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Civil society and the Internet energize each other in their co-evolutionary development in China. The Internet facilitates civil society activities by offering new possibilities for citizen participation. Civil society facilitates the development of the Internet by providing the necessary social basis—citizens and citizen groups—for communication and interaction. These arguments are illustrated with an analysis of the discourse in *Qiangguo Luntan* [Strengthening the Nation Forum] and an ethnographic study of *Huaxia Zhiqing* [Chinese Educated Youth], <www.hxzq.net>.

Does the Internet contribute to China's democratization and civil society development? Answers to this question are typically ambivalent. The short history of the Internet and the lack of sufficient empirical evidence make it hard to spell out an unambiguous case. The ambivalence is also due to the way in which the research question is posed. Historically, technology has changed human societies, and it is reasonable to ask what this new technology does to Chinese society today. Yet, this is only one side of the coin. Technology is used by members of society; its diffusion and use depend on social conditions. The conditions of society, in other words, shape technological development.

This article asks instead: how do the Internet and civil society in China interact in ways that shape the development of both? It argues that Chinese

civil society and the Internet energize each other in their co-evolutionary development,[1] even as both are constrained by other forces. The Internet facilitates civil society activities by offering new possibilities for citizen participation. Civil society facilitates the development of the Internet by providing the necessary social basis—citizens and citizen groups—for communication and interaction. The Internet and civil society have an interdependent relationship, yet current literature tends to ignore this relationship and emphasize the unidirectional impact of technology on society.

To develop these arguments, I will first discuss the developments of the Internet and civil society in China and analyze why the Internet matters for Chinese civil society and vice versa. Next, an analysis of the discourse of the popular *Qiangguo Luntan* (Strengthening the Nation Forum) in this part shows how China's Internet users perceive the Internet. Finally, I will present an ethnographic case study of *Huaxia Zhiqing* (Chinese Educated Youth, at <http://www.hxzq.net>. Initially set up as an online bulletin board in June 1998, *Huaxia Zhiqing* has evolved into a portal site and online community that typifies the co-evolution of the Internet and civil society in China. The conclusion summarizes my arguments and addresses broader implications.

Chinese Civil Society: Incipient Yet Dynamic

Civil society is here defined broadly as the intermediate public realm between the state and the private sphere. Citizens and citizen groups participate in organized or unorganized discursive or non-discursive activities in civil society. This definition includes the public sphere, voluntary organizations, and social movements as key components of civil society. Although some scholars have argued that there is no necessary and logical link between civil society and democracy, a robust civil society is often taken as a basis for democratic politics.[2] Many scholars have argued that contemporary Chinese civil society is incipient.[3] I suggest that the incipient nature of Chinese civil society is a favorable condition for the development of the Internet in China. An incipient civil society has many vulnerabilities, but it is dynamic. It ab-

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1. I borrowed the idea of co-evolution from Jonathan Bach and David Stark, "Link, Search, Interact: The Co-evolution of NGOs and Interactive Technology." Working paper of the Social Science Research Council Program on Information Technology, International Cooperation and Global Security, <http://ssrc.org/programs/itic/publications/working/LinkSearchInteract.doc>, accessed February 23, 2002.

2. On the "neutral" nature of civil society, see Gordon White, Jude Howell and Shang Xiaoyuan, *In Search of Civil Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 5–6.

3. See, for example, Timothy Brook and B. Michael Frolic (eds.), *Civil Society in China* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1997) and Rebecca R. Moore, "China's Fledgling Civil Society: A Force for Democratization?" *World Policy Journal* 18:1 (Spring 2001), pp. 56–66.

sorbs new things quickly and is open to innovations. Organizational theory postulates that organizational inertia increases with age.[4] Although civil society does not consist of organizations only, social organizations are a central component of China's emerging civil society.[5] The relative "young" age of Chinese civil society may thus mean that it is more responsive to technological change, especially those technologies that may meet its needs.

The incipient and dynamic character of Chinese civil society is evident at various levels. First, there has been an emerging rights consciousness related to the notion of citizenship rights. Several authors have documented this new trend, showing that while bureaucratic and economic power often encroaches upon citizen rights, more and more people have begun to use the legal system to defend and protect their rights.[6] This does not mean that China has developed a strong rule of law, but it does indicate that the notion of citizenship has become an increasingly important basis and goal of Chinese civil society development.

Second, there have been significant changes in China's public sphere. Studies of Chinese mass media have consistently revealed a tendency toward the loosening of political control and the parallel trend of commercialization, despite cautionary notes about the limits of political decentralization and the problems of commercialization.[7] Furthermore, as some scholars have argued, public spheres are not only to be found in the media in China but also in a wide range of social spaces. Two recent volumes show that China's public sphere also resides in living room conversations, McDonald's restaurants, greeting cards, telephone hotlines, discos, and the like.[8] The consumer

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4. Michael Hannan and John Freeman, "Structural Inertia and Organizational Change," *American Sociological Review* 49 (June 1984), pp. 149–64.

5. Much of the work on Chinese civil society focuses on social organizations. See White, Howell and Shang, *In Search of Civil Society*; Brook and Frolic, *Civil Society in China*; and Margaret Pearson, *China's New Business Elites* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

6. One indicator of rising rights consciousness is the increase in the number of lawsuits filed against violations of property and personal rights. See Minxin Pei, "Rights and Resistance: The Changing Contexts of the Dissident Movement," in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, eds. Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 20–40. See also Kevin O'Brien, "Rightful Resistance," *World Politics* 49:1 (October 1996), pp. 31–55. Also see Elisabeth Rosenthal, "Pollution Victims Start to Fight Back in China," *New York Times*, May 16, 2000, p. A-1.

7. See Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market and Democracy in China* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998) and Daniel Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics and "Thought Work" in Reformed China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

8. See Nancy N. Chen, "Urban Spaces and Experience of Qigong," in Deborah S. Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton, and Elizabeth Perry (eds), *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China*, pp. 347–61. See also Deborah S. Davis, ed., *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), especially David Fraser, "Inventing Oasis: Luxury Housing Advertisements and Reconfiguring Domestic Space in Shanghai," pp. 25–53; Yun-

revolution in contemporary China has the unintended consequence of producing new social spaces for public expression and communication.

Third, social organizations also manifest an incipient yet dynamic character in China. Western and Chinese researchers alike have argued that although the state still maintains strong control, social organizations have not only grown in number but also enjoy more independence than before.[9] Even faced with strong state regulative challenges, social organizations have a lot of room for maneuver. As Tony Saich shows, they have strategies to bypass the government's strict registration policies, such as by registering as a business or as a secondary entity of an existing dormant organization.[10] While social organizations can often negotiate freer space within the system, even the Chinese government has recently called on China's social organizations to fulfill social functions as a "third force."[11]

In short, Chinese civil society is incipient yet dynamic. Its various elements are not well-developed, but they are growing and transforming, providing favorable conditions for the diffusion of the Internet in China.

The Development of the Internet in China

Current debate on the development of the Internet in China revolves around two themes, political control and political impact. Studies of political control of the Internet take the Internet as a dependent variable to be explained, while studies of political impact take the Internet as an independent variable. One of the most systematic studies of political control of the Internet in China was produced by Michael S. Chase and James C. Mulvenon.[12] Their meticulous analysis of the multifarious ways of state control of the Internet and the creative uses of the Internet by dissident groups shows that "the Internet . . . will probably not bring 'revolutionary' political change

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xiang Yan, "Of Hamburger and Social Space: Consuming McDonald's in Beijing," pp. 201–25; and James Farrer, "Dancing through the Market Transitions: Disco and Dance Hall Sociability in Shanghai," pp. 226–49.

9. Scholars have begun to study these social organizations as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). See Deng Guosheng, "New Environment for Development of NGOs in China," in *500 NGOs in China*, ed. NGO Research Center, Tsinghua University (United Nations Centre for Regional Development and NGO Research Center, Tsinghua University, 2002), pp. 17–29. See also Susan H. Whiting, "The Politics of NGO Development in China," *Voluntas* 2:2 (1991), pp. 16–48 and Qiusha Ma, "Defining Chinese Nongovernmental Organizations," *Voluntas* 13:2 (2002), pp. 113–30.

10. Tony Saich, "Negotiating the State: The Development of Social Organizations in China," *China Quarterly* 161 (March 2000), pp. 124–41.

11. "Chinese NGOs to Work with Government for Poverty Reduction," *Renmin Ribao* [People's Daily], online English edition, Beijing, October 28, 2001, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200110/28/print20011028_83359html>.

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

to China, but instead will be a key pillar of China's slower, evolutionary path toward increased pluralization and possibly even nascent democratization."[13] Another important study, by Eric Harwit and Duncan Clark, examines political control at the level of physical network and content.[14] They find that both the private sector and the Ministry of Information Industry (MII) vie for control of the network infrastructure, not necessarily in order to maintain control over content, but to collect revenues and profits. Content control is in the hands of several other government and party organs. Yet, for two reasons, content control remains "schizophrenic"[15] and ineffective. First, the concerns of government agencies responsible for content control may conflict with the lucrative interests of MII and the private sector, thus making control difficult. Second, much of China's Internet content is in private hands and some comes from foreign sources, which exacerbates the difficulty of control. As a result, political control tends to take the form of "killing the chicken to scare the monkeys," i.e., occasionally arresting one or two violators.[16] This tactic induces self-censorship among users.

While studies of political control of the Internet show who attempts to control what and how control is maintained and challenged, studies of the political impact of the Internet, though few in number, convey several mixed messages. First, there is some recognition that diffusion of the Internet will challenge undemocratic state behavior and enhance pluralism.[17] Second, there is evidence that the Internet has important implications for China's public sphere, associational life, and political activism.[18] There are also cautionary notes about the limits of the Internet as a tool for political change. Kathleen Hartford, for example, suggests that "as Internet use and applications expand in China . . . we may well find that its greatest impact lies in

13. Ibid., p. 90.

14. Eric Harwit and Duncan Clark, "Shaping the Internet in China: Evolution of Political Control over Network Infrastructure and Content," *Asian Survey* 41:3 (May/June 2001), pp. 377–408. See also Zixiang Tan, "Regulating China's Internet: Convergence toward a Coherent Regulatory Regime," *Telecommunications Policy* 23 (March–April 1999), pp. 261–76; Jack Linchuan Qiu, "Virtual Censorship in China: Keeping the Gate between the Cyberspaces," *International Journal of Communications Law and Policy* 4 (Winter 1999/2000), pp. 1–25; Kathleen Hartford, "Cyberspace with Chinese Characteristics," *Current History* (September 2000), pp. 255–62; Nina Hachigian, "China's Cyber-Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 80:2 (March/April 2001), pp. 118–33; and Philip Sohmen, "Taming the Dragon: China's Efforts to Regulate the Internet," *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs* 1 (Spring 2001), pp. 17–26.

15. Harwit and Clark, *Shaping the Internet in China*, p. 408.

16. Ibid., p. 395.

17. See Chase and Mulvenon, *You've Got Dissent!* and Geoffry Taubman, "A Not-so World Wide Web: The Internet, China, and the Challenges to Nondemocratic Rule," *Political Communication* 15 (April 1998), pp. 255–72.

18. Guobin Yang, "The Internet and Civil Society in China: A Preliminary Assessment," *Journal of Contemporary China*, forthcoming.

intensifying existing social contradictions."[19]   Some analysts have warned that the Internet may become a tool for the expansion of Chinese nationalism of both the popular and official types. Todd Munson's analysis of a Chinese tourism website shows how nationalism is "sold" online.[20] C. R. Hughes and Alan R. Kluver have both argued that the Internet may be used to promote nationalism rather than democracy.[21]

Current focus on the political control and impact of the Internet in China has opened key areas for research, yet such a focus has unnecessarily limited the scope of the research questions. Technological diffusion is not shaped only by political and economic factors, nor is the impact of technology confined to the political sphere and state behavior. Broader realms of social life may affect technological diffusion while being mediated by technologies. Social and technological processes may develop along parallel paths with mutual influences. From this perspective, it is crucial to examine how Chinese civil society shapes the development of the Internet, and vice versa.

Why Does the Internet Matter for Chinese Civil Society?

One way of understanding the significance of the Internet for Chinese civil society is to compare Internet use by civil society with two other areas: e-government and e-commerce. E-government and e-commerce have both been promoted by the Chinese government, yet they have developed at a rate far slower than, so to speak, China's e-civil society.[22] Commentators have observed the slow development of e-commerce in China thus far, even while being optimistic about its potential size and scope in the future.[23] Statistics

19. Kathleen Hartford, "Cyberspace with Chinese Characteristics," p. 261.

20. Todd Munson, "Selling China: www.cnta.com and Cultural Nationalism," *Journal for Multimedia History* 2:1 (1999), <http://www.albany.edu/jmmh/vol2no1/chinaweb.html>.

21. C. R. Hughes, "Nationalism in Chinese Cyberspace," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 13:2 (Spring–Summer 2000), pp. 195–209; Randy Kluver, "New Media and the End of Nationalism: China and the US in a War of Words," *Mots Pluriels* 18 (August 2001), <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP1801ak.html>.

22. In the literature on Internet use by civil society organizations, there is some recognition that the Internet attracted civil society organizations before it became attractive to commercial and political institutions. See, for example, Patti Whaley, "Human Rights NGOs: Our Love-Hate Relationship with the Internet," in *Human Rights and the Internet*, edited by Steven Hick, Edward F. Halpin and Eric Hoskins (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 30–40. See also Roberto Bissio's essay about the experience of the influential Association for Progressive Communications: Roberto Bissio, "The Network Society, 1990–2000: Electronic Conferences, Global Summits, Getting Together for Good Purposes," in The Association for Progressive Communications, APC Annual Report, 2000, pp. 22–26, <http://www.apc.org/english/about/index.shtml>, accessed May 16, 2003.

23. Ernst Dieter and He Jiacheng, "The Future of E-Commerce in China," *Asia Pacific Issues*, no. 46 (October 2000).

TABLE 1 *Select Network Services Used by Internet Users in China (Multiple Options),*
June 1999–December 2002 (in percent)

	Email	Newsgroups	BBS	Online Shopping	Online Payment
June 1999	90.9	21.4	28.0	3.2	N/A
December 1999	71.7	17.0	16.3	7.8	1.8
June 2000	87.7	25.4	21.2	14.1	3.7
December 2000	87.7	19.3	16.7	12.5	2.7
June 2001	74.9	10.7	9.0	8.0	1.8
December 2001	92.2	13.4	9.8	7.8	2.1
June 2002	92.9	20.4	18.9	10.3	N/A
December 2002	92.6	21.3	18.9	11.5	N/A

SOURCE: China Internet Network Information Center survey reports, July 1999, January 2000, July 2000, January 2001, July 2001, January 2002, July 2002, January 2003. See <http://www.cnnic.net.cn>.

published by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) indicate that although more and more people in China seem to be buying or making payments online, the percentage has remained very small over the years, both in absolute and in relative terms. In June 1999, 3.2% of respondents reported having shopped online, while 21.4% reported having used newsgroups and 28% bulletin boards. The numbers fluctuated, with a curious increase in online shopping up to 14.1% in June 2000, while the percentages of respondents who used newsgroups and bulletin boards in June 2000 were 25.4% and 21.2%, respectively. The numbers for all three categories declined after June 2000 and rose again one year later, though significantly more people reported having used newsgroups and bulletin boards than used online shopping or online payment. Table 1 shows these numbers from June 1999 to December 2002. Email, which has consistently been the most frequently used network service, is added for comparative purposes.

The general pattern is clearly that China's users are more attracted to the social than the commercial functions of the Internet. The drop in reported user preferences for newsgroups and bulletin boards in 2001 may have been due to government policies to promote e-commerce and discourage newsgroup and bulletin board activities,[24] but even under conditions of tighter

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24. The Chinese government announced regulations targeting bulletin boards in November 2000, stipulating that bulletin board services should follow a licensing procedure and that users could be held responsible for what they say online. This may have adversely affected the use of newsgroups and bulletin board systems. For a list of Internet regulations in China, see <http://www.cnnic.net.cn>.

political control, many more people were engaged in online social and political activities than in commercial activities.

In January 1999, the Chinese government launched a "Government Online" project. Its goal is to increase administrative efficiency, reduce costs, and give citizens more access to government information. Within about a year, China's "gov.cn" domain names had increased from 982 to 2,479. By December 2002, China had a total of 7,796 gov.cn domain names, accounting for 4.3% of all .cn domain names.[25] Although government websites have been on the increase, how effective they are as a means of providing information and encouraging public participation remains doubtful. Chinese journalists have complained that government websites are often inactive, outdated, or lack useful information.[26] According to one study, even the website of Qingdao city in eastern China, one of the top five e-government websites in China, had only about 1,500 hits a day as of December 2000.[27] In contrast, at roughly the same time, China's popular bulletin board *Qiangguo Luntan* (Strengthening the Nation Forum) had about 100,000 hits and 1,000 posts daily.[28] Even a specialized bulletin board like *Huaxia Zhiqing Luntan* (Forum for Chinese Educated Youth), which attracts mainly members of China's "educated youth," the "Red Guard" or "sent-down" generation,[29] had an average of 700 hits daily. [Editor's Note: For an extended discussion of *zhiqing*, see Nora Sausmikat, "Generations, Legitimacy, and Political Ideas in China: The End of Polarization or the End of Ideology?" *Asian Survey* 43:2.]

It is quite clear that civil society use of the Internet by far surpasses e-government and e-commerce at this stage. How to explain such disparities? Why could civil society sectors take better advantage of the Internet? In the case of e-government, a major problem lies with the government agencies that run their websites. There is simply too little information there. The slow development of e-commerce involves complicated factors, such as the lack of

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25. CNNIC, "Zhongguo hulian wangluo fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao" [Statistical report on the conditions of China's internet development], January 2003, <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/develst/2003-1/>.

26. "Zhengfu wangzhan heshi huo qilai?" [When will government websites come to life?], <http://www.gov.cn/news/detail.asp?sort_ID=7391>, accessed April 2, 2003.

27. Junhua Zhang, "China's 'Government Online' and Attempts to Gain Technical Legitimacy," *ASIEN* 80 (July 2001), pp. 1–23.

28. The figures are based on data I collected in my online ethnographic research. The 100,000 daily hits are figures for May 2000. The 1,000 daily posts are figures for December 2000.

29. The "educated youth" (or *zhiqing*) generation is sometimes known as the Red Guard generation or the Cultural Revolution generation. It refers to the cohort that was sent down to the countryside in the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages" movement. The movement started in 1968 and was officially called off in 1980. See Liu Xiaomeng, *Zhongguo zhiqing shi: Da chao 1966-1980* (A History of the Educated Youth in China: High Tide 1966–1980) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1998).

an effective legal framework, and security concerns. To understand the relatively high level of Internet use by civil society sectors requires a historical understanding of the conditions of Chinese civil society and some knowledge of the technical features of the Internet.

There are many different descriptions of the technical features of the Internet. Jonathan Bach and David Stark capture them well with their emphasis on the Internet's capacity to "link, search, interact."[30] They explain that the telephone can be used to search for people and link them up so that they can interact, yet this process is only additive. On the Internet, this process becomes multiplicative and recombinatory, with each step—search, link, or interaction—forming the basis for other steps. In explicating the political implications of this multiplicative, interactive technology, Bach and Stark suggest that Internet use creates a space *for* something to happen as well as a space *within* which something happens, including new social bonds and new forms of organization. It is ideal "for lowering transaction costs, increasing participation and impact, and streamlining operations."[31]

Of course, the technical features of the Internet do not automatically promote civil society. The Internet may be used by state or nonstate actors to undermine the development of civil society.[32] Yet, the Internet remains a relatively powerful new medium and space for participation in civil society. The term "relatively powerful" is worth emphasizing. Studies of technological diffusion generally hold that the "relative advantage" of new technologies compared to existing ones is an important facilitating factor in the diffusion of new technologies.[33] New technologies may have relative advantages in the sense that they better meet certain social needs. In China's case, the Internet can better meet people's needs for personal expression and public participation than conventional media can.

A historical perspective may further highlight the contemporary relevance of the Internet. In Maoist China, political participation was strictly guided by the state, and political dissent was a risky behavior. In the reform period beginning in 1978, mass political campaigns gradually receded from China's political scene while new, individualist modes of political participation appeared.[34] In his study of political participation, Tianjian Shi enumerates 28

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30. Bach and Stark, "Link, Search, Interact."

31. Ibid.

32. See Greg Walton, "China's Golden Shield: Corporations and the Development of Surveillance Technology in the People's Republic of China," International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, 2001, <http://www.ichrdd.ca/frame.iphtml?langue=0>, accessed April 12, 2002.

33. Everett Rogers, *The Diffusion of Innovations*, fourth edn. (New York: Free Press, 1995).

34. Wenfang Tang and William Parish, *Chinese Urban Life Under Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

political acts used by citizens in Beijing to articulate interests. With the exception of big-character posters, none of these involves public participation. Most acts, such as "complaints through the bureaucratic hierarchy," involve the airing of personal grievances without the possibility of opening up these grievances for public discussion.[35] A basic conclusion to be drawn from these studies is that while the channels for citizen participation have expanded in the reform era, they are neither adequate nor sufficiently open to the broader citizenry. The Internet offers new possibilities.

Why Is an Incipient Civil Society Favorable for Internet Diffusion?

The Internet began to develop in China in the mid-1990s, at a time when a civil society was already emerging.[36] Ever since, this emerging civil society has provided favorable conditions for diffusion of the Internet. First, existing and dormant citizen groups and networks provide a social basis for using the Internet. The interactive nature of the Internet means that for it to be used and popularized, a basic level of online social interactions is necessary. Interactions may take place among total strangers, as is common in chatrooms and bulletin boards. Formal and informal social groups provide networks for online interactions to occur. Examples include professional groups, alumni networks, and other social groups based on some kind of preexisting identities. The case study of China's "educated youth" generation to be presented below will demonstrate how a generational identity serves as the nexus of solidarity among a group of Internet users.

Second, the internal dynamics of Chinese civil society also favor the development of the Internet. There are various manifestations of such dynamics, such as the expansion of individual rights and urban public spaces, the proliferation of popular protest, the decentralization of the media, and the expansion of associational life.[37] These dynamics derive from the extraordinary combination and juxtaposition of ambiguities, tensions, contradictions, and hopes in contemporary Chinese life. To take one obvious example: how can we understand all the social problems (such as accentuated unemployment, prostitution, and corruption) that have accompanied China's "progress"

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35. Tianjian Shi, *Political Participation in Beijing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

36. China was connected to the Internet in 1994, when there were about 10,000 Internet users. By October 1997, Internet users in China had reached 620,000. See CNNIC, "Zhongguo hulian wangluo fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao" [Statistical report on the conditions of China's internet development], October 1997, <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/develst/cnnic199710.html>.

37. See essays in Davis, Kraus, Naughton, and Perry, eds., *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China*; Deborah Davis, ed., *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*; and Perry and Selden, eds., *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*.

toward modernity? How can we understand modernization in light of these social ills? And how can we understand the value of one's personal life if one happens to be a helpless victim of these problems? These are common concerns among the Chinese public, often heard and lamented about in daily conversations. Thus, when the Internet began to spread, users quickly embraced it as a means of expressing and discussing such concerns. Hence the proliferation and popularity of online magazines and bulletin boards.[38] To a certain extent, the government's reinforced measures to regulate the Internet toward the end of 2000 was a response to the widespread online debates about these social problems.[39]

Lastly, as noted above, the essence of civil society is citizen participation in public life. Citizens may or may not perceive the Internet as conducive to public participation. Such perceptions influence Internet behavior. A comparative study of public attitudes toward computer-mediated communication in Japan and South Korea shows that although Japan is technologically more developed, people in South Korea are more enthusiastic about the Internet as a tool of communication and information exchange. The stronger interest in Korea seems to derive especially "from the desire for free expression that had been suppressed during the years of dictatorship that ended in 1987."[40] Is there a similar desire for free expression in China? Students made a strong case for this in 1989 with their own actions. Does the passion for free expression still live on today? What is the perception of the Internet as a means of public participation among China's Internet users?

To understand these questions, I conducted a discourse analysis of the posts that appeared from August 1999 to December 2000 in the most popular online bulletin board in China, *Qiangguo Luntan*, or QGLT for short. QGLT is affiliated with *Renmin Ribao* [People's Daily], the leading official newspaper in China. It practices more censorship than other bulletin boards and is thus a conservative case for analyzing public perceptions of the Internet in China.[41] Yet even here, the message is clear: Internet users generally con-

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38. Major portal sites such as Sina.com, Sohu.com and Netease.com all support popular bulletin boards. For a study of online intellectual magazines in China, see Yongming Zhou, "Expanding Space under Refined Control: Party-State, Intellectuals, and Cyberspace in Contemporary China." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, March 28, 2003, New York.

39. The Chinese government promulgated several Internet regulations in November 2000, including one about bulletin board systems. See <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/>.

40. Robert J. Fouser, "'Culture', Computer Literacy, and the Media in Creating Public Attitudes toward CMC in Japan and Korea," in *Culture, Technology, Communication: Towards an Intercultural Global Village,* ed. Charles Ess (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 271.

41. One of the most popular Chinese-language bulletin boards, QGLT <http://bbs.people.com .cn/bbs/mlbrd?to=47> boasted 30,000 registered user names in May 2000 with an average of

sider the Internet as a freer and more open space for public participation.[42]
(Below, transliterated user names and dates of posting are included in paren-
theses, in order to give electronic "voice" to individuals expressing their
views in the Forum.) Users speak of the Internet as a place for ordinary
people to discuss national affairs, communicate feelings, and express opin-
ions (Suisheng yousi guoqiren, 11/03/99);[43] a place for self-discovery and
self-expression (Guiyuan, 11/07/99); a space for demanding democratic su-
pervision and independent thinking (Changren, 11/15/99); and a "coffee
shop" that "cannot turn away customers, nor dictate what they talk about"
(Zuishang bushuo, xinlixiang!, 04/08/00). They often compare the demo-
cratic potentials of the bulletin board (BBS) forum with the lack of such
potentials in conventional media, and are excited about the new possibilities
of freedom of speech. Thus, the author of one post calls QGLT "a sacred
temple where we had our first taste of the sacred rights of freedom of
speech," and believes that QGLT "provides an opportunity of expression for
grassroots voices that have always been repressed and blocked" (Changren,
01/19/00).

   Users are also aware of the potential political functions of the Internet.
One post notes that QGLT is already beginning to function as "a clearing
house for world news, different view points, and people's voices" (Duoduo-
shuo [talk-talk-talk], 07/25/00). Some propose that QGLT could serve
China's democratic governance. One post submits that QGLT could become
an online RAND company (sic) for the Chinese government (Guoke, 09/20/
99). Another suggests that "QGLT should be a place for hearing people's
voices and providing input for government decision-making" (Beidou, 02/24/
00). Others emphasize democratic participation. Thus, QGLT should be-
come a channel for ordinary citizens to participate in government (Guoke, 10/
07/99). "The forum should become a people's democratic square" (Xinzuo-

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1,000 posts daily. As of April 2, 2003, the online community of which QGLT is a part, has
196,402 registered users. The discussions in QGLT are mostly about current affairs. The forum
opens on a limited basis, from 10 A.M. to 10 P.M. daily, and has computer filters and full-time
hosts to monitor posts.

   42. This finding is supported by the results of an Internet survey, which shows that compared
with newspapers, television and the radio, the Internet is perceived as more conducive to expres-
sing personal views. See Guo Liang and Bu Wei, "Huliangwang shiyong zhuangkuang ji yingxi-
ang de diaocha baogao" [Investigative report on internet use and its impact] (Chinese Academy
of Social Sciences and Center for Social Development, April 2001), <http://www.chinace.org/ce/
itre/>, accessed April 12, 2002.

   43. "Suisheng yousi guoqiren" is the transliteration of the user name of the person who posted
the message. Many of these user names are humorous and expressive. "Suisheng yousi
guoqiren" means "a state enterprise employee who, though alive, is like dead." "11/03/99" re-
fers to the date the post appeared in the forum. I will follow the same citation format throughout
this article. Many of these posts are no longer available online but are part of my personal
collection of downloaded files.

pai [New-leftist], 01/06/00). The multiple voices in the forum should be published in the pages of official news media (Changren, 11/09/99; Shuini, 03/28/00). In aggregation, the persistent voice is to call on QGLT to use this space to promote democratic politics in China (Xingfu, 11/09/99).

The censorship practices in QGLT have incurred repeated criticisms,[44] but by and large users of the forum consider the Internet as a means of and space for public participation. This perception influences their likelihood to participate in online communication and interaction.

<www.hxzq.net>: A Case Study

To illustrate the co-evolution of the Internet and civil society, I present a case study of <www.hxzq.net>, based on close contact with its collective management and intensive research into the site.[45] Conclusions below derive from this work. Called *Huaxia Zhiqing*, or *Huazhi* for short, hxzq.net is a network of websites run by about a dozen former educated youth (*zhiqing*). The development of *Huazhi* is a story of the development of an Internet enterprise. *Huazhi* is also an active virtual community of members of the educated youth generation, with activities often spilling out to the "real" world, such as mutual visits and social gatherings. *Huazhi*'s growth exemplifies the growth of a civil society group. The challenges it encounters as well as its dynamic growth reflect the challenges and dynamics of an incipient civil society.

Huazhi started out as an online bulletin board set up by two former educated youth on June 18, 1998. By May 2000, it had attracted a daily average of 700 hits and ranked 15th in the list of top-ranking Chinese-language bulletin boards maintained by <www.geocities.com>. In July 2000, through online discussions, the core members of the forum established a "Chinese Educated Youth Internet Studio" (Huaxia Zhiqing Wangluo Gongzuoshi), a collective management entity, to plan, develop, and fund the operations of its BBS forum and associated websites. As of April 2, 2003, *Huazhi* functions as a portal site comprising the following elements:

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44. The following message is only one of many examples of such criticisms: "No one should be domineering and stand above others. People are equal: I hope the administrators and hosts [of QGLT] give serious thought to this issue. . . . We are fed up with reading stuff with the same uniform views. We should be able to read reports of the same event from different angles (Beidou, 05/16/00).

45. All data on *Huaxua Zhiqing* are collected based on my online participant observation and ethnographic research. I began to participate in *Huazhi*'s online activities in February 2000 and became a member of its collective management body "*Huaxia Zhiqing* Internet Studio" when it was set up in July 2000. I explained to members of the Studio that I was not a former educated youth but was doing research on the educated youth generation. I obtained their permission to write about *Huazhi* in my research.

- three online forums;
- four websites featuring, respectively, the history of the sent-down movement, old photos, songs, and music from the educated youth period, and educated youth literature;
- a collection of personal essays written by participants of this virtual community;
- a selection of messages posted to the bulletin boards on various issues related to educated youth;
- a database of 237 former educated youth with current contact information;
- public debates on issues related to the educated youth generation;
- other related historical documents, e.g., the Cultural Revolution;
- links to a collection of personal home pages maintained by former educated youth.

Huazhi is a successful website and active online community. It has raised enough money to lease commercial server space. It has organized several large online activities, including a virtual New Year celebration party broadcast live online. Members have also organized offline gatherings in Beijing, Wuhan, and Guangzhou. The community's online archives contain valuable research resources on the past and present of the educated youth generation.[46] For all these reasons, *Huazhi* has not only attracted many former members of the educated youth generation but has also caught media attention in China.[47]

Why is the Internet important for these former educated youth? How do they make the Internet work? From the perspective of civil society, it may be argued that in contemporary China, members of the educated youth generation form a large and important social group. They have already been engaged in civil society activities even before the Internet entered Chinese life. Indeed, triggered by an influential museum exhibit in Beijing in November 1990 featuring the history of the sent-down movement, a wave of collective nostalgia swept over the generation during the subsequent decade. Since then, members of the generation have organized and participated in voluntary group activities, such as "homecoming" trips to the villages or farms where they had spent their youthful years. They have intervened in China's public sphere debates by publishing reminiscences of the past and collections of old-time photos, diaries, letters, and poems.[48] Their active participation in Chinese public life reflects a desire to solve an identity crisis at a time of great

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46. For example, a *Beijing Youth Daily* article about a fundraising performance in support of the victims of a disastrous snowstorm in Inner Mongolia was written based on materials in *Huazhi.* See Yuan Xiaolu, "Caoyuan zai nali?" [Where are the grasslands?], *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao* (China Youth Daily), March 14, 2001.

47. For example, *Huazhi* was mentioned as a popular website in an article published in the *Dazhong wangluo bao* [Popular Net News] on January 8, 2001.

48. Nostalgic in undertones, these reminiscences often contain critiques of the present. See Guobin Yang, "China's *Zhiqing* Generation: Nostalgia, Identity, and Cultural Resistance in the 1990s," *Modern China* 29:3 (July 2003).

social change. There is a sense among many that their generation is being forgotten as China marches toward modern times, while they had sacrificed their youth for the country's modernization projects. They yearn to express themselves and share their historical experiences.[49]

Common historical experience and nostalgia, generational identity and a shared sense of common fate, loosely organized groups, a yearning for self-expression and social interaction—these are the sociological conditions crucial to the success of *Huazhi* as an online network of former educated youth. These conditions influenced the generation's impulse to go online. When the Internet began to be popularized in China, it seems that many educated youth in different parts of the country simultaneously discovered it as a useful new medium for communication and expression. Many personal home pages featuring themes related to educated youth appeared after 1998;[50] *Huazhi* was only one of the earlier ones. Former educated youth went online in search of other former educated youth. One person describes his first encounter with *Huazhi* in the following terms:

> Once, after some random searching, I entered *Huazhi*'s website and then *Huazhi*'s bulletin board. . . . A new world appeared in front of me. Isn't this the home I've been looking for? . . . After that, I felt I had a place to belong to. I no longer felt lonely. I found a place to express my feelings.[51]

The Internet's unique multiplicative capacity, combining "link, search, interact," helps to meet the needs of the educated youth generation well. As individuals start to use the Internet to link, search, and interact using *Huaxia Zhiqing*'s websites, *Huazhi* becomes many things for different people. It is a space for social interaction, but also for personal expression, mutual help, political debate, artistic expression, online publishing, and more. In this process, *Huazhi*'s size and influence have multiplied. But there are numerous other websites like *Huaxia Zhiqing*. Why is it *Huazhi*, and not others, the one that has become the most influential? One important reason is that *Huazhi*'s collective management made better use of the "link, search, interact" functions of the Internet than the operators of similar websites. Soon after the *Huaxia Zhiqing* Internet Studio was set up in July 2000, its members went to other bulletin boards to post advertising messages for *Huazhi*. By the author's count, by September 18, 2000, advertising messages had been posted

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49. Xiao Fuxing, a well-known writer and former educated youth, says he is dedicated to writing stories about his generation in the hope that "when history gently turns its pages," it will not "casually omit us." See Xiao Fuxing, *Chumo wangshi* [Gently touching the past] (Changchun: Jilin People's Press, 1998), p. 359.

50. As of April 3, 2003, *Huaxia Zhiqing* contained links to 122 personal home pages run by former educated youth. See < http://www.hxzq.net/zqmz1/Default.asp>.

51. <http://www.hxzq.net/xlu/xlu184.htm>, accessed March 30, 2002. Author's translation.

in 39 popular bulletin boards, including the influential "Strengthening the Nation Forum." The word was spread widely on the Net. Second, although the Studio has no physical office, its members have turned the Internet into their virtual office. The Studio had 27 members when it was first set up. They voted to elect seven as a core leadership group. A private bulletin board was then set up for the 27 members to discuss "business" related to *Huazhi.* Email communication among them is frequent. As *Huazhi* began to receive donations, one of the 27 members was designated as treasurer, and regularly emails accounting information to other members. Thus the *Huaxia Zhiqing* Internet Studio became an effective management body through the use of the interactive features of the Internet. Its organizing efforts have been essential for *Huazhi*'s success.

In its five-year history, *Huaxia Zhiqing* has encountered many challenges. These challenges reflect the incipient nature of civil society in China. One of the most daunting challenges is political control. Analysts of Chinese civil society have often argued that social organizations lack independence and autonomy. While online communities such as *Huazhi* clearly enjoy more independence, they are not immune from political control. *Huazhi*'s top-level domain name, hxzq.net, has remained the same since its registration in July 2000. But before and since then, its bulletin boards have had to migrate several times. A long-time serving board was <http://www.netsh.com.cn/bbs/3246>. Here, political discussions became so intensified that the forum was forced to shut down in May 2000. Before it stopped functioning, the mysterious but friendly system operator of the dot.com company that owns the board posted a message saying, "You've caused big trouble, that's all I'll say. Please pass on my apologies to your friends too."[52] That event prompted the members of the forum to set up the *Huaxia Zhiqing* Internet Studio in order to sustain the survival of the virtual community. For safety reasons, through its online network, the Internet Studio managed to lease a bulletin board run on a foreign server. After using this board for more than a year, *Huazhi* shifted back to domestic bulletin boards for technical reasons. However, to reduce political risks, it instituted a system of moderators. Studio members take turns to serve as moderators for its bulletin boards. Moderators mostly maintain a symbolic presence only, though they do warn users to stay within political and legal limits in their online behavior. One could argue that online freedom of speech is compromised under these circumstances, but moderated discussions have so far worked well. *Huazhi*'s approach to the challenge of political control may be considered strategic negotiation with the

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52. <http://www.netsh.com.cn/bbs/3246/messages/248.html>, accessed May 26, 2000.

state, as Saich puts it in his recent study of social organizations in China.[53] Such an approach has given *Huazhi* room to grow.

Huaxia Zhiqing is only one of many cases of the co-evolution of the Internet and civil society in contemporary China. Other examples include the co-evolution of the Internet and China's environmental groups, the emergence of a new genre of writing called online literature, the proliferation of intellectually oriented personal home pages, and so forth. The case of *Huaxia Zhiqing*, however, exemplifies the co-evolution of the Internet and civil society particularly well. Members of the educated youth generation constitute a socially active group in today's China. They are active in associational life, though usually on an informal basis as unregistered social groups. Many of them have published personal stories of their past, in print form as well as on the Internet, and thus intervene in China's public sphere with their own critiques of contemporary Chinese society. When they find themselves online linking up with one another, they contribute to the intensified use of the Internet and the growth of such websites as *Huaxia Zhiqing*. At the same time, Internet use also brings more of them together across vast distances, thus intensifying and expanding their activities as members of a civil society group.

Conclusion

This study has argued that while it is important to understand how politics shapes the Internet, a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of the Internet requires attention to the interactive dynamics of technology and civil society. Conceptualizing the development of the Internet and civil society as a co-evolutionary process provides such an analytic approach. Through a discussion of the technical features of the Internet and by comparing e-civil society with e-government and e-commerce in China, the study demonstrates that the Internet matters for Chinese civil society in notable ways. It has also shown that China's incipient civil society—its active or dormant citizen groups, internal dynamics, and need for public participation—has provided favorable conditions for Internet diffusion in China. Finally, an ethnographic study of the co-evolution of a website and a civil society community, *Huaxia Zhiqing*, demonstrates in concrete detail the dynamics of the co-evolutionary process. The arguments in this paper lead to the conclusion that civil society and the Internet energize each other in today's China.

Due to the analytic focus of this article, the author has not discussed this co-evolutionary process within the larger context of globalization and domestic social transformation. It must be recognized that Chinese civil society and the development of the Internet respond to broader conditions in China and

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53. Tony Saich, "Negotiating the State."

the world even as they develop along their own paths. This analysis therefore is not a rejection of but a complement to theories of Internet and civil society development that emphasize the role of the state or the market. Its contribution lies in showing the actual interactive dynamics of Internet growth and civil society development, an important but neglected dimension in current research. In addition, this study contains some broader implications. For one thing, given the interactive and intertwined relationship between the Internet and civil society, future research should pay more attention to the recombinatory logics of these two fields of development instead of focusing on unidirectional causes and effects. A key question for future research will be: What are the dynamics and consequences of the recombinatory logics underlying the co-evolution of the Internet and different civil society sectors or groups? For example, what are the dynamics and consequences of the co-evolution of the Internet and an online public sphere in China?

Related to this are two political implications. The co-evolution of the Internet and civil society means that political control of the Internet in China will have to take the form of control of civil society as well, and vice versa. Both options are open to the state, but the simultaneous control of the Internet and civil society will add to the difficulty and complexity of control. The co-evolutionary process also means that civil society development will facilitate the democratic uses of the Internet as much as the diffusion of the Internet will shape civil society. This scenario may have long-term consequences for the development of the Internet and civil society in China.