Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Theses, Dissertations, and Major Papers

2009

The myth of cyberdemocracy in China's information society

Yun Wen
University of Windsor

THE MYTH OF CYBERDEMOCRACY

IN CHINA'S INFORMATION SOCIETY

by

Yun Wen

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

through Communication Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of Master of Arts

at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2009

Canada

Author's Declaration of Originality

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication.

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, my thesis does not infringe upon anyone's copyright nor violate any proprietary rights and that any ideas, techniques, quotations, or any other material from the work of other people included in my thesis, published or otherwise, are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices.

I declare that this is a true copy of my thesis, including any final revisions, as approved by my thesis committee and the Graduate Studies office, and that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

ABSTRACT

The explosive development of the Internet in China has catalyzed the emergence of the information society. It is a commonly held view that the Internet provides an online public sphere which provides citizens real opportunities for the democratization of public life. This common sense creates a "myth" of cyberdemocracy. My thesis tests whether this "myth" can be justified with respect to China's information society. First, the nature of the "myth" is analyzed. I examine how the Chinese people understand and interpret the "myth". Second, I focus on whether the "myth" of cyberdemocracy can be justified, especially in the context of China's information society. Based on the analysis of China's information society background, I also explore how the "myth" works to eliminate social contradictions and to obscure the power relations underlying the discourse. I hypothesize that the contradiction between the market-oriented economy and political control impairs the Internet's democratic potential, and power relations in China's information society have not been changed.

ACKNOLEDGEMENTS

My appreciation goes first to my advisor, Dr. Jim Wittebols, whose invaluable suggestions and assistance significantly contribute to my thesis. I'm also grateful for the encouragement and instruction from my committee members Dr. Paul Boin and Dr. Zhenzhong Ma.

I would like to thank the remainder of the graduate faculty and the staff at the Department of Communication Studies for providing tremendous assistance for me during these two years.

Next, many thanks to my advisor, Yannan Liu, at Communication University of China, who has given me generous help to enrich my learning experience in the field of Communication. And I also owe my thankfulness to my dear friends in Canada and in China.

Last but not least, my special thanks must go to my parents. Their consistent love and support is the major source for me to pursue my dream.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The emergence and thriving of the Internet have brought about profound social changes in many ways. People herald the advent of the information age and the new prospects technocratic utopianism promises. This blind optimism obscures the limitations of the information society, and also results in the formation of the "myth" surrounding new technologies.

China is experiencing a transition in economic and political systems. China's socio-economic situation offers a new possibility for the emergence of a new form of democracy. Whether or not the Internet meaningfully contributes to the democratic practices is a significant question to explore. Moreover, most democracy theories or models have been developed within the context of western countries and lack solid intellectual and conceptual roots in developing countries like China.

Methodologically, most studies focuses on the micro or technical level of analysis, losing sight of the political, social and cultural contexts. Carey (2005) argues that Internet research has been insufficiently embedded in the real world of politics, economics, religion and culture. A holistic analysis of the social structures and power relations is needed in Internet research.

Significance and Practical Implications of the Research

The topic of this research is significant for China's context.

First, China's current democratic transformation fairly lags behind its economic achievements. The incompatibility between the political and economic systems

dramatically obstructs China's modernization and further development. Therefore, exploring an effective mechanism to facilitate China's process of democratization is an imperative issue. In the information age, the promise of cyberdemocracy has been transformed into a "myth" which overestimates the potential of the Internet in the process of democratization. Therefore, the purpose of my research is to demystify the myth and to look for opportunities for resistance to the dominant hegemonic discourse about the Internet and democracy. In this sense, addressing the influence of the Internet on China's democracy will make for a theoretically significant and practically meaningful study.

Secondly, most democracy theories or models are derived from Western countries. As Rankin (1993) states, civil society and democratic models did not develop along one path even in Western society, and any kind of Western pattern cannot simply be expected to be duplicated in the very different Chinese historical and societal contexts. My study will situate the issue of cyberdemocracy specifically in the context of Chinese society by incorporating Western theories of democracy. The findings of the research can be used to examine whether Western democratic theories and models are applicable to China's uniqueness.

Thirdly, the majority of research on the relationship between new communication technologies and democracy traditionally heralds the transformative and positive influence of the Internet on democratization. Most studies focus on the technical factors, lacking a holistic perspective to examine the deep social structures and power relations in the background of the information society. In contrast, my research will debunk the blind optimism with critical and skeptical perspectives. To better understand China's democratic development, my thesis plans to adopt a political-economic approach to examining how economic and political power relations shape our cyberspace and the

landscape of democratic transformation.

Finally, the stance of my research is neither neutral nor value-free. Instead, I will bring normative concerns to address this issue. Specifically, I will focus on the inequality of power distribution in the new social structure, and explore the possibilities of social changes. In this sense, my thesis is significant and practical, because it can provide a moral perspective and a guideline of transformation leading to social justice.

Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to demystify the "myth" of cyberdemocracy and explore the power relations underlying the new social structures. With these concerns, I will examine the nature of the "myth", the deficit of this "myth", and the central contradiction the myth tries to downplay and mask. Specifically, this study can be categorized into two main research questions:

1. What is the nature of the "myth" of cyberdemocracy?

This research question covers such sub-research questions as: what political prospects does the "myth" promise? Has the myth already been accepted as a common sense? How do the Chinese people understand the role of the Internet in the process of democratization?

2. What are the real impacts of the Internet on China's democratization beyond what the myth promises?

Taking up the nature of myth, I will specifically examine the following questions: what are the characteristics of cyberdemocracy? Can cyberspace serve as a new form of civic space or public sphere? Can the Internet motivate more civic engagement? Are the Chinese people equally empowered by the Internet? Who is included in and who is excluded from online public fora? Who has the discourse power over cyberspace?

After examining the democratic potential of the Internet in the context of Chinese society, I will look at the factors that obstruct the fulfillment of cyberdemocracy. According to Vincent Mosco (2005), "myths conceal a great deal about the politics of cyberspace and in order to appreciate the significance of this point, to understand more precisely why urban planners pour their dreams into concrete, it is useful to turn to the political economic relationship between digitization and commodification. (p.154)" The myth of cyberdemocracy originates from the information society and functions to legitimate current social and political realities. I will use a political economy approach to exploring the inherent contradictions and power relations underlying China's information society. I assume that the conflict between the commercializing Internet industries and rigorous political censorship can exacerbate the limitations of cyberdemocracy. This reality further demonstrates the illusory nature of the myth. To verify this assumption, the following questions need to be examined: does the myth serve to favor the political and corporate interests? How does political control impair "people's right to speak"? What's the current situation of commercialization on the Internet in China? Do corporate interests intervene and impair online public sphere? Does commercialization of the new media exacerbate the democratic divide? On the global level, does global capital threaten the development of China's domestic democracy?

The Analytical Framework of the Thesis

As Vincent Mosco (2005) says, "cyberspace is mutually constituted out of culture and political economy, out of the interconnected realities of myth and social institution. (p.10)" Two main tools will be incorporated into my research. First, I will use critical cyberculture studies to examine the meaning of the myth, which will serve as an entry point to understanding the role of the Internet. Critical cyberculture studies view

cyberspace as a new cultural context and seek to offer more complex, more problematized findings (Silver, 2000, p.25). This tool can explore how the myth is accepted by many and become the dominant discourse in China's society. Moreover, this approach also provides a way to examine how ideological power works to favor the dominant interests. Second, I will bridge the cultural analysis with political economy. By using political economy, the underlying social structures and power relations embedded in the information society can be revealed. And "political economy is always present as subtext, related to culture in mutual constitution" (Mosco, 2005, p.11).

In addition to the critical research on the nature and the function of the myth, I am also concerned about the deficit of cyberdemocracy. I propose to use the criteria of cyberdemocracy drawn by Wilhelm as my analytical framework. In *Democracy in the Digital Age*, Wilhelm (2000) points out three features of the virtual civic spaces constructing the key elements of cyberdemocracy, including antecedent resources, inclusiveness, and deliberation (p.35).

The first element of cyberdemocracy is antecedent resources. It means the resources and capacities that a person can use to access cyberspace to participate in democratic discourse. Based on this criterion, my thesis will focus on how socioeconomic status influences people's abilities to access to the Internet, and how antecedent resources influence citizen's opportunities to participate in the online public forums and democratic process.

The second characteristic of cyberdemocracy is inclusiveness, reflecting a long-standing commitment to universal participation in political decision making (Wilhelm, 2000, p.33). In a democratic society, opinion formation and decision-making are thought to be legitimate when they represent the will of the people, typically defined not as the

wishes of a particular interest group but all persons who are potentially affected by a policy. Therefore, my research will especially focus on the inclusivity and exclusion in the formation of the public opinions.

The third feature of digital democracy and civic engagement online is deliberation. With deliberative democracy, interlocutors in a political debate need to provide reasons to support their arguments, reasons that can be validated intersubjectively in a public space free from the interference of corporate powers or political forces. In order to reach democratic agreement, diverse viewpoints must be aired and subjected to critique (Wilhelm, 2000, p.33). The notion of diversity of voices is a critical and central standard of public spheres, and it is also a prerequisite to achieving cyberdemocracy.

The Structure of the Thesis

According to the research questions I discussed above, my thesis is divided into six chapters:

The introduction to the research presented here has discussed the significance of the study and particular research questions.

The second chapter of the thesis deals with a literature review of relevant theories concerning cyberdemocracy and the information society. This part specifically focuses on: 1) the conception of "democracy", especially its features in the new information age and in China's context; 2) the discourses concerning the technocratic idealism which gives birth to the myth of cyberdemocracy; 3) the debate aimed at debunking the myth of cyberdemocracy; 4) the conception and the nature of "the information society"; 5) the possible strategies of achieving cyberdemocracy.

In the third chapter, I focus on the background of China's information society by applying the approach of political economy. This chapter starts from a description of

Chinese traditional media's role in the process of democratization. Then the historical development of China's Internet industry is briefly outlined. Next I mainly focus on central contradiction in China's information society. The contradictions between economic liberalism and political control are the fundamental nature in China's information society. Therefore, I specifically discuss how these factors impair the democratic potential of the Internet and further debunk the myth of cyberdemocracy by putting this issue in a holistic societal background. The power relations and social structures in the new information society will be examined in this chapter.

The fourth chapter discusses the methodologies applied in my research. The methodologies I propose to use include virtual ethnography and case studies. A case study of the *tianya.cn*, one of the largest online communities in China, will be conducted. The data of the case study will be generated through the methodology of virtual ethnography. Through online text-analysis, online observation and online interviews, which are the main methods of virtual ethnography, I can examine what the "myth" means to people, how people share and interpret the "myth", and whether the "myth" meets their demands for civic engagement. The case study will also focus on whether the online community has the initiative to facilitate public discussion or whether commercialized and political factors obstruct the goal of constructing an online public sphere.

The fifth chapter is the main body of the research. In this part, I conduct a case study on *tianya.cn* and examine this case by applying Wilhelm's model of cyberdemocracy. This part starts from an outline of tianya's background. Next, people's understanding about the role of the Internet in facilitating Chinese democratization is examined. The factors of limitation are also discussed in this part.

The last chapter summarizes the key findings of my research. To resolve the

limitation of cyberdemocracy, potential alternative ways are discussed. This section will

also provide discussions on my study's limitation and the directions of future research

concerning this topic.

CHATER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

My thesis draws on three lines of inquiry as the theoretical foundation: a) democracy theory; b) the role of myth in masking reality; and c) the information society theory. Among various democratic theories and models, I will highlight the deliberative model as a fundamental theoretical framework in my study. I will examine the issue of Chinese democracy by looking at the specific political, cultural and social factors which have brought China to this point in its history. Additionally, the cyber romanticism which results in the myth of cyberdemocracy and the dystopian views will be fully examined. Finally, the characteristics of the information society, especially the new social structures in China's context, will be addressed with the approach of political economy.

Democracy: An Evolving Conception

In order to evaluate the impact of the Internet on China's democratization, it is necessary to clarify the features of democracy and its implications for the new information society. In this section, I will examine the variety and conflicting meanings of democracy, delineate the trajectory of Chinese democratization, and explore the debate around the role of new communication technologies in political society.

Western Democratic Theories

According to Douglas Schuler (2004), "democracy" is difficult to define; there is no agreement on an exact definition. However, its basic nature has been acknowledged by most people. He concludes five elements of democracy: the first of these attributes is "inclusivity" which means that everybody, in theory, can participate in public decision making. Second, "there must be ways in which citizens can place their concerns on the

public agenda" (Schuler, 2004, p.71). If the public agenda is monopolized by the dominant interest groups, such as corporations, politicians, or the media, democracy is seriously imperiled. Third, democracy should function in a deliberative way. Democracy requires a public sphere for citizens' deliberation to express their public opinions. Fourth, equality should be ensured at the decision stage. Finally, when direct participation is impractical, a representative approach is necessary to serve the function of democracy. Barney (1996) argues that "democracy refers to a form of government in which citizens enjoy an equal ability to participate meaningfully in the decisions that closely affect their common lives as individuals in communities" (p.22). This definition captures three elements essential to clarify the standard of democracy: equality, participation, and a public sphere.

With the emergence of new communication technologies, democracy has been endowed with some new meanings within the context of new technological possibilities. Hacker and Dijk (2000) define that digital democracy is the use of information, communication technology (ICT) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) in all kinds of media for purpose of enhancing political democracy or the participation of citizens in democratic communication. According to Ogden (1996), cyberdemocracy is "the exercise of democratic principles in cyberspace" (p.128). It seeks to exploit the advantages of new communication technology to facilitate new patterns of democracy. It is believed by the cyberdemocracy advocates that the various qualities of new media—interactivity, fast modes of data transmission, opportunities for many-to-many-communication, abundance of information, and new user-control features--can contribute favorably to democratic political systems. Fackson Banda (2003) argues that cyberdemocracy is better appreciated as a vision of participatory democracy made

possible by the availability and purposeful use of computer technology, especially the Internet. "Cyberdemocracy implies disenchantment with modern forms of political organization, with a view to broadening such forms for enhanced citizen involvement and participation. (Banda, 2003, p.6) "

Scholars have built different models of cyberdemocracy based on traditional democratic values. Hoff, Horrock and Tops (2000) identify three democratic models in the information age: 1) consumer democracy, 2) demo-elitist democracy, 3) neo-republican democracy. The consumer democratic model is the closest to the constitutional democracy which emphasizes the consumption of public services. In this model, the Internet is most likely to serve the purpose of making governments freely available, providing more public service information to citizens, and giving them more choices, and thus more power in dealing with bureaucracy. The second model, the demo-elitist model, stresses the legitimacy of responsive, accountable and open governance. From this perspective, the Internet is used to open up and strengthen vertical rather than horizontal flows of information between citizens and governments. The neo-republican model has similarities with the deliberative model. It is concerned with the quality of participation and engagement, especially at the micro and local levels of politics. According to this perspective, the Internet is a public space where human agents participate and debate community issues.

Drawing on different democratic values and goals, new media can play different democratic roles. However, as Barber (2004) has asked: "which technology and which democracy? (p.33)" Among the various democratic models, such as elitist democracy and pluralist democracy, deliberative democracy has been seen as a sophisticated and appropriate way to fulfill the democratic function in the information age. In China, the

current political regime leaves little room for radical transformation. In this case, deliberative model of democracy, which highlights the significance of grassroots' participation and underscores the existence of a well-functioning public sphere, is applicable in Chinese political and societal context.

Deliberative democracy is defined as a democratic political system based on citizens' voluntary and free discussions on public issues (Kim, 1997). Deliberative democracy incorporates elements of both direct democracy and representative democracy, which emphasizes the public deliberation of the citizenry as the central democratic institution of democracy. The theories of deliberative democracy have been preoccupied with the concept of the "public sphere". Habermas originally explored a systematic theoretical framework concerning the concept of the "public sphere". In his early book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, he described the public sphere as an open institutional space between the state and the private world of the family in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Habermas, 1989). In bourgeois public sphere institutions, such as the coffee houses, salons, newspapers and other printed forms, the public were allowed to participate in "rational discussion and debate on questions of state policy and action" (Butsch, 2007, p.4). In this sense, the public sphere was a new and budding form of democracy by which citizens had the capacity to govern themselves through informed discussion and reasoned argument.

In the information age, many scholars have also begun to pay attention to whether the Internet constructs one of the forms of "multiple public spheres" (Dahlberg, 2001; Palczewski, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002; Poster, 1999). Their work suggests that "there is a clear connection between the Internet and the public sphere" (Poor, 2005). My research will examine this argument by focusing on the specific social context in China.

Dahlberg (2001) has proposed six criteria for online public sphere. They are: autonomy from state and economic power; exchange and critique of criticizable moral-practical validity claims; reflexivity; ideal role-taking; sincerity; and discursive inclusion and equality. This set of requirements provides a measure of the extent to which the public sphere is being facilitated. In *The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation*, Dahlgren (2005) also discusses how the Internet actually functions as a public sphere. He underscores three main analytic dimensions of "democracy's communication spaces": the structures, representation, and the interaction (p.148). For Dahlgren, a well-organized online institution, encompassing legal, social, economic, cultural, and technical ecology, is needed to construct an online public sphere. As Dahlgren states, "a society where democratic tendencies are weak is not going to give rise to healthy institutional structures for the public sphere. (p.149)" The representational dimension refers to the output of the new media. In this dimension, one can raise all questions relevant about public issues which affect the public interest. In terms of the dimension of interaction, citizens should be empowered to participate in discursive interactional process. The form of "one to many" online communication can contribute to civic deliberation.

Some scholars conduct massive empirical studies to test whether an online public sphere exists or not in the information society. For example, Poor (2005) conducted a case study of the website *Slashdot* (an online community of computer enthusiasts) to study how it functions as a public sphere. He argues online public spheres should be spaces of mediated discourse, allowing for "new, previously excluded, discussants" to express their opinions. Issues discussed in the online public sphere are often political in nature. Ideas are judged by their merit, not by the standing of the participants. Poor (2005) concludes

that the *Slashdot* meets these criteria and reflects the concept of the online public sphere.

Democracy with Chinese Characteristics

Chinese orthodox democracy is built on the ideological framework of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. During the period of Mao's domination, "people's democratic dictatorship" was embraced as the principle of Chinese democracy. This orthodox principle maintains the Communist Party of China (CCP) acts on behalf of the people, and can use dictatorial domination over the "enemy classes". "Dictatorship" and

"centralism" were the two cornerstones of Chinese orthodox democracy. "Class struggle" between "the people" and "the enemies" was the fundamental purpose of Chinese orthodox democracy. Only "the people", which was a concept of a collective entity with its unified interests, could enjoy the rights of democracy. However, democracy within "the people" was carried out under the leadership of the CCP. All aspects of people's lives were controlled by vast bureaucracies of economic management, police surveillance, political supervision, and propaganda (Nathan, 1985). Franz Schurmann (1968) argues democracy refers to the "impulses coming from below", implying a transfer of authority and the spontaneity of the masses. However, in China, it is not the case. In contrast, Mao gave an overriding emphasis on "democratic centralism" which meant "impulses coming from above". The practice of centralism guaranteed that the dominant power was always held in the hands of CCP.

Chinese orthodox democracy began to decline when economic reforms were initiated in 1979. Economic decentralization was implemented throughout the national economic system. Under these reforms, there was increased separation of non-planned sectors from direct state control, resulting in increased economic freedom. As the economy became

more and more liberalized, "class struggle" was no longer the primary concern in Chinese society. Correspondingly, the state control over people's social and political life was weakening. These socioeconomic changes laid the foundation for the further development of the Chinese people's autonomy and their civil participation in the public life.

Different from the concept of "traditional authoritarianism", some scholars came up with a new political model called "neo-authoritarianism". This model advocated the need for economic freedom as the foundation for democracy. With this model, the realization of economic freedom was the only way to create social, economic and cultural preconditions for the eventual democratization. In the late 1980s, the emphasis was increasingly placed on "the return of power to society". The main argument focused on "the societalization of government functions" (Cai, 1988). According to Rong (1987), the process of carrying out "the return of power to society" included two steps: first, society would regain the power of economic self-determination from the state; second, society would regain political power and eventually come to realize democracy. Under this model, China is on its way with economic reforms. However, political reform is still at its early stage of development. The CCP has not yet lessened its political power.

In the 1990s, "civil society" became a hot issue in China. This concept of "civil society" seeks for alternatives beyond the state and market. The "public sphere", correspondingly, became a direct result of an active civil society. The adaptability of this new emerging democratic model in China's context has been widely discussed. Deng and Jing (1992) argue that the first key to China's modernization is the building of a healthy civil society which can provide an effective mechanism in checking the power of the state. Deng further delineates two phases in constructing civil society in China: one is the establishment of the state-civil society dual system; the other is the positive interaction

within this dual system, and the realization of democratic politics. Driven by the need to apply the concept of "civil society" to the Chinese political landscape, He (1994) developed a notion of "semi-civil society in China". He (1995) writes that "it is the feature of partial autonomy and overlapping with the state that makes Chinese social associations a semi- or quasi-civil society" (p.8). On the other hand, Huang (1993) argues the concepts of "public sphere" and "civil society" are inapplicable to China, because they presuppose a dichotomous opposition between state and society. Wakeman (1993) also concurs with Huang's opinions. According to his understanding, though public realm has expanded significantly in China, there is no an overwhelming civic power over the state. And "most Chinese citizens appear to conceive of social existence mainly in terms of obligations and interdependence rather than rights and responsibilities" (Wakeman, 1993, p.133-134). Chan (2005) asserts that Chinese citizens have not enjoyed the full status of citizenship in the sense of rights and participation because civic awareness in China is still low.

With the explosive development of the Internet in China, some scholars argue that the Internet is "the newest, and perhaps the most liberating, medium of mass communication" and has brought new hope to the prospects of civil society in China (Tai, 2006). According to Tai, "the Internet is not only bringing about a new type of social space to Chinese netizens, it is also redefining existing social relations and propelling existing civil forces into new possibilities" (p.xii). The contending opinions about the role of the Internet in constructing Chinese civil society and "public sphere" will be discussed in the following part.

During the post-Mao era, the change of Chinese political culture also significantly contributed to the progress of China's democratization. Almond and Powell (1980) point

out that the importance of political culture lies in that it affects people's political behavior and their idea of political legitimacy. Chinese official ideology advocates "harmony" among the state, the party, society and individuals. Therefore, people were not allowed or not aware to challenge the legitimacy of the party and the state. During the country's transition from totalitarianism to "neo-authoritarianism", there was profound change in political values, belief and attitude. Influenced by the traditional cultural values of collectivism, Chinese orthodox democracy emphasized the unity of interests enjoyed by "the people". However, with the rapid socioeconomic change in Chinese society, individualism and independence have come to be viewed as important alternative social values. Diversified interests representing different social groups have opportunities to be voiced and balanced. And individuals can be also empowered to express their public opinions. This cultural change provides the rationale for the cultivation of a pluralistic and deliberative model of democracy in China.

On the other hand, Moody (1983) views the political changes in the post-Mao era as a process of depoliticization and deradicalization. Some Western scholars suggest that a huge gap had developed between the official and the unofficial culture, and they considered a process of "ideological secularization" had taken place in China. From their views, a significant portion of the Chinese people, especially the new generation and the public intellectuals, have developed growing political and ideological alienation from the official ideological control. "Political alienation" refers to a feeling of estrangement from the current regime. "Ideological alienation" represents people's loss of the faith in the traditional cultural values and their challenge towards the orthodox ideology. To some degree, the changes of culture and social values occurring during this time were helpful in facilitating a bottom-up civic power in China's society.

To sum up, the concept of "democracy" in China has salient "Chinese characteristics" which are quite different from the Western notions of democracy. As Robert Ware (1992) concludes, "democracy with Chinese characteristics" shows five different aspects: it emphasized goods instead of rights, the collective instead of the individual, practice instead of procedure, objective interests instead of subjective interests, and social mobilization instead of voluntary participation. Therefore, though the economic reform and corresponding cultural change provide a prospect for a new path of democratization, the CCP still grasps ideological control as a dominant tool to govern the people. In reality, there is a tight pyramidal political system controlled by the Party-state, which confines massive grassroots participation in the public discussion and decision-making process. Power is still highly centralized on the top of the pyramid. Some scholars believe that new communication technologies, especially the Internet, can break this kind of tight political control and facilitate a new way of mass participation. To examine this discourse, I will discuss the role of the Internet in the process of democratization in the following part.

The Myths of Cyberdemocracy

Defining Myth

The analysis above examined democracy and its evolving meaning. There are still some specific questions which need further examination. For example, does the Internet meet these requirements of democracy? What are the capacities of the Internet in facilitating democracy? Is cyberdemocracy a utopian illusion? How are the technocratic myths constructed? And is it possible to debunk these myths? To identify these questions, I will introduce the concept of the "myth" to examine the democratic potential of the Internet.

"Myth" is a central concept in the field of cultural studies. Scholars define the "myth" in a variety of ways. Barthes (1984) defines myth as a system of communication, a message, and a phenomenon of everyday life. The content of a myth is ideological. According to Doty (1986), myth is an "articulated body of images that give philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life". Levis-Strauss (1987) asserts that myths are stories which help people deal with contradictions in social life that can never be fully resolved. Mosco (2005) argues that myths are a form of reality. They give meaning to life, helping us to create in vision or dream that cannot be realized in practice.

The advent and thriving of the new communication technology has given birth to the myth of cyberdemocracy which points to people's intense longing for a democratic participation. The myth attributes too much optimism to the potential of Internet, which raises the Chinese people's expectation of democracy through the Internet. This optimism masks the underlying power relations in the information society. To understand the discourse of the "myth" of cyberdemocracy, I will focus on the debate between technocratic utopianism and digital skepticism in the following section.

The Cyber Romanticism: Constructing the "Myth" of Cyberdemocracy

Technocratic utopianism tends to view new technology as "the great equalizer, possessing magical powers that can wake up a sleepwalking democracy" (Wilhelm, 2000, p.21). This kind of romanticism contributes to constructing the myth of cyberdemocracy. In contrast, cyber-skeptics assert that new technology has little positive impact on democracy. And more pessimistic writers suggest that the Internet will even widen the gap between the engaged and the apathetic (Norris, 2001, p.98).

The myth of cyberdemocracy has history in academia. It mainly derived from contemporary technological optimism which started from the 1970s. Building on the

work of Alvin Toffler (1970), the technological idealists began to instill new technologies with the quality of a "myth" which advocated technological solutions to political problems. With the increasing dependence on information technologies in the society, a wave of futurism dominated academic work. Marshall McLuhan (1972) was especially influential in this field. In his primary works *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*, McLuhan develops a "technologically determinist analysis of the history of western cultures" (Andrew, n,d). He believes that technologies affect society in a personal fashion but also have impact on social structure. Raymond Williams (1974) sums up the technological determinists' position. He states that technological determinism sees technology creating the conditions for human development and progress. "New technologies are discovered, by an essentially internal process of research and development, which then sets the conditions for social change and progress. (William, 1974, p.13)"

In the 1980s, new technologies were lauded for their democratic potential. Some scholars extended the previous futurists' works to reinterpret the power of new technologies. For example, Jim Ruben (1983) asserted electronic technologies would ameliorate current ills in our society. Toffler (1980) envisioned the flourish of information technology. He argued that networked computers would eventually alter the way in which current democratic system worked. A new society, marked by local control and broadened democracy, is coming.

With the emergence of the Internet, a number of scholars showed their great enthusiasm for this new way of communicating and the prospect of online democracy. From their views, the Internet has the potential to allow the public to become more knowledgeable about public affairs, more articulate in expressing their views via online

communication, and more active in mobilizing civic engagement and political participation (Norris, 2001, p.97).

Susan Herring (1993) summarizes the prevalent promises of cyberdemocracy into two factors: one is access to a means of communication, and the other is the right to communicate equally. In contrast to the hierarchical and centralized features of traditional media, Hanson and Narula (1990) argue the Internet constitutes a decentralized network and fosters pluralism and democracy. Similarly, Mark Poster (1999) also claims that the decentralized nature of the Internet has moved political structures away from the convergence of power to a new type of politics which pose a fundamental reversibility of status, authority and power. From his view, people reform their personal identity through the Internet to be "electronic beings" (Poster, 1999, p.187). This online identity allows citizens to enjoy more freedom for civic engagement. This change also requires a new form of governance from political authorities, which could offer opportunity to reframe the existing political structure.

Colin Sparks (2001) examines the ways in which the Internet provides a solution to some social problems. He then concludes that the potential of the Internet has been embodied in real democratic structures. Richard Groper (1996) articulates a view in which the Internet can be used to overcome "the crisis that presently plagues the American democratic system" (p.157). Based on an analysis of the nature of a public sphere, Dahlgren (2001) argues that "the Net does make a positive contribution to the public sphere and has the potential to do even more" (p.50). The Net not only permits ongoing discussion of existing political issues, but also opens up the possibility of introducing new issues, that is, "of defining the field of the political." This quality of the Net constitutes the elements of public sphere.

Some scholars focus on the potential of virtual community—the new form of social organization—on fulfilling democracy. Howard Rheingold (2000) notes that "the technology that makes virtual communities possible has the potential to bring enormous leverage to ordinary citizens at relatively little cost—intellectual leverage, social leverage, commercial leverage, and most important, political leverage.(p.275)" Rheingold's statement suggests virtual community has capacity to function as an alternative civic space. Some public forums revive the public sphere, mobilize communities, and strengthen "direct and strong democracy" (Rheingold, 2000). My thesis will examine whether this assumption is justified when it comes to China's virtual community.

In relation to China's context, the Internet is especially seen as a progressive instrument that can be used to break down political control. A number of studies express abundant optimism by emphasizing the positive impact of the Internet on China's democratization. Negroponte (1995) early points out an informatization fantasy in China's context. He claims that new media, especially the Internet will connect Chinese people with the democratic regimes, bring them pluralism, and meet their desire for free speech. In *The Internet and Civil Society in China: a preliminary assessment*, Yang (2003) states that his research "gives reason for optimism". Through survey data and case studies, he articulates the Internet has given rise to a new type of political action and online public debate in China. The Internet shows new possibilities for "organized civil society action" (p.475). In addition, new forms of online protests facilitate citizens' engagement in collective action to demand for their rights. Based on an empirical study of China's online campaigns, Hung (2006) concludes that the Internet has indeed made "China's authoritarian government more transparent and accountable" (p.168).

Technological idealists demonstrate a romantic view of the democratic future. They

believe that technology, especially the Internet, will bring about a transformative effect on

political system. This romanticism contributes to the "myth" of cyberdemocracy in our

society. After examining the content of the "myth", another important question should be

clarified, that is, how does the "myth" of cyberdemocracy function? The literary critic

Roland Barthes (1972) elaborates the functions of "myth". Myth, as he states, functions to

give things a "natural" and eternal justification. In essence, "myth is depoliticized speech"

(As cited in Mosco, 2005, p.30). Myth also has an ideological function. According to

Mosco (2005), "myth does not just embody a truth; it shelters truth by giving it a natural,

taken-for-granted quality. (p.30)" Myths offer stability for a society. They convey the

political and moral values of a culture and provide systems or interpreting individual

experience within a universal perspective ("Analyzing", 1995). The dominant power can

utilize the myth to signify events, and determine the social practice of interpreting the

myth. In this way, the myth is naturalized as "a sort of guarantee of its truth". In

conclusion, myth is internalized as a form of common sense. Therefore, the myth prevails

as a dominant social value through consent rather than coercion.

For Mosco (2005), the key point to understand the "myth" is to figure out "why the

myth exists, why it is so important to people, what it means, and what it tells us about

people's hopes and dreams" (p.29). These questions are also the key concerns for my

research. Specifically, I will examine how the "myth" of cyberdemocracy is constructed

in our society and how this myth is interpreted by the Chinese people.

Dysutopian: Debunking the "Myth" of Cyberdmocracy

In the opposite camp, the technological skeptics have doubts about the capacities of

information technologies and their social impact. Their works contribute significantly to

the collapse of the technocratic myth. Among these skeptics, Vincent Mosco is an

influential scholar who continuously endeavors to challenge the "myth" of new

technologies. Mosco (2005) goes beyond the blueprint drawn by technocratic

romanticism, rethinking the myth of cyberspace and the values of new technologies in

relation to their roles in politics, economy and culture. He argues that the myth of

cyberspace serves to purify social relations by "eliminating the tensions and conflicts that

animate the political life of a community" (p.31). Mosco's work is extremely important

for examining how the myth is created and what factors contribute to maintaining the

myth. Abbott (2001) also focuses on the power relations underlying the "information

society". He explicitly points out the fundamental problem of the technocratic "myth" is

that it "largely obscures the power relations that permeate cyberspace" (p.106). Similarly,

Young (1987) argues the vision that the new information technology has the ability to

bring about democracy is historically, sociologically, and politically naïve. It ignores

questions of power. In particular, it ignores the insight that a society mediated by an

existing social structure will tend to reproduce that structure. Only when the democratic

distribution of power is equally assigned can the optimistic vision be realized.

Furthermore, Wilhelm (2000) points out the factors challenging cyberdemocracy in

the digital age. First, he is concerned about the barriers into a digitally mediated public

sphere, including a set of resources and skills. The second threat is that marginalized

people in the information society remain marginalized. He also sees a threat from

commercial interests which will undermine the independence of new media (p.6). Peter

Levine (2002) also criticizes the optimistic assumptions about cyberdemocracy. He

summarizes four of these, First, the Internet can offer the convenience of participation for

citizens; second, people can be informed through the Internet; third, the Internet is an

alternative form of public sphere; finally, democracy will flourish when the "power

brokers" are gone (p.127). Levine contends these assumptions are not convincing. Instead, Levine points out that "the odds favor an increasingly privatized and commercialized cyberspace" (p.137).

Benjamin Barber (2004) also offers a rigorous critique of cyberdemocracy. In *Which technology and Which democracy*, Barber (2004) points out the characteristics of digitalization can hamper democracy. He states that technology has a "tendency to segment and compartmentalize what we seek to know" (p.44). The new media may "advantage the politics of special interests; but it clearly disadvantages deliberation and the pursuit of common ground and undermines the politics of democratic participation" (p.45). Therefore, new technologies have little benefit for the pursuit of civic engagement and public discourse. And without these factors, "democracy itself becomes problematic. (p.45)" Similar to Barber's concerns, Margolis and Resnick (2000) also reject the overoptimistic prospect of cyberdemocracy. They argue the Internet cannot create a new form of "cyber politics". Instead, "politics as usual" still dominates the political system. "What has occurred is the normalization of cyberspace... Virtual reality has grown to resemble the real world. (p.2)"

The opinion of "politics as usual" is also supported by Robert McChesney (1995). He considers this issue with a gloomy sentiment. He says, "it is far more likely that the Internet and the new technologies will adapt themselves to the existing political culture rather than create a new one. Thus, it seems a great stretch to think the Internet will politicize people; it may just as well keep them depoliticized. (McChesney, 1995)"

Habermas pointed out that inevitably "the public sphere would be corrupted and co-opted in part by the commercialization of the press through advertising and entertainment" (as cited in Poor, 2005). Based on Habermas's analysis, Papacharissi (2002) argues that

any online public spheres will be subject to the same problems of Habermas's bourgeois public sphere, and will be corrupted by commercialism.

Taken together, the technological skeptics arrive at three fallacies about cyberdemocracy: the belief that new communication technology is neutral, autonomous, and equal. From the critical analysis on the role of new technologies on democratization, we can see that the promise of cyberdemocracy through new technologies is relatively naïve. Therefore, pointing out the problems of cyberdemocracy existing in our society is imperative to wake up people's awareness on the truth behind the "myth" and activate their resistance to the dominant hegemonic discourse. In my research, I will specifically focus on the democratic divide which is one aspect of deficit of cyberdemocracy.

According to Pippa Norris's (2001) definition, the democratic divide could be identified as a dimension of digital divide. It signifies "the difference between those who do, and do not, use the panoply of digital resources to engage, mobilize, and participate in public life (p.4)". It is also concerned with the distribution of power and citizen's influence in political systems (p.12). In my research, I will argue that new technologies have limited impact on democracy due to the attributes of the information society, in which the inequality of allocation of power and resources still exists.

Discourse of Cyberdemocracy in China

China is amid the transitional stage of social transformation in all aspects. During this stage, traditional ideology suffers from profound changes. The advent and rise of the Internet even catalyze the social changes. The Internet communication enlarges and enriches the political landscape in China. A new prospect, which highlights the possibility of a new democratic system brought by new media, is forming in China's information society. The prophets of cyberdemocracy promise us everything: from authoritarian

governance to public participation; from the central control to decentralization; from a society emphasizing authorities and subordination to a society organized by liberty and citizens' power. By offering such a possibility of a truly "democratic mechanism", the Internet can be used as a tool of propaganda in the service of so-called "progressive goals". The national ideological institutions, including government agencies, the mass media, educational system, and a variety of social institutes, construct the mechanisms of propaganda to spread the myth of cyberdemocracy.

According to a study conducted by Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 2007 ("Internet", 2007), most Chinese people hold strong expectation for the fulfillment of public participation through the Internet. The results show that 75.1% of the respondents think the Internet can help the Chinese people better understand political information; 59.3% of the respondents agree that the Internet can make the government concern more about public opinions; and 47.9% of the people think they are empowered of the "right to speak" by the Internet. These optimistic tones also spread across Chinese mass media. *China Youth Daily*, an influential nationwide newspaper in China, conducted a survey on the topic of "cyberdemocracy" in 2008. The newspaper reports that 67.1% of the Chinese public assume the Internet has become an important channel for the government to learn people's political demands; public communication through the Internet is considered as a "positive democratic practice" in China by the majority of the respondents; 56.8% of the people agree that online public opinions have been caught attention and appreciated by the central government; and most people believe that China's Internet communication would be much more dynamic and citizens' public participation would be further strengthened by the Internet in the future.

Not only do the ordinary people express their optimism toward the role of the

Internet, the central government also shows an open and positive attitude toward this new way of public communication. On June 20, 2008, Chinese President Hu Jintao became the first head of the nation to go online, chatting with citizens through *Qiangguo* Forum owned by www. people.com.cn-- the major news portal of the Communist Party of China. President Hu said Chinese leaders were willing to know through the Internet what people were concerned about and people's opinions about the Party and the government's policies. This event was described as a "milestone" of China's public communication by the mainstream media. The mass media suggest, Hu's live chat with netizens highlighted "recent efforts of the government to directly contact the public". And it also indicates that "the Chinese leadership has more confidence and open-mindedness as well as their determination to adopt people-oriented politics" ("Chinese", 2008).

The discourse around the potential role of the Internet in Chinese democratization shaped and spread through the state's ideological institutes. It significantly strengthened the myth of cyberdemocracy in China's society. However, is it really what people feel about the role of the Internet in their public life? What are the truths masked by the mass media's discourses? And what are the real impacts of the Internet on Chinese society? These questions will be further explored in my case study.

The Information Society: The Political-Economic Context of the "Myth"

The above analysis examined the debates around the "myth" of cyberdemocracy. As Mosco (2005) points out that the function of "myth" is to obscure the social conflict and contradiction. Therefore, to gain deeper understanding of the information society, I will use political economy as my analytical framework in this part of research.

As Garnham (1990) describes, political economy "is always concerned with analyzing a structure of social relations and of social power" (as cited in Calabrese, 2004,

p.2). Norris (1990) also proposes that the political economy of communications "is concerned with the polity, the economy and the communications system, with the existing relationships among wealth, power and knowledge".

From the analysis above, we can see that the political economy approach to communication is especially useful to the analysis of the myth in the context of information society. This approach to information society can assist us in examining the structure of this new formation of society, and in capturing the dialectics between the Internet industry and social totality. Such an approach goes deeply into the interweaving relationship between "market logic" and "political logic", the mix of social ideologies and power relations underlying the information society, and so on. This approach can also provide a critical perspective to analyze the political and economic factors that construct and undergird the "myth".

One of the most influential discourses about the information society comes from Manual Castells. According to Castells (1996), the network inevitably leads to increases of social division and fragmentation. Castells (1996) argues that inclusion in the network is a requisite for people's full participation in socioeconomic activities (p.198). Based on this understanding, the information-poor who are excluded from the information network probably cannot gain a right of citizenship to fully participate in the democratic process. To reveal the deep-rooted tension in the information society, Castells uses the term of "information capitalism" to analyze the role of information in the capitalist system, which unavoidably brings about a new form of social stratification. The information laborers who master the access to information and information expertise will control the whole process of information production, distribution and consumption.

Other neo-Marxist-oriented theorists, such as Herbert Schiller (1996), Robert

McChesney (1999), and Frank Webster (2002), argue that, in the information society, the increasing use of information, computers, and networks just marks another phase of capitalism. Schiller (1996) identifies three key elements of the information society: market criteria, class inequalities and corporate capitalism. Schiller argues market criteria, namely the maximization of profit, lead to commodification of information. Class inequalities provide the basis for "information inequality" which is one crucial symbol and consequence of advanced capitalism. Schiller also views the corporate sector as the major beneficiary of the "information revolution". Webster extends Schiller's theory, claiming that the "information revolution" being brought into a class society is marked by existing inequalities and may indeed exacerbate them. Thus what has been called the "information gap" may be continuously widened, with those economically and educationally privileged able to extend their advantages by access to sophisticated information resources (Webster, 2002, p.149). Meanwhile, McChesney (1999) points out that the Internet will not "set us free"; rather, corporate control of the new "rich media" will bring "poor democracy".

Vincent Mosco (1989) also applies the political economy approach to analyzing the nature of the information society. He argues that computer-mediated information technologies and systems have actually "deepened and extended the logic of the marketplace," centralized managerial control, and strengthened the surveillance of the labour process. Thus, the attribute of the information society still lies in its unchanged logic of the capitalist system. Moreover, along with the inherent tendency of commodification of the information, "the values of the political and cultural spheres have increasingly been commodified and drawn into the economic sphere" (p.141), which undoubtedly damages the potential of democracy.

By analyzing the concepts of "ideology" and "information society", Slack (1987) concludes that beyond what the ideology promises, the information society actually extends and intensifies the social relations of industrial capitalism. "As the development of information technology is dominated by private capital, the trend is already toward continued erosion of the public sphere in the creation of hierarchical social relations. (Slack, 1987, p.7)"

According to the above analysis, we can see that the logic of capital underlies the essential substance of the information society. The economy of the information society is still driven by the need of earning profits and reproducing capital. With market-driven logic, information is produced and made available where it has the prospect of being sold at a profit. This process of commodification of information will further undermine virtual civic space. Some scholars argue that there is an increasing skew between market-driven expansion and democratic objectives. The influence of collaborative civic engagement over the process of democratization will continue to wane.

In addition, the information industry is managed by the most oligopolistic, gigantic and global of corporate businesses. Information corporations tend toward concentration due to the fiscal and technological convergence of the new media. Peter Golding (1998) pointed out that major corporations in the telecommunications and information sectors went through a rash of mergers and acquisitions (p.69). The convergence is designed to place the big corporations at the leading position in the race of commercializing the Internet. This logic of capital undoubtedly eliminates the diversity of citizens' choices in the market and leads to the dominant ideas controlled by monopolistic corporations.

Apart from the economic factors, the role of the state government in the information society should also be put under scrutiny to further examine the deficit of

cyberdemocracy. In *How to think about information*, Dan Schiller (2006) points out that informationalized capitalism pressed new demands on the state, and the government responded by documenting, elevating, and projecting these policy preferences domestically and internationally (p.39). Government intervention was pivotal to sustain the capitalists' interest by privatizing public information, strengthening monopolistic corporations' market status and facilitating corporations' global expansion. Thus, citizens' demands for democracy are subordinated to economic interest. This initiative of public policy contributed to a sweeping process of accelerated commodification.

The abovementioned discussion analyzed the nature of the "information society" where the "myth" of cyberdemocracy is deeply embedded. The analysis can be also utilized to examine how virtual civic space is colonized by capital expansion and political control, how diversity of ideas are eliminated by commodification of information, and how the potential for cyberdemocracy is lessened by the monopolistic power of corporations and state government. In this sense, political economy can analyze the unrealistic aspects of the "myth". It also further justifies that the promise of cyberdemocracy simply functions to sustain the political and economic interests by providing a natural and taken-for-granted "myth".

A Way to Cyberdemocracy: Reconstructing the Power Relations?

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that the "myth" of cyberdemocracy is created to serve the need of the hegemonic discourses in the information society. As Gramsci's states, hegemony is also a site of struggle. Therefore, we should see the hope of resistance to the dominant hegemony which advocates the transformative role of the Internet on democratization. But where is the force of resistance located? Dan Schiller (2006) gives the answer: unless that the distribution of social power is broadly shared,

democracy itself is threatened (p.57). Therefore, my thesis will seek and find out the possibilities of social changes to realign the power allocation and bridge the democratic divide in China.

Wilhelm (2000) proposes a two-tiered approach by which the values and policy goals associated with cyberdemocracy can be brought to fruition. He points out the democratic values or ideals to facilitate cyberdemocracy, including equalizing teletechnological skills and resources, building openness to alternatives to the market, and strengthening the strong role for the public sector to promote the public interest in telecommunications (p.154). These values could be realized by new sociopolitical movements to promote equality, human dignity and social justice as well as other strong public-interest objectives.

But what forces can we depend on to implement these values? What kinds of power allocation can challenge the hegemony of corporate and state monopolies to fulfill democracy ? Can we motivate citizen's consciousness to challenge traditional power

allocation? In China's information society, do subordinated groups have the capacity and motivation to participate in the democratic process? It seems that one of the solutions to these questions lies in forming citizenship consciousness and civic culture which can serve as an engine to inspire the social movements and to facilitate the formation of a society of justice and equality where power can be equally distributed and used.

CHAPTER 3: POLITICAL ECONOMY AND CHINA'S INFORMATION SOCIETY

The Chinese system has been transformed from totalitarianism to state-capitalist authoritarianism characterized by a higher degree of tolerance for a separation (and integration) between economic dynamics and political dictates (Lee, 2001, p.9). In this model, China is working to marketize its economic system which will lead to highly capitalized markets. On the other hand, the role of "socialism" is that of "ideological guardian" to counter the tendency towards taking the capitalist road. China's media landscape has also undergone a fundamental transformation over the last two decades. This transformation reflects "the state-market complex" in itself, which means that the power of the state interacts with the force of the market. Embedded in this specific political-economic context, China's democratic transformation through new technologies staggers along the way full of conflicts between the liberal capital logic and the authoritarian ideological control. In this chapter, I will apply the political economic approach to analyzing the nature of China's information society.

The Landscape of Chinese Mass Media

As Peter Kenez points out (1985), a totalitarian regime requires the media to articulate the official ideology, to sustain legitimation of the party-state, and to disseminate propaganda in the interests of mass mobilization. The CCP also points to the virtues of news media that represents the Party's interests and simultaneously serves as the mouthpiece of the Party. Rather than acting as a role of watchdog, Chinese mass media traditionally were used as a part of the state apparatus, completely subordinate to the Party in terms of news content and media operations. The mass media were owned

and funded by the state. The news media had to be placed under tight Party supervision and all news reports had to be guided by the Party's ideological instruction. The principle of Party's domination over the communication system is referred to the "Party principle". It has three basic components: that the news must accept the Party's guiding ideology as its own; that they must propagate the Party's programs, policies and directives; and they must accept the Party's leadership and stick to the Party's organizational principles and press policies (Zhao, 1998, p.19-20). Under such ideological control, people were indoctrinated through simplified and uniform news content, resulting in their obedience to the Party.

In China, the sources of news content are usually dominated by the national Party-media. For example, the *People's Daily (Renmin Ribao)*, the top national newspaper, has been described as "the key link in the entire communication system" and as the newspaper to which "all other papers in the nation turn for guidance and direction. (Yu, 1963, p.270)" When the *People's Daily* introduces the Party's new guidelines or the state's policies, these articles are reprinted by provincial Party newspaper or other media. No dissents from this top national Party newspaper are allowed to be present in the subordinate newspaper. Another important news agency, the *Xinhua News Agency (Xinhuashe)*, also takes the role of representing the Party's voice on a broad range of topics. The Party requires local television and print media (provincial level and below) to use *Xinhua News Agency* as the main information sources on politically sensitive topics. In terms of television, China Central Television (CCTV) enjoys the largest television viewing audience in the world and conveys national propaganda to the national population. These national mass media are at the top of the hierarchy of Chinese communication system, which guarantee that the state's propaganda's tool is centralized

in the Party's hand.

During the state's transition from totalitarianism to "neo-authoritarianism", China's media landscape was significantly changed. During this era, Chinese mass media system was struck by the wave of neoliberalism and marketization. Facing with the pressure from the market and globalization, Chinese mass media began to carry out a large-scale transformation that came to reconstruct the power of the Party's propaganda system. The mass media inaugurated a "dual-track system" which became the most salient feature of the Chinese communication system. On the one hand, the mass media takes the public responsibilities of producing news content—a form of public goods and service. This still requires the mass media to undertake the task of propaganda—to sustain the stability of the Party's domination. On the other hand, with the legalization of advertising in 1979, the mass media began profit-making ventures through market-oriented activities. This process of transformation has created a dichotomy in which media serve as both major Party organs and fully commercial media outlets. Despite being pushed to the market for earning profits, the top Party media are still directly controlled by the Party. While commercial media outlets have to rely essentially on market competition for their survival and prosperity rather than depending on state subsidies.

With respect to the press, Zhao (2008) states media commercialization revolution started with the implementation of a business-oriented system. News content shifted from emphasis on the Party's activities or policies to civic life which attracts the mass audiences' interests. In the 1990s, there was a proliferation of metropolitan dailies and other commercial print media in Chinese major cities. These new emerging forms of print media focused on popular topics as their primary focus. Civic affairs happening in people's daily lives are favorably reported by metropolitan dailies. Popular topics, such as

entertainment, sport, lifestyle, etc.., also get much more freedom to report than political news. The explosion of commercialized mass media provides the mass audience more access to diversified news resources or ideas. However, some sensitive topics are still completely forbidden, or required to be reported under the strict control of the "Party line". These topics include social conflicts--especially "mass events" that protest against the Party and the government, political democratization reform, national unity, or topics referring to the Party's leaders. As Zhao (2008) articulates, the "Party line" always ensures its continuing relevance and its disciplinary power over the communication system.

The number of television stations experienced rapid growth after 1983, when the Central Committee allowed provincial and local governments to mobilize their own resources to build full-scale television and radio stations. This new system was made up of central, provincial, municipal and county level stations. The new television stations were placed under the "dual responsibility system" that gave management responsibilities to local governments as well as to the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (MRFT) (Esarey, 2007, p.5). Simultaneously, the different levels of stations, from the state to the local, began to set up market-oriented specialty channels to cater to commercially desirable audiences and capitalize on an expanding advertising market.

Decentralization of ownership and rights from the state to lower levels of the hierarchy endowed mass media with more autonomy. However, market fragmentation along territorial and sectoral boundaries became a barrier to Chinese media's commercialization (Zhao, 2008). To gain the effect of scale economy, the central party-state adopted a "two-pronged" strategy to rationalize and consolidate the media market: administrative campaigns aiming at media recentralization, and the creation of

conglomerates to achieve the optimal integration of political control and market efficiency (Zhao, 2008, p.96).

Under intense market competition, the self-reliant commercial media have reduced their dependence and loyalty on the state, and weakened its mouthpiece role for the Party. The transformation results in scholars' optimism towards the prospects of Chinese democratization. Wu (2000) argues that marketization has diversified media structures and expanded the freedom of the press in the Party system. Peter Berger (1985) asserts that the state, economics, and culture are progressively depoliticized, thus creating considerable room for media liberalization in China. Pei (1994) argues the self-liberalization of China's mass media will play a fundamental role in facilitating the regime's shift from communism to neo-authoritarianism. Though the top-down transformation allows the emergence of diversified and critical perspectives in the media, there is not enough civic space for the grassroots to express their voices through Chinese mass media. Actually, Party organs still lead the process of transformation, and the Party's monopoly over the communication system has not been changed. All the mass media's activities, from management to the production of news content, hews to the "Party line" of propaganda, without any opportunity to challenge the monopoly of the regime's power. Zhao (2000) argues the Party is aiming to enhance political control through rationalization of market and conglomeration of the media. For example, in the press sector, no newspaper can be set up as an independent or private business. The establishment, operation and advertising management must be licenced by the Party's administrative departments. In this sense, the Party still maintains its tight grip over all mass media. As Orville Schell (1995) warns, the "double jeopardy" of Party censorship and market censorship could suffocate political debate. Therefore, the mass media in

China are unable to undertake an active role to facilitate Chinese democratization.

In the information society, the explosion of new media provides a prospect for bottom-up changes leading to democracy. However, the contradiction between commercialization and political control could also confine the further development of an online public sphere. The dilemma Chinese traditional media are facing also obstructs the fulfillment of new media's democratic potential. The information system has largely reproduced power relations in the Chinese communication and political systems, leading to a democratic divide in China. In the next section, I will elaborate the nature of China's information society, which can help us better understand the illusion of the "myth" of cyberdemocracy.

The Nature of China's Information Society

For the past decade, the expansion of the Internet has been fast and furious. Involved in this wave of new technologies revolution, China also showed enthusiasm by embracing this new vehicle of communication. According to the report from China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the number of people online in China has continued to grow. By the end of 2008 June, the number of people going online in China reached 253 million, exceeding the United States to be the first place in the world (CNNIC, 2008, p.10).

Historical Development of China's Information Society

The path of development of China's information society can be mapped out into four main stages (Tai, 2006, p.120). The first phase spanned from 1986-1992, when Internet application was limited to email transmission services among few scientific research institutes. The second phase started in 1992 and ended in 1995. In this stage, Chinese government came to realize the importance of a national computer network infrastructure

for building an information society. This period is marked by the construction of the country's early four major networks: Internet network-China Science and Technology Network (CSTNET), China Education and Research Network (CERNET), China Public Computer Network (CHINANET) and China Golden Bridge Network (CHINAGAN). These projects were to build a national information and communication network connecting government agencies, state enterprises, the public, and all provinces and major cities through the country. The construction of these major infrastructure projects showed the government's incentive and determination to develop the information society. From then on, informatization projects extended to a wide range of fields, including some key areas of the country, such as the educational, military, and financial areas. The third stage of China's information society development lasted from 1995 to 1997. The rapid expansion of the Internet has shown the profound potential of the information economy. The Chinese government began to pin their hopes of national development on this new form of economy. During this stage, the number of Internet content providers (ICPs), including portals and specialty websites, mushroomed across the country. The Chinese government also actively engaged in the global Internet revolution in the hope that the Internet industry would yield great economic benefits to the national economy. On the other hand, the government began to pay attention to the potential threat of this new communication technology to challenge their traditional ways of domination. The fourth stage of the information society started in 1998 and extends to the present. This stage has been marked by the full-scale commercialization and increasingly rigorous political control of the Internet. The fundamental contradiction in the information society has been exacerbated.

Commercialization of the Internet Industry

China's market-oriented new economy has accelerated the commodification of information. The scale of the market exploded rapidly. In 2008, the market size of China's Internet-based economy reached 54 billion yuan. It is expected that the value will exceed 150 billion yuan in 2011 (iResearch, 2009). Economic liberalization in the information industry allows the Internet companies and related industries to exploit any potential profit-making model and maximize their profits in the market.

Since 1998, Chinese entrepreneurs and the government started to tap into online business opportunities that were considered a "gold mine" in the new age. In the West, the Internet industry was experiencing a prosperous period that had already created "the miracle of fortune" at that time. The concept of "e-commerce" first caught on in mainland China in 1993. This new business model transformed the traditional ways of production, exchange, distribution, and consumption of products and services, bringing about huge benefits to the industry and to national economy as well. In 1998, the first commercial transaction online in China was conducted. Since then, e-commerce sites have proliferated. In 2008, the revenue of Business-to-Business (B2B) websites reached 5.7 billion yuan (iResearch, 2009). On the other hand, Business-to-Consumer (B2C) and Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C) markets have experienced explosive growth. The number of online shopping users has amounted to 80 million by the end of 2008 (iResearch, 2009). However, among those huge numbers of e-commerce enterprises, only a few of them have achieved monopoly power in the thriving market. For example, Alibaba Group, found in 1999, has grown into the largest e-commerce company in China. Alibaba.com, the flagship company of its Group, accounted for 52.6% of the total revenue in the domestic B2B market in 2008 (iResearch, 2009). The Group's another company, *Taobao,*

registered user base of more than 80 million, *Taobao* dominates 80% of the market share in China's C2C market. The transaction volume on this site has reached 43.3 billion yuan (iResearch, 2009).

In addition to e-commerce, online advertising is also another major source for the Internet business revenue in China. Since 2001, the size of China's online advertisng market has increased to 10.6 billion yuan in 2007 (iResearch, 2008). Most of the revenue from the online advertising market is centralized in the hands of few major portals, such as sina.com, sohu.com, and tom.com. This mode of commercialization is the source of most of the profits for the websites' operations. Sohu.com's CEO says making profits through online advertisement will become their main business model in the future. At present, online advertising penetrates various online media, including portal, search engine, online games and social network software (SNS). Commercial information can be delivered to target audiences through specific online media. With the development of Internet technologies, advertising formats have evolved from simple display to being interactive or embedded in the virtual environment. In this sense, any potential medium can be transformed into a tool of commercialization. In addition, online audiences' preferences and behaviors can be detected and tracked by new technologies. The audiences are divided into small segments according to their demographic features and consuming capacity, and then sold indirectly to advertisers. Rather than independent or autonomous individuals, online audiences are treated as sources of profit through which enterprises can achieve their commercial interests.

Driven by the principle of profit maximization, internet enterprises attempt to exploit any potential space for expanding commercial opportunities throughout cyberspace. Relying on China's huge number of the Internet users, Internet companies exploit this

massive potential market by earning money directly from the users. Not all content or

services online can be accessed equally by each user. Instead, offering various value-

added content and services to users serves as a new model of growth engine of profits for

many companies. This new model has penetrated into a variety of Internet markets, such

as online news, email, games, music, video, and so on. Thus, online content and services

have been highly commodified. New technologies enable Internet enterprises to pinpoint

their target audiences by tailoring and providing customized services. This business

model undoubtedly leads to the audiences' unequal access to information, and

disadvantaged groups will be further excluded from the cyberspace and the access to the

information society.

To maximize profits, some Internet companies even sacrifice the public's interest,

giving way to the commercial interests. For example, in 2008 November, China's Internet

search giant baidu.com, referred to as China's Google, was exposed for its scandal of

paid-link business. It was reported that baidu.com had accepted money from illegal

medical companies and placed their Web links on the top of search results. This

marketing service, called page-rank bid, accounts for more than 80% of the company's

revenue. Such a business model allows online advertisements to be inserted into search

results without notice. When the principle of maximizing profits conflicts with public

interest, business interests are always prioritized. In this case, the democratic potential of

the Internet is significantly damaged by the companies' incentive of pursuing profits.

Globalization of China's Internet Industry

China's information industry has made a sustained effort to be involved in the

global market. It is hoped that globalization will boost China's new economy and provide

unique opportunities for the whole country. As the Internet brings China and the rest of

the world closer to an unprecedented extent, China is playing an increasingly important role in the globalization process. However, the large-scale expansion of global capital also brings about new threats to China's nascent information society.

When China's Internet industry was still at an early developing stage, a number of internet companies expanded their corporate resources by incorporating overseas venture capital. In 1999, China.com, the Hong Kong-based Internet company, became the first Chinese Internet business to be listed on the NASDAQ stock exchange in the United States. China.com initially was an overwhelming success in its NASDAQ debut: its opening price of 20 dollars rose to a high of 66 dollars on its first day of trading (Seawright, 1999). In 2000, at the peak of the Internet boom, the Chinese government gave permission to three of the top mainland-based Internet companies on the NASDAQ list to raise capital, including sina.com, netease.com and sohu.com, all of which are the leading portals in China. However, one year later, the Internet bubble began to burst and the dotcom revolution was gone. China Internet concept stocks were hit seriously and Chinese authorities took intensified measures to control the Internet industry. New companies were not allowed to sell shares to the public, and a handful of major Chinese Internet content providers were kept from going public abroad. However, in early 2004, China Internet stocks recovered from the crisis. A dozen more Chinese Internet companies sought oversea capital through providing an initial public offering on NASDAQ. Through this form of capital operation, China's Internet sector entered into a new surge of industrial growth.

Since entering the World Trade Organization (WTO), China has sped up its pace of global expansion. During its WTO negotiations, China promised to remove or reduce both its tariff and non-tariff barriers to IT products. And it also committed to the opening

of its value-added telecom services to foreign investors. A maximum of 50% foreign

ownership in Chinese telecommunications and Internet companies is allowed. These

policies demonstrated the enormous potential of China's Internet market to the rest of the

world, attracting more and more global venture capital to the increasingly promising

market.

In China's domestic market, few of China's Internet companies have innovative

technology or abundant capital that would give them a competitive edge in the global

industry. Therefore, only a few big players can establish themselves globally. To achieve

economies of scale and localize their business in China, most international Internet giants

generally begin their venture in China through mergers and acquisitions. For example, in

2003, eBay, the biggest global online auction company, had acquired a two-thirds share of

the Shanghai-based auction site EachNet.com for about US $150 million (Tai, 2006). In

2004, the global online retail giant Amazon.com Inc. acquired China's leading B2C

company Joyo.com Ltd. for US $75 million (Tai, 2006). In 2005, Yahoo invested US$1

billion on Alibaba Group, China's largest e-commerce company. Yahoo also acquired 40%

of Alibaba's share, which made Yahoo the main shareholder of Alibaba Group. The

Alibaba Group then signed an agreement with Yahoo to acquire Yahoo China. This

acquisition has shown Alibaba and Yahoo's ambition: to play a leading role in both

domestic and global markets by combining e-commerce and online searching.

As China's Internet sector becomes fully integrated into the global market, the logic

of capital has been accepted as the dominant incentive for the industrial development.

Global Internet capital penetrates into various fields of Internet industry, such as online

news, online search engines, and e-commerce. Less and less space is left for cultivation

and development of the public sphere. The fast pace of consolidation in the industry has

led to centralization of market power in the hands of a few of giant companies, and inevitably undermines the diversity of public opinion across cyberspace.

The State's Initiative of Facilitating the Information Society

The Chinese government continues to project a promising future for the role information society will play in the country's economics, society and politics. The glorification of informatization creates the myth of the information society. One of the central tenets of this dominant ideology is that informatization will serve as an economic engine in the new age. Informatization, as the discourse of the myth depicts, is capable of unlimited growth. However, what is the real intent of the Chinese government beyond what the myth promises? And what is the role of the state in China's information society? In this section, I would like to examine these questions and to look at the political factors that impair the democratic potential of the Internet.

In China, informatization is a top-down strategy. The state and the CCP have undertaken an active role in leading and facilitating the process of informatization. The government has pinned its hopes on information technologies and systems to propel China's economy. On the other hand, the boom of information technologies and systems also brings threat to maintaining the socialistic ideology and its monopoly of political power. This contradictory situation strongly exacerbates social conflicts in the information society and impedes the realization of cyberdemocracy.

Over the past 30 years, China has been experiencing impressive economic growth. However, the traditional model of economic growth mainly relied on labor-intensive and low-capital manufacturing sectors. Inspired by the western concept of the "information society" and the rise of a new economy reform on a global scale, Chinese leaders recognized the significance of informatization in national economic and social

development. Therefore, government enacted a variety of preferential policies favoring the information sector. A group of U.S. scholars at the Global Information Technology Assessment Group say that government policy has been the most important determinant in China for fostering the Internet industry's exponential expansion.

In 2006, The State Informatization Development Strategy (2006-2020) was published by the State Council. This policy provided a guideline for China's national informatization development for the next 15 years. The central government mapped out China's goals to facilitate an information society. This strategy includes providing information infrastructure nationwide, strengthening capacities for independent innovation of information technology, optimizing the information industry infrastructure, improving information security, building a more information-oriented national economy and society, establishing the new type of industrialization model, building a beneficial national policy and system for the informatization process, and enhancing the capability of applying the information technology among the public ("China", 2006). This strategy also indicates that the state's initiative in facilitating informatization was to propel and sustain a high rate of economic growth.

Political Control and Surveillance System in China's Information Society

In China, the CCP's leadership builds its legitimacy on economic growth. Therefore, the state's capacity has to be subordinate to economic interests. "Economic growth without political destabilization" is the substance for building "the information society with Chinese characteristics". In addition to facilitating economic growth, the Chinese government will also take advantage of new communication technologies to strengthen the government's surveillance capability. This function of informatization was labeled as the "invisible infrastructure" (Mueller & Tan, 1997) by the government.

In a neo-authoritarian country, bottom-up information-collecting and decision-making is less dependable and trustworthy than the centralized manner of China's political system. In the eyes of China's leaders, the Internet, which transforms the traditional ways of communication, brings a real challenge to the state's domination. As Li Xiguang (2001)--a Chinese famous communication scholar—states, "computer networks are essentially interactive, non-regional, centerless and anarchistic." Therefore, the China's leaders have to find a safe and controllable way to reduce the uncertainty of information, to provide them "dependable information" for decision-making, and hence to maintain their central control. As Mueller and Tan (1997) have identified, the political incentive of building an information society lies in establishment of "the perceived link between information system and central government economic control" (p.57). This incentive can provide a favourable political environment for economic development by intensifying central control

To avoid the political risks caused by the high rate of informatization development, the central government has adopted a variety of measures to sustain the regime's legitimacy. Ideological control remains the primary way the CCP maintains its domination, and it is the last thing that the Party will let go. "Socialistic spiritual civilization" is a banner raised by the CCP all the time. The "thought work" is the critical element in China's ideological control system. The task of "thought work" is to educate people in patriotism, collectivism and socialism, and to promote socialistic ethics and cultural progress. Since the start of the economic reforms and opening policies, the state's ideological system has been struck by cultural alienation. The Chinese people see the collapse of socialistic economic model, the rise of materialism and individualism, and the decay of elementary social morals, all of which result in the "faith crisis" in China's

society. In the information age, the explosion of the Internet also enables people to access more diversified sources of information from the outside world, and generates cyberculture—a new form of grassroots-oriented culture. Under such a new changing situation, the central government has intensified its efforts at ideological control. Any new cultural form deviating from the official ideology has to be put back on the "right track". "Socialistic spiritual civilization" is promoted to a new phase--"advanced socialistic culture"--in the information society. The Party argues that building an "advanced socialistic culture" in the information society can sustain or promote the Party's progressiveness, can provide more favourable opportunities to facilitate the Party's propaganda, and can consolidate the status of "socialistic spiritual civilization with Chinese characteristics". In this sense, the information society is dressed with new cultural meaning by the Party for its purpose of ideological control, which also strengthens the myth of the information society in contemporary China.

To achieve political control over cyberspace, the Party-state relies on different and overlapping methods. First, the Chinese government controls people's access to a free-flow of information in many ways. It strictly controls the ownership of the national information infrastructure. All the national networks I mentioned above are owned by the state. Through strict controls on the network, public access to outside information resources has been limited by the government. In addition to the control of public accessibility, the Chinese government has implemented a series of specific policies to fulfill its monopolistic power of ideological control. Here I would like to examine the regulation and censorship of Chinese cyberspace, and further disclose the myth of cyberdemocracy in China's information society.

Several political departments are responsible for monitoring the Internet industry,

including the State Council Information Office (SCIO) and the Ministry of Information

Industry (MII). The former oversees all websites that publish news. Most websites are not

allowed to act as independent news gatherers, and may only reprint news that has been

published by official media outlets. Few websites can obtain Internet news content service

licenses from the SCIO, which have been granted to a select group of sites, such as

Sina.com, China's largest online portal. Counterpart offices at the provincial and city

levels have also been established. All of these offices together comprise a systematic

network that monitors online information and controls online content. The MII was

established under the central government for the specific purpose of regulating Internet

information services. This agency is charged with the task of "the manufacture of

electronic and information products, the communications and software industry, as well

as the promotion of informatization of the national economy and social services in the

country" (Min, 2000). The MII is also responsible for licensing and registering all

websites in the country. All independent domain names and China-based IP addresses

need to register with MII. Internet service providers (ISPs) are also required to register in

order to connect through the nine gateways to the global Internet.

Since 2000, a number of government regulations have been implemented. For

example, the administrative regulation of "*The Provisions on the Administration of

Internet Information Services*" is designed to control the operation of both Internet

Content and Service Providers (ICPs and ISPs). All ICPs and ISPs have to gain the

licenses from relevant authorities. ICPs need to seek approvals from relevant agencies in

some areas, such as news, education and health care. Both ICPs and ISPs are required to

maintain complete records of users who have used their sites and all information posted

there for the last 60 days. All the copies of these records are required to be handed over to

the specific agencies, such as the Public Security Bureau (PSB), and the State

Administration of Radio Film and Television (SARFT).

In 2005, *"The Provisions on the Administration of Internet News Information*

Services" was promulgated by the Press Office of the State Council and Ministry of

Information Industry. Strict regulations are imposed on Internet content. This regulation

includes a ban on presenting or disseminating several categories of information across the

cyberspace. These banned categories include: information that endangers the national

security, violates the basic principles of the constitution, leaks state secrets, subverts the

government, or destroys the integrity of the nation's unity; information that harms the

honor and interests of the state; information that agitates ethnic hatred or racism, or that

undermines the ethic solidarity; information that breaches the state's religious policy, or

that propagates "evil cults" and feudalistic superstition; information that disturbs the

social order and destroys social stability; information that spreads pornography, gambling,

violence, or terror; information that insults or slanders other people; information that

mobilizes illegal gathering, marches, demonstration or other activities that disturb social

order; propaganda of some activities organized by the illegal social organizations or

associations; or other information that are prohibited by laws and regulations

("Administration", 2005). This regulation is widely applied in news websites, electronic

bulletin board services, and any other channels that disseminate and distribute public

affairs. According to the official statement, this regulation is formulated to "satisfy the

needs of the public for Internet news information, safeguard national security and public

interests, and promote the healthy development of Internet news information services"

("Administration", 2005). The regulation reflects a taken-for-granted meaning instilled by

the authorities. The real initiative of political control is naturalized as the "purpose for

public interests". The central government utilizes the state apparatus to further mask the truth and social contradictions underlying the discourses.

In addition to the state's regulations, ISPs and ICPs employ self censorship to control their internal activities. In 2002, "The *Public Pledge of Self-Regulation and Professional Ethics for China Internet Industry"*, which was drafted by a semi-official organization backed by the Ministry of Information Industry, was issued. Until now, more than 100 Internet companies have endorsed this pledge. Self-censorship requires service and content providers to create their own specific procedures to implement information security protection. To survive in China's market, some global Internet giants have also compromised their principles in favour of the Chinese government. For example, Yahoo China has blocked some sensitive keywords in its search engine, such as "Taiwan independence", "China democracy", and "human rights". Additionally, individuals who discover harmful information online are encouraged to report it to the authorities.

At a technical level, the Chinese government has also launched a series of projects to provide solid measures to guarantee its political control. The "Great Firewall", China's national firewall system, undertakes the major task of online surveillance in China. The online surveillance system is carried out by the techniques of traffic types identifying, IP blocking, and content filtering. There is a long list of the blocked websites for the surveillance system, such as Human Rigths Watch (HRW), Human Rights in China (HRIC), Reporters without Borders, etc.. Currently, China's online surveillance mechanism has experienced "a shift from generalized content control at the gateway level to individual surveillance of users at the edge of the network" (Walton, 2001). The security network companies "provide extensive firewall capabilities that are simple to provision, and enable constant monitoring of every individual's traffic flow" (Walton,

2001). Some monitoring software can create the subscribers' demographic profiles in real time and monitor their online behavior by tracking Web hits. Under the trend of information globalization, some international companies also involved in the development of China's information security infrastructures, such as telecom device providers like Cisco System and Nortel Network. For example, Nortel has a joint research project with Qinghua University on specific forms of speech recognition technology for the purpose of automated surveillance (Walton, 2001). And the authorities of Cisco Systems also said that the company "feels privileged to play a part in building the future of China's Internet generation, and will continue to actively work with the Chinese government to achieve its IT goals" ("Cisco", 1999). Apparently, both the Chinese government and foreign companies enjoy reciprocal benefits and a "win-win" relationship. However, this kind of cooperation enables the Chinese government to strengthen its techniques of surveillance and to further retain the power of political control at the cost of people's freedom.

The myth of cyberdemocracy in China's information society holds the belief that the Internet is potentially the most powerful mass communication tool that could help to empower the general public and further erode the Party and state's capability. Some optimistic advocates assert the Internet as "the strongest force for democracy available to the Chinese people" (Gutmann, 2002). However, from the above analysis, we can see that China's information society is still dominated by market logic and the state's political control. Informatization, especially the expansion of the Internet in China, obviously will not radically change the power relations and provide people with an ideology free country. On the one hand, commercial interests intervene into any corner of the cyberspace; global capital grows rapidly in the new age; and the information industry has a tendency toward

concentration which leads to the monopoly of market power in the hands of a few of giant companies. The myth of cyberdemocracy, on the other hand, is strengthened by the state government. The myth gives the Chinese people the promise of a future with impressive progress in economic, societal, cultural and political development due to the emergence of the information society. Therefore, the Internet is given a taken-for-granted meaning that serves to consolidate the Chinese government's domination and legitimacy. Beyond what the myth promises, the real initiative of the state to facilitate the information society lies in the state's pursuit of economic interests. In essence, the state takes the Internet industry as a new economic engine that could bring the whole country into a new phase of development. In addition, the expansion of new ways of communication also poses a serious threat to the Chinese government. To guarantee the central power, the state is installing a massive, ubiquitous and multilayered system of political control, which deploys the power of control from the national level to individual, and from ideological control to specific law-making. To sum up, the colonization of both economic and political interests into cyberspace, which is the central contradiction in China's information society, has significantly squeezed the online public sphere. And the promise of democratization through the Internet just demonstrates itself as an unrealistic prophecy.

Online Community in China

Online communities are widely used in computer-mediated communication (CMC). They can be established technically in several ways, including online chat rooms, bulletin board systems (BBS), newsgroups, instant messaging and blogs. The term of online community was advanced and promoted by Howard Rheingold, who created one of the first major Internet communities called "The Well" in the world. According to Rheingold (1994), online communities are defined to be "social aggregations that emerge from the

Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relations in cyberspace" (p.5). Van Dijk (1998) argues that online communities are "not tied to a particular place or time, but which still serve common interests in social, cultural and mental reality ranging from general to special activities." He further concludes four characteristics of online communities: having members, a social organization, language and patterns of interaction, and a culture and common identity (Van Dijk, 1998). Nancy Baym (1998) analyzes the unique features of an online community that distinguishes itself from an off-line community. She suggests that members of an online community can share common interests, ideas and feelings by playing with new forms of expressive communication, exploring possible public identities, and creating behavioral norms (p.37-38).

Some scholars are optimistic about this new form of communication and organization. From their views, this new many-to-many type of communication breaks down the conventional relationship between disseminators and audiences. Audiences are potentially creators as well as consumers of information. Interactivity and interaction, two of the most prominent properties of an online community, facilitate the free flow and exchange of information. The feature of decentralization, characterized by the dispersed and boundary-transgressing networks of online community, also weakens the centralized power and control of communication. Due to the advantages of this new form of communication, Bakardjieva (2003) argues that online communities can offer "liberating, equitable and empowering" opportunities of participation for membership (p.293). Rheingold (2000) also suggests that virtual communities have a profound effect on the nature of democratic discourse. Online communities offer public social space which makes us "see the potential of the Internet as a liberating force in civil society" (Tai, 2006,

p.332).

However, this optimistic perspective has been criticized for taking an uncritical stance. Some scholars point out that a virtual community may fail because it may become a place of tension and fragmentation rather than cohesion (Kolko & Reid, 1998). Online identities may be fragmented and unstable. And the "virtual" nature of an online community may also impair its democratic potential for peoples' real lives. In my case study, I will take a dialectic perspective to examine the dynamics and the limitations of an online community in China.

Members of online communities often undertake different social roles in communities, such as lurkers, novices, experts, and leaders. These social roles contribute to diverse ways of interaction and the structure of hierarchy in online communities. By identifying these different social roles in my case study, I will explore the power relations among different types of members, and examine how the virtual hierarchy influences the formation of online public opinions and the qualities of public discussion.

In China, online communities have been experiencing more than ten years' development. This form of Internet communication has become a major platform for Chinese people to express opinions, to gain information and to build social network. The history of the development of China's online communities can be divided into four periods. In the mid-1990's, China's online communities entered into the initial stage of development. During this stage, some local, small and specialized communities, which were built on the basis of simple applications such as BBS and chat room, emerged and caught peoples' attention. Since 1999, online communities have stepped into the period of rapid growth. A great number of online communities continuously sprang up. This period was marked by the establishment of some large comprehensive online communities, such

as *Xicihutong, Tianya, and ChinaRen*. There were two trends of development for the online communities in this stage. On the one hand, the major online communities were not only limited in providing news and information of current affairs, but also devoted to the strategy of diversified development in order to satisfy the users' different interests. On the other hand, some vertical communities, which only specialized in one specific topic or service, also emerged and spread across cyberspace. In 2005, the concept of Web 2.0 became a hot issue in China. This concept suggests a big increase in the use of Internet technology. In contrast to Web 1.0, which was regarded as the "Web-as-information-source", Web 2.0 aims to enhance creativity, information sharing, collaboration and interactivity. Thus, the concept of "Web-as-participation-platform" captures the central feature of Web 2.0. This new technology gave rise to abundant new patterns of online communities, such as social-networking sites, wikis, and blogs. Some major online communities have developed into large platforms which incorporate numerous online services.

Currently, Chinese online community members have reached 3 billion. The total number of daily page views across bulletin board systems has reached over 1.6 billion, with 10 million posts published every day. According to a report produced by iResearch Consulting Group in 2007, around 36.3% of users in China spend 1-3 hours per day on BBS sites; about 44.7% of users spend 3-8 hours; and even 15.1% of users are on BBS sites for more than 8 hours each day. According to the report, the primary reasons for using BBS sites is to find solutions to problems, to have general discussion, to seek information, and to share life experiences. Ninety eight per cent of users have contributed to a BBS by publishing articles, replying to posts, participating in online polls, etc. The report also says 64.5% of users have attended some offline activities organized by BBS

administrators or users. The report shows that online communities have become the major focus of people's online activities and penetrated into their real lives as well.

Online community sites are also confronted with challenges and pressures from the Internet market. In the era of Web 2.0, how to prosper with the help of new Internet applications has become a primary concern for the online community companies. Some scholars note a model of "economic democracy" has emerged with Web 2.0. This model means that "companies can design and assemble products with their customers, and in some cases customers can do the majority of the value creation"(Tapscott & Williams, 2007, p.289). With this business model, "masses of consumers, employees, suppliers, business partners, and even competitors co-create value in the absence of direct managerial control"(Tapscott & Williams, 2007, p.55). This new business model suggests a new trend in how corporations are using online communities. However, this view also suffers from criticism due to its overly optimistic euphoria toward the potential of online communities. Some critics describe Web 2.0 as "Bubble 2.0" ("Fears", 2006), suggesting that too many new forms of online community companies attempt to develop the same patterns of products and services. In China, most online communities are still struggling to seek the best model for commercialization. According to the report conducted by iResearch, the main source of revenue in Chinese online communities is still online advertising. More than 65.7% websites mainly depend on advertising to gain revenue. Other methods of profit-making, such as e-commerce, membership fee and wireless income, only account for small parts of those companies' revenue (iResearch, 2008).

Chinese online communities are also under strict control by the state. "*The Provisions on the Management of Internet Electronic Bulletin Services*" issued by the Ministry of Information Industry is the major regulation for online communities. The

"Internet electronic bulletin services" in the provisions refer to the electronic bulletin board, electronic forums, online chat rooms, message boards and other interactive forms for Internet users to view, publish and exchange information on the Internet. Under the provisions, providers of Internet electronic bulletin services have to obtain licenses from the regulatory agencies. The providers are responsible for monitoring Internet users and to prevent "harmful" information from publishing on BBS, forums or chat rooms. And if there is any content that violates the regulations, service provides have responsibility to delete the content immediately and send the records to the relevant state authorities.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Most previous research on cyberdemocracy was dominated by quantitative approaches. Content analysis is a frequently used quantitative method in Internet research. It has been applied to electronic forums, chat groups, Usenet newsgroups, and electronic mailing lists, but rarely to content of an expressly political nature (Davis, 1999). In Richard Davis's book *The Web of Politics*, a content analysis of three political Usenet groups is conducted. From each newsgroup, an identical number of posted messages was selected and coded according to a preestablised categorization. Through a quantitative analysis, Davis (1999) concludes that the political Usenet groups fail to encourage a diversity of viewpoints, and the "promise of Usenet is a hollow one" (p.167).

Researchers who utilize a quantitative approach to the studies of the Internet embrace a positivist position in their studies. They simply focus on people's online behaviour, attempting to seek a causal law or model in online interaction and separating themselves from the social and political contexts. Quantitative research fails to reveal the fundamental social conflicts and the role of human agency in the process of social changes. In contrast, qualitative research seeks to explain the ways with which people make sense of and operate in their social environment by eliciting social meaning through observations and participant observations, interviews and document review (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Therefore, qualitative research can contribute to an in-depth understanding of social practices and historical context. Qualitative research is also the most appropriate methodology when the research seeks an emancipatory objective, because this methodology gives us a tool to examine problematic social mechanisms and facilitate the commitment to transforming society.

However, as Mann and Stewart (1996) noted, "there has been little systematic analysis of how the Internet might be incorporated into qualitative research practices" (p.4). Therefore, applying qualitative methods in my study will be a great challenge, but it can also open up a new way to look at the issue of cyberdemocracy. Specifically, in my study, I will mainly incorporate case study and virtual ethnography to address the research questions.

Case Study

According to Yin (1994), a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (p.13). Case studies can be characterized by two features. The first one is that it specifies a "unit" to represent a holistic and complex social context. This feature of the case study method deals with the issue of generalization, which means that one specific case can be transferable to another similar situation. Researchers need to clearly identify and describe the characteristics that are typical of a phenomenon so as to ensure applicability of results across sites and disciplines.

The second feature is that case studies emphasize understanding the underlying context to these situations. The merit of the case study method is generalized in three key words: describing, understanding and explaining (Hamel, Dufour, & Fortin, 1993). It can generate a richly detailed and "thick" elaboration of the phenomenon, and allow researchers' critical insights and explanations of the data.

Because a vast majority of democratic theories have been formulated in the context of Western societies, it is especially meaningful and useful to apply the case study to understand the role of the Internet in China's context. Some researchers have used case

studies to explore the democratic implication of the Internet in China. Zheng (2005) examines several Internet-based collective actions that succeeded in challenging the state. Each of these cases chosen by the author had a profound impact on Chinese society. For example, when all the reports about the SARS epidemic were suppressed by Chinese media in 2003, new media were the major channel for the Chinese people to circulate information. In the information age, suppressing news through an authoritarian method would raise people's concerns about the truth. In this case, online public opinions forced the Chinese government to respond to SARS in a more transparent and accountable way. The author presents another case—the death of Sun Zhigang--to address the profound impact of the Internet in China's society. Sun Zhigang, a 27-year old young man, was beaten to death in a custody and repatriation center in Guangzhou. The death of Sun Zhigang aroused people's outrage online against the "measures for custody and repatriation (C&R) of vagrant and beggars in cities". Netizens allied online to demonstrate their anger and called for an abolition of the system. Launching online signatures and issuing online protest letters were the forms citizens' resistance and protest took. With increasing public pressure, C&R was eventually abolished. It was the first time in China's history that online movement caused the repeal of a state regulation and promoted an improvement in state's human rights. These events challenged the political system and advocated for accountability of the Chinese government. These studied cases exemplify the positive results of online activism and generalize the pattern of online collective actions in China.

Wu (2007) conducted a case study on a famous Chinese bulletin board called *Strengthening-the-country Forum*. This state-owned online forum has been enjoying prosperous development since it launched in 1997, and has become the most popular

Chinese-language bulletin board. A case study on this forum generalized "the role of bulletin boards in political debate among Chinese", and verified "its democratizing potential in constructing a virtual public sphere in the cyberspace beyond the national boundary" (p.270). Influential events and online discourse taking place at this forum are fully examined. The researcher conducted online interviews with some opinion leaders who actively participate in the online debate to collect in-depth data.

In my study, a case study of the *tianya* community, which is one of the largest online communities in China, will be conducted. This community provides an influential platform for public discussion in China. Some topics originally derived from *tianya* can spread across the country and initiate national public debates. However, commercialization has intervened into this public community. And some sensitive topics are also forbidden on the public forum. Therefore, an in-depth case study of this online community in facilitating cyberdemocracy is appropriate. Given the great influence *tianya* has across the Chinese cyberspace, I believe this case study could provide useful data and information to address my research topic. A number of new emerging Internet events happening in *tianya* will be used to analyze the formation of online public opinion and its social impact. Other research in this area tends to fall into a binary analysis— negative or positive, pessimistic or optimistic. How my research differs from these studies lies in my dialectical approach to this case. These aspects of *tianya*'s dynamics and limitations will be fully examined. On the other hand, the audiences and communicators' interpretations will be both emphasized. The audiences can be given opportunities to air their opinions. The community's structure and operation will be also under scrutiny. This research should help overcome a lack of studies that explore the democratic potential of the virtual community within China's specific political economic context. Thus, my case

study will make up for this weakness by combining the specific case with the analysis of China's information society.

Virtual Ethnography

In my research, the case study will be conducted with the approach of virtual ethnography. Virtual ethnography offers an approach to understanding online structures and contexts. Hine (2000) defines virtual ethnography as a way to study "how the Internet, as a way of communicating, as an object within people's lives and as a site of community-like formations, is achieved and sustained in the ways in which it is used, interpreted, and reinterpreted" (p.64). Virtual ethnographers have complex positions on ontology. They reject the pure realist position, but embrace social constructionist position. However, virtual ethnographers confront a dilemma in ontological thoughts. New communication technologies give rise to the emergence of "virtual space". But how do virtual ethnographers constitute the "virtual" space as a "real" object? Hine (2000) suggests two perspectives to clarify the ontological dilemma. She argues that the Internet can be viewed in two distinct ways: the Internet as culture and cultural artifact.

The first view sees that the Internet represents a place, cyberspace, where culture is formed and reformed (Hine, 2000, p.9). The researchers who view the Internet as a cultural site strive to locate their fieldwork in cyberspace and to gain a local understanding of virtual collectives and cyberculture. They mainly focus on the formation of new online organizations and social relations. The research questions revolve around "what people actually do with the technology and why they do it" (Hine, 2000, p.21). In my own research, I will mainly focus on one form of online organization—an online community, examining whether the public online community facilitates online public discussion and whether it constructs an online public sphere through online observation

and online interviews. Moreover, the concern about how people utilize the capacities of the Internet to participate in the public online community can be also examined through the method of virtual ethnography.

The second view of the ontology of virtual ethnography sees the Internet as a product of culture (Hine, 2000, p.9). In the online environment, "the first step toward existence is the production of discourse" (Markham, 2005, p.794). This means that online communication can only proceed on the basis of the construction of shared meaning. Cyberspace is a dynamic and meaningful system in which symbols, words, actions and culture are shared by interactive discourses. This ontological position accentuates the symbolic dimension of online communication. With this view, the tasks of virtual ethnographers are to reveal how meanings are produced, interpreted and shared by people through online communication practices, how symbols are extricated from the online text-based discourse, and how intersubjective interaction constructs new social identity and relations. From this dimension, virtual ethnography can be applied in my research to examine people's shared understandings about the "myth" of cyberdemocracy.

Virtual ethnography modernizes traditional ethnographic approaches in several ways. Hine (2000) says that "in the current academic climate, time for prolonged immersion in a physically located ethnographic field site is hard to come by" (p.22). By contrast, virtual ethnography condenses the time frame of traditional ethnography by gaining flexible access to online settings. Researchers have access to the objects or "setting" at any time without the spatial-temporal constraints. On the other hand, interaction in the real world is ephemeral. However, online data can be archived and retrieved by ethnographers long after online interaction first occurred.

Compared to traditional ethnographic approaches, such as the focus group, personal

interview, and participant observation, virtual ethnography is "a far less obtrusive method". It is conducted in a natural context rather than a fabricated environment. This naturalistic approach to online research is a starting point for the analysis of situated behaviour (Hine, 2000, p.18). Virtual ethnography is also far less cost and time-consuming than traditional ethnographic methods.

Though virtual ethnography enjoys various advantages over traditional approaches, it still confronts some limitations and dilemmas in its practices. One of the main problems of virtual ethnography is the question of "authenticity". In the virtual setting, informants often use fabricated identities. Therefore, the questions often asked in virtual ethnographic studies are "who are they, really, and how to verify what they say? (Markham, 2005, p.808)" Moreover, the accuracy of information about age, gender, nationality etc. can hardly be checked by ethnographers (Wittel, 2000). Researchers also have difficulties in convincing participants of their own credibility to gain access to the online setting where they interact.

The second problem of virtual ethnography is the limited data collected in the process of ethnographic studies. Interaction on the Internet usually takes place in text. This kind of interpersonal communication influences the character of the online interview taking place between researcher and users (Sade-Beck, 2004, p.7). Because of lack of face-to-face contacts, ethnographers can hardly understand the informants' emotions and physical reactions in online interaction. As Wittle (2000) states, "fieldwork in virtual spaces cannot rely on external forms of structure."

One difficulty stands out especially when ethnographers attempt to carry out online observation. The netizens' mobility on website makes researchers difficult to "follow up on a regular and methodical basis, or to define users, as people can change their identities

from site to site" (Sade-Beck, 2004, p.7).

Hair and Clark (2003) delineates five stages of virtual ethnography, which will be carried out in my study:

Stage one: This stage mainly corresponds to accessing to the online setting. To overcome the problems of entry, the researcher should be familiar with the rules of the virtual community. My study took place at www.tianya.cn. It is an open and public online community for people to access and communicate. Rather than looking for representativeness, purposive sampling was adopted for this study. Because in-depth online interviews require fewer participants, I intentionally chose the key informants who were the most willing to participate and who possessed salient characteristics on *tianya*. Because *tianya* consists of hundreds of sub-boards covering various topics, I mainly focused on *"tianya talk"*--one of the popular discussion boards on *tianya*. This board comprises a variety of public topics and enjoys the most popularity on *tianya*. Thus, it was suitable and representative to conduct the sampling on this board. The majority of the respondents in my study came from the board of *"tianya talk"*. And the rest of the respondents were recruited through other ways. Overall, four administrators of *tianya*, including one editor, two moderators and one marketing administrator, were selected. In terms of the users of *tianya*, fifteen members were chosen. Among them, eleven interviewees were active users who were regularly involved in and contributing to online public discussion. Four lurkers on *tianya* were also included.

Stage two: In this stage, gaining trust from the participants of the online communities is critical to collect authentic data. Researchers should take steps to explain their project, role and offer benefits of the research to those being researched (Hair & Clark, 2003). During this process, rapport between the respondents and researchers

should be established. For example, researchers can explain to the participants that the study is about them, and for them. And it should also be noted that participants are free to withdraw from the research. The contact between researchers and participants was made through electronic means publicly on the website boards or privately through electronic mail to individual participants (Hair & Clark, 2003). On *tianya*, the administrator, moderator and user of the online community could be first contacted either by email or message board. To access the board of *"tianya talk"*, I joined its Tencent QQ Instant Messaging group. This discussion group provides another alternative space for *tianya*'s users to conduct real-time communication online. The moderators of *"tianya talk"* are also the members of this Instant Messaging group. Thus, it provided me a convenient way to contact with the potential respondents. I first established relationships with the moderators on *tianya* and gained permission to conduct my study on *"tianya talk"* from one of its moderators. The assistant moderator on *"tianya talk"* was willing to participate in my study. After gaining permission, I sent messages to the group members, introducing the purposes and process of my study and asking their willingness to participate in the interviews. Nine people replied through Instant Messaging agreeing to be interviewed. It was still short of the ideal sampling number. To complement the sampling I asked those people who had agreed to suggest other users for me. Based on the key informants' trust and support, snowball sampling was conducted to recruit more participants. Four potential respondents were recruited through this way. On the other hand, I personally contacted those users who had posted influential articles relevant to public topics on *tianya*. Two of them replied and agreed to participate in the interviews. After recruitment, I sent all the potential respondents the consent forms. To ensure that the consent form was in fact returned by the actual participant, I set up a code number during the contact and

asked the participant to return it on the electronic consent form. This measure could guarantee that online signatures were secure and reliable. The potential respondents signed their ID names on the electronic consent form and sent them back to me through online file transfer or email.

Stage three: In this stage, online text analysis and observation is conducted. These methods offer a means to understand the social meanings that are constitutive of and reflected in human behavior. As Singh and Dickson (2002) argue, online text analysis and observation have to be "translated into intense reflection on reasons for the behaviors and events observed." (p.122). Therefore, detailed field notes, including descriptive and reflexive notes, should be collected over the period of the research to identify the researcher's experience and interpretations. In my study, the online text analysis and online observation mainly focused on what kinds of topics of discussion were paid more attention by netizens or forbidden by the webmasters, who led or dominated the public discussion, and whether the public forum offered rational and intellectual deliberation.

Stage four: Hair and Clark (2002) identify the electronic depth interview as the fourth step of doing virtual ethnographic practice. They argue "virtual ethnographic practice can use interviews to facilitate an understanding of meaning". A non-standardized interview is usually used as a data collection tool in online ethnography. Non-standardized interviews taking place online are to use "either synchronous forms of chat or asynchronous email based interviews" (Hair & Clark, 2003) to probe subjective experiences of individuals. My study mainly conducted semi-structured interviews with both the administrators and users of the *tianya* community. Therefore, the research question schedule (Appendix 1) was divided into two parts to gain different data. Some specific questions have been carried out in my research, such as what the myth of

cyberdemocracy meant to the netizens, how the netizens made sense of the role of the Internet in constructing cyberdemocracy, how they took advantage of the capacities of the Internet, what was the significance of using the Internet for them to participate in public discussion, whether the Internet fulfilled their demands for civic engagement, and whether the profit-making operations and political censorship limited civic engagement. Online interviews were conducted mainly through Tencent QQ—the most popular Instant Messaging software in China. The real-time chat could help me ask follow-up questions according to the respondents' responses.

Stage five: In the final stage, critical and reflexive interpretations are needed. For critical virtual ethnographers, "the reflexive, problematic, and sometimes contradictory nature of data" (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p.714) should be revealed in the process of interpreting. In the previous stages, I remained reflexive by keeping notes on the research process. While I was collecting data, I continually took notes during and after each chat session and every day's observation experiences. After data collection, I spent considerable time editing original interview transcripts. First, I created coding categories according to my research questions, for example, the respondents' understanding about the Internet's role, their expectation for China's cyberdemocracy, their online behavior, their opinions on the quality of *tianya*'s public discussion, commercialization of *tianya* and online censorship. During the course of coding and analyzing the data, I reflected on my research questions continually, and kept revising the chosen categories. I wrote two sets of memos. The first one was line-by-line notes concerning the specific context and thoughts about the transcripts. The other one was a generalization drawing from an overall examination of the data. I found this strategy allowed me to highlight some important information and to use data effectively to address my research questions.

Virtual ethnography synthesizes the methods of online observation, online interview and online text analysis into a unified methodological framework. However, to critically examine cyberspace and the power relations existing in the new form of societal space, virtual ethnography cannot simply takes a representational role by observing, describing and explaining the cyberspace. Instead, critical positions should be incorporated into the studies to fulfill the normative role of research. Hair and Clark (2003) develop the concept of "critical virtual ethnography" which incorporates the elements of virtual ethnography and critical ethnography, situating cyberspace in a political and holistic social context. Critical cyberculture studies explore the social, cultural, and economic interactions which take place online (Silver, 2000, p.25). Critical approaches to the Internet have a fundamental interest in emancipation and empowerment to engage in online communicative interaction. Based on this intellectual lineage, critical virtual ethnography adopts a change orientation--the purpose of research is not solely for description but for social change (Hair & Clair, 2003). My study specifically applied the critical virtual ethnography method to examine the unequal power distribution in the new social context and foregrounds social conflicts embedded in the information society. In this sense, critical virtual ethnography is undoubtedly the most appropriate approach to my research on China's cyberdemocracy.

CHAPTER 5: A CASE STUDY: TIANYA ONLINE COMMUNITY

Introduction

Founded in May 1999, *tianya.cn* was initially a small-scale, simple and local discussion forum with a limited number of discussion boards and registered users. It is owned by *Tianya on-line network technical Ltd*. After almost ten years' development, this site has grown into "the most influential online community for the global Chinese people" ("About Tianya", n.a.) with over 20 million registered members. According to the latest data from Alexa, the traffic of *tianya.cn* has ranked first among Chinese online communities. And it always has more than 1 million users online. *Tianya* online community is famous for its dynamic discussion boards. Its 400 hundred public discussion boards are assigned to six major sub-forums. Some public discussion boards on *tianya*, which focus on political affairs, humanistic topics, and social issues, enjoy high popularity and reputation across China's cyberspace. Apart from public discussion boards, *tianya* online community also offers a variety of value-added products and services, including user blogs, photo sharing, *tianya* groups, and classified information. *Tianya* blogs (www.blog.tianya.cn), launched in January 2004, is the first site in China combining online public communities and personal blogs. *Tianya*'s registered users can use this service for free, which provides a personal and independent space for users to express their ideas and feelings. *Tianya* groups (http://groups.tianya.cn) are the social networks created and self-governed by ordinary community users. It represents a new form of online communication and organization: community members are organized by their interests and social network, and users are empowered by the right of autonomy to establish and administrate their own virtual space. *Tianya* hopes this new way of

communication can keep close ties among users to sustain their loyalty to the online community. The section of classified information (http://info.tianya.cn/) is a space for the users or companies to post commercial information. It can provide customized and specialized information concerned with the users' personal requirements.

During the wave of rapid development of the Chinese Internet industry, *tianya* developed into a large-scale online community with significant influence across the country. Based on my deep acquaintance with *tianya* and its profound influence, I think a case study on this online community is appropriate and representative. *Tianya* has proclaimed its social responsibilities and an ideal of providing an "online spiritual home" for the global Chinese people. However, under pressure from the market and political authorities, *tianya* online community is also seeking a change in its development strategies which may prioritize profit making over providing an online public sphere. Can this online community fulfill its social responsibilities? Can it undertake the role of a public sphere that facilitates Chinese people's civic participation and free speech? How do people understand the role of the Internet? Can online public opinions generate any effect on Chinese society or political system? And what are the factors that impair the democratic potential of *tianya*? These questions are the major research questions I focus on during the study.

Sample Characteristics

I interviewed nineteen people during my study. Four of them are *tianya*'s administrators, including one editor, one discussion board moderator, one assistant moderator, and one marketing coordinator in *tianya*'s marketing department. The rest of the interviewees were *tianya*'s users, including 4 lurkers and 11 participants.

Demographic questions, such as gender, age, education, and occupation, were

referred during the interviews. In terms of the interviewees' gender, the findings showed that the sample was skewed towards men. Of the nineteen interviewees, fourteen were men. Only five women were interviewed. The reason for this problem probably lies in women's inactive participation in online public discussions. As a female lurker said, "she didn't have much interest and motivation to participate in public discussion concerning public affairs". With regard to the participants' age, the ages ranged from 23 to 41. The average age was 31. Moreover, all of the participants had college or university degrees. It showed that all the interviewees were well-educated. In terms of the participants' occupation, most of the interviewees had white collar jobs. Two of them were students, and one was unemployed. According to the results, I found that active users had higher levels of occupation. Some of them were executives, managers, or officials.

People's Understanding on the Democratic Role of the Internet

In relation to participants' perspective on the role of the Internet in China's democratization, there are many different and even extremely opposite standpoints among *tianya* users. To evaluate the extent to which the Internet influences people's political life, I will examine the democratic role of the Internet in terms of three dimensions--gaining information, participating in public affairs, and changing the policymaking process.

Being informed of political information is a critical prerequisite for vigorous and full civic participation. *Tianya* asserts the major task of the public forum is to provide the users with abundant and diverse information. For example, *"tianya space-time" (tianya shikong),* one major discussion board concerned with current political and social affairs, advocates "rational discussion, analysis and interpretation about social reality". It claims to listen to the opinions of the Chinese people and satisfy their demands for in-depth information. In this sense, taking the informing role is a primary concern for *tianya.*

However, do *tianya* users have desire to get information through the Internet, and how do they take advantage of this function of the online community as *tianya* proclaims? These are the questions I was concerned about during the course of interviews.

Some respondents mentioned their major purpose for getting *tianya* is to "gain information". *Tianya* covers a wide range of discussion topics. The website is broken up into nine channels, including *social, humanities, economics, vogue, entertainment, sports, campus, figures,* and *city.* All the discussion boards, blogs and groups are divided into in these nine categories. The editors of *tianya* select some popular posts from a variety of boards everyday and put them on the website's homepage called *"tianya focus".* A respondent said he usually went through the homepage each time when he logged on the site and selected posts which interested him. Some users added some specific discussion boards as their "favorites" and usually went directly to these boards.

Most respondents mentioned that they had interests in the topics concerning social and political issues. An interviewee noted that Chinese mainstream media represents just official voices, and their reports are always kept in conformity with the CCP. He felt antipathy toward the mass media's propagandistic reports which only praised the Party's achievements and concealed social conflicts. He said negative and diversified voices can hardly be heard from the mainstream media. So he always turned his attention to some online public forums to gain alternative information. He considered *tianya* as a "mini-society" reflecting diverse social phenomena and public opinions. Another respondent suggested that *tianya* made her better understand Chinese society and learned some news which otherwise would not be carried by the mainstream media.

The informing role of *tianya* can also be illustrated in the users' posting of their personal accounts of social affairs and problems in the real world. *Tianya* advocates users'

original posting, encouraging the exchange of personal perspectives and dissemination of alternative information. On the board of *"tianya talk"*, the majority of the topics are focused on social injustice in China. These stories mostly came from the users' individual experience and observation. Some topics can generate heated discussions across the country, catching people's attention on relevant issues. A respondent maintained that *tianya*, to some degree, has become "the only place for Chinese people to speak out the truth". He illustrated a famous case happening on *tianya* to illustrate his point. In April 2008, a *tianya* user posted an article on the board of *"tianya talk"*. She said in the year of 2007, her father--Tang Jiabo, who was a county official in Hunan province, died abnormally in his government office. The authorities asserted that Tang committed suicide due to bribery. After several days, Tang was cremated without his relatives' authorization. This case was completely concealed from the public. After one year, Tang's daughter went to *tianya* to expose the case, calling for the truth of her father's death. The article caused a great stir across the online community even all of Chinese cyberspace. The netizens expressed their intense rage and appealed to the authorities to investigate this case. This event was nominated as "the most influential Internet event" in 2008 by some *tianya* users.

With regard to the informing role of the Internet, a famous user on *"tianya talk"* asked such questions during the interview: "What are the consequences when people are deprived of the freedom of being informed? Do people have the right to know the truth? Do people have the right to seek the truth? Do people have the right to expose the truth?" He further argued that, "if traditional channels block all the ways, how can citizens carry out their civil rights?" "Thanks to the Internet, especially online public forums like *tianya*," he said, the "Chinese people have a relatively open and free environment to learn

and seek the truths about social injustice which are masked and concealed by the mainstream media."

On the other hand, news from mainstream media also provides a constant stream of source material for the online community. Because traditional media lack interactive communication, audiences have few choices to express their comments on the news. There are several ways for the online audiences to respond to the traditional media's agenda-setting through the Internet. First, audiences can publish their comments on the news. Second, news sources can be reinterpreted by community members. And audiences can complement news sources by providing their own experience and sources.

One editor of the *Society* channel of *tianya* said that a vast number of discussion topics on the community originated from reports in mainstream media. However, rather than taking the consenting attitude with traditional media, *tianya* users think critically about the news. One remarkable example that demonstrates the clout of online public opinion came from the "Southern Tiger Photo Scandal". On October 13, *News Broadcast* on CCTV reported that a local farmer named Zhou Zhenglong took a clear photo of a wild South China tiger that was thought to be extinct across the country. This photo was released by the Forestry Department of northwest China's Shaanxi Province, and the report said that experts had identified the photo as authentic. The news spread quickly across Chinese mainstream media. Zhou Zhenglong was described as a hero who discovered a miracle by the Chinese media. However, this story gave rise to Chinese netizens' skepticism about authoritative information. On October 15, A *tianya* user first published a post "Shaanxi South China Tiger: another faked news" on *tianya*, enumerating his doubts about the photo. By analyzing the photo through image technology, he claimed in his post "the photo could not be more fake". This topic rapidly

dominated online public forums and became a heated issue on cyberspace. The increasing online public discussion drove the case to the top of the agenda in mainstream society. Chinese netizens' doubt initiated a wide-scale debate among ordinary Chinese people, local government, and mainstream media concerning the authenticity of the event and the authorities' credibility. Though local officials still insisted on the existence of wild South China tiger in the region, the lie was exposed when a *tianya* user pointed out that the tiger image was cropped from a Chinese New Year poster. Due to extensive public pressure, in June 2008, the provincial government admitted the photo was fake, and announced 13 local officials were sacked or punished. At the same time, the "photographer" Zhou Zhenglong was arrested and given a suspended jail sentence.

Beyond the authenticity of the photo, what the netizens were really concerned about is the political power and interests behind this event. The netizens accused officials of endorsing the fake photo as a means of promoting tourism in a poor region. This event also highlighted the prevailing problem in Chinese society: people's lack of trust in public agencies and mainstream media. When talking about this issue, the assistant moderator of "*tianya talk*" was proud of the role *tianya* took in various Chinese internet controversies that have happened. He argued, "what if Chinese people live in a society full of lies? What if we are deceived and manipulated by the authorities? How can the Chinese people gain critical awareness and autonomy?" From his view, the Internet can provide sufficient opportunities for Chinese people to participate in public discussion and challenge traditional power relations. He said *tianya* is a grassroots forum which empowers each citizen with "the right to speak" and "the right to know", and people are guaranteed a platform to express their opinions. Because of *tianya*'s accumulated popularity and influence, more people are attracted to this site, which further widens the scale of online

public participation.

Most *tianya* users I interviewed agreed that the Internet has facilitated Chinese citizens' public participation in the current political and social issues. A respondent said, "the Internet is the **only** possible channel through which a person can express personal opinions in China. No newspaper, magazine or television, or other channel would ever present your argument or ideas." She said she would participate in public discussion about her own interests.

Though most respondents admitted the positive role of the Internet in informing citizens and facilitating public participation, with regard to the question of "the real effect of the Internet on Chinese society and on political policy-making process", the respondents came up with quite different ideas. The users with long years' of experience on *tianya* generally showed an optimistic attitude toward the social and political effect of the Internet. The assistant board moderator of "*tianya talk*" said "Chinese netizens were growing as an indispensable agent to facilitate Chinese social and political transformation. This trend would dramatically decrease the barriers for the grassroots' entry into the policymaking process" and he suggested that the Internet was an effective weapon for the Chinese grassroots to supervise the government's actions and to fight against social inequality. A respondent who has used *tianya* for almost 10 years also agreed that the Internet had powerful effect on Chinese society. He noted a variety of influential public discussions on *tianya* in recent years, and concluded "Chinese democracy would be made possible by the Internet".

On the other hand, some respondents thought that the real effect of the Internet on Chinese democratization was limited. A respondent who has been an active user on *tianya* said that she has decreased her devotion to public discussion. She explained she felt

helpless and frustrated about the possibility of social and political change after years' of online public participation. "It is true that you can be empowered to speak to some degree, but you can never gain the power of decision-making in China." A respondent said the degree to which the Internet can effect change depended on the Party-state's attitude. From his view, the state has been increasingly alert to the threats brought by online opinion. Therefore, he was concerned that the influence of the Internet would be impaired in the future. Another respondent acknowledged that the Internet has indeed brought about profound social change in China. However, the political effect of the Internet was indirect. Some public policies were changed due to the pressure of online opinions rather than the government's initiative.

From the above analysis, we can see that the respondents generally believed in the democratizing potential of the Internet. The view that the Internet could facilitate Chinese democratization has become a dominant belief shared by respondents. Some of them even expressed overoptimism about this issue. Some people still pin their hopes for democracy on the Internet. From my view, the Internet's contribution to Chinese democratization lies in the following aspects: first, the Internet complements traditional information sources, making people more informed of diverse information. Second, the Internet, especially online public forums, is capable of providing a relatively free environment to voice grassroots' public opinions. Ordinary Chinese people have the right to exchange and communicate with their ideas online to some degree, which will certainly pave the way to deliberative democracy. Finally, through extensive online public participation, the Chinese people also have opportunities to challenge Chinese authorities and to expose social injustices. Compared with other traditional channels, the Internet can be considered as an important alternative way for people to participate in political life. Despite these

positive functions, the democratizing potential of the Internet is still limited by various factors. Next I will use Wilhelm's model to examine the factors that impair the possibilities of cyberdemocracy.

Limitations of Cyberdemocracy

Antecedent Resource

Wilhelm (2000) describes "a resource model of digitally mediated political life" which addresses the prerequisites of online public participation (as shown in the figure, p.51). This model explains the relationship between people's socio-economic status and their use of advanced communication technologies for cyberdemocratic purposes. In other words, the acquisition, possession and utilization of digital resources and advanced skills for political participation are predominantly determined by the factors of socio-economic status, such as people's occupation, education, income and location (Wilhelm, 2000, p.51). Therefore, examining the socio-economic status possessed by the users of *tianya* can shed light on necessary antecedent conditions for people's participation in the virtual public sphere.
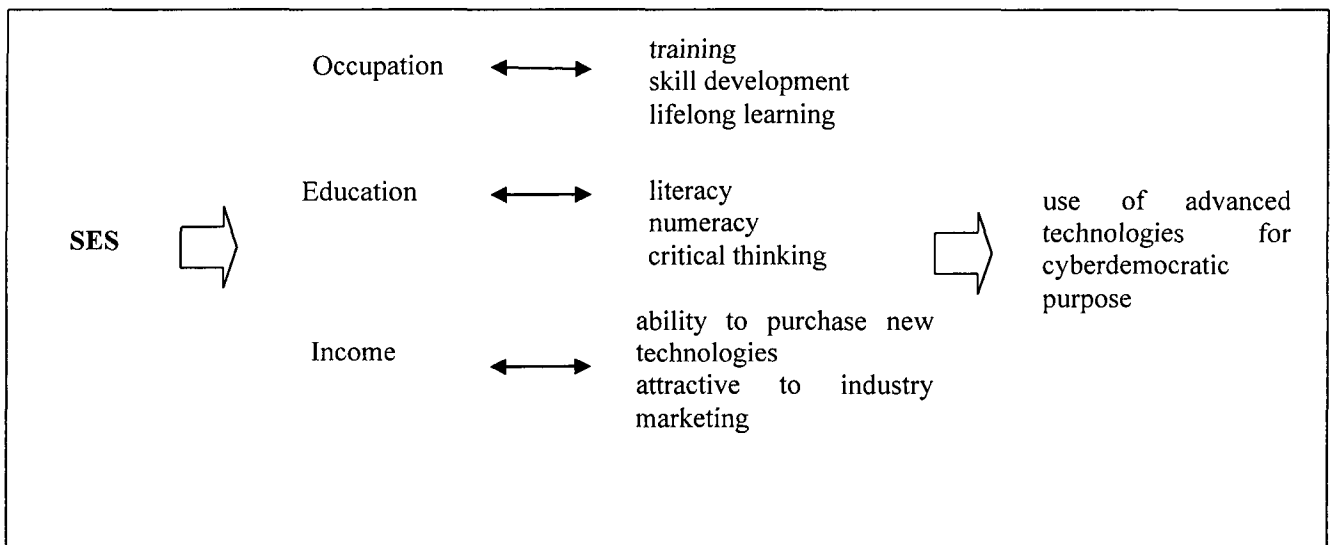
According to a *tianya*'s survey on its users' demographic features, there is a

significant divide and disparity among the different groups of users. First, the majority of users are still young people. People with the age under 35 account for 80% of the total users of *tianya*. The younger generation is considered aggressive, energetic, active and open, and the major force for facilitating social change. In terms of users' educational attainment, the percentage of users with at least a university degree is 78%. The majority of *tianya* users are well educated. The occupational category of "business" accounts for the largest proportion, reaching 26%. Other categories, such as "communication industry" and "legal service industry" also account for large proportions of the membership. Seventy two percent of *tianya* users have incomes of 1000 yuan per month. In terms of geographical distribution, the majority of the users are located in the wealthy areas and big cities.

From the data above we can see that people with high socio-economic status account for the major proportion of *tianya* users. As an employee in *tianya*'s marketing department told me, the audiences with high levels of education and income were considered huge resources for *tianya* to exploit their value to advertisers. These groups of users were also the active and loyal users in the community. They generate high traffic and enhance the community's popularity. On the other hand, the employee further explained that, these target audiences were also "the major potential objects for *tianya* to sell and provide value-added services and products" because they possessed high disposable income. Therefore, the key business strategy for *tianya* was to attract and sustain these affluent and educated users. The primary concern for *tianya*'s operation was to satisfy the target audiences' information demands and improve the user experience when they went on the community.

Economic-inequality limits people's ability to access to the new communication

technologies, and further constrains their involvement into social, civic and political

discussion. As Hirschkop (1997) states, virtual political engagement is more likely among

those who can pay the cost of using computer-mediated applications. Even though China

has the largest number of netizens in the world, the penetration rate (the percentage of the

total population which has go online) is slightly lower than the average Internet

penetration rate in the world (CNNIC, 2008). These disparities in peoples' antecedent

resources result in a divide between "information rich" and "information poor".

Disadvantaged people are further marginalized from the center of public discussion due to

these limitations.

However, antecedent resources not only concern a person's socio-economic status,

but also relate to people's initiative and capability for political participation. Political

participation happens when people have the interest and initiative to become actively

involved in political activities. Online public discussion is one important form of political

participation in the information society. On *tianya*, some users have strong interests in the

topics of public affairs. During my research, I contacted an active user who regularly

contributed articles on civil rights and China's democracy on *tianya*. He said he usually

observed some social phenomenon in Chinese society and then wrote down some

thoughts about it. He hoped that his observations and perspectives could contribute to

people's critical awareness toward our society and political system. However, he also

pointed out that his articles mostly referred to superficial phenomena rather than

provocative suggestions. He was uncertain about whether he made any realistic

contribution to social change. In China, people with a strong desire for political

publications account for a small proportion of the population. According to a survey

conducted by CNNIC (2008), the top Internet application for Chinese netizens is digital

entertainment with the rate of 84.5%. In contrast, political participation is not the major motivation for Chinese netizens to go online. When talking about this problem, the *tianya* editor admitted that the posts concerning entertainment or personal emotion usually captured the most hits and replies. So the editors always highlight some posts with sensational titles on the site's front page. The online community's initiative in facilitating public discussion has given way to the mass audiences' interests.

Another respondent suggested that the efficacy of online public participation would be impaired due to the limitation of Chinese political culture. From her view, the Chinese people lack of the identification of "citizen" due to the country's long history of political suppression. Therefore, the majority of Chinese people do not have the consciousness or initiative to participate in political discussions. The Chinese people have doubts about their ability to change the Chinese political system. In other words, they do not believe that the government would respond to their political demands. All these psychological factors and cultural norms lead to Chinese people's low interest and initiative in online political participation.

People's ability to participate in politics also determines one's online engagement in political and social affairs. First, digital skills are required for citizens to participate in public discussion. Digital skills not only refer to the skill to operate computers and Internet connections, but also "the skill to search, select and process information from a superabundance of sources" (Van Dijk, 2000, p.2). People with higher levels of education have the ability to understand political matters, to analyze and criticize public policies, and to take advantage of new technologies to participate in public affairs. A lurker on *tianya* told me "sometimes politics and government seemed so complicated that I could not fully understand what was going on. And I also don't know what I can come up with

to participate in their debate." This was the most salient reason why he seldom spoke on the online public forums. Political participation is also affected by one's socio-economic status. Drawing on the data of a survey which focuses on the factors of influencing people's online political participation, Corinna di Gennaro (2006) concludes that "more educated individuals with higher incomes and managerial and professional occupations are likely to have higher levels of political efficacy, a perception that they can influence government". Given the huge gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged groups in contemporary China, the Internet's democratic potential cannot be easily realized. The democratic divide is exacerbating due to the unequal distribution of socio-economic resources existing in China's information society.

Inclusiveness

Habermas' (1962) argues that inclusiveness is a core characteristic of public sphere. It means people in the public sphere "preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether. The tendency replaced the celebration of rank with a tact befitting equals" (p.36). Wilhelm (2000) also summarizes inclusiveness as one of the normative features of cyberdemocracy. From his view, the feature of inclusiveness reflects universal and equal participation in political decision-making. Universal participation guarantees that people can be equally empowered to express their preferences and need, and their voices can be equally heard. In this part, I will examine if *tianya* public discussion boards are dominated by the advantaged groups and what factors that impede the feature of inclusiveness on *tianya*.

Tianya proclaims it is an online community that advocates the principles of equality, tolerance, and freedom. Each user can be equally treated online and each user's voice can be respected and equally aired. In terms of the online community's management, *tianya*

alleges to implement the policy of "self-governance". Actually, a hierarchical mechanism exists on *tianya*, which potentially leads to unequal power relationships within the online community. Management hierarchy can be generally divided into five levels: the site administrators, the forum administrator, board moderators, experienced users and common users. The power hierarchy has greatly limited people's freedom of expression and public participation.

The "*General Online Community Regulation*" of *tianya* stipulates the "*tianya* administrative committee" consists of the highest body of authority within *tianya*. The parent company, *Tianya on-line network technical Ltd.*, has the power to appoint and remove the key committee members. The committee has the power to formulate the community's regulations, to approve the establishment of the forums, to appoint or remove the forum administrators, and to execute the power of supervision.

The forum administrators are responsible for administering the public affairs of the sub-forums, such as assigning board moderators, editing, and censoring the posts. The editor on the "*Society*" forum told me that, there are always thousands of new posts or replies published on his forum. Overwhelmed by superfluous information, he has to select what he decides are the most valuable and popular posts and put them on the main page of his forum. Because of *tianya's* tremendous influence, the issues arising from here would probably capture the nationwide attention. The editor dealt with his job with great care. Generally, some top posts were automatically generated based on the click rate and the total replies. However, to guarantee the "quality" of the posts, some "recommended posts" had to be selected by the editor according to his own judgment. The editor explained that sometimes he paid more attention to the posts published by the influential users and preferred to choose these articles as "recommended posts". This means that

active and influential users' opinions have a much greater chance to be selected and highlighted than ordinary users.

The board moderators are drawn from the experienced users, rather than the site's employees. The moderators are usually nominated and voted by users, but the power of appointment is held in the hand of forum administrators. The major responsibility of the board moderators is to manage the posts. They have the power to delete the posts, to mark valuable posts, to move the posts to other boards, to limit users' replies, and to ban the users' ID. The assistant board moderator of *"tianya talk"* has been a member on *tianya* for more than five years. As an administrator of the most influential board on *tianya*, he feels pressure and responsibility as well. He said "the moderator has the power to determine and influence what a discussion board would look like. And *'tianya talk'* also has the potential to influence our society. So I think we have the responsibility to guide the public opinion on our discussion board." As a voluntary administrator, he devoted much of his free time to the management issues. He had to delete a great deal of posts violating the community's regulations, such as posts containing advertising, spam, offensive language, etc. Another important task for him was to select the top ten topics per week and edit them into a digest. The moderators on the *"tianya talk"* community also initiate new topics relevant to current affairs to facilitate public discussion. For example, at the end of each year, *"tianya talk"* votes for "the most influential Internet events in China." The moderators also have the right to recommend posts from their boards to the editors and ask them to put the posts on the eye-catching area. To some degree, the moderators act as "gatekeeper" on the online public discussion forum, owning direct power and influence on guiding online public opinion. However, a moderator' virtual power is controlled by his/her superiors. The moderator has had his posts deleted by the editors. As he said, the

hierarchy system limits the fulfillment of his right.

A number of opinion leaders constitute of an important force on *tianya*. Some of them were originally well-known intellectuals. They gathered on *tianya* to express critical opinions that probably cannot be aired in mainstream media or other traditional channels. And their influence has also been expanded by *tianya*. They helped *tianya* become popular, but resulted in online public discussions dominated by elites' voices. There is a sub-forum named *"figures"* on *tianya* that mainly gives a priority for the social elites to express their opinion. On its main page, it is said that the *"figures"* especially provides a communication platform for the professors, scholars, writers, and the high-level of users in various fields. Apart from the social elites, *tianya* also helps ordinary people gain a reputation across cyberspace. *Tianya* has adopted an ID ranking system, which means that users can be assigned a "rank" according to their online hours, login times, and total posted articles. So the posts from some active users who have a high rank on *tianya* gain more prominence than other common users. Their regular and active participation in public discussions also make their opinions much more visible. A respondent who is an active user on *"society"* forum told me that, ID was not just a way of identification on online public forums, but also a predictor of whether voices can be equally aired or heard. He personally had different registered ID on *tianya*. Each time when he used his "famous" ID, which had a high rank to publish an article, he always got numerous replies, and the posts were highlighted by the moderators or editors. In contrast, the posts published with his second ID hardly captured people's attention.

Common users account for the lowest level but the largest proportion within *tianya*'s hierarchy system. They seldom published posts or participated in the public discussion, or their posts rarely caught people's attention or gained high popularity. All the *tianya*'s

users I interviewed told me that their posts have been deleted. One respondent's main ID has even been banned by the moderator because he published some "negative" speech toward *tianya*. Another respondent felt indignant about this issue because his posts were always deleted without any given reason. He said his basic right of speech cannot be fully guaranteed. Influenced by China's collectivist-oriented culture, the ordinary Chinese people who do not enjoy high social status are not willing to engage in self-expression, or to challenge the "experts" or authorities' opinions. This "invisible hierarchy" also excludes some common users from online public forums.

The hierarchy system existing in the *tianya* online community represents a form of power relations in cyber space. Though most respondents agreed that *tianya* was a grassroots community which enjoyed more freedom of expression than other Chinese websites, people's freedom of speech was limited and conditional. The administrators of the website, who are located at the top of the hierarchy, have the power to constitute and regulate the fundamental policies with which each user has to comply. The forum administrators and board moderators act as the role of "gatekeeper" to filter and highlight the information or opinions. Online public opinions, to some extent, are guided and controlled by these "gatekeepers". The advantaged groups of people, such as social elites and influential users, enjoy more opportunities to express their opinions and make their opinions visible. The common users, who are in the lowest level of the hierarchy, have speech rights that are tightly controlled by the people at the top of the hierarchy. In this sense, the diversity of online public opinions is significantly impaired by the virtual hierarchy and by the unequal distribution of power relation on cyberspace.

Deliberation

The process of deliberation is central to the deliberative model of democracy.

Dahlberg (2001) argues that a "well-functioning" public sphere focuses on "the social sphere constituted by rational-critical discourse that enables the formation of public opinion through which official decision making can be held democratically accountable". Habermas (1996) suggests civil society acts as a "sounding board" for the articulation of political issues to be addressed. Thus, political forums ought to be deliberative to provide a platform for those people to raise concerns and express opinions. Fishkin (1992) addresses three components of deliberative competence: (1) political messages of substance can be exchanged at length, (2) there is opportunity to reflect on these messages as well as ongoing debate and reflection, and (3) the message can be processed interactively, with opinions being tested against rival arguments. This means that a vibrant online public sphere entails open and reflexive articulation and contestation of diverse arguments. Applying this dimension to China's context, I am concerned about such questions: does Chinese cyberspace offer a "sounding board" in enabling deliberation to construct an online public sphere? And what are the factors that impede this feature of cyberdemocracy?

There are numerous posts on *tianya* public discussion boards every day. But the quantity of posts does not guarantee the "quality" of public discussion. It is vital to discern if online public discussion can acquire rational, tolerant, and vigorous communication. To examine the quality of public discussion on *tianya*, I classify the discussion threads into three categories: information-oriented, opinion-oriented and emotion-oriented threads.

Information sharing, seeking, gathering and integrating are the prerequisites for deliberative discussion. A number of breaking news and online big events are originated from *tianya*. People can get the updated information everyday from *tianya*. For example,

after the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, information about the disaster, including authoritative

and personal sources, rapidly exploded through *tianya*. The first quake-reporting message

appeared less than a minute after the earthquake occurred. Follow-up information

increased quickly, which integrated and gathered information from diverse sources. The

unblocked and swift information dissemination mechanism can guarantee people's "right

to know". However, the biggest challenge online public forums face is the authenticity of

information. Because it is difficult to verify the large amount of information on the

Internet, a great deal of rumors can spread across the cyberspace. As Wilhelm (2000)

states, the rationality of public discussion depends on the reliability of the knowledge

embedded in it (p.90). Therefore, the information from unconfirmed sources would

mislead the public and greatly damage the quality of online public discussion.

Online public forums enable people to articulate their opinions and concerns about

social and political issues. *Tianya* has been famous for its elaborate criticism. However,

with regard to current situation of *tianya*, most respondents said that the quality of public

discussion on *tianya* was deteriorating. The assistant editor of *"tianya talk"* said the

discussion board was saturated with nonsense postings each day making it difficult for

opinion-oriented postings to gain attention or generate enduring debate. *"Tianya talk"*

usually initiates public debate on some specific topics, but the moderator said the threads

were usually irrelevant and off-topic.

In current Chinese cyberspace, one salient problem that damages the Internet's

deliberative potential lies in Chinese netizens' irrational emotions. Some respondents

mentioned that the issues relevant to abuse of power, government corruption, social

injustice, or the gap between the rich and poor always generate netizens' sharp resentment

or aggressive emotions. In July 2008, Yang Jia, a 28-year-old unemployed man from

Beijing, killed six Shanghai police officers. Instead of condemnation, Yang Jia even won widespread praise from Chinese netizens for his "courage". A netizen left a message on Yang's Myspace page, saying: "You have done what most people want to do, but do not have enough courage to do." A murderer had become an Internet cult hero, but the dead were given little sympathy. In contrast, a surge of rage and doubt attacking the unfair judicial system rose among the netizens. Through this case, people's complaints and resentment toward the privileged have an outlet. However, netizens' extreme reaction to this case showed that the basic social values and morals have been distorted due to Chinese people's increasing resentful emotion toward the unequal power distribution in the country.

One respondent said netizens' expressions of discontentment and indignation online resulted from their suppressed emotions in the real life. Underprivileged people have no chances to challenge political and social power, while the Internet can endow them with "illusion of power". In this sense, the Internet is only a tool that provides netizens' opportunities to give voice to their resentment. This phenomenon also represents Chinese netizens' thirst for power. Numerous impassioned Chinese netizens undertake the role of "moral defender" to judge social issues according to their own radical values .The grassroots' irrational emotion can easily turn into collective "Internet violence", and the group of people with blind resentment is called an "Internet mob". This phenomenon significantly decreases the quality of online public discussion.

Commercialization

Corporate colonization into cyberspace has become one of the greatest threats to cyberdemocracy. As Slack (1987) argues, as the development of information technology has been dominated by private capital, the trend is already toward continued erosion of

the public sphere. Dahlberg (2005) also argues the colonization of cyberspace by corporate interests will lead to the marginalization of critical and less powerful voices in the public forums. As I discussed before, the Chinese Internet industry has been captured by private capital and is highly commercialized. In this part, I undertake a critical examination on the specific case of *tianya* online community.

In the initial stage of development, the *tianya* online community was funded by the revenue of *Hainan Online* and *Hainan Tourism Online* both of which are owned by the same parent company--*Hainan Tianya online Network Technical Ltd.. Tianya* began to make profits through online advertising after almost five years' development and exploration. Its main channels of profit-making are traditional online advertising and interactive marketing. The latter has developed as the main method of commercialization for this online community. In 2007, *tianya* launched a "self-organized marketing" mode called ADtopic, a space for commercial information and advertising. This system combines corporate blogs and the technology of advertisement matching. To use this ADtopic system, enterprises can organize their information by posting advertisements or initiating a discussion relevant to their products. Their posts can be automatically distributed on specific boards based on the advertisers' topics. For example, *tianya* has signed a cooperative agreement with 7 Days Inn Group, a hotel chain corporation. The latter is allowed to organize and manage a specific discussion board called "7 Days Inn brand zone" on which *tianya* users can get information on registration and discuss their experience or assessment of the hotel. The hotel's advertising is distributed on relevant discussion boards, such as *Travel*, *Business*, and *City*. *Tianya* users can click the advertising link and go directly into the hotel's "brand zone". According to the agreement, *tianya* will get a share of the booking from the hotel. A *Tianya* employee explained target

advertisements will effectively reach the "right" audiences and can be highly controlled. Advertisers can manage the comments and highlight some topics. They can even delete those negative comments as they wish. This advertising model gives corporations privilege and significant power to intervene in public discussions. Marketing links are mixed within postings, and advertisements are placed on the site's eye-catching area. The online community's users are passively fed a diet of marketing and consumer-focused information, which will greatly distract the audiences' attention from political discussion.

With these new opportunities brought by web 2.0, *tianya* is actively seeking a new business model. Unlike other mainstream portals, online public forums have limited channels of profit-making. *Tianya*'s employee in the marketing department said: *"Tianya* indeed enjoys high popularity on the public forum, but popularity can hardly be translated into profit." To change this situation, *tianya* endeavors to build a comprehensive platform based on its influential public forum. With regard to this strategy, the employee said *tianya* would try to provide extensive product lines for the users to perfect their user experience. A wide array of services, including discussion forums, instant messaging, search engines, online games, and virtual shopping, will be further explored. She believes that a comprehensive platform can result in ongoing and deep relationships with users, and keep the users within its sphere of influence. Recently, *tianya's* president revealed in the press that, *"tianya* is going to become the Chinese *Facebook"*. It suggests *tianya* will intentionally shift its focus of development from public forum to a social networking system. The president also mentioned *tianya* would promote a new third party application programming interface. It is a framework on which any other web-based social network applications can be built. For example, *tianya* has signed a cooperative agreement with Google to launch two services—*Wenda* (Q&A) and *Laiba*--on tianya. Similar to Google

Answers, *tianya Wenda* is an online knowledge community that allows users to post their questions and to research answers to others' questions. *Laiba* is a sub-community of *tianya* which focuses on networking-centric function. On *Laiba*, most posts are just daily greetings based on interpersonal communication. *Tianya*'s strategic shift will weaken its function as an influential public forum which facilitates public participation in China. Its focus on commercialization and profit-making will effectively decrease its efforts at serving the public interest.

The process of commercialization will certainly affect the site's development. During the course of interviews, most *tianya*'s users expressed concern that the shareholders' interest, rather than public interest, will be emphasized in the future.

Driven by the market-oriented values, *tianya* also considered its users as "individualized-instrumental" consumers rather than as "critical-reflexive" citizens. The users are simply deemed consumers to be targeted. The increasingly individualized and customized services fragment the audience into isolated consumers. As Dahlberg (2005) argues, "public communication is often buried within a myriad of consumer services, marketing, and privatized practices, encouraging participants to perform as private, strategic actors". The commercial interest prevailing on the cyberspace has largely impaired online civic culture.

Online Censorship

During my interviews, all the respondents considered political control to be the biggest obstacle to cyberdemocracy in China. Though they all agreed that *tianya* generally gave netizens greater freedom of expression than other websites, they said lately they have seen greater online censorship over people's speech.

The government propaganda authority generally issues the "working instructions"

for the operators of the website, which regulate the principles of online censorship. Based on the instructions, the online community formulates a list of taboo topics or "sensitive" words. Users are not allowed to publish any posts that contain "sensitive" words or refer to the taboo topics. A respondent said his posts concerning official corruption have been deleted many times. Another respondent's posts concerning several riots in China were not allowed to be published. The list of censorship also changes regularly according to the current public affairs or focus of political control. For example, after Tibet's riot in 2008, any posts relevant to this topic were restricted. Information from Western media was blocked on the forum. With the 2008 Olympics Games approaching, Chinese websites were asked to tighten Internet censorship. The editor of *tianya* said: "during that period, the company's administrator required us to closely watch for 'unhealthy' information." The users also felt that many key words were added into surveillance system to supervise information on the community.

Tianya's self-censorship system is carried out in several ways. Since 2008, *tianya* has begun to implement a system of prepublication review. Any post has to be previewed by filtering software and human monitors. If the post is "inappropriate", users will be alerted by the site that his/her post is too sensitive to be published. Secondly, the method of "post" censorship also strengthens the system of surveillance. The site administrators and board moderators serve as the role of "gate keepers" to keep tracking the posts and delete "harmful" information from the community. They also have the right to block or delete a user's ID if the user violates the regulation. In some cases, the administrators did not notice some "sensitive" content until the post has already spread widely and captured extensive attention. Once some heated topics are identified as sensitive issues, the administrators usually clean up all the relevant posts to prevent the spread of discussion.

On June 28, 2008, in Guizhou Province' Weng'an county, over ten thousand people rioted and torched the government buildings to "vent anger towards the local government's cover up of an alleged rape and murder of a teenager girl" ("Girl's", 2008). This issue became prominent on online public forums. When the issue broke out on *tianya*, the post immediately invoked heated criticism over the local government's cover-up of the incident. However, this social "mass incident" became a taboo topic in China. *Tianya*'s administrators reacted swiftly by cleaning up all the relevant posts and replies regardless of netizens' discontent. When I was doing my research, I tried to enter the key words "Weng'an" on *"tianya talk"* to search the postings. The search engine only showed nine relevant postings left, and seven of these postings came from official reports on the traditional media.

Tianya also has strict restrictions over foreign IP's access to the community. People with foreign IP cannot register on the community, because foreign IPs are difficult to be tracked and managed. I also suffered from such a problem when I started my study. The only way I could sign on was to ask my friend in China to register me as national user. Since 2008 April, *tianya* has charged each new user 1 yuan for registration. Users are asked to leave their cellphone number through which the site will send a logging code. Some respondents expressed that this measure was also a form of surveillance because the site can obtain your real identity. Other respondents were also concerned that this method will be a form of "real name registration" for *tianya* in the future. In addition to the self-censorship of the site, the Internet police also show up on *tianya* to supervise the site. Users can report any "illegal information" to "virtual" cops.

From the case of *tianya*, we can see that a variety of factors, including unequal antecedent resources, hierarchical power structure, poor quality of deliberations,

commercialization and political control, damage the potential of the Internet for Chinese

democratization. In this sense, the ideal of cyberdemocracy is just an illusion in China.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

With the rapid development of the Internet in China, the myth of cyberdemocracy

that romanticizes the democratic potential of the Internet has been generated. The myth of

cyberdemocracy overestimates the potential of the Internet as a significant liberating

force in civil society, especially in repressive regimes like China. The discourse of

cyberdemocracy casts the Internet as the best hope for democratizing communication in

Chinese society. It promises that Internet communications will contribute to a new kind of

public sphere and thus to a new form of democracy creating political and social change in

China. The myth of cyberdemocracy promises us everything: the Chinese people will be

equally empowered by the Internet; the public will enjoy more opportunities to participate

in public discussion; and grassroots' opinions might influence the decision-making

process.

The myth of cyberdemocracy results from a variety of reasons. First, Chinese public

opinion, especially at the grassroots' level, has been suppressed for a long time. There is a

lack of effective channels for the Chinese people to express their opinions. Traditional

media serve as the "mouthpiece of the Party" which cannot fully represent the majority of

ordinary people's voices. However, with the country's modernization, the Chinese

people's demands for self-expression and civic engagement have been stimulated. The

emergence and thriving of the Internet provide new opportunities for the Chinese people

to revitalize civil society. The Internet has also been considered as the only powerful

weapon with which ordinary people can change society and affect public policies. In this

sense, the myth of cyberdemocracy embodies Chinese people's expectations and political

demands for democratization.

The myth of cyberdemocracy is also strengthened by the state. By offering the possibility of a "democratic mechanism" facilitated by the Internet, the state government and the Party, to some degree, are attempting to satisfy the people's hunger for democratization and release public discontent against the country's authoritarian governance. Therefore, the myth of cyberdemocracy can be also used to sustain social stability by the state. On the other hand, the Internet serves as a tool of propaganda in the service of political control. Actually, Chinese leaders have recognized the significant role of the Internet in forming and disseminating public opinion. Therefore, to strengthen existing social structures and to legalize the Party-state's domination, the myth of cyberdemocracy is created and propagated as a national ideological mechanism.

China's information society is marked by its rapid development of an information-based economy. By delineating the trajectory of China's informatization, we can see that the Internet industry undertook the role of promoting national economic growth in China. However, as many scholars of political economy state, information society only marks another phase of capitalism. In China, the logic of capital is also deeply embedded in the thriving Internet industry. Commercial interests have gradually come to dominate cyberspace, reducing the potential development of an online public sphere.

To debunk the myth of cyberdemocracy, the role of the state needs to be scrutinized. Since the introduction of the Internet in China, the Party-state has held an ambivalent attitude towards this new force in Chinese society. On the one hand, state government has played the role of agent in response to business interests. It considers the Internet industry essential parts of the country's economic development, and has actively supported national informatization projects. To carry out its role in the information society, the

Chinese government enacted a variety of preferential policies slanting toward the

information sector. The Party-state has been the trigger for the development of an

information economy. The initiative of facilitating cyberdemocracy and promoting the

public interest has given way to the priority of economic development. On the other hand,

the Internet communication poses a threat to the government's governance. Cyberspace

has been considered a new battleground for ideological control by the Party-state.

Intensified political control and censorship are carried out through multi-layered

mechanisms, including regulations, technological filters, and self-censorship.

As demonstrated in the previous sections, China's information society is marked by

its "Chinese characteristics". The contradiction between a privatized economy and

political control is the fundamental contradiction in Chinese society. In the information

age, this contradiction has been intensified. The intervention of corporate and political

interests into virtual space has significantly limited the full potential of the Internet for

constructing and growing an online public sphere in China.

To examine how the Chinese people understand the role of the Internet in Chinese

democratization and what factors affect the fulfillment of the Internet's democratic

potential, I focused on the case of *tianya* online community. The research findings suggest

that the Chinese people generally have positive and optimistic perspectives towards the

Internet's democratic function. The majority of the respondents view the Internet as an

emancipator and empowering tool for Chinese democratization. They think the Internet

marks a dramatic departure from Chinese traditional political communication. From my

own view, the revolutionary effects of the Internet in Chinese information society can be

summarized in the following aspects:

First, the Internet breaks down the traditional top-down structure of information

dissemination by providing the public access to more diverse information sources. The Internet has given ordinary people a place to gather, publish, share, and communicate information, which cannot be realized through other conventional channels in China. Numerous events censored by traditional media have an opportunity to be distributed online. The informing role of the Internet is the prerequisite for deliberative democracy. Not only can it satisfy people's demand for information and their "right to know", but it can also stimulate informed people's autonomy and awareness to challenge the traditional power relations.

Second, the Internet, especially online public forums or blogs, can serve as venues for exchanging ideas and arguments. The interactive feature of the Internet changes traditional one-way communication, providing more opportunities for the grassroots to air their opinions. According to the theories of deliberative democracy, the purpose of democracy can be achieved by contestation and articulation of alternative opinions. In China, there is a lack of effective channels for grassroots' expression. To some degree, cyberspace is the only public space for the Chinese people to express their opinions on public matters and political decision-making. Online public discussion plays an increasingly important role in reflecting those people's voices which have been ignored by the authorities for a long time. Virtual space also shifts the media's function as the Party's "mouthpiece" to a public forum that will pave the way to deliberative democracy.

Third, online public opinion has emerged as an important force in Chinese society to facilitate social and political changes. Online public opinion functions as a "watchdog" which serves to expose social inequality and abuses of political power. I have illustrated several current online events in China which exerted a profound impact on Chinese society and political system. These instances reveal that online public knowledge can also

have effects on government behavior.

However, the social and political effects of the online public opinion are limited. First, the emergence of these stories online was accidental. The Internet is not an institutionalized democratic mechanism in China. Under the Party's control, grassroots' public opinions have not been incorporated into the decision-making process.

Second, there is a lack of online organizations in Chinese cyberspace which consistently advocate for the public interest or to mobilize online social movements. The Party's rigorous political control leaves little room for the development of cyberactivism. Therefore, the action-oriented function of the Internet cannot be fully developed and realized.

Online public participation can be allowed to develop only if this new democratic practice would not pose any threat to the Chinese regime and the Party-state's governance. Therefore, it is impossible to touch on the regime's fundamental problems and then bring about radical democratic reforms in China.

People can express themselves on the Internet but it does not mean that the public sphere exists in the virtual world. The myth of cyberdemocracy ignores the fact that the Internet is not universally accessible by the public. Online political discussion excludes those groups who lack the necessary antecedent resources. The power hierarchy system existing in cyberspace also amplifies the voices of the advantaged people who are on the top. This virtual power provides those key persons with the privilege to express and lead public opinions. In contrast, common people's opinions are further marginalized from the center of the public discussion. This unequal online power structure significantly impairs the development of a vibrant online public sphere.

Additionally, the poor quality of online public discussion also becomes another

important factor that impedes the fulfillment of cyberdemocracy. Inauthentic information sources and irrational discourse contribute to the deterioration of online public forums' quality.

The online public sphere also faces colonization by commercial and political interests. From the case study of *tianya*, we learned the primary concern for the company which runs the site is to maximize profit rather promote the public sphere. Though profit-making is vital for the commercial website's survival, online civic space is decreasing in favor of commercial interests. The corporation continues to explore any new ways to create profit, such as embedded advertisements, public relation advertorials in the discussion boards and online word-of-mouth marketing. Online public forums are being exploited as tools of profit-making.

The research findings show that China's online surveillance and censorship have been intensified since the Party-state has become aware of the significant impact online opinion exerts in China. Online public forums are the places where most online public opinion originates. Therefore, the Chinese government pays particular attention to this form of communication in the information age. In addition to the national regulations, website companies also implement rigorous self-censorship by following the state government's guidelines of political control. Though *tianya* has enjoyed a large degree of free speech in China, the extent of freedom is decreasing. The stringent political control reminds us of the presence of the state power in cyberspace. To some degree, political control is the biggest obstacle to fulfillment of cyberdemocracy in China.

Recommendation: Cultivation of Civic Culture in China

The myth of cyberdemocracy masks the fact that the power in Chinese cyberspace is actually controlled by corporate and political interests. New communication technology is

fostering greater inequality in China's information society. The way of resolving this fundamental problem is to redistribute power more equally. In addition to providing more chances for the Chinese people to ensure equal access to new communication technologies, changes are also required to nurture grassroots' civic awareness and autonomy. Therefore, from my view, cultivating civic culture is an essential step in changing the unequal power distribution.

Civic culture refers to those features of the sociocultural world that constitute everyday preconditions for all democratic participation (Dahlgren, 2000, p.336). First, the identity of citizen is the primary feature of civic culture. The identity of citizenship can help people foster the consciousness of civic power and perceive possibilities for participation. Certain democratic values and norms should be internalized as a prerequisite for citizenship. Civic identity can also be understood as a combination of identities. As Dahlgren (2000) states, citizenship can be seen as the construction of our multiple selves (p.339). Civil society is built on "assembling groups of people with common concerns and communicating with each other to formulate a common agenda" (Klein, 1996). The construction of such an identity is a critical element to motivate people to fight for social resources and struggle against manipulation by elites. Driven by shared characteristics and interests, online communities and social movement activists can organize to pursue specific political purposes. In this sense, the identity of citizenship is a key to motivate citizens to become agents of social change. In the information age, the Internet can provide more opportunities to build a collective identity. First, online communities can easily gather people with shared interests to form collective groups and strengthen their collective identity. New communication technology can provide access to a large audience, which can easily mobilize the mass into public participation.

Improving political competence is required for a vibrant civic culture to empower more people. Citizens must have the ability to take advantage of any possible channel, to express their own ideas, and to advance rational public discourse. Therefore, the cultivation of communicative competencies is indispensable for a democratic citizenry. The improvement of this kind of competence depends on civic education, which can instill citizens with democratic values and ability of public participation. Since 1990s, Chinese mass media and education system have reinvigorated the concept of citizenship and promoted the legal right of citizens. However, Chinese citizenship is still embedded within "an authoritarian mode of governance and a collectivist understanding of rights" (Keane, 2001, p.3). To change this situation, Chinese civic education system has to be reformed. Schools should not be authoritarian institutions that only impart "official" knowledge. Civic consciousness and political knowledge concerning democratic institutions and procedures have to be included in the education of youth. Critical and reflective thinking, rather than the spirit of obedience, should be promoted. Civic education should become a life style, rather than a type of ideological control. This means that other social institutions should be incorporated into the system. Beyond what the mainstream media propagate, the independent, fair and critical alternative media should emerge and undertake the essential role in cultivating civic education in China. Social movements that represent diverse interests should be able to mobilize the mass and encourage the citizens to fight for their rights. The civic competences can be gained effectively through democratic practices.

According to Dahlgren (2000), loyalty to democratic values and procedures can contribute to strengthening the function of democracy. Dahlgren argues procedural mechanisms take on extra importance in this dimension of civic culture. It requires the

state's legal system or other social institution to legalize democratic practices and promote democratic values.

Additionally, it is believed that democracy must be embodied in concrete and recurring practices. Social changes will happen only when democratic values or beliefs have been transformed into actual political action. Such democratic practices help "generate personal and social meaning in relation to the ideals of democracy" (Dahlgren, 2000, p.338). In China, online public opinions are fragmented, occasional and non-institutionalized. These features of online public participation limit the degree and extent of cyberdemocracy. Therefore, the democratic practices through the Internet should become an element of the routine, of the taken-for-granted ideal and of the tradition in our political system.

The emergence of the Internet and growing cyberactivism have definitely strengthened grassroots' participation and promoted the bottom-up social changes in China. I also believe that the Internet communication will penetrate the Chinese people's political life in the future and will become a powerful tool to facilitate Chinese democratization. However, there are still essential obstacles to realize the full democratizing function in China. Gilley (2004) advances a list of factors that are conducive to a transition to democracy in China: an emergent civil society; a growing rule of law; unprecedented international interaction (through participation in the globalization of trade and political relationships); debate within the CCP on democracy; and fundamental political structural changes. From my view, these democratic changes will require much time to be fulfilled in China's political economic context. Under one-party rule by the CCP, radical democratic reforms, such as constitutional democracy, are not yet achievable. In response to the Chinese people's demand for democracy, small changes

will probably be allowed only on the premise that the Party-state's governance will not be threatened. Even though China has experienced highly liberalized economic reforms, the CCP still tightly holds its control and accelerates its efforts to secure the "commanding heights" in the country's political, ideological, economic and cultural realms. The existing political economic system and power structure stay intact even if new communication technologies unprecedentedly constitute fundamental economic and social changes. Therefore, in the long run, China will be still on its way to becoming a deliberative democracy. Though political developments will be gained during this period, the fulfillment of Chinese democracy is unpredictable.

Contribution of the Research

Through the literature review, I found there was a lack of research on the political and social role of the Internet in developing countries. Previous research tends to focus on the technical aspects of the Internet's development without much consideration of political, social and cultural contexts. Thus, my research is a significant complement to existing literature with regard to the democratic function of the Internet in China's society. Additionally, this research is also an important attempt to apply Western democratic theory to China's context. Specifically, Wilhelm's digital democracy model was used to examine the cyberdemocracy with "Chinese characteristic" through a case study. The research findings suggest the typical characteristics of China's information society: the tension between economic liberalization and political control. In China's transitionary society, bottom-up grassroots' participation in political and social transformation can be fulfilled to some degree through the Internet, and this new form of democratic practice has become a remarkable force to promote China's democratization. However, the central government's rigorous grip of political power still fundamentally impedes the democratic

reform in communist country like China. This finding suggests the dilemma China faces, which distinguishes Chinese cyberspace from Western models.

On the other hand, a majority of literature, government rhetoric and media discourse have contributed to the shaping of the myth of cyberdemocracy in China. My thesis is a counterbalance of these optimistic discourses by adopting a dialectic and critical perspective on this issue. This research unprecedentedly combines the concept of the "myth" with the issue of cyberdemocracy in China's society. It provides meaningful findings with regard to both the dynamics and limitation of the Internet's democratic role. The research findings can help the Chinese people be more informed of the problems and the potential of new media, and better understand how to take advantage of new communication technology to effectively participate in democratic practices.

Moreover, previous studies have tended to use either micro or macro level analysis. My research provides a broader perspective to examine the issue by incorporating micro, institutional and macro level of analysis. At the micro level, interviewees' individual experiences and understandings were obtained. At the institutional level, I examined an online community's democratic practice and found supportive evidence for the myth of cyberdemocracy. At the macro level, the characteristics of China's information society were analyzed through the lens of political economy.

Methodologically, this study applied virtual ethnography on the study of cyberdemocracy. In the field of new media research dominated by quantitative methods, my study makes a significant contribution to the relevant literature and explores a new approach to this issue. The study looked at people's articulation of their everyday practices and understandings. The in-depth interviews indicated the respondents' different opinions regarding the democratic role of the Internet. The interviews of both the users

and administrators of *tianya* gave respondents fair opportunities to express their opinions and allow me to make thorough conclusions.

Limitations and Future Trend

This study has some potential limitations. Though qualitative methods provide in-depth data, the limited sample cannot draw overall or representative generalizations. I did not intend to define relationships among demographic, psychological and online behavior variables that might shed light on online public participation. In this sense, a combination of both quantitative and qualitative in the future studies is needed.

Second, a text analysis is not fully used in my study. This method can help the researcher learn more about the quality of online public discussion. It would be a worthwhile next step to conduct more detailed analysis of the formation of online public opinions and the quality of public discussion.

My study focuses on the concept of "myth." Myth" has not been paid sufficient attention in studies of cyberdemocracy. Future studies could further specify how the discourses of the "myth" form, and how dominant ideological mechanisms help to construct the myth.

My thesis suggests the cultivation of civic culture in this respect. Future studies should consider the practical measures which are applicable to China's context. Hopefully, this perspective could lend people's attention to the realignment of the power structures, could promote and create more dynamic social movements and provide a counter-discourse to the dominant discourses concerning new media's social effects.

REFERENCES

Abbott, J. P. (2001). Democracy@ internet.asia? The challenges to the Emancipatory potential of the net: lessons from China and Malaysia [Electronic version]. *Third World Quarterly,* 22(1), 99-114.

About Tianya Online Community, from http://help.tianya.cn/about/about.htm

Administration of Internet News Information Services Provisions, (2005). Available at http://www.eduzhai.net/yingyu/615/763/yingyu_247290.html

Almond, G.A.& Pwell, G.B (1980). *Comparative Politics Today.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

Analyzing mythology (1995). Retrieved October 3, 2001. Available from http://www3.sympatico.ca/untangle/mythII.html.

Andrew, J. *McLuhand Reconsidered.* from http://www.vispo.com/writings/essays/mcluhana.htm

Asen, R., & Brouwer, D. (Eds.). (2001). *Counterpublics and the State.* New York: State University of New York..

Bakardjieva, M. (2003). Virtual Togetherness: An Everyday-life Perspective. Media, Culture & Society, 25(3), 291-313.

Banda, F. (2003). *Community radio broadcasting in Zambia: a policy perspective.* PhD thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria.

Barber, B. (1998). *A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong.* New York: Hill and Wang.

Barber, B. (2004). Which Technology and Which Democracy? In Jenkins, Henry & Thorburn, David (Ed.), *Democracy and New Media* (pp.33-48) . Cambridge, Massachusettes, London, England: The MIT Press.

Barney , D. D.. (2000). *Prometheus Wired: The Hope for Democracy in the Age of Network Technology.* Vancouver,Toronto :UBC Press.

Barthe, R.(1972). *Mythologies.* New York: Noonday Press.

Barthes, R. (1984). *Mythologies. Translated by A. Lavers.* New York: Hill and Wang.

Baym, N. K. (1998) The Emergence of On-line Community. In S. Jones (Ed.) *Cybersociety: communication and community* (pp. 35-68), Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Berger, P. (1985). *The Capitalist Revolution.* New York: Basic

Butsch, R.(2007) Introduction: How are media public spheres? In Butsch, Richard (Ed.) *Media and Public Spheres.*(pp.1-14). New York: Palgrave Maccmillan.

Cai, T. (1988). Shichang Jingji Yu Zhengzhi Fazhan (Market economy and Political Development), *Tianjin Ribao (Tianjin Daily)*

Calabrese, A. & Sparks,C. (2004) *Toward a Political Economy of Culture: Capitalism and Communication in the Twenty-First Century.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Cary, J.W.(2005). The historical pragmatism and the Internet. *New media and society.* 7(4). 433-455

Castells, M.(1996). *The Rise of the Network Society.* Oxford:Blackwell publications Ltd.

China maps out informatization development strategy (2006). Available at: http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/xw/t251756.htm

Chan, G. (2005). *China's Compliance in Global Environmental Affairs: Trade, Arms, Control, Environmental Protection, Human Rights.* New Jersey: World Scientific Publishing Company.

"Cisco Gaining Momentum in China Telecommunications Market" Available at: http://www.cisco.com/warp/public/146/asia_pr/september98/11.html

China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) (2008). *Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China.* Beijing: CNNIC

Chinese President Promises Divergent Voices be Heard Online. Retrieved on June 20, 2008, from http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-06/20/content_8408597.htm

Dahlberg, L. (2001). Computer-mediated communication and the public sphere: A critical analysis. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 7* (1). Retrieved May 1, 2003 from http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol7/issue1/dahlbergold.html

Dahlberg, L. (2005) The Corporate Colonization of Online Attention and the Marginalization of Critical Communication? *Journal of Communication Inquiry 29(2), 160-180*

Dahlgren, P. (1998). Public Service Media, Old and New: Vitalizing a Civic Culture? The 1998 Spry Memorial Lecture. Available: http://www.fas.umontral.ca/COM/spry/spry-pd-lec.html.

Dahlgren, P. (2000). Media, Citizenship, and Civic Culture. In J. Curran & M. Gurevitch (Eds.), *Mass Media and Society* (3rd ed.), London: Routledge.

Dahlgren, P. (2001). The Public Sphere and the Net: Structure, Space, and Communication. In Bennett, W. Lance & Entman, Robert M. (Ed.) *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy* (pp33-55). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dahlgren, P. (2005). The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation. *Political Communication, 22:147-162*

Davis, R. (1999). *The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Deng, Z. & Jing, Y (1992) Jiangou Zhongguo de Shimin Shehui (Building Civil Society in China), *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Jikan (Chinese Social Science Quarterly)* 1:58-68

di Gennaro, C. and Dutton, W.H. (2006) The Internet and the Public: Online and Offline Political participation in the United Kingdom, *Parliamentary Affairs,* 59 (2):299-313

Doty, W. G. (1986). *Mythography: the study of myths and rituals.* University, Ala.: The University of Alabama Press.

Entman, R. M. & Herbst, S. (2001). Reframing Public Opinion as We Have Known It. In Bennett, W. Lance & Entman, Robert M. (Ed.)*Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy* (pp203-225). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Esarey, A. (2007). Concerning the Market: State Strategies for Controlling China's Commercial Media. In Dali L. Yang (Eds.) *Discontented Miracle: Growth, Conflict and Institutional Adaptations in China* (pp.1-48). Hackensack: World Scientific Publishing Company.

"Fears of Another Internet Bubble" (2005). Available at http://www.economist.com/business/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_QQNVDDS

Fishkin, J.S. (1992) Beyond Teledemocracy: America on the Line. *The responsive Community* 2(3):13-19.

Fontana, A. & Frey, J.H. (2005) "The Interview: From Neutral Stance to Political Involvement" In Denzin, Norman K. & Lincoln, Yvonna S. (Eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research, 3rd Edition.* (pp. 695-728) Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Garnham, N (1990) The Role of the Public Sphere in the Information Society, in C.T. Marsden (Eds.) *Regulating the Global Information Society*, London: Routledge. (2000)

Gilley, B.(2004) *China's Democratic Future: How It Will Happen and Where It Will Lead. New York:* Columbia Univ. Press

Girl's Murder Triggers Riot in Guizhou Province , Retrieved June 30, 2008, from http://www.infowars.com/girls-murder-triggers-riot-in-guizhou-province/

Golding, P. (1998) Global Village or Cultural Pillage? The Unequal Inheritance of the Communications Revolution. In R.W.McChesney, E.M. Wood & J.B. Foster (Eds.), *Capitalism and the Information Age: The Political Economy of the Global Communication Revolution* (pp.69-86). New York: Monthly Review Press.

Groper, R. (1996). Electronic Mail and the Reinvigoration of American Democracy. *Social Science Computer Review 14(2): 157-168.*

Gutmann, E. (2002). "Who lost China's Internet?" *Weekly Standard News Corporation* Available at: http://www.weeklystandard .com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/000/992dgmtd.asp

Habermas, J. (1962): *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgois Society.* Cambridge: The MIT Press

Habermas, J.(1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere:an Inquiry into a category of Bourgeios Society.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Habermas, J.(1996). Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press

Hacker, KL & Dijk, J Van (2000). *Digital Democracy: Issues of Theory and Practice.* CA, USA: Sage Publications

Hair, Neil & Clark, Moira. (2003). *An Enhanced Virtual Ethnography: The Role of Critical Theory.* From http://www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/ejrot/cmsconference/2003/proceedings/exploringthemeaning/Hair.pdf

Hamel, J, Dufour, Stephane, & Fortin, Dominic (1993). *Case Study Methods.* London: Sage

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1983). *Ethnography: Principles in Practice.* London & New York: Routledge.

Hanson,J. & Narula, U.(1990). *New Communication Technologies in Developing Countries.* Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Assocuation

He, Baogang (1994). "Dual Roles of Semi-Civil Society in Chinese Democracy" *Australian Journal of Political Science,* 29(!):154-171.

He, Baogang (1997). *The Democratic Implications of Civil Society in China.* New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc.

Herbst, S (1993). *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling Has Shaped American Politics.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Herring, S. C. (1993). Gender and democracy in computer-mediated communication. *Electronic Journal of Communication, 3* (2).

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

Hirschkop, K (1996). Democracy and the New Technologies. *Monthly Review* 48 (3):86-98.

Hoff, J., H., I. & Tops, P. (Eds.) (2000). *Democratic governance and new technology: technologically mediated innovations in political practice in Western Europe.* London and NY: Routledge.

Huang, Philip C.C.(1993) "Public Sphere/Civil Society in China? The Third Realm Between State and Society. *Modern China*, 19(2):216-240

Hung Chin-Fu, (2006). The Politics of Cyber Participation in the PRC: The Implication of Contingency for the Awareness of Citizens' Rights [Electronic version]. *Issues & Studies*, 42 (4): 137-173.

Internet Usage and Influence in China's Twelve Cities. from http://tech.sina.com.cn/focus/internet_R/index.shtml

IRG Technology, Media and Telecommunications and Life Sciences Weekly Market Review From http://www.irstreet.com/top/am/amfiles/e20060827_0902.pdf

iResearch (2008):*The main revenue of internet community is still advertising in China*. From http://english.iresearch.com.cn/views/Web2.0/DetailNews.asp?id=9010

iResearch (2009) *2008 China Internet Industry Research Report* From http://www.iresearch.com.cn/coredata/2008q4.asp

Jensen, M. J., Danziger, J. N., & Venkatesh A. (2007). Civil Society and Cyber Society: The Role of the Internet in Community Associations and Democratic Politics [Electronic version]. *The Information Society*, 23(1), 39 – 50

Jung, E. & Kim, E.(2006). More Democracy or More Restriction: Global Internet Information Flows and Censorship in the Public Sphere on Cyberspace in China [Electronic version]. *Cultural Space and Public Sphere in Asia 2006*, Seoul, Korea.

Keane, M.(2001). Redefining Chinese Citizenship. *Economy and Society Volume* 30(1):1-17

Kenez, P.(1985). *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Kim, J. (1997). *On the Interactions of News Media, Interpersonal Communication, Opinion Formation, and Participation: Deliberative Democracy and the Public Sphere* Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania 1997.

Klein, Hans K. Grassroots Democracy and the Internet: The Telecommunications Policy Roundtable. Retrieved May 6 1996, from http://www.isoc. org:80/HMP/PAPER/164/txt/paper.txt

Kolko, B. & E. Reid. (1998). Dissolution and fragmentation: problems in on-line communities. In Jones, S.G. (Eds.). *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (pp.212-229). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kolko, B.E.(Eds). (2000) *Race in Cyberspace*. New York: Routledge.

Lee, Chin-Chuan (2001), "Rethinking the Political Economy: Implications for Media and Democracy in Greater China," *Javnost-the Public*, 8, 4:81-102.

Levine, P. (2002). Can the Internet Rescue Democracy? Towards an Online Commons", in Ronald Hayduck & Kevin Mattson (Eds.), *Democracy's Moment: Reforming the American Political System for the 21th Century*,(pp.121-137). New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Levi-Strauss, C. (1978). *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Levi-Strauss, C. (1963). *The Structural Study of Myth*. In Levi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology. Basic Books

Li, Xiguang (2001). "Laizi Xuni Kongjian de Zhenshi Tiaozhan" (The real challenge from the virtual space). Available at: http://www.enews.com.cn/article/200112/20011210054246_6.xml.

Lupia, A. & McCubbins Mathew (1998). *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Mann, C. & Stewart, F. (1996). Internet Communication and Qualitative Research. In Nigel G. Fielding and Raymond M. Lee.(Eds.) *New Technologies for Social Research* (pp.118-156). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Margolis, M. & Resnick, D.(2000). *Politics as Usual: The Cyberspace "Revolution"*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Markham, A. (2003) Representation in online ethnographies. In Johns, M. Chen, S.L, & Hall, J. (Eds), *Online Social Research: Methods, issues, and ethics* (pp.131-156). New York: Peter Lang.

Markham, A. (2005) The Methods, Politics, and Ethics of Representation in Online Ethnography, In Denzin & Lincoln, (Eds.), T*he Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Third Edition)(pp.793-820). London: Sage Publications.

McChesney, R. W. (1999). *Rich democracy, poor democracy: Comunication politics in dubious times*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

McChesney, R. W. (1995). The Internet and U.S Communication Policy-Making in Historical and Critical Perspective. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communications,*Available from: http://www.ascuse.org/jcmc/woll/issue4/vollno4.htoml

McLuhand, M.(1972). Automation: Learning and Living. In A. Toffler (Ed.), T*he Futurists* (pp.60-72). Toronto: Random House of Canada Ltd.

Merriam, S.B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Min, Dahong (2000). "2000 nian zhongguo wangluo xinwen chuanbo lingyu huimo" (Review of China's Internet media in the years of 2000). *China Journalism Review*. Available at www.cjr.com.cn

Moody, P. R (1983) *Chinese Politics after Mao*. New York: Praeger.

Mosco, V.. (1989). *The Pay-per Society: Computers and Communication in the Information Age*. Garamond Press

Mosco, V. (2005). *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power and Cyberspace*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. London, England: The MIT Press.

Mueller, M. & Tan, Zixiang (1997). *China in the Information Age: Telecommunications and the Dilemmas of Reform*. Washington, D.C.:The Center of Strategic and International Studies.

Nathan, A.J (1985). *Chinese Democracy*. California: University of California Press

Negroponte, N. (1995). *Being Digital*. Knopf: Vintage

Norris, V. P.(2001) *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Norris, V. P. (1990). *The Political Economy of Communications: An Exploration of Fundamental Concepts* (Working papers). State College: School of Communications, Pennsylvania State University.

Ogden, MR. (1996). Electronic power to the people: who is technology's keeper on the cyberspace frontier? *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 52: 119-133.

Palczewski, C. (2001). Cyber-movements, new social movements, and counterpublics. In R. Asen & D. Brouwer (Eds.), *Counterpublics and the State* (pp. 161-186). New York: State University of New York.

Papacharissi, Z. (2002). The virtual sphere: The Internet as a public sphere. *New Media & Society, 4* (1), 9-27.

Pei, Minxin (1994). *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union*. Boston: Harvard U.P

Popkin, S.(1991). *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuation in Presidential Campaigns*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Poster, M. (1999). The net as a public sphere. In D. Crowley & P. Heyer (Eds.), *Communication in History: Technology, Culture, Society.* London: Longman.

Poor, N. (2005). Mechanisms of an online public sphere: The website Slashdot. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 10*(2), article 4; from http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue2/poor.html

Ragin, C. G. (1991). Introduction: The problem of balancing discourse on cases and variables in comparative social science. In C.G. Ragin (Ed.), *Issues and alternatives in comparative social research* (pp.1-8). Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.

Rankin, M. (1993). Some observations on a Chinese public sphere. *Modern China,* 19 (2), 158-182.

Rheingold, H. (1994). *The Virtual Community.* New York: HarperCollins

Rheingold, H. (2000). *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier.* Cambridge: The MIT Press

Rong, Jian (1987) Lun Makesi de Minzhu Sixiang (On Marx's Democratic Ideas), *Zhengzhixue Yanjiu (Political Science Research)* 3: pp.1-7.

Rubens, Jim. (1983). Retooling American Democracy. *The Futurist* 17(1): 59-64.

Sade-Beck, L. (2004). Internet ethnography: Online and offline. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 3*(2). Article 4. from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_2/ pdf/sadebeck.pdf

Schell, O. (1995) *Mandate of Heaven : The Legacy of Tiananmen Square and the Next Generation of China's Leaders.* Clearwater: Touchstone Books Ltd.

Schiller, D. (2006). *How to Think about Information.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Schiller, H. I. (1996). *Information Inequality: The Deepening Social Crisis In America.* New York : London Routledge.

Schuler, D. (2004) Reports of the Close Relationship between Democracy and the Internet May Have Been Exaggerated. In Jenkins, Henry & Thorburn, David (Ed.), *Democracy and New Media* (pp.69-84). Massachusettes, London, England :The MIT Press.

Schurmann, F. (1968) *Ideology and Organization in Communist China.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Seawright, S. (1999). "China.com Triples in Nasdaq Debut" *South China Morning Post*

Seligman, A. (1992). *The Idea of Civil Society.* New York: Free Press.

Silver, D. (2000). Looking Backwards, Looking Forward: Cyberculture Studies 1990-2000. In David Gauntlett(Ed.) *Web.studies: Rewiring Media Studies for the Digital Age.* (pp.19-30). Oxford University Press.

Simon, H.n (1996). The Paradox of Case Study. *Cambridge Journal of Education,* 26(2): 225-240.

Singh, V. & Dickson, J. (2002) Ethnographic Approaches to the Study of Organizations. In D. Partington (Ed.) *Essential Skills for Management Research* (pp. 118-134). London: Sage.

Slack, J. D. (1987). The information Age as Ideology: An Introduction. in Slack, Jennifer Daryl & Fred Fejes (eds.) *The Ideology of the Information Age* (pp.1-11). Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation

Spark, C. (2001). The Internet and the Global Public Sphere. In Bennett, W. Lance & Entman, Robert M. (Ed.)*Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy* (pp33-55). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tai, Zixue (2006). *The Internet in China: Cyberspace and Civil Society.* New York London: Routledge

Tapscott, Don & Anthony D. Williams (2007). *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*. New York: Penguin.

Toffler, A.(1970). *Future Shock*. Toronto: Bantam Books of Canada Ltd.

Toffler, A. (1980) *The Third Wave*. New York: Bantam Books

Van Dijk, J (1998). The Reality of Virtual Communities. in J. Groebel (Eds.), Trends in Communication I (pp.39-63). Amsterdam: Boom Publishers.

Van Dijk, J. (2000). Models of democracy and concepts of communication. In K. L.Hacker and Jan van Dijk (Eds). *Digital democracy: issues of theory and practice*. London: Sage.

Wakeman, Jr., Frederic (1993). "The Civil Society and Public Sphere Debate: Western Reflections on Chinese Political Culture." *Modern China,* 19(2): 108-138.

Walton, G. (2001) "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. Available at:
http://www.ichrdd.ca/english/commdoc/publications/globalization/goldenshieldEng.html

Ware, R (1992) What good is democracy? The Alternatives in China and the West" in Anthony J.P. & Ronald C.K, eds. *Comparative Political Philosophy*. (pp.115-140) New Delhi: Sage

Webster, F. (2002). *Theories of the information society*. London and New York: Routledge.

Wilhelm, Anthony G. (2000). *Democracy in the Digital Age: Challenges to Political Life in Cyberspace*. New York and London: Routledge

Williams, R (1974). *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. London: Fontana.

Wittel, A. (2000) *Ethnography on the Move: From Field to Net to Internet*. January, 2000. from http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-00/1-00wittel-e.htm

Wong, J. & Nah, Seok Ling (2001) *China's Emerging New Economy: The Internet and E-Commerce*. Singapore University Press World Scientific.

Wu, Guoguang (2000). One Head, Many Mouths: Diversifying Press Structures in Reform China. In C.C. Lee (Eds.), *Money, Power and Media: Communication Patterns and Bureaucratic Control in Cultural China* (pp.45-67). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Wu, Yan. (2007) Blurring Boundaries in a "Cyber-Greater China": Are Internet Bulletin Boards Constructing the Public Sphere in China. In Burtsch, Richard (Ed.), *Media and Public Spheres* (pp.210-222). New York: Palgrave Maccmillan.

Yang, Guobin. (2003). 'The Internet and Civil Society in China: a preliminary assessment', *Journal of Contemporary China,* 12:36, 453 – 475. Available from: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10670560305471

Yan, Wu (2007). Blurring Boundaries in a "Cyber-Greater China": Are Internet Bulletin Boards Constructing the Public Sphere in Chin. In Richard Butsch(Eds) *Media and Public Spheres,* (pp.210-223). New York :Palgrave Macmillan.

Yin, R. K.(1994) *Case Study Research: Design and Method*. Sage Publications

Young, T.R. (1987). Information, Ideology and Political Reality: Against Toffler. in Slack, Jennifer Daryl & Fred Fejes (eds.) *The Ideology of the Information Age (*pp.118-132). Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation

Yu, Frederick T.C. (1963). Communitaions and Politics in Communist China, in Lucian W. Pye (ed.), *Communications and Political Development*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
Yurcik, William & Tan, Zixiang. (1996). "The Great (Fire) Wall of China: Internet Security and Information Policy Issues in the People's Republic of China". 24th *Annual Telecommunication Policy Research Conference (TPRC), Solomons Island, MD. USA*

Zhao, Yuezhi (1998) *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Zhao, Yuezhi (2000). From commercialization to conglomeration: the transformation of the Chinese press within the orbit of the party state. *Journal of Communication,* 50: 3-26.

Zhao, Yuezhi (2008). *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power, and Conflict.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc

Zheng, Yongnian & Wu, Guoguang. (2005). Information Technology, Public Space, and Collective Action in China. *Comparative Political Studies.*38 : 50tp://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10670560305471

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Non-standardized online interviews will be conducted with recruited people. Considering that the study needs to collect different data from the administrators and the users of *tianya* online community (*tianya*), the interview questions will be divided into two parts. The interviews will last approximately 60 minutes.

Questions for the administrators:

How do people understand the democratic potential of the Internet?

1. When was this online community started?

2. What were the initial purposes?

3. Do you think *tianya* facilitates or promotes public discussion?

4. Do you think that *tianya* provides an effective platform for citizens to express their opinions under China's background? If yes, why? If no, what are the factors that impede the fulfillment?

5. Do you think online public discussion has an impact on the real world? If yes, how does online public discussion impact citizens' public life and social mechanism? If no, what are the factors that impede the fulfillment?

What are the characteristics of online public discussion?

1. What types of the topics are the most popular on *tianya*? Do you think topics relevant to political and social issues attract universal participation?

2. What are the characteristics of average users who actively participate in online public discussion?

3. Are divers viewpoints equally aired on the online public forums?

4. How would you judge the quality of the online public discussion?

What are the factors that impede the fulfillment of democratic potential of the Internet?

1. What is the dominant value or principle embodied *by tianya*?

2. *Tianya* stresses its role and social responsibility in Chinese society. How does *tianya* fulfill its promise?

3. What are your main methods of profit-making?

4. What paid services does *tianya* community provide?

5. What kinds of topics do the moderators and editors highlight on the public forums? For what reasons?

6. In the April of 2008, *tianya* started charging each new user 1 yuan for registration. What are the purposes of this decision?

7. *Tianya* is developing a new marketing strategy called ADtopic. This new technology allows the advertiser to intervene with the management of online topics. What are the impacts of this marketing strategy on the quality of online public discussion?

8. *Tianya* has 20 million registered users. What is the demographic profile of these users? How does *tianya* take advantage of this huge resource? Does *tianya* view them as customers or citizens?

9. It is said that *tianya.cn* will be listed on the Chinese stock market in 2009. What impact will it bring? How will the stockholders' interests and public interests be balanced?

10. What regulations does *tianya* comply with to manage online public discussion? Does *tianya* have self-censorship? If yes, what are the purposes? And what are the procedures? What are the topics and contents that have to be filtered or deleted?

That's the end. Thank you for your time!

Questions for the users:

How do people understand the democratic potential of the Internet?

1. How long have you been participating on *tianya.cn*?

2. What were your initial reasons for registering as a user of *tianya.cn*? What do you expect to get from participating in online public forums?

3. Do you use the Internet to express your opinions? If yes, do the online public forums meet your needs for expression? Does the new communication technology strengthen your expectation for civic engagement?

4. Do you think that people are empowered with "the right to speak" by the new communication technology? If yes, why? If no, what are the factors that impede the fulfillment?

5. Do you think online public discussion have an impact on the real world? If yes, how does online public discussion impact citizens' public life and social mechanism? If no, what are the factors that impede the fulfillment?

What are the characteristics of online public discussion?

1. What topics are you interested in?

2. Do you actively participate in online public discussion? If no, why?

3. Do you frequently publish posts on the public forums? If yes, what topics do you like to discuss with other people? How frequently do you post: daily, weekly, monthly, etc.? If no, why?

4. Do you ever feel that you are included or excluded from online public discussion?

5. Are diverse viewpoints equally aired on the online public forums?

6. Have your posts or replies been deleted by moderators? If yes, for what reasons?

7. How would you judge the quality of the online public discussion?

What are the factors that impede the fulfillment of democratic potential of the Internet?

1. How do you evaluate the character of *tianya*—is it a commercialized online community or an online civic space?

2. Do you think *tianya* fulfills the social responsibility it proclaims?

3. Do you pay for any custom service provided by *tianya* community? If yes, why?

4. In the April of 2008, *tianya* started charging each new user 1 yuan for registration. What do you think of this decision?

5. *Tianya* is developing a new marketing strategy called ADtopic. This new technology allows the advertiser to intervene with the management of online topics. Do you think some topics of online discussion are influenced or controlled by the online community? What are the impacts of this marketing strategy on the quality of online public discussion?

6. It is said that *tianya.cn* will be listed on the Chinese stock market in 2009. Do you think it will have an impact on how the site functions?

7. Compared with other traditional media, do you think the Internet provides a relatively free environment for speech or not?

8. Do you think online censorship limits your expression online?

9. Finally, I'd like to ask some demographic questions. You can choose to answer or not.

   Are you male or female?

   How old are you?

   What's your level of education?

   What's your occupation?

That's the end. Thank you for your time!

Appendix2: Recruitment Letter

University *U* of Windsor

Recruitment Letter for Administrators of Tianya Online Community

Dear Sir/Madam,

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study. I am a master's candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Windsor in Canada. I am conducting a study for my master's thesis under the supervision of Professor Jim Wittebols. I would like to provide you with more information about this project.

Over the years, the thriving of the Internet has brought about people's optimism for democratization. However, some feel the potential of the Internet has also been overestimated. My study will examine the real impacts of the Internet on Chinese democratization, and to explore Chinese people's understandings on the role of the Internet in their public life.

I will conduct a case study on www.tianya.cn, one of the most influential public forums in China. To carry out this study, I would like to recruit some administrators or operators of *tianya.cn* for online interviews. Because you are actively involved in the administration and operation of the online community, you can provide in-depth information concerning the various issues, such as the initiative of facilitating public interests, characteristics of online public discussion, commercialization of the online community, etc..

This interview will provide you an opportunity to express your opinions freely as your responses will remain confidential—your name or identity will not be known to any others except myself. And your participation in this study will help me better understand the dynamics and limitations of the new communication technology. If you are willing to participate in this interview, I will do it at a time that is convenient for you. For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact me at email: weny@uwindsor.ca

Your Sincerely

Yun Wen
Department of Communication Studies
University of Windsor

Recruitment Letter for Users of Tianya Online Community

Dear Sir/Madam,

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study. I am a master's candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Windsor in Canada. I am conducting a study for my master's thesis under the supervision of Professor Jim Wittebols. I would like to provide you with more information about this project.

Over the years, the thriving of the Internet has brought about people's optimism for democratization. However, some feel the potential of the Internet has also been overestimated. My study will examine the real impacts of the Internet on Chinese democratization, and to explore Chinese people's understandings on the role of the Internet in their public life.

I will conduct a case study on www.tianya.cn, one of the most influential public forums in China. To carry out this study, I would like to recruit some users of *tianya.cn* for online interviews to discuss the various issues, such as your experience of participating in public discussion, your initiative of utilizing the Internet to express public opinions, your understanding about the role of the Internet in facilitating cyberdemocracy, etc..

This interview will provide you an opportunity to express your opinions freely as your responses will remain confidential—your name or identity will not be known to any others except myself. And your participation in this study will help me better understand the dynamics and limitations of the new communication technology. If you are willing to participate in this interview, I will do it at most any time that is convenient for you. For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact me at email: weny@uwindsor.ca

Your Sincerely

Yun Wen
Department of Communication Studies
University of Windsor

Appendix 3: Recruitment Poster on the Public Forum of www. tianya.cn

University
of Windsor

Subject: PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR A RESEARCH

I am Yun Wen, a master's candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Windsor in Canada. I am conducting a study for my master's thesis.

I'm looking for volunteers to take part in my study concerning with Cyberdemocracy in China's information age. As a participant in this study, you would be asked to do an online interview which would approximately take 60 minutes. This interview will provide you an opportunity to express your opinions freely as your responses will remain confidential—your name or identity will not be known to any others except myself. And your participation in the interview will also help me better understand the potential of the Internet on cultivating a healthy civil society.

If you are willing to participate in this interview, I will do it a time that is convenient for you. For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact me at email: weny@uwindsor.ca.

VITA AUCTORIS

Yun Wen was born in 1983 in Guangdong Province, China. She graduated from Hainan Middle School in 2002. From there she went on to Sun Yat-sen University where she obtained a B.M in Public Relations in 2006. She is currently a candidate for the Master's degree in the program of Communication and Social Justice at the University of Windsor and hopes to graduate in Winter 2009.