There were some QGLT users who answered the questionnaire, but later turned down the invitation for an interview. One reason might be their preference towards maintaining the anonymity associated with online identity. The other reason might be the political risk in being involved in this
kind of research based overseas. The main researcher had been questioned a few times for her real identity and once was even asked to show her ID card by interviewees. Some QGLT users suspected the researcher worked either for the Chinese government or for a foreign media organisation under the disguise of a Cardiff University student.

Interviews with QGLT users were semi-structured topical interviews which, as Rubin and Rubin describe, is ‘a tree-and-branch mode’ (1995:201). We started out with a set of structured main questions covering the overall subjects such as users’ media consumption behaviour, the frequency they visit and post on QGLT, their understanding of good postings and good online discussion, etc. Probe and follow up questions are under certain main questions, such as asking users to give examples of ‘good discussion’ or ‘bad discussion’ they experienced within QGLT. In the less structured parts of the interview, we tailored our questions to each individual based on our knowledge of them from their postings. The less-structured part of the interview provided detailed information about what factors encourage or inhibit QGLT user’s online opinion expression, their specific understanding of political discussion, and their unique experience of identity construction both online and offline.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Launched on January 1, 1997, www.people.com.cn was created as a platform for ‘disseminating information from China’ by People’s Daily (formed in 1948), the Communist Party’s ‘mouthpiece’ ever since its inception. To a certain amount of surprise, this on-line party organ has enjoyed a prosperous development ever since, and had an impressive page view record of 10 million hits per day during September 11 Incident. Meanwhile, its flagship QGLT community has become one of the most popular Chinese-language Internet bulletin boards for Chinese government to know public opinion (Xiao 2001).

QGLT: A Party’s Special Zone for Free Speech
Online communities cannot be disconnected from offline communities (Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben 1997; Steven Jones 1998; Nancy Baym 1998; 2000) and should be examined in offline political-economic contexts. This argument can help to explain the popularity of QGLT. QGLT was first used as a replacement for real life protest which is extremely scarce in China. Set up on May 9, 1999, the second day after NATO’s bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the Kosovo Conflict, QGLT was first named as Kangyi Luntan (Protest Forum). More than 90,000 messages of civil protest were posted until the forum changed its name to Qiangguo Luntan (Strengthening-the-country Forum) on June 19 (Xiao 2001). Centring on QGLT Current Affairs, QGLT In-Depth, China Forum in English, other sub-boards on China-Japan relationship, local development, and other issues were gradually set up within the community.

QGLT discussion is open to all users for viewing, but only registered users can post. Up until the end of July, 2004, there have been nearly 330,000 registered names in QGLT community with an average daily increase of 200 new names. The average number of daily visitors is ‘near one million’, according to the QGLT administration. Broadband, with connection speed of 200 megabytes per second, provides comparatively fast and steady input and output of data including an audio-visual service. Expressional icons are not provided on this bulletin board. Users rely on words, signs, repetition, HTML language, or set the words in larger font or in colour for emphasis or expression of emotion. The asynchronistic temporal structure allows users to post at different times on the same topical discussion. Though the majority of users are based in Mainland China, there are a significant number of them based in Taiwan, Hong Kong, the USA, and other countries.

Construction of Cyber-Personalities within QGLT

Within online communities, the “public” has largely been a blurred picture of anonymous individuals as the Internet ‘make[s] possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple’ (Sherry Turkle 1995, 12). Scholars argue that anonymity enables users to explore their socially suppressed aspects of public selves or to take on multiple identities (Shannon McRae 1997; Elizabeth Reid
1995; Allucquère Rosanne Stone 1995; Turkle 1995). However, studies on computer mediated communication (CMC) also prove the consistency of on-line and offline selves among the majority of users (Baym 1998; 2000).

Within QGLT, a strong sense of civil participation connects people together, where they debate about current issues of public interest. From QGLT users’ pennames, signature files, and the political clusters online, one can spot a consistency of online and offline selves among the users. The invention of online identities is situated closely in offline social context and reflects a variety of ideological inclinations in contemporary China.

**Pennames**

The asynchronous temporal structure within QGLT gives users great control over their cyber-image by naming themselves in an anonymous environment. Names are ‘transformed into trademarks, distinctive individual smells by which their users are recognized as either friends or enemies within an otherwise vague and anonymous BBS communication environment’ (David Myers 1987, 240).

A theme of patriotism runs through most QGLT users’ pennames such as LovelyChina and Zhonghua shi wo qin’ai de jia (China is my beloved motherland). Patriotism in China is usually associated with nationalism, which exhibits a certain degree of stately insecurity from a more than one hundred year history of being invaded and colonized. One example is the penname Renzhong Daoyuan Baowei Zuguo which literally means ‘when it comes to safeguarding my motherland, the task is solemn and the road is long’. Zhongguo de Nuhou (Angry roaring from China) from Taiwan registered this penname with QGLT in April, 2001 to show the user’s indignation towards the USA’s military dominance in the China-US military planes collision incident (On April 1, 2001, an American spy plane collided into a Chinese military plane above the Chinese territorial airspace. The Chinese plane plunged into the sea and the pilot went missing. The American spy plane was forced into an emergency landing in China. After two weeks of bilateral talks, the American plane and the pilot were returned to the US.) A similar example can also be found in Rihuo sheng rihuo, guohuo zhu guohuo (the Japan-made commodities bring calamity; the China-made commodities benefit our country) which extends the patriotism into
the economic aspect.

Public resentment towards corruption, injustice and inequality, the widening gap between rich and poor, and other social problems in contemporary China can also be detected from QGLT pennames. Zuigaofayuan dafuguan xuancheng de sifa gongzheng zai na’r?? (where is the legislative justice claimed by the Supreme Court Judge??), which questions the operation of Chinese legal system. The penname Teda Tanguan, which means ‘a super corrupt officer’ in English, is chosen to express the user’s ‘hatred towards official corruption’ and his ‘sarcasms and derision’ (20/04/2004, in this paper postings quoted from QGLT users are referenced as penname date/month/year. Citing from QGLT users from interviews is referenced as interview date/month/year). A plebeian character can be detected in QGTL from pennames like Shanyecunfu (a peasant from the wild countryside) or Banyun Gongren (a porter). Pennames are also used to reflect the miserable life of the lower social stratum such as Ti xiagang shiye zhigong shuoju gongdaohua (speaking out for the unemployed workers) and Woshi nongmin, nongmin mingzhenku (I’m a peasant; our peasants have a doomed destiny).

Ideological advocacy and political viewpoints are also embedded in QGLT pennames. Minzhu qingchu fubai (democracy eradicates corruption) and Jianjue hanwei gongmin jiben quanli (firmly safeguarding citizens’ basic rights) exhibits users’ political objectives. Behind the penname ЯKob in Russian is the user’s ‘democratic Socialism’ ideal (Interview 31/08/2004). Movement towards market economy has brought about privatisation in China since 1992 and has been triggering public debate and nostalgia towards an idyllic equality during the Socialist era within QGLT. The penname Shichang neng jiejue wenti ma (can market solve all the problems) is one example.

A survey conducted by QGLT in 2004 reveals that among the 1635 QGLT respondents who have pennames, around 17.8 percent (291 people) have more than one penname. One QGLT user we interviewed claimed he has more than 500 pennames from the end of 2000 to April 2005. Pennames attributed to him are created to show his attitude in topical discussions. For example, he used Lixing Kangri (Resisting Japan rationally) in the March 2005 nationwide online protest against Japan’s whitewashing of wartime events in their history textbooks; and Huanying Lian Zhan Laifang (Welcome Lian Zhan to the
Mainland) before Taiwan Kuomintang top official Lian Zhan’s visit to Beijing in April 2005. Multiple-identity, according to a user who registered more than twenty pennames up to 2004, is also a way to avoid flaming when disagreement in political debates leads to personal attacks (Songyang 19/04/2004).

Use of multiple identities has been a feature for almost all the online communities and the QGLT survey in 2004 suggests that 82.2 percent of QGLT users (1344 out of 1635 respondents) stick to one identity. The in-depth interviews found veteran QGLT users, who have built up credibility within this online community, especially prefer to stick to their main penname. Laobenniu (the old dull bull) is a Chinese living in the USA who has registered this penname within QGLT since 2000. He uses Laobenniu to post and this name has been well known among other users. Two other pennames Xin laobenniu (the new old dull bull) and Aidang Aiguo Airenmin (Love the Party, love the country, and love the people) are only used when Laobenniu is blocked temporarily (usually up to seven days) for his occasional dissident opinion. Though QGLT moderators know well these three different pennames come from the same IP, they would rather not lose this loyal community member as long as he does not become too radical in his political opinion.

**Signature files**

Signature files can be a name, an e-mail address, a line of quotations, a statement, a poem, photos, illustrations, or even ASCII illustration (built out of punctuation marks and letters) that are attached to the bottom of each posting. Signature files usually betray the users’ hobbies, political preference, humour, or friendliness. Because they appear on every posting from the senders, they become ‘one of the most immediate and visually forceful cues to identity’ (Baym 1998, 56).

Appearing most often in QGLT users’ signature files are URLs of their personal web pages, bloggings, or contact details like email addresses or even telephone numbers, which resemble the exchanging of business cards in offline society. Apart from email addresses and personal websites, some users also make a small statement in their signature file to further disclose their personality. As Ji’an’s signature file says, to him, Internet bulletin boards are his farmland on which he works for the benefit of the 1.3 billion Chinese people. He also
invites other users to publish, crosspost, or translate his articles into other languages and communicate the idea to the world.

Political enthusiasm constitutes an indispensable part of QGLT users’ signature files and reflects a collective identity. Patriotism, nationalism, longing for democracy and resentment towards social injustice remain as themes. Qiangtan Kanke quotes a line from the former national leader Deng Xiaoping in his signature file: ‘I’m a son of Chinese people, I devote my deepest compassion to my motherland and people’. LovelyChina states his wish for Chinese unification along Taiwan Strait and declares himself as ‘an absolute Chinese nationalist!’ Renwoying expresses his yearning for democracy: ‘Democracy is the only road leading to a strong nation for China!’ ‘Only democracy can save China! Only democracy can save China! Only democracy can save China!...’ Laobenniu, who has been living in North America for 16 years, still has concerns over corruption in the Mainland, and expresses this concern in his signature files:

The old dull bull,
Hates the corrupt officials;
He’s digging graves for them;
He’s working for the elimination of corruption…


In the interview with Laobenniu, he said that Laobenniu is a ‘netbeing’ possessing its own character and credibility. This signature file of resenting corruption contributes to the overall ‘personality’ of this netbeing.

**Clusters formed from different political outlooks**

Political discussion over current affairs brings about the categorization of the ‘Left’ and the ‘Right’ among QGLT users. Some users even flag up their political preference through self-explained pennames such as Zuo Ye (a leftist), Youce tongxing (passing through on the right side) or Gongchan zhuyizhe Jia (Communist A).

In their collaborative study on QGLT postings regarding the 2001 US-China
planes collision incident, Tang and Shi (2001) concluded that QGLT users formed three political clusters online—the Left, the Right, and the Middle-of-the-road. Members of the same political cluster appeared online at the same time and showed group characteristics. Key members of each cluster (usually 3 to 5) actively posted and led the on-line debate. According to Tang and Shi, the Left viewed the incident as a provocation from ‘American imperialists’ and urged the Chinese government to take a hard-line on foreign policy; the Right urged the Chinese government to return the American planes and the crew for a peaceful solution to the crisis; while the Middle-of-the-road put this single incident in the context of international relations and international laws and started re-thinking China’s role in a changed international security environment.

The left-right demarcation in QGLT is characterised by contrasting ideological preferences adopted by different clusters. However, the boundaries among the political clusters are never stable and users can easily move into overlapping subgroups holding pro, anti, and mixed attitudes towards any current issue. Tang and Shi’s categorization simplified the complicated political outlooks presented within this community. Meanwhile, though ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ have been used as political terms in China since 1920s, the demarcation between left and right is very different to that in Western nations.

Table 2 An analysis of QGLT political clusters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QGLT Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Economic advocacy</th>
<th>Totalitarianism/ Democracy</th>
<th>Equality and social justice</th>
<th>International Issues</th>
<th>Transformation of society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Far Left</td>
<td>Maoists</td>
<td>Planned Economy; Organised social production, State ownership</td>
<td>People’s democratic dictatorship (totalitarianism)</td>
<td>Anti-humanism</td>
<td>Aggressive Nationalism</td>
<td>Radical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neo-Left</td>
<td>Neo-Leftism in China</td>
<td>Accept market economy, but advocate a mixed economy with a significant public sector; Advocate state intervention in the economy</td>
<td>Agree with freedom and democracy, but believe the social conditions in China are not ready for democracy</td>
<td>Concerns for public interest; against the widening gap between the rich and the poor</td>
<td>Range from Aggressive Nationalism to Nationalism</td>
<td>Range from radical to reformist view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td>Liberalism and centre-left</td>
<td>Accept market economy, but advocate a mixed economy with both public sector and private sector; Limited state intervention in the economy</td>
<td>Advocate for democracy and social liberty</td>
<td>Concerns over the wellbeing of common people</td>
<td>Rational Nationalism</td>
<td>Sympathize with or advocate democratic movements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Far Right</td>
<td>Extreme Liberalism</td>
<td>Laissez faire capitalism ; Privatization of industries; Economic liberty</td>
<td>Longing for western (especially American) democracy</td>
<td>The state should prioritize economic liberty to social equality</td>
<td>Internationalism in pro-Americanism</td>
<td>Mixed to radical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centralism</td>
<td>A mixture of via media and no attitude</td>
<td>Developing economy and strengthening the nation is the first</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Against radical social changes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In general, the Left in China refers to those who advocate the Communist Party’s governance, while the Right refers to those who long for democracy. These dual standards in categorizing political preference can sometimes create confusion within QGLT. For example, *kob* has been claiming himself a centre-Left advocating Democratic Socialism, but other QGLT ‘Left’ have been labelled him as the ‘Right’. Based on the participant observation and textual analysis of QGLT users’ postings, the authors attempt to provide a basic description of the prevalent political beliefs within QGLT community in the following table “An Analysis of QGLT cluster”.

Worth noting is also the trend that more and more QGLT users believe they cannot be simply labelled as Left or Right. The users who advocated the USA’s military invasion of Iraq in 2003 (usually the “Right” in QGLT) could be the same group of users arguing for the public ownership of educational institutions (usually the “Left”). Hence, a growing number of QGLT users choose to strike a balance between the “Left” and the “Right” outlook and tend to describe themselves as: “a moderate leftist”, “a so-called rightist”, “a slightly leftist”, and so on. The categorisation of political “Left” or “Right” triggers debates and even flaming within the QGLT community. But most users believe the categorization of political clusters is necessary for debating ideas (*Yundan shuimuan* 06/01/2004). Some even believe the magnetism of QGLT lies largely in its debates among different political clusters, from which ‘dialogue between different political camps are held’ (Interview with Dahongyan 18/04/2005).

**Lurkers**

‘One cannot create a recognizable identity in any group without posting’ (Baym 2000,144). Nevertheless, a significant number of QGLT users choose rarely or never contribute to the online discussion and remain anonymous and invisible.

The QGLT survey in 2004 shows that around 48 percent (1481 out of 3116) respondents have never registered pennames. Since only registered users can post in this community, almost half of QGLT users choose not to talk about politics in public. The participant observation found an even higher percentage...
of lurkers. Take for example, a typical ‘rush hour’ for QGLT from 1 to 2 pm GMT (9-10 pm Beijing Time) on an ordinary weekday on Jan. 5, 2005. The total number of registered users reached 348,160 on that day from QGLT’s inception. Of the 38,570 visitors online at 13:52 GMT, only 168 users posted. The rough percentage is 4 out of 1000 users post on average.

The majority of the posters gathered in the *QGLT Current Affairs* (105 out of 168), another 38 users posted in *QGLT In-Depth*, and there were still dozens of users in another two discussion boards. Therefore, a large number of QGLT users, 38,420 in observation, were interested in the current issues but remained as a silent anonymous collective. Hannah, an unregistered user in QGLT, is a 33-year-old female university administrative staff. When talking about her lurking, she gave the following reasons:

I don’t think I’m cherishing an enthusiasm for politics or holding an extreme political attitude which presses me to speak out in public in this online community… But I do like reading other users’ posting every day during the lunch break… I also visit other universities’ bulletin boards like *Yita Hutu* based in Beijing University. To me, the online discussion and debates remind me of the other part of my personality, that of an active citizen apart from being a good employee, a wife and a mother (Interview 05/08/2004).

Unregistered lurkers like Hannah are extremely difficult to trace. Their status will only be registered as a number of ‘visitors online’. But registered lurkers and posters change their roles from time to time. Quite a few of QGLT heavy posters started as lurkers when they first joined this online community. *Wanyusu* had been lurking for a few months before posting. He had been ‘listening too much and thinking too much,’ and found words failing him at the beginning (28/05/2004). *Chenmozhi* had been a heavy poster in QGLT from 2001 to 2004, but chose to lurk in 2004 because ‘the more I know about this society, the less I can write about. The more I understand, the more willingly I choose to keep silent’ (12/04/2004). *Sanyeqing* started by posting short comments on *QGLT Current Affairs* and soon felt himself rather ‘shallow’ compared to others. Then he opted to be a lurker and had been lurking for 3 years before delurking again as a frequent poster (30/05/2004). Thus, there is a
fluid identity exchange between lurkers (especially the registered users) and posters, and reasons for this identity exchange vary greatly among individuals.

Limitation of the Virtual Public Sphere

Though Internet bulletin boards provide a platform for public political discussion, its empowering capacity has inherent limitations. This virtual public sphere emerging in China tends to exclude those who are poorer, less educated and female. It is also venerable to political control and commercialisation. Political extremist voices also pose a looming threat to the rational critical debate online.

**Elite-dominated virtual sphere**

Though in theory the public sphere is open to all, Habermas points out that the public in the bourgeois public sphere are those private individuals ‘who – insofar as they were propertied and educated – as readers, listeners, and spectators could avail themselves via the market of the objects that were subject to discussion’ (Habermas 1989, 37). Thus the public sphere in practice excludes those who are less well-off, uneducated or less educated. This exclusion to the online public discussion exists in the form of digital divide in China which put people from rural area or with less education in a disadvantageous position.

In general, QGLT users fall into the propertied, educated and digitally well-off category. Among the 35 QGLT users who answered the questionnaire, 34 of them hold a university degree or above and live in a non-rural area. Comparing this demographic feature with the 2000 nationwide census which displays only 3.53 percent of the whole Mainland China population hold a university degree or above whilst 63.91 percent of the whole population live in a rural area (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2000), one has to admit, QGLT users are quite elite.

However, there are also signs of the plebeian nature of this rising public online. The QGLT survey in 2004 shows that 73 percent of QGLT users claim they have no steady income or a monthly income less than RMB 2,000, which indicates their economic status as below the urban middle class (The average monthly income in Shenzhen is RMB 4109 and Beijing: 3764 in 2004. ‘Beijing salaries rise’, the survey is available at
As self-employed QGLT user Zhongguo de Nuhou said, ‘if judged from our intelligence and our thought, we are elite; but if judged by wealth and social status, we are definitely not’ (interview 23/08/2004). Meanwhile, all QGLT users interviewed are very reluctant to label themselves as ‘elite intellectuals.’ ‘Elite intellectuals’ to them are intellectuals trading their knowledge and social conscience for personal gains from the government or foreign powers. They view themselves as plebeian representatives talking about issues of general public interest with the goal of ‘strengthening the country’.

**Male dominated QGLT**

QGLT provides female users with an equal chance to take part in political discussion. Female users have developed their speciality in talking about politics—Jieyu on agriculture and migrant peasant workers issues, Xiaowan on Chinese unification along the Taiwan Strait, Aierbushang on the historic account of state-owned enterprises. Postings from QGLT female users show that women are more than capable of giving their opinions on important political issues in the public sphere.

However, the gender ratio within QGLT is extremely unbalanced (especially on the Current Affairs and In-Depth boards) with almost nine out of ten users being male in 2001 (Interview with Chengbiao Shan, Director of QGLT, 06 May 2003.) There have been several reasons contributing to the lack of female users in QGLT. The traditional social norms that frown upon women participating in public speech, different language patterns in argumentation, and the bad manners from male users should all be blamed. Taking care of the household rather than talking politics in public is still culturally accepted as the women’s role in Chinese society. For those women who do post on political bulletin boards, they have to make the best use of their time between work and taking care of the household. One female user said she usually visits QGLT whilst cooking supper every evening. She has to rush back to attend dishes on the stove during reading and posting. Though never discouraging her explicitly from ‘arguing on the Internet bulletin boards’, her spouse ‘laughed at’ her for being such an ‘aggressively fighting chicken’ and tried to talk her into ‘reading without making comments’ (Yuxuepiaopiao 19/04/2004).

Different language pattern between male and female users in debate is another reason for the exclusion of women in online political debate. Victor Savicki et al. (1996) argues that men tend to use more fact-oriented language
and call for action, whereas women are more likely to self-disclose and try to prevent or reduce tension. The language pattern within the male-dominated QGLT is ‘masculine’ in its objectivity, impersonality and rationality. Meanwhile the general language pattern of femininity which is associated with subjectivity, personal feelings, emotions, and love does not fit into this community very well. Even though QGLT female users show their ability to join rational critical debate, their intrinsic nature of preventing or reducing tension makes them vulnerable in the powerful ‘warfare of argument’.

Bad attitude from male users like intimidating, insulting or even harassing language is still another reason for female’s exclusion of online discussion. One day when one of the author was moderating Lianyi Huiguan board in July 2004, a male user Banong Guocui followed the postings by one of the authors with questions such as ‘Who’s this chick?’ and ‘Which guy in QGLT possesses her?’ (21/07/2004) She replied him a greeting message and told him ‘to watch his language’, which invited further aggressive postings. Within 20 minutes, a verbal fight containing coarse languages was broken between users who blame Banong Cuocui for his online behaviour and those who joined Banong Guocui. It is not difficult to imagine how discouraging this kind of experience would be to other female users.

Overall, the barriers for female users to join political online forums are evident, but not unbeatable. For example, to avoid online provocation, there are QGLT females who choose ‘neutral’ or even ‘masculine’ pennames which has no clear indication of their gender. In order to empower themselves in the virtual sphere, women need to shake off the social shackles and grasp the know-how of the online language pattern and online communication skills.

**Political extremists**

Internet bulletin boards in China have also been employed by political extremists to voice out hostility against Japan and fervour towards unification with Taiwan. QGLT, according to Hughes, ‘is a hotbed of nationalist fervour’ and the Communist Party has been using the Internet for ‘mobilise nationalism to legitimate its own claim to power’ (2002, 218).

The Chinese public has been turning to electronic bulletin boards to vent nationalist ranting over the Japanese government’s denial of the Nanjing
Massacre and Japanese top officials’ annual visit to the Yasukuni shrine worshiping the WWII War criminals. Civil protest such as boycotting Japanese commodities, is usually first organised through bulletin boards and then held offline. However, nationalism can become extreme, and xenophobic and jingoistic rhetoric can also be found on bulletin boards.

The 2004 Asian Cup final was contested between the Chinese and Japanese football teams. When a Japanese footballer scored by his hand which finally resulted in the victory over China, this sports event developed into a diplomatic issue. Internet bulletin boards had been blamed for flaring up public sentiment as anti-Japanese postings flooded online immediately after Chinese team lost the game:

Keep Japanese hands off our high-speed railway between Beijing and Shanghai…
(Zheli Shimian Maifu 08/08/2004)

Here I posted several photos of Japanese Army’s atrocities [during the WWII]. Those who cheer for the Japanese team need to have a look… (Bushi Wo Shuode 08/08/2004)

Nationalistic fervour triggers flaming among users, which constitutes a danger for the rational critical debate, and criticism of China is labelled as ‘betrayal’ by the extreme nationalists. Users who post pro-Japan or pro-USA messages are called ‘running dogs’ and ‘boot-lickers’ of foreign powers, and some even receive threatening messages, virtual stalking and hacking.

Government control and commercialisation

Technologically, Internet bulletin boards are harder for authorities to control. However due to the dual-status of being politically administrated and financially semi-dependent, Chinese Internet media are subject to both stringent administration from the government and the pressure of commercialisation.

The Regulations on Interactive Computer-Mediated Communication was passed by the Ministry of Information Industry on October 8, 2000. This regulation specified that bulletin boards and other interactive online services must be put under tight control of the government. Users must not post information that might let out the nation’s secrets, subvert the sovereign, impair national unification, or stain the nation’s reputation. Within QGLT, punishment
for ‘inappropriate’ postings range from warning to temporary block out of pennames. ‘Malign behaviours’ such as claiming Tibet’s or Taiwan’s independence will result in the permanent closedown of users’ IDs.

Economic reform and the opening-up policy invited multinational media tycoons like News Corp. and Disney as investors to China. The forming public sphere faces the risk of degradation when drastic commodification and prevalent illiteracy transfer large number of citizens from authoritarian regime to a commodified situation of refeudalization (Baudrillard 1994, 2001; Habermas 1989).

CONCLUSION

As the explosive diffusion of the Internet into China the proliferation of virtual communities are bound to be developed and growing. The nature of those communities and communications is rather diverse, and the benefits such as the ability to interact with likeminded individuals instantaneously from anywhere on the globe, for personal psychological well-being, as well as for society at large, of belonging to such a group that Rheingold (2000) among many others envisioned are not necessarily realized, or pursued, due to the constraining of social and political forces. However, it is not uncommon to see the internet uses in search of self identity and political sense within their virtual communities and the netters registered with QGLT are the pioneers of those Chinese who are actors in those virtual communities.

Our findings suggest that Internet bulletin boards enable ordinary Chinese to have their identities as politically activated citizens constructed in cyberspace. A consistent enthusiasm for political participation can be found in users’ pennames, signature files, political clusters, and online behaviours. Though patriotism is still the theme of QGLT users’ identity, humanism and a critical view of social problems such as corruption and social injustice are also displayed. Meanwhile, public longing for freedom and democracy, often kept underground and regarded as a challenge to the authoritarian administration, also finds its place in the virtual public sphere.

Online debate among different clusters reflects a variety of ideological
preferences in contemporary China. Women users, though small in number, also participate in the online political discussion. Thus, this ‘public’ online, rooted in well-educated intellectuals, emerges from the social background of economic development, urbanisation and digital globalisation, and their enthusiasm in political participation may lead to tensions between people and the government. However, this emerging ‘public’ online has its limitations in terms of inclusion and autonomy. The virtual public sphere is subject to political control and the looming danger of commercialisation. Non-progressive voices such as extreme nationalists also pose a threat to the rational critical public debate online. It is suggested that the future study should based on an even larger sample that can better reflect the population being studied. Also it is important to make a comparative analysis about the online virtual communities and the real communities in Chinese society to find out the sameness and differences between virtual and physically real communities.

Notes

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Turkle, Sherry.

Turner, John
Press.


Appendix 1 Selection of 22 QGLT informants for intensive interviews (2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Demographic Distribution of Interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>20-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>High school Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of origin</td>
<td>Village/town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Present living</td>
<td>Village/town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profession</td>
<td>Self-employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2
Survey questions to QGLT users:

Part III Your use of the Internet and the QGLT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often do you Use the Internet</th>
<th>daily</th>
<th>3-4 times per week</th>
<th>weekly</th>
<th>2-3 times per month</th>
<th>occasionally/ rarely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often do you Visit the QGLT</th>
<th>daily</th>
<th>3-4 times per week</th>
<th>weekly</th>
<th>2-3 times per month</th>
<th>occasionally/ rarely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Others: _________________________</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often do you Visit the QGLT In-Depth</th>
<th>daily</th>
<th>3-4 times per week</th>
<th>weekly</th>
<th>2-3 times per month</th>
<th>occasionally/ rarely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Others: _________________________________</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often do you Post on bulletin boards</th>
<th>daily</th>
<th>3-4 times per week</th>
<th>weekly</th>
<th>2-3 times per month</th>
<th>occasionally/ rarely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often do you Post on QGLT In-Depth</th>
<th>daily</th>
<th>3-4 times per week</th>
<th>weekly</th>
<th>2-3 times per month</th>
<th>occasionally/ rarely</th>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How long have You been a QGLT member</th>
<th>5 years</th>
<th>4 years</th>
<th>3 years</th>
<th>2 years</th>
<th>1 year of less Than 1 year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Others: _____________________________</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How long have You been with QGLT In-Depth</th>
<th>5 years</th>
<th>4 years</th>
<th>3 years</th>
<th>2 years</th>
<th>1 year of less Than 1 year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The majority of cross-posted cross-posted cross-posted translated self-
Your postings are from Chinese traditional media, from Chinese Internet media, from overseas Chinese media, from overseas media (from foreign languages), composed Others ____________________________________________________________

Have you had Your postings deleted in QGLT almost all your postings most of your postings half of your postings a quarter of your postings it rarely or never happens to you

What is your political affiliation in QGLT community Ultra-Left Left Mid-of the road Right Ultra-Right refuse to be grouped

Your opinion about the political affiliation within QGLT: ____________________________________________________________

Do you find QGLT a friendly community? very friendly friendly moderate not friendly very unfriendly

Have you had contacts or communication with other QGLT members offline? Please indicate in the following form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>frequently</th>
<th>often</th>
<th>sometimes</th>
<th>occasionally</th>
<th>rarely/never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mails</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Emails</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meeting up</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work relationship</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Friendship</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please describe the theme of your postings (including the articles you cross-posted from other media):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>frequently</th>
<th>often</th>
<th>sometimes</th>
<th>occasionally</th>
<th>rarely/never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Headline News</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Investigative journalism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online petition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Literature</td>
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<tr>
<td>History</td>
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<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Military studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others:</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Which of the following adjectives best describe the language used in your postings?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>very appropriate</th>
<th>appropriate</th>
<th>not sure</th>
<th>inappropriate</th>
<th>very inappropriate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patriotic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Concerning (about the country & the people)

- Passionate
- Sarcastic/cynical
- Objective
- Truthful
- Rational
- Logical

Others: ____________________________________________________________

What's your impression of other QGLT postings?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>very appropriate</th>
<th>appropriate</th>
<th>not sure</th>
<th>inappropriate</th>
<th>very inappropriate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patriotic</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Concerning (about the country &amp; the people)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Passionate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarcastic/cynical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Objective</td>
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<tr>
<td>Truthful</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rational</td>
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<tr>
<td>Logical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others:</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Among the following list of possibilities, what will happen to China in the coming 20 years?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>highly possible</th>
<th>possible</th>
<th>don’t know</th>
<th>impossible</th>
<th>highly impossible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuous economic development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A strong military power</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unification with Taiwan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compulsory education for all children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Better international relations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improvement in environmental protection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improvement in protecting rural population’s rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>Further privatisation of state-owned enterprises</td>
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<tr>
<td>No census registry system</td>
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<tr>
<td>Effective control of corruption</td>
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<tr>
<td>Progress in legislation system</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others:</td>
<td></td>
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Crafting Self Identity in a Virtual Community: Chinese Internet Users and Their Political Sense Formation

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ABSTRACT

To study the process of constructing self identity by Internet users is a challenging task for social anthropologists, while the use of ethnographic method in studying the interactions among individuals in an online virtual community is by no means of easy job. Employing qualitative studies as the main research approach, the authors conducted a case study of a virtual community for the mainland Chinese, with a focus on its users’ identities constructed politically. The paper examines the users’ pennames, signature files, online communications such as lurking and flaming and political clusters formed on different ideological viewpoints and argues that Internet bulletin boards as virtual communities in China are used as social institutions in the public sphere although this virtual public sphere still has its limitations in terms of inclusiveness, autonomy, and people’s public use of their reason.

Although the Internet connected China to the world in earlier 1990s the major steps for building online community were not achieved till August 1995 when the influential campus bulletin boards Shuimu Tsinghua BBS were set up, which is run by the students from one of the leading universities in China. Sixty-two bulletin boards emerged in Mainland China by the end of 1996 as the result of online virtual communities’ growth. From then on, Internet bulletin boards have flourished from university campuses to the rest of the society and became a vital forum for students and professionals to present themselves and craft virtual identities. Public access to Internet in China has grown in a quick fashion. Research on whether Internet bulletin boards contribute to democracy in China shows both a celebration of cybertopia and a loathing of cyberghetto.

What is nevertheless lacking in the existing literature is a depiction of the emerging Chinese “public” as represented on bulletin boards and other online interactive communities. The construction of virtual community identities among Chinese Internet users and their motivation for lurking, posting or
flaming still remain largely unknown, which draws the attention of the authors of this paper. This study proposes some initial answers to the above questions through an anthropological case study of users’ construction of virtual community identities in *Qiangguo Luntan* (QGLT) ([http://people.com.cn/bbs/start](http://people.com.cn/bbs/start)), one of the most popular Internet bulletin boards in the Chinese world for current affairs discussion.

Taking QGLT as our online study site the authors apply an ethnographic approach for the research. The data gathered are mainly through participant observation and in-depth interviews. The participant observation consists of the authors’ experience both as registered users under a few pen names since early 2001 and personal interactions with the directors of QGLT, as well as one of the authors’ fieldworks working as an intern moderator with QGLT in 2004 for about 10 weeks. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with twenty-two QGLT users were conducted for this research. The sampling process is a combination of maximum variation sampling and snowball sampling due to the sensitive nature of the research perceived by the respondents. Among those 35 participants 22 individuals agreed for intensive interviews according to the maximum variation principle. The interviews were conducted either through long distance telephone calls (11 out of 22) or through face to face dialogues (3 out of 22), or though emails and instant message communications (9 out of 22).

As the explosive diffusion of the Internet into China the proliferation of virtual communities are bound to be developed and growing. The nature of those communities and communications is rather diverse, and the benefits such as the ability to interact with likeminded individuals instantaneously from anywhere on the globe, for personal psychological well-being, as well as for society at large, of belonging to such a group that Rheingold (2000) among many others envisioned are not necessarily realized, or pursued, due to the constraining of social and political forces. However, it is not uncommon to see the internet uses in search of self identity and political sense within their virtual communities and the netters registered with QGLT are the pioneers of those Chinese who are actors in those virtual communities.

Our findings suggest that Internet bulletin boards enable ordinary Chinese
to have their identities as politically activated citizens constructed in cyberspace. A consistent enthusiasm for political participation can be found in users’ pennames, signature files, political clusters, and online behaviours. Though patriotism is still the theme of QGLT users’ identity, humanism and a critical view of social problems such as corruption and social injustice are also displayed. Meanwhile, public longing for freedom and democracy, often kept underground and regarded as a challenge to the authoritarian administration, also finds its place in the virtual public sphere.

It is suggested that the future study should based on an even larger sample that can better reflect the population being studied. Also it is important to make a comparative analysis about the online virtual communities and the real communities in Chinese society to find out the sameness and differences between virtual and physically real communities.