

Self-censorship and the Rise of Cyber Collectives: An Anthropological Study of a Chinese Online Community

Cuiming Pang, University of Oslo

The relationship between the Internet and democracy has been a continuing matter of debate for decades. Optimists foresaw new opportunities for accelerating the democratization process, for consolidating and promoting democratic societies, and for facilitating the collapse of authoritarian regimes, maintaining that the Internet is inherently a powerful force for democracy (e.g. Barber, 1998, p. 573-589; Hirschkop, 1996, p. 86-98). Pessimists lamented the arbitrary manipulation of the Internet by political authorities, who used it to enhance their surveillance capability and controlled its use and appropriation in response to a fear of political resistance (e.g. Gandy, 1993; Lyon, 2003, p. 67-82). Research concerning the Internet and democracy in China mostly concentrated on the government's censorship system from a top-down perspective, while few studies focus on the meso-level of collectives and organizations, and on the micro-level of individual Internet users. Many scholars mentioned that in China, censorship is often not initiated by the government alone, but is in fact self-censorship by organizations, such as Internet service providers and Internet content providers (e.g. Sinclair, 2002, p. 24; Sohmen, 2001, p. 21-22). Therefore, a detailed study of collectives and organizations in terms of their attitudes and implementation of self-censorship is essential to understand the political impact of the Internet in the Chinese context.

Focus

Based on participation observation of an online community - *Houxi Street*¹ - and in-depth interviews with community managers and members, this paper will investigate Internet users' and Internet content providers' perceptions of and reactions to censorship, especially regarding how they learn, perceive, and practice self-censorship. Special focus here will be on the organizations' interpretation and practice of the government's media policies, their conflicts and negotiations with both the government and Internet users, and how they provide space for Internet users to express themselves within the boundaries of the limitations on free speech set by the government.

This paper argues that many Chinese cyber collectives organized in the format of online communities tend to withdraw collectively rather than fight for free speech when they encounter the government's censorship. Even though there is a wide range of criticism towards the government's political suppression among ordinary community members and even community managers, the managers tend to learn and practice self-censorship on their own, rather than taking risks to challenge the government authority, for fear of penalties. They generally tend to establish a friendly relationship with ordinary users, and adopt the strategies of negotiation and dialogue rather than restrictions and sanctions, to remind users to be cautious of their own behavior. In addition, ordinary users who establish a collective identity with the community in which they participate tend to understand and accept the community

managers' self-censorship, even treating it as a collective task, maintaining and protecting their collective spontaneously. Therefore, cyber collectives that emerge in the Chinese Internet environment actually act as a "social safety valve," and to some extent help to relieve the tensions and struggles between the state and individuals. This makes it easier for the government to practice Internet censorship, and the road to democracy in China is much more unpredictable.

Internet with Chinese Characteristics

The Internet, when in its beginning stage, was widely predicted to convey information freely and globally, redefining concepts of space, place and time, thereby challenging nation-state boundaries (e.g. Frissen, 1997, p.115). However, a number of case studies, especially those focusing on authoritarian states, such as Cuba, Saudi Arabia, and some Asian countries, have proven that states, as information receivers, actually play an active role in selecting and reinterpreting information, exerting a great resistance to information globalization (e.g. De Kloet, 2002; Fandy, 1999, p. 124-147; Hachigian, 2002, p. 41-58; Kalathil & Boas, 2001). China, for example, has largely supported the development of new technology, realizing its important role in the process of modernization, industrialization, and marketization, but at the same time has adopted sophisticated strategies to restrict information access and use, in fear of a potential danger to political stability (Zhou, 2006, p. 131-154).

These complicated censorship systems, including technologies, laws, and hierarchical structures of administration, have been established gradually by the Chinese government, ever since China was connected to the Internet². National firewall and filtering systems have been the main technologies used to block "harmful" (*youhai de 有害的*) websites and information outside China, and "sensitive" (*mingan de 敏感的*) words in domestic Internet content. Various rules and regulations have been constituted, aimed at telecommunications, Internet services in general, news services, publications, bulletin board services, and Internet cafés specifically³. Several government agencies, including the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Public Security, the Central Propaganda Department, and their subordinate bureaus in provinces and cities, have taken the main responsibility for conducting censorship at different levels and in different domains⁴.

Most of the rules and regulations are targeted directly at organizations, such as Internet service providers and Internet content providers. In order to obtain an operating license, Internet content providers, such as *Houxi Street (HXS)*, are required to register with the provincial information bureau, submitting materials describing personnel and the purpose and content of the website, and must then register with the local police bureau within the first thirty days. If a website runs without a license, or provides services other than those registered, it will be fined, compelled to rectify the situation, or forced to shut down. In addition, Internet content providers are required to set up a secure registration and login system used to identify and track subscribers, to keep logs of subscribers' usage for sixty days, and hand this information over to the government upon demand. The general picture of website operation in the Chinese context was depicted vividly by one of the *HXS* members when we were chatting in Starbucks, taking the coffee store as an analogy that "land, roads, and even electricity are owned by the Communist Party and the government, and if these services are suddenly taken

away, the store will definitely close down.” In fact, not only do these external facilities depend on the government, but the products the store sells are also under the government’s supervision. Instead of conducting direct censorship on Internet content, the government requires the Internet content providers to employ “self-censorship” (*ziwo jian du 自我监管*). By taking responsibility for controlling content posted on their websites and implementing filtering mechanisms, the Internet content providers should, as an Internet police officer whom I interviewed put it, “take charge of their own expression and behavior.”

This self-censorship policy seems to make room for website managers to make their own decisions. However, many website managers, such as those on *HXS*, are frustrated about how exactly to “take charge of themselves,” what kind of content is deemed to be “inappropriate” (*buheshi de 不合适的*), and what kind of expression and behavior will bring trouble upon themselves. The difficulties of “grasping the yardstick” (*bawo chidu 把握尺度*) set by the government are largely due to the current regulatory framework.

Many scholars mentioned in their studies on Chinese Internet rules that the current regulatory framework for controlling Internet content carries some “Chinese characteristics” (Hartford, 2002, p. 255), such as “multiple regulators,” “vagueness of types of prohibited content,” “lack of required monitoring procedures,” and “impracticality of content maintenance requirement” (Ellis, 2005). The administrator of *HXS*, who holds the main responsibility for setting up a filtering system, complained about these rules and regulations for being “too general and vaguely written” and “difficult to implement,” thus making it difficult to determine which words and phrases to filter. Some expressions found in Internet rules, such as “endanger the security of the state,” “divulge the secrets of the state,” “harm the dignity and interests of the state,” “disturb social order,” and “damage social stability”⁵, which are used to judge “inappropriate” content make the rules too ambiguous to be used as criteria for carrying out self-censorship.

The obscurity of the Chinese Internet rules annoyed many website managers because of the difficulties it caused when censoring Internet content. On the other hand, its ambiguity was something *HSX* took advantage of. According to the “*rule for the administration of Internet bulletin board system services*” (2000), those websites that have bulletin board services (*HSX* for example), should apply for a special license and are required to arrange full-time website administrators to monitor their screen round the clock⁶. However, *HSX* actually does not have this license, and from my interview with the founder, it seemed that he did not intend to apply for it, mainly owing to the difficulties of applying for the special license and the expense of hiring full-time administrators. He also did not show any concern about violating the Internet law and the possibility of being punished. “We have a ‘relationship’ (*guanxi 关系*) with the provincial information bureau,”⁷ he explained, and “those bigger websites don’t have any trouble, let alone such a small *HXS*.”

The *HXS*’s administrator’s main impression of how Internet police implement regulatory rules can be described as “take action after the event” (*shihou guan 事后管*). After having dealt with Internet police on several occasions, he figured out that the implementation of the government’s regulations, especially actions taken by Internet police, tend to be loose in peace time, but could suddenly become strict, mostly in the form of intensive campaigns,

when something happened. His argument is supported by the national emergent reorganization of Internet cafés in 2002, which resulted from a big fire in an Internet café in Beijing. Tuis, in his study of the Chinese Internet, took “sine wave” as a metaphor, and pointed out that regulations are usually strictly enforced to begin with, followed by a lax period, and then tightly enforced again, when the government feels it needs to issue a warning (Tuis, 2001, p. 28). The general situation and potential dangers of Chinese websites, which are facing the government regulation, were concluded by one of my interviewees who has much working experience in the IT domain, as “In general, pretty free; if problems arise, then regulations come into play.”

Lawrence Lessig constructed a model of cyberspace regulation, in which law, market, architecture, and norms are regarded as four main regulators that constrain individuals’ expression and behavior (Lessig, 1999 p. 85-99). This innovative model provided a general framework of what and who regulates the Internet, while how the Internet is being regulated, especially the conflicts and negotiations between the regulators and regulatees, should be complemented by specific case studies. In Chinese cyberspace, technology, such as filtering systems, must be set up in every website. The words and phrases to be filtered are added by the website administrators themselves, who normally have differing ideas, opinions, and judgement, a situation that results in different interpretations of the key words and phrases⁸. Laws have been put into effect as well, to maintain the legitimacy of government censorship, although the practice of these laws is sometimes unstable and unpredictable. Both law and technology in the Chinese context have left “grey space” (*huise didai* 灰色地带) for arbitrary interpretation by the government, for organizations’ tricky strategies of “taking a chance” (*zuan kongzi* 钻空子), and also for the struggles, conflicts and negotiations between individuals, organizations, and the government with regard to the enforcement of self-censorship.

Web 2.0 and the Construction of *Houxi Street*

The year 2006 was widely acclaimed as the “year of online communities” (*shequ zhi nian* 社区之年) in the Chinese IT domain⁹. The number of online communities in China reached 630,000 in September 2006; about 30.3% were established during this year¹⁰. Online communities, which are normally characterized as a social space with “social aggregation and personal relationships” (Rheingold, 1993, p.5), have initiated a “new enclosure movement” (*xin quandi yundong* 新圈地运动)¹¹ in Chinese cyberspace. “Communitization” (*shequhua* 社区化) is predicted by many IT experts to be the inevitable tendency of Chinese websites¹². The explosion of online communities and groups in recent years has escalated with the innovative and broad use of web 2.0 applications, such as weblog, RSS, tag, podcast, and so on. These new applications have greatly encouraged users to play the role of both consumers and producers of information, provided a platform for individual exhibition and open communication, and also created a new type of social participation. The popularity of *MySpace* and *Facebook*, in which members can produce files, share information, and create groups, has shown that social network sites – perhaps “the most socially significant of the

Web 2.0 applications” (Beer & Burrows, 2007), mainly online communities – have been widely accepted by Internet users all around the world.

The boom of online communities in China has also impressed *HXS*'s administrator, who had established his own forum in 2001. “Any forum at that time was treated by Internet users as an invaluable treasure,” he remembered, “while now, what bothers users most is which community to choose, rather than where to find one.” This opinion was reinforced by all other interviewees, who showed a strong interest in online communities and exhibited a great autonomy in selecting the “right” one. According to their description, the main criterion for choosing a community or group is “whether it is useful for me.” “Useful” (*youyong de 有用的*) here is a concrete reference to “getting information,” “getting rid of a feeling of loneliness,” “enlarging a social network,” “improving social ability,” and even “clarifying career and life direction,” and “making sure what we really want in our life.” “Common interest” (*gongtong xingqu 共同兴趣*) was another important criteria. A twenty-three year old girl told me that she joined some groups because of their abundant offline activities; however, when she found that most of the activities took place at pubs, something she was not happy about, she left these groups immediately. Not only do users choose communities, communities choose members as well. Once certain themes are formed in a community, the members tend to protect their common interest and maintain community order, barely tolerating different voices and behaviors. Therefore, those intruders who do not fit into the invisible standards of the community would be kicked out (*tichuqu 踢出去*) by community managers, while those who are accustomed to the community “culture” (*wenhua 文化*), “environment” (*fenwei 氛围*), and “rules” (*guize 规则*), will easily achieve a sense of “belonging” and a feeling of “being at home.”

To establish a “virtual home” was the initial idea of *HXS*'s founder, who created this website in November 2005. His former experience of surfing a national schoolmates' online community inspired him to build a similar community for communication specifically for people from his hometown – *Tanyang*¹³ – living in other places. By July 2007, *HXS* has attracted more than six thousand registered community members from among former *Tanyang* people all around China and even overseas, and is widely praised by many *Tanyang* people as the best website in *Tanyang*¹⁴. The “common interest” of *HXS* is diverse topics in reference to *Tanyang* County, including its economic development, travel industry, religion, education, dialect, food, leisure activities, etc. Many “talented,” “well-educated,” and “high social status” people of *Tanyang* post in order to express their ideas and opinions, which were seldom heard by others before, as well as to receive a lot of feedback, support, and praise. Therefore, for those who are interested in and concerned about the development of *Tanyang*, *HXS* is not only a platform for communication and interaction, but also an influential means for expressing personal voices.

In addition, various community activities organized both online and offline have also contributed to the outstanding reputation of *HXS*. The most famous online activity is the “*HXS* evening talk” (“*HXS yehua*”) held every month, providing an opportunity for members to gather online at the same time and discuss certain topics, such as how to invest in the stock market, how to relieve children's stress, etc. Offline activities mainly include dinner

gatherings, badminton sessions, outdoor activities, movie appreciation, and some volunteer work. *HXS* has registered with the *Tanyang* government to become a non-governmental organization in 2006, and has launched many activities, including soliciting donations for a seriously ill student, recruiting a volunteer team to look for old soldiers who survived the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). These volunteer activities are considered by many members as “meaningful” (*youyiyi de 有意义的*), having “positive effects” (*jiji yingxiang 积极影响*) on society, having expressed their sense of “social responsibility” (*shehui zerengan 社会责任感*) and fulfilled their “social values” (*shehui jiazhi 社会价值*). After two years of operation, *HXS* has developed a “participatory culture” (Decrem, 2006), where users are deeply involved in community construction, generating content, expressing opinions, expanding networks, and organizing collective activities.

As with most *HXS*'s members, I also knew of this website from friends, and entered easily into the community, getting the chance to interview community managers and ordinary users. My offline fieldwork started during the period of May to July, 2007. During this two month period, I conducted in-depth interviews with almost thirty members, including the community founder, investors, administrator, board masters, and some other ordinary members. I also participated in various online and offline activities, such as dinner gatherings, playing badminton, and some volunteer work. After registering to be a member of this community and its chat groups, I have also employed participant observation on the virtual field site, reading posts, recording chat material, and analyzing virtual characters created by members through their nicknames, avatars, personal profiles, weblogs, and so on. These anthropological methods have helped me to develop a more comprehensive picture about how an online community really runs, what happened inside this community, and especially the perceptions, ideas and opinions of community members towards diverse topics, such as the government's Internet censorship, which are sometimes not clearly shown on the web.

Censorship and Self-censorship: From the Perspective of Community Managers

Within various communication forms – email, chat room, weblog, etc – in Chinese online communities, Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) is the basic and most popular form (Cui, 2001 p.6). It attracts broad attention mainly because of its “simple user-friendly design” and “great topical openness” (Giese, 2005, p. 26). According to the latest CNNIC report released in July 2007, about 43.2% of Internet users frequently use BBS or forums¹⁵. Topics on BBS cover diverse domains, ranging from general themes on education, literature, fashion, sports, music, partnership, marriage, and parenthood, etc. to specific interests, such as customs in certain minority groups and real estate in certain cities. Compared with other forms, BBS was widely assumed by many Chinese Internet researchers to be the most public-oriented space for open discussion, spreading information swiftly, thereby easily triggering and stimulating widespread social movements from the grassroots level (e.g. Chen and Deng, 2002, p.13; Giese, 2005, p. 20-43). Nevertheless, other scholars emphasized the existence of regulatory rules and hierarchical administrations on BBS, pointing out that this seemingly open space is actually strictly controlled by its managers, who play an active role in setting up rules, monitoring content, and quickly removing “unhealthy” (*bujiankang de 不健康的*) and “inappropriate”

(*buheshi de 不合适的*) posts (e.g. Huang, 1999, p. 145-162; Qiu, 1999, p.1-25).

BBS in China generally has two types of regulatory systems: a “front stage” (*qiantai 前台*) and “back stage” (*houtai 后台*) system. The former refers to those strategies shown on the web - the arrangement of “board masters” (*banzhu 版主*) and the establishment of “board rules” (*Bangui 版规*) – which are adopted to warn users not to cross certain borders, while the latter, operating in the background as the name implies, pertains to the main tasks of community administrators, including all sorts of technical issues, such as setting up secure login and filtering systems, applying BBS or weblog format, etc., in order to ensure the website runs smoothly.

Taking *HXS* as an example, the basic service of the *HXS* community, *BBS* on *HXS* comprises fifteen boards with a wide range of themes, including sports, photography, local customs, games, investments, partnerships, and so on. Each board has its own set of rules, which is usually publicized on the front page by board masters, defining board boundaries and warning users to take responsibility for their own posts. Four kinds of behaviors are normally deemed to be a violation of “board rules,” quoting, as follows: (a) “expression against the government and Communist Party”; “expression against Chinese laws, rules and regulations”; or “touching upon sensitive political topics”; (b) “spreading sexually suggestive material, gambling, violence, and immoral information”; (c) “insulting or slandering others” or “exposing others’ privacy” and (d) “commercial advertising.” Penalties imposed upon those who break the rules vary from the most common penalty of removing the offending posts and issuing a warning to the authors, to the higher level of reporting to the community administrator to ban their ID temporarily, and to the most extreme penalty of permanently banning their ID and prohibiting their access to the community. However, as *HXS*’s administrator admitted, the real control system – filtering system in particular – is dealt with behind the scenes; it is operated automatically and is perhaps not known by ordinary users. A set of keywords, such as “Falun gong,” “June 4th,” and “Jiangzemin,” which are classified by *HXS*’s administrator as “obviously violating the rules and regulations,” are included in *HXS*’s filtering system. Posts including these words are blocked, or the offending words are replaced with *XX*.

Although it is difficult to figure out exactly what kind of topics are deemed “inappropriate,” by the government, there seems to be a “common knowledge” (*gongshi 共识*) among community managers – the founder, administrator, board masters – regarding political issues. In terms of community managers’ criteria for deleting posts and setting keywords, topics like June 4th, Falun gong, Tibet, or Taiwan independence, are “high-tension lines” (*gaoyaxian 高压线*), which means “very sensitive”; those who touch them will definitely “bring troubles on themselves” and “will be sent to prison” as a consequence. To criticize the central leaders of the government and the Party is normally prohibited, and to denounce leaders of certain regions where the website is registered is deemed to be a risk; however, it is normally no problem to show indignation toward leaders of other regions. What’s more, the format of posts, the style of description and the tone displayed in these descriptions are sometimes more arresting than the content itself. Posts written with a harsh tone are more

likely to be deleted than those with a gentler tone, even if their content and purpose are no different.

Normally, there are no directives from the government listing supervision criteria explicitly; nevertheless, website members are usually able to sense the government's ideology and thoughts toward the Internet, largely owing to the government's propaganda. As a key weapon employed to maintain the legitimacy of the government and the Communist Party, the Chinese propaganda system continues to play a crucial role, and is in fact strengthened by the introduction of new tools, such as the Internet (Brady, 2002, p. 574). Meanwhile, this tool itself is also recognized as an unstable and dangerous space, demanding strong propaganda. In the physical world, the Chinese government has traditionally used a combination of slogans and campaigns in enforcing censorship of the media. This technology is now being applied to the virtual space, creating slogans, such as "build up a harmonious Internet" (*jianshe hexie wangluo 建设和谐网络*), "run a civilized Internet" (*wenming banwang 文明办网*) and "use the Internet civilly" (*wenming shangwang 文明上网*), and launching campaigns targeting Internet cafés, University BBS, and so on. "These slogans and campaigns actually reveal the government's thoughts and attitudes towards the Internet," a board master concluded, from his abundant experience as board master on a national website. "We should learn to grasp their ideology from their propaganda!" Sometimes, the local propaganda department or public security bureau will organize conferences, gathering local websites' managers to "study documents" (*xuexi wenjian 学习文件*), which normally convey the "spirit" (*jingshen 精神*) of higher-level government. *HXS*, for instance, is required to send representatives every year to participate in conferences organized by the *Tanyang* government, to learn the government's Internet policies.

This "common knowledge" is also shaped by lessons learned from Internet police's direct warnings and punishment. *HXS's* administrator operated his own forum previously, and was once fined, or "invited to drink tea" (*qingqu hecha 请去喝茶*) in his own words, by Internet police, for not removing a post which mentioned the 1989 student movement. During my fieldwork in *Qingjian*, similar things also happened to *HXS*, when the founder suddenly received a call from *Qingjian's* Internet police, urging him to delete a post expressing harsh criticism towards the national leaders – immediately. The Internet police also tried to test *HXS's* filtering system on one occasion, by sending some meaningless words to the administrator, requiring him to put these words into the system, to check whether the website had set up a filtering system, and how quickly it worked. In order to avoid "making mistakes" (*fancuo 犯错*), *HXS's* founder sometimes logged on to bigger websites intentionally to observe how these websites treat certain particular issues, and which topics they did or did not cover.

It is obvious from my interviews of *HXS's* managers that they do not intend to challenge the government's authority. "We have to face reality for survival's sake," as *HXS's* founder emphasized, "survival is the most important thing for a website. Users might applaud you for a while, for your braveness in publishing bold posts. However, the day you die, who will mourn you?!" Website managers tend to take charge of political posts primarily because of their fear of the government's penalties, which are usually practiced in three ways: fines,

temporary suspension of network connection, and licence revocation. Even though many managers considered it (with “the openness of society” and “the rise of legal consciousness”), the Chinese government would not be as arbitrary as before; they still believe the following famous saying: “Don’t trouble troubles until trouble troubles you” (*duo yishi buru shao yishi 多一事不如少一事*).

It is true that different websites may have different sets of words to be filtered and different website managers may have their own criteria for removing posts; however, this does not mean there will be a rise of conscious resistance from organizations to the government. From my observation of *HXS*, I prefer to consider this fact as a consequence of the difficulties for organizations in conducting self-censorship, and their confusion in judging “inappropriate” messages, as a tricky strategy they used to take advantage of the ambiguous Internet rules, or as an accidental leakage occurring in their balance between maintaining the website’s openness and ensuring its survival. These websites have shown their potential attitudes toward Internet censorship when they registered with the government in the first place. They might exhibit a dissimilar interpretation and practice of self-censorship, and some even diverge from the rules and regulations; however, they are, for some websites at least, more liable to back up at any time at the government’s request.

However, on the other hand, the organizations’ practice of self-censorship does not necessarily mean that they totally support the government’s censorship policy. Many international Internet companies, such as Yahoo, Google, and Microsoft, have been widely criticized by international human rights organizations for their work in assisting the Chinese government in suppressing ordinary users’ rights to free information and free speech¹⁶. Similarly, Chinese websites, their managers in particular, have been blamed by many researchers for their cooperation with the government and their active instigation of censorship (e.g. Huang, 1999, p. 145-162; Qiu, 1999, p. 1-25). Website managers, such as administrators and board masters, who are responsible for monitoring Internet content, establishing rules, and deleting posts, are generally categorized as the lowest level of the technocrat system, or the whole hierarchical administration structure (Qiu, 1999, p. 14). It is true that website managers play an active role in weeding messages which are not in line with government rules, and also call for an orderly and rational discussion; nevertheless, those managers, at least *HXS*’s board masters and administrator, may not be satisfied with the appellations of “technocrat” (Qiu, 1999, p. 14), or “big mama” (Tsui, 2001, p. 39).

Board masters on *HXS*, as those on many other Chinese websites, are ordinary users, elected by other users, and also could be dismissed from their positions at any time, if not qualified. Only those who are “active,” “enthusiastic,” “professional,” and “prestigious” are liable to be elected as board masters. As *HXS*’s “*rule of board masters’ management*” mentioned, being a board master means responsibility and persistence rather than glory. Most of *HXS*’s board masters take this unpaid job seriously, spending a lot of time and energy on their own boards. Their most important tasks, described in the board masters’ own words, are to “attract attention,” “activate atmosphere,” “help the board flourish,” and “hold focus” at the same time. They encourage members to publish posts of “high quality” – have “convincing points,” “literary talent” or “sufficient arguments” – and tend to delete those posts involving violence, pornography, personal insult, and violation of privacy. They also keep an eye on political posts; however, from my interviews and observations of these board masters, it

seems that they are not so rigorous and scrupulous as much of the research seems to imply, and also do not treat the political mission as their only or even main responsibility.

In her report about how the Chinese government controls the media, He Qinglian suspected the authenticity of a large-scale survey released by the Chinese Academy of Science in 2003, which claimed that 50% of respondents think it is necessary to manage and control the Internet, and another 36.2% think that it is somewhat necessary (He, 2004)¹⁷. However, when I asked a similar question of my informants, every informant, manager or ordinary user answered without any hesitation that the Internet should be regulated, and recognized law, government, and individuals themselves as the main regulators. As with almost every online community all around the world, *HXS*'s members exercised a strategy of self-regulation in community construction as well, arranging an administration system, creating their own code of conduct, and resolving community conflicts. It is very clear that the arrangement of board masters is not only required by the government but also demanded by Internet users, who are frustrated over Internet rumors, misleading information, and slander, and who appeal for the establishment of a regulated Internet environment.

Calling for an orderly Internet environment, however, does not mean that those managers or ordinary users support the government's regulation of political issues. Scholarly analysis of the report mentioned above has tended to ignore the fact that most people think pornography (86.7%), violence (71.2%), and junk messages (68.5%) should be controlled, while a smaller number think content related to politics (12.9%) should be controlled¹⁸. This large differentiated attitude towards ethical and political issues has also been testified by my interviews with *HXS*'s managers and members. They believed that the government should take responsibility for regulating the production and spread of immoral behavior, and even felt that the government's policy and its implementation are too loose to control pornography, violence, rumors, etc., effectively. On the other hand, those managers, even the founder and the administrator, are critical of the government's Internet surveillance on political issues, considering it to be "too strict" and saying there is "no need to be so strict."

Based on my observation of *HXS*, I prefer to put aside all the stereotypes toward community administration systems and their managers, rather than presume them to be on the government's side. The management system is arranged not only due to the government's requirements, but also by the demand of ordinary users who want an internal control of immoral expression and behavior. Managers do take measures to control posts on political topics in accordance with the government's requirements, and tend to learn self-censorship on their own rather than taking risks to challenge authority. However, these managers are first of all ordinary Internet users and have their personal ideas, opinions, and attitudes toward government Internet censorship, be it supportive, understanding, discontent, or criticism, which are likely at odds with the behavior they exhibit on the web. It is not difficult to understand why there might be a large discrepancy between managers' inner thoughts and external behavior; however, the most intriguing questions here would be how ordinary members perceive and react to community managers' self-censorship; how the managers face ordinary users' possible questions, indignation, challenges, and resistance, while they themselves may also have similar doubts and discontent with the government's political control; and how they encourage users' self-expression while attempting not to stray beyond the government's tolerance limitation.

Identity and the Collectivization of Political Discussion

The number of Internet users in China has increased dramatically in recent years, and reached 162 million in July 2007, retaining its status as the world's second-largest population with Internet access only after the United States¹⁹. The Internet is consistently used by Chinese users for obtaining information, for communication and entertainment, and for practical assistance, such as online dating, online shopping, and online education²⁰. Even on *HXS*, a small and highly hegemonic community, there are a variety of services, including news, music, movies, games, weblogs, a chat service, match-making, and plenty of suggestions and tips on fashion, investment, finding jobs, raising children, maintaining health, and so forth. A 2005 survey on urban Chinese Internet usage and impact discovered that most Chinese Internet users seek out entertainment online instead of serious political discussion, and concluded that the Chinese Internet is an entertainment highway rather than an information highway²¹. Nevertheless, some other researchers also pinpointed that, in the Chinese Internet arena, attention towards political and social problems and discontent with current society are undoubtedly on the increase (Lagerkvist, 2006 p. 43). Posts concerning political and social issues on *HXS*, for instance, are not rare, and those topics relating to corruption, officials' irresponsible behavior, and foreign policies always invoke heated discussion.

It was not a surprise to me when I was told by *HXS*'s founder that he had just been warned by Internet police for not deleting a post with harsh criticism towards the national leaders. I was more attracted to a conversation, transmitting this news from the founder to other members, especially the post author, when all of us showed up in the same chat group (*liaotian qun* 聊天群) at the same time. This conversation started when the post author made another critical post in this chat group:

2007-06-13 14:49:11 land@HXS²²: Dragon,²³ Don't transfer this post to our BBS, otherwise the Internet police will call me again.

2007-06-13 14:50:04 dragon: Internet police?

2007-06-13 14:50:08 HXS Øthumb²⁴: If the post was only published here, will they block this chat group?

2007-06-13 14:51:28 dragon: How did Internet police find it?

2007-06-13 14:51:39 pig's head: ...So serious...

2007-06-13 14:51:55 pig's head: But funny.

2007-06-13 14:52:03 land@HXS: They searched it automatically.

2007-06-13 14:52:16 land@HXS: They found that joke you transferred from our stock chat group²⁵ to the BBS.

2007-06-13 14:52:21 dragon: Now I see. In fact, it will make our website more famous.

2007-06-13 14:52:36 dragon: What's wrong with that joke?

2007-06-13 14:52:54 land @HXS: Dragon doesn't have any political sensitivity.

2007-06-13 14:53:02 dragon: I agree.

2007-06-13 14:53:29 dragon: But it was not for political opinion's sake. I just thought that the joke was funny.

2007-06-13 14:55:01 land@HXS: Yes, I know.

2007-06-13 14:55:08 land@HXS: *That's why I didn't blame you.*

2007-06-13 14:55:43 dragon: *And then, you deleted that post?*

2007-06-13 14:56:56 dragon: *Poor me. I searched so hard on the stock group and finally got something. But now I've become a spy!*

2007-06-13 14:57:16 land@HXS: *Faint! Of course I deleted it. Otherwise, should we wait to die?*

2007-06-13 14:57:23 land@HXS: *They called me!*

2007-06-13 14:57:37 dragon: *I should save it to my hard disc first.*

Some research on the Chinese BBS or forum pointed out that many managers maintain a kind tone when communicating with ordinary users (e.g. Zhou, 2006, p. 152). The above conversation between HXS's founder and its members also proved that the managers in some online communities, HXS for instance, are willing to develop an open communication and a friendly relationship with ordinary members. Even faced with the post author who brought trouble to the community, the founder showed a great understanding and tolerance instead of assigning blame and invoking punishment. He patiently explained the cause and effect of this event to the author, and even joked with him for not having any "political sensitivity" (*zhengzhi mingandu 政治敏感度*). On the other hand, the author, *dragon*, also seemed to understand the founder's treatment of his post, and accepted the fact immediately without any dispute. In some other cases, which are exhibited on HXS's BBS, some authors whose posts were deleted by the managers are not so polite and accepting as *dragon*; they usually tend to publish another post with a striking title, angrily demanding an explanation. However, their irritation is often appeased by the board masters' modest attitudes, patient explanations and sincere apologies. According to HXS's "rule of board masters' management," community managers are not allowed to use coercive methods to resolve conflicts and disputes. They have an obligation to give reasons for removing posts and are expected to keep an open mind toward users' questions and challenges.

It is also clearly shown in this conversation that HXS's founder was confronting a dilemma of preserving the community's openness and obeying the government's rules at the same time. He obviously still tried to balance this conflict and did not want to constrain members' self-expression completely, even though he showed a strong fear of the government's political censorship. By reminding *dragon* not to transfer his post to HXS's BBS, the founder distinguished two types of communicative forms, BBS and the chat group, and treated the former as a more fragile space, where members should be more cautious of their behavior, while performance on the latter seemed to have a lesser risk in relation to governmental supervision. The members also showed their awareness of the difference between BBS and the chat group, when *dragon* called himself a "spy," and HXS *∅ thumb* questioned the safety of the chat group, even though they clearly did not know how to behave appropriately in each place.

In Chinese cyberspace, a variety of methods of counter-control are adopted and widely spread by Internet users, despite the fact that many of them may not intend to challenge the government. By observing and comparing different communicative forms – BBS, email, weblogs and chat groups – I found counter-control strategies to be most vividly displayed in chat groups, where a number of people are able to chat and discuss at the same time²⁸. I was

sometimes surprised by bold expression in chat groups, such as a picture of a naked female body with Jiang Zemin's²⁹ head, some funny words added to serious images of Hu Jintao, and some extremely harsh doggerel satirizing corruption officials. In chat groups, it is quite normal for users to create various metaphors, satire, jokes, pictures, and avatars to make their expression more humorous and poignant.

In fact, although chat groups are also under the supervision of the chat service provider and the government³⁰, it is more difficult to exert censorship in this participatory form than in others, mainly because it is too complicated on a practical level to control the huge amount of daily chat material, and censoring technologies are still not able to recognize pictures, which are widely used in chat groups³¹. This weakness in Internet censorship is exploited by many websites, such as *HXS*, as a strategy to strengthen their relationships with users. By creating a virtual space to meet most users' demands for communication and interaction, and thereby unlocking a more open space for freer expression, *HXS*'s managers have built up a mutual understanding and trust between themselves and members, and have greatly encouraged members to develop a sense of identity toward this community.

Many members told me that, compared to other communities in which they have participated, this *HXS* community is the easiest to become deeply involved in. As Giese pointed out, the awareness of one's local place of birth is a very important part of one's online identity (Giese, 2006, p. 30); a common birth place and dialect, similar interests, and familiar background, have attracted a large number of people to gather together on *HXS* and to get to know each other quickly. This group of people not only uses this website to express themselves and develop interpersonal relationships, but also exerts great effort to facilitate website construction and development, producing a diverse Internet content, offering managers suggestions and advice, and spontaneously maintaining a collective orientation and set of values. Some community symbols, such as the community name, logo, slogan, and clothes, which were created by members cooperatively, have distinctly indicated a strong collective identity established on the *HXS* community.

A Chinese Internet observer pointed out that forum participants tend to be more cooperative with web masters in keeping the forum in order when they realize the political risk the forum faces³². Many of *HXS*'s members also exhibit a great comprehension of the difficulties of running a website in China's political environment, and the struggles the managers must confront. Managers often took a community member living in Taiwan as a typical example to show members' support and understanding, and appreciated the fact that he reminded managers to delete his posts if they were inappropriate. As one member expressed, "*HXS* is, after all, a spontaneous, private, and self-financing website, we should cherish and protect it." Many members also seem to develop a "common sense" similar to the managers, regarding the kinds of topics they can or cannot touch, and tend to avoid publishing harsh posts in relation to political and social issues. Those who are not aware of the "yardstick" (*du 度*), like *dragon*, generally become more cautious after being reminded by the community managers.

In fact, many members are not only cautious about their own behavior, but also watch others, even the managers' performance, and try to remind them to "grasp the yardstick" if necessary. Once when a board master who took charge of "*HXS* evening talk" proposed a discussion about the fact that large numbers of Chinese government officials use the services

of prostitutes, many members reminded him that this topic was “too sensitive” and was likely to result in “serious consequences,” especially during the current “tense situation” (*fengsheng jin* 风声紧). The phrase “don’t discuss politics” (*motan guoshi* 莫谈国事) is quite often quoted, not only by managers, but also by ordinary users on BBS and in chat groups, as a serious warning, or sometimes as a joke which actually implies a criticism and discontent towards the government’s censorship.

It is also very interesting to note that in the above conversation, all the participant members – *HXS* *∅ thumb*, *pig’s head*, *glass snake*, *dragon*, etc. – did not really seem to take this event seriously, and commented that it was “funny” and would “make *HXS* famous” instead. They also did not show great indignation toward the government’s censorship, which to some extent exhibited their underlying political opinions and attitudes. As *dragon* clarified his behavior as not being “for political opinion’s sake,” some *HXS*’s members who create and spread political pictures, jokes and doggerel also explained that their initial intent was for entertainment rather than to express political views. Some others who actually want to express their dissatisfaction with political and social problems tend to criticize the policies, rules, and regulations the government and Communist Party enforce, instead of directly targeting China’s political system, one-party rule, and non-democratic regime. Most of my informants seemed to hold an ambivalent attitude toward the Chinese government and Communist Party, criticizing their “opaque political practice,” and at the same time believing they are improving all the time, having achieved more openness and transparency. There are also some informants who were not optimistic about the Chinese future and pointed out potential risks China might encounter with the authoritarian system. Nevertheless, they tended to accept current reality, adopting a pragmatic view that “to change things that can be changed, and to accept things that cannot be changed,” rather than seeking resistant strategies as those political dissidents reported by the media.

From my observation of this Chinese online community, it seems that a collective behavior regarding political discussion has developed among community managers and ordinary members. In order to maintain a friendly relationship with members, managers do not generally want to exert complete supervision toward political posts, an attitude which also facilitates the development of a collective identity in the community. And once members establish a strong identity with the community, they tend to protect it when faced with the government’s censorship, by taking care of their own behavior and reminding others. Those managers who are not aware of the current political climate and might “make mistakes” are also liable to be warned by ordinary members. Therefore, conducting self-censorship and “grasping the yardstick” has been treated as a collective task by ordinary members, and not as the responsibility of the managers alone.

Moreover, in his study of Chinese media and the Internet, Johan Lagerkvist noted that a kind of “social contract” (Lagerkvist, 2006, p. 184) in relation to Internet use is agreed upon, not only by the Communist Party and the government, but also by media organizations and individual Internet users, who tend to be satisfied with the emergence of new media and alternative information channels. Actually, similar social contracts have also been established in China with regard to China’s political system and the Chinese future, in which many ordinary Chinese people still have confidence. This underlying belief and the exhibited fear of punishment, together with some possible vents for expressing discontent and criticism, have

also helped to explain why the collective political discussion on many online communities, such as *HXS*, tends to withdraw rather than exhibiting active resistance and protest, when it encounters the government's censorship.

Conclusion

Since the early 1980s, China has experienced an intense individualization process concomitant with the gradual retreat of the state from the lives of ordinary citizens, within the context of rapid industrialization, marketization, and urbanization. On the other hand, there has been a tendency to establish new collectives, either by the government, which realizes that tense social conflicts result from a rapid dismantling of old collectives without alternative social security systems, or by individuals, who are forced to recompose their lives and are liable to fall back on collectives to fight a rather unstable and insecure society³³. The trend of forming new groups, collectives, and organizations is clearly exhibited in the Chinese Internet arena, and has escalated with the introduction of Web 2.0 applications, which greatly facilitate a deeper and wider social interaction and participation. These web-based collectives, such as the *HXS* community, have created a new type of communicative mode and a particular organizational form: transcending class and regional boundaries and inviting broad participation and collaboration; eroding the social order and social stratification that exists in the physical world, and at the same time constructing alternative rules and alternative hierarchical structures; and developing a largely anonymous environment and establishing a mechanism of mutual trust.

The emergence and proliferation of cyber collectives in recent years was regarded by Yang Guobin as the main indicator and force, together with public debate and popular protest, for unlocking the public sphere in China and empowering Chinese civil society (Yang, 2003a, p. 453-475; Yang, 2003b, p. 405-422; Yang, 2006, p. 303-318). He argued that these web-based collectives and organizations, such as environmental groups, usually start as online communities and adopt various media applications – email, instant messaging, BBS, and weblogs, etc. – for “trans-regional mobilization” (Yang, 2006, p. 209), “practicing bottom-up politics” (Yang, 2003c, p. 92), and “linking up” (Yang, 2003a, p. 475) with the global community. It is evident that collective action is more influential in spreading public opinion and organizing public activities than separated and unorganized individual action. However, when faced with the threat of a more powerful authority, a grassroots collective would possibly become more fragile than the individual, and is liable to compromise in order to avoid complete annihilation. The evaluation of the impact of the Internet on politics in terms of the collective level should not only be based on what kind of activities these collectives launch, but also on how they organize these activities, especially how they conflict and negotiate with the factors that influence their practices.

The case of *Houxi Street*, a small and local online community, however a good illustration of the problems and issues common to all such Chinese online communities, proved that at least some Internet content providers who create online communities are confronted with a dilemma between offering users a space that is as open as possible, while ensuring their own survival. By taking advantage of the obscurity of the self-censorship policy, they attempt to create some vents for users to express their indignation toward the government while attempting to maintain a friendly relationship with users for the sake of

website development. And as many other ordinary users, website managers also have their own opinions toward the government's political censorship, mostly negative in the case of *HXS*. To a certain extent, these opinions influence the way in which they censor Internet content, setting up filtering words and removing posts. However, on the other hand, fear of severe penalties keeps them from taking risks to challenge government authority, and they are liable to withdraw when their behavior is deemed by the government to have transcended political lines. In order to persuade users to take responsibility for their own statements and avoid sensitive political topics, the managers generally adopt gentle strategies instead of coercive methods when dealing with users' questions and challenges, and are ultimately usually successful in appeasing users' irritation. Moreover, ordinary Internet users tend to participate actively in website construction when they choose to be members of a community such as the *HXS* community, which functioned as a platform for cementing alliances and providing mutual assistance, for individual expression and the exchange of information, and as an arena for exhibiting a strong sense of social responsibility and social solicitude. They are also eager to protect these communities, into which they exert much effort, show a great understanding of the managers' self-censorship, and try not to bring problems to the community. Therefore, a collective action of retreat rather than direct and further collision with the government has occurred in some Chinese online communities, the *HXS* community being one example, with regard to political discussion and activities.

It is evident that the Chinese government has never abandoned or even loosened its control of collective activities in fear of the potential dangers and challenges these collectives could bring. The occasional unrest or potential political resistance in the Chinese Internet arena is normally suppressed by the government, for example by the management of the reorganization of Internet cafés and university BBSs. Fierce repression is enforced by the government in dealing with some cyber collectives constructed by political dissidents, such as the Falun gong group, while a gentler strategy of self-censorship with some room for negotiation is implemented toward most other cyber collectives, which actually have no intention of organizing political protest and resistance. This self-censorship strategy has largely consolidated the Chinese government's Internet censorship, and is likely to continue its influence in the short run.

Notes

¹ In the following sections, the name of this online community has been altered to protect its anonymity, as are the website address and members' nicknames.

² There are numerous articles and media reports, which have given a general introduction to China's Internet censorship system; see for example: OpenNet Initiative. 2005. Internet Filtering in China in 2005-2005: A Country Study. Retrieved September 14, 2006 from http://www.opennetinitiative.net/studies/china/ONI_China_Country_Study.pdf

³ Rules and regulations; see for example: Measures for managing internet information services (2000); Provisional rules for the administration of the operation of news publication services by web sites (2000); Rules for the administration of Internet bulletin board system services (2000). Retrieved October 10, 2007 from <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/index/OF/index.htm>

⁴ These three government organs have different tasks. The Ministry of Information has the

main responsibility for managing telecommunication industries and Internet service and content providers' licenses; the Ministry of Public Security, in conjunction with Internet police, mainly supervises the use of the Internet; The Central Propaganda Department is in charge of propagandizing the Communist Party's ideology and policies relating to the Internet.

⁵ See the rule: *Measures on Internet information service (2000)*, Article 15. Retrieved October 10, 2007 from <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/html/Dir/2000/09/25/062.htm>

⁶ See the rule: *Rule for the administration of Internet bulletin board system services (2000)*. Retrieved October 10, 2007 from <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/html/Dir/2000/10/08/0653.htm>

⁷ This relationship refers to a friend of one of *HXS's* members, who works in the provincial information bureau.

⁸ The variation of setting up words to be filtered can be proved by a test carried out by the OpenNet Initiative in November 2004, which examined the filtering mechanism of three Chinese blog providers, showing that some of the keywords contained in blog entries were completely prevented from being posted by two of the providers, while the other carried out the censorship of entries by replacing the words with “ * ” characters. The report “Filtering by Domestic Blog Providers in China” is available online: Retrieved September 14, 2006 from <http://www.opennetinitiative.net/bulletins/008/>

⁹ See relevant reports about the first Chinese online community conference which was organized in 2006. Retrieved June 16, 2007 from <http://www.qihoo.com/site/portal/zhuanti/newpower/index.html>

¹⁰ Current statistics were published by a national survey of Chinese online community in 2006. Retrieved November 10, 2007 from <http://app.discuz.net/2006vote/report.pdf>

¹¹ For relevant reports, see for example Dai Lu, 2007.

¹² See relevant reports about the second Chinese online community conference which was organized in 2007. Retrieved June 16, 2007 from <http://www.techweb.com.cn/special/zt/07webbbs/>

¹³ The name has been altered.

¹⁴ This website registered in *Qingjian* (the name has been altered), the capital city of one province in China; however, it was also under the *Tanyang* government's management, because it also registered with the *Tanyang* government as a non-governmental organization.

¹⁵ Current statistics were released by China Internet Network Information (CNNIC), in the report “The 20th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development.” Retrieved August 11, 2007 from <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/uploadfiles/pdf/2007/7/18/113918.pdf>

¹⁶ Relevant reports see for example: Amnesty International report “Undermining freedom of expression in China: the role of Yahoo!, Microsoft and Google” (July 2006).

Retrieved November 14, 2007 from <http://irrepressible.info/static/pdf/FOE-in-china-2006-iores.pdf> Human rights watch report “Race to the Bottom: Corporate Complicity in Chinese Internet Censorship” (August 2006). Retrieved December 10, 2006 from <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2006/china0806/china0806webwcover.pdf>

¹⁷ The title of the report is “Surveying Internet Usage and Impact in Twelve Chinese Cities,” released in 2003 by the Chinese Academy of Science. Retrieved September 14, 2006 from http://www.markle.org/downloadable_assets/chinainternet_usage.pdf

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ This statistic was released by Chinese Internet Network Information (CNNIC) in the 20th

survey report on China's Internet development. Retrieved August 11, 2007 from <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/uploadfiles/pdf/2007/7/18/113918.pdf>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The title of this survey is "Surveying Internet Usage and Impact in Five Chinese Cities." It was released in 2005 by the Chinese Academy of Science. Retrieved September 14, 2006 from http://www.markle.org/downloadable_assets/china_final_11_2005.pdf

²² This is the founder's nickname. All the nicknames here have been altered.

²³ This is the poster author's nickname.

²⁴ This is the nickname of one of HXS's members, as are *pig's head* and *glass snake* in the following conversation.

²⁵ This is another chat group on HXS, the main topic of which is the stock market and stock investment.

²⁶ This is my translation of the original citation: "Minzhi mingao Hu Jintao" (民脂民膏胡紧套). The name of the president was actually replaced by some other characters with the same pronunciation.

²⁷ This is the trace left by Internet police, showing that a certain post on a certain website was checked out. The URL address, website physical IP, website physical address, and website name have been altered.

²⁸ This chat service is called QQ group, a sort of Instant Messaging (IM), provided by Tencent QQ Company, China's most popular instant messaging company.

²⁹ China's former president.

³⁰ One of HXS's QQ groups was once blocked by Tencent QQ Company, which suspected that this group used QQ service for gambling. According to some of HXS's managers' analysis, all the chat history will be stored in Tencent QQ Company's server for six months, and must be handed over to the government upon request.

³¹ Even though this QQ chat may be more open and less censored than BBS and weblogs now, this situation may change in the future.

³² This reference was quoted from a secondary source. See Zhou, 2006. The original online source was retrieved by Zhou in July, 2000 from www.peopledaily.com.cn/wsrm/istannual/mtpl/i.html. The site was not retrieved when I later tried to access it.

³³ These conclusions are mainly inspired by the research project *The Chinese Individual: Negotiations of Rights and Responsibilities*. Detailed project description retrieved October 24, 2007 from <http://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/forskning/forskningsprosjekter/chineseindividual/index.html>

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